The Fallen and the Forgiven

by Renaerys

Summary

An ancient evil threatens Paris, and Ladybug and Chat Noir reluctantly return to face it after years spent apart. Ladybug struggles to trust and forgive her estranged partner's mistakes, but when ghosts of the past resurface, our heroes will face their worst demons yet: each other.

Meanwhile, a wholly unprepared Marinette finds herself drawn to Adrien, as one does when one's former teenage dream has honed that most potent of masculine dark arts: charm. She is at risk of falling for him all over again, and he’s doing everything he can to encourage her. Since when is Adrien Agreste an incorrigible flirt?

But just when things are looking up, a terrible tragedy befalls Adrien’s family, and Marinette fears he may be losing more of himself each day.
Prologue

Chapter Notes

I finally caved to my guilty pleasure and decided to write a Miraculous Ladybug fic. Specifically, an Adrinette fic, with a healthy dose of Lukloe (Chloluka?) on the side. If that latter part puts anybody off, rest assured this is first and foremost a stupidly, unabashedly romantic Adrinette from start to finish. But also eff you, I will make you ship it and you will join me in the dumpster by the end of this (please).

Because it’s me, there will be plenty of action, too. And also enough angst to put us all in an early grave. But I have boarded the Adrinette train, folks. It has left the station. Men in uniform are clipping tickets and the snack cart is coming down the aisle, and I plan to indulge. You get the idea.

Also, this branches off during Glaciator, for context. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was one of those sticky-hot Parisian summer nights that layered the city of love in sweet swelter. The twilight shimmered dusky pink, and the stars were still shy. In the distance, the Eiffel Tower shone as a beacon of light to take up the dying sun’s mantle and lend courage to the budding stars above. It was a night for pretty girls and daring boys, ice cream and secret smiles.

Marinette wasn’t smiling when Chat Noir found her on her balcony, alone and gazing at the sky like she wondered what kept the stars from their shimmer. Her white tank top clung to her in the heat, and her legs were bare under her pink jean shorts. She was barefoot, too hot to bother with shoes, too hot even in her own skin. Even her trademark pig tails were relegated to a messy bun to keep her thick hair off her neck. She didn’t see him watching her, but this didn’t surprise him. Chat was quiet and slight when he wanted to be.

Which was why she didn’t see him until he was right beside her, perching precariously on her balcony railing very much like a sly alley cat looking for a little attention.

“I’d ask you to let down your hair for me to come up, but this heat’s catastrophic,” he said, grinning.

Her blue eyes were wide with surprise at the sight of him suddenly there and so close, but she recovered quickly and put her hands on her hips. “The only thing catastrophic here is you wearing black leather on the hottest night of the summer.”

“Hey, my super suit’s an all-weather model.” He hopped down from the railing to stand next to her. “Marinette,” he held out a clawed hand and bowed in a flourish, “it’s nice to see you again.”

Marinette eyed his offered hand warily, rolled her eyes, and accepted the handshake at length. He brought her knuckles to his lips for a chaste kiss, smiling to himself as she blushed and tried to look put-off even as she bit her lip to keep from smiling at his silliness.

“Y-Yeah, I guess it’s been a while since my run-in with the, uh, Evillustrator,” she stammered. “I
haven’t really talked to you since then, nope! Not at all!”

He laughed at her flustered reaction. Even in his civilian life as teen supermodel Adrien Agreste, Marinette was always tongue-tied around him. He suspected that she hadn’t really forgiven him for his part in one of Chloe’s mean pranks on his first day at their shared high school, even though he’d apologized. But as Chat Noir, she was much more at ease. There was no way Marinette would ever tease Adrien with a cat pun the way she’d just teased Chat Noir. The irony of it made him smile at her, bemused.

“So, what brings you to my humble corner of Paris?” Marinette asked. “Don’t you and Ladybug have people to save or something?”

The mention of Ladybug sent Chat’s mood plummeting once more, and his smile fell. He leaned on the balcony railing next to Marinette and pawed at his messy blond hair, restless. “Not tonight. Ladybug’s… Well, to tell you the truth, I don’t know where she is. We were supposed to meet up for dinner, but…”

“For dinner? Y-You mean like—”

“A date?” Chat sighed. “Guess it was wishful thinking, as usual. She said she might not make it, but I was hoping she might change her mind in the end. Should’ve known better, hah.”

Marinette was quiet beside him a while, and he watched the people walking below. A couple exited her family’s bakery on the first floor, their arms full of baked goods as they laughed together on their way to a picnic, or perhaps a party.

“Chat Noir,” Marinette said softly. “Are you… Do you like Ladybug?”

Chat sighed again and rested his chin in his hands. “Yeah,” he said, for once not trying to hide behind a smile or a cheesy joke to lighten the mood. “I really, really do.”

God, he was sort of pathetic. It was bad enough that he was pining for a girl who’d never once given him any indication that she even remotely reciprocated his desperately romantic feelings for her, but now he was sulking about it to a classmate who didn’t even know who he was, just some weird guy in a leather cat suit. Maybe he never should have come out here. Maybe he should’ve just stayed home and practiced the piano, like Nathalie had told him to do when his father never showed up for dinner.

Stood up twice in one night. You really hit the jackpot tonight, dude.

A gentle hand on his shoulder startled him, and he looked up to find Marinette right next to him, her big blue eyes dark with twilight and a deep, tranquil sadness he could not begin to understand. Had he said something to upset her so much?

“I’m sorry, Chat,” she said, her voice strained. “I’m so sorry Ladybug didn’t show up tonight. I’m sure…whatever the reason, she didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

Chat stared at her, unable to comprehend this sudden welling emotion she seemed to cling to like a lifeline, like it mattered, like he mattered. She didn’t even know him, and yet he could see her heart breaking for him. Her hand gave a reassuring squeeze, reminding him that she was there, too, that he wasn’t here alone after all.

He was reaching for her before he knew it. “Can I show you? I set it all up, and it’s just such a waste if…”
Marinette held his gaze a moment, and then she settled her other hand on his shoulder and nodded. “I’d love see it, thank you.”

Soon, Chat was flying over the rooftops of Paris once again, his extending staff in one hand and Marinette in the other as she clung to him. He found the secluded rooftop where he’d set out a simple picnic spread, candles and everything. The plates were bare, the food still in the wicker basket he’d packed. He set Marinette down to get her bearings, and quickly he set about unpacking the basket.

“Wow,” Marinette said, walking around to the other side of the picnic blanket. “You did all this for… for Ladybug?”

“Of course,” Chat said, setting out a box of strawberries next to a wrapped wedge of camembert. “Pretty romantic, huh?” He gave her a toothy grin, but she wasn’t smiling, and he soon lost his motivation.

Marinette picked up a candle holder and turned it over in her hands. “It’s perfect.”

“Hey, Marinette?” he said, setting down a paper bag with sliced brioche. “If you’re not busy or anything, you could stay for a bit. If you want?”

“You want me to have dinner with you?”

“Sure, I mean, we’re friends, right? And to be honest, I really don’t want to be alone tonight.”

She looked up at him, looking lost in that tranquil, sad way she’d looked all night, like it pained her just to look at him for long. Chat suddenly felt uncomfortable, and he began to regret asking her to stay. If she didn’t want to be here, why couldn’t she have just told him no?

“Unless you have somewhere else you need to be?” he asked, hating how small his voice sounded to his own ears. Just how pathetic was he reaching for any human attention whatsoever, even from a girl who barely knew him, in and out of the mask?

“No,” Marinette said, “I don’t. I mean, I did, but that’s… I don’t have anywhere else to be.” She smiled, and it set his heart fluttering in anticipation. “I’d love to stay with you, if that’s really okay.”

“It’s okay,” he said quickly, no wanting to give her any reason to back out and leave him alone. “It’s more than okay. I want you to stay.”

Marinette giggled. “Okay, Kitty, settle down. I already said yes.”

Chat couldn’t help it. She’d turned what was shaping up to be a completely miserable, lonely night alone in his room into something decidedly less sad and pathetic. He’d take what he could get.

He flashed her one of his trademark Chat Noir smirks. “Okay, okay, I promise not to get too paws-y with the princess. I’m a gentleman, after all.”

Marinette rolled her eyes. “You keep dishing out those ridiculous cat puns and I might just turn into a pumpkin now, Catsanova.”

Chat could have cried from joy at her playing along with him. Okay, so tonight was not at all what he’d dreamed it would be, but maybe there was a silver lining here somewhere. Come Monday, he would make sure to put in a little more effort to befriend Marinette as Adrien. Maybe he could even find a way to get her to forgive him for the gum prank at the start of the semester, if that was really still bothering her.
They began to eat as they watched the pink of twilight fade to violet night, and the stars finally found their courage to light up the sky. The Eiffel Tower blazed in the distance, and the temperature mercifully dropped a few degrees.

“So, what were you doing before I dropped by and swept you off your feet?” Chat asked between bites of cheese.

Marinette leaned back on her hands and gazed at the Eiffel Tower. She bit her lip, debating whether to tell him.

“Did I mess up your night, after all?” Chat asked, fingers trebling a little.

“No, it wasn’t you,” Marinette said, unaware of his nervous trepidation. “I was…supposed to get ice cream with some friends. Well, I did get the ice cream, sort of, but…”

That’s right, he’d been invited to get ice cream at André’s tonight. Well, Adrien had been invited, but he’d canceled to spend time with his father, who never showed up, anyway. The thought made Chat frown, and he set down the strawberry he’d been about to eat, no longer hungry.

“Sounds like fun,” he said, trying to sound cheerful. “André makes the best gelato in Paris.”

“Yeah,” Marinette said, smiling wistfully. “Everybody liked it, except… Never mind, it’s stupid.”

“What?” Chat prodded. “You can tell me.”

“You don’t want to hear about my boring personal life.”

“Not true! You know what they say about cats and curiosity.” He waggled his eyebrows at her.

As predicted, she giggled and waved him off. “Yeah, they get killed.”

“Good thing I have nine lives, then.”

Marinette considered him. “Let’s just say tonight didn’t go as I was hoping it would. Consider us both a little bit heartbroken.”

The reminder only brought back a host of emotions Chat wished would stay buried a little bit longer, and he felt miserable all over again thinking about everything that had happened today. He hugged his knees to his chest and sighed tiredly.

“Yeah,” Chat said.

You’d think I’d be used to this by now.

But no matter how many rejections he took, how many lonely nights he spent, there was no getting used to this emptiness. He had Plagg, but oftentimes Chat suspected Plagg was only around for him because he didn’t have any other choice in the matter. The cat kwami didn’t seem to mind the solitude nearly as much as his charge, content to stuff his face with cheese and nap all day if he had things his way.

And tonight, for just one night, he’d thought he could have someone—no, the one person in the whole world who could understand just a little—to talk to, to help him forget that these two half-lives he was living didn’t add up to one whole, fulfilling life. Goddamnit, why didn’t Ladybug show up? What could she have had to do that was just so much more important? He was her partner in crime, literally! Even if she didn’t return his feelings, they were at least supposed to be friends, weren’t
“Hey,” Marinette said, “are you okay?”

Chat clenched his fists so hard that his sharp nails bit through his leather gloves. “I’m fine,” he lied.

Marinette got up and approached him. “You don’t look fine. Chat?”

“Is there something wrong with me?” he asked, still staring at his knees.

“What? Why would you say that?”

Yes, a small, cruel voice whispered in his head. *Of course there is. Why else would they all turn their backs on you?*

He hugged his knees tighter and buried his face in his crossed arms.

“Chat, snap out of it. Please, don’t be sad. If it’s about Ladybug, I’m sure she had a good reason for not—”

“You’re only saying that to make me feel better,” he said.

*It’s me, isn’t it? It’s my fault. Father, Ladybug, even…even Mom, maybe…*

It was strange how these feelings, so long kept under lock and key, chose these moments to come out. Darkness and starlight, an empty room and thin sheets, or on a lonely rooftop with a stranger who would never really know him, no matter how nice she was trying to be. The only common denominator was Chat—Adrien himself. But then, could he really blame them? They didn’t know him any better than Marinette, her hands on his arms, gently shaking him.

“Because I want you to feel better. It’ll be okay, I promise. Maybe you’ll see Ladybug tonight after all, later?”

*Maybe you’ll see your father tonight, later,*” Nathalie had said before locking him in his room earlier that evening.

But it was just another lie. Nathalie didn’t even try to mask them anymore. What was the use? He knew the truth, always had.

“I doubt it,” Chat said, hating how miserable he felt about this. Why couldn’t he just enjoy a night with a friend, even if she wasn’t who he’d been hoping to see tonight? He resigned himself to apologizing and excusing himself so she wouldn’t have to put up with his self-indulgent crap any longer.

But something over her shoulder caught his attention. “Is that…?”

It was. Chat moved without thinking, grabbing Marinette and twisting to shield her with his body just as the fluttering darkness was about to hit her. Cold fingers ran down his spine, stealing his breath, until abruptly the pain began. Nails dug through flesh and bone as if to open him up like a person bag. He seized up and lost all motor control. Marinette scrambled away, shouting something, but he didn’t hear her as he convulsed, the agony overwhelming, and a voice stronger and more confident than hers ringing out above it all:

*“Chat Blanc, such a pleasure to finally meet you. Although, considering your current melancholy, the pleasure appears to be all mine.”*
Chat choked on his breath as he rolled on the ground and pressed his claws into his temples to rip that silken voice from his head. But when he opened his eyes to search for Marinette, all he saw was a cold, gloomy place full of fallen stars, and a pair of sinister blue eyes that could peer into his soul.

“H-Hawk Moth,” he choked out.

The villain merely bared his teeth in a feral smile, and Chat fell weak with terror.

Marinette shook Chat, shouted at him, did anything she could to get him to wake up, but he continued to seize on the floor in the fetal position. One minute he was relatively fine, if not a bit glum, and the next he was tackling her to the ground and having a seizure.

“Chat Noir!” Marinette shouted, a creeping fear making her hands shake. He was digging his own claws into his temples and drawing blood, to her horror. “Chat Noir, wake up! What’s wrong?!”

But when he opened his eyes, they were not the jeweled green she was used to, but a malevolent magenta that burned. His ring began to smoke as though it were burning through his super suit. And then, he uttered the words that sent a chilling terror to her core the likes of which she’d never known before.

“H-Hawk Moth…”

Marinette stumbled back, understanding dawning. “No,” she whispered, scrambling away from him. “No, please…"

But as she watched the dark tendrils creep over him like wandering, oily fingers, she knew in her heart of hearts that it was true. That it was happening right in front of her, and she was just sitting there like a helpless damsel on her ass doing absolutely nothing to help. She hadn’t even seen the akuma.

Tikki flew out of her purse and got right in her face. “Marinette!” she hissed. “This is very bad! We have to help him!”

The tiny, red kwami’s uncharacteristic urgency snapped Marinette out of her daze, and she was on her feet in an instant. Tikki was right. If what she thought was happening was actually happening, then she would need all the luck in the world to pull Chat through this one.

“Tikki, transform me!” Marinette shouted.

The transformation only took seconds, and soon she was super-suited in red and black polkadots, her magic yo-yo swinging. And just in time too—Chat was struggling to get up.

Except it wasn’t quite Chat anymore, not as she knew him. He was drained of all color, from his bright, cornflower hair to his anemic pallor to the white leather cat suit he now wore. And those eyes…

“Hello, my lady,” he said in a low timbre Ladybug hardly recognized. “So you decided not to stand me up, after all.”

“Chat Noir,” Ladybug said, hardly believing her eyes.

His white cat ears flattened, and those glowing, magenta eyes narrowed dangerously. “Not exactly.”
Before Ladybug could say another word, he was already lunging for her, claws bared. Ladybug yelped and backflipped out of the way, tossed her yo-yo, and swung hard away from the building to the adjacent one. She’d barely reached for a handhold when Chat’s extending staff smashed into the stone crenellations just inches from her hand. She dared to look back, only to see him leaping after her, impossibly fast.

Ladybug didn’t think, she just threw her yo-yo again and focused on putting some distance in between them. Normally, she would never have run from an akumatized victim no matter how dire the situation, but something in Chat’s eyes was different from the others they’d faced together, almost poisonous. There was no rhyme or reason to it, but the thought of him touching her filled her with abject dread. And yet, it was all she could do to stay ahead of him. Between his super jumps and his extending staff, Chat was damn fast like she’d never known him to be before, almost as if whatever physical limitations had held him back before no longer applied. Or perhaps he just had the right motivation.

*I can’t just run from this! I have to save him!*

But that was easier said than done when her whole body shook with fear at the sight of him systematically smashing his way over the rooftops to catch up to her. And watching those possessed eyes watching her, she knew with every fiber of her being that he would catch her.

*Hide,* she thought, searching for something, anything that might help her.

She spotted a skyscraper with a terrarium that took up most of the roof space. Without hesitation, Ladybug swung as hard as she could and disappeared among the thick trees and flower bushes. No sooner had she touched down and ducked behind a thick tree than Chat landed a few yards away next to a rose bush. The silver bell at his collar tinkled ominously, and Ladybug shivered.

“Laaaaaadyybug,” he drawled, twirling his staff. “What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?”

If she wasn’t honestly afraid for her safety right now, she may have rolled her eyes at that particularly trite cat pun. But it was neither here nor there. She needed a strategy, and she was coming up short.

“You know, I was so sure you would show up tonight,” Chat said as he stalked about the terrarium, eyes sharp and searching for movement. “You should’ve seen me, fretting about what kinds of food you’d want to eat, how many candles to bring, hah.” He smacked a hydrangea bush hard with his staff without warning, sending a squirrel scrambling for his life up a nearby tree.

Ladybug bit her lip and tried to tell herself to breathe, to think, she was good at that! She was always coming up with some crazy plan or other to save the day, so why couldn’t she think of anything to save herself? Why was she being such a coward?

“I bet you like that, huh,” he said, continuing his stalking, like a panther sniffing out his prey. “The thought of your simpering little kitten pining and yearning for his Lady, forever at the mercy of your whim.” Another smack, this one not five feet away.

Ladybug quietly skirted her tree and moved to another while his back was turned. He must have heard her, though, because he whirled and stared unblinking into the gloom. She could see him from her angle, the deadened ruthlessness in his eyes, and it was all she could do to cover her mouth to keep from whimpering in fear.

What the hell had Hawk Moth’s akuma done to him? Usually, the akumatized victims lashed out in flamboyant temper tantrums, slaves to their base emotions and unable to control themselves. With Chat, however, it was as if he had never been more in control in his life, and it scared the living
daylights out of her.

“I feel it too, you know,” he said. “This… yearning… for you.” He gripped a long-fingered hand over his heart, as if it physically hurt him to admit it. “It consumes me.”

Ladybug was no longer listening to him as she forced herself to swallow her fear and think of something to get out of this. If Chat was akumatized, then that meant she just had to purify the akuma possessing him, right? Which meant she just had to get whatever object the akuma had possessed away from him. Yes, good, this was a dance she knew.

*It has to be his Miraculous ring,* she decided. *The akuma messed with his transformation, so it has to be that.*

But how the hell was she supposed to get his ring from him? And even if she did, that would mean…

*I’ll see him beneath the mask.*

Ladybug wasn’t sure if she was ready for that. Most of all, she wasn’t sure it was fair to Chat to do that to him without his consent. But what choice did she have now? If he caught her before she was ready—

*Thwack!*

The tree next to hers trembled and creaked under the force of Chat’s blow, and Ladybug bit down on her tongue so hard she tasted blood. He was close, just two feet away on the other side of her tree.

“I can smell you,” he whispered.

Ladybug was done running and hiding. Faster than it took her to think, she swung around hard with her yo-yo and smacked Chat in the face hard enough to knock him over. He swore and stumbled, his hands shielding his face, and Ladybug took that opportunity kick his staff away. He was back on his feet in no time, an ugly gash on his forehead where she’d clipped him, and the sight of his blood turned hers cold.

“Chat,” she said, hating herself for hurting him, no matter the reason.

“I should have known you were the type to play with your food,” he said. He wiped the trickle of blood from his forehead and licked his finger clean. It was so obscene that Ladybug felt physically ill at the sight.

“Chat,” she said again, “listen to me. I know you’re upset that I blew you off earlier, and I’m truly sorry for that. I never meant to hurt you—”

He didn’t let her finish before lunging. They collided in a tangle of limbs, scratching and clawing and punching at each other as they rolled through the grass. Somehow, Ladybug ended up on top struggled to restrain his wrists. His ring was right there! If she could just slip it off—

Chat suddenly spit in her face, the act so appalling and shocking that Ladybug slackened just long enough for him throw her off him. A stone maiden sculpture broke her fall and cracked. Pain lanced through her back for a flash before her super suit absorbed the brunt of it. If not for her suit, she was sure the impact would have shattered her spine.

Unfortunately, their scuffle dislodged her yo-yo from her grip, and it rolled a couple feet away. Ladybug scrambled after it, but Chat had the same idea and beat her to it. His booted foot came
down hard on her wrist just as she closed her fingers around the yo-yo, and she cried out under the pressure.

“Tsk tsk tsk,” he scolded her. “You took my toy, so it’s only fair that I take yours.”

“We’ll see about that. Lucky Charm!” The yo-yo exploded with bright light, momentarily blinding, and Chat cursed and shielded his sensitive eyes.

Ladybug took the opportunity to roll away to safety, wipe the spittle from her cheek, and brandish her lucky charm tool, which was a perfect replica of her purse—Marinette’s purse. What the hell was she supposed to do with this?!

Her Miraculous earrings beeped a warning. She wouldn’t have long until Tikki reverted her. Great.

“Sounds like you don’t have much time left,” Chat taunted. “But don’t worry, I’ll make it quick for you.”

“You’ll have to catch me first,” Ladybug spat before taking off again with her yo-yo swinging.

He made a swipe at her, but she was too fast in the air, and soon she was clear of the terrarium and back in the concrete jungle with a decent head start. Chat would have to find his staff before he could properly pursue her, which gave her a little time to formulate a strategy that centered around a perfect replica of her purse. For once, couldn’t her Lucky Charm turn into something immediately useful, like a Taser or a muzzle or something?

Think, Marinette, think! Gotta figure this out before I run out of time.

First things first, she would have to stop running and confront him. She thought about hiding again to surprise him, but his eyesight was even better at night than during the day, and apparently now he could sniff her out. He also still had his Cataclysm. If she could just get him to use that on something superfluous, get it out of the way…

That’s it! she thought. If she could wait out his transformation, then he would revert, right? Maybe the akuma would be forced to leave him without the power of Chat Noir sustaining it. Her earrings chirped again, and her heart sank. This would only work if she could maintain her Ladybug persona. As Marinette, she wouldn’t stand a chance against him…

A crash in the building next to her made her yelp, and she saw Chat glaring at her, his staff extended, and to her utter horror, his right hand glowing white with what she could only assume was his Cataclysm. If he touched her with that hand, what would happen to her?

He appeared to have every intention of finding out as he relentlessly pursued her across the city. They bypassed countless people enjoying the lazy summer evening, but those people barely registered the blur of white and red that passed them by far overhead, too absorbed in their own lives to know Ladybug’s was in grave danger of ending.

No, she thought desperately, even akumatized, Chat would never…

But he was angry with her, right? Was that the root of his turmoil, why the akuma had targeted him? He was angry with her for her perceived rejection, for not returning his romantic impulses. She couldn’t begrudge him that, but would he actually, truly hurt her over it?

She got her answer soon enough when, in an impossible burst of speed, Chat cut her off and forced her to swerve onto the concrete roof of a building. Ladybug lost her balance and somersaulted, yo-yo and purse in each hand as she came face to face with him once more.
“Chat, please,” she said. “You don’t have to do this. Let’s talk about it, okay? You’re my partner, my best friend. You know how much I care about you!”

“Enough of your lies,” he said, approaching. “You’re even worse than him, leading me on just to drop me hard.”

Who was he talking about? She didn’t have time to wonder.

“Stop,” she said. “Don’t come any closer, or I won’t hold back!”

“Good, then neither will I.”

He lunged at her, and it was all Ladybug could do to dodge his destructive right hand. She dropped her Lucky Charm purse, useless as it was, and thrust her yo-yo at him, hoping to ensnare him. But he was too quick, and she only succeeded in smacking his shoulder with it. Snarling, Chat took another swing at her, and seeing an opportunity, Ladybug grabbed his arm and yanked him with all her might. They collided with a painful snap and fell together. He had a hand around her throat, and Ladybug saw stars as she struggled under his weight.

“Uh-oh, Bugaboo,” he said, smiling dangerously. “Looks like I caught you.”

Ladybug gasped for air, but he only squeezed harder. And she realized in that moment that yes, he was trying to hurt her—no, he was trying to kill her. His Cataclysm hand hovered dangerously over her, ready to strike, and there was so much hatred in his eyes that it physically hurt to look upon him like this. Despite herself, she felt tears water her eyes.

“Kitty,” she gasped, reaching around the concrete floor for something, anything to use against him.

Something in his eyes flashed, a glint of recognition, or hesitation, but it was gone as soon as it had appeared and he came closer. “Cry for me, my lady.”

Her hand closed around something soft, but she steeled her gaze and swung as hard as she could, clocking him in the temple with her Lucky Charm purse. He grunted and lost his balance, and it was just enough time for her to slip out of his grasp. She nearly tripped over his staff, and thanking all the little gods out there for her extraordinarily good luck, she snatched it up and brandished it at him.

“Don’t make me hurt you,” she said, her voice raspy and painful.

“I think we both know I can’t make you do anything,” Chat said, spitting blood.

That was it. Ladybug had had it with this sadistic nightmare. “What is wrong with you?! Are you really that upset that I didn’t show up to a dinner I told you I wouldn’t be able to make?”

“What’s wrong with me?” he repeated. “You really don’t know, do you? How could you? You don’t even know who I am.”

Was that what this was about? Their secret identities? Her eyes found the Lucky Charm purse, dusty and smeared with Chat’s blood.

*Am I…supposed to reveal myself? Is that how I win?*

There had to be another way. Her chirping earrings, however, were not giving her any alternatives. If this dragged on for much longer, she would revert whether she chose to or not, and then she would be completely at his mercy.
Well, forget that.

Ladybug came in swinging with his staff, forcing him to duck and dodge. If she could just get him off balance long enough to ensnare him with her yo-yo, she could get to his ring and purify the akuma before it was too late—

“Agghh!”

She felt rather than heard herself grunt in pain—no, agony. Arms trembling, she dropped Chat’s staff and looked down at where his Cataclysm hand was pressed to her belly, warping her super suit and shredding it before her eyes. Her earrings chirped incessantly, but she could no longer hear them. She met his gaze, and the hatred and despair there hurt even more than the physical sensation of fiery worms crawling under her skin where he touched her.

“Bye bye, little Ladybug,” he snarled.

Ladybug’s knees buckled, and he let her fall. They kneeled together, her shaking and him looming over her to examine his handiwork. Ladybug gagged and choked on her own spit, god there was so much of it. But a quick glance down told her that was not saliva, but blood, and it kept coming. Blinking through her tears, she met Chat’s gaze again and laid her hands on his shoulders for something to hold on to.

“Oh, chaton,” she said, her voice quavering. “I’m s-sorry you’re suffering.”

He blinked at her, and for a heart wrenching moment, he looked like her Chat again. Her suit was disintegrating, her body imploding, and the damage was done. Never had Ladybug dreamed that it would be her own partner and friend to be her undoing.

“My lady,” he said, eyes wide as she took his face in her trembling hands.

It was getting harder to keep her vision straight now, and harder still to breathe with all that blood in her throat. Vaguely, she realized that without her Lucky Charm’s release, she wouldn’t heal. Would it even heal damage done by Chat’s Miraculous? What a silly thought, she was so tired…

“I’m sorry,” she said, her words slurring as consciousness began to fade. “I’m sorry…I left you all alone.”

He was crying, his tears hot and sticky between her fingers like this stifling summer night. The Eiffel Tower, so close, blazed like a torch in defiance of the oppressive night.

They say it’s bad luck to cross a white cat at night.

Maybe her luck had finally run out.

“What are you doing?! Take her Miraculous, now!” screamed the voice in his head that drowned hers out.

But Chat wasn’t listening anymore as Ladybug’s unconscious body slumped in his arms, her fingers slick with his tears, her blood on his chin. Except it was no longer Ladybug in his arms, but Marinette.

Marinette Dupain-Cheng.
Something snapped in him, tore through the buzzing of a thousand angry moths in his head. It cut them all down and poured out of him in a boiling, wretched rage. He wailed like a dying animal and clutched her bleeding body to him. His ring chirped its limit, and the voice in his head let him be, at last.

But as Adrien sat there cradling Marinette’s limp body to him, her blood soaking through his shirt, he could do nothing but cry and shudder.

“All right! Adrien, please!” shouted a tiny voice buzzing about his face. A red, bug-eyed creature hovered before him, tears in her frightened, compound eyes as she implored him to listen.

“Please!” she wept. “You have to undo the damage! The Lucky Charm, hurry!”

A kwami, he realized. Ladybug’s kwami. Ladybug… Marinette.

Marinette, who had cheered him up tonight when he thought he could fall no lower. Marinette, who had teased him and laughed with him and indulged his aching loneliness just because she had some time. Shy, stuttering, flabbergasted Marinette who wouldn’t even look at him straight at school, but who had shared a piece of herself with him tonight just because he’d asked.

Oh god, what have I done?

“All right!!” Marinette’s kwami screamed at him. She had the dirty Lucky Charm purse in her little hands, and she was shaking badly, as if she could not keep hovering much longer. “I need your help!”

Sniffling through his tears, Adrien grasped the purse—Marinette’s purse, an exact replica, oh god—and together with the red kwami, flung it in the air.

“Miraculous Ladybug!” the kwami chanted, and the purse exploded in a flurry of fluttering red ladybugs. They dashed all over the city, repairing the damage he and Ladybug had caused, and they swirled around Marinette and him. The gash in his head knitted together, the blood on his shirt and pants dissolved, and the ladybugs dissipated into stardust.

But Marinette did not wake up.

“My la—Marinette,” he said, unable to control his voice from cracking with a fresh wave of despair. He turned her over. The gaping hole in her belly was gone, but she was passed out cold, and he was losing his goddamned mind.

“Ugh,” grumbled a familiar voice. Plagg crawled out from under Adrien’s pant leg, coughing gratuitously. “My head… Tikki?”

“Plagg,” said Tikki, the red kwami. She was on the ground, no longer able to fly. “Oh—your eye!”

Plagg’s left eye was its usual bright green, but his right was a blood-chilling magenta that made Adrien whimper in fear at the sight of it.

The cat kwami blinked up at Adrien, but there was nothing in his expression. He merely stared up at Adrien, as if expecting something from him.
“P-Plagg, I…” was all he could manage.

“There’s no time!” Tikki screeched. “Adrien, call an ambulance. Marinette needs a hospital!”

Adrien could hardly see straight through his tears, and there was a deep-seated aching in the pit of his belly that he knew was only going to get worse. But he couldn’t worry about it now—Marinette—*Ladybug*—was in trouble. He fumbled around for his phone in his jeans, dialed the authorities, and somehow managed to get them to send an ambulance to the area. He dropped his phone and clutched at Marinette’s lifeless body like she might disappear. Her bun had come undone in their fight, and her thick, black hair hid half her face from him.

But he could do nothing for her now, nor for the two kwami at their feet. Nothing but wait, alone, clinging to the hope that he hadn’t just committed the ultimate sin against the person he loved most in the whole world. Sobbing, he held her to him and cried into her shoulder.

*It’s all my fault.*

The EMTs found them like that, and they had to carry them both down to the ground level to the ambulance, unable to separate them.

When Gabriel Agreste’s personal mobile flashed with the number for the Paris General Hospital, he rushed out of his study, shoved Nooroo in his jacket over the kwami’s squeaky protests, and drove through two red lights to get to the room the operator had told him about. And there he found his only son, red-faced and shaking like a leaf, as he clutched an unconscious girl’s hand like she might fade away.

Gabriel had arrived so quickly that even the girl’s parents were not yet present, though he suspected that would not remain the case for long. He did not have much time. Adrien took one look at him and burst into tears all over again.

“F-Father,” he said, small and broken and afraid.

And it was then that he saw it, that silver ring on Adrien’s finger that never left it. The face of the girl, Marinette something or other—*she designed a hat for one of my ad campaigns, talented girl*—was the same face he had seen through the eyes of his akumatized victim, come to light under her disintegrating Ladybug mask. He could not unsee it, could not rid himself of the blurry-eyed vision of her pale face through Chat Noir’s eyes—his own son’s eyes. Never had he imagined it would come to this, that his own son—

*My own son…*

“I’m here,” Gabriel said, crossing the room to his grieving child. He took Adrien in his arms without thinking about it and held him close. “I’m here now, son.”

Adrien, oh fragile, innocent Adrien, just crumpled to pieces, overwhelmed. He tore at Gabriel’s lapels and sobbed. Unseemly for a boy of fourteen, almost a man, but Gabriel silenced that niggling voice for once. For once, the boy would have to cry for them both.

“Father,” Adrien blubbered, “sh-she won’t wake up, even after L-Ladybug’s Lucky Charm, she’s… she’s—!”

“I know, son. I know.” But his words did little to soothe Adrien, too distraught to think straight and
Gabriel had had his suspicions about his flighty son, but they had all been dispelled when he’d seen Adrien from afar while Chat Noir fought alongside Ladybug… But whatever he’d thought he’d seen, it had been a lie.

*My own son, all this time…*

And he had corrupted him.

“‘It’s all my fault,” he said.

Adrien sniffled. “What?”

Gabriel hugged him tighter, and Adrien didn’t try to pull away. He couldn’t even remember the last time he’d hugged his son. Not since his wife, Emilie, disappeared last year. His own son, and he couldn’t even bring himself to touch him, to remind himself…

Marinette—Ladybug—lay still in her bed, monitors beeping and recording her vitals. She looked half a corpse trussed up in the white, paper hospital gown, her hair a matted mess. He didn’t know her, didn’t care about her, and yet he could not avert his gaze.

Her Miraculous earrings were dark and dormant, and just an arm’s length away.

Abruptly, Gabriel stiffened and twisted his lips in disgust at his own abhorrent thought. Had he truly fallen so far? To covet an unconscious girl’s Miraculous over the broken body of his only son, whom he had personally corrupted and turned into a mindless weapon? As though sensing Gabriel’s inner turmoil, Adrien looked up at him with those bright, green eyes that reminded him so much of Emilie’s. He was entirely, exquisitely her in every way. And for the first time since she had disappeared, Gabriel was eternally grateful for that.

“Adrien,” he said softly, “it’s time to leave.”

Adrien grew fearful immediately. “Leave? No, I-I can’t leave her like that! I have to t-tell her—”

Gabriel took his son’s face in his hands and wiped away the tears with his thumbs. “No, Adrien. You can’t tell her anything.”

Adrien’s eyes widened as he understood his father’s meaning, the truth in those words. The fear. His secret wasn’t safe, and neither was Marinette’s.

“It’s all right,” Gabriel said. “You’re safe with me.” He glanced at Marinette. “And so is she.”

Nooroo squirmed in his jacket, but Gabriel ignored the butterfly kwami and the growing knot in his stomach. All his work, all this time, every sleepless, lonely night, all down the drain, and for what?

*My own son…*

His breath hitched. “You’re safe with me, Adrien. I swear it.”

Adrien gazed up at him with those bright eyes he’d fallen in love with that day they had placed him in Gabriel’s arms in this very hospital. He’d been crying then, too, such an emotional one, this child, just like his mother. But this was the last time Gabriel would watch Adrien cry. He would sooner die than watch his demons become Adrien’s.

*I’m sorry, Emilie. I can’t break my promise, not even for you.*
He closed his eyes and held his son close, shuddering as he felt his vow sink its claws in, inescapable. Not for her, and not for himself. He would not bend if the price was their only son.

“Let’s go.”

“But Marinette—”

“—will be here tomorrow.”

“But I don’t—”

“Adrien,” Gabriel silenced him. “Please.”

Adrien searched his eyes for something, and god he was so transparent, so open, so much like her that it physically hurt Gabriel to look upon him like this, carrying this terrible weight that Adrien could never, ever know.

Adrien cast a last look at Marinette in her bed and took her hand in his. Gabriel allowed him this final moment, as much as it pained him to watch a story he had already seen play out to its fiery, cataclysmic end once before. But for his only son, all he had left of Emilie, he would hold his tongue just this once.

“My lady,” Adrien whispered, kissing Marinette’s knuckles. “I’m sorry.”

Gabriel’s throat clenched, the guilt and fury almost too much to bear. If they lingered here another minute, he would not be able to contain it. He took Adrien’s other hand and gently, insistently, dragged him away. They had not made it around the corner when Gabriel spotted the couple he recognized as Marinette’s parents—the Dupain-Chengs, they owned that bakery a few blocks down—rushing down the hall with a nurse to Marinette’s room. Gabriel spun and dragged Adrien in the opposite direction, and they avoided detection while Marinette’s parents were too focused on getting to their daughter. As he and Adrien descended the stairs, he could hear a woman burst into tears and wail incoherently, but it was soon washed away in the hospital din.

Adrien was silent the entire ride home, and it was just as well. Gabriel did not trust himself not to say something incriminating in front of his son right now.

Coward, he thought bitterly.

And he was. Gabriel Agreste had always, always been a coward. He had lived a life of regrets and what-ifs, and he’d lost the people he’d loved most because of his own failings. But so help him, he would not lose his only son.

And he would not allow his son to make the same mistakes he had.

So Adrien would never know any of it. He would live a life without loss, without sorrow, without the crippling burden of his own cowardice that was all he had left to cling to, for he had nothing else left. And now, thanks to Gabriel’s own weakness, he never would again.

Nooroo poked his bulbous, purple head out from Gabriel’s lapel and looked up at him with wide, misty eyes. Gabriel said nothing with Adrien in the back seat doubled over and clutching his hair, but with Nooroo often words were not necessary. A side-effect of the Butterfly Miraculous, he supposed. This crushing empathy, and no one to lend an ear but a god who had too much empathy to protest his own servitude.

Gabriel tried to picture Emilie’s face as he remembered it, but it was like trying to remember a dream
upon waking. She slipped through his fingers like smoke, and when he looked up, he could only see their son staring back at him in the rearview mirror.

And he wondered, on those dark, cold nights when Adrien was in his room alone, as he would be for the next fourteen years, what he saw when he looked in the mirror.

Chapter End Notes

That moment when you feel for Gabriel Agreste just a teensy bit. Savor it. I told you this would be a heartbreaker.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

In which Marinette is totally 100% believably Over It™, Adrien is a Shady McShadester, and Chloe and Alya are all of us.

Chapter Notes

Wow, I just want to say I am very surprised (delighted!) at the reaction this has gotten so far. I’m new to the ML fandom, so thank you all so much for giving my writing a chance. I have fallen into the black hole that is my ML obsession and have every intention of setting up camp here. I have a bunch of this fic already drafted… So here’s the official first chapter! Updates will slow down a bit in the future at some point, but damn if I’m not motivated to keep things moving. You have yourselves and your enthusiasm to thank. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

14 years later...

Marinette’s iPhone alarm buzzed angrily and sent her flying out of bed. She swung around like a blind, angry bear and toppled her nightstand lamp, cursed, and rolled over to cover her head with a pillow. Something landed on the pillow and began to bounce.

“Marinette! Rise and shine, you lucky girl! It’s time to get up!” Tikki sang.

“No, it’s not,” Marinette grumbled, her voice muffled by the pillow.

Tikki sighed and tapped the iPhone screen with a delicate, red foot to turn off the blaring alarm. “Yes, it is. It’s 7 a.m., and your meeting downtown is in one hour. You have to get ready!”

“Lies, Tikki.”

“Oh, you don’t believe me?”

“I believe it’s 7 a.m. somewhere in the world, but not here it’s not.”

“Really.” She could just picture Tikki’s compound eyes narrowed and patronizing.

“It’s still dark out. It can’t be morning yet.”

Tikki sighed and, with a strength that belied her tiny bug frame, yanked the pillow from Marinette’s head.

“Hey!”

“You’re right, Marinette. It’s not 7 anymore, it’s 7:04 and you’re going to be late!”
“…Damnit.”

With little choice, because who argues with an all powerful deity as old as the universe, Marinette rolled out of bed and landed on the floor with a thud. She had never been a morning person despite growing up the daughter of bakers. Every day was a struggle, and she was pretty sure she would be struggling for the rest of her adult life. Alya, who was always up at the crack of dawn raring to go, assured her that as they approached thirty, Marinette would need less sleep and find getting up in the mornings easier. More lies.

“It’s 7:07, Marinette,” Tikki said. “Shouldn’t you really get moving?”

Marinette groaned and remained obstinately seated for another thirty seconds, just long enough for Tikki to start hovering. She did that when she was fretting about something, and damn it was effective for how annoying it could be, like a buzzing mosquito that wouldn’t quit. Marinette got up and trudged to the bathroom.

“How schedules 8 a.m. meetings, anyway?” Marinette grumbled.

“Investors who want to give you all their money?” Tikki said.

Marinette smiled over her toothbrush. “Good point.”

She was washed, dressed, and out the door in twenty minutes, which gave her enough time to hail a cab and (hopefully) get to her meeting on time. Bell & Pausini’s offices were in the middle of the downtown financial district, and traffic in the morning was notoriously congested. Marinette escaped the jam a few blocks away, tipped her driver, and ran the rest of the way, her striped purple scarf flailing haphazardly behind her. By the time she made it to reception, her escort was already waiting.

“Morning, Marinette. Do you need a minute?”

Juleka Couffaine was dressed smartly in a grey pant suit and violet satin blouse. Her lusciously long, black hair was twisted in a thick bun that flattered her heart-shaped face. Marinette smiled upon seeing her, even now marveling at how much Juleka had deviated from everyone’s expectations of her back in high school. Fourteen years ago, if anyone had told Marinette that the class goth princess with the purple dye job, fifteen piercings, and extreme diffidence would grow up to become a high-powered corporate attorney at one of Europe’s leading multinational law firms, she would have laughed in their face.

But Marinette wasn’t laughing now as she approached Juleka with a relieved smile. “Hey, sorry I’m late. You know me in the morning.”

Juleka cracked a smile. “And you know how our American friends are.”

Marinette waved her off. “Yeah, yeah, let’s just get this over with.”

“You know, you could sound a little more excited. They want to invest ten million US in your company.”

Marinette smirked. “Yeah, but why couldn’t they throw money at me at 2 p.m.?”

“Okay, okay, let’s just go before you pass out from exhaustion.”

Juleka led her past the sterile lobby to the main part of the law firm, where the client meeting rooms were all set up in one hallway.
“Hey, how are you so upbeat? You were at Hardrock’s concert last night, too.”

“Yeah, but I left at 1 because I’m not averse to sleep, like you are.”

Marinette pouted, and Tikki wriggled in her the pocket of her slacks smugly. “They were playing until 3, and I promised Luka I’d come see him play.”

Juleka smiled and side-eyed her. “You know, Marinette, he wouldn’t disown you if you left a little early next time.”

Marinette shrugged. “I missed the last two, and I promised I’d come this time. It’s just sleep, it’s no big deal. And his band’s really good.”

“You’ve been saying that since high school.”

“I’m a simple girl with simple tastes. Just give me some good indie rock and I’m happy.”

That got a rare laugh out of Juleka. “Well, just so you know, it means a lot to him that you still care so much. And to me, too.”

Juleka’s hand found Marinette’s and squeezed lightly. Marinette blushed at the sincerity from her otherwise reserved friend. It was nothing, really, to support Luka’s band in whatever small way she could. His music had always captivated her since they met in high school so many years ago, and he’d only gotten more talented as they got older. Nothing, not even a college break-up, would change that. It didn’t hurt that he was the gentlest soul Marinette had ever met, a true romantic at heart. The best musicians always were, in her humble opinion.

Juleka led her to a small conference room with a big-screen plasma monitor, a table surrounded by plush leather chairs, and two men who were already seated and waiting. They both rose when the women joined them.

“Miss Couffaine, Miss Dupain-Cheng, it’s good to see you again,” said Will Black, the opposing counsel from Bradley Reinhardt, the American law firm representing Marinette’s investor.

His French was flawless with just the barest hint of an American accent. Marinette had only met him once before, but he was likable enough. Tall, blond, brown eyes, broad shoulders. The typical American boy next door type.

But it was his client that drew Marinette’s full attention. He rose in a flourish, as was his custom in everything he did, and bowed dramatically as if he were greeting a pair of princesses who had deigned to grace him with their divine presence.

“Miss Couffaine,” he said, kissing Juleka’s knuckles, “and Marinette! Lord knows you grow more beautiful every time we cross paths. It’s lovely to see you again after so long.”

Marinette smiled, blushing. “It’s lovely to see you, too, Mr. Legrand.”

“Just Aramis, please,” he said.

Aramis Legrand was a tall Frenchman who could have been a model on the covers of romance novels in his youth. He had long, dark hair pulled back in a stylish ponytail, a trimmed beard that had gone completely grey, and the most intense blue eyes Marinette had ever seen. They were icy and perceptive where hers were deep and tranquil. But there was nothing icy about Aramis, and he proved it by taking Marinette by the hand and guiding her to a seat at the table like a gracious maître d’. He was an older man, already past 60, but he had a youthful spirit full of energy and optimism,
and he was the wealthiest man Marinette had ever met.

“So, shall we get started?” Will said, opening up a leather briefcase and pulling out some documents. “I have the term sheet prepared here, as discussed. Redlines to the last versions you saw are here,” he pushed a packet marked up in red and blue toward Juleka. “We incorporated your suggestions and made some changes to the anti-dilution provisions, as discussed.”

Juleka methodically looked over the term sheet, while Aramis continued to beam at Marinette.

“Once the lawyers work their magic, Marinette, I’d like to see what new ideas you have for your spring line. And you mentioned the last time we spoke about expanding to Shanghai?”

Marinette lit up. “Yes, of course, I have some preliminary designs already drawn up that I’d love to send you. And as for Shanghai, that’s the goal, at least, if I can get the capital and find the right local partners for a joint venture.”

“Well, I know I can help with all that. I have many contacts in Shanghai. A meeting shouldn’t be too difficult to procure.”

“I’d really appreciate that, thank you.”

Aramis smiled. “But of course! When I met you while you were still a graduate student, I knew immediately that you were going places. I’m a gambling man, I’m not ashamed to say, and I saw a good bet in you.”

Aramis had been her first investor to stick around. She’d had one other potential investor who’d made it far along in the term sheet negotiations, but ultimately backed out at the last minute, devastating Marinette and her career prospects. Without funding, she would never be able to incorporate, launch her brand, and cover the high fixed costs associated with any startup fashion boutique. But her luck had always had a way of finding her again, and it found her just at the right time in the form of Aramis Legrand, former hedge fund manager, philanthropist, and high fashion connoisseur. He’d spent much of his youth in the United States, where he’d discovered his love of high fashion at the New York fashion shows, and thus began a life-long love affair with art. Marinette could not have asked for better luck than meeting him randomly at an industry function she’d attended with her graduating class. A few glasses of wine and hours of conversation later, and she had a firm offer for one million US dollars handwritten on a cocktail napkin, with the promise of more should she prove herself a good investment. And now, she was ready to cash in on that promise.

Juleka explained the revised terms to Marinette, who trusted her judgment better than anyone’s. Juleka had been helping Marinette since she’d started looking for investors, and together they had risen in the ranks of their respective professions.

“Okay, Marinette, Mr. Legrand. We just need your signatures, and I’ll have my team start drafting the financing documents,” Juleka said. “Will, I’ll be in touch with our initial drafts next week sometime.”

“That works for me,” Will said.

They got up to say their goodbyes and thank-yous, but Aramis stopped Marinette. “I realize this is terribly last minute, but do you have any plans on Saturday evening?”

“Saturday? No, not in particular.” Marinette had spoken with Alya about possibly grabbing dinner, but they hadn’t decided anything concrete yet.
“Excellent! Well, you may or may not know, but there will be an industry networking event at Le Grand Paris Hotel.”

Marinette gaped at him. “Y-Yes, I know it! The Trefoil Gala.” It was only one of the most exclusive fashion industry parties in Europe. Invitations were almost impossible to get without an insider’s help, but the cream of the crop of Europe’s corporate fashion industry were known to attend every year for a night of dancing, drinking, and dabbling. It was every young fashionista’s dream to get a foot in the door at the Trefoil Gala.

“Ah, you’re familiar with it! I can’t say I’m surprised. Well, if you’re not busy, I have a couple extra tickets I need to get rid of. Would you like to take them off my hands?”

Marinette could have literally cried. This man, this angel, had given her the money to launch her business, his undying faith in her talent and drive, and now the chance to attend the Trefoil Gala.

“I-I would love to take your hands!” she stammered.

Aramis laughed, and Marinette realized her slip too late.

“I mean, the tickets, um, I’d love to go,” she said lamely, cursing her perpetual bashful streak. “Sorry, that came out wrong.”

“It’s perfectly all right! I have my answer, and you shall have those tickets. I’ll leave your name with security, so just show up with your plus one and you’ll have no problems. I look forward to seeing you there. We’ll have a toast to the next step in our partnership, yes?”

“A-Absolutely!” Marinette almost tripped over herself to agree with him, and Juleka shot her an amused look. “I’ll see you there, Mr. Legrand.”

“Aramis, please. Must I always correct you?” The smile in his bright, blue eyes belied his amusement.

“Aramis, of course. Thank you so much.”

He donned a bolero and took his heavy trench coat from the receptionist, who had stored it for him. “Then, until Saturday. Enjoy the rest of your week. I’d say you’ve earned it.”

Marinette was left standing with Juleka in the lobby, utterly dumbfounded.

“Well,” Juleka said, “I sort of have a mountain of work to get back to, so…”

“Shh,” Marinette shushed her. “Let me just bask for a minute here.”

Juleka rolled her eyes, but she bit back a smirk and nudged Marinette playfully. “He’s right, you know. You earned this investment, and this party. You’ve been working your ass off the last three years, and you’re finally starting to be profitable. You do deserve the good things coming your way.”

Marinette warmed at Juleka’s kind words. “Thanks. But if I’ve earned it, so have you. Where would I be without my badass super lawyer to guide me?”

Juleka chuckled. “Bankrupt and out of business. And definitely not invited to some swanky fashion party. Have fun on Saturday. Tell Alya I said hi.”

Of course Juleka would know Marinette would bring Alya as her plus one. A part of her felt bad not inviting Juleka first, but as though Juleka could read her mind, she put up her hands.
“Hey, I have plans with Rose this weekend that I’ve been looking forward to all month. And you know I hate those big schmoozy parties. I may have sold out to Big Law, but I’m not about flip on everything I ever stood for.”

Marinette laughed. “Whatever you say. If you ask me, you’d get scouted as the next Gisele within five minutes at a party like this one.”

“You see this face?” Juleka deadpanned. “This is my sexy model face. Can you tell how excited I am?”

“You know, the irony is that you actually do have the smoky model look down pat.”

Juleka gently nudged her out the door. “And that’s my cue to stop feeding the troll. I’ll see you later. I’ll be in touch with those financing docs, so check your email for once.”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard you.”

Marinette practically skipped out the door even without Juleka’s encouragement. She could hardly contain her excitement—the Trefoil Gala! It was almost too good to be true. She had to call Alya immediately.

“Psst, Marinette! Are we going to a party?” Tikki whispered from the folds of Marinette’s scarf.

“We sure are,” Marinette said. “But it’s not just any party—think Cinderella with the fairy godmother, the pumpkin, and the prince. This is the real deal. I could meet potential investors tonight who could take me to the next level in a really big way.”

Tikki giggled. “Well, I’m happy if you’re happy. And I like parties, especially if there’s a prince involved.”

Marinette smiled. “I don’t know about a prince, but I’d be super happy to get some new industry contacts.” She suddenly paled. “Oh my god, what the hell am I going to wear?! I’m a professional fashion designer, but I have absolutely nothing to wear. Who even am I?”

Tikki just sighed. Her Chosen was always so dramatic about these things, quick to overreact, and just as quick to settle on a plan of action.

“That’s it. I’m calling Alya as soon as we find a cab. She’ll know what to do.”

And that was that. Tikki grinned and burrowed back into Marinette’s scarf for the ride home.

By the time Saturday came around, Marinette was somewhere between exploding with excitement and an all-out panic attack courtesy of, well, her own typical self.

“Girl, you have got to chill the fuck out,” Alya said as she worked on weaving the perfect braided bun. “God, I always forget how much of a pain Asian hair can be. I need, like, a gallon of hairspray just to get it to behave.”

“Maybe I should just wear it down,” Marinette said as she touched up her makeup in the vanity. They had decided to get ready at Marinette Designs, her boutique uptown, which was considerably more spacious and better equipped for party prep than her tiny one-bedroom apartment.

“Oh? Giving up then, are we?”
Marinette scowled at Alya’s goading. “Fine. Just go easy on the hair spray, if you can.”

Alya’s hair and makeup were already done. She had that mermaid hair that always looked good down no matter the occasion, her auburn locks thick and wavy and just so perfect, always. Marinette smiled at her through the mirror, and Alya narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

“What?”

“Just thinking about how I’ll have the hottest plus one at the party tonight.”

Alya grinned. “Tell me something I don’t know. Okay, that should do it. Let’s take a selfie, c’mere.”

Marinette rolled her eyes. “Seriously?”

“I promised Nino. Shush up and put on your best high fashion face.” Alya puckerer her full lips for the iPhone camera and balanced it in front of them both.

Marinette bit back a smile and tried her best to look aloof and serious, but Alya tickling her in the ribs ruined it and she burst out laughing just as the flash went off.

“Ah, perfect,” Alya said, typing out a quick message to her fiancé. “That’s some smokin’ haute couture right there.”

Marinette snorted at the picture. “You can see all the way up my nose.”

“And isn’t it just your best angle?” Alya wiggled her eyebrows salaciously, and they shared another laugh. “All right, Miss Fashionista, let’s get our party dresses on and get moving, or we’ll be late.”

She paused, considering. “Actually, what’s the rule on being fashionably late to a fashion party? Do you think they just bump the start time up an hour anticipating everyone will arrive late?”

“It wouldn’t be fashionably late if everyone did it.”

“Exactly. I feel like I’ve stumbled upon the great mystery of our time.”

“Okay, Ronan Farrow, let’s leave the investigative journalism aside for now. We have a party to get to.”

They changed into their formalwear and did one final check in the mirror. Marinette’s winter *qipao*-inspired dress was dark navy silk embroidered with golden suns. The long, black sleeves were thin but warm, and contrasted with Marinette’s light complexion. Alya was brighter in a pale lilac empire waist gown. Both dresses were *Marinette* originals, never before worn.

“Oh girl, what did I tell you? The *qipao* looks *uh*-mazing on you,” Alya preened.

After an entire day wasted on what to wear tonight, Marinette had taken Alya’s advice and altered an existing dress she’d been neglecting. The embroidery had taken all her free time the rest of the week, but she was proud of her work and even prouder to be able to wear her own label tonight.

“Thanks, Alya,” Marinette said, blushing at the compliment. “You look great, too.”

“I know.” Alya winked deviously. “So come on, let’s go already!”

They caught a ride share to Le Grand Paris Hotel, and despite the usual Saturday night traffic, they made decent time. Marinette had been to this hotel a number of times in her youth, but never as a guest. Seeing the white stone facade lit up with winter blue and violet light in honor of the event tonight gave her pause.
“Kinda weird being here, huh?” Alya said. “I think the last time I actually set foot in this place was back in high school when Jagged Stone got akumatized.” Alya shivered at the memory.

“I remember,” Marinette said. She recalled that day as clearly as if it had happened yesterday. “His pet crocodile turned into a dragon.”

Alya made a face. “You know, I feel like anywhere else in the world, talking about that stuff would get us thrown in the insane asylum. What even is Paris?”

“Well, it was a long time ago.”

“You’re telling me. Not that I miss those days or the hell we all went through,” Alya shuddered as they made their way to the lobby entrance, perhaps recalling her own time as the akumatized Lady Wifi. “But I do miss having Ladybug and Chat Noir around to save the day all the time.”

Marinette bit her lip so hard she feared she may draw blood. “Yeah, I guess so.”

They followed the signs through the reception area to the elevators, which would take them to the penthouse ballroom for the gala. The lobby was just as Marinette remembered it all those years ago, red carpet and Doric columns and white marble floors. Other people dressed smartly for a fancy party were heading for the elevator bank, and Alya and Marinette fell in with them.

“It’s just so weird though, you know?” Alya said as they settled in the back of the elevator and rode it to the top floor. “I mean, one day it was all Ladybug and Chat Noir, fighting crime and saving the day, and the next it was all gone, like that.” She snapped her fingers for emphasis.

“Well, there were no more akumatized victims running around, right?” Marinette hedged. “Hawk Moth retired.”

Alya snorted. “Yeah, and that’s what’s so damn suspicious! Oh come on, you don’t find it a little weird? Dude just decided to give it all up without so much as a parting super villain monologue? No one ever even figured out what his point was. I’m telling you, something about it is weird.”

Even fourteen years later, Alya still wouldn’t let go of what she knew had to be a killer scoop. She had graduated from the Ladyblog and taken a deep dive into the world of investigative journalism, working several freelance gigs until landing a permanent position at the Gazette covering a broad range of political and economic issues. Her job often took her out of Paris to meet with sources and interview witnesses, much to Marinette’s and Nino’s worry. Alya was careful and smart, but no one was safe in a conflict zone, least of all a foreign reporter.

But the Ladyblog was still up and running, despite the truncated content and few hits it got these days. There wasn’t much use for a blog dedicated to a superhero people had rarely seen or heard from in fourteen years. Hawk Moth wasn’t the only one who had mysteriously retired without explanation.

But Marinette said nothing of her thoughts. It was another life, another girl, and it had ended a long time ago on that sweltering, summer night in the arms of a masked boy she had never seen again.

“Hey, you okay?” Alya said suddenly. “You suddenly look a little down. Not pooping out on me early, are you?”

Marinette blinked and forced herself to smile, banishing those dark memories to the farthest corner of her mind where they had remained undisturbed for years. “No, I’m fine. Just, um, a little nervous I guess. Networking can be exhausting for me, you know.”
“Well then, it’s a good thing this is a party where we’re meant to have fun. Don’t look at me like that, Marinette, you’re going to have some fun tonight if it kills us both. You’ve been working yourself into an early grave for the last three years, and it’s time to live a little. Don’t you have a new term sheet to celebrate?”

Marinette forgot her worries momentarily and beamed. “Yeah, I do.”

“Well then.” Alya offered her arm in a comical flourish as they exited the elevator together with the small group of partygoers ahead of them. “Shall we?”

Marinette grinned and made a show of fanning herself daintily before taking Alya’s offered arm. “We shall.”

They laughed together, and Marinette checked them in with security at the doors. She’d half expected them to turn her away, but her name was on the list just as Aramis promised it would be, and soon she and Alya were escorted inside. Marinette could not help but stare openly at the lavish decorations.

They had gone all out with the winter theme. The wide room, which was a ballroom ringed by standing tables, had a glass ceiling open to the night sky and the blue and violet search lights spinning outside. A live band played soft jazz in the far corner while gorgeous partygoers dressed in everything from Chanel to Calvin Klein danced and mingled on the dance floor. A full-service bar stretched along the western wall decorated for the occasion with ice and snow garnish. Waiters wore three-piece tuxedos with white gloves and black masks. In fact, now that Marinette looked around, she saw that almost everyone in the room was wearing masks. A table near the entrance was handing them out to anyone who wanted one.

Alya, of course, delighted in the opportunity and dragged Marinette to the table. These masks were much fancier than the plain ones the wait staff had donned, and Marinette found herself looking covetously at a black satin harlequin mask embroidered with lace and tiny rhinestones.

“Yes, that one, absolutely,” Alya said, accepting a white mask embroidered with purple forget-me-nots that matched her dress. Each mask was different, and Marinette wondered who of the many famous designers here tonight could have been responsible for them.

“Excellent choice, miss,” said the man overseeing the mask distribution. “That one is one of Mr. Agreste’s most successful designs.”

“Aestre?” Marinette said as she fingered the black mask she’d tentatively selected. “These are Agreste Fashion’s masks?”

The staff person smiled. “Of course. Gabriel Agreste himself designed each one with tonight’s gala in mind. Please, take whichever ones you like. They are compliments of AF for all tonight’s guests.”

Once they had their masks, Alya said, “Gabriel Agreste, there’s a name I haven’t heard in a while.”

AF had opened a new corporate office in New York City across the pond, and Gabriel Agreste himself had traveled there to oversee the operations and build AF’s brand stateside. That had been fourteen years ago, and since then, AF had enjoyed more and more success as they expanded into Tokyo, Hong Kong, Sydney, and Milan, among other places. What had begun as a premier French fashion house was now an international phenomenon able to compete with the likes of the biggest fashion powerhouses in the world.

“He’s one of the most powerful businessmen in fashion today,” Marinette said. Unlike Alya, she had
kept up closely with developments in her industry, including AF’s incredible growth over the years. “But he hasn’t been in France for years, apparently.”

Alya gave her an unreadable look. “You mean, since he pulled Adrien out of high school and shipped them both across the world without so much as a goodbye?”

Marinette winced. “Technically, yes.”

They had stopped at a standing table, and Alya crossed her arms with a look Marinette knew all too well. That was Alya’s reporter scowl, and she wasn’t going to let this go. “Marinette, is that why you looked so down in the elevator? Do you know something about AF’s involvement tonight?”

It was no use lying to Alya. She’d heard through the grapevine that Gabriel Agreste himself was back in Paris since last month, and that he was even rumored to be making an appearance at tonight’s gala. Marinette had never really known the man personally, having met him only a handful of times in high school, but he had been the first person to see any sort of potential in her as a budding fashion designer. She’d be lying if she said she didn’t wonder what he might think of her now that she had made a name for herself, albeit a modest one.

“Not really, just that Gabriel Agreste is supposed to be in Paris for a while.”

Alya studied her closely. “Uh-huh. And is that really what’s on your mind?”

Marinette frowned. “Alya, please. It’s been years. I haven’t thought about him like that in a long time. I haven’t thought about him at all in a long time.”

“Adrien Agreste. You can say his name, you know. It’s not gonna summon a swamp demon from another dimension or anything.”

Marinette’s frown deepened. “Yeah.”

Alya laid a reassuring hand on Marinette’s shoulder. “Hey, I know they say time heals all wounds, even broken hearts. But it’s okay to still feel sad, you know. His dad did shuttle him off, and you didn’t get to see him at all to say goodbye while you were in the hospital. It’s okay to still feel bad about that.”

Everyone else from their class had come to the hospital to visit Marinette while she was recovering from a devastating incident she had vowed not to dwell on or discuss with anyone, lest she reveal her secret identity as Ladybug, but Adrien hadn’t come. He’d sent her a get-well-soon card, generic and simple, and some pink carnations, which had made Marinette’s heart flutter at the time, but looking back over the years, she realized just how far apart they had always been. As much as she’d cried her eyes out finding out that not just one, but two important boys in her life were suddenly gone without a trace, the true sadness was a subtler beast that grew over time and she realized she didn’t really have a right to be sad about Adrien.

She’d never really known him or been close to him, after all. A generic card and some mail-order flowers only proved it. And that, perhaps more than his abrupt departure from her life, had stung the most.

“Can we talk about anything else, please?” Marinette said. “I thought we were supposed to be having fun tonight?”

Alya hesitated, unwilling to let things lie when her best friend did not seem totally, one hundred percent, okay. Marinette loved that about Alya, her genuine compassion and concern for others.
“You’re absolutely right.” She pulled on her mask and fluttered her long eyelashes. “So, do I look like I’m ready for some fun or what?”

Marinette smiled and pulled on her own mask, careful of the bun Alya had torn out a chunk of her hair to fix up just right. “You look like you’re ready for trouble.”

Alya’s hazel eyes glittered mischievously. “That’s the spirit. Now, let’s go find some millionaire playboys to charm.”

Marinette laughed, but she also knew Alya wasn’t entirely joking. Well, tonight was supposed to be about networking as much as it was about having some fun, right? And if she could meet some rich businesspeople with an eye for fashion and a willing ear, what was the harm in that?

They stopped at the bar first and ordered drinks, and then began to mingle with the guests. Despite her years working in the industry, Marinette was forever amazed at just how beautiful so many of these people were. There were more than a few super models about, many of them on the arms of corporate suits and high-powered designers. People were friendly enough, and she suspected that many of them were here strictly for the expensive booze, good music, and eye candy to unwind.

Alya had been pulled into conversation with a middle-aged woman who looked like she’d once been a super model. They were talking animatedly and gesticulating. Leave it to Alya to make friends wherever she went. Marinette excused herself from a conversation with two fellow designers to grab some food from a passing waiter, but had too much between her drink and the little plates to carry gracefully all at once. She made her way to a table nearby and set down the couple plates she’d grabbed. There was a leggy blonde woman standing there typing on her cell phone, and she didn’t notice Marinette immediately.

“So, do you mind if I share your table? I’ll just be a few minutes,” Marinette said.

“It’s fine,” said the woman, “I was just about to leave…”

They locked eyes with each other, and Marinette was struck with a slap of recognition meeting those dark cobalt eyes. “Chloe Bourgeois?” she blurted out.

Chloe wore no mask and was dressed in an elegant, floor-length, black cocktail dress with a pastel yellow sash around the middle. She frowned as she struggled to place Marinette’s face behind the mask. It didn’t take her long. “…Marinette Dupain-Cheng.” She set her phone down on the table. “Wow, I didn’t actually expect to run into you here tonight.”

Chloe wore no mask and was dressed in an elegant, floor-length, black cocktail dress with a pastel yellow sash around the middle. She frowned as she struggled to place Marinette’s face behind the mask. It didn’t take her long. “…Marinette Dupain-Cheng.” She set her phone down on the table. “Wow, I didn’t actually expect to run into you here tonight.”

Marinette was immediately on the defensive. Chloe was still obnoxiously pretty, tall, and had that air of superiority that followed her like a bad smell. It had been years since she’d seen her former high school classmate, but old habits died hard, she supposed. Chloe must have sensed something in her expression because she pressed her glossy lips in a thin line, annoyed.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she said. “Only that this event is exclusive. Not many independent designers can snag an invitation.” She looked her up and down. “One of yours, I assume?”

Marinette could do little more than stare like an idiot for a moment as she processed what Chloe had said. “I… Yeah, this is one of my designs.” She shook her heard. “Sorry, how do you know any of that?”

Chloe looked at her with an icy boredom that suggested she was trying very hard not to say something condescending. “This is my hotel. It’s my job to know who’s on the guest list for an event I’ve been planning for months.”
“Your hotel?”

Chloe crossed her arms. “That’s right. Problem?”

Marinette suddenly felt a little embarrassed for reasons she could not name. “No, sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. Um, your father… I thought he owned this hotel, right?”

“This one, and every other branch of it from London to Beijing. He’s retired now. I’m running all the operations here in Paris.”

“Wow,” Marinette said, unable to keep the awe from her voice. “You?”

At this, Chloe bristled. “Yes, me. No need to sound so incredulous. I did graduate from the top hotel management school in the States, for your information. I know what I’m doing.”

Marinette closed her mouth before she could catch any flies. She blushed. “I’m sorry, I… I guess it’s just a surprise. A good surprise.” She swallowed her nerves. “I mean, good for you.”

Chloe seemed to weigh her words, searching for any hint of disingenuousness, but found none. “Yeah. Good for you, too. If you’re here, you must be doing something right.”

It was just too bizarre having what amounted to a passably normal conversation with Chloe Bourgeois, of all people. Marinette keenly remembered how blue in the face Chloe would get in her anger, usually with Marinette. The girl had simply loathed Marinette with every fiber of her being for the longest time, and for seemingly no other reason than that Marinette was well-liked, nice, and had a crush on Adrien Agreste, Chloe’s oldest friend. Where had that girl gone? There seemed to be little and less of the catty high school bully in the woman standing across from Marinette now.

“There you are,” said a man dressed in a sleek, black Hugo Boss three-piece suit and a white mask as he drew up to their table with long strides. “Way to abandon me to the wolves, Chlo.”

Chloe rolled her eyes like she could not be bothered. “Some of us have actual work to do.”

“I’m working,” the man pouted.

“Flirting with super models isn’t work. You’re such a man-child, A. This isn’t your second year MBA anymore.”

Marinette stared at the newcomer, suddenly tense. He was north of six feet with styled, dirty-blond hair, a leonine profile, and very clearly in peak physical condition from the way he filled out his well-tailored suit. And that voice, a soft baritone that she recognized the way one recognizes an old song on the radio, filled her with an inexplicable nostalgia. When his luminous, green eyes alighted on her, Marinette knew she was blushing behind her black mask and staring. Openly.

Because no way. No fucking way was he who she thought he was. No. Way.

As if someone had flipped a switch on him, he turned his full attention to Marinette and flourished— practically glowed with charm. “Hello there,” he said in a subdued timbre he absolutely did on purpose.

Marinette squeaked. Like a mouse caught in a devastatingly handsome trap, she literally eeped. He sensed her embarrassment and smiled brilliantly as he offered his hand to take hers.

“Adrien Agreste,” he said. “And you are…?”
Marinette chanced a look at Chloe, who actually looked *amused* as she watched this happen. She didn’t fly off the handle in a jealous rage, or shriek and protest like she may have in high school. No, she was *enjoying* watching Marinette squirm at the misunderstanding, those blue eyes laughing with her growing smirk. Who *was* she?!

Marinette’s body moved without her consent. She held out her trembling hand for Adrien, which he took and kissed her knuckles.

“Gorgeous dress,” he said in that same, husky, flirty voice that was starting to send Marinette into a panic. “Who are you wearing tonight?”

*Oh my god.*

Chloe couldn’t contain her laughter anymore. “Okay, enough, even I can’t watch this horror show go on.” She put a friendly hand on Adrien’s shoulder. “A, you remember Marinette Dupain-Cheng. She was at Dupont with us before you moved to New York.”

As though he’d been doused in ice water, Adrien tensed and his grip on Marinette’s fingers tightened uncomfortably. He soon released her as though he’d been burned, awkwardly righted himself, and flushed as red as Marinette’s lipstick. The abrupt change in him from suave ladies’ man to pre-pubescent teenager caught looking at porn for the first time was almost enough for Marinette to momentarily forget her own embarrassment and discomfort. She forced herself to breathe deeply, and then she carefully removed her mask to look at him directly.

“Hi,” she said, stupidly proud that her voice didn’t sound as weak as she felt.

It was Adrien’s turn to gawk, and it took him just a second too long to gather his bearings. Marinette got the strange feeling that he wasn’t just feeling surprised, but a little afraid. He fumbled with his own white mask, and when it came away, Marinette came face to face with those blazing green eyes she had once swooned and sighed over in her naive youth.

“Marinette,” he said, almost a question. “You’re…”

His gaze fell to her abdomen, but averted just as quickly. Marinette caught it, though, and instantly paled. Of course he would remember her stint in the hospital. It was the last thing that had happened before he’d left town forever. She was depressingly not surprised that that was how he remembered her, at her lowest and most vulnerable.

How would he know? *He never even said goodbye,* taunted a bitter little voice in the back of her head.

She ignored it and forced herself to smile. “I’m a fashion designer. That’s why I’m here tonight, I was invited.” She peered at him. “I’m guessing you’re here with AF’s models?”

Adrien was not quite so pale anymore as he recovered from the shock of his mistake. But even so, he was looking at her nervously, like she might crush him or humiliate him somehow.

*Weird.*

“Oh, Adrien doesn’t do that anymore,” Chloe said when it was painfully obvious that Adrien had not yet regained full control of his bodily functions. “He’s an old maid in super model years now.”

Chloe’s teasing snapped him out of his uncomfortable, embarrassed trance and he shot her a withering look. “You make it sound like I age in dog years or something. I’m not that old.”
“Twenty-eight is old in that business.” To Marinette she said, “Adrien just finished his MBA in the States, and he’s back at AF now as a VP of Finance.”

“Manager, not a VP,” Adrien corrected her. “I’m working my way up.”

Chloe rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. You’ve basically been doing this job since college. The only reason Gabriel won’t give you the title is because of your age. Not a lot of new MBAs come in as VPs right out the gate.”

Adrien chuckled. “A second ago I was an old maid.”

Chloe nudged him playfully. “Do try and keep up.”

“Hah, yes ma’am.”

Marinette watched their easy interaction with no small degree of fascination. They were like two old friends with no secrets between them, or possibly more than that. And it was silly, and little bit petty, but on some level, the fourteen-year-old girl in Marinette could not help but feel a small prickle of envy at their closeness.

Chloe’s phone beeped, and she quickly scanned through whatever text she’d just gotten. “Well, as entertaining as this…whatever this is, I have an actual job to get back to.” She pointed a finger at Adrien like an old schoolmarm. “You, behave. I’m not driving your drunk ass home at three in the goddamn morning again.”

With that, Chloe melted into the crowd of glamorous guests, her phone to her ear. And suddenly, Marinette was alone with Adrien Agreste: corporate fashion suit, former super model, and the keeper of her teenage sexual awakening.

Jesus Christ, you did not just think the words ‘teenage sexual awakening.’

Adrien, while clearly cultured and skilled in many mysterious arts, thankfully had not yet acquired the ability to read the minds of formerly infatuated women from the way he was watching her thoughtfully. The longer they stood there just watching each other, the more uncomfortable Marinette felt.

“So,” she said, trying to come up with something to say that would allow her to duck out of here as soon as possible without being rude, “been a while.”

“Fourteen years,” Adrien said.

“Who’s counting?” Marinette immediately regretted her words at the look he gave her.

Wow, way to go, Mari-nut. Obviously he’s counting—he literally put a number on it.

She wanted to dissolve. Right there, like a little escargot in salt, just shrivel up in her qipao as if she had never been there at all. It would have been less painful than the awkward tension sucking the very life out of her the longer she stood here with Adrien Agreste: actual stranger she hadn’t seen in fourteen fucking years because of course she was counting, whom she’d never actually known on any kind of personal level, and who had never even said goodbye—

“I should apologize,” he interrupted her private lambasting, “for not recognizing you earlier.” He scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “And for making a complete idiot of myself coming on to you like that…”
Oh.

*Oh no.*

Had someone told him that back-of-the-head-scratch thing was unbearably cute? Did he just do that on purpose?

“Definitely on purpose,” she muttered to herself without thinking.

“Sorry?” he said, leaning closer to hear her better over the music and the din of voices. He even *smelled* hot. That cologne was definitely Paco Rabanne, subtly floral.

*Do. NOT. Smell. Him.*

Which, admittedly, was a little difficult considering he was leaning towards her. Marinette leaned back.

“Uh, you didn’t do it on purpose!” Marinette hedged. “I mean, um…” She snatched her mask from the table and brought it up between them. “I was wearing a mask, so of course you wouldn’t know it’s me after all this time.”

He looked at her strangely, almost suspiciously, like he didn’t believe a word she said. But when he took the mask from her and rubbed the folded satin and lace in his fingers, there was something… almost tender about the way he handled it.

“No, I guess not,” he said.

They stood there like that—him fondling her mask, her gripping her gin and tonic like a lifeline—for what seemed like an eternity. Of all the people Marinette had thought about running in to tonight, her teenage crush was *not* one of them. She honestly thought she would never see this man again for the rest of her life, and she had come to terms with that truth a long time ago. He was wealthy and beautiful, his father was the CEO of a growing, multinational corporation—people like him were a kind of royalty, never meant to linger in one place among the little people for long.

“*Adrien?!*” said Alya, who was suddenly at Marinette’s side holding two glasses of Merlot, one of which she passed to Marinette.

Marinette gratefully accepted the drink and downed a large gulp. She made a mental note to grovel at Alya’s feet later for her impeccable timing and thought to libations.

“Alya, hi,” Adrien said, recognizing her even behind her mask, which she promptly removed to properly stare at him.

“Wow, talk about a blast from the past. What’re you doing here?”

“He’s a VP at AF,” Marinette said, intensely interested in her wine glass.

“Manager,” Adrien corrected her without thinking. They caught each other’s eyes, and he promptly averted his gaze. “I’m a senior manager in the finance department.”

“Well that’s…something,” Alya said, trying and failing to be polite.

Was that… Was he *blushing*?

Alya gave Marinette a reassuring arm around her shoulders, and Marinette could have melted at the silent encouragement. Alya was here for her no matter what she was up against, even her former
high school crush.

“Marinette, there you are! I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Aramis Legrand had spotted Marinette and was heading directly for her, two glasses of champagne
in hand. He handed one to Marinette, grinning from ear to ear.

“Aramis! You’re here,” Marinette said lamely, blindly accepting the champagne flute and
abandoning her half-drunk wine goblet. His sudden appearance seemed to command the light in the
room and offered Marinette a welcome respite from focusing on Adrien.

“But of course! And now that I’ve found you, we shall have our toast, as promised.” He noticed
Alya then and beamed. “Ah, and who is your lovely friend?”

Alya flushed prettily, and Marinette found her confidence again. “This is Alya, my plus one. We’ve
been friends since high school. She’s an investigatory journalist.”

“Enchanté,” Aramis said, dipping his head and taking Alya’s hand to kiss politely. “A friend of
Marinette’s is a friend of mine. Aramis Legrand, at your service, mademoiselle.”

“Aramis Legrand?” Adrien said. “As in, Legrand Capital?”

“My hedge fund, yes,” Aramis said, glancing at Adrien. “Formerly, of course. I’m retired. And you
are…?”

“Adrien Agreste, sir. I-I was an MBA intern at your hedge fund’s New York office two summers
ago…”

Aramis peered at him. “Agreste, you say… Ah! Of course, you must be Gabriel’s son! I’d know that
strong nose anywhere.”

“You know my father personally?”

Aramis smiled enigmatically. “We have a little history, Gabriel Agreste and myself. An intern, you
say? I see my colleagues were unable to sway you to our side of the table in the end if you’re back
with AF, yes?”

“A-Ah, well, it was a difficult decision in the end,” Adrien said.

Aramis just smiled. “Not so difficult, I think. You have an eye for beauty, like your father. I can
always tell these things.” He gestured at Marinette and Alya. “After all, here you are surrounded by
beautiful, talented women, are you not?”

Alya was practically glowing with delight at Aramis’s compliments, but Marinette had heard quite
enough. “Adrien’s just an old high school acquaintance,” she said a little more harshly than she’d
intended. “We haven’t even seen each other in years.”

Aramis frowned. “Oh no, then it appears I’m interrupting an important reunion.”

“Oh, interrupt away,” Alya said dreamily.

“No!” Marinette blurted out. “I-I mean, you’re not interrupting anything. Uh, here!” She raised her
champagne flute. “A toast, you promised we’d have one, right?”

Aramis looked like he might have been put off, but to Marinette’s relief he smiled and clinked his
glass to hers after all. “Of course! Cheers to you, Marinette Dupain-Cheng: fashion’s newest rising
star. You will do great things, I’m sure of it. After all, I would not have invested so much in you if I didn’t believe it!”

“You’re her investor?” Adrien asked.

“We just signed a new Series Seed term sheet this week. Marinette has plans to expand into Shanghai in the future, isn’t that right?”

“Well, yeah, that’s the plan once I’ve found a suitable local partner,” Marinette said, chancing a glance back at Adrien, who looked oddly contemplative. “That, and I’ll be launching my spring line at the end of the season.”

“And I very much look forward to it,” Aramis gushed.

“I see,” Adrien said. He glanced at Marinette askance. “Congratulations. You seem to be doing well for yourself.”

“Thank you,” Marinette said, proud. She was doing well, and it felt damn good to be able to say that out loud to someone who had always done well in everything he’d ever tried. The butterflies she’d been wrestling with upon seeing Adrien in the flesh again had mercifully subsided. Aramis’s timing was impeccable.

“Careful now, young Agreste. I know very well how AF operates, poaching fresh new talent before they can make it big on their own. I’m afraid Marinette Designs is under my protection for the time being, but I look forward to seeing what your in-house designers will produce come spring.”

“Of course,” Adrien said. “I think it’ll be a lucrative season for French fashion.”

“For some of us, at least.” Aramis raised his glass to Marinette, and she almost melted in the presence of his very obvious, very vocal faith in her abilities. “Anyway, Marinette, I must be on my way. I have some other business to attend to, I’m afraid. Please, enjoy the party with your friends. I’ll be in touch, of course.”

“Thank you, Aramis, for everything,” Marinette said.

Alya just giggled dreamily, and he excused himself to rejoin the party.

“Oh man, Marinette,” Alya said, “that’s your sugar daddy? For real? He’s a total silver fox!”

Marinette blushed furiously. “He’s my lead investor, not my sugar daddy! Christ, Alya!”

Alya placed a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. “Oh, honey.”

Adrien, whom they had both forgotten was still there, cleared his throat. “That’s impressive that Aramis Legrand invested in you at this stage,” he said. “He must have seen something truly inspired in your work.”

Before Marinette could respond, Alya was leaning across the table. “Count on it, Agreste. Marinette won the 2017 Paris Fashion Week’s Newcomer Award. You’ve missed a hell of a lot.”
Adrien looked between the two of them, his expression unreadable. “Clearly.”

“ Weird seeing you again, though,” Alya went on. “You in Paris long?”

“ Why?”

Alya shrugged him off like he didn’t matter at all. “Oh, you know, just wondering if I should let my fiancé know. You remember Nino Lahiffe, right? ‘Bout yea tall, glasses, drops the sick beats, formerly your best friend before you dropped off the face of the earth without so much as a goodbye?”

Marinette resisted the urge to groan. She had a feeling she was going to get an earful from Alya about this bizarre blast from the past encounter later tonight.

“Fiancé,” Adrien repeated, his eyes drawn to the diamond engagement ring on Alya’s finger. “…I guess congratulations are in order all around.”

A pretty redhead nearly of a height with Adrien in her four inch pumps had made her way to their table and reached for him. “There you are! Hey, come join us, we’re opening up the Dom Pérignon.”

She was already dragging Adrien away from the table before he could respond properly. “Oh, right, I’m coming.” He awkwardly waved to Marinette and Alya as an afterthought. “Good to see you both.”

They just watched him go, and Marinette raised her hand in a wave, but he was no longer looking at her and disappeared in the crowd.

“Well,” said Alya, sipping her wine. “That was fucking weird.”

Marinette did groan this time. “I feel like my head’s about to explode.”

“Hey, breathe, girl,” Alya said, no trace of her fiery sarcasm left at the sight of Marinette slumped. “You okay?”

“Yeah…I think,” Marinette said. She shook her head. “No, I don’t think I am. I suddenly feel like I’m gonna be sick.”

“Did he say something to you?” Alya’s expression darkened dangerously. “Because if he did, I swear to god—”

“No, no, it was nothing like that. Adrien was perfectly nice, at least, after he stopped coming on to me.”

She realized her mistake when Alya gaped at her and a teasingly wicked smile spread over her face. “I’m sorry, come again?”

“It’s not what you think, he just didn’t recognize me.” Marinette held up her mask. “I was wearing this, and it’s been a while. I’m not surprised he didn’t recognize me.”

Although, Chloe knew it was me right away, and I haven’t seen much of her since college…

“Suuuuure,” Alya drawled, understanding. Mercifully, though, she decided to spare Marinette a ribbing. “Well, look, I dunno what’s going on with that dude, and honestly I couldn’t give a crap. What I do give a crap about is you.” Alya reached for her hand. “You don’t have to be okay, you know. I remember how you were when he left back in high school, right after your accident, too.
That was a rough week, and I’d totally understand if you wanted to leave. Just say the word, and we’re outta here.”

Marinette squeezed Alya’s hand back in an attempt to convey her genuine gratitude. “Thanks, Alya, I mean that. But…I’ll be okay. I think it’s just a shock seeing him again after so long. I wasn’t prepared. It’s not like I’m still upset like I was back then. I’m obviously over him and all that.”

“Right,” Alya said, not quite believing her. “Well, just don’t forget that you’re a grown-ass woman. An amazing, beautiful, successful grown-ass woman with nothing but good things coming your way. Don’t let Adrien Agreste and all his baggage get you down, okay? He’s absolutely not worth it.”

“You’re right. I want to enjoy tonight, Adrien or no Adrien. I came here to meet people and build connections.”

“There’s my girl! C’mon, I’ll help you. You know everybody loves my natural poise and charm. Just consider me your networking wingman tonight, okay?”

Marinette laughed and looped her arm through Alya’s. “Sounds like a plan.”

Marinette had met so many people tonight that she was starting to regret not bringing a larger purse than the gold clutch nearly bursting at the seams to hold her cell phone, a tube of lipstick, and the many business cards she’d amassed. Alya had been her unintentional secret weapon, ever the social butterfly eager to strike up conversation with anyone. She gushed about her dress (“A Marinette Designs original, isn’t it just gorgeous? Let me introduce you to the lady herself.”), about this party (“Aramis Legrand was kind enough to invite us in honor of his latest investment in Marinette Designs. Isn’t that right, Marinette?”), and about Marinette herself (“You probably recognize her from the Parish Fashion Week awards last year—Marinette won the 2017 Newcomer Award, you know.”). With Alya at her side breaking the ice, Marinette found herself with half the battle already won. All in all, tonight had been an unequivocal success. She’d had more than a few promising conversations with potential future investors intrigued by some of her ideas for her spring line.

Now, with her face sore from smiling so much and her feet aching from standing in three-inch heels without rest, she left Alya with a group of fashion reporters to talk journalism and escaped to the balcony for a brief reprieve. It was cold even with the heater towers blazing at full power, and Marinette shivered. But the chill also had a liberating effect after the close-quarters and buzzing energy inside. There were a couple others outside on a smoke break conversing quietly, and Marinette gave them a wide berth so as not to intrude. She leaned over the balcony’s edge and looked down at the busy Champs-Élysées and the towering Arc de Triomphe glowing gold in the distance at the end of it. She hugged her arms for warmth and let herself smile, still not quite believing she had actually made it this far.

“Brave of you to come out here in this weather.”

Marinette turned to see Adrien approaching, hands in his pockets and his dress shirt rolled up to the elbows. His suit jacket was nowhere to be found. Before she knew it, he was leaning on the railing a couple feet from her.

Marinette swallowed. She’d actually forgotten he was even here after the whirlwind networking she and Alya had done in the last couple hours. This time, thankfully, he did not catch her so completely off guard as before. He was looking down at the Champs-Élysées lights, his blond hair tinted indigo in the glow of a passing searchlight.
“I could say the same to you,” Marinette found her voice, nodding at his bare arms.

Sensing her gaze, he turned to look at her and offered her the ghost of a tired smile. “It was getting a little too humid in there.”

Marinette nodded. The bracing, early-winter air did feel good after the heat inside. But she’d been out here for a few minutes already, and now that she had company, she wondered if she should go back inside and find Alya again. It was getting late, anyway.

“Well, um, I’ll just…”

Before she could get her body to obey and take her back inside, his voice stopped her. “Don’t go.” He righted himself and turned around, his back to the street and his hands gripping the stone railing lightly. “You were here first. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“You’re not intruding,” Marinette felt compelled to reassure him.

“Really?”

The way he looked at her suggested he already knew the answer to his question. Marinette frowned, not liking that look. This was stupid. Stupid and childish, she decided. So he was an old acquaintance, and he was easy on the eyes. That wasn’t really surprising considering his former profession and her former feelings. All things considered, it wasn’t _that_ weird to run into him here, of all the places. He did work for one of the most successful international fashion houses around, and Marinette had spent the better part of the evening schmoozing with names much bigger than his.

But even so, something about his presence here was still irking her.

_You’re a grown-ass woman, and don’t you dare let anyone make you forget it_, she imagined Alya’s voice in her head.

“Oh, okay,” Marinette said, giving him her full attention. “Honestly? It’s weird seeing you again after all this time. And maybe a little bit uncomfortable.”

His expression gave nothing away as he watched her. “It’s been fourteen years.”

“Yeah, I’m aware of that. I get that it doesn’t make much of a difference to you, but it doesn’t make it any less awkward for me.”

He said nothing to that, and Marinette took that as good enough. She tried to leave.

“Marinette, wait,” he said, reaching for her wrist.

His hand was cool through her sleeve, his grip firm but not uncomfortable. She whirled and found him watching her in the most peculiar way. Was that… Was he…?

Blushing?

As if sensing her incredulity, he averted his gaze and let go of her. “Look, I can appreciate how weird this is. It’s weird for me, too. I’ve been back in Paris for more than a month and I still wasn’t prepared for…”

Marinette was so taken aback listening to him stumble over his words that all she could do was stand there and wait for him to finish. Who was this man? He seemed a far cry from the cool, kind, easy-going super model she remembered.
“What I’m trying very poorly to say is…I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

He looked at her strangely. “For leaving the way I did. For not saying goodbye?”

It took her a moment to realize what he meant. “You’re sorry.”

He grew visibly more uncomfortable. “Um, yeah. You were in the hospital, and I… My father put me on a plane for New York that same week. I barely got a chance to say goodbye to anybody.” He searched her face for something. “You…don’t remember?”

Marinette could hardly believe what she was hearing. “Of course I remember. I didn’t think… I mean, it was so long ago, and you’re…” She shook her head, suddenly feeling the strangest urge to apologize to him, too. “I got your get-well card and flowers.”

“Card and flowers?” He frowned, thinking, and then his face fell. “Nathalie.”

“What?”

He shook his head. “I never sent you a card or flowers. It must have been Nathalie, my father’s personal assistant.”

“Oh.”

Wow, I’m an even bigger idiot than I realized.

He hadn’t even sent her a shitty card. He’d just left without a word, after all. All this time and she thought, at the very least, he’d reached out if only because his classmate had been hospitalized and that was the kind of thing normal people did in those situations. It wasn’t what she’d wished for, but at least it had been something. But even that had been a lie.

At this point, she was surprised he’d recognized her tonight even without the mask.

“Hey,” he said, perhaps registering the utter, soul-crushing shame she was probably radiating. “Marinette, look at me.”

She shook her head and forced herself to smile through this new and unexpected surge of heartache she would never have imagined could still affect her after all this time. God, she was so pathetic. “It’s fine, I should probably just go—”

“I’m sorry,” he said, reaching for her again before she could flee. “Please, you have to believe me. I wanted to come see you in the hospital when you woke up. I begged my father, but he wouldn’t budge. Not being there for you after I—after your injury, I’ve never been so sorry for anything in all my life.”

Marinette barely felt his grip on her elbow as she bore witness to the raw, unfettered emotion on his face. There was pain there, a deep-seated regret she would never have expected from him, of all people, after all this time. Had she really upset him this much? Over something that had nothing to do with him? Where were these sudden feelings of his coming from?

“Adrien,” she said, unsure what else to say at this bizarre and strangely heart wrenching turn of events. “I didn’t realize you felt so strongly.”

He squeezed her elbow as though trying to convey with his actions what he could not find the words
to say. “I did. Do.” Suddenly, he released her and took a step back. “I mean… I saw you tonight and it kind of all came rushing back without warning. I should’ve reached out back then. I’m so sorry, Marinette.”

Marinette honestly did not know what to make of this, or of him. All things considered, in all her youthful fantasies of one day reuniting with Adrien, this was not at all how she’d imagined it would go. And yet, he looked so earnest, so… unlike the man in the mask who’d kissed her hand upon first meeting earlier tonight. Whatever his reasons, she could not hold such earnestness against him if she tried.

“Thank you,” she said, meaning it, hugging her arms around her middle. “That really means a lot to me. More than you know.”

“I do know,” he said, and she realized he truly believed it. *What a thing to say.*

It made her smile a little. “You’re not at all like I remember you.”

“You are,” he said readily. “You’re exactly as I remember you.”

Marinette’s smile widened. “God, I hope not. I had such a monster crush on you back then that I could barely speak to you.”

He looked at her like a deer caught in the headlights, and it took him a few seconds to swallow and regain some measure of control. “S-Seriously?”

At this, Marinette laughed. It felt like ages ago, that silly little girl with her first crush. Nostalgic, and just a little bit sad. “Let’s just say if you didn’t know, you were the only one.”

He said nothing as he watched her, contemplative, and the silence stretched to the point where Marinette began to fidget. Maybe she shouldn’t have said anything? Shit, maybe she’d made it too awkward.

*And that’s my cue.*

“Well, hey, thank you, really. You didn’t have to tell me all that. It’s not like you owe me anything, of course.” She glanced inside at the party, wondering if Alya was looking for her. “I should…”

“Yeah, of course, sorry to keep you,” Adrien said a little too quickly. “I’ll walk you back inside.”

“Oh, okay, sure.”

It was surreal walking like this with Adrien Agreste, of all people. This may have been the first real conversation she’d ever had with him that didn’t devolve into blithering drivel as she stumbled over her words and barely made eye contact. She’d really had it bad, huh? What would her fourteen-year-old self think of her now, attending the most exclusive fashion party in Paris walking side by side with him and not about to fall over under the weight of an oppressive, and slightly misguided, infatuation?

Perhaps there were some wounds time could heal, after all.

They arrived at the doors, and Adrien held them open for her. Marinette lingered a moment and worried her lip, wondering what her fourteen-year-old self would think of what she was about to do.

“Adrien,” she said.
“Yes?”

“Do you, um… You said you just recently moved back to Paris?”

“Yes?”

One-word responses, Marinette thought, annoyed. And while fourteen-year-old Marinette would have disintegrated into dust by now, grown-ass-woman Marinette had a little more fortitude and pride than that. Pride that was telling her she would never forgive herself for not at least trying after that bizarrely heartfelt apology he’d laid on her.

“Well, I was thinking, if you want, I could, you know, take you out sometime?” She immediately realized her damning word choice and flushed. “Uh, I mean with friends!” She gestured wildly. “You know, friends from Dupont. You probably haven’t seen many people yet, right?”

His eyes flashed with emotion, but it was gone before she could make any sense of it. When he smiled, it was polite and a little distant. “Maybe. I’m pretty busy these days, though.”

Marinette wished she could go ahead and disintegrate with her fourteen-year-old self right about now. Of course he was busy, he was a big-time businessman now. He probably had a million things he’d rather be doing than running around Paris with old high school acquaintances. And it wasn’t like she had all the free time in the world these days. Once Aramis’s new investment closed, she’d have her hands full for the foreseeable future getting her company to the next level.

“Right, of course you’re busy, I didn’t mean to imply—”

“But let me get your number,” he interrupted her hastily, already pulling his phone out. “For when I’m not busy one of these days?”

Marinette knew she was staring, but she could not figure this man out for the life of her. “My number…”

He laughed, and goddamnit even his laugh was hot.

“You know, so you can call me, maybe,” he said.

Marinette’s eyes widened. Did he just…

“I know I just met you again,” he went on, grinning wider at her reaction, “and this is crazy. But here’s my number.”

He did just.

“Are you seriously quoting Call Me, Maybe to get my number?”

His eyes danced with mirth, and Marinette’s pride and dignity promptly rose from the ashes, er, dust.

Oh my god, he’s a dork.

Adrien Agreste: certified gorgeous, emotionally not unintelligent, workaholic had just outed himself as a huge dork.

Marinette was already pulling out her phone to exchange with his.

“Well, it worked, didn’t it?” he said.
“No, I’m just in shock and have no control over my actions right now.”

He laughed again as he typed his number into her phone. “Hey, that song was my karaoke staple in college. It’s a classic.”

“Oh, so you karaoke now, too? Is there anything you can’t do?”

He shrugged. “I guess we’ll find out.”

They exchanged back their phones, and she realized she was staring at him again. But he was also staring at her. And very much like a dumbass teenager with a crush (goodbye again, pride, thou art a fickle mistress indeed), Marinette did not want to be the first one to look away.

“There you are!” Alya said as she arrived at the door. “Marinette, I’ve been looking all over for—oh. You again.” She gave Adrien a suspicious look.

“And that’s my cue,” Adrien said a little brusquely. All traces of his previous teasing were completely gone. “Marinette. Alya.”

Adrien left to rejoin the party, and Marinette was left with a highly suspicious Alya.

“Do I even want to know what that was all about?” Alya said.

“I don’t think I even know what that was about,” Marinette said. “But I’ll let you know when I figure it out.”

Adrien’s number glowed on her phone screen, and she stashed it back in her bulging purse.

Marinette could not sleep when she and Alya finally left the party and went their separate ways for the night. It was late, well past midnight, and she should have been exhausted. But her thoughts were filled with the excitement of the night, all the new connections she’d made, and all the strange encounters she’d had. One in particular was keeping her up.

“Marinette? Are you okay?” Tikki asked in between bites of macaroon.

“I’m okay, just a little mind blown, I guess.”

“Does that have to do with seeing Adrien tonight?”

Marinette cast Tikki a knowing look. “Maybe, but not for the reasons you think. I’m not fourteen anymore.”

Tikki smiled understandingly. “I know, but it still must be a surprise to see him after all this time. And he apologized, too.”

“Yeah, he did.” Marinette frowned. “I still don’t really get why.”

Tikki set down her macaroon to hover next to Marinette’s head. They were in her loft apartment and sitting on Marinette’s bed, a half-drunk cup of tea on the night stand that was supposed to help her sleep but had done nothing to ease her nerves. “I think it was really nice of him. He knew how hard it was for you being in the hospital back then, not getting to see him to say goodbye.”

“That’s just it, Tikki. He didn’t know. No one did. At least, not the real reason.” And she planned to
keep it that way for the rest of her life.

Tikki’s compound eyes glowed indigo in the muted lamplight. “We aren’t talking about Adrien anymore, are we?”

Marinette hugged her knees to her chest. There was no hiding anything from her omniscient kwami, and Marinette was glad of that. She couldn’t talk to anyone about it, not that she wanted to when it would mean facing the shame of defeat and betrayal all over again, but having Tikki at least silently understand what she’d been through had been invaluable as she coped with things, then and now.

“I don’t want to talk about him,” Marinette confessed in a small voice.

“You never do.”

Marinette sensed a ‘but’ in there. “What’s wrong with that? It’s not like he’s ever coming back.” *It’s not like I ever want him to come back.*

Tikki watched her quietly. “It’s okay to miss him, Marinette. He’s your other half.”

A spike of anger, out of nowhere, struck Marinette with almost physical force, and she glared at Tikki. “That monster isn’t my other anything.”

Unbidden, Marinette felt her eyes grow hot with tears. She wiped at them furiously, ashamed of herself. It had been years since she’d thought about him, the boy who’d once been the other half of her world before he’d ripped it apart, just like he’d nearly ripped her apart, too.

“Damnit,” she swore, hiding her eyes. “I thought I was over this.”

“Oh Marinette, whatever he’s done, Chat Noir will always be—”

“Stop,” Marinette snapped. “Please, don’t say that name.”

Tikki looked at her Chosen sadly. “It wasn’t him who hurt you, Marinette. I know you know that.”

“But it was him who left,” Marinette bit out, ashamed to be taking her bitter anger out on poor Tikki, who did not deserve it, but there was no one else to hear it. No one else who knew this old pain she’d carried on her shoulders alone for years. “He left, Tikki. He ran away and *left me*. He’s not my other half. I don’t think he ever was.”

“You don’t mean that.”

Marinette got up. “Well, we’ll never know now, will we?”

“Oh Marinette—”

“Tikki, transform me.”

The little red kwami gasped in surprise, but at the magical command, she dissolved into scarlet shimmers, merged with Marinette’s Miraculous earrings, and transformed her. Soon, Ladybug was racing over the rooftops of Paris, her yo-yo swinging and cutting a scarlet streak through the darkness as the denizens of the night lingered in the lighted streets below. None of them paid her any mind, none looked for the spotted former heroine who’d once captured their hearts and imaginations fighting supernatural villains next to her equally super partner. The Paris of today had all but forgotten Ladybug, just as Chat Noir had forgotten her all those years ago.

Ladybug’s tears were blown away in the rushing wind, the cold hardly noticeable under the
protection of her super suit. She ran faster, jumped higher, threw her yo-yo farther, hoping to outrun this heavy, familiar weight that threatened to drag her down as it once had so many years ago. She’d been doing so well. Her civilian life was so busy and bright that she’d nearly forgotten the other life she’d once led, and the person who’d once made it worth every moment.

Ladybug gasped on a sob and she threw her yo-yo as hard as she possibly could. She felt the whiplash in her neck even through her magical super suit, but she held on and pulled herself skyward all the same. When she landed, she was out of breath and steadied herself on a metal bar to regain her bearings. She wiped the last of her tears away and looked around. She couldn’t help the bitter laugh upon realizing where she’d ended up without even meaning to.

The Eiffel Tower rose tall and proud, its many lights a blaze of soft silver that rivaled the stars. She could see all of Paris from here, even Le Grand Paris Hotel, where the searchlights still swept the sky as the party continued without her. It would probably go on all night.

Ladybug sank down, her legs dangling over the edge of the thick bar she’d landed on about halfway up the tower. Her loose hair fluttered haphazardly in the wind, still curly from the braided bun Alya had woven into it hours ago. She knew why she had come here.

This had been their spot, once. A lifetime ago. She hadn’t visited it in years. Once Ladybug had woken from her coma after two days in the hospital, she’d scoured the city relentlessly, day and night. But there was never any sign of either Hawk Moth or her wayward partner. It was as if they’d both simply vanished without a trace, and Ladybug was alone.

For months, she drove herself to the brink of insanity trying to find Chat. The last she’d seen him, he’d been akumatized and very nearly killed her. Why he hadn’t finished the job, she could not be sure. But she woke up in the hospital as Marinette, surrounded by flowers and cards and her sleep-deprived parents, good as new. And she still had her Miraculous. Why hadn’t he taken it?

Tikki had been in very bad shape, and Marinette had to rush her to Master Fu for treatment, which took far longer than Marinette’s own recovery. The little kwami’s memory was fuzzy, and she admitted that she did not know what had become of Chat Noir or the akuma that had infected him. That had troubled Marinette to no end. If she didn’t purify the akuma, what would happen to Chat? They had always been able to defeat akumatized victims in a matter of hours. But now, it had been fourteen years since he’d been infected. Was he still infected? If he was, why didn’t he come for her to finish the job? Was his disappearance related to Hawk Moth’s own disappearance? Was Chat even still alive?

*He’s alive,* Marinette reminded herself. *Tikki would know if her other half was released from his Chosen bond.*

But beyond that, Tikki had been less than helpful. Even though she and Plagg, Chat’s kwami, were bonded, they did not share as much as Marinette had once believed. Tikki did not know where Plagg and Chat were, or if they were even still themselves.

And honestly? A part of Marinette hoped she would never find out.

“*Cry for me, my lady.*”

Marinette shuddered. She could hear his voice in her ear, dripping poison. Those malevolent magenta eyes she didn’t recognize, that cold touch ripping her apart from the inside out. And god, the fear. She could *feel* it even now, a fear like none she’d ever known before creeping under her skin and pulling her apart like stitches. He had been so soft before, so sad.
“*I really don’t want to be alone tonight,*” he’d confessed to Marinette in a moment of raw vulnerability she’d had no idea lay simmering beneath the layers of patented Chat Noir bravado.

It had taken her so long to finally come to terms with his disappearance after that night, and even now the pain was as fresh as the very day. He had been in love with her, with Ladybug, and she had rejected him. What other reason could he have to leave her forever?

He just hadn’t wanted to be alone anymore.

Ladybug got to her feet, exhausted. It had been a long time since she thought about Chat and his murderous alter ego. Perhaps Adrien coming back into her life had reopened old wounds. They had both left around the same time, after all. Well, at least Adrien was back now, whatever that meant. She was not some simpering teenager holding out hope for anything. She wasn’t even sure there was anything worth hoping for. Adrien Agreste belonged to some other girl’s life, a life she had left behind a long, long time ago.

But Chat…

Ladybug hugged herself for the warmth she couldn’t feel through her super suit. Without Chat Noir, she didn’t feel like Ladybug. Without Chat, she couldn’t *be* Ladybug. Maybe it was finally time to accept that, once and for all.

She threw her yo-yo in the direction of home, the wind in her hair and the lights of the Eiffel Tower shrinking behind her. She never noticed the pair of glowing, green eyes that had watched her from the shadows, and how they followed her retreat.

Chapter End Notes

Bring on the ANGST.

Next time: Marinette has a not-date with Adrien and Chloe. It goes not at all how you think it will.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Hopeless boys are hopeless.

Chapter Notes

You thought you were getting angst, but instead I give you enough fluff to stuff a mattress with. Enjoy it while it lasts!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Paris was a city of dreamers. Tonight there were two who, unlike their fellow Parisian dreamers, would not find sleep within their grasp. One sat alone in darkness, watching the distant lights of the Eiffel Tower and the scarlet figure that flew from its ramparts in defiance of the laws of gravity. Not long after, another followed, harder to pinpoint as it melted into the darkness.

“It’s time,” said the muffled voice on the phone.

The sleepless figure stared out the window and held the cell phone to their ear. “Finally. You’ve kept me waiting long enough.”

The disembodied phone voice chuckled, a mouthful of static. “I know I have. We’ll be together soon now, once I have what I want.”

The figure smiled with painted lips and took a long drag of a cigarette. The smoke tasted like chocolate and ash. Like all addictions, a little sweet, a little poison. “Give me five days.”

“Make it three.”

Painted lips twisted in a gleeful smile. The challenge was a rush.

“Three it is.”

The connection died, and the cell phone fell dark. The figure drew another puff of lacy arsenic and blurred the window view. The sun would rise soon, and Paris would awaken.

“Three days. We’ll be ready by then.”

A pair of glowing, pink eyes watched from the gloom. “As you wish.”

Three days, then.

*Three days until my wish comes true.*
Marinette’s week turned hectic literally overnight. No sooner had she managed to catch a couple hours of sleep than her phone woke her at 6 a.m. the Sunday morning after the Trefoil Gala—a supplier was out of the royal blue taffeta fabric she’d ordered, and Marinette needed to decide if she wanted a substitute or wait two weeks for resupply. Neither option was palatable given a custom order fitting coming up on Wednesday. She needed that royal blue.

Luckily, her staff and business partners had her back.

“Marinette, I’ve got Watson’s on line two. They have the royal blue we need for the Fujiwara custom order,” said the lone intern of the staff.

Marinette looked up from her dummy model, one Alfonse Laroux. He yelped in pain when she stuck his shoulder with a needle. “Oh! Sorry, Al, I wasn’t looking.”

“Yeah, I can see that, Mar. Do I really have to be the dummy? This is a women’s bubble dress!”

Alfonse was a short, slight man with a receding hairline, brown eyes so dark they were nearly black, and a face made for scowling. He was her grad school classmate-turned-business partner, and she trusted him implicitly with her company’s financial stability and luxury branding. Marinette Designs was as much his project as it was hers.

“I know, but it’s Sunday and you and I are the only ones here,” Marinette said.

“The intern is sitting right there!” Alfonse complained, but he dutifully held up the fabric Marinette was working on all the same.

“Yeah, well, the intern is saving your asses and she’s not even getting paid to do it,” quipped said intern.

“Manon, what’s this about Watson’s?” Marinette asked.

Manon Chamack, a newly-minted college Freshman, had been interning sporadically with Marinette’s boutique since she graduated from high school. She dreamed of one day having her own fashion line, inspired by Marinette’s dedication and success over the years. And she was willing to help out this Sunday in Marinette’s time of need, so that the rest of the full-time staff could take the weekend off like normal people.

Manon grinned, her honey-brown eyes glittering with smug satisfaction. “They have the taffeta you need for the Fujiwara contract. Aaaaand I may or may not have convinced them to ship a rush delivery for tomorrow.”

Alfonse paled. “And how much will that cost, exactly?”

Manon grinned wider. “The same as regular delivery. They’re willing to help us out as long as we commit to an output contract for three months.”

Marinette looked at Alphonse, who looked like it pained him to consider it. “Watson’s has been hounding me lately. They lost some big customers to the Italians, but they have quality product, and I haven’t been very happy with our current supplier. This is the third time they’ve had to reschedule deliveries due to inventory problems…”

Marinette winked at Manon. “Well, that sounds like a ringing endorsement if I ever heard one, Al.”

Alphonse was muttering something under his breath that sounded a lot like math. “I suppose the high initial contract costs could eventually be made up with the on-time deliveries… Manon, tell them yes
on the condition that we get rush delivery for the three months. If all goes well, I’ll commit for the year.”

Manon beamed. “On it, Boss.”

Sunday mercifully proceeded without anybody dying and the boutique still standing, which all things considered was an A+ kind of day in Marinette’s book. She was in the midst of treating Alphonse and Manon to happy hour drinks at a cozy bar down the street from the boutique when her phone buzzed.

[Adrien: So it’s one of those days.]

Marinette stared at her iPhone screen in disbelief. Just how much alcohol was in her beer? Because her brain was not registering what her eyes were telling her.

“Uh, earth to Marinette!” Manon said, clinking her beer to Marinette’s.

“Anything I should know about?” asked Alphonse at the concerned look on her face.

Marinette whipped her head up and smiled nervously. “Oh! Uh, no, it’s not work.”

Manon instantly broke out in a wolfish grin. “Ooh, so it’s pleasure, then?”

Alphonse shot her a withering look. “How old are you, again?”

[Adrien: I mean I’m not busy today. That was vague sorry.]

[Adrien: You mentioned taking me out sometime?]

Marinette still did not quite understand what was happening. Adrien…was texting her? Wait, yeah, she’d given him her number at the gala. Was that just last night? Jesus, she was wrecked today. Barely any sleep after her rather emotionally-charged conversation with Tikki, gallivanting as Ladybug for the first time in months, and this morning’s supplier fiasco at the boutique had her moving with all the grace and agility of a blue-eyed slug.

“Sorry, just a sec,” Marinette mumbled an apology to her coworkers as she began to text back.

[Marinette: Sure! I didn’t mean today…]

[Marinette: Not that today is bad! Just that I saw you only yesterday.]

[Adrien: So that’s a yes?]

*Someone’s eager*, she thought, curious. He’d seemed hesitant to see her again despite the whole Call Me, Maybe exchange. What was with this hot and cold vibe?

[Adrien: Unless you’re busy…?]

Marinette warred with herself. She wasn’t busy per se, but she was definitely starting wonder exactly who was on the other end of these texts. One moment he was too busy to potentially, hypothetically meet up with old friends in the future, and the next he was texting her not twenty-four hours later wanting to see her. Talk about mixed signals.

[Marinette: No I’m free.]

[Marinette: But since you’re being so pushy, I get to pick the place.]
Marinette: It's only fair.

She bit her tongue as she watched the three blinking chat bubbles shuffle as he typed.

Adrien: Sounds fair. Dress code?

Marinette thought about that.

“What’re you smiling about?” Manon said.

Marinette’s smile abruptly fell. God, pull yourself together, girl.

It was just Adrien. It wasn’t like she was still infatuated with him. He was just a friend. More like an acquaintance, really.

*An acquaintance with an eight-pack and longer eyelashes than me.*

What was wrong with having hot acquaintances? Absolutely nothing, that’s what. And she had been the one to suggest they hang out sometime...

Marinette: Anything that doesn’t scream millionaire playboy supermodel.

Adrien: I do love a challenge ;)

Marinette stared at the infernal winking emoji. What did that mean? Were they on emoji-level terms now? Since when?

Adrien: When and where?

Marinette: 8 pm @ Firefly Lounge

Adrien: I’ll be there.

Well.

*Is this a date?*

“What am I, fourteen?” Marinette grumbled.

“What was that?” Alphonse said.

Marinette put her phone down on the table and groaned. “I feel like I’m being gaslighted.”

Manon patted her arm. “There, there, Marinette. You’re good. When in doubt, just ask yourself what I would do.”

“Hah, pass.”

“Mar, is everything all right?” Alphonse asked.

Marinette saw the genuine concern in his dark eyes, and she spared him a smile. “Fine. Maybe. I’m not sure yet. I mean, hypothetically speaking, say a…person you were estranged from for a really long time, like, oh I don’t know, fourteen years? Suddenly came back into your life? And sent a winky-face emoji?”

Alphonse looked unamused. “So you’re meeting an old flame?”
Marinette groaned again and buried her face in her arms, her beer forgotten. “Not exactly.”

“Well, I think that sounds great,” Manon chirped. “The winky-face is promising.”

“It is? Why?”

“DTF, duh.”

“Debt Transaction Financing?” Alphonse said.

Manon rolled her eyes so far back in her head that Marinette saw white. “No, god, how old are you?” To Marinette she said, “DTF, down to fuck. Seriously, you guys are the worst millennials ever.”

Marinette flushed like a tomato. “That is not what it means,” she hissed.

“Uh, yeah it does. D-T-F, it’s an acronym for—”

“Not that!” Marinette slapped her hand over Manon’s scandalous mouth. “The winking emoji! That’s not what it means! At least, not in this context.”

Manon pulled her hand away and held out her own hand. “Let me see.”

“What? No, I’m not letting you read my text messages!”

“Then you’ll just have to take my word about the DTF.”

Marinette was torn between her pride and masochistic curiosity. The latter won out in the end, and Manon greedily scanned through the few messages she’d exchanged with Adrien.

“Oh, never mind, this guy’s not DTF,” Manon said. “He’s just clingy.”

“What? Let me see that.”

Manon handed Alphonse the phone, and Marinette choked on a scream. “Manon! Don’t just pass my phone around!”

Alphonse squinted at the screen. “It just sounds like he’s looking forward to seeing you tonight. That winking emoji is a little creepy, if you ask me.”

“Nobody asked you!” Marinette snatched her phone back, mortified. She clutched it protectively, and the screen lit up. She had a new text from Adrien.

[Marinette: I’ll wear something cute ;)]

[Adrien: Can’t wait :3]

Marinette stared at the text she absolutely did not send and Adrien’s response with another emoji, this one inexplicably cat-inspired.

“What’d he say?” Manon leaned over to peek.

“You did not,” Marinette said.

Manon’s wicked smile was back. “Well, someone had to. You’re trying to bang this guy, right?”

Marinette wished she could melt into her half-drunk beer bottle and just die. “I used to babysit you,” she said weakly.
“Well, uh, good luck with that, I guess,” Alphonse said. “Just don’t forget about the Fujiwara order. The taffeta will be in tomorrow by noon, and the client’s scheduled for that fitting on Wednesday.”

Marinette mumbled a weak acknowledgment, too mortified to manage much else.

“Hey, if you’re going to Firefly Lounge, you should get moving,” Manon said. “If it’s what I think it is, tables’ll fill up fast.”

Marinette checked her phone: 6:32 p.m. Shit, Manon was right. She tossed some bills on the table, bade her coworkers goodbye, and ran out the door to hail a cab. Whatever she was in store for tonight, she had some damage control to manage when she saw Adrien. She just hoped she could hold it together long enough to actually do it.

She very maturely ignored Manon’s departing words of, “Remember to wear something cute!”

She debated inviting Alya, if nothing else than for a sanity check, but remembered Alya had plans with Nino that night. So Marinette was on her own. This wasn’t a date, right? She’d literally just re-met Adrien yesterday. For all the time he’d been gone and not a part of her life in any way, he was half a stranger. And now he was texting her wanting to hang out?

Wait… Was this a booty call? Damn Manon and her teasing.

He did come on to me.

Marinette hung her head in her hands at the small, round table she’d snagged at the Firefly Lounge.

He came on to me before he even knew who I was.

From the way he’d behaved, something told Marinette that behavior was routine for him. He probably was, in every sense of the stereotype, a millionaire playboy supermodel.

Ex-supermodel.

Right. Chloe had said he was retired. Didn’t change the fact that he had a face made to be sit on.

“Oh my god, shut up,” Marinette hissed at herself.

It was fine. So he was good looking. Didn’t change the fact that she didn’t know the guy. Lots of people were good looking. And if he really had reached out tonight looking for a tryst, well…he’d be leaving here disappointed.

“Marinette.”

She looked up in surprise that he’d managed to approach her without her noticing. Pretty stealthy for a dude over six feet tall. She got up and smiled politely.

“Hi, Adrien.”

He’d taken her advice on the dress code, it seemed—designer skinny jeans, a jade button up open at the front, black v-neck T-shirt, and that just-woke-up hair that of course looked perfect on him and would have looked an absolute terror on a mere mortal like her.

He took one of the tassels on her chunky, pink sweater in his fingers and caught her eye. “Cute.”
It took Marinette a moment to understand what he was talking about, and then she remembered Manon’s infernal texting. “Oh, yeah, about that… My intern may have stolen my phone and sent you some weird texts.”

He grinned. “I’ll have to stop by your shop and thank them sometime.”

*Okay…flirting?*

It seemed like he was flirting. With her. In real life. Marinette just smiled and hoped she wasn’t blushing too much as she gestured vaguely for him to take a seat. Instead of sitting, though, he asked the couple at the table next to them if he could steal their third chair, which they obliged.

Before Marinette could ask, she got her answer in the form of a slightly put-off blonde in a red sweater dress, leggings, and Louboutins carrying a tall glass of something alcoholic with a hot pink straw hanging over the edge.

“I recommend sticking to beer or coffee in this place, the simpler the better,” said Chloe as she approached their table. “The bartender looked at me like I was speaking Greek when I tried ordering a Floradora. Eight euros, and I had to tell him how to make it. Ugh, what the hell kind of dive bar is this?”

She didn’t wait for an invitation and sat down in the empty third chair Adrien had procured for her in between Marinette and himself.

“I think it’s technically a lounge, right?” Adrien looked to Marinette for confirmation.

“Uh, yeah,” she said, still trying to make sense of what was even happening here. “Chloe Bourgeois?”

Chloe cast her a sidelong glance, then focused on her drink as she swirled it with that ridiculous Lisa Frank-inspired straw. “Marinette Dupain-Cheng. Are we really going to do the whole full-name greeting every time?”

Luckily, Adrien offered the explanation Marinette clearly wanted but had lost the ability to ask for as she slowly internalized the fact that she had seen Chloe more in the last twenty-four hours than she had in the last four years. “I invited Chloe. Hope that’s okay?”

“That remains to be seen,” Chloe said. “What’s going on here? Is there a show, or are we just supposed to entertain ourselves?”

Marinette took her proverbial foot out of her mouth and managed by the grace of whatever god was probably laughing at her right now to speak a full sentence. “Yeah, a band.” She swallowed. “Sorry, I… Are you two…?” She gestured between them vaguely.

“Master and sex slave. Didn’t A tell you?” Chloe deadpanned.

The shock on Marinette’s face must have been something stunning, because Chloe burst out laughing and Adrien flushed hard enough to match her dress.

“God, your face,” Chloe snorted—*snorted*. “You can stop internally hexing me. Adrien and I are just friends no matter how genetically superior our children would be. He was afraid to come here alone to see you, so I graciously agreed to chaperone.”

“Chlo!” Adrien hissed. “That’s *not* why I invited you.”
Chloe sucked on her pink straw, nonchalant. “Whatever.”

Marinette looked between them, recalling the way they’d been at the party last night, so at ease around each other. And she found that she couldn’t hold on to her shock and embarrassment.

_They’re friends._

Good enough friends that Chloe was maybe a little bit worried about Adrien if she was coming to a grungy lounge bar clearly out of her comfort zone, sipping a watered down cocktail through a middle school birthday party straw instead of doing whatever high powered, wealthy, beautiful people did on a Sunday night.

Huh.

“Oh fuck me, not this guy again,” Chloe said, looking at a man in dark jeans, an ACDC T-shirt, and an unzipped hoodie who was approaching their table. She began fixing her already perfect hair.

He weaved around the other patrons, who had quickly snapped up the remaining tables and now took to populating the bar and sagging leather couches closer to the stage.

“Who?” Adrien asked.

“Luka, hey!” Marinette said, standing and greeting him with a hug. “What’re you doing out here? It’s almost 8, shouldn’t you be backstage?”

“Yeah, just saw you out here and wanted to say hi.”

“No way…Luka Couffaine?” Adrien said with the unmistakable lilt of recognition.

Luka peered at Adrien, and the memory clicked. “Adrien Agreste, wow. Is that really you?”

“Wait, you _know_ each other?” Chloe said.

“Yeah,” Adrien said. “We played in a band together back in high school for a semester. Good to see you, man.”

“Back at you,” Luka said with a friendly smile.

Luka was a couple years older than them, and he’d fronted Kitty Section, the Dupont high school rock band, before heading off to college. Adrien had subbed in on keyboard for them a few times, Marinette recalled. As Juleka’s older brother, Luka shared her slender figure and half-Japanese features, except for the teal highlights in his styled hair. No matter how many times she came to one of his shows here, Marinette could never quite get over how he and Juleka had turned out so differently despite being related.

“So you’re back in Paris?” Luka asked, shoving his hands in his pockets casually.

“Yeah, mostly working, catching up with some old friends here and there.” Adrien glanced at Marinette.

“Oh, I get it, so this was your doing, huh?” Luka grinned at Marinette.

She grinned right back. “What? You said I should feel free to bring people whenever.”

“Got me there. Thanks for coming. I heard from Juleka that you had some big party last night.”
“You know I wouldn’t miss it.”

He held her gaze. “I know, Mar. Thanks.”

Adrien and Chloe watched their exchange in silence, until Chloe inevitably broke it.

“So you’re obviously not the bartender.”

Luka turned to her and eyed her drink. The ice was melting and watering it down to a pale pinkish color. “Not tonight I’m not, but I’d never let a gorgeous girl go thirsty on my watch.”

Chloe looked like she’d been held up at gunpoint for a hot second, but she frowned dangerously. “Okay, Gerard Way, take it down a notch. You’ll need to do a lot better than Tanqueray and a fluorescent bendy straw before you can say something like that to someone like me.”

Luka looked amused and not at all offended. “I’m a quick study.”

“Damn, and I left my grading pen at home. Too bad.”

Chloe held his gaze in challenge. Adrien and Marinette, meanwhile, exchanged looks of intrigue (Adrien) and abject horror (Marinette).

“Well, I better get back there,” Luka said. He ran a hand through his long, blue-tipped bangs. He wore a couple silver rings on his black-painted fingers. “Glad you guys could make it, Marinette, Adrien, and…” He glanced back at Chloe, who was busy bending her bendy straw.

“Chloe,” Adrien said when it became apparent that Chloe had no interest in responding.

Chloe shot him a look that promised medieval torture levels of pain later. Adrien pretended not to notice.

“Chloe,” Luka repeated, dark eyes bright with amusement over the way she bristled. “Enjoy the show.”

Marinette waved him goodbye and retook her seat. Adrien, however, was quick to offer to get drinks for the table before Chloe could make good on the glares she was sending his way. Which left Marinette alone with her for the next few minutes.

“Um, are you okay?” Marinette asked.

“I’m fine.” She bent her straw back and forth. It made a soft crinkling sound. “So how long do I have to be here, anyway?”

“Oh. Well, the show goes until about 10 or so, but if you have somewhere else to be…”

Chloe made a face. “Great. Two hours of emo ballads. I’m sure this is some karmic whiplash finally catching up to me.”

“Hardrock’s music isn’t even remotely emo, and neither is Luka, for that matter. You know, if you really don’t want to be here, you could leave.”

Chloe shot her a look. “Nice try, but no. I’m the chaperone, remember?” She shifted in her seat and sucked the last of her drink down through the straw.

Marinette couldn’t help but feel a little frustrated with Chloe. “We’re all adults here, Chloe. I get that you’re his friend and you’re worried about him, but you don’t have to babysit Adrien if you really
don’t want to be here. It’s not like I have some ulterior motive or anything.”

Chloe looked at her with a mixture of pity and amusement. “Oh Marinette, it’s not your ulterior motives I’m concerned about.”

*What does that mean?* Marinette wanted to ask, but Adrien returned with drinks just as the lights were dimming and the band took the stage at the back of the room. The patrons clapped as Luka set down his guitar and adjusted the standing microphone. The rest of the players shuffled about tuning their instruments and making last minute adjustments to their set up.

“Hey, everybody, thanks for coming out tonight,” Luka announced. “We’re Hardrock, and we’ll be playing a couple sets and taking requests later on. Well, I’m not gonna waste any more of your time, so sit back, relax, and enjoy the show.”

Soon enough, the soulful sounds of Hardrock’s music filled the room, and patrons nodded along with the beat and carried on their side conversations.

Adrien leaned around the table and tapped Marinette’s arm. “Hey, they’re actually really good,” he said a few inches from her ear so she could hear him.

Marinette smiled. “Yeah, they’ve been selling out shows lately. Just a matter of time before some big label snaps them up.”

“Sort of makes me miss the old high school band.”

He was smiling at her and close enough to smell his cologne. His hand was still on her arm, heavy but warm. Marinette tried not to think about it.

“Well, you could always put in a request at the end. They might even let you jam with them, for old times’ sake?”

“I just might.”

Marinette was suddenly very warm as he lingered in her personal space, but soon enough he withdrew to sit back and enjoy the music. She clutched her drink for something to hold on to and tried to do the same. It wasn’t difficult considering how much she loved Hardrock’s music. The band had evolved over the years since they formed in college and Marinette had started going to their shows.

Luka thrummed a low beat on his bass, while Rokia, the curvaceous lead singer-slash-celloist, belted out a sultry crescendo that Marinette felt down to her toes. Marcel kept the rhythm on drums, his eyes closed and his trademark orange beanie low over his curly blond hair. Prakash supported Rokia’s voice on lead guitar. He was heavyset and hirsute and couldn’t sing in tune to save a life, but his fingers were downright supernatural. Those magical fingers flew into an electric solo while Rokia stepped back and swayed to the music as she waited for her next verse.

Marinette chanced a furtive look at Chloe, who was busy checking work emails on her phone and only half paying attention to the music. Adrien, on the other hand, seemed very pleased with Hardrock’s performance as they finished their seventh song of the night.

The band took a short break soon after, and Chloe excused herself to use the bathroom. Marinette got up to follow her, and they were standing side by side at the long basin sink as Chloe touched up her makeup.

“Well?” Chloe said. “You followed me in here, so you obviously have something to say to me that
you don’t want Adrien to hear. So spit it out already.”

Marinette did have something she wanted to ask Chloe, but the blonde’s perpetual annoyance with her very existence made her forget her mission for a moment.

“Look, do you have a problem with me or something?” Marinette said.

Chloe rolled her eyes. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Oh, I don’t know, your negative attitude all night?”

Chloe let out a sharp breath and pulled out a tube of lipstick from her purse. “Negative, huh? I didn’t realize your feelings were so fragile.”

It was Marinette’s turn to roll her eyes. “Okay, let’s just get this out right now. You and me? We don’t like each other. It’s been that way since high school, and I accepted it a long time ago. So I’d appreciate it if you could stop the passive-aggressive threats.”

Chloe pursed her peach-glossed lips in the mirror, satisfied with her touch up. “Please. If I’d threatened you, you wouldn’t be here talking to me with that tone of voice.”

Marinette slammed her hand on the counter just hard enough for the smack to reverberate. Chloe, whom Marinette was convinced must be carved from literal stone, only spared her a bored glance. It just served to piss off Marinette even more.

“Then what was all that about an ulterior motive?” Marinette said, hating that she was having this conversation with Chloe, of all people. “Look, I accept that you and Adrien are close, and despite our differences, I can see that you guys genuinely get along. Great, I’m happy for you both. But for your information, he approached me about tonight. So if you want to play the territorial she-wolf, take it somewhere else. I really have no interest in this high school drama bullshit.”

Marinette turned to leave, but Chloe’s voice stopped her.

“I only meant to warn you,” she said.

Marinette huffed, incredulous. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I don’t need you looking out for me.”

“Yeah, you do.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be doing that for Adrien? Since you guys are such good friends?”

Chloe’s blue eyes flared with anger, and for a moment, Marinette felt like a skinny high school girl again facing down the wrath of the class bully. “Look, I’m the only person from Dupont who kept up with Adrien over the years. We were even at grad school in the States together. I’ve known him a lot longer than you.” She put up her hand for silence when Marinette opened her mouth to protest. “It’s not a competition. I mean that I’m the one whose had splash section seating in the roller coaster that is Adrien Agreste’s adult life thus far. He’s had incredible ups, but he’s also fallen lower than most, and it’s not entirely his fault.

“There are things about him you don’t know,” Chloe went on. “Things…that aren’t my place to talk about. But all the same, I’d be remiss not to give you a heads up. He’s fragile, but he’s also very good at breaking things.”

Marinette stared at Chloe as she tried to process. “So, what? He’s had some bad relationships?
Falling outs with friends? Everybody has."

“Not like this.” Chloe looked her dead in the eye. “He’s not... He’s gotten help, I made sure of it. He puts on a good show, but he has cracks, and I’ve seen what happens to the people who slip through. Not everyone can handle it.”

“So, you’re saying he’s what? Depressed? Anxiety? Anger issues?”

“I’m saying he’s not always what he’s shown you yesterday and tonight.”

But he seems so confident. So composed. And he’s so privileged, he could have or do anything he wanted...

But he’d also cornered her the other night with an apology so emotionally charged that it had thrown Marinette for a loop. Where had those emotions come from, and why? Was she missing something?

“Adrien’s both the easiest and the hardest person to love,” Chloe said, though she was staring intently at her lipstick tube. “So look, you and I are whatever. Whether you’re interested in his friendship or his dick or his connections or whatever, that’s between you and him. I’m not trying to stand in your way.” She looked Marinette directly in the eye. “We’re not in high school anymore, and I’m not the queen bitch I used to be, as hard as that might be for you to believe. I have way more important shit to worry about in my very exciting, successful life. So you can leave your complaints in the past where they belong.”

Marinette could honestly say she was speechless, if she could actually say anything at all in that moment. All she managed was a dumb nod.

“Good, I’m glad we understand each other,” Chloe said.

The bathroom door opened to admit another woman, and with her came the sounds of conversation and the band warming up for the next set. Chloe returned her lipstick to her bag and held the door open. She gave Marinette a look like she had better appreciate the gesture, or else. So Marinette obliged her and slipped out of the bathroom, still reeling.

“Hey, Chloe,” she said softly. “For what it’s worth? Thanks for being honest. I... I really appreciate it.”

“Yeah, yeah, girl power, blah blah. Let’s just go before I get a staph infection in here.”

Marinette cracked a smile. This was turning out to be the strangest Sunday she’d had in a long time. Maybe ever. “After you.”

They headed back to the table, and Marinette felt a little bit lighter in her steps than she had before. Who would’ve known Chloe Bourgeois of all people could have actually made her smile? Adrien waved them over, and they reclaimed their seats.

“You guys were in there a while. Everything okay?” he asked casually, but the way he side-eyed Chloe betrayed his worry.

“Marinette came on to me, but I rebuffed her advances. Don’t worry.”

Marinette flushed, and Chloe smirked in triumph. It was such an irritating look, such a challenge, that Marinette could not resist rising to the occasion.

“Yeah, well, I have a thing for blonds. Can’t help myself,” she said.
Chloe choked on a piece of ice she’d been chewing on. Adrien just laughed.

“I take it back, what I said about you not changing since Dupont. I doubt fourteen-year-old Marinette would’ve ever said something like that to Chloe.”

“Shows how little you knew me.”

“Oh, you had a secret side I never saw or something?”

Marinette sipped her beer. “Or something.”

“Well, I’m interested to get to know you more now.”

It was Marinette’s turn to nearly choke. Had Adrien always been so flirty? She did not remember him acting like this in high school, but Chloe had a point—that was a long time ago. Still, her warning about how he put on a good show stuck with Marinette. Was that all this was? A performance for her benefit? Try as she might, Marinette could not find the cracks Chloe claimed were there somewhere behind Adrien’s dazzling green eyes, shy smile, and long-fingered hands folded just inches from her own.

“Okay people, we’re about ready to get started with our second set tonight,” Rokia spoke into the standing microphone, pausing while the audience clapped. “As most of you probably know, I bring the pipes to our humble ensemble.”

Some guy whooped loudly, and Rokia patted her violet hair wrap dramatically as if to bask in the praise. The deep purple and the audience’s enthusiasm made her flawless teak skin positively glow. She lived for the attention.

“All right, down boy!” she said with a laugh. “So like I said, I’m generally the pipes, but even I need a break sometimes. Oh, don’t cry!” She reached dramatically for the man in the audience who’d enthusiastically whooped. “Luka’s going to take over for this next song. Ladies, get your panties ready.”

Some women in the audience clapped and one even whistled. Luka, now with an acoustic guitar over his shoulder, took the teasing in stride and traded places with Rokia, where she sat and settled her cello in her lap.

“Thanks Rokia, for that, uh, introduction,” he said a little sheepishly. “I got some friends here tonight who probably have a thousand better things to be doing than sitting here listening to this crap.”

Someone in the audience booed sarcastically, and he laughed. He cast a glance at Marinette’s table. “I’m no Gerard Way, but I’ll try not to disappoint.”

Some people in the audience booed sarcastically, and he laughed. He cast a glance at Marinette’s table. “I’m no Gerard Way, but I’ll try not to disappoint.”

The music started up with Prakash on the keyboard, Rokia on backing vocals, and Luka singing along with her. It was slow, soft, and a little sad. Marinette nodded along to the lulling tune, but when they approached the chorus, the music swelled, and Luka’s voice drowned out Rokia and the music.

“There’s nothing to hold but voices and souls.
All of your ghosts still haunt me…”
Immediately, Marinette was captivated. His voice was raspy and raw, full of emotion as he began to carry the song forward like a wave rushing toward the shore ahead of the rest. He strummed his acoustic, and Rokia swelled on the cello through the next verse and chorus again.

His voice was as good as she remembered it, better even. He used to sing for her all the time in college, back when they were Luka and Marinette, however briefly. And while any romance between them fizzled after Luka graduated from college and got busy being a full-time musician, they had remained close friends. She’d witnessed his rise, as he’d witnessed hers. And somehow, he still had the gall to be surprised when she turned up for one of his shows, like he couldn’t quite believe she still cared enough.

*Hopeless, hopeless Luka.*

Marinette glanced back at Adrien, who was listening and nodding along to the song, and Chloe, who had her phone out but was ignoring it in favor of watching the stage. She had a strange look on her face, not quite annoyed or bored, not quite happy or even entertained. Just…attentive.

“I hear them call when silence falls.
All of your ghosts still haunt me…”

Luka took the mic in his hands to give it his full power, expression appropriately pained as he pined for a love he would never know.

The final chorus gave way to Rokia’s backing oohs as Luka held on to his last notes beautifully. The music tapered out, and the audience clapped and cheered. Luka accepted the praise with grace and aplomb, bowing out to return to his usual spot and pick up his bass. Marinette let out a whoop of her own because she knew he was embarrassed and trying to hide it and they couldn’t have that, now, could they? She was loud enough to draw his eye from the stage, and he laughed, shaking his head.

The band began their next song, and Marinette turned back to her table mates.

“Chlo? You want anything? Marinette and I’ll grab more drinks,” Adrien said.

“What? Oh… Yeah, no, I’ll have whatever.”

Adrien looked at her like she’d been body-snatched. “You’ll have whatever?”

“Yeah, whatever, A. You know what I like.”

Adrien shot Marinette a look like he absolutely did not know what she liked because Chloe Bourgeois had to have things done in a very specific way exactly how she wanted them, but he also wisely chose not to argue. He jerked his head toward the bar, a silent invitation for Marinette to follow.

“Well, that was weird,” he said as they made their way to the end of the bar and waited to be served. “I don’t think she’s very happy with me for dragging her out here.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not it,” Marinette said, fighting hard not to smile at his expense. Unfortunately, he wasn’t looking at her as he waved at the bartender and ordered three beers.

“Hey, I’m sorry about that, by the way. I know you and Chloe never got along before. I just thought you’d prefer to have some kind of buffer.”

“You mean that chaperone thing was for real?”
He looked at her, realized what he’d said, and immediately tried to backpedal. “No, I mean, that’s not what I meant, I—” He ran his hand through his hair in the universal sign of frustration. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Then what?” She looked up at him until he finally met her gaze. “Hey, whatever it is, it’s okay. I’m not mad that Chloe’s here. The more the merrier, right?”

“Hah, yeah, sort of.” He looked uncomfortable as he warred with something. “Last night, when I… When I met you and didn’t recognize you, I was… I just don’t want you to get the wrong idea.”

“The wrong idea,” Marinette repeated. “Oh… You mean when you hit on me?”

He blushed at how easily she said it, and Marinette couldn’t help but laugh this time. Abashed was a good look on him.

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. I made a complete ass of myself. Not the first time it’s happened, and probably not the last.”

The bartender arrived with their drinks, and Adrien pulled out a few bills. But the bartender waved him off and moved to help the next guys.

“Your money’s no good here, Agreste. I have this magical thing called a tab. They just give me all the drinks I want, no cash upfront required,” Marinette said in an effort to assuage him.

Unfortunately, Adrien just looked a little miserable. “That’s great. Now I’m the asshole who blindly came on to you and I can’t even buy you apology beer.”

“You already apologized. And besides, it’s not like it was all that necessary. Why would any girl object to attention from a former supermodel?” She handed him his beer. “Especially one with such a pretty blush?”

And bless his heart, he did it again, right on command. Marinette really wished she could be filming this.

Sadly, her time at the top did not last very long. Adrien’s gaze darkened with what could only be described as mischief, and Marinette’s heart took full advantage of the opportunity to implode just a little.

“Well, then,” he said in a voice that was not his voice two minutes ago, because two minutes ago she did not feel the sound of him shiver down to her fingertips. “If it’s attention you want, you should know you’ve had mine all night.”

His hand on the small of her back was fire as he slowly guided her back to their table, and she was keenly aware of how close he was. And goddamnit, this was not fair. Because somewhere along the line, some horrible, no good, weak-willed traitor had made him realize just how obnoxiously attractive he was, and he’d learned how to weaponize his advantage to deal maximum damage to unwitting women harboring old crushes.

“Marinette,” Chloe said when she and Adrien reclaimed their seats. “How late does this show go?”

Marinette checked her phone. “Maybe another half hour or so? Why?”

Chloe was simultaneously typing an email on her phone while talking to Marinette. “Perfect. I assume there’s some kind of after-party?”
“Uh, kind of. The band usually grabs a drink together after the show.”

“Great. A, we’re staying.”

Adrien looked at her oddly. “You want to stay? Seriously?”

“Yeah, is that a problem?”

“Well, no, just that you were complaining earlier that you had an early meeting and wouldn’t want to stay out too late.”

“Canceled. I just cleared my morning.”

“You did?”

“I’m the boss. I can do whatever I want.”

Marinette watched their exchange, a smile spreading on her face.

*Hopeless, hopeless Adrien.*

“That’s great, Chloe,” Marinette said.

“It is?” Adrien looked at her like she’d forgotten who she was talking to.

Marinette held out her beer expectantly. “Absolutely. Cheers.”

He shrugged, still not totally convinced, but clinked his beer to Marinette’s all the same. Chloe automatically reached for her beer, scowled when she saw the brand, and put it back down.

“Nastro Azzurro? *God.*”

“You said to get you whatever!” Adrien pouted.

“Whatever isn’t piss in a bottle.”

“Ahhh, Chlo.” Adrien put his arm around her and half shook, half squeezed her like an obnoxious big brother might do to his kid sister to fluster her. “You’re so adorably high maintenance.”

Chloe pushed him off her. “Says the guy who takes an hour to do his hair. We were late because of him.” Chloe gave Marinette a very serious look that said, ‘You have no idea what you’re getting into.’

“It didn’t take an hour. That’s ridiculous!”

“Your bathroom is ridiculous. Marinette, guess how many different hair products this prima donna owns.”

“Uh, I don’t know, five?” Marinette couldn’t keep from smiling at Adrien’s obvious distress.

“Fourteen,” Chloe said, putting a hand over Adrien’s mouth before he could protest. “I counted while I was waiting for him to finish styling his hair. And let’s not forget, this is me saying this. Look at my hair. This shit should be insured.” Chloe flipped her perfectly styled ponytail.

Marinette was laughing now, and Adrien stewed in his chair, pissy. She felt a little bad making fun of him, but fourteen hair products seemed like a bit much… On a whim, she leaned across the table
and ran her fingers through Adrien’s hair. It was a little stiff with product, but soft enough to surprise her. The fact that his hair was thicker and softer than her own put her off a little.

“Very nice,” she said, teasing.

Adrien grabbed her offending wrist. “Hey, hands off the goods.” But the way he was looking at her suggested that was the last thing he wanted.

Marinette suddenly regretted her caprice. Her wrist burned where he held it, and she was very aware that she was leaning precariously over the table, balancing on one foot, and one tug from Adrien would probably send her falling face-first into his chest.

“Well, since I have to do everything myself, what a surprise, I’m getting something else to drink.” Chloe got up, grabbed her purse, and stalked off toward the bar.

Adrien returned her wrist, and she sat back in her chair.

“Bold of you to go for my hair like that,” he said.

“You’re really protective of it,” Marinette said, wondering if she’d inadvertently crossed a line.

“Not really. It’s just that when a woman grabs my hair like that, she’s not bending over a table.” He tapped his fingers on the table and chuckled softly. “Well, usually.”

It took Marinette a moment to get his meaning, and she felt the heat in her wrist slowly rise up her neck and face through her hairline. He smiled slowly, carefully. There was something almost hungry in that look, like it was all he could do not to return the favor. Marinette tugged on her loose hair nervously, and her breath hitched at the sight of his eyes falling to her fingers as they entwined in her hair.

If she’d had any doubts about Adrien flirting with her before, that look burned them out of her completely. And now, she had no idea what to do. She actually wished Chloe would hurry up and come back.

Oh my god, Marinette thought frantically as Adrien shifted and slowly leaned across the table like some kind of predatory big cat. Her throat went dry and her tongue was suddenly way too big for her mouth.

When he reached out and curled his fingers around hers in her hair, Marinette was sure she would literally spontaneously combust.

“Very nice,” he said.

Somewhere in Marinette’s messenger bag under her chair, Tikki was having a stroke.

And just when Marinette was absolutely certain she was at death’s door—and god, just fucking kill her already and get it over with—Adrien lost his composure and broke into a shit-eating grin.

“Oh man, your face,” he said. “You’re really cute when your embarrassed.”

Marinette’s heart felt like it had dropped into the pit of her stomach. The heat and color drained from her face, and she narrowed her eyes at him. “Oh, I see how it is. You’re keeping score, huh?”

He was still grinning like a fool. “You strike me as the type who likes a challenge.”

“Oh, Adrien,” she said, her blood boiling as adrenaline brought her back from the dead. “You have
no idea what you’ve just started.”

“Is that so?”

“It is. But remember, you’re the one who just had to make it a competition. You’ll only have yourself to blame in the end.”

He laughed and ran his thumb over her knuckles. She’d forgotten he was still holding her hand. “Looking forward to it.”

His laughter sobered her a little, and she gently reclaimed her hand and crossed her arms. “Please, who’re you fooling? Your favorite song is Call Me, Maybe.”

“I never said it was my favorite song, but it’s up there.”

“Oh, yeah? So, what else is in the Adrien Agreste Billboard 100? Justin Bieber? Taylor Swift?”

He made a face. “Hardly. I’m a little more of a late ‘90s and early 2000s pop connoisseur.”

“Ah. Britney.”

“The one true queen.”

“I’m more of a Spice Girls fan.”

“No Doubt,” he countered.

“TLC,” Marinette said.

“Destiny’s Child, obviously.”

“Backstreet Boys.”

He gave her a look of mock offense. “N’Sync, and I’ll hear no arguments on the matter.”

“What? No way! Backstreet Boys were the boy band.”

“Ninety-Eight Degrees,” Adrien said.

Marinette threw her hands up. “Oh, come on.”

“You’re the one who picked TLC over Destiny’s Child.”

“Hey, Don’t Go Chasin’ Waterfalls was twelve-year-old Marinette’s personal anthem, I’ll have you know. God, next thing I know you’ll be saying Avril Lavigne is a true artiste.”

He said nothing, and Marinette gaped at him.

“No,” she said.

“If Britney’s the queen, Avril’s the princess.”

Marinette hung her head in her hands, distraught. “I feel like I’ve just been incepted.” She looked up. “Where’s the spinning top? Where’s Leo?”

“Who’s Leo?” asked Luka.
Marinette almost jumped out of her seat. “Luka! Hey, what’re you doing here?”

He gave her a weird look. “We finished our set for the night. You weren’t listening?”

Marinette instantly felt like the most horrible friend to ever disgrace the world with her selfish existence. “Crap, I’m sorry. That sounded so bad. I was listening, and you guys were amazing! I guess I just got caught up in the conversation…”

Luka smiled a little. “Oh, yeah? What’re we talking about?”

“I was just telling Marinette that Avril Lavigne is the punk pop princess we all deserved,” Adrien said.

Marinette groaned. “Oh my god, stop.”

Luka looked thoughtful. “She had some good stuff back in the day.”

“Luka, no.” Marinette looked at him like she no longer recognized him.

“What? Some of her earlier stuff is great to cover. Lots of energy.”

Adrien looked like a cat with cream. He pulled up a fourth chair, and Marinette scooted over to make room for Luka in between Chloe’s empty chair and hers. “I know what I’m requesting next time I come hear your band play,” Adrien said.

“What are we requesting?” asked Chloe, rejoining them. She had a whiskey on the rocks and a bowl of caramel popcorn for the table.

“An ambulance,” Marinette deadpanned, “to pronounce me dead on arrival. Adrien wants Luka to cover Avril Lavigne songs for the next show.”

“…I left for five fucking minutes,” Chloe said. “I swear to god, A, if you get ‘Hot’ stuck in my head again, I will skin you.”

Luka began humming the melody for Hot, and Chloe turned on him.

“Zip it, Sk8ter Boi,” she said. “Your voice isn’t that pretty.”

He smiled up at her, casual in that sleepy way he had, and Chloe scoffed and sank into her chair. Marinette did not miss the rosy glow on her cheeks as Luka reached across her and plucked the untouched beer she’d abandoned.

With the show over, most of the tables cleared out as patrons went home, but the band hung around and socialized with those who lingered. Marinette introduced Adrien and Chloe to the other members of Hardrock, who in turn introduced other friends and fans, and soon the group had grown to three tables strong as everyone talked and laughed and enjoyed the evening.

And despite how distracting Adrien had been earlier, Marinette found herself more caught up in observing Luka, her normally soft-spoken, sensitive, easygoing friend, tease and banter with Chloe the entire evening. He had her boxed in with one arm on the table between them and the other strung lazily over the back of her chair. Chloe leaned her shoulder against his arm as his fingers discreetly brushed the ends of her hair. When Luka finished his drink, he moved his free hand to Chloe’s knee and whispered something to her. She rolled her eyes, but she was fighting a smile and leaned in a little closer.
“Earth to Marinette!” Rokia said, laughing. “I asked if you wanted another coffee. I’m busting out
the espresso machine and none of you unbelievers can stop me.”

“Somebody please stop her,” Prakash said. “She’ll burn this place down, and we’ll have nowhere to
perform.”

“Ha ha, asshole.”

“I’m okay for now, thanks,” Marinette said. Her phone clock said it was well past 11 p.m. She
should probably get home soon, and she didn’t want a caffeine buzz if she was going to get some
sleep in the near future.

Adrien saw her checking her phone and leaned over. He’d been pushed around their circular table to
accommodate the others, and now he was seated directly next to Marinette. “Will you be turning into
a pumpkin soon?”

Marinette snorted. “I’ll turn into something a lot worse than that if I don’t get some real sleep
tonight.”

“Something keep you up last night?”

It was an innocent enough question, but it nonetheless recalled her midnight run to the Eiffel Tower
as Ladybug, and all the muddled emotional baggage she’d allowed to get the better of her last night.
She didn’t often think of Chat Noir and his sudden disappearance from her life, but when she did, it
had a tendency to turn into a whole ordeal that could drag her down for hours, even days on end. But
of course, she couldn’t tell Adrien any of that without raising some uncomfortable questions about
how she managed to swing through the city and climb the Eiffel Tower with nothing but a yo-yo…

“I had a really early morning,” she hedged. “A little crisis with a supplier.”

“Really? Who do you use?”

“We just signed Watson’s. Just a few too many late and canceled deliveries with our previous guys.”
She shrugged. “I have an important custom fitting this week, so Watson’s better show me some royal
blue taffeta by noon tomorrow or I’ll turn into the Evil Stepmother. Forget the pumpkin.”

Adrien looked at her, bemused, and Marinette winced. She’d just complained to him, like a whiny
brat and not at all the mature, successful designer she was supposed to be.

Definitely time to call it a night.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to just word vomit all over you like that.”

He put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “That’s okay! Obviously you’re stressed out about it, so
you should talk if that helps. I’ll, uh… I’ll hold your hair back while you word vomit everything up.”

Marinette laughed. “Somehow, you made that really gross mental image sound kind of endearing.
What a gentleman. Thanks.”

“I’m at your service, my lady,” he said.

Marinette tensed without meaning to at that turn of phrase. He was still smiling softly and hadn’t
seemed to noticed the sudden shift in her. She stared at him, trying to make sense of this achingly
nostalgic feeling that had hit her like a freight train all of a sudden, but he turned away and took a sip
of his drink, and it was gone again. When he caught her watching him thoughtfully, he frowned.
“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said, shaking her head and wondering what on earth had possessed to her think, even for a fleeting moment, that she was fourteen again hearing Chat Noir bluster and blaviate and call her his lady. “Sorry, I just… Never mind.”

She looked away and chewed on her lip, trying to rid herself of this sensation. This ache of longing, something that ran oceans deep within her, real and true and so very wrong. Because it wasn’t Chat Noir who had left, but someone else. Something else. It had devoured him from the inside out and wore his face, but it was not him. And despite knowing that, despite what that monster had almost done to her, for just a quiet, unguarded second, she couldn’t help but wish he was still here.

Marinette almost spat out her drink. It tasted like ashes on her tongue. She had to get out of here before she threw up for real.

“I have to get going,” she said, forcing a smile for Adrien. “It’s getting late.”

“Oh, okay, sure,” Adrien said. “I guess it’s almost midnight. Maybe I should go, too.”

“No, stay! You don’t have to leave because of me.”

“I know, but I came out to see you. Not much of a reason to stay if you’re leaving.”

Marinette couldn’t help the fluttery feeling in her chest at his sincerity. Maybe the Adrien she’d fallen for once many years ago was not so left behind, after all.

“I’ll walk you out,” he offered.

“Okay, thanks.”

“Let me just get Chloe.”

Marinette stopped him with a hand on his arm and shook her head. “I don’t think Chloe’s ready to leave yet.”

He followed her gaze to where she and Luka were still talking and completely ignoring everybody else around them. His hand was still on her knee tracing circles with his thumb.

“Oh,” he said. “Wait, really? When did this happen?”

Marinette rolled her eyes. “You know, you’re a little oblivious. Pretty sure he had eyes for her the second he saw her.”

“And Chloe?”

“Did you really not see her reaction when he was singing before?”

Adrien looked thoughtful. “Huh… I guess I wasn’t paying attention.” He had a sudden thought. “Actually, she never cancels her meetings unless it’s important…”

Marinette grinned. “Seems important to me.”

“Give me a sec, I’m just going to let he know I’m leaving.”

Adrien talked to Chloe while Marinette got up and said her goodbyes to everyone. She caught Luka’s eye and gave him a cheeky thumbs up, and he just smiled and waved before turning back to
Chloe. She then left the lounge with Adrien, and together they waited on the street for their ride share drivers.

“Chloe will be okay on her own, right?” Marinette asked as they huddled on the sidewalk for warmth. “Not that Luka isn’t safe or anything. That came out wrong.”

“Chloe can take care of herself, believe me. It’s him I’m worried about.”

“Oh, really?”

Adrien cast her a knowing look. “When Chloe decides she wants something, it’s best to get out of her way. She can be…a lot.”

“Well, I know Luka pretty well. He’s not as gentle as he seems. I’m sure he can handle her.”

“From the way they were practically knotted together in there, I’d say they’re going to do a lot more than just handle each other.”

Marinette elbowed him playfully. “That was a terrible pun. Don’t quit your day job.”

“Oh, okay, not my best work, that’s fair. I’ll have to do better next time.”

Two cars pulled up to the curb, and the first one lowered the passenger window to reveal a college-aged guy with wide doe eyes. “Marinette Dupain-Cheng?” he asked.

“That’s me,” Marinette said.

“And that one’s probably mine,” Adrien said, nodding at the second car. “I guess this is goodbye for now.”

“Yeah,” Marinette said, biting back a smile. “For now.”

“I had a great time with you tonight,” he said more softly. “Thanks for this.”

“Any time. Or at least, whenever your busy schedule permits.”

“Oh, yeah, shit. It’s going to be a hell week for me. I’m dreading tomorrow.”

“You’ll get through it.” She opened the back seat door of her ride. “And, you know, if you find yourself with some time on your hands, you can always call me, maybe.”

Adrien smiled like a goof. “Careful, an open invitation to blow up your phone is a dangerous thing to give me.”

“Bring it on, ambiguous winky-face emojis and all.” Marinette slipped into the back seat of her ride.

“Be careful what you wish for!” Adrien teased, closing her door for her.

Through the window Marinette winked dramatically. The last sight she saw as her ride pulled away from the curb was Adrien’s happy smile, those green eyes shadowed in the cover of night and pale street lights. She pressed a gloved hand to the window and bit her lip.

The drive was not a long one, and she was dead on her feet when she finally made it inside her apartment and put her coat away. Tikki had fallen asleep in her bag and hardly stirred when Marinette pulled her out and gently set her on the pink body pillow on her bed. She quickly changed into her pajamas and checked her phone before she headed to the bathroom to brush her teeth.
was a text from Adrien.

[Adrien: Goodnight Marinette. Sweet dreams.]

[Adrien: :3]

She rolled her eyes at the stupid cat emoji. In all fairness, he had warned her.

[Marinette: Goodnight Adrien.]

Marinette stepped lightly to the bathroom and smiled as she examined her reflection in the mirror.

*I had fun tonight.*

With Adrien. And, dare she say, even with Chloe, sort of. She wondered if Chloe was still with Luka, and then realized it was both none of her business and also not something she wanted to be thinking about as she lay in bed alone tonight. But that was okay. Luka was a good guy, and he deserved good things in his life, if Chloe Bourgeois could be considered a good thing. Perhaps for a night, just about anyone could be.

Marinette smiled. Wait until Alya heard about her night. What had started off as sort-of-a-date, sort-of-not-a-date with Adrien had turned into a hookup for their friends and nothing for either of them.

*Well, nothing but a goodnight cat emoji.*

She climbed into bed and petted Tikki’s forehead gently. The kwami stirred a little, but didn’t wake. Marinette grew drowsy and soon fell asleep, too. Her last thoughts were of Adrien watching her through the window of the car, her hand pressed to the glass, as she drove away.

She fell asleep with her fingers in her hair, and dreamed they were his.

Chapter End Notes

*Welcome to the Lukloe party nobody asked for. Yes, what could possibly go wrong starting out a relationship with an impulsive hook up? Surely these are Mature Adults who Communicate and Make Good Choices…*

*Credit for the song, “Ghosts Still Haunt Me” by Nine One One, which is beautiful and worth a listen: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7uc4yv9mkI*

*Next time: lights, camera, ACTION.*
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Ladybug is ready for her close-up and an unexpected reunion, and a bird and a turtle share tea and accessories.

Chapter Notes

Remember that angst I promised you all?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Alec Cataldi was running late this morning. His producer was going to skin him alive if he missed another live taping, he lamented as he emerged from the subway and all but ran the remaining four blocks to the Canal Plus building, where his game show was taped in front of a live studio audience every Wednesday. He pulled his blue beanie down over his bald head to stave off the chilly wind as he practically flew down the sidewalk and resisted the urge to check his watch.

I’m getting too old for this shit.

Nonetheless, the thought made him smile. He’d come a long way from pre-teen talk shows to prime time game shows with prizes valued in excess of one million euros. He’d made a good name for himself and his brand. And all he had to do was show up on time one day of the week. Yep, Philippe was going to kill him.

It was a cold, grey morning that threatened snow, and the people he passed on the sidewalk trudging to work were a sea of black and blue pea coats, fur-lined hats, and sturdy leather boots. Alec’s scarf flapped behind him in his haste, hopefully not smacking any passersby in the face.

The Canal+ building loomed tall just around the corner. Almost there. But he’d barely cleared the corner when he ran right into oncoming traffic. A woman yelped, and a man’s thick shoulder slammed into Alec’s. He went down, landed forward, and dropped his bag, which of course opened and spilled its contents everywhere.

“Pardon me!” said a woman, her heels clacking as she rushed off.

Swearing and smarting where his forearms had struck the concrete, Alec struggled to get to his knees and looked around. No one had fallen with him, and there was no sign of the person he must have collided with. He was getting looks from passersby as he lingered on the ground.

“Damnit.” He winced and began gathering his things back into the bag.

The last object he picked up was a pin he didn’t recognize. It was small and pale pink, hand carved from the looks of it, some kind of coral perhaps. Its shape was a rose, and it was no bigger than a two euro coin. The person he’d bumped into must have dropped it by mistake. Alec looked around again, but of course they were long gone by now. He hadn’t gotten a look at them, couldn’t even be sure if
they’d been a man or a woman on this crowded morning. Sighing, he picked up the pin, intending to hold on to it for now and perhaps turn it in to the police station after work.

The moment he picked up the pin, he was surprised to find it warm. Not just warm, but radiating warmth, as if it produced heat itself. He cradled it in his palm, curious, and ran his thumb over the intricately carved rose petals. He’d never seen jewelry carved from coral before. It was quite lovely. So lovely, in fact, that he felt compelled to wear it. Careless of the passersby shooting him odd looks, he carefully pinned the rose to his lapel. He could feel its warmth radiating through his clothes over his chest, pleasantly buzzing.

...What had he been doing? Oh, yes, work. He was running late, and Philippe was going to chew him out like a piece of old gum. But somehow, Alec could not be bothered to care about that anymore. He got up, a determined smile on his face, and walked purposefully the rest of the way. He had a very good feeling that today’s show would be spectacular, and Philippe would forget all about his delay. After all, Alec Cataldi was the most charismatic, successful, handsome game show host in France, if he did say so himself. And today, nobody would be able to bring him down.

It was Wednesday, and Marinette had not heard from Adrien since the goodnight text on Sunday. It was for the better, honestly, since she’d been working almost nonstop since then. Watson’s delivered on the royal blue taffeta, literally, and since noon on Monday, she’d been furiously measuring and sewing. She had a staff and two other full-time seamstresses, but she had them working on the preliminary designs for the upcoming spring collection, leaving Marinette to shoulder the brunt of this custom order. The customer had asked for her expertise specifically, and so she had little choice in the matter.

But Marinette was happiest when she was alone in her studio, her fingers black with lead from sketching, or a needle and thread in hand and the sound of the pedal sewing machine whirring. Alphonse was handling the supplier contract negotiation with Watson’s, as well as turning comments for Juleka on the financing documents she and her team had been drafting, leaving Marinette to focus on the part of the job where she really shined.

It wasn’t all work, though. Between Manon and Alya, Marinette had recounted all the details of her not-a-date with Adrien and Chloe on Sunday. She left out her bathroom conversation with Chloe when Manon bugged her for details, deciding to relay that part of the night to Alya only.

“So what, you’re BFFs with Chloe Bourgeois now?” Alya said sarcastically as they grabbed a quick lunch together at a café uptown near Marinette Designs.

“Of course not,” Marinette said, frowning at her banh mi. “I mean, I don’t hate her or anything like I used to. She’s really… We grew up, that’s all.”

“Right.” Alya was not at all convinced. “Forgive me for not taking your word for it.”

“Maybe you can take Luka’s word for it. From what I heard, he and Chloe had a pretty fantastic night together.”

Alya pretended to gag. “That sweet summer child. Marinette, how could you let her corrupt him? He was one of the last pure ones.”

“You’re talking like she turned him into a vampire or something. They had a one-night stand. Two consenting adults. Who cares?”
“Apparently not you.” Alya gave her a knowing look across the table they had snagged by the window with a view of the street and people passing by. “Which is weird. How can you not care?”

“Because it’s none of my business who Luka’s with. We’re just friends.”

“Riiiiight, because you can totally just be friends with a guy who gave you some of the best orgasms of your life.”

Marinette blushed furiously. “That was a really long time ago. And keep your voice down, Jesus Christ.” She looked around furtively, searching for the eyes of disgust that must surely be casting their way. “I would hardly say best, anyway. It was college. We were young and inexperienced and didn’t know any better.”

Alya brightened, which was never a good sign. “Good thing Adrien’s back to finally show you better, am I right?”

Marinette groaned. “I walked right in to that one.”

“You sure did, sweetie. But hey, from the way he was with you on Sunday, I bet you could walk right into him and he wouldn’t mind at all.”

Alya waggled her eyebrows behind her cat eye glasses, and Marinette tried her very best not to groan again. “I thought you didn’t like him. You weren’t the friendliest at the gala on Saturday.”

Alya shrugged. “I’m on Team Marinette. If you’re happy, then I’m happy. And you are happy, right?”

Marinette pulled her fingers through her hair and smiled, remembering Sunday. “I think…ugh, I don’t know. It’s way too early to tell. I mean, I kind of barely know the guy, to be honest.”

Alya peered at her. “What about what Her Royal Highness said to you?”

“Chloe’s probably his closest friend at this point. I guess she would know him better than anyone from what I gathered. I’m now really curious about what the story there is.”

“Are you sure she wasn’t fucking with you? I mean, it’s Chloe. She makes Regina George look like Malala.”

“Alya, really, she’s not that bad. And anyway, I don’t think she was making it up. I think…I believe she was genuinely looking out for him. And for me, even, in her own way.”

Alya snorted. “If you say so, but I’ll have to see it to believe it. What’re you going to do about it?”

“What can I do? It’s not like I can just come out and ask Adrien, ‘Hey, do you have any history of crippling emotional or mental instability I should know about before we take our emoji texting to the next level?’”

“Obviously that’s not what I meant. Just, you know, maybe stay vigilant is all. If nothing else, you haven’t known him for fourteen years. That’s a long time to go not knowing someone. He’s not the same Adrien you remember.”

“Yeah, I think I got that memo loud and clear.” Marinette nibbled on her banh mi thoughtfully. “I think I’m just going to see what happens. I don’t want to be that stuttering teenager with a crush again.”
“You sure it’s not too late for that?”

Marinette shot her a look. “I thought I was a grown-ass woman with so much success and potential and, like, glitter coming out of my ass to hear you talk about it.”

Alya laughed. “Girl, you know you have a lovely ass, but don’t go letting that go to your head. Anyway, I fully expect you to bring your boy toy over so I can properly examine the goods.”

“Alya, he’s not a piece of meat.”

“Good, because as you know, I’m a vegetarian.” She grinned. “I told Nino he was back. He seemed open to the idea. Consider it a double date.”

“We’re not dating.”

“Of course not. Which is why you’re here having sad lunch with your best friend instead of having steamy office sex with Adrien.”

“Oh, look at the time! I have to get back to my taffeta.” Marinette wrapped up the rest of her uneaten sandwich to take to go.

“Make good choices, dear!” Alya called after her.

Marinette flipped her off, but Alya made a show of catching her middle finger and keeping it in her pocket for later. Marinette trudged back to her boutique to keep working. She had a fitting appointment with the client, Jessika Fujiwara, and she wanted to make sure she had something presentable to show the woman, who Marinette discovered through Google was a fairly prominent film and television actress based in Tokyo. How on earth she had discovered Marinette’s little corner of the fashion world remained a mystery.

The office was much as she'd left it with staff running around with armfuls of fabric, taking measurements, sketching in notebooks. The retail part of the boutique had a few customers browsing, and Manon tapped her watch teasingly at her from behind the register as Marinette hurried past. She only had a couple hours before the client would be here, and she still had a few alterations to make—

“Ah, there she is,” said Alphonse, who looked like he’d just eaten a ghost pepper whole. He wrung his hands nervously. “Marinette, Ms. Fujiwara has been here waiting for her fitting.” He shot her a look that said, ‘Where the hell were you?!’

Marinette gaped. “N-Now? But I thought our meeting wasn’t until four!”

“It was, but something came up and I had to move some things around in my schedule. I apologize for the inconvenience, but I promise I won’t be too much of a bother. I understand the dress is not yet finished,” said a slender woman whom Marinette guessed must be Jessika Fujiwara.

She wore her jet black hair up in an elegant twist. Her face was perfectly made up and her green winter dress fit her very well, as one would expect of someone used to being seen for a living. She was an older woman, probably past fifty, but she could have passed for ten years younger.

“Oh! No, it’s not quite finished, I’m afraid. My apologies, Ms. Fujiwara,” Marinette said, feeling nervous in the presence of someone famous, even if Marinette was not personally familiar with her work. She had a man with her, a slender Japanese guy in a suit and sunglasses who looked like he could be an international assassin from the way he held himself. Marinette wondered just what kind of trouble Ms. Fujiwara was expecting to have a second shadow like that following her around.
“It’s Jessika, please,” she said, removing her own sunglasses to reveal two dark, glittering eyes. “After all, I feel as though I know you already. My niece, Juleka, says such lovely things about you.”

“You’re Juleka’s aunt?” Marinette said, incredulous. She looked Jessika up and down again, and the longer she looked, the more she saw the resemblance. Juleka had that same willowy build, heart-shaped face, and sly half smile. They could have been sisters if not for the age gap. “Wow, I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize. It’s so nice to meet you!”

Jessika smiled brightly. “When I told Juleka I was filming here in Paris for my new show and needed a dress that would stop hearts at the premiere party next week, she insisted I come to you. And I do love being at the cutting edge of high fashion.”

Marinette returned the smile. She owed Juleka dinner for this, no doubt about it. The custom order was her largest individual sale in months. “Thank you, but the honor is all mine. Please, this way. We’ll do the fitting in my studio. Thanks Al, I’ll take it from here.”

Alphonse looked immensely relieved and nodded. “Thanks, Mar.”

He scampered off to his office, and Marinette was left with Jessika and her statuesque body guard. Jessika saw her looking and gestured noncommittally. “That’s Yuki, my personal body guard. Just think of him as wall dressing.”

“Oh, sure. Can I at least get you something to drink while you wait?” Marinette offered.

Yuki turned his head slightly, but it was impossible to see where he was looking behind those sunglasses. He said nothing and remained standing ramrod straight.

“Oh, never mind him. Now, please show me what you’ve got so far. I’m dying to see!” Jessika said.

So Marinette took her to the studio in back and brought out the royal blue taffeta and silk she’d been working on nonstop. It was not the finished product, but Jessika was able to try on the shell of what it would become.

“The skirt will be longer than this,” Marinette said as she took measurements and scribbled some notes for the alterations she would need to make. “The taffeta will layer from the side, here. And the brocade you requested will fan out from the bodice here, in gold.”

“This dress is luscious,” Jessika said, admiring herself in the full-length mirror. “I especially like the plunging neckline.”

“Oh, yeah, I was going to add a sheer teal gossamer there.”

Jessika touched a ringed finger to the exposed center of her chest, imagining the feel of gossamer there. “Yes, good, all right. As long as the plunge stays. I’ve always loved a little bit of teasing, you know?”

Marinette nodded. “I do know. I’m partial to plunging necklines, myself.”

Jessika made no secret of how pleased she was with the progress so far. Marinette secretly thanked Manon again for her quick thinking with Watson’s.

“So, this will be ready for me by next Saturday, yes?”

“Oh, yeah, of course!” I guess I won’t be sleeping this week...
“Perfect! Oh, and while I’m here, you don’t mind if I take a look at your boutique offerings, do you? I only just arrived in Paris last week, and of course my wardrobe is just far too Tokyo.”

“N-Not at all! Thank you! Um, please be my guest.”

“I shall. Marinette, it was delightful to meet you. Oh! We’ll do lunch sometime. I have a feeling this is only the beginning of a lucrative business partnership.”

“Thank you!” Marinette said, pleased. “And I really hope you enjoy your stay in Paris.”

Jessika smiled slyly. “I certainly intend to.”

She changed back into her own clothes and snapped her fingers. “Yuki, watashi no kaban wo motte kinasai.”

Yuki the bodyguard retrieved Jessika’s large hand bag and followed her quietly back to the main boutique, leaving Marinette with an armful of taffeta and a few pages of alteration notes. Well, it could be worse, she supposed. It wasn’t every day she gained a glamorous, international actress for a client. Sighing, Marinette resigned herself to another full day of grueling work.

She’d fallen asleep in her studio. Again. Groaning, Marinette sat up and winced at the ache in her stiff neck. Tikki was out of her bag and munching on a macaroon from the stash Marinette kept on her person at all times.

“Hello, sleepyhead,” Tikki said. “You have a lead smudge on your face.”

“Huh?” Marinette pulled out her compact and checked her reflection. “Crap.” She licked her fingers and rubbed her cheek until the smudge came out. Unfortunately, the smudge also appeared on the page she’d been working on, and a little spit wouldn’t fix this mess. “I have to redo this. Goddamnit.”

She’d made a lot of progress, all things considered, but somewhere along the line, her concentration drifted and her eyes drooped. It was past 10 at night, and everyone else had gone home.

Sighing, Marinette debated the efficacy of washing her face and getting back to work, or calling it a night. Jessika’s dress hung draped on a nearby sewing manikin, looking marginally more like a dress than it had five hours ago, at least. A light was flashing in the corner of her eye, and Marinette saw that Tikki had the television on low.

“Bored, Tikki?” she asked.

Tiki smiled shyly. “I like the voices. And you were snoring, so…”

“I would never,” Marinette protested playfully. “What’re you watching? Is that the news?”

Marinette popped one of Tikki’s macaroons in her mouth and turned up the volume. Nadia Chamack was hosting a special report from the TVi news studio.

“…the bizarre broadcasts coming out this evening, all from Canal+ channels. We’re turning now to live coverage of the Canal+ building. What can you tell us, Emile?”

The picture cut to Emile, a reporter on scene in front of the Canal+ headquarters downtown, where a police barricade was blocking entry by any pedestrians.
“Thanks Nadia,” Emile said. “As you can see, local authorities have cordoned off the area. The suspect is inside, and I can confirm that he has at least twenty hostages working with him to continue the strange broadcast. No sign of police entering the building yet, but we have Municipal Police Chief Roger Raincomprix here discussing strategy with his men behind me, as you can see.”

The camera moved in for a shot of a bulletproof vest-clad Roger Raincomprix huddled over a table with several men and women in uniform.

“Back to you, Nadia.”

The picture cut back to the main news room, and Marinette sat watching, curious. “What’s going on? A hostage situation?”

“Yes, I think so. At first it was just some strange broadcasts, but I didn’t realize something was actually wrong,” Tikki said, worried.

Marinette picked up the remote and flipped through a few channels until she landed on one of the Canal+ channels. What she saw didn’t look all that strange to her, just some kind of game show.

“Wait… What the hell?!”

She got right up to the screen to see better, but her eyes were not playing tricks on her. The game contestants were slumped, some of them unmoving. They were crusted in some kind of branching pink growth. But it was the show host, a man she recognized from daytime television, that captured her particular attention.

“Isn’t that Alec Cataldi?”

Perhaps it had once been. It looked enough like him, but he had the same pink growths slithering over his body. They seemed to rip through his clothes, as if they’d broken free somehow. One curled around his neck, jagged and sharpened to a point. And his eyes…

“What’s going on?” Tikki said. “What’s wrong with those people?”

“I don’t know,” Marinette said, but she had a thought. She dreaded voicing it aloud.

“Marinette, you don’t think this is…”

Marinette set her jaw. “I don’t know. But I know I have to do something.”

“You mean—”

“I do.” She pulled her hair back in a messy bun and took a steadying breath. “Tikki, transform me!”

Tikki quickly fused with her, and soon Ladybug was out the window and flying over the rooftops of Paris. It was snowing lightly, and her ears burned with the cold, but she swung her yo-yo as quickly as she could in the direction of the Canal+ building in the middle of the financial district downtown. And all the while, Ladybug’s dreaded thoughts dwelled on the possibility she could not bring herself to consider out loud.

What if he’s back?

What would that even mean? And why? It had been years, and no sign of Hawk Moth at all. So why would he return now?

Ladybug landed on the roof of the Canal Plus building and stowed her yo-yo. Whatever Hawk
Moth’s reasons, she would find out soon enough. Below, the police barricade was in full swing. Siren lights flashed ominously, and a larger crowd had gathered as they watched the bizarre broadcast on their smart phones. From the looks of it, the police were getting ready to send in armored men. Ladybug needed to move quickly.

Using her super strength, she kicked in the roof access door and followed the floor map signs to the recording studio. She burst through the doors, yo-yo swinging and a hand on her hip. “What’s going on here?”

The studio was bright on stage, and a red ‘Recording’ button glowed over the door. Three cameras were angled on the stage from different positions in the room. The stage had a guest panel, where three people sat worryisomely slumped over and twitching erratically. The studio audience was equally catatonic, and those weird pink growths had gotten worse since she’d seen the broadcast back at the boutique. They reminded her a little of coral.

But most horrifying of all was Alec Cataldi himself, whom she hardly recognized anymore. A coral branch grew out of his shoulder and curled down his arm like a fat, pale snake. Now that she was seeing him in person, she saw how the coral seemed to originate from his chest and spread like wandering fingers over his body. And his eyes when he turned on her froze her in place. They were red-rimmed and wide, the eyes of a madman, as if he did not see her at all.

“What’s this, a new contestant? Step right up, little lady!” Alec said.

The cameras turned to her, and she knew that now all of Paris would see her standing there after fourteen years without her. After Hawk Moth’s disappearance, Ladybug had hung up her yo-yo and left the crime fighting work to the police. No need for a superhero without a super villain running around. She wondered what people thought, seeing her now after so long, older and taller, no cute pigtails in sight. Maybe their hearts soared. Or maybe they resented her long absence. There was no time to worry about it. She had a job to do, and now that she’d revealed herself, she had a feeling the police would not be long in catching up.

“Alec Cataldi,” she said, cautious as she approached the stage, one hand on her yo-yo. “You don’t look well. Let me help you.”

Alec looked at her strangely. “I’m not Alec Cataldi; I’m the Host. And this is the greatest show on Earth!”

He spread his arms and grinned, revealing his bright, white TV teeth, but Marinette only cringed. There was something…grotesque about him, something that went deeper than the creepy growths enfolding him. What kind of akuma was he?

“Okay, sure,” Marinette said, stalling for time as she looked him over and tried to figure out where the akuma could be hiding. “What’re we playing for?”

“Why, the grand prize, of course! Step right up and spin the wheel. Fortune favors the bold! But if you lose, well…” He chuckled to himself. “You’ll join the others in my garden.”

As she passed them, the other contestants twitched and wheezed. Their eyes swiveled to see her, and Ladybug nearly lost her composure. Their hollow gazes betrayed their agony, as if the coral growing around them was strangling them, or piercing them, or—

“Hey, you look familiar—have you been a contestant before?” asked the Host. “Because I never do repeat performances. Every show is unique, and every show is the greatest it’s ever been!”
A round of recorded applause roared through the speakers, and he positively writhed at the attention. Ladybug stared at the coral wrapping around his back—did it just move?

“I’ve never been a contestant,” Ladybug said, racking her brain. Nothing on his person looked suspicious enough to be hiding an akuma. She couldn’t even see most of what he was wearing with all the coral enveloping him like armor.

*Could that be it? Is the akuma hiding in the coral?*

The Host peered at her, and then his eyes widened in a ghastly stare. “What a minute, I know you! You’re Ladybug, aren’t you?” He looked her up and down. “I’d know that spotted suit anywhere. Ladies and gentlemen, we have ourselves a celebrity contestant tonight!”

More recorded applause, and the catatonic studio audience stirred. A few of them got up, woozy on their feet as though drunk.

“Spin the wheel, fair Ladybug, and claim your prize,” the Host ordered, grinning sinisterly.

Ladybug decided to play along for now. Maybe she could distract him long enough to lasso him with her yo-yo and pin him down, search him for his akuma. But those audience members shuffling on ungainly feet toward her were beginning to worry her. Swallowing her doubts, Ladybug spun the colorful game wheel as the cameras, and the Host, watched hungrily. The needle rattled past all-black sections, a few skull icons, a rose, and finally landed on a triple euro sign icon.

“What?! T-That’s not supposed to happen!” the Host said. “Nobody ever wins the grand prize!”

“Just lucky, I guess,” Ladybug said. “And now I’m claiming my prize!”

She threw her yo-yo, snagged him, and yanked hard. The Host jerked forward, but he didn’t fall. In fact, it was Ladybug who felt the strain of the pull. She stared at him in shock. It was as if he weighed thrice what he should.

“What the hell?”

The Host wobbled on his feet, but he was quick to recover. And when he did, he began to strain against her yo-yo strings. “Uh-oh, folks, we’ve got a rule breaker on our hands! And you know what happens to contestants who break the rules.”

The audience members, more and more of whom had begun to stir, groaned out something unintelligible. Behind Ladybug, the three contestants were also on their feet and moving with jerky twitches toward her. But all she could focus on was the Host who, by some feat of inhuman strength, broke through her yo-yo cord. The sound of it clattering to the floor, useless among the scraps of frayed string, sent a jolt of fear down to her toes.

“I break them,” the Host said in a low, threatening voice that sounded more rock than man.

He placed a hand over his heart at the point of origin where the coral grew, and under his fingers, Ladybug could just barely make out the glow of a rose, small and sinking under the growths. Before she could make sense of it, heavy hands landed on her shoulders from behind with the crushing force of ten men instead of the petite, twenty-something woman they belonged to. Ladybug yelped and sank to her knees on instinct, rolled, and jumped away. The woman who had accosted her tripped and fell to one coral-laden knee. Her impact cracked the floor of the stage, but her coral armor growths remained intact.

“A wild card, are you?” the Host said. “Well then, I suppose I’ll have to break a few rules, too! After
all, I’m the greatest showman on Earth, and I promised my viewers a performance they’ll never forget!”

Ladybug snatched up her broken yo-yo and stowed it at her hip. Needless to say, she was now at a severe disadvantage without a reliable weapon. Fourteen-year-old Ladybug had a partner for her secret weapon; twenty-seven-year-old Ladybug had only her wits. She jumped at one of the rotating camera dollies just as some of the audience members were getting ready to maul her, and pushed it with all her might. It crashed into six of them, broke off its stand, and smashed on the floor.

Just when she’d cleared a path, however, the Host caught up to her and swung. His punch grazed her shoulder, but she went stumbling all the same. Pain exploded in her shoulder, but her super suit absorbed most of it, allowing her to flip away and regroup. Out of practice, alone, and now without a weapon, suffice it to say Ladybug was a little rusty at the akuma fighting thing. And that grazing punch had hit her like a ton of bricks. What kind of super strength was this guy packing?

*I just need to get the akuma,* she reminded herself as she leaped over the fortune wheel and landed on the host podium. *Which means I just have to smash that coral armor.*

But what would be strong enough? She looked around for something she could use, anything at all, and noticed the huge spotlight currently illuminating the stage. That could work if she could get up there and get it down. But without her yo-yo…

“Ladybug!” shouted a man from the doors she’d broken down to get in here. He was dressed in a black, armored police uniform and carried a bulletproof shield. There were seven others with him. Ladybug was actually relieved to see them. “The akuma’s in his coral, over his chest! I have to smash it, but it’s as hard as stone. Stay back!”

The police officers spread out, pistols aimed. One of them got too close to one of the coralized audience members, and he struggled against them. “Agh! Let go!”

Ladybug was climbing her way up the rafters when his gun went off, four staccato shots in succession. One of the stray bullets came dangerously close to Ladybug’s head and ricocheted off the metal rafters. And one actually hit the Host, breaking off a large chunk of his coral over his left thigh. The cop went down, though, and he screamed as more audience members piled on top of him, their weight crushing and their limbs beating. His colleagues shouted for them to desist, warned them that they would open fire, but they didn’t stop. They didn’t even hear the officers. Ladybug saw it happening, and yet she remained paralyzed mid-reach for the spotlight.

*No,* she wanted to say. But she just hung there, suspended, mute.

The police opened fire on the audience members, spraying them with bullets that would have instantly killed any normal person. But for every bullet that embedded in soft flesh, the audience members only groaned and crawled off the crushed police officer, their attentions now on the remaining officers.

“W-What the fuck is this?” one of the officers said.

They were outnumbered and up against seemingly impervious foes. *Hostages,* Ladybug had to remind herself. But what kind of hostage crushed a police officer with their raw weight and absorbed bullets like a sponge absorbed water? She had to put a stop to this, and fast.

“Hey, Host!” she said, settling behind the huge spotlight. “Up here!”

The Host squinted up at her. To her horror, the coral he’d lost was already regrowing over his thigh.
“You’re bad for ratings, little bug!”

“Yeah? Well I’m about to take you off the air, permanently!” Ladybug kicked the spotlight with all her might. The metal whined under her super strength, but it broke and down she went. The Host raised his arms to shield himself, and Ladybug crashed on top of him with the spotlight to break her fall. The landing rattled her teeth so badly that she was sure she’d popped a few loose. Quickly, she rolled off the spotlight as the audience members noticed her in reach now and began coming after her.

Under the smashed spotlight, the Host groaned and tried to get up. His coral was shattered to hell, and Ladybug lifted the twisted remains of broken glass and metal off of him. Sure enough, his armor had cracked and broken such that only the growths around his heart remained. At at their center, Ladybug could see the shape of a small rose pinned to his lapel. It had to be that.

But as soon as she reached for it, strong hands grabbed her and yanked her back. Two coralized audience members had gotten ahold of her, and Ladybug was shocked to see that one of them was wearing a police uniform. He had a gash in his head from the earlier scuffle, and from the bloody folds of his skin, Ladybug could see a tiny tendril of coral fast engorging and wriggling its way out of his skull.

She was going to be sick. The strong hands shoved her down, and Ladybug saw stars when her head hit the floor. They loomed over her, and when they moved, they shed flakes of crusted coral. She could see it now, how it grew not over them, but out of them, through flesh and bone, protruding from welts in their skin beneath their clothes. Hawk Moth had never been so bloody in his transformations before, so what had inspired such a gruesome turn now?

She snapped out of her thoughts when she realized just why they had shoved her to the floor—they were trying to crush her like they’d crushed that first cop. Somewhere, bullets were still flying intermittently and men shouted for backup. Ladybug gathered her wits and pushed back against the shoulders of the coralized person pinning her down, but damn if they weren’t strong. Another body joined them, and another, and soon she was holding up the weight of four coralized victims. She gasped as she felt their pressure on her lungs, cutting off her air. She struggled, but there was no moving them. They were too heavy. Gasping, Ladybug felt tears prickle at the edges of her mask as panic and fear began to weaken her resolve.

Not like this, she prayed. Please not like this!

Her Lucky Charm. If she could just chant the magic words, then she might get out of this yet. But her throat clenched for lack of air, and she only managed a pitiful wheeze. Her vision dotted with black spots that grew larger and fuzzier with each passing second.

And then, the pressure was alleviated, just like that. The bodies pressing down on her lifted off as if by magic, or something just as strong. The weight gone from her chest, Ladybug sucked in a gasping breath and coughed violently, hugging her belly instinctively. She screwed her eyes shut, her head throbbing and dizzy as her brain screamed for oxygen and shut down everything else. Strong arms lifted her, and she was flying. The sensation was a short one, and she soon felt the cold bite of metal where she’d been set down in the rafters, out of reach.

“Stay here,” a voice commanded, and soon the warm presence next to her was gone again.

Like hell Ladybug would stay there. She struggled to get to her feet, but she couldn’t stop coughing up a lung as her body trembled after the assault. Nonetheless, she gripped the railing and looked around the stage. The cops were on the defensive and using their shields to corral the coralized victims. It looked like some backup had arrived to help them, including Chief Raincomprilx himself.
And one more figure Ladybug was frozen to look upon.

*No way,* she thought, gripping the railing so hard the metal twisted and bent under her super-powered fingers. *It can’t be…*

But it was. *He* was. Chat Noir, his extending staff swinging, was slipping in between the slower moving coralized victims as he contended with the Host, whose coral armor had once again miraculously grown back at an alarming rate. And for every hit Chat Noir landed, breaking off a chunk, two more branches soon filled the holes left behind.

Ladybug knew she was shaking. She knew she couldn’t just stand here on the sidelines. She knew this reaction was purely emotional, the result of a shock so bone-deep she couldn’t even hear herself think because he was here, right here. Not a stone’s throw away, black leather and blond hair. Ladybug’s breath hitched in her throat.

“Chat Noir,” she said, barely a whisper.

Not the akumatized version she’d last seen, but the real Chat Noir, exactly as he used to be. As if he felt her stare, he cast a glance her way, and they locked gazes for a split second. Green eyes, no trace of that malignant magenta when he’d—

“Look out!” she shouted.

The Host came in swinging, and Chat took a bad punch to the face that sent him flying. He crashed into the fallen spotlight and crumbled among the broken glass, his staff rolling away out of reach.

*Shit!*

This needed to end now. If the police started shooting again and they hit her, or Chat… Would Lucky Charm even reverse that kind of lethal damage? She didn’t have time to dwell on it. The super suit had dulled her pain to a manageable level, so Ladybug swung over the railing and landed on the stage again.

“Hey, Alec! Over here!” she taunted him.

The Host spun around in a rage. “I am *not* Alec! I am the world’s greatest television host of all time!”

Chat spat out blood and a broken piece of tooth, but he got to his feet and snatched up his staff. The police had rounded up most of the coralized audience members, and now it was just Ladybug, Chat Noir, and the latest akumatized victim.

“Yeah, well, I’m canceling your run! Lucky Charm!” Ladybug tossed her yo-yo, and when it came back down, it was followed by a red and black spotted cat’s paw. She could have screamed at how utterly useless this was.

“Show’s over,” Chat said, lunging and cracking off another large chunk of coral from the Host’s torso.

Ladybug jumped out of his way and landed a kick to the back of the Host’s head, which felt like smashing her foot into solid concrete. She yelped and landed on her good foot, wincing as her suit absorbed the brunt of the pain yet again. She was going to be very relieved to purify this particular akuma. But how was she supposed to get at the rose pin she was certain contained the corrupted butterfly? She glanced at her Lucky Charmed cat’s paw again.

*A cat’s paw…*
Tikki was getting very cheeky with her double entendres if Ladybug had to do what she was thinking she would have to do. Stowing the cat’s paw at her hip, she ran after the Host and Chat again.

“The akuma’s in a rose pin buried under all the coral!” she said. “You have to destroy the coral to get to it!”

Chat looked at her through gritted teeth as he grappled with a stray coralized audience member and struggled to throw him off. “I’ve got my paws full over here, my lady!”

Ladybug’s heart wrenched at the sound of that old pet name. She swallowed her pain and reached out a hand. “Throw me your staff! I’ll give you an opening!”

“What?!”

“Just do it, Chat!”

Something in him changed at the sound of his name in her voice, and with a grunt of effort, he threw the coralized victim at the Host like a sack of flour. It bought him a couple seconds as the Host angrily tossed the body off the stage, and Chat tossed Ladybug his staff. She caught it and brandished it like a baseball bat.

“Over here, Alec! You still owe me my grand prize!”

The Host bared his teeth in a snarl. “How many times must I tell you?! I am not Alec!”

He ran at her, and Ladybug sidestepped him and swung as hard as she could. A chunk of coral broke off, but he was surprisingly agile and spun around with every intention of punching her into next Tuesday. His coral armor twisted and moved, making a sound like teeth grinding that curled the hairs on the back of Ladybug’s neck. It was almost as though the stuff was alive, even sentient…

She had his attention now, and Chat had the time he needed to activate his Cataclysm. The sight of his clawed hand dripping with dark energy made Ladybug whimper, but she forced herself to focus on moving her body for now. Another swing of Chat’s staff to the legs sent the Host stumbling, and that was when Chat swooped in. The Cataclysm sank into the coral armor like a hot knife through butter, and the two of them watched as the ultimate destructive power devoured the coral growths faster than they could regenerate, until only the unprotected rose pin remained. Chat closed his fingers around it, too, and the delicate pin crumbled to dust.

The Host—Alec Cataldi—let out a strangled gasp and fell still on the floor. The other coralized victims also collapsed like dominoes as the coral branches growing through them dissolved now that the core had been destroyed. Ladybug got her yo-yo ready to purify the akuma, but none emerged. Chat had the same confusion as he looked around for the telltale flapping wings. When he met her gaze, she saw her own rising fear reflected in his slitted cat eyes.

“It must be something else,” he said, dropping to his knees and searching Alec’s person.

Ladybug stared down at Alec, who lay unmoving and bleeding where the coral had dissolved and left numerous gaping holes in his body. The police had lowered their shields and were similarly taking stock of the formerly coralized victims, all of whom lay unmoving on the floor in heaps. They, too, oozed blood from the wounds in their flesh where the coral had grown through them—no, out of them. As if from within. Ladybug only realized she was shaking when her yo-yo began to rattle in her grip. Chat had already destroyed two pens, a building ID card, and a box of tic tacs he’d found on Alec’s person, but there was no black butterfly to be seen.
Ladybug stared at the cat’s paw in her hand. Maybe this was just a different process than before. Maybe once she reversed all the damage, everything would be okay. She threw the cat’s paw into the air and shouted, “Miraculous Ladybug!”

Glittering ladybugs made of pure magic exploded and flooded the studio, repairing damaged equipment, healing her bruises, and even fixing her shredded yo-yo at high speed. But Alec’s wounds did not close up, and he didn’t stir. Ladybug covered her mouth with a trembling hand.

“Sir,” said one of the police officers to Chief Raincomprix, “they’re… They’re all dead.”

Every last one of the coralized victims.

Chief Raincomprix remembered himself and jerked hastily at the cameras. “Turn those off, now! Hurry up!”

One of the officers tripped over himself to cut the power to the cameras. Ladybug glanced directly into one of them, her face half covered by her trembling hand and tears in her wide, blue eyes.

A telltale beep broke her out of her trance. Chat was on his feet again breathing shallowly through his nose. “Ladybug,” he said, “we have to leave.”

She just looked at him, and something in her expression made him look away.

“Get the medical team up here,” Chief Raincomprix barked into his radio. “And forensics. We got bodies here. A lot of bodies.”

Ladybug’s earrings gave a warning beep, and she touched one. Alec’s blood pooled beneath him, and it had reached her boot. She leaped back without thinking, trailing a few drops of his blood in her wake. It stained her boot. *Alec’s blood is on my boot.*

*Alec is dead.*

*They’re all dead.*

There was never any akuma.

Movement caught her eye—Chat was leaving. And suddenly, all she could think about was that he was going to disappear again, that he would vanish without a trace or explanation, a shadow in the moonlight. There was a dead man at her feet—a dead man I couldn’t save—and twenty more scattered around the studio, and all Ladybug could do right now was follow Chat. It was easier than facing the glassy eyes of the fallen all around her.

So she flew after him over the protests of a couple police officers. There was only one way he would have gone, and that was to the roof. She raced up the stairs and burst through the roof access door just as she spotted him getting ready to extend his staff and disappear.

“Don’t you *dare* leave!” she said.

He froze mid step, and his cat ears flattened over his wild blond hair. He looked back at her over his shoulder. “My time’s running out.”

“I don’t give a fuck.” Ladybug marched right up to him and yanked him by the arm.

He was considerably taller than he’d been when they were fourteen, a man grown in every sense of the word. Even the perpetually teasing glint in his eyes from back then was nowhere to be found in
the cold, jaded stare he held her in now. Despite herself, Ladybug’s heart wrenched at that look, so unlike the Chat she’d once known.

They faced off for a couple seconds, neither willing to back down, but men’s voices and footsteps drifted to them from the access door. Chat extended his staff, and Ladybug tightened her grip on him.

“Don’t,” she warned him again.

He looked away and set his jaw. “Then you better hold on tight.”

Staff in one hand and Ladybug’s waist in the other, Chat vaulted them off the roof and onto the next one over, where he barely touched down before taking off again. With a few city blocks between them and the action back at Canal+ headquarters, he released her and stowed his staff. Their Miraculous beeped, but they still had time before they reverted. He stood opposite her and waited.

But Ladybug had once again lost her words as she just looked at him, took him in, believed. He was really here, flesh and blood, the same man from fourteen years ago before he… Before…

“Ladybug, I… I’m—”

That snapped her out of it, and she closed the distance between them so that they stood nearly nose to nose. God, he even smelled familiar, sweat and leather and the night itself, and she almost lost her nerve. But Ladybug could be hard when she wanted to be, and now she steeled herself.

“You left me,” she said in a whispered tone so scathing, so venomous that Chat flinched.

“You left me!” She shoved him, shaking and unable to control the floodgates of her wrath any longer. Fourteen years was a long time coming. “You attacked me, you used your Miraculous against me, and you fucking left me!”

He didn’t fight her, didn’t even try when she shoved him again, hard. He stumbled and grunted under the force of her blows, but he took it without protest. Ladybug could not have cared if he’d begged her for mercy right now. Her fists flew of their own accord, and she followed them blindly, willingly, anything for the chance to make him feel even a little of this pain he’d selfishly left her with.

“I hate you!” she said through gritted teeth as she pushed him again, this time into the roof access door, busting the lock and nearly knocking him down. “I hate you so much!”

He took her wrists in his hands. He was shaking, and there were tears in his eyes. “I know.”

And Ladybug came undone. Those tears, that broken voice, so much like the scared, lonely little boy who’d confessed his pain to Marinette all those years ago because he had no one else to talk to, they dismantled her. Ladybug choked on a sob and sank to her knees, and he sank with her.

“I know,” he said again, his voice cracking with emotion. “I hate me, too.”

She let out a strangled cry and beat his chest with her fists, but there was no power behind her blows anymore. He’d taken her pain and paid it back in kind.

Alec is dead.

They’re all dead.
She couldn’t stop seeing their mangled bodies all over the studio, many of them peppered with bullet holes in addition to the coral holes. And she couldn’t save a single one of them. She had lost, just as she’d lost Chat all those years ago.

Ladybug heaved a sob and collapsed against him. She clung to him, buried her face in his chest, and held on to the one source of familiarity and safety that had pulled her out of that sea of death, no matter what he’d done before. There would be time to hate herself later, to beat herself up for this weakness. That was future Ladybug’s problem. Right now, he was here for her like he hadn’t been for fourteen lonely years, and when he held her close, she almost didn’t care that it was a lie.

They sat there rocking back and forth, Ladybug half sprawled on his lap as he held her, shaking, until their Miraculous gave another warning beep. Heeding the warning, they slowly disentangled themselves. Ladybug’s cheeks and neck were sticky with her tears, but there was no helping it now. Chat rubbed the heels of his palms over his eyes to dispel his own tears, and after a few seconds, they had collected themselves enough to look at each other once again. Ladybug sniffled and gathered her courage, what little was left of it.

“There was no akuma,” she said.

He averted his gaze. “Doesn’t look like it.”

“I was sure it was Hawk Moth.”

“Me, too.” He met her gaze again. “But it wasn’t.”

Their unspoken question hung between them, neither brave enough to give it voice and shape.

*If it wasn’t Hawk Moth, then who was it?*

What was the shape of this monster with the power to possess and control, and then discard the used up shells after? It was beyond Hawk Moth, beyond anything they’d ever encountered. Hawk Moth didn’t kill, but this… Tonight had been a slaughterhouse.

And Ladybug had no idea what to do about it.

Their Miraculous chirped twice more. They were out of time. Chat drew his staff again.

“We’re not done here,” she said, hating the way her voice shook still.

“I know,” he said, resigned. “Rain check?”

His weak attempt at levity did not go over well. Ladybug clenched her fists. “Tomorrow. Eiffel Tower at midnight.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Tomorrow’s not the best for me…and I can see you don’t give a shit. Okay, tomorrow it is.”

She continued to glower at him.

“I’ll, uh… I’ll see you.”

Ladybug said nothing as she watched him bound away over the rooftops, fast disappearing from sight. Her Miraculous gave its final beep, and her transformation reverted. An exhausted Tikki floated into her hands, and Marinette slumped against the wall, the blows she’d taken in the fight coming back to haunt her in pulsing, phantom aches all over her body. She was alone on a rooftop
downtown with no yo-yo to help her fly, and she’d left her winter jacket at the boutique. She sorely hoped whoever’s building this was wouldn’t ask too many questions about a random woman just trying to get home.

“Oh, Marinette,” Tikki said with a sniffle. “I’m so sorry.”

Marinette didn’t know when she’d begun to cry again. She sniffled and wiped her eyes, and she hugged Tikki close to her heart. “Tikki, I… I’m so…”

“Shh, I know. It’s all right, I’m here for you.”

“It hurts,” she sobbed, her voice strangled with grief. “It hurts so much.”

Tikki snuggled closer to her and cried softly, her tears like liquid starlight.

“I’m so weak,” Marinette said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I ca—I can’t…” She choked on a sob and covered her mouth.

“Cry for me, my lady.”

Marinette squeezed her eyes closed. It wasn’t the monster she saw in her recurring nightmares, but Chat Noir’s tears as he held her tonight.

_I can’t hate him at all._

She couldn’t say how long she and Tikki stayed there huddled, aching together.

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It was late, far too late for an old man his age to be awake, and yet something had stirred Wang Fu from sleep and would not leave him be. He quietly got out of bed and headed for his modest kitchen, where he put a kettle to boil and took a clay cup from the cabinet. His hand lingered on the knob to close it, but after a moment’s hesitation, he pulled another cup out and set it down quietly next to the first.

The water boiled quickly. He transferred it to a clay pot on a tray with the cups, and then he carried the tray slowly to the adjoining sitting room. The moon was bright tonight, so even without the room lights, he could see his unexpected visitor already seated at the table waiting for him. He paused, taking a moment to look at her. It had been many years since he had last seen her, but she had not changed much.

Then again, the glamour she wore made it impossible to tell.

“I apologize for waking you,” she said in a voice that reminded him of a deep, still lake, impossibly blue. “But this could not wait.”

Fu set the tea tray on the table between them. Over two hundred years old and still kicking, but these old bones had their limits. He sighed as he settled into the cushioned seat opposite her and offered her a clay cup.

“Tea?”

She poured for them both and held her cup in both hands as if to warm them through her blue gloves. Most of her was blue, though in the moonlight she appeared nearly black. Even her skin was glamour blue, and her hair was completely hidden beneath a feathered cap that framed her face.
She wore a long, blue, warrior’s dress with slits to the hips for ease of movement, revealing functional, dark pants and boots underneath. Two long, metal fans were folded and holstered across her lower back, and a glittering, aquamarine broach secured a blue sash at her nape. Most of her was blue, except for the eyes—a pale green that glowed in the moonlight.

“Mayura,” Fu said, using her Miraculous name out of respect. “I can see that this is not a social call. Although, I would have hoped to have a bit more time to speak with you after so many years. You look well.”

“As do you, Master Fu,” she said politely. “But as I said, this is urgent. I’m afraid I don’t have much time. I shouldn’t be here at all.”

Fu sipped his tea. “Tell me what you require of me.”

“You saw the broadcast tonight.”

_Ah, so that’s it._

He had not been able to put it out of his mind, in truth. Like all of Paris, he had watched from the comfort of his own home as Ladybug and Chat Noir, after so many years away, appeared to fight a mysterious new threat on live cable television. He had thought it would be Ladybug to visit him tonight, or even the elusive Chat Noir. Mayura was a surprise, and not entirely a pleasant one.

“I saw it, yes,” he said. “It’s…troubling.”

“Then you know why I’m here.”

He had an idea, and he didn’t like it. He set down his tea. “There is only one reason I can think that you would risk everything to come here. And as Guardian, it is incumbent upon me to remind you of my position.”

“You know the risk I take,” Mayura said, “and you know why I can’t leave without what I came for. I’ve seen…”

Fu leaned forward, curious and a little fearful. “What have you seen?”

Mayura touched a delicate finger to the truncated peacock feather fastened to her broach. In the murky moonlight, it could have passed for a trick of the light brought on by a lack of sleep. But Fu trusted his eyes as he watched the peacock feather’s Eye blink with sight.

“Not enough,” Mayura said. “But after tonight, I fear I’ll have too much to keep watch over alone. I need help.”

Fu sighed over his tea, wishing Wayzz were here. The turtle kwami was sound asleep in his little bed, and Fu did not think it right to disturb him. Often, Wayzz could be more hindrance than help, anyway. There was such a thing as too much wisdom, too many answers, as Fu himself had learned over the course of his too-long life. “I see.”

“Master Fu, please. It will only get worse.”

He nodded. In this, after what he’d seen tonight, he was inclined to agree with her. But he did not have to like it. Still, Fu rose and went to the old gramophone he kept above a cabinet that housed his small but treasured records collection. It was not a record he was after tonight, however. He bit his thumb and pressed the bloody print to a button on the gramophone, which caused the top portion to slide open. After pressing a few buttons on the newly revealed panel, it too slid open to reveal a
small jewelry box, which he retrieved and brought to the table. Inside sat two pieces of jewelry: a necklace inlaid with amber and mother-of-pearl in the shape of a fox’s tail, and a lacquered comb decorated with a jeweled honey bee on the handle.

“Trixx will be pleased to be reunited with Duusu. It has been more than a century since they were last active together,” Fu said.

But it was the comb containing the Bee Miraculous that Mayura selected. Fu had not been expecting this.

“I do not understand,” he confessed. “The Peacock and the Fox are a pair: the perfect sight and the perfect blind. The Fox is your most potent ally.”

Mayura examined the delicate comb. “I didn’t come here for myself. Illusions won’t help those two; they need a weapon that can cut through anything. The ultimate sword.”

Fu looked at her as she examined the Bee Miraculous, and he knew that nothing he said would sway her. She had made up her mind before she’d come here, and he’d never been able to change it before.

“You have someone in mind,” Fu said.

“I do.”

“Are you certain?”

She met his gaze, and the part of him that was still human regretted his words. But the Guardian in him knew he had to push her now, as he had not pushed her the last time.

“No,” she said, her tone laced with remorse. “I’m not certain of anything. But I believe in my choice.”

He peered at her, but it was clear that she believed her words, had considered them carefully, and still could justify the risk of coming here. Not at all like the last time when she’d come to him, desperate and wrapped up in the passion of her convictions, so sure of success that she never stopped to consider the consequences. That was the thing about people, though. Unlike pieces of jewelry in a box that remained unchanged and pristine for thousands of years, people were not so certain. They could fail, they could fall, and they could break.

But given time and trust, they could also rise.

“Then I will choose to believe in your choice, too,” Fu said, closing the box with the Fox Miraculous still safely in its place. “And I am sure those two will, as well.”

Mayura folded the comb in her hands, and it disappeared in a sleight of hand. She rose. “Thank you, Master Fu.”

He smiled and reached for the kettle to pour himself another cup of tea. “Take care, Mayura.”

She was gone when he looked up again, no trace of her having been there at all, save for a lone peacock feather on the table next to her cold tea.
I'm making some small changes to Miraculous powers, as you can see. It's a conscious decision made solely to fit better with some themes and plot direction I want to work with here, and hopefully not too distracting to any canon purists out there.

Next time: Plagg braves the emotional minefield that is Adrien’s life, and Pollen picks up some valuable, 21st century slang.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which kwami give the best (?) life advice, and Luka is the only Certified Mature Adult™ in the entire universe.

Chapter Notes

The Angst is real, and so is my Lukloe obsession. Welcome.

Adrien sat in his office with the door closed slumped over the draft of this quarter’s financials trying his damndest to focus on the cannibalization rate of the latest men’s underwear line when he realized he’d reread the same footnote four times and still could not make sense of it. He groaned and rubbed his eyes. His mind kept wandering to places it should not, not when he had a mountain of work to deal with and a small army of analysts to manage.

“Somebody’s pissy today,” said Plagg, a.k.a. all powerful kwami of the Black Cat Miraculous, a.k.a. Despotic Harbinger of Chaos and Destruction, a.k.a. pocket-sized anti-gravity cat-shaped loudmouthed bobblehead, a.k.a. the bane of Adrien’s miserable existence this fine, French Thursday afternoon.

“Not now, Plagg,” Adrien said. The beginnings of a migraine prickled at his temples. Was it too early for a drink? Only 2 p.m. and he’d skipped lunch, shit. He opened the top drawer of his desk, fished out the bottle of pain killers, and swallowed three dry.

Plagg hovered over and plopped his furry, black cat butt down right over the passage Adrien had been staring at fruitlessly and began to lick himself clean as if he were an actual house cat. Adrien watched, torn between frustration and fascination at seeing Plagg act so, well, domestic. Banal. Until Plagg stretched his back leg over his head and licked around his butthole.

“Do you really have to do that here?” Adrien said, leaning back in his ergonomic chair and rubbing his temples, willing the pain killers to kick in before this migraine really picked up steam.

“Do what?” Plagg said, the paragon of innocence as he blinked his big, green eyes like a regular Puss in Boots.

“You know what.”

Plagg let his leg drop and crossed his paws. “You’re distracted. I can smell your negativity from across the room, and it stinks.”

“Gosh, I’m so sorry to disturb your regularly scheduled eight-hour nap.”

Plagg floated up and got in his face. Those luminous cat eyes peered at him dispassionately, the way
a scientist might examine a lab rat. “You’re stressed out.”

“I have five hundred things to finish today, and you’re distracting me.”

“Why don’t you just beat off or something? That usually helps.”

Adrien growled and swatted Plagg like the buzzing carrion fly he was, but the kwami was damn fast and too practiced in their particular brand of conversation. “You know, you could try not being so… you for once,” Adrien said.

“Oh, I’m sorry, kid. But you know the rules: you wanna act like a brat, I get to treat you like a brat. Feel free to grow up anytime.”

Adrien groaned and dug his fingers into his temples. This day needed to end. “I just feel like I’m going to spontaneously combust.”

Plagg sighed and shook his head. He drifted back to Adrien and settled in his hair and began to knead. Adrien would never admit it, but the sensation was kind of pleasant, like someone playing with his hair. At least, so long as Plagg kept his claws retracted.

“You knew this was coming. You knew you’d have to face her eventually,” Plagg said in a flat tone.

“I’ve been facing her,” Adrien said. “I thought I was even doing all right.”

“There’s nothing to face with Marinette. It’s Ladybug who’s got you by the balls now.”

*Same difference.*

But Ladybug didn’t know that. Maybe she didn’t remember. That wouldn’t surprise Adrien at all considering what she’d been through. What he’d put her through. Just the thought of it made him tremble with shame and guilt. The tears in her eyes, her fingers on his cheeks.

“Oh, chaton, I’m sorry you’re suffering.”

Adrien wanted to break something. Every night for the last fourteen years when he closed his eyes to sleep, it was her crying face he saw, broken and bleeding because of him. And last night, seeing her suited up and trying to be strong even after all this time, seeing her tears as she shoved him, pushed him, hated him—it was too much.

“I deserve her hatred,” Adrien said, covering his face with his hands and wishing desperately that he could just peel it off and be someone, anyone else. “I deserve so much worse than what she gave me last night.”

Fourteen years and the wounds were as fresh as the day he’d inflicted them. He’d thought he could move past it in time. He’d thought he could return to Paris after so long. Chloe was here for him, she’d carried so much of his shit over the years, never truly knowing why and never forcing him to explain. Without her, he would have wasted away a long time ago, forget ever coming back here.

But he was here now, and after weeks of making excuses not to look her up, not to go out of his way to bump into her somewhere, there Marinette was at the Trefoil Gala looking like he never remembered her looking before. Surely the shy, stammering girl who hadn’t ever held a full conversation with him could not be the dark beauty behind the mask he’d shameless courted as he would any other potential conquest. But much had changed in his absence, and all of it for the better.

She was better without him around.
He couldn’t face her after the gala, instead watching her from the shadows at the Eiffel Tower like a coward, watching as she stood alone with all of Paris at her feet. He’d vowed he would not insert himself into Marinette’s life, into Ladybug’s life. She did not deserve to suffer at his expense again. And dammit, he’d tried his best not to give in to weakness. Being away dulled the pressure; seeing her up close, her endless blue eyes, her smile, even her raw anguish as she watched over the city thinking herself alone, brought it all back like a knife to the chest. Seeing her flourish at the gala, seeing how far she’d come, he could not help but want to be near her. How could he not? And Sunday had been better than anything he expected, anything he could have imagined. All because she didn’t know him beneath his mask.

It was official: Adrien Agreste was the most selfish person he knew.

They said ignorance was bliss; Adrien was sure it was only heartbreak that hadn’t happened yet. How was it possible for him to be hopeful and, dare he say, even cautiously happy with Marinette, when Ladybug was in so much pain because of him? How did she do it, balancing both? If he hadn’t seen her Miraculous glamour fade under the power of his Cataclysm all those years ago, he would never, ever have guessed they were the same girl. Even now, seeing Marinette glow and rise while Ladybug languished and lamented, he could not quite believe it. Her strength was unlike anything he’d ever seen, and he wanted—craved to be near that, to feel strong in her shadow, inspired, for once. It had been so, so long.

He hated himself every day for his weakness.

He hated himself even more for being unable to stop.

“Okay, pity party, get ahold of yourself. This isn’t all about you, you know,” said Plagg as he circled himself in Adrien’s hair, trying to find the fluffiest, choicest locks to nest in.

“How is it not about me? I’m the whole reason any of this is even happening.”

He could almost feel Plagg rolling his eyes. “Get a grip, kid. The world doesn’t revolve around you and your problems, no matter what that crackpot you call a therapist says. Bottom line is you fucked up once upon a time, Ladybug got hurt, and now you both have to learn how to work together again in spite of it. So I repeat, get a grip.”

Adrien scowled. “Thanks, how much do I owe you for that insightful piece of bullshit I already know?”

“You know my price: a wheel of camembert per hour. That’s my friends and family rate, so consider yourself lucky.”

Says the avatar of bad luck himself.

Still, as much as Adrien did not like to admit it, Plagg had a point. The attack last night had been bad, much worse than anything Ladybug and Chat Noir had ever faced in their youth. This wasn’t Hawk Moth, of that Adrien was dead certain. But then, who was behind the grisly murders? And more importantly, why? Like it or not, Ladybug would need Chat Noir’s help with whatever the hell this was, and that meant Adrien would need to pull his head out of his ass and do some long overdue damage control. But would she go for it?

“Hey, Plagg,” Adrien said softly. “Do you… Do you think she could ever forgive me?”

Plagg was silent for a while, and Adrien was beginning to wonder if he’d even bother answering what probably sounded to him like another bratty, human question. “As Ladybug? Sure, I’ve seen
Ladybugs forgive far worse. But as Marinette? Hell if I know. You humans’re all psychotic.”

But they’re the same, Adrien wanted to say. Marinette is Ladybug, and Ladybug is Marinette.

Why should it be different?

But it was. It was so different. And he could not afford to forget that when he was with her, masks or no masks. Above all else, Marinette did not deserve Ladybug’s pain. He would not do that to her.

Adrien slumped in his chair, exhausted. He reached up to scratch Plagg’s bulbous head and earned himself a purr. And for the next thirty seconds or so, kwami and Chosen sat together in a silence that spoke louder than any words could.

A knock on the door. “Mr. Agreste? Your 2:30 is here,” said Armand, his executive assistant.

Plagg, comfortably hidden in the gelled jungle that was Adrien’s hair, remained perfectly still and immediately ceased his purring, as if he wasn’t there at all. Adrien rubbed his tired eyes and gestured noncommittally. “Thanks, Armand. Send them in.”

Armand nodded and opened the door for Adrien’s guests to file in. He’d just have to finish his review work later. For now, he plastered a polite smile to his face and got up to shake hands with the suits waiting to speak with him. It was time to leave Chat Noir behind and be Adrien Agreste, as if the difference even counted anymore.

Chat was late, to the surprise of absolutely no one, least of all the man himself. He raced over the rooftops of Paris, a sleek shadow in the cold, winter moonlight hardly seen and barely heard. Work, predictably, had kept him at the office putting out fires and dealing with ornery executives, but such was the life at quarter’s end. Everyone wanted results, and nobody wanted to wait for them. He just hoped Ladybug wouldn’t chafe too much at having to wait an extra half hour for him to drag his sorry ass to the Eiffel Tower as planned.

Although, all things considered, that was probably the least egregious of his many offenses against her. What was one more log to add to the fire?

She was already there waiting when he finally landed on the metal platform she’d camped out on, about three quarters of the way up the tower. It was lit up, as it usually was, a silver knife gutting the night sky, beautiful and a little lonely surrounded by so much darkness. Her hair was long and loose tonight, and at the sight of her standing there looking out over Paris, Chat had the irrational urge to run his fingers through it. Marinette had let him on Sunday, but Ladybug would probably sooner slice off his fingers than let them anywhere near her hair.

There was something different about her, he noticed now that he was standing next to her. Her suit, which had always been form-fitting and sleek for ease of movement, was now corrugated with scales, almost as if she’d donned red and black spotted armor. But it moved with her, as if it were a part of her super suit. Had her super suit...changed somehow? Was that even possible?

“Nice of you to finally show,” Ladybug said, glaring at him for good measure.

Chat lowered his head. He definitely deserved that. “Sorry, I got held up at work.”

She peered at him, perhaps searching for the lie. Even in this, she mistrusted him. It should have been expected, but it stung all the same. And he hated that her judgment, no matter how much he thought
he deserved it, affected him so much.

“First,” she said, not meeting his eyes, “I want to…thank you. For showing up last night. Honestly, it was the last thing I ever expected to happen.”

At this, Chat could only blink in surprise. Of all the things he’d prepared himself for in anticipation of what was surely to be a painful conversation tonight, the last thing he’d expected was her gratitude. “Oh, uh… I mean, I saw you on TV.”

He and the rest of Paris. Their fight had been all over the news all day. The cameras had recorded nearly all of their fight against the late Alec Cataldi, a.k.a. the Host. Suddenly, after fourteen years of radio silence, the airwaves were alive with chatter about Ladybug and Chat Noir, reunited and returned to face the newest supernatural threat to terrorize Paris. But would Paris’s heroes find a way to work together again? From the way Ladybug was looking at him, Chat wasn’t holding his breath.

“How long have you been back?” Ladybug asked, her expression unreadable.

*Shit,* Chat thought. He could not say anything that might compromise Adrien.

“A while,” he hedged. “But last night was the first time I suited up.”

Ladybug had always been creepily good at sniffing out his dishonesty on the few occasions he’d tried to massage the truth in the past. Maybe he’d gotten better at lying, or she just didn’t know him anymore, because she nodded at length, accepting this explanation. Chat didn’t know which option was more depressing.

“Me, too,” she said, hugging herself. “God, all those people…”

He stepped closer to comfort her, but stopped short when she whipped her head around, suspicious. Chat hid the sting of her clear rejection with a sigh. “Look, Ladybug, I’m here to help you. With this…whatever this is. It’s why I showed up last night. Whatever you think of me personally, please… Just know that I’m here to help, however I can.”

“Whatever I think…? You honestly think that my personal issues with you would make me forego your help with this? You really think I’m that petty?”

Chat raised his hands in a placating gesture. “No, I—that came out wrong. I just meant—shit.”

“You’re Chosen by the Miraculous,” Ladybug said through gritted teeth. “It’s your goddamned *job* to use your powers for good. Or were you planning on skipping town again if I didn’t tell you what you wanted to hear?”

“No!” Chat snarled, unable to help his anger. “How could you think that?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe because you’ve *done it before*?”

“Yeah, and I’m sorry! I’m sorry I got akumatized and attacked you! I’ve been sorry every day since.”

“Oh, wow, *poor you.*”

“You know what? I came here to apologize and let you say or do whatever you need to get past this. But maybe I made a mistake.”

“You think?” she said sarcastically, but her blue eyes flashed with pain.
Chat bit his tongue so hard he tasted blood. “Ladybug,” he said, trying hard to rein in his emotions. “Please. Let me atone.”

She bared her teeth in a fury and turned on him. “No. No way, you don’t get to skate by with an apology and expect me to pretend everything’s fine. It’s not fine, Chat.”

“I was akumatized! I wasn’t even myself!”

“I know that!”

He stared at her. “You do?”

There were tears in her eyes, and fuck he’d done it again: he’d made her cry. He was shit, lower than shit. He was yelling at her when she had every right to be upset with him. Plagg was right, he was nothing but a brat living in a world that revolved around him.

“You think I don’t know you weren’t in your right mind?” Ladybug said through her tears, wiping them angrily like she couldn’t stand them. “You think I don’t know Chat Noir would never do anything to hurt me?”

The look on his face must have given her an answer, because her lip trembled and she covered her eyes with her arm to hide her pain from him.

“I must have really hurt you to make you think that,” she said, her voice cracking.

No. This was all wrong, so wrong. She wasn’t supposed to be the one apologizing for his mistake. Chat took her by the arms and shook her lightly, his eyes wide with emotion.

“Stop,” he pleaded with her. “Please stop. You have nothing to feel bad about. It was me, my fault, all of it. Yell at me, hit me, hate me if you want. I can take it. But don’t you dare blame yourself for what I did to you.”

She sniffled and shook in his grip, and god he just wanted to hold her and tell her it would all be all right. But it wasn’t all right. It hadn’t been for a long time.

“I looked for you,” she said, barely a whisper.

“What?”

“For months I scoured the city and even beyond. Every night for three months I searched for you. I even wished for you.” Her voice cracked, and something in Chat cracked, too. “But you never came back. You left me all alone.”

He could not bear to hold onto her anymore. He could hardly bear to remain standing, and he staggered back, the weight of his own words from so long ago thrown back at him as he finally understood the shape of her pain.

“You were my partner, the person I trusted most in the world. And you abandoned me. You never even said goodbye,” Ladybug said, her eyes puffy and her tears freely falling. “How can you ever atone for that?”

Chat’s heart throbbed with a pain that was all too real. Because it was not just Ladybug accusing him, but Marinette, too. Marinette, who had comforted him that fateful night when he’d felt abandoned by Ladybug, by his father, by the world. Marinette, who had given him her time and her attention just because she could, because she cared, because secretly she was Ladybug, and she
trusted him. Because she did not want him to be alone.

And he had abandoned her.

“I can’t,” he said, miserable as his own tears slicked his cheeks and made his mask itch. “Even if I tried for a thousand years, I can’t.”

Silence stretched between them, punctuated only by Ladybug’s snifflies as she tried to get her crying under control. He couldn’t bear to see her so fractured.

“Ladybug… Are we too far gone?”

He shook with fear as he waited for her answer. Whatever Plagg said, Ladybug was not just Ladybug, she was Marinette, too. And Marinette deserved so much better than him.

“No,” she said at length, so soft he wasn’t sure he’d heard her right at first. “You’re here now.”

Chat knees wobbled and he leaned against the metal rafter next to him, disbelieving. Even after all he’d put her through, she was willing to give him another chance.

“Ladybug,” he said, clutching his face to hide his shame. “I’m so sorry.”

Her hand on his shoulder was tentative, afraid, but she held on all the same. “I know you are.”

He looked up at her, only to find her eyes closed and her teeth clenched, like it hurt her to be this near to him.

“I don’t hate you,” she said haltingly. “I-I just…” Her face contorted in pain, and fresh tears beaded around her eyes. “I missed you so much.”

Chat was holding her in a crushing embrace before he could think about it, and she collapsed against him. So small, and yet so strong even in her suffering, and he clung to her for dear life. She sobbed against his chest, shaking like a leaf, and he buried his face in her hair and curled his claws around the ends of it. His tears disappeared in her hair, as if she absorbed his pain and shouldered it for the both of them, like she’d always done.

“I missed you so much!” she sobbed, her fingers digging into his shoulders.

“I’m here, my lady,” he soothed her, clutching her tight. "I'm right here for you."

She tensed at the old, romantic diminution, but she didn’t push him away. They stayed that way for a while, saying nothing and simply feeling. He could have stayed with her like this all night if she asked it of him. It was the least he could do for her. But eventually, she pulled away and met his gaze. Her eyes were puffy but still that brilliant topaz blue he’d fallen for so many years ago, the same topaz he saw in Marinette when she ran her fingers through his hair, never knowing it was him.

“Tell me what to do,” he said, searching her eyes for any clue. “I’ll do anything, just say the word.”

Slowly, regrettably, she extricated herself from his grasp and they stood an arm’s length apart high above Paris. “I don’t know. I didn’t think that far ahead.”

He couldn’t help but laugh, however sadly. “You always have a plan, though.”

She sniffled and wiped her cheek of stray tears. “I wish.”

“Can we…” He was almost too afraid to ask. “Can we start over?”
She looked at him. “No, Chat. We can’t.”

His heart sank, even though he knew he had no right.

She hugged herself for warmth. “And I… I don’t know if I’m ready to trust you again.”

That hurt more than it should have. It must have shown, because she averted her gaze, ashamed.

“I’m sorry,” she said, contrite. “But I need time.”

Yes, and he knew he could not begrudge her that. This wasn’t about him at all; it was about her. It was about their shared mission, the common enemy. He had no right to question her, to hold her to the same lofty expectations he had when they were fourteen.

“I understand,” he said, wishing he didn’t.

“Chat—”

“No, I do.” He flashed her the shadow of a grin he didn’t feel. “I get it. And you’re right. Which is why I’m making you a vow right now.”

He got down on one knee and asked for her hand with his. She didn’t give it, and he tried to ignore this newest sting as he folded his hands over his bent knee.

“Ladybug, I promise to do everything in my power to regain your trust. Even if it takes the rest of our lives, I won’t quit. I swear to you.”

“Chat…”

“I just ask one thing of you.” He swallowed, gathering his courage. “I’m not asking for your forgiveness. I just want you to give me a chance to make it up to you. To prove you can trust me again. Please.” He searched her eyes, more afraid than he’d ever been. “Please don’t give up on me.”

She took her time answering. “I can’t promise you anything, but I’ll try. I need you, Chat. What we’re up against… I can’t do this alone.”

“You don’t have to.” He got up, and at his full height he towered over her. It took everything he had not to reach for her then. Instead, he tried to convey his sincerity with his eyes alone, and hoped beyond hope that she heard him. “I’m not going anywhere.”

They stood there like that for what seemed like an eternity, so high above the world, alone together. Like old times, and yet not at all. There was a distance between them now, a chasm neither of them dared to cross, neither of them could cross. Not yet, maybe not ever, though he did not want to think about that. Foolishly, he found himself holding onto Plagg’s words, that Ladybugs of the past had forgiven far worse. Did he dare to hope?

“Chat, there’s actually something I wanted to ask you about.”

“Sure,” he said. “Anything. Ask away.”

“Before, when you were akumatized.”

*Oh.*

He crossed his arms. “What about it?”
“The akuma. I never purified it.”

He had a feeling she’d mention that. “Yeah.”

“What happened to it?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“I mean I don’t know. One minute I was Chat Blanc, and the next…”

He trailed off seeing her flinch at that name, the name Hawk Moth had bestowed on him as he felt himself slip away. What a strange feeling, even now after all this time. He remembered it so vividly. It was like water dripping through his fingers, feeling everything that made him Adrien slip away through the cracks he never knew he had, and looking up from below, unable to reach the edges.

“The akuma,” Ladybug pressed. “When I don’t purify them, they multiply and spread.”

“I know.” Of course he knew that, had thought of that, had agonized over it for years after the fact. “But I’m fine. Plagg was out of it for a week or so, but he recovered. We’ve been fine ever since.”

“Plagg… Wait, are you saying the akuma possessed him?”

Chat had been over it a thousand times with Plagg already, and every time they arrived at the same conclusion. “One of his eyes… It was magenta for a while. He wasn’t himself, but it eventually faded. I don’t know why. The best we could figure was that he just absorbed the dark energy. He’s a god of destruction, so he probably destroyed the akuma from the inside out.”

Ladybug chewed on that, her brow furrowed in consternation. “The akumas from before always possessed inanimate objects. I guess possessing a living thing, an omnipotent kwami of all the things, may not have the same effect.”

“I haven’t had any issues since,” Chat said more confidently. “Not that I’ve been running around as Chat Noir much since Hawk Moth disappeared. But I’m telling you, there’s no trace of the akuma left. Maybe the rules are just different with kwami and Miraculous holders.”

Ladybug nodded, but she still seemed skeptical. “I guess that makes sense.”

“But you’re not convinced.”

Her gaze flickered to him briefly. “Can you blame me?”

No, he supposed he couldn’t. It didn’t make the conversation any less unpleasant.

“I feel fine as far as that goes,” he said with quiet conviction. “I’d know if something was wrong.”

“Are you sure?”

“I would know.”

“Well, all the same, you’ll let me know if anything changes. Even if it seems negligible, I want to know.”

“Yes,” he said. “Of course I’ll let you know.”
“Okay.” She nodded.

“Okay.”

The lapsed into an awkward silence again, and Chat hated how obviously uncomfortable they were, a far cry from their seamless partnership and playful banter from before.

“It’s late,” Ladybug said. “I should probably get home, get some sleep.”

“Oh, yeah, okay,” he said, unable to mask his disappointment.

She peered at him askance. “Chat, I…” She looked away. “Thanks.”

For what, he could not have said. But he nodded all the same. “Yeah.”

And then she was gone, flying away with the aid of her magical yo-yo, and he was alone once more. Not ready to leave yet, he sank down and sat with one leg curled to his chest, the other dangling over the edge. He curled in on himself and buried his head in his arms, shuddering.

He thought he’d be used to being alone by now, having stripped himself of all the connections he’d made here so long ago. But that was the thing about loneliness: it was most powerful at the mercy of hope. And she had given him a glimmer of hope tonight, so small in his hands that he feared it would slip through his fingers at the slightest disturbance.

Chat lingered there, hanging just over the edge, until the sun came up.

Chloe grunted as she dodged and slashed, parried with shaking arms, and tried to ignore the sting of sweat dangerously close to her eyes behind her fencing mask. She and her mysterious partner had been at this for three straight hours. The last five minute break for water felt like a hundred years ago as Chloe panted and danced backwards to give herself a little breathing room. But her partner charged forward, closing the gap as soon as it opened, her blunted rapier nothing but a silver flash.

It wasn’t that Chloe was a poor fencer. Maybe a little out of practice, but she knew her technique and she kept in shape. A size two didn’t maintain itself, thank you very much. But the years of fencing lessons she’d taken initially because she wanted to spend more time with Adrien, and subsequently in college because it made her feel like a badass, could not prepare her for the supernatural technique her opponent employed to systematically carve her like a turkey dinner. Or would have, if their blades had not been blunted. Chloe had so many bruises she probably looked like a leopard under her padded suit.

Her opponent lunged impossibly fast, and Chloe was too slow to parry in time. She tried to twist, but the angle was wrong and she lost her footing. With a yelp, she fell back on the floor with a thud. A blunted rapier pointed a hair’s breadth from her throat.

“Oh, Honey Bee, you can’t give up yet!”

Chloe growled in frustration and ripped her mask off. Something buzzed around her head and landed delicately on the extended rapier. Blue compound eyes glittered down at her over a luxurious yellow mane.

“Easy for you to say, Pollen,” Chloe huffed. “You’re not the one working her ass off over here.” She winced and rubbed her sore tailbone. “Ugh, literally.”
Pollen, the talking bee-shaped creature Chloe had come to know as a kwami, giggled down at her. Her antennae twitched mischievously. “Well, I would offer to help, but…”

“But you would do well to commit your skills to muscle memory in your human form before you attempt to fight transformed,” said Chloe’s indomitable opponent. “You’ll be that much more prepared when you do fight at full power.”

Pollen shrugged, and Chloe got the distinct impression that she was rolling her eyes, if compound eyes could be rolled. “Just to be clear, Mayura, the only reason I’m allowing you to boss around my Chosen is out of respect for the Guardian and our short timeline.” She flew at Mayura’s blue-tinted, feather-capped face, little wings buzzing angrily. “But a queen doesn’t take orders from little birds. So watch your words.”

Mayura’s icy green eyes were impassive and unblinking as she stared down the fun-size, talking bee, which in any other context may have been completely ludicrous. But as Chloe had quickly learned upon meeting Mayura, there was nothing remotely humorous about her or her intentions for Chloe.

“I had heard about your…particular nature,” Mayura said, looking down on Pollen over her nose. “Rest assured, I only want to prepare you, both of you, for what lies ahead. Ladybug will need all the help she can get. I have no time to pamper you.”

With a grunt, Chloe climbed to her feet and held out her hand for Pollen. “Well, this better goddamn pay off. Black and blue really clash with my complexion.”

Mayura gave her a withering look and lowered her practice sword. She had barely broken a sweat despite their grueling morning exercise. A bonus of fighting while Miraculous, Chloe thought bitterly. She wondered how much of Mayura’s insistence on keeping her glamour was to protect her identity, and how much was to ensure she could land Chloe on her ass every time they crossed swords.

Drop the guise and you wouldn’t stand a chance against me.

As though sensing Chloe’s frustration, Mayura’s gaze softened a fraction. “You’re making excellent progress. This isn’t the ideal way to acclimate, I realize, but we don’t have—”

“—we don’t have the luxury of time, yeah, I heard you the first five hundred times.” She crossed her arms.

“Get some rest. I’ll see again tomorrow morning.”

And with that, Mayura exited through the balcony doors and leaped over the edge almost without a sound. Never mind that the drop was more than thirty stories from Chloe’s live-in hotel suite at Le Grand Paris. The first time Mayura had jumped, Chloe almost had a heart attack—what would people think if they saw a crazy blue woman leaping from her balcony as the sun came up? But Mayura had been doing this for a long time, that much soon became obvious. She knew how to stay out of sight.

Pollen sighed dramatically. “Duusu certainly picked a charmer for his Chosen.”

“Duusu? Is that Mayura’s kwami?” Chloe asked as she peeled her training jacket off and let it fall on the marble living room floor.

“He’s such a whiny little chicken. I haven’t seen him for a hundred years, and I still hear his stupid sobbing in my dreams sometimes.” Pollen turned her nose up.
“Well, they’re both gone now, and I need a shower.” She winced as she stretched her arms. “Ugh, this whole fighting crime thing is the worst.”

Pollen giggled and buzzed around Chloe’s head. “But you’ll be the best at it, Honey Bee. You know, mine’s the strongest Miraculous of them all.”

“What about Ladybug and Chat Noir?” Chloe said, stripping out of her pants and padding to the bathroom, where she examined her body for the tender red areas that would inevitably blossom into more bruises to join the others from the past few days’ grueling sparring sessions.

Pollen tutted. “Chat Noir’s destructive power can be a menace, but Ladybug’s tool is a yo-yo. A yo-yo. She may be our leader, but you and me are Queen Bee for a reason.”

Chloe smirked at Pollen in the mirror while she waited for the shower to heat up. “You know, the queen is the best piece in chess, even if only the king can win the game.”

“Pfft! The king has to have some role, even if it’s just a formality.”

Chloe thought Ladybug was a hell of a lot more than a mere formality, though. Seeing her on television facing those creepy coral people had been a rush. For years, there had been hardly even a whisper of Ladybug. With Hawk Moth’s apparent disappearance, there seemed to be no need for superheroes in Paris anymore. Until now. As a girl, Chloe had idolized Ladybug and wished she could be strong and powerful like her. It had always been a pipe dream, though. There were other kinds of strength and power in this world, and Chloe was proud of how much she’d accumulated for herself over the years.

Now, though, she had a chance to live out the destiny her fourteen-year-old self would have sold a kidney to taste. But this was no Shoujo manga fantasy, and from what Mayura had explained to her, they weren’t up against a fashionably incompetent Queen Beryl and her Negaverse minions.

Twenty-three people were dead, and nobody could explain why. And now, they would become Chloe’s responsibility as she assumed the mantle of Miraculous. What if she wasn’t good enough? What if Mayura had chosen wrong? What if she just made things worse for Ladybug and Chat Noir? What if I fail?

“Are you just going to stand there naked all morning?” Pollen said.

Chloe suppressed a shiver. “Ah, no. Just thinking…” She hissed when she tested the water—it was scalding hot. She adjusted the temperature and stepped inside.

“Earlier, you called me your Chosen,” Chloe said as she basked in the heated water. “What does that mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. You’re my precious honeycomb, and I’m your all powerful, benevolent kwami.”

Chloe snorted. “But you didn’t actually choose me; Mayura did.”

“Pfft! That peacock is so self-important. And no, Sweetness, she didn’t choose you. We kwami always choose our partners. The Miraculous comb only activated because I accepted you. I’m very picky, and if you’d been unworthy of me, we wouldn’t be here, and your life would be oh so boring and sad for never having met me.”

“Believe me, my life is anything but boring these days,” Chloe said, her mind drifting to the memory
of a night last week spent with a certain silver-tongued musician. He certainly did have a talented
tongue, she had to admit. It was almost a shame she wouldn’t be seeing him again.

But Chloe had more pressing things to concern herself with than a man who could never be right for
her, even if she wanted him to be. Which she did not. She had a very specific vision for her future,
and it did not include struggling musicians, no matter how good in bed they were.

She finished her shower, feeling markedly better, and went to her bedroom to finish her morning
ritual just as the sun was breaching the horizon. Chloe had always been a morning person, but
waking up at four every morning to get her ass handed to her by Mayura was pushing it. Still,
apparently Ladybug and Chat Noir needed her help—Queen Bee’s help. And Chloe would be lying
if she said she wasn’t a little excited to stretch her wings and see what she could really do,
figuratively and literally. Because despite the clear and present danger associated with their line of
work, who didn’t dream of gaining superpowers and fighting the bad guys to the adoration of the
masses?

“So you chose me,” Chloe said to Pollen as she got dressed for the work day in a black skirt suit and
pale lilac blouse. “But Mayura still brought you to me.”

“So?” Pollen said. “Like I said, it doesn’t matter.”

“I get it, but why would Mayura pick me? Does she know me under her glamour?”

Pollen shrugged, and it was honest to god the most adorable gesture Chloe had ever seen. She’d
never had a thing for bugs, but Pollen was more Beanie Baby than bee to look upon her. “How
should I know? I’ve been asleep for a hundred years.”

Still, of all the people in Paris, why her? Under her Miraculous glamour, Chloe could not hope to
know Mayura's face. She couldn’t even discern her true age with any confidence.

Or maybe it wasn’t about Chloe at all; maybe it was about Ladybug and Chat Noir. Chloe had had
plenty of interactions with them in their high school days, perhaps disproportionately so. Mostly
because she’d been the root cause of a number of akumatized victims.

But even so, her actions had put her in close contact with Ladybug and Chat Noir perhaps more than
anybody else. Maybe Mayura had come to her because in a way, she was already involved. Chloe
had no idea, but she intended to find out.

As she was zipping up her pencil skirt, her phone buzzed. Pollen was on it immediately. For some
reason, she was absolutely smitten with the idea of phones, how they buzzed whenever someone
wanted to talk. She was convinced bees had been the inspiration for phones as a way to connect
many people across long distances with a friendly buzz. Then again, Pollen seemed to think just
about everything humans did was about bees, or ought to be.

“Hey, you have a message!” Pollen said, her excitement palpable. “From Hot Luka. Ooh, who’s
that?”

Chloe immediately snatched her phone. It was barely 8 a.m. and he was already up and texting her.
Again. Boy didn’t know when to quit.

“Is he feverish?” Pollen asked.

“What? No,” Chloe said, distracted as she read the message.

[Hot Luka: Can I see you today?]
“Then why is he hot?”

“Hot also means good looking.” She chewed her lip, wondering how to respond. He’d been wanting to see her again since Sunday, and she’d given him excuse after excuse not to. She was busy, that wasn’t a lie, but she also wasn’t actively looking for a way to see him again.

[Hot Luka: Just coffee. Doesn’t have to be long.]

Chloe frowned. Just coffee? What did that mean? Was he not satisfied with Sunday?

*Please, I blew his freaking mind on Sunday, among other things.*

“Ohhhh, I see. So Hot Luka is your drone, hm?” Pollen said.

“My what?”

“Your mate. He gives you his seed. Your drone, of course. Every queen bee has at least one.”

Chloe nearly choked on her tongue. “Okay, ew, first of all. ‘Gives you his seed’? He’s just some guy I hooked up with once. I’m not trying to have his babies, Jesus. And drone? Really? Do you have to use bee words in normal conversation all the time?”

“I prefer buzz words,” Pollen said smugly. “Isn’t that clever? I read it on your Internetting. Apparently, it’s when words are especially meaningful and important. Isn’t that just perfect?”

Chloe suppressed a groan at the excruciating bee pun. “Internet, it’s called the Internet. And I don’t remember giving you web browsing privileges.” Although, that explained why her iPad’s browser history was replete with Buzzfeed articles about everything from Disney princess personality quizzes to the latest Comic-Con coverage.

“Why do you call it the web? It’s more like an infinite honeycomb with all those pockets of sweet knowledge just waiting to be mined.”

This was going to be a thing with her, wasn’t it? Were all kwami this narcissistic? Or worse, did they choose Miraculous hosts based on compatible personalities? Was she this narcissistic?

“Well…” Chloe muttered, not necessarily wanting to continue that train of thought.

“Well, what? Aren’t you going to respond to him? He clearly wants to mate with you again,” Pollen said.

Chloe rolled her eyes. “Of course he does, it’s *me*.” But did she want to see him again? In truth, she would not have minded a repeat of Sunday. It had been a while since she was last with anybody, and there was something about him that made her want to break all her self-imposed expectations for what a romantic partner should be. Or rather, her mother’s expectations.

The thought of Audrey Bourgeois, socialite extraordinaire, meeting Luka, knowing he was the man Chloe willingly brought to her bed at night, drew a dastardly grin to her face. She fantasized about her mother melting like the Wicked Witch of the West upon learning the truth. That image alone almost made her accept Luka’s invitation on the spot.

“Are you thinking something naughty, Honey Bee?” Pollen said, matching her grin and vibrating at the possibility of mischief.

“Maybe.” Chloe ran a hand through her damp hair. She needed to blow dry it and get a move on.
“But I don’t have time for fun right now.”

“Sure you do! C’mon, what’s one little coffee date, hm? And I want to meet your drone, too!”

“Oh my god, he’s not my drone. I don’t have drones. He’s just some guy.”

“Yes, a hot guy. And you’re a bee-autiful queen. I think you deserve hot things.”

Chloe looked thoughtfully at Pollen. It’s like she’s my spirit voice. Maybe their partnership really had been a touch of destiny, bee puns notwithstanding. “Well, you’re not wrong. I do work pretty hard.”

“You know what you need? Some soft hands to rub those bruises away. Does Hot Luka have soft hands?”

He did. An artist’s hands with long, talented fingers. Chloe felt a flutter of heat in the pit of her belly as she remembered flashes of Sunday night at his place. She bit her lip.

We could keep it casual, no big deal. I’m too busy with my work and now this Miraculous thing, and he’s working two jobs on top of his music to pay the bills. He’d understand.

She was already typing out a reply before she could rationalize taking relationship advice from a talking bee.

[Chloe: Okay. I’m free at 4.]

The chat bubbles bounced as he typed back an immediate reply. Pollen buzzed next to her ear, and they waited together for his text to come through.

[Hot Luka: Perfect. I’ll come to you.]

“Fuck, no,” Chloe said, her fingers flying over the touch screen of her smart phone.

“What? But you just said I could meet him!”

“Meet—what? You can’t meet him. I never said that.”

[Chloe: No that’s okay, I’ll come to you. Firefly?]”

“What do you mean I can’t meet him?” Pollen whined. “It’s my sworn duty to make sure your drone is fit to please you!”

“You’re a magical talking bee god, Pollen. You can’t just meet him, or anyone for that matter. We’re supposed to keep this between us, remember? Besides, you’ll only give him a heart attack.”

Pollen looked ready to burst into tears. “Y-You think he w-won’t like me?”

Chloe pinched the bridge of her nose. “Oh my god.”

[Hot Luka: Great, looking forward to it.]

Chloe dropped her phone in her purse and headed back to the bathroom to finish getting ready for work.

“W-Wait, Honeycomb! You never answered my question! Won’t he like me??”

Chloe combed out the tangles in her wet hair. “That’s not what I meant.”
“Then whaaaaaat??”

Sighing, Chloe set down her brush and held out her hands for Pollen to have a seat. She looked absolutely miserable, or at least, as miserable as a bee can look. And goddamn her tenderheartedness, but Chloe felt a little bad. “He would adore you,” she said, planting a kiss on Pollen’s bulbous head and earning herself a buzz that sounded remarkably like purring. “But Mayura said we have to keep this between us. If whatever asshole is behind those coral murders found out about you…”

Chloe didn’t want to think about how dangerous that would be.

“Look, you can meet him, but he can’t meet you. He can’t know you’re there. If you promise to stay hidden and quiet, you can come along.”

Pollen sniffled. “You mean it, Sweetness?”

Chloe smiled for her. “Would I lie to you?”

Instantly, Pollen brightened and buzzed about happily, as if she had completely forgotten what had upset her. For all her supernatural presence, Pollen sometimes reminded Chloe more of a spoiled child than an omnipotent god.

“Okay, now I have to finish getting ready, so buzz off for a bit.” She blasted the hairdryer.

Four o’clock rolled around sooner than Chloe anticipated. She was up to her eyes in work getting ready for a big event next weekend, something for a new television premiere, as well as the quarter’s end reporting rush. She was also juggling a real estate negotiation to open up another hotel here in Paris, a boutique bed and breakfast place that would cater to the ultra wealthy looking for the flavor of Versailles in the heart of Paris. All things considered, Chloe’s time these days was so valuable that she was technically losing money by spending time on a date with Luka. Maybe she should be charging him. The thought made her laugh. Classy.

She was a little late arriving and finishing up a work email on her phone when she walked into Firefly Lounge. It looked different during the day, like a cozy hipster cafe more than a jazz lounge. Patrons cozied up on the old leather couches and round two-top tables sipping overpriced cappuccinos and big chocolate chip cookies. A slow R&B tune Chloe didn’t recognize played through the speakers in the background. The place smelled of espresso, vinyl, and pot.

“You made it,” said Luka, coming toward her from behind the espresso bar. He had a stained towel in his hands that he used to wipe them off. Like the rest of the patrons, he was casually dressed like he’d gone to a rock concert the night before and slept in his clothes.

But damn if he didn’t pull it off. His perpetually sleepy-eyed gaze caught hers, and he smiled in that pretend-shy way that sent her heart pounding a little faster. Because as she’d learned on Sunday, nothing about him was shy at all.

Okay, so he was attractive. And clearly happy to see her. That was fine.

*This is fine.*

As soon as he touched her, it wasn’t fine anymore. Her took her waist in one hand and her neck in the other, and pulled her in for a kiss—and she fucking let him. To be fair, he didn’t give her any warning. Also, he was a good kisser, and Chloe was not one to waste talent when it was so
graciously offered up before her. Her hands (traitors!) found their way to his plaid overshirt and twisted the lapels. She felt him smirk against her lips, and soon he pulled away. Dark eyes held hers, smiling. Could eyes smile? Luka’s could.

“Hi,” he said.

Chloe tried to remember what breathing was, which was not easy considering the way his thumb pressed against the sensitive flesh behind her ear. “H-Hi.”

In her coat pocket, Pollen squirmed, excited, but remained mercifully silent like she’d promised she would.

“Been a while,” Luka said. “You look good.”

Chloe let out a sharp breath. “I look like shit. This week has been hell.”

He chuckled softly. “Are you just saying that because you want me to tell you you’re beautiful? No need to fish for compliments. I’m happy to oblige.”

She frowned and crossed her arms. “I don’t need you to tell me what I already know.”

“Fine, but that won’t stop me.” He took her hand in his and pulled her after him. “Come on, I’m on my break, and I don’t want to waste it.”

They took a table in the back where it was a little quieter, and Chloe shed her white pea coat.

“Not a word,” she warned him when she caught him looking at her. “I know I look like a corporate leech in this.”

“Why do you think I brought you to the back where no one would see us together? I have a reputation to maintain,” he teased.

“Ha ha.”

“If it makes you feel better, I could tell people you’re my therapist here giving me important life advice.”

“Right, because it totally makes sense for a therapist to go on a coffee date with her patient. There definitely aren’t any ethical violations I can think of there.”

He laughed, and the sound made Chloe’s toes curl in her stilettos. “Then in the interest of doctor-patient confidentiality, I won’t tell a soul about this scandalous rendezvous.” He put a hand over his heart.

Chloe said nothing to that. She tried to ignore the sudden stab of guilt in her gut, though she could not really say what had brought it on. She played if off with a snarky eye roll. “So, what does a girl have to do to get a macchiato in this place? Can they even see us back here?” She waved at a passing barista taking orders from another table.

They got their coffees soon enough, along with a snicker and a wink from the barista to Luka. Clearly, they did not often see him bring women around. At least, not women like Chloe. They barely settled in with their drinks when they were interrupted again.

“Luka, we’re heading out now,” said a woman approaching from behind Chloe.

“Okay, thanks for stopping by,” Luka said.
“And who is this? Oh! Luka, are you on a date?”

Chloe wondered what kind of fine she’d be looking at for starting a brawl in a cafe. But she was already spotted, might as well just get the awkward conversation over with. She turned, smiling politely. “Hi, I’m—”

“Chloe Bourgeois?” said a familiar voice from an unfamiliar face. She was dressed in a tailored suit, and her hair was pulled back in a professional but pretty bun that flattered her heart-shaped face. There was something vaguely familiar about that face, those almond eyes…

“Oh, right, I guess you two would know each other since you went to high school together,” Luka said.

And then it hit her like a ton of bricks, and Chloe gaped. “Juleka?”

“Yeah,” Juleka said, clearly uncomfortable as she tugged on a tress of her bangs. “It’s been a long time.”

“I didn’t even recognize you,” Chloe blurted out, still not quite believing that this corporate suit in front of her was the same Juleka Couffaine, a.k.a. ‘Sadako’ as Chloe had once cruelly dubbed her, who’d worn electric violet lipstick every day, a gallon of eye liner, and more Christian iconography than most evangelicals. She’d also been painfully diffident with few friends.

“I get that a lot,” Juleka said with the tired resignation of someone who was used to the incredulous stare Chloe was giving her. Her dark eyes flashed to Luka, and then back to Chloe. “So, you’re dating my brother?”

“No,” Chloe said at the same time as Luka said, “Yes.”

That stab of guilt needled deeper in her gut.

Luka just rolled with it, cool as a cucumber. “Well, we’re not really calling it anything right now.”

The older woman with Juleka, who was dressed very fashionably in a jade, woolen poncho coat over black leather pants and designer booties, beamed. “Luka! Yatto omae kanojo ga dekite kita ne! Shikamo, honmono no bijin da shi! Omedeto.”

Luka laughed, while Juleka looked a little embarrassed to be here. Chloe did not speak a word of Japanese and was left playing the dumb idiot in the middle, knowing they were talking about her but with no clue what had been said. Thankfully, Luka did not have a rude bone in his body and came to the rescue.

“Chloe, this is my aunt, Jessika. She’s an actress based out of Tokyo, but she’s here in Paris for the season filming a new show. She just called you a true beauty.” Luka spared her a knowing smile.

Chloe, however, needed no further introduction. She recognized this woman easily.

“Jessika Fujiwara?” Chloe said. “Of Lady Moon fame?”

Jessika brightened, and it was Juleka who gaped her incredulity this time. “My goodness, you are quite well-informed! Yes, Lady Moon was my big break when I was a young woman trying to make it big in Tokyo. Ah, what a lovely memory you’ve given me!”

“Of course I know it, it’s a classic of Japanese sci-fi cinema. One of the first to make it big even by Hollywood standards,” Chloe said excitedly. “It’s a work of art.”
“Oh, you flatter me! Luka, I quite like this one. Good job.”

Chloe was too starstruck to worry about the implications there. She was talking to Jessika Fujiawara! *The Jessika Fujiawara!* She’d grown up watching her films before the actress transitioned into television dramas as she got older. And suddenly, Chloe remembered the event that had been sucking up all her time at work this week.

“Wait, the premiere party for Silver Soul next week, that’s your new television show, isn’t it?”

Jessika nodded. “Yes, it is. It’s an international collaboration with producers and actors from Tokyo, Milan, and Paris. I’m very proud to have been given the leading female role.”

Chloe was so beside herself that she got up and actually took Jessika’s hand in hers. “That party is at my hotel, Le Grand Paris! I’ve been handling all the contracts and operations logistics for weeks.”

Jessika, rather than taken aback at Chloe’s enthusiasm, took Chloe’s hands in hers and smiled brightly. “How lovely! Beauty and success all in one. But you are so young! How can you be in charge of such an important event? And such a grand hotel?”

Chloe grinned, feeling cocky. “Well, I’ve worked very hard to get to where I am. My father trusted me to manage his local business affairs when he retired last year.”

“Andre Bourgeois, of course!” Jessika gushed. “You must be Audrey’s daughter! She is an old friend of mine. Oh, but the fun we used to have…” She shook her head as she recalled some fabulous memories of her youth.

Chloe was not at all surprised that her social-climbing mother could be acquainted with a famous foreign actress, but the fondness with which Jessika spoke about their relationship was unexpected. She was sure that aside from Emilie Agreste a lifetime ago, Audrey had never had any real friends at all.

Juleka cleared her throat. “So, Aunt Jess, we’re going to be late for our appointment…”

“Oh! Yes, Juleka, you’re absolutely right. We should be on our way. These nails won’t manicure themselves, you know.” She fluttered her already perfectly manicured nails and smiled coyly. “Chloe, it was an absolute pleasure to meet you. And to see my sweet Luka so smitten! Well, who can blame him?”

Honestly, Chloe didn’t even care anymore. *Jessika Fujiwara!* “Y-Yes, you too. I’ll see you on Saturday. For the premiere party. At my hotel. I’ll be there.”

Jessika lit up as though she’d just had the most marvelous idea. “The party, of course! Luka, you must come. It will be a magnificent soiree, as you say, and wouldn’t you like the chance to see the results of Chloe’s hard work?”

Chloe froze. “Wait, what?”

“A party?” Luka said, bemused.

“Black tie not optional, I assume,” Juleka said, shooting Luka a look.

“W-Well, I mean, the guest list is pretty exclusive,” Chloe hedged, looking back at Luka. “And these things can be pretty boring.” She immediately bit her tongue, because *Jessika Fujiwara.* “I-I mean, boring for people not involved! In the production! I’ll be working anyway, so I’ll be busy. Super busy.”
Oh god, what have I done? She began to panic.

“Nonsense! You simply must come, Luka, I insist,” Jessika said. “As the lead actress, I may invite whomever I choose, of course. Juleka, you will also come to support your favorite auntie, yes?”


“If it’s okay with Chloe, I’d love to go,” Luka said. He looked at her expectantly, a silent question.

I’m fucked. I’m royally, fantastically fucked.

“Well, we must be going. Juleka, I know you have a meeting at 6, so we must be off. Luka, I’ll see you for dinner this evening, yes?”


“We will. Chloe, so nice to meet you. Don’t go breaking my precious Luka’s heart now!” she teased. Luka shared a last parting look with Juleka, and then the two women were off.

“So,” Luka said, shoving his hands in his pockets. “You all right?”

“Huh? Oh, um, yeah. A little starstruck. All this time, Jessika Fujiwara was your aunt?”

“Yeah, ever since I was born. Apparently those things tend to stick.”


Luka shrugged. “She does her thing, Juleka does hers. I do mine. We’re a family of doers.”

They sat back down to finish their coffees, but Chloe’s had gone tepid in her neglect.

“Chloe,” Luka said. “Do you not want me to come to your party?”

Chloe stared at him like a deer caught in the headlights. That twisting knife of guilt in her gut sliced her clean open, and she squeezed her coffee mug. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

He gave her a look that was simultaneously knowing and patient. “Your lack of enthusiasm, for one thing.”

She winced. “Right, that. Look, it’s just—”

Just what? What could she say to him the wouldn’t make her sound like ten pounds of shit in a five pound bag? She hadn’t meant to sound so indelicte, but she’d never been very good at hiding her true feelings from people, especially the negative ones. Which would not normally have bothered her, as there were so few people who actually mattered enough to be careful around, anyway. So why did she feel this stabbing guilt when he looked at her like he would understand whatever bullshit excuse she gave him?
“It’s just,” she started again, licking her lips and trying to find a way to say this nicely. “You’re just…”

“I’m just…?”

How did he do that? How did he put her on the spot without sounding the least big judgmental about it? The more time she spent with Luka, the more she got the sneaking suspicion that he was, at his core, a genuinely nice person. And it scared the shit out of her.

“It’s not really your crowd,” Chloe hedged. “I just thought you wouldn’t have any interest in that sort of thing.”

You fucking coward, a voice in the back of her head screamed at her. But she couldn’t do it. She couldn’t say it, not when he looked like that, not when it might actually scare him off for real...

“I see,” he said, watching her thoughtfully. He leaned across the table on his elbows and laced his fingers together. “Well, this might shock you, but unlike Juleka, I happen to enjoy the occasional party and meeting new people. And I may even have a suit stashed somewhere at the back of my closet from my high school graduation dance, if it still fits.”

He was teasing her now, trying to put her at ease. Unbelievable.

“Why are you so agreeable about everything?” she blurted out.

“Why not? It’s obviously harder for you than it is for me. I don’t mind.”

“But why?”

“Is it that hard for you to believe that maybe I’m kind of in to you? I thought I made that pretty clear on Sunday.”

Chloe flushed. “You did.”

“Then shut that pretty mouth about it.”

Chloe shivered a little at the glimpse of that hidden control he’d shown her on Sunday when they were alone together.

“We had fun together. I’d like to continue that. I think you do, too, since you’re here. I can see that you need some time to get comfortable with the idea, and that’s okay with me. I’m not in to labels, anyway. But if you want whatever this is to end, then you need to tell me right now.”

“No,” Chloe said automatically. “I mean, I don’t…” She took a deep breath and forced herself to look him in the eye. She at least owed him that much. “I had fun with you, too. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be.”

“Okay,” he said, as simple as that.

“…Okay,” Chloe said.

“So, the premiere party. Are you okay with me being there or not?”

She bit her lip, but nodded. I’m guess really doing this. “Yeah. It’s fine.”

It was going to have to be.
“Okay,” Luka said, settling back in his chair and giving her some breathing room. They lapsed into silence, but he didn’t make it feel awkward. More like he was giving her time to collect herself.

“So,” she said after a beat, “Juleka’s your sister.”

“I can tell you were pretty surprised by that.”

Chloe shook her head. “No, just… Well, yeah, I guess. She’s so different than I remember.”

“She’s a corporate lawyer. A fucking good one, from what I hear.”

“Seriously?”

“At Bell & Pausini.”

“Seriously?! That’s like the Cravath of Western Europe!”

Luka looked at her funny. “Is that a good thing?”

“Yeah, or I guess depending on your perspective. Bell & Pausini’s the most prestigious law firm in Europe. Anyway, the point is, she must be a real killer to have gotten hired there.” And no desire for a personal life outside of all those billable hours…

He grinned. “I’ll let her know you said that.”

“Oh my god, don’t.”

“No, she’ll appreciate it. Juleka’s always been a little…underplayed, you could say. But she’s a boss. She deserves to hear that from one boss to another.”

Chloe couldn’t help but preen a little at his praise. “So I’m a boss, am I?”

“Only a true boss would show up here unironically in stilettos. You have no shame.”

“Oh yeah, I can be a real queen bee.”

His gaze darkened, almost hungry, and Chloe felt her pulse spike. “I’m aware.”

Damn him, she thought in a whiny voice that reminded her remarkably of Pollen. Luka knew the suggestive look he was giving her and the very immediate, very carnal effect it had on her given Sunday’s prurient escapades.

And that was her cue to get out now before she did something impulsive like sleep with him again. It was bad enough that he’d caught her in an embarrassing lie and convinced her to admit that she might actually be interested in him beyond Sunday. She didn’t need to make it worse by giving in to her baser desires again so soon.

“I should get back,” Chloe said, standing and shrugging on her coat.

“Oh, all right.” He didn’t bother masking his disappointment. He checked his phone for the time. “I guess I should probably get back to work, too.”

“You guys still serve coffee after five?”

“Nah, the bar will open. I’ll be on cocktail duty.”
Chloe made a show of shuddering. “Then I’m definitely leaving.”

He followed her as she buttoned her coat and headed for the door. “Come on, I have some skills.”

“You absolutely do not. You didn’t even know what a Floradora was until I had to explain it to you. Twice.”

They made it to the door, and Chloe let herself out. Luka still followed her, and he grabbed her wrist.

“Sorry,” he said, laughing. “Firefly caters more to the beer crowd than anything else. But at least I take direction well.”

Chloe shot him a knowing look. “More like I’m a pro at giving orders.”

“Well, I won’t argue with you there.”

She was suddenly aware of just how close he was. They lingered in the covered entrance on the firefly pattern mosaic that gave the place its name. He smelled like soap and coffee and Luka. Goddamnit, I know what he smells like. She swallowed. His hand snaked around her jaw and tilted her face towards his. In her heels they were of a height, but he had a borderline supernatural way of making her look up at him all the same.

“Chloe,” he said.

And damn him and his stupid sexy voice because he knew exactly what he was doing to her.

“Yes?” she said, unable to control the quaver in her voice. If there was one thing Chloe could not resist in a man, it was the ability to steal her coveted control away. Every day she was the boss, be it in her job or in her personal life, there was no difference. But to let go of that control, to surrender it even for just a night, to trust implicitly that she’d get it back in the morning… Fuck. Him.

Fuck him.

What an idea.

“Come back to my place,” he commanded. Commanded. Somehow, in the short time they’d known each other, he had figured out exactly what buttons to push, and how to dismantle her.

That little seed of an idea had taken root and absorbed what little was left of her sanity. Who needed rational thought? Rational thought did not know her secret pressure points like Luka did.

“Okay,” she said, for there was nothing else to say.

He pulled her into a ruinous kiss that stole her breath and the last of her dwindling resistance. Yes, he would ruin her, and goddamnit she wanted to be ruined. What was it about him? At once sensitive, almost poignant, the way he sang on Sunday, like they were the only two people in the room, and yet so confident, so enviably comfortable in his own skin, like he knew exactly what he wanted and would not shy from it for decorum’s sake. He was so obnoxiously attractive to her that she could hardly think straight as he deepened their kiss.

He’d sung for her, he confessed when they were alone in his bed. She’d been wound so tightly, and he’d wanted to watch her unravel. How could someone be so vulnerable and exposed one minute, and so consuming, even ravenous, the next? She didn’t know, but she wanted to find out.

He bit down on her lip just enough to focus her attention, and she whimpered, fingers curling his
shirt front insistently. She felt him smile against her lips, and he pulled away with a lingering reluctance that promised more later. His fingers ghosted the lacquered Miraculous comb tucked in her hair.

“Pretty,” he said.

Somewhere in Chloe’s coat pocket, Pollen swooned dreamily.

Chloe huffed. “I only have an hour, and then I have to get back. That’s non-negotiable.”

He smirked, eyes dancing with mirth and something much more promising. “Then I promise not to waste a single minute of your valuable time.”

He took her by the hand and led her south a couple blocks to his apartment, where he made good on his promise and cherished every minute they had.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Gabriel has an Agenda, and Marinette and Adrien attempt to have a dinner party with Alya and Nino.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Gabriel gives us some insight into Adrien’s mindset, a dinner party crashes but doesn’t totally burn, and Marinette finally gets some answers and even more questions after a visit to Master Fu.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Gabriel Agreste’s icy gaze lingered on Municipal Police Chief Roger Raincomprix over the rim of his scotch glass as they sat across Gabriel’s mahogany desk. Unlike Gabriel, who was broad-shouldered and slim with a figure best suited to filling out a three-piece suit, Chief Raincomprix was easily twice Gabriel’s weight with hands like ham hocks and jowls that rivaled a bullfrog in chorus. His once ruddy, coarse hair had receded, only to sprout anew in his grey-streaked beard and mustache. His doughy cheeks were rosy with drink—not from the quantity consumed, but because of his natural predisposition to intolerance. He looked like the kind of man people might avoid on a Saturday night, the kind of man who needed little impetus to start swinging those ham fists.

But get him talking, and Chief Raincomprix was just Roger, former acquaintance and PTA parent, concerned citizen, and predictably, inevitably, pathetically human.

“I think it’s really great that you’re concerned enough about what’s been happening to want to help,” Roger said amiably, swirling his scotch.

The man loved his scotch, Gabriel recalled from past outings years ago, when Emilie introduced them. Gabriel had had neither the interest nor the time to socialize as he struggled day and night build up his company and take it public, but Emilie was always making friends and dragging him along, whether he liked it or not. In hindsight, Gabriel was grateful he hadn’t antagonized this forced acquaintance, although he never would have predicted that simple, pandering, Roger Raincomprix would earn his stripes and rise to the rank of Chief of Police.

“But to be honest with you, I’m not sure there’s much a civilian can do,” Roger continued. “Well, except for your civic duty, of course.”

Gabriel plastered a winning smile on his face, one practiced and perfected. He sat back in his leather chair and crossed his legs comfortably. “Of course, we all have our part to play. I can’t imagine yours has been easy these last few days having to console the victims’ grieving families.”

Roger’s face fell, betraying his genuine sorrow. “No, I can tell you it hasn’t. It doesn’t help that all of Paris witnessed the whole thing go down on live television.”

He sighed, weary with stress and exhaustion. Gabriel wondered if the man had gotten any sleep at all since Wednesday.

“Yes, it was horrifying. I saw the broadcast myself, of course,” Gabriel agreed.

“I tell you, it was some stroke of luck having Ladybug and Chat Noir show up when they did.”
Roger grimaced at his drink, lost in the memory. “I lost some good men that night. Would’ve lost many more if it wasn’t for those two.”

He was too lost in his own troubled thoughts to notice the way Gabriel tensed at the mention of Paris’s masked superheroes. Gabriel willed himself to relax, to remember why he had invited Roger here in the first place.

“How goes the investigation?” Gabriel asked. “Any leads on the culprit, or his motive?”

Roger looked up and blinked stupidly. “Oh, well, not to be rude considering you invited me here as a friend, Gabe—”

Gabriel smiled to hide his displeasure at that nickname. He loathed that particular diminution of his name.

“—but you know I’m not at liberty to discuss an ongoing investigation with a civilian,” Roger finished. He looked genuinely remorseful as he lowered his mighty chin and looked up at Gabriel.

“Of course. I would never ask you to compromise your ethical obligations. It’s just that, well, I’m sure you can imagine how…disconcerting all this is.” He let that hang for a moment, watching as Roger’s expression furrowed with worry. “Given the supernatural element to the murders, it’s no wonder people have voiced their concerns about the municipal police’s fitness to handle this investigation.”

Roger choked on a sip of scotch and coughed violently. Gabriel watched impassively as he beat his chest like some feral ape and tried to clear his throat. When the coughing died down and Roger heaved to catch his breath, Gabriel said, “I’m sure the police have their best forensics and medical teams working day and night to determine what could possibly cause all those tragic deaths. I have no doubt that the dedicated men and women in your office will get to the bottom of this sad and horrific injustice.”

“I’ve heard the talk,” Roger said as he dabbed his sweating forehead with an old handkerchief he’d pulled from his pocket. “You know, people are scared, I understand, but they can’t just demand answers right away. These things take time.” He scowled. “M.E.s don’t even really know the right questions to be asking.”

“Nonsense! Your medical examiners are some of the brightest minds in Paris. I should know—I’m on the board of trustees at the General Hospital. You have good people working for you.”

Roger frowned deeply. “Of course, of course.”

“Oh, of course… But with so many bodies, and pressure from the public, not to mention how thinly spread M.E.s are known to be, especially on a government salary—”

“Yes, I know, it’s been a difficult time.” Roger shook his head in frustration. “I’m doing everything I can, and so is my team, but…”

“…But wouldn’t it be nice if you had more of a cushion?”

Roger peered at Gabriel. “A cushion? What do you mean?”

Gabriel gestured noncommittally. “Oh, never mind. I think I may be meddling in police business, after all. Best to leave it at that.”

Roger licked his lips and leaned forward a little. “No, it’s all right. I’m happy to hear your
suggestions. No law against that, of course.”

Gabriel smiled politely and reached for the crystal decanter on his desk. He poured another finger of scotch in Roger’s glass. “I’ve had the great fortune of meeting many highly competent professionals in the medical field. There are exciting breakthroughs coming, truly the cutting edge of the cutting edge. I could make some calls,” Gabriel said nonchalantly, as if he had offered to call up the neighbors and ask for a cup of sugar. “I’m sure your M.E.s and forensic analysts wouldn’t object to fresh eyes from some of the leading minds in their fields?”

Roger’s eyes grew large as he all but began to salivate at the prospect. “That would be…”

“Of course, the best minds come with a high price tag, I’m sure you understand. But it’s for such a good cause. I can’t bear to sit by while my fellow Parisians live in terror of the next attack. I suppose I could set up a charitable trust for the Municipal Police Force. I’ve been looking for a way to get more involved in our community ever since my return.”

“Gabe, that would be amazing,” Roger said. “With more funding and access to resources, we may even be able to figure out what caused that bizarre coral growth. You’d really do that?”

“Of course. I seem to recall that I have a civic duty. It’s my pleasure to help.”

Roger, awestruck, sat back in his chair and raised his scotch glass. “Well, I’m delighted to hear it. The Mayor will be, too.”

“Yes, I’m sure. And I hope you’ll let me know how the investigation gets along. I’m eager to see justice done.”

Roger looked at him, his smile fading as he slowly took Gabriel’s meaning. “You’d like to know… how the investigation is going?”

“Just like any other concerned citizen would. I’d like to know your progress, any developments, no matter how small… just as soon as they come to light.”

Roger was no longer smiling. He dabbed his bald forehead with his handkerchief again and set down his scotch, no longer thirsty. “Well, that’s…”

“You need time to consider your options, I understand.” Gabriel rose and headed for the door to his office. “I appreciate your time all the same, Roger.”

“You do?” Roger got up and warily approached the door.

“Absolutely. And I’m sure the National Police will be just as eager to hear my proposal if you’re not interested.”

“T-The National Police? Well, hang on a minute, what’s this about?”

Gabriel blinked guilelessly. “Well, it’s as I said, I feel that it’s my civic duty to aid law enforcement however I can to see justice served. As you can see, I’m no superhero like Ladybug.” He chuckled and indicated himself. “But I do have quite a lot of money, so I simply thought there might be something even I can do, no matter how small. If you’re not interested, though, I could always ask the Na—”

“No! I mean, yes, the Municipal Police would be, ah, very humbled by your generous support,” Roger stammered. “I myself, of course, would be most appreciative. That is, knowing my department had the faith and support of such an upstanding citizen like yourself. Yes, I think it would be
excellent for morale, too. God knows we need a little of that in these dark days.”

“I completely understand.”

Roger scratched his cheek. “I suppose I could keep you abreast of any, ah, changes here and there. My job can be a bit…overwhelming, and it’s good to know I have friends who will lend a willing ear whenever I feel the need to, ah, unload anything…”

Gabriel placed a hand on Roger’s thick shoulder. “These are dark days indeed. We could all use a friend here and there. I’m honored to be counted among yours, Roger.”

Roger breathed a sigh of relief and wiped his forehead again, nodding. “Of course, Gabe.”

Gabriel smiled brightly and hoped it hid the unseemly twitch of his lips at the sound of that heinous diminution. “Well, Roger, it was good seeing you. We’ll catch up again very soon, I’m sure. Nathalie will show you out.”

Nathalie was already waiting just outside the office, and she led Roger down the stairs to the front door. Gabriel shut the door behind them and went back to his desk, where he topped off his scotch and sipped it by the window overlooking the inner courtyard of the Agreste Mansion. Something wriggled in his jacket, and little butterfly wings fluttered and settled on his shoulder.

“I’m surprised he agreed to share police intelligence with you,” Nooroo said.

“Are you? Any longer, and he may have gotten on his knees to beg.”

Nooroo sighed. For one so small and, some might say, cute, the butterfly kwami betrayed the weight of the world in that sharp little sigh. “I don’t like deceiving people.”

Gabriel’s lips twitched. He could see the shadow of his reflection in the window. His blond hair had long since turned to spun silver, but unlike the good Chief of Police, he had a full head of hair that remained the envy of men even ten years young than him. Rimless glasses perched on his straight-edged nose, and his prominent chin was as smooth as a baby’s, freshly shaved. The sun was low in the sky, almost five in the afternoon. It would be dark soon. He swirled his drink and appreciated the smoky aroma.

“Even if the lie is for a good cause?” Gabriel asked at length.

“I suppose,” Nooroo said. “But…it just doesn’t feel right.”

Gabriel downed the rest of his drink. It was liquid fire going down, but he maintained his icy composure. “It will feel right when this fiend is found and put down for good.”

He could still vividly recall Wednesday’s eerie television broadcast, those possessed audience members nothing but meat sacks, unable to think or feel beyond the need to obey some invisible master. He’d recognized the technique almost instantly watching Ladybug get surrounded as she tried to attack their ring leader. Someone was pulling their strings, someone powerful. But it was not Alec Cataldi. No, he had been as much a pawn as the others, the patient zero of their merry little zombie band.

Someone else was responsible. Someone who, like Hawk Moth fourteen years ago, preferred to remain in the shadows, unseen.

Which would have been just fine with Gabriel. He had money, a successful company, and a purpose in life. He could live anywhere, protect himself in this fortress, or even join the fight himself if it ever
came to it. He was not without resources and options. But he was also not without a weakness, and the sight of Chat Noir on the scene pulling the coralized victims off of Ladybug, careless of his own safety in the process, had awakened an old fury so incandescent that Gabriel still felt the embers smoldering in his gut. It would not take much to set them ablaze once again, and he knew it was only a matter of time.

Chat Noir would not abandon Ladybug a second time, and unlike when he was fourteen, there was little Gabriel could do to stop him now. But he had to try. His only son was the most selfishly selfless person Gabriel had ever known, save for the boy’s mother.

“I know you’re worried about Adrien,” Nooroo said gently. “I am, too.”

“Then you understand the need for deception,” Gabriel said. “That boy is putty in Ladybug’s hands, then as now. He’ll die for her if he believes it will save her. I cannot allow this to continue.”

“Chat Noir and Ladybug are meant to be together. They’re partners, two halves of a perfect whole. It makes sense that Adrien would want to protect Ladybug. It’s his purpose.”

“It’s a lie,” Gabriel spat. “Ladybug and Chat Noir… Their entire existence is a farce. To force two people to bend and contort together to the satisfaction of their unbalanced kwami is unnatural. And it will only end up destroying them in the end.”

Nooroo had never been particularly pugnacious, preferring to assuage his Chosen with patience and a willing ear to air his grievances. But there were some topics about which Nooroo was not shy to voice his opinion.

“You’re wrong, Master,” he said calmly. “There is nothing unnatural about Ladybug and Chat Noir’s partnership. Since the beginning, they have always existed as equal and opposing forces. Together they may fall, but together they rise higher than all the rest of us. They are the strongest Miraculous because they have each other.”

“Yes, just as Felix and Bridgette had each other.”

Nooroo gasped and shrunk in on himself. Gabriel could feel his sadness to recall such a despicable memory—a chilling tremor that rattled his bones like a strong wind. It was a low blow, but the truth had a way of forcing the high and mighty to one knee when they towered too high. A part of him regretted bringing up such a painful memory, but he quickly smothered that guilt. Nooroo was a kwami, an all powerful god that had existed for eons. He had seen loss, death, and suffering ad nauseam. Gabriel was relatively new to the sensation by comparison, even as he looked ahead to the winter years of his life. But he did not shrink as Nooroo did, and he would not fall to his knees anymore. Not when the one thing left to him that mattered was at stake.

Gabriel fished his personal cell phone out of his pocket and called the only number in his Favorites list.

“Father, hi,” Adrien said when he picked up.

“Adrien, did I catch you at a bad time?”

“No, I have a few minutes before my next meeting. Did you need something?”

“Yes. Well, no, actually, not in particular.” There was an awkward pause as Adrien waited for him to elaborate, and Gabriel waited for him to interject. He switched the phone to his other ear.

“Anyway, I’ve cleared my schedule for the evening, and I was wondering you’d like to join me for dinner.”
“Oh… Well, actually—”

“After your meeting, of course,” Gabriel added. “No rush. It’s still early, but I can have Nathalie make a reservation somewhere. Anywhere you want. Perhaps that new Greek place that opened up downtown?”

“I’m sorry, Father. I actually already have dinner plans tonight.”

Nooroo looked a little glum as he met his gaze. Gabriel cleared his throat.

“Oh, I see. Yes, I know you’ve been very busy with the quarter’s end reports.”

“It’s not a work dinner. I’m meeting friends.”

“Ah, right. Anyone I know? I realize it’s none of my business, but—”

“Marinette Dupain-Cheng,” Adrien interrupted him. “And some other friends from high school. I doubt you remember Nino Lahiffe and Alya Césaire. I never had people over back then.”

“I see.” Gabriel was transported back to a sterile hospital room many years ago, and the sight of his only son, bent and broken over the unconscious body of a girl who had once meant the entire world to him. The same girl who now was the reason he was putting himself in reckless danger against an enemy Gabriel knew frustratingly little about. “I remember them.”

There was a pause on the line, and then, “Anyway, I can’t make dinner. Sorry.”

Gabriel set his jaw. All he could think about was the footage of all those bodies full of holes at the Canal+ studio. “Adrien, listen to me. About your…actions on Wednesday—”

“I have to go, Father. My next meeting is here.”

“No, wait—”

The line went dead. Gabriel set down his phone, reached for the crystal decanter, and poured himself another finger of scotch. He tossed it back like tequila and poured himself another. This one, too, he drained in a matter of seconds before slamming the glass down and leaning heavily over his desk. Nooroo floated down by a paperweight and looked up at him.

“How many dinners did I miss with him when he was a boy?” Gabriel asked as he stared at his veiny hands.

Nooroo knew better than to answer that, but his empathetic stare was no less grating. Gabriel squeezed the empty glass in a white-knuckled grip.

Perhaps I deserve this.

He squeezed the glass tighter, and the thick glass cracked. But he released it just before he could shatter it.

“Master,” Nooroo said sadly.

There was a knock on the door, and Nooroo phased through the desk to hide in a drawer just as Nathalie poked her head in. “Sir, did you still want me to reserve you a table for two tonight? Adrien’s calendar shows that he’s free in an hour.”

“No, Nathalie, that won’t be necessary. I’ll be dining in my solar tonight.”
Natalie blinked owlishly behind her square glasses. “Oh, just you, sir?”

“Yes, Nathalie, just me. That will be all, thank you.”

She hesitated, but thought better of whatever foolish whim had momentarily taken hold of her and quietly closed the door. Once she was gone, Nooroo pushed the drawer open and poked his head out. Gabriel removed his glasses and sank into his chair. He rubbed his tired eyes as Nooroo quietly floated to his shoulder. They sat together in silence, waiting for the time to pass, and to take this gnawing emptiness with it.

Marinette was running late, and that was extremely unfortunate because she had set her alarm to leave an entire half hour early to give herself time to stop at her parents’ bakery for dessert, grab a ride share, and make the trip to Nino and Alya’s place. She wasn’t sure where she had been led astray, but it was probably somewhere during her mother’s penchant for pulling her in to conversation and peppering her with questions about her busy life. Her father had to physically separate the two of them just so Marinette could get a foot out the door, cake in hand, or she may have been there chatting for the next hour. She made a mental note to pay her parents a proper visit soon. Maybe once she was done with Jessika’s custom ball gown for her fancy party on Saturday.

The reminder of that looming deadline put a serious damper on her mood, and Marinette groaned as she hauled herself out of the back seat of her ride share, almost had an aneurysm when she realized she’d forgotten the cake, and then jogged the rest of the way through the secured lobby to the elevator. She nearly crashed into the other person who’d also rushed to grab the elevator.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, but stopped himself when they locked gazes. “Marinette, hey.”

Marinette fought to catch her breath. “Adrien! Hi, hey, what’s up?”

He smiled sheepishly. “Oh, you know, fashionably late as usual…”

“Me, too. But you pull it off a lot more glamorously than me.”

He wore a dark leather jacket and jeans, and as usual his hair was styled to messy perfection. “Nah. I only used ten of my fourteen hair products tonight.”

“Wow, you heathen, how could you possibly leave the house so unkempt?”

He grinned. “I guess you could say I’m a hot mess.”

She snorted. “I’ll say.”

They smiled at each other, and Marinette felt her spirits rise a little. It was nice being around him. Fun. She could use a little nice and fun after the whirlwind week she’d had with the coral murders, as the police were now calling them, and the rocky reunion with Chat Noir. All Marinette wanted to do was eat some good food, hang out with good friends, and forget about the Chat Noir drama. The elevator dinged, and they rode up together.

She shifted the cake box in her arms for a better grip, and she noticed that Adrien was watching her with an unreadable expression on his face. She caught his eye, and he immediately smiled politely, as though he’d been caught doing something untoward. The smile didn’t quite reach his eyes, and he stood a bit stiffly an arm’s length away from her.
“So don’t freak out, but Alya’s probably going to give us shit for showing up late together,” Marinette said in an attempt to break the strange tension between them that hadn’t been there a moment ago. “My advice is not to make a big deal about it. She’s like a Chinese finger trap: the harder you struggle, the worse it gets.”

“I see,” Adrien said. “So, you think I should just come out and tell her we’re late because we’re having an illicit affair and there’s no use in trying to deny it any longer?”

Marinette swallowed the lump in her throat and forced a laugh. “I mean, maybe not that explicit…”

“Oh, I get it. You want to keep us a secret. Embarrassed to show me off to your friends?”

He was smiling for real now, those green eyes alight with mirth at her expense, but she couldn’t bring herself to hold it against him. It was a much better look on him than his earlier furtive wariness.

“If they found out I was debasing myself with a guy who only uses ten of his fourteen hair products for a date, I’d be completely ruined.”

“Ah, noted. I’ll be sure not to cut any corners in the future.”

The elevator dinged again and opened to let them out. Adrien held out his arms.

“Here, let me take that. You’ve got your hands full.”

“Oh, thanks!” Marinette handed him the cake box and rearranged her purse and the shopping bag she’d brought with some of Alya’s clothes that she’d left at Marinette’s boutique the night of the Trefoil Gala.

They knocked on Alya and Nino’s door and waited to be admitted, which did not take long. Alya, dressed comfortably in leggings, a fashionably long shirt, and her trademark cat-eye glasses, answered the door. She took one look at them and grinned wickedly.

“Nino! You owe me five euros,” she said triumphantly. “I told you they’d come over together.”

Marinette shot Adrien a look that said, ‘I told you so’.

“For real?! Goddamnit,” Nino grumbled from deeper in the apartment.

“Nice to see you again, Alya,” Adrien greeted politely. “Thanks for inviting me.”

“Uh-huh, no problem.” Alya gave him a rather seedy once-over and slowly broke out in a grin that Marinette did not like one bit. Alya winked at her, and Marinette blushed furiously.

“Oh, thanks!” Marinette handed him the cake box and rearranged her purse and the shopping bag she’d brought with some of Alya’s clothes that she’d left at Marinette’s boutique the night of the Trefoil Gala.

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“Okay, coming through! This cake needs to get in the fridge asap!” Marinette grabbed Adrien’s elbow and pulled him inside past Alya, who had no choice but to let them pass.

“Sexy dress, Marinette,” Alya called.

Marinette bit the inside of her cheek and refused to respond to that, knowing Alya was just trying to tease her. She wasn’t even that dressed up, really. Her violet sweater dress was plain and simple over black tights and flats, nothing to write home about. But as she took the cake back from Adrien and got it in the fridge, she felt his eyes on her figure, inevitably drawn to the flattering flare of her skirt now that Alya had to go and open her big mouth.

“Marinette, hey!” Nino came into the kitchen from the adjoining living room and gave her a hug. “It’s been a while! You look great, as always.”
“Hey, Nino,” Marinette said, happy to see him. “You too. How’s the new album coming?”

Nino was comfortably casual in jeans and a long sleeve shirt with a huge peace sign on the front. He grinned at the mention of his latest project. “Eh, can’t complain too much. The artist has a ‘vision’ for what he wants his sound to be, don’t they all. Like, I totally get it, but man, my job is literally to make these dudes sound better. It’s like, let me work.”

Marinette laughed. “Sounds like you have your hands full, Mr. Producer.”

Nino shrugged, and finally he turned his attention to Adrien, who’d been standing there unsure how to contribute. The two former best buds looked each other over. Nino was nearly as tall as Adrien, but he was stocky and full-chested compared to Adrien’s lankier build. He had traded his glasses for Lasik, and without the eyewear his amber eyes were more piercing, sharper. For one dreaded second, Marinette thought they might hash it out. But Nino smiled easily and went in for a hug.

“Adrien, dude! You’re like the fucking green giant over here. What’d they feed you in the States, man?”

Adrien had little choice but to give in to the unexpected hug. He caught Marinette’s eyes over Nino’s shoulder briefly, and she smiled encouragingly for him.

“I don’t know, food?” he said lamely. “I can’t think of anything clever to say, but it’s good to see you, Nino.”

Nino chuckled, and they separated. “Back at you, man. I can’t believe it’s been so long, huh?”

“Yeah…”

Alya slipped her hand in Marinette’s and rested her chin on her shoulder as they watched Adrien and Nino get reacquainted.

“About that,” Adrien said. “I know I kind of dropped off the face of the Earth back then.”

Nino rubbed his perpetual five o’clock shadow thoughtfully. “Hey, I get it. You were a big time supermodel, and your dad was, well, your dad. It’s cool.”

Adrien frowned and looked very serious all of a sudden. “It’s not cool. I shouldn’t have left without giving you an explanation. Not that I wanted to leave, but—the point is, what I’m trying to say… I’m sorry. You were a really good friend to me back then, and… I’m just really sorry it all went down the way it did.”

Marinette held her breath, and Alya squeezed her hand encouragingly.

Nino laid a hand on Adrien’s shoulder. “I appreciate that, but it was a long time ago. I know things with your dad were…complicated.” He glanced briefly at Alya and Marinette, and Marinette wondered if there were things Nino was not saying in front of them. “You moved to a different time zone before Facebook blew up, and I suck at keeping in contact. It’s not just your fault we lost touch. And anyway, you’re back now, and I’m cool if you’re cool. What do you say we start over?”

Adrien let out the breath he’d been holding as his whole body seemed to relax for the first time that evening. “Yeah, let’s start over. Please.”

Nino laughed. “Man, you’re as polite as ever. At least tell me you lived a little while you were off in the States.”
Adrien managed a small smile. “I had my moments.”

“I bet you did, Agreste,” Alya said.

“Ah, my lovely fiancé,” Nino said. “Ain’t she just the sweetest, most giving creature you ever saw?” Alya’s smile was sickeningly saccharine. “You keep talking, Mr. DJ, and I’ll give you a kick in your cute ass.”

Nino put a hand over his heart. “Oh baby, not in front of the guests!”

Alya snickered and released Marinette to grab plates from the cabinet. “I won’t be tamed, Nino, so don’t even try.”

“Ah, she’s a national treasure.” Nino said. “I’m spending the rest of my life with that woman, ya know.”

Adrien smirked. “Well, she puts up with you, so…”

Nino ribbed him playfully. “Man, you just got here and you’re already giving me shit!”

Adrien dared to laugh a little, and Marinette caught Nino’s eye.

‘Thank you,’ she mouthed silently.

Nino winked at her.

Soon, they had gathered their plates and were seated around Alya and Nino’s four-top dinner table. There was food everywhere, and they’d already made it through one bottle of red by the time they finished the stuffed mushroom appetizers. Nino had his Evening Chill playlist going on Spotify to fill the background of their conversation. The apartment was cozy and lived-in, with pictures of Alya and Nino all over the walls. Some of Alya’s published articles were framed and hanging up—Nino’s doing, Marinette knew. He was surprisingly domestic, although with Alya’s job taking her out of Paris for weeks on end on assignment, he needed to be. Nino had cooked most of the food they had tonight, to Adrien’s genuine surprise.

“You did all of this?” Adrien said. “When did you learn how to cook, anyway?”

“Please, I’ve got mad skills,” Nino bragged.

“You’ve come a long way from microwaved gas station burritos.”

“He’s just on his best behavior,” Alya said. “When I’m away, it’s microwaved burritos galore.”

“Woman, that is slander and I won’t stand for it,” Nino said.

Alya grinned and pinched his cheek playfully. “It’s not slander if it’s true.”

“How would you know? You’re not even here when I do burrito night.”

“Because I’m a sly fox who just got you to admit I’m right.”

Nino laughed and slung an arm around her. He pulled her close and planted a wet kiss on her cheek. “You’re foxy, all right.”

“Hey, get a room, you two,” Marinette teased.
“Hm, yeah, maybe we should kick you two out early,” Alya said, waggling her eyebrows suggestively.

“Fine, but I’m taking the cake back.”

“No, stay,” Nino said. “That cake’s a Tom Dupain specialty. No way passin’ up a slice!”

“Right, your parents own that bakery,” Adrien said. “I don’t think I ever tried their stuff before.”

“Really? I could swear I brought samples to school all the time,” Marinette said.

Adrien shrugged. “I had kind of a strict diet back then.”

“Oh, yeah…”

There was an awkward pause then as it became clear that Adrien was a little uncomfortable. Maybe it was his time as a child supermodel, or the reminder that he’d once been a part of this group before he left without a trace. Whatever the case, Marinette felt like the biggest jerk for bringing up Dupont.

“Speaking of our old school days,” Alya cut in, “Ladybug and Chat Noir are back. Talk about a blast from the past.”

Marinette and Adrien both snapped to attention.

“Oh, here we go,” Nino said, refilling everyone’s wine glasses with a little liquid courage.

“Don’t you ‘here we go’ me, Nino. This is huge, and not just because the Ladyblog’s servers almost broke from all the hits it got after that epic TV fight.”

“You’re still running the Ladyblog?” Adrien asked while Marinette took a large gulp of her wine.

“Oh yeah,” Nino answered for her and shooting Adrien a look that suggested Alya never let him forget it.

“What a rush seeing them on TV like that,” Alya said dreamily. “Ladybug’s as strong and beautiful as ever. I wish I could’ve been there to catch her in action.”

“People died, Alya,” Marinette said a little more harshly than she’d intended. “That wasn’t some cool action movie scene like back in high school. Alec Cataldi and twenty-two other innocent people were brutally murdered.”

“Whoa, chill girl, you know I didn’t mean it like that,” Alya said. “Obviously it’s beyond horrible that all those people lost their lives. But it would’ve been a hell of a lot worse if Ladybug and Chat Noir didn’t show up when they did to help the police. They made a big difference, and I think that’s something to be proud of. That’s all I’m trying to say.”

Marinette immediately felt bad. Of course Alya wouldn’t make light of such a horrible tragedy despite her excitement about seeing Ladybug in action. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you. That came out all wrong.” She fist her skirt under the table discreetly, hating this feeling and unable to explain why it ate at her like acid. “I just… It was so awful.”

“Damn straight,” Nino said grimly. “I remember Hawk Moth was an annoying asshole back in the day, but whoever’s behind this is one sick psycho. I really hope Ladybug and Chat Noir find the dude and kick his teeth in before he strikes again.”

Easier said than done, Marinette thought hopelessly. She—Ladybug didn’t have the slightest clue
about who could be behind the attack or why.

“They will,” Adrien said with a conviction that surprised everyone at the table. “As long as they’re working together, Ladybug and Chat Noir will absolutely get to the bottom of those horrific murders. They make an unbeatable team.”

“Here here,” Nino said.

Marinette found she could not share in Nino’s and Adrien’s confidence in Paris’s superheroes given her recent conversations with Chat Noir as Ladybug. It wasn’t Adrien’s fault—he could not possibly know how close to home his words had struck—but this talk of Ladybug and Chat Noir left her feeling hollow, and a little sad. She reached for her wine to hide her glum expression.

“You think so?” Alya said in that skeptical reporter tone she often got when she was trying to ferret out a story from a mark. “Because the way I see it, Chat Noir’s been MIA for years, and I don’t think Ladybug was all on board for that.”

Marinette froze mid sip. Just when had Alya deduced—

“What’s that supposed mean?” Adrien said.

“Just what it sounds like. I remember when Ladybug was running around the city by herself for months. I thought it was weird, obviously, her on her own when Chat Noir was basically her second shadow before. And Hawk Moth going quiet around the same time was just as suspicious.”

Damn Alya and her super sleuthing. Marinette had no idea she’d been so observant of Ladybug’s movements back then… Alya tried talking to her for an interview with the Ladyblog on several occasions after Chat’s vanishing, but Ladybug always declined, unable to face the fact that yes, she had been tossed aside like yesterday’s newspaper and Chat was never coming back.

“And their fight together last Wednesday? They weren’t in sync at all. I swear, it was almost like they were total strangers just winging it compared to the way they used to fight together,” Alya continued.

“Well, like you said, you weren’t there,” Adrien said, his tone clipped. “Whatever’s going on with Ladybug and Chat Noir is between them.”

“I guess. But don’t you think it’s a little bit suspicious? Chat Noir disappeared around the same time as Hawk Moth, and now that there’s some new, creepy, murder-y super villain running around he finally decides to show up for the first time in, what, fourteen years?”

“What does that mean? Are you implying that Chat Noir’s somehow involved in this?” Alya peered at him behind her glasses, her eyes narrowed slightly. “I’m not implying anything; I’m just saying it’s a weird coincidence. Why would he suddenly turn up now all of a sudden?”

“I don’t know, maybe because Ladybug needed him to help fight those coral mutant people. Like you said, things would’ve been a lot worse if he hadn’t shown up.”

“Oh, okay kids, settle down. Let’s all take a deep breath, yeah?” Nino said.

“Whoa, okay kids, settle down. Let’s all take a deep breath, yeah?” Alya said, picking up her wine glass and taking a casual sip like she wasn’t hyper-focused on this bizarre, borderline hostile turn in the conversation. “Adrien and I are just bouncing ideas around, right?”
Adrien set his jaw as if he was working very hard not to open his mouth and say something they would all regret. Marinette swallowed her melancholy thoughts about Chat Noir and reached for Adrien’s hand under the table. He turned to look at her askance, and Marinette was taken aback to see the stormy turbulence behind his pretty, green eyes. There was something almost animalistic about the way the light reflected in them, and it struck a small but clear spark of dread in her.

She threaded her fingers in his and held his gaze, willing him to calm down from whatever had set him off. Almost immediately, the glimmer of hostility faded, and he glared over. Whatever had leaked out of him receded, leaving no trace behind the invisible walls he had erected. It lasted only a second or two, but it was enough for Marinette to wonder, cautiously, about what Chloe had said about Adrien’s cracks, and about his talent for breaking the things closest to him.

“Right,” Adrien said, noticeably more subdued than he’d been a moment ago.

Marinette felt his fingers grasp hers tightly, just shy of painful, like he would sooner hurt her than risk letting her pull away again. It was an unpleasant thought, one unbidden, and Marinette felt bad for even entertaining it. What was wrong with her tonight? She’d come here to enjoy being with Adrien and her friends, and all she could do was worry about Chat Noir.

“Sorry,” Adrien said, smiling this time and reaching for his wine glass with his free hand. “I didn’t mean to get all intense there. This whole thing just has me pretty shaken up, I guess.” He ran his thumb over Marinette’s knuckles, relaxing a little.

Nino grunted his assent. “I’ll say. I bet you that coral’s some Last of Us shit, like with those spores that turn people into brain-dead fungus zombies. You see how it just dissolved when Chat Noir put down Alec Cataldi? I don’t know about you guys, but I’m kind of afraid to leave the house these days. Who knows if there’s others carrying the coral spores out there?” He shuddered.

Alya frowned deeply as she considered this. Marinette did not blame either Nino or Adrien for being afraid. She was scared shitless, and she was Ladybug. She was supposed to be brave when others could not be. That was her job. But dealing with Chat’s sudden resurgence on top of it all only exacerbated the problem. He said he was fine, that there was no trace of the akuma that had infected him left, but could she really believe that?

What if Alya had a point? What if Chat suddenly reappearing was somehow connected to this new threat? She felt awful for even thinking it, but the coincidence of his reappearance right when this new enemy revealed itself was worrisome.

Alya sighed. “Okay, so since I officially killed the mood, how ‘bout I atone by busting out that cake?”

“Yes, please,” Nino said.

“Aly, give me a hand?” Alya asked, already up and heading back to the kitchen.

“Oh, sure.” Marinette got up, and Adrien reluctantly released her hand. She spared him an apologetic smile, and he returned it, almost sad to see her go. It shouldn’t have, but the small gesture sent a thrill right to her stupid, romantic heart.

She heard him laughing with Nino about something as she rounded the corner to the kitchen, but she couldn’t make it out.

“Grab me some forks, will you?” Alya said. She’d pulled the cake out of the fridge and was unpacking it from its box to divvy up.
Marinette rummaged around the drawers to do as she was bid. “Hey, I’m sorry again about snapping at you. I don’t know what came over me, but I shouldn’t have taken it out on you like that.”

Alya said nothing, and when Marinette brought her the forks, she was surprised to find Alya just standing there watching her.

“What?” she said.

Alya put her hands on her hips. “What? Is that all you have to say?”

“I’m a little lost. What’re we talking about?”

“Marinette,” Alya began gently, her voice low. “Adrien just lost his temper in there with me. You’re not telling me you didn’t see it.”

“Lost his… What? No he didn’t. He got a little defensive, yeah, but can you blame him? Twenty-three people are dead, and we all saw it happen right before our eyes. On live television,” she added quickly. “He’s upset, just like I’m upset and Nino’s upset and everyone’s upset.”

“No, girl. He’s not upset, he’s *livid*. Are you seriously telling me you didn’t see the look on his face?”

“I…” Marinette recalled that brief flash of something feral in Adrien’s eyes when she took his hand, gone before she’d had time to really consider it. “He apologized.”

“Yeah, he said the words, but his fake smile practically screamed ‘fuck off, Alya.’ It was kind of creepy. How did you not pick up on any of that?”

Nino and Adrien burst out laughing about something again. Marinette frowned.

“Sounds like Nino didn’t pick up on it, either. Alya, come on. Maybe he was a little defensive, and yeah, that’s a little weird I guess, but I really don’t think he meant to get upset with you.”

“Don’t gaslight me. You know that shit doesn’t work on me. I know what I saw.”

“I’m not gaslighting you!” Marinette hissed, trying to keep her voice down. “Ugh, what’s even happening right now? Why are we fighting?”

“We’re not fighting. I’m trying to tell you something honest you don’t want to hear about the guy you like. There’s a difference.”

“Okay, great, that’s just great. I thought we talked about this. And this dinner party was *your* idea, by the way.”

Alya removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes wearily. “Okay, this isn’t how I wanted this to go. Let’s back up a minute.” She donned her glasses again. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said it like that. I wasn’t trying to upset you, and I’m only saying any of this because I love you to pieces.”

Marinette felt her anger recede as Alya bared her truth. She could not fault her for that. “Well, now I feel like the bad guy here.”

“You’re not. Hey, hey, look at me.” Alya put her hands on Marinette’s shoulders. “You and me? We’re Thelma and Louise. You know I’d drive off a cliff with you before I let a guy come between us.”

Marinette spared her a smile. “You’re such a romantic.”
Alya smiled back. “You love me.”

“I do. So now what? Are you saying you don’t like Adrien? Is this the part where you tell me I’m making the biggest mistake of my life?”

“None of the above. Look, I’m here for you, remember? I’m just saying…be careful. That was a lot of anger packed into one very practiced supermodel package coming at me back there. Maybe you’re right, and it’s just the shit happening with this new super villain putting everybody on edge. But… maybe it’s more than that. I’m not saying I know for sure, I’m just saying—”

“—be careful, yeah.” Marinette nodded. “I will.”

“That’s my girl.” Alya winked slyly.

They got the cake and brought four plates back to the table. Whatever Adrien and Nino had talked about in the girls’ absence, it seemed to have set Adrien back at ease. He was all smiles and compliments to the chef, which Marinette promised to pass along to her father, who always appreciated when his work was enjoyed. They opened another bottle of wine and spent the rest of the evening sharing embarrassing college and grad school stories, work plans, and the latest news. There were no further mentions of Ladybug, Chat Noir, and the mysterious new evil they faced.

At the end of the night, Adrien and Nino exchanged numbers with the promise of catching up for time lost.

“I have a gym in my apartment building,” Adrien said. “Almost nobody uses it, and it beats the public gyms.”

“Seriously? Dude, I keep forgetting you’re loaded. I’m droppin’ way too much on my gym membership and I barely even go,” Nino complained.

“Well, why don’t you just come over to my place? It’s only a ten minute drive from here.”

“Hey, if it means you getting in shape, my vote is yes,” Alya said, poking Nino’s stomach playfully.

“But you love my flabs,” Nino pouted.

“Flabs?” Adrien said.

“Flabby abs,” Alya clarified. “And no, I don’t love them. More like It’s Complicated.”

Nino looked crushed. “My foxy lady, hast thou forsaken me so cruelly?”

“Don’t worry, Nino, you still have your sparkling personality going for you,” Marinette teased.

Nino clutched his heart. “Ah! A second blow to my tender man-heart! You ladies are too harsh.”

“Sounds like it’s settled, then,” Adrien said with a laugh. “To be honest, I’ve been so busy with work that I haven’t been as diligent about working out lately, either.”

“Yeah, you’re definitely letting yourself go,” Marinette said. “That second slice of cake’ll go right to your ass.”

Adrien flushed prettily as everyone present inevitably glanced at said ass, and Marinette resisted the urge to cackle.

Nino burst out laughing. “Nice one, Mar!”
“Thank you, Nino.” Marinette did a little bow.

“All right, that’s enough from the peanut gallery for one night. Nino’s flabs and I have a standing date that you two very rudely interrupted with all these dinner party shenanigans.”

They all said their goodbyes, and Adrien and Marinette soon found themselves back in the elevator heading down.

“So, I take it you’re an ass lady,” Adrien broke the silence.

Marinette shrugged nonchalantly, but she bit back a grin. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Adrien was suddenly right next to her and leaning casually on his arm. It was not the first time Marinette marveled at his wizard-level stealth game despite appearances, and she cursed her lack of vigilance now as he all but boxed her in between the wall and his arm.

“Yes,” he said, “I really would.”

Marinette supposed she deserved this. He was no longer playing coy about flirting with her. In fact, he seemed to be flaunting it in her face just to watch her squirm. She swallowed hard. His leather jacket was open in front, and damn that was a good look for him, blond and black leather…

And just like that, she was back to thinking about Chat Noir and how much he’d hurt and upset her and just…no.

The elevator dinged their arrival on the main floor, and Marinette quickly ducked under Adrien’s arm and exited. “I’ll have to keep you in suspense for now, sorry! I have to go.”

Adrien followed her outside. “Hey wait, Marinette—”

“I’m really sorry, I just remembered there’s something important I need to check on for work.” She waved and jogged down the street. “Text you later, bye!”

He raised his hand to her in a wave, looking a little dumbfounded, and Marinette felt bad, she really did. But if she had to be around him a second longer with these thoughts of Chat and the murders and everything else going wrong in her dumpster fire of a superhero half-life, she would explode. And Adrien did not deserve to end up as collateral damage to her bullshit.

As soon as Marinette rounded the corner into an alley, she pulled a sleepy Tikki out of her purse and gave her a wake-up kiss on the head.

“Hmm? Marinette?” Tikki said, yawning. “Is the dinner party over already?”

“Sorry Tikki, I don’t have time to explain right now. Transform me!”

“Wha—”

Tikki was cut off as the power of her Miraculous transformation disintegrated her into scarlet shimmers, and soon Ladybug was looping her yo-yo over a nearby fire escape and flying over the top of the building into the night.

The trip to Master Wang Fu’s place was long enough to leave Ladybug feeling winded when she touched down in his front yard. He’d long since moved out of the city proper and settled in a cozy
one-story villa just beyond the hustle and bustle of urban life. It was modest, but it was private and homey. Ladybug took a moment to catch her breath and peer through the screened windows. They glowed with yellow light—he was home.

In the moonlight, Ladybug’s super suit glinted. After the fight against the coralized victims, Tikki explained that her super suit changed to better defend against her opponent’s strengths, something she had not needed against Hawk Moth’s various akumtized victims in the past. Where before her suit was breathable and flexible, now it was reinforced with a thin but ultra hard exoskeleton of segmented scale armor.

Even her yo-yo had gotten a power-up. The cord was twice as thick as the previous model’s, and the yo-yo itself was reinforced with the same scale armor as her suit. Something told her the next time she faced any coralized people, her yo-yo’s cord would hold up under the pressure.

Ladybug knocked on the door and waited to be admitted.

“Ladybug, what a pleasant surprise,” Fu said warmly. “Please, come in. It’s very chilly tonight.”

“Thank you,” she said, following him inside.

He led her to the living room, where he had been playing Go with Wayzz, Fu’s sagacious, turtle-inspired kwami. The black and white stones were arranged across the board in a way that was incomprehensible to Ladybug. Her mother knew the game, but she’d never learned.

“Tikki, revert me,” Ladybug said.


Tikki floated over to Wayzz and sat down next to him. “Hello, Wayzz. I’m happy to see you, but I didn’t know we would be visiting you tonight.”

Marinette took a seat at the table. “Sorry, Tikki. I just… I needed to get out of there.”

Fu returned with a tray of tea and cookies, which he set on the table next to the Go board. “It sounds like you have quite a lot on your mind, Marinette.”

He sank into the chair opposite hers and passed Wayzz and Tikki one of the two plates of cookies to share. The kwami sat side by side and munched on their snacks, large eyes trained on their Chosen.

“I…” Marinette tried to find the words to begin. There was so much, too much. She felt it welling inside her like a dam fit to burst.

_Get it together, girl._

The last thing she wanted to do was have an emotional break down in front of Fu after already inconveniencing him with this unplanned visit. He had always told her that as Guardian, his job was to watch over Miraculous holders like herself, and to guard the remaining Miraculous until such time as they were Chosen. But over the years of coming to him, begging him for information about Chat Noir, where he could be, if he was ever coming back, and getting nothing out of Fu, she had learned to stop asking. He was not going to give her the answers she wanted, whether he knew them or not.

But this time, it was different. Surely, he would see that she needed guidance. Surely, he would make an exception just this once. Marinette had no one else to turn to.

“It’s all right,” Fu said gently. He placed a hand on hers to comfort her. “Take your time. I’m here.”
Marinette drew quiet strength from their contact. His hands were rough and wrinkled from his extreme old age, but they were strong hands, too. She wondered, whimsically, how many other Ladybugs he’d sat across from, his hand upon theirs, waiting for them to gather their courage.

“Chat Noir’s back,” she said in a voice so soft she almost thought he didn’t hear her.

But he sighed wearily and patted her hand encouragingly. “Yes, I know.”

And then it all came pouring out: the fight against the coralized victims, Chat Noir’s sudden return, their fight and semi-reconciliation, and his vow to earn her trust back. Once she got started, she could not stop. Fu patiently listened to her ramble on and on, never once cutting her off.

“My goodness,” he said when she finally came up for air, “that’s quite a lot for one woman to shoulder by herself, even one as capable as you.”

“Master Fu, I don’t know what to do about any of this. I don’t know what to think, or what I’m supposed to think.”

“You said you don’t believe you’re ready to trust Chat Noir again.”

Marinette warmed her hands around her tea cup and nodded, ashamed.

“It’s all right, Marinette. If you’re not ready, then you’re not ready.”

“But… You’ve always said Ladybug and Chat Noir are partners—more than partners. Two halves of the same whole. I’m supposed to trust him, but I…”

“You’re not ‘supposed’ to do anything. You cannot help how you feel any more than Chat Noir can help what’s already been done in the past. All you can do, both of you, is move forward. You feel that Chat Noir betrayed your trust and abandoned you when he disappeared. I think that’s very understandable, and it’s all right that you need time to get used to him being back in your life.”

“But the coralized victims, this new enemy—we have to stop them. How can I possibly expect Chat to help me when I won’t even do him the favor of trusting him? I wouldn’t want to help me if I were him.” She bit her lip. “I upset him, I know I did. It seems like all I’ve ever done is upset him.”

“Oh, Marinette,” Tikki said. “Please don’t say that. What’s happening with the coralized victims affects all of Paris. Of course Chat Noir would want to help you put a stop to them. He even said so himself, remember?”

Wayzz, as was his fashion, remained silent while he listened, but he caught Fu’s eye briefly, and the two of them exchanged a look.

“Tikki is right,” Fu said. “And I see now that perhaps I may have given you the wrong impression about how the Ladybug and Black Cat Miraculous function. Tikki and Plagg are, as you say, two halves of the same whole. Chaos and order, destruction and creation—these are equal and opposing forces. They may fluctuate, but in the end, they will always seek balance. This is the way of the universe, as it always has been and shall always be until the end of time.

“But beneath the masks, you and Chat Noir are human. And humans, unlike kwami, must strive to find balance within themselves. Only then can you and Chat Noir learn to heal and forgive the wrongs of the past and move forward together.”

“Beneath the masks,” Marinette said. “I don’t even know who he is under his mask, and he doesn’t know me. That’s never mattered before.”
“Then it need not matter now. You are capable of great successes, as well as great failures. You are not perfect, and you will make mistakes, as all people do. Chat Noir made a mistake when he left you. I do not excuse his actions, but I know he is trying to make amends. That is the person I chose, the same person Plagg found worthy above all others. Chat Noir is a man of fierce compassion and selflessness, then as now. If he was not, he would never have returned to you.”

*Then he shouldn’t have left in the first place!* Marinette wanted to give voice to her frustrations, but the protest died in her throat. Maybe… Maybe she was being too critical. Maybe Chat really did deserve a fresh start. He had even gotten down on one knee to make his pledge, a typically grandiose Chat Noir gesture that betrayed his unabashed sincerity and reminded her of the boy she once knew and trusted. She had to believe he was still there somewhere, beneath the mask. She wanted to believe it so badly.

“Thank you, Master Fu. I think I do need some time before I’ll be ready to trust him fully again.”

Fu nodded. “And that is perfectly understandable, as long as Chat Noir also knows this.”

“He does…”

Fu watched her thoughtfully. “But there’s something else on your mind, isn’t there?”

“Well…”

He refilled her tea and smiled, ever patient as he silently bade her continue. Marinette debated how to give voice to a concern plaguing her since Alya voiced her suspicions about Chat Noir at dinner.

“Earlier, you said Plagg found Chat Noir worthy, that that’s why he chose him,” she began.

“Yes, that’s right. Why?”

“I was wondering… Is it possible for a Miraculous Chosen to become…unworthy?”

Wayzz tensed, and it was all the answer Marinette needed.

“They can, can’t they? Wayzz?”

Wayzz looked at her dispassionately. “Why do you ask?”

Marinette bit her lip. “Chat Noir… I’m not saying I believe any of this, and I didn’t even really put it together until tonight, but he reappeared right when the coral murders started. And before, when Hawk Moth akumatized him, they both disappeared—”

“No,” Fu cut in. “Marinette, I know you are struggling, and I understand how tempting it is assume the worst when hope feels lost to you. But I assure you, Chat Noir is worthy of the Black Cat Miraculous, and he has nothing to do with these recent coral murders or whoever may be behind them.”

“With all due respect, that doesn’t answer my question.”

Fu watched her with the heavy gaze of one burdened by knowledge. “I think it’s best that it remain that way for now.”

“I think she should know,” Wayzz spoke up.

Fu was just as surprised as Marinette to hear the reticent turtle kwami speak. “Wayzz, please, this is not the right time to—”
“What should I know?” Marinette demanded.

Wayzz glanced and Tikki, and Marinette looked at her. She was startled to see Tikki looking so miserable all of a sudden. “Tikki?”

Tikki looked up at her sadly, pearly tears welling in her eyes.

“Tikki,” Marinette said again, holding out her hand for Tikki to crawl on. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, Marinette,” Tikki said.

“Wayzz,” Fu said a little more harshly. “I do not think this is the time. She is not ready.”

“Master, with all due respect, she has waited fourteen years for an explanation,” Wayzz said.

Fu looked very troubled. “I understand your reservations concerning Chat Noir, but surely this is not yet necessary.”

“Ladybug and Chat Noir are nothing without each other,” Wayzz said. “They should know the truth. We cannot risk history repeating itself, not when we face an enemy we know so little about. Ladybug must understand what’s at stake.”

For a cute, turtle-themed, mini god, Wayzz had an uncanny finality to his demeanor that silenced all arguments when he chose to speak. He and Fu shared a look, and Marinette had to physically restrain herself from demanding an explanation. Her heart was pounding in her ears, and Tikki clung to her thumb, sniffling. At length, Fu sighed and rubbed his weary eyes, nodding his reluctant permission.

“Tell her, Tikki,” Wayzz said.

All eyes were on Tikki now. Marinette brought her to her eye level. Her heart wrenched at the sight of Tikki’s pearlescent tears. What was she keeping that made her so miserable?

“Please understand, Marinette,” Tikki said, her voice shaky with emotion. “I wasn’t lying to you. We simply do not discuss our past Chosen, ever. That is our way. Unless…”

“Unless there is no other choice,” Wayzz said gravely.

Fu looked like he had a number of other choices to offer, but he held his tongue. His kwami, the embodiment of infinite wisdom, had spoken, and there was no swaying him.

“Tikki,” Marinette said, unable to hide her dread. “What happened last time?”

Tikki wiped her tears with her little hand. “Last time, I-I lost my Chosen.”

“You lost…?”

“She was killed.” Tikki held her large head in her tiny hands. “S-She died protecting… She was p-protecting Chat Noir, b-but…”

“But the previous Chat Noir did not take her sacrifice well,” Wayzz said when it became clear Tikki could not go on. “He turned against his fellow Miraculous Chosen and sought to fulfill his ultimate wish to bring her back by any means necessary.”

Marinette could only stare, horrified for Tikki and for the terrible memories she and Wayzz shared. “Oh my god, that’s… What do you mean, by any means necessary?”
It was Fu who answered her. The stress lines on his wizened face seemed to her deeper, wounding. “Felix—Chat Noir—never knew that the woman he loved, Bridgette, was in fact Ladybug. When she died protecting him, he lost a part of himself. He vowed to combine the powers of the Black Cat and Ladybug Miraculous to grant him his greatest wish: to bring her back. To that end, he fought against his fellow Miraculous Chosen, and ultimately lost his life. He never got his wish, among other things…”

Marinette covered her mouth in shock and sadness. She looked at Tikki, who was crying softly in her palm, and brought her close for a hug. She could not even imagine such pain, to find out the person she loved most had just died protecting her, never knowing it was them under the mask all along…

“Plagg found Felix unworthy,” Wayzz said. “He renounced their bond before Felix could make his wish on the Miraculous. It was the only way.”

“The only way…?”

“To defeat him, of course. He simply would not stop. Mayura and Hawk Moth—they dealt the killing blow.”

“Hawk Moth… No, you can’t mean—”

“Yes,” Wayzz said. “Hawk Moth, the very same you faced years ago. He brought Chat Noir’s rebellion to an end when he took Felix’s life with his own hands.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m thrilled to have reached nearly forty subscriptions to this fic! Thank you all so much for your dedication and interest! I would really love to get some feedback (general fangirling is always welcome, too!) from readers if you can spare the time. Feedback is how I improve and make a better, more enjoyable story for all of you. I’m also fairly new to this fandom, so I’d love to get to know some of you lovely readers! You can also find me on Tumblr @renaerys. Please don’t be shy about reaching out. :)

Next time: Ladybug and Chat Noir work with the Municipal Police in the wake of a second coral attack, and Jessika’s premiere party brings both heartache and joy to our heroes.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Ladybug discovers the hazards of social media while fighting her second coralized victim, and Adrien sits down for Therapy with Plagg, Round Two.

Chapter Notes

This chapter ended up being crazy long, so I had to split it. The premiere party will be in the next chapter as a result, sorry! I’ll try to get that posted soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To be fair, Ladybug had fully intended to have a Serious Talk with Chat Noir as soon as she saw him again. If nothing else, he had a right to know what Fu had told her about their predecessors, even though she knew—she knew—he would take it the wrong way. It didn’t change the fact that he deserved to know what she knew, that he needed to understand what could happen to them if they didn’t find a way to put the past behind them.

That’s not us, she thought vehemently when she’d departed Fu’s house, her head full of questions she never thought she would have to ask.

But what if it could be? Felix and Bridgette, whoever they had been, probably did not envision the fate that had ultimately befallen them. With the coral murders to worry about, Ladybug had no idea what was in store for Chat Noir and her, but hell if she was going to let her fears get in the way of giving them the best shot they had at putting a stop to the evil plaguing Paris. It meant putting her own feelings aside and giving Chat a real second chance, no strings attached. She wasn’t fully ready to trust him again, but she would have to trust that they could get back there one day.

And then, disaster struck.

“All of you, kneel before me! I am Fashionista, the most beautiful woman in the world!” cried the newest coralized victim from her place on the catwalk. She was draped in coral growths that clung to her like rope. Branches twisted about her head like a crown of pink thorns, and at her breast pulsed another rose pin, the heart of her unnatural power and strength.

She was one of the supermodels performing in an Agreste Fashion winter show this evening. She had already coralized a few of her fellow models, and the audience was screaming and cowering in fear. Some had made it to the exits, but the coralized models were strangely fast, unlike Alec’s victims had been. They soon cut off all exits and corralled the people like cattle, where they were forced to stay and watch the ‘show’. Fashionista strutted along the catwalk, all lights on her.

Ladybug had only found out about this attack so soon because Marinette had been in attendance representing Marinette Designs. It had been a last-minute decision to go despite the work that remained to be done on Jessika’s ball gown, but she couldn’t resist the invitation from one of the contacts she’d made at the Trefoil Gala. And so, she and Manon, who’d somehow convinced...
Marinette to bring her along, had had a front-row seat to Fashionista’s debut.

“Talk about a fashion faux paw,” said Chat, landing hard beside Ladybug out of nowhere.

“Chat,” Ladybug said, trying very hard not to roll her eyes at that particularly ill-timed cat pun. “You got here fast.”

“I was in the neighborhood.”

“C-Chat Noir!” Manon gasped, torn between her very understandable fear over her situation and something that looked disturbingly like starry-eyed awe. “Oh wow, you’re both really here! This is so cool!”

She had the nerve to take out her phone and try to Snapchat the two heroes, but Ladybug hauled her off by the elbow and stuck her with the crowd of normal people huddling together.

“You, stay out of the way,” Ladybug said.

“Yeah, okay, whatever you say,” Manon said, filming the whole thing on her phone, anyway. “Save us, Ladybug!”

“Ladybug, help!” shouted another person in the crowd. More of them began to swarm toward her like an amorphous mass, and Ladybug was forced to leap away before they could mosh pit her. In her distraction, she missed the beginning of Chat’s fight with Fashionista.

“How dare you interrupt my show!” Fashionista screeched. Her red hair fanned out wildly. “Mangy cat, I’ll throw you back out on the street where you belong!”

With a wave of her hand, two of the coralized supermodels under her control lunged at Chat, careless of their own safety. Ladybug was moving before she could even process what she was doing. She jumped, threw her yo-yo, and crashed into one of the charging supermodels, while her yo-yo wrapped around the other one. She yanked it back with all her might, and the coralized supermodel went flying backwards. Unlike before, the cord held taut, and he struggled in vain to free himself. Coral cracked and broke where Ladybug’s knees slammed into the first coralized supermodel, who now writhed beneath her.

Chat stared at her, frozen to the spot in awe of her stunning heroics.

“Don’t just stand there!” Ladybug said.

“Y-Yeah, right!” Chat brandished his baton at Fashionista as he ran at her.

The coralized supermodel Ladybug had landed on finally regained his bearings and managed to throw her off the catwalk, and she landed hard on her back among the cowering crowd. Hands reached for her to help her up, but the coralized supermodel she’d entrapped also rolled off the catwalk and struggled against his restraints, sending the crowd into a fresh wave of panic as they scrambled to get clear of him.

“Get back, please!” Ladybug commanded. “It’s not safe!”

“Aaarrrgh!!” Fashionista cried out as she rammed her coral against Chat’s baton. Spikes of the stuff grew from her arms like jagged swords, twirling around each other thickly as Chat broke off branch after branch. “You ugly stray! Get off my stage!”

“I’ll show you ugly. Cataclysm!” His knuckles cracked with the promise of pain as he circled
Fashionista like a predator on the hunt.

“Chat, no!” Ladybug said, panicking. “You can’t use Cataclysm on her!”

Chat glared at her, his cat eyes slitted menacingly. “It’s the only way to stop her!”

“They’ll all die!”

But Fashionista was quick and ruthless as she caught Chat in a deadly dance of swords. Chat was remarkably adept with his baton, wielding it like a proper sword and parrying Fashionista’s sharp jabs even left-handed. His skill only fueled her anger, however, and her movements became ever more erratic and dangerous.

“I refuse to be disgraced at my show!” Fashionista bellowed.

Ladybug punched the daylights out of the struggling coralized supermodel until she passed out, quickly retracted her yo-yo, and dashed after Chat and Fashionista. She was intercepted by two more coralized supermodels, their joints cracking as their coral armor bent and twisted to accommodate their jerky movements. The sight turned Ladybug’s stomach—these poor people had no idea what they were doing. Those hollow, bloodshot eyes spoke volumes of their silent suffering, and she hated that she had to hurt them even more to make them stop.

Spinning her yo-yo, Ladybug maintained her distance to keep the two of them at bay, but there was no way to get to Chat and Fashionista without going through them. “Chat!”

“Just die already!” Fashionista said.

She smacked Chat with one of her coral saber arms, forcing him to parry, but it opened him up to attack on his other side. The jagged coral saber pierced his flank and sank in through his super suit. He gasped and pawed at the wound, and Ladybug saw red.

“No!” she screamed.

Fashionista’s coral began to dissolve to black ashes the moment it pierced Chat’s suit and skin—his Cataclysm-drenched claw gripped her coralized arm. The two of them sank together to the floor as Chat’s blood pooled at his knees.

Ladybug lost the ability to think straight. She struck out with her yo-yo hard, knocking one of her assailants square in the forehead and round-housing the other with all her might. She heard something crack, and the two of them fell to the floor in a heap, twitching. But she couldn’t bring herself to care, her thoughts only of that police officer and the coral growing out of the gash in his head where Alec Cataldi’s victims had punctured the skin and turned him into one of them.

“Chat!” she said, landing next to him and pulling him away in her arms just as the baleful aura of his Cataclysm subsided. He grunted in pain, his hand pressed to his side where blood continued to gush out of him.

“I’m fine, just a scratch,” he wheezed.

“You’re not fine!”

Ladybug couldn’t help her tears as she clutched him to her. She pressed her hand over his to staunch the bleeding, and shuddered at the hot wetness seeping in between her fingers. But there was no time. Fashionista was struggling to her feet again.
Wait.

“She’s not dead,” Ladybug said, almost a question. “But you…”

Sure enough, Fashionista was still standing, but her coral armor had dissolved, revealing only the rose pin at her breast. The pin remained intact despite Chat’s Cataclysm, engulfed in black smoke with the remnants of his power. The other coralized supermodels were also still draped in coral and zombified.

“Ladybug, stop her,” Chat said, wincing as he gripped his side. “Hurry up!”

“Y-Yeah.” Ladybug rose, reluctant to leave Chat in his injured state, but there was no time. She threw her yo-yo in the air and shouted, “Lucky Charm!”

And she was going to give Tikki a entire box of macaroons for this one, because the Lucky Charm deposited a spotted tranquilizer gun in her hands. Ladybug quickly took aim and fired at Fashionista just as the crazed supermodel lurched toward them. The dart hit true in her shoulder, and in a matter of seconds Fashionista fell to her knees, muttered incoherently, and slumped in a deep sleep. Her coralized victims were still in play, and the two that remained conscious closed in on Ladybug.

“Hey! Over here, you coral mutant!” shouted Manon. She’d grabbed a metal folding chair from the audience and smacked one of the coralized supermodels with it.

The reckless attack bought Ladybug just the time she needed to dash after Fashionista and pry the rose pin from her dress. It burned to the touch, and Ladybug yelped in pain, unable to hold on to it. The pin clattered to the floor, pulsating with shimmering heat. As soon as Ladybug removed it from Fashionista, her coralized victims seized and fell to the floor unconscious.

“Ladybug,” Chat said, his voice strained with pain and his eyes dilated as he struggled. “The pin—”

“I’ve got it.” Ladybug unlocked her yo-yo, revealing a bath of cleansing light. Like a heat-seeking missile, her yo-yo locked on to the vibrating rose pin and snapped it up. Her yo-yo was hot to the touch, and for a terrifying moment she feared she’d done the wrong thing. But it popped back open, and the rose pin, now free of Chat’s Cataclysm spell and no longer shimmering with heat, clattered to the floor like any normal jewelry pin.

Ladybug tossed the tranquilizer gun into the air. “Miraculous Ladybug!”

Shimmering, scarlet magic swept through the studio, repairing and replacing everything the coralized supermodels had destroyed, including Chat. His blood evaporated, and his wound closed. Ladybug was so relieved that she ran to him and threw her arms around him.

“Oh my god,” she said, shuddering against him. “You stupid, reckless cat!”

He tensed in surprise, but soon returned her embrace. “My lady…”

“Don’t you ‘my lady’ me!” She pulled away from him and ran her hand over his side, where the wound Fashionista had given him had disappeared without a trace. “How are you not coralized? Chat, what did you do?”

Phone camera lights flashed, and Ladybug realized they had an audience. Manon was filming everything, and Ladybug knew this was going to end up on the Ladyblog before the end of the day. Great, just what she needed.

Sirens outside indicated the police had arrived, and soon uniformed officers burst into the studio,
firearms drawn as they shouted for everyone to get down while they assessed the situation.

“I think we better finish this conversation later,” Chat said, squeezing her forearms reassuringly.

Chief Raincomprix of the Municipal Police approached the hero duo flanked by two of his officers while the rest of the officers focused on clearing everybody else out of the building. “Ladybug, Chat Noir. I see you’ve stopped another of the coralized people. Thank you for your assistance, it’s much appreciated.”

“Hey, what’s this?” said one of the uniformed officers, reaching for the dormant coral rose pin Ladybug had pulled off of Fashionista.

“No, don’t!” Ladybug said, swooping in to push him out of the way. “Don’t touch that. It’s the source of the coral power. I purified it, but we shouldn’t risk exposure all the same until we know what we’re dealing with.”

The officer immediately backed off, and Chief Raincomprix spoke through his two-way radio.

“Forensics and medical will be right in,” he said. “You’re telling me that little piece there caused all of this?”

“That’s right,” Ladybug said.

“Then we should destroy it.”

“No. Destroy it, and we’ll end up killing all the coralized victims.”

A team of people in uniform with the word ‘Forensics’ painted on the backs of their jackets filed in and surrounded Fashionista, the other immobile coralized supermodels, and the rose coral pin itself. After some direction from Chief Raincomprix, they gathered the rose pin in a glass container, bagged it, and carefully transported it, along with the comatose coralized victims, back outside to be taken to the police station.

“Where are you taking them?” Chat asked as he and Ladybug went outside with Chief Raincomprix. It was dark out, and a large crowd had gathered to gawk.

“To be properly examined,” Chief Raincomprix said. “It’s about time we got to the bottom of these incidents. I don’t know how you’ve managed to keep these victims alive this long, but I won’t look a gift horse in the mouth. Er, cat.” He side-eyed Chat.

“Chief Raincomprix, I think Chat Noir and I should come with you,” Ladybug said. “I know we’re not part of your police investigation, but we need to know what we’re up against as much as you do.”

Chief Raincomprix nodded. “Normally, civilians don’t have a place in police business, but I guess you two aren’t really civilians. All right, we can compare notes.”

“Meet me at the station in fifteen minutes,” Ladybug said to Chat once they were alone.

“I’ll be there,” Chat said, turning to take off in the opposite direction as her.

“And Chat—”

“Yeah, we’ll talk later. I told you, I’m not going anywhere.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but a pang of guilt at the way he said it, so dismissive, held
“Matilda Moretz,” said a curvaceous, brunette woman in what looked to Ladybug like a white hazmat suit sans helmet. “A.k.a., Fashionista. According to her medical file, she’s employed as a supermodel with Agreste Fashion. I’m guessing from her fancy dress she and the others were all part of some kind of fashion show today?”

“That’s right,” Chat answered before Ladybug had the chance. “Are they going to be okay?”

“Miss Moretz is alive, though barely.” The woman, clearly a doctor of some sort, looked at Chat through her thick safety goggles. “I’m told you used some kind of, ah, magic on her? To stop the coral growths.”

Ladybug could not really blame her. Miraculous had no place in the realm of science, just as she suspected whatever was causing these coral murders had more of a magical than a scientific explanation. She let Chat explain the rudimentary basics of his destructive power and what he’d done.

“I just wanted to destroy the coral, not the pin,” Chat explained to the woman—Doctor Rochelle Devereux—and her team.

Ladybug looked up from where she was standing examining one of the other comatose supermodels. “What did you just say?”

Chat met her gaze across the examination table. “I only thought about destroying the coral growths, not the pin. And it worked.”

They looked at each other for a moment as Ladybug understood what he was trying to tell her. Perhaps Chat’s powers had evolved to counter their enemy’s strengths, just as hers had.

“And you’re okay,” Ladybug said, more question than statement.

He took her meaning and put a hand over his side, where Fashionista’s coral had pierced him. “I destroyed all her coral,” he said.

He hadn’t turned into a coralized zombie, so Ladybug supposed it must be true. Dr. Devereux was less concerned with their conversation as she returned to her monitoring equipment. Chief Raincomprix came down the stairs with a couple officers in tow, spotted the two heroes, and waved them over. He was examining the rose pin, along with an older Mexican man with an iPad and a look of supreme consternation on his pinched face. Ladybug soon learned that the man, Antonio ‘Tony’ Lopez, was a rather famous professor of marine biology and oceanography.

“So, Professor Lopez, what can you tell us about this pin?” Chief Raincomprix said.
Lopez spoke French with a thick Spanish accent, but he spoke with the confidence of familiarity. “Difficult to say. Preliminary tests confirm it is like coral.”

“Like coral?” Ladybug asked. “You mean, it’s not?”

Lopez frowned deeply. “I will say it simply, for you to understand. This sample here,” he tapped the sterile glass container holding the rose pin, “and that coral there,” he indicated the nearest coralized victim, still covered in branches of the mutant coral, “are the same organism. But this is not possible.”

“The same organism, as in, they’re the same continuous growth?” Chat said, his frown matching Lopez’s.

“You see? Not possible. I accept for the sake of argument that this sample here is the source.” Lopez wiggled his fingers from the pin to the sleeping victims, as if to imitate the flow of magic. “But biology is not magic. I cannot explain how it works, yet.”

“All right, well let’s say we agree that it’s all one organism, like you said,” Chief Raincomprix said. “How does it spread? How do we kill it? I’ve got five people still growing the stuff over there.”

“This answer will take time. Dr. Devereux is examining patient zero now, yes?”

“Matilda Moretz,” Ladybug said a little more harshly than she meant to. “She has a name.”

Lopez nodded dispassionately. “Yes, her. I am thinking all answers lie with her. Dr. Devereux is a virologist; she will discover the root of this cancer, I am certain.”

A cancer.

Ladybug shivered at the insidious word. She recalled Nino’s cartoonish comparison of the coral to a zombie virus and wondered briefly if he hadn’t been close to the mark, after all. And if so, how the hell were they going to save those afflicted? Even purifying the pin hadn’t reversed the damage. If these brilliant minds Chief Raincomprix had working on a solution couldn’t figure it out, what chance did she and Chat stand?

Which reminded her. “Chief Raincomprix,” she said when the three of them backed up to give Lopez and his team their space to continue to run tests on the rose pin, “since when does the Municipal Police employ specialists like Professor Lopez and Dr. Devereux?”

Chief Raincomprix puffed up. He was a big man, but he had a face Ladybug wanted to trust, an honest face. “As a matter of fact, our department received a sizable donation specifically to fund the investigation into the coral murders.”

“Wow, that’s…really incredible,” Ladybug said.

“Incredibly expensive,” Chat said. “And lucky.”

“Luck’s got nothing to do with it. Gabriel Agreste set it all up. He and I go way back, and now that he’s back in Paris, he reached out to me personally wanting to help with the investigation in any way he could.” Chief Raincomprix put a hand each on Ladybug’s and Chat’s shoulders. “Between the two of you and my team here, we’re going to get to the bottom of this, mark my words.”

Gabriel Agreste? Ladybug was surprised to hear his name in this context, and not unpleasantly so. The man had money, true enough, though he was not famous for his philanthropy. Still, if he wanted to help by providing the police more resources to fight against the coral murders, she would not stand in the way.
Beside her, Chat had gone as rigid as his extending staff. “Gabriel Agreste?” he said casually, almost too casually from the way his cat eyes had narrowed to dangerous slits. “He’s responsible for all this?”

Chief Raincomprix nodded. “That’s right. He used his connections to bring in Professor Lopez and Dr. Devereux and their teams especially for the investigation. Well, see for yourself. No way my M.E.s could handle this on their own, I’m sorry to say.”

“I see,” Chat said. He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

Ladybug had half a mind to ask Chat was his deal was when a lab tech accidentally bumped in to her trying to get by. The basement was not a small room, but between the specialist teams and all the coralized victims spread out around the space, there was little room to maneuver.

“I think we may be in the way,” Ladybug said, feeling claustrophobic. “Chief Raincomprix, thank you for keeping us in the loop. If you could let us know as soon as your team discovers anything—”

“You’ll be the first to know,” he agreed readily. “Actually, how do I contact you?”

Ladybug considered. “The flag pole. Raise a red flag with a spot light so it’s visible. It’s tall enough to see from across the city. We’ll be watching.”

He nodded, though he looked skeptical that they would actually be able to see it. “All right, I suppose that could work for now.”

“At least until you can get funding for a bat signal,” Chat quipped. “Or, rather, a bug signal.”

Ladybug took him by the elbow. “Okay, I think we’ve overstayed our welcome. Let’s get out of the chief’s hair.”

They headed back upstairs to the main station floor to leave. Neither of them noticed the small peacock feather embedded in a crack in the high corner of the basement lab, its dark eye swiveling to watch them go.

Ladybug and Chat Noir raced across the rooftops to their familiar haunt: the Eiffel Tower. It was late, and the tower was bright for the evening, as usual. Paris reflected its light below, the people continuing on with their lives in spite of Fashionista’s murderous antics earlier. How nice for them to be able to forget and move on so long as tragedy did not affect them. Ladybug almost wished for their ignorant bliss. Almost.

“Are you really okay?” Ladybug demanded of Chat once they had settled at their usual perch halfway up the tower. She approached him and ran a hand over his middle without waiting for permission.

“Like it never happened,” he said, placing his hand gently over hers. “I’m all right, Ladybug, I promise.”

She searched his gaze for any hint of exaggeration, but found none. “Good, then I won’t feel as bad telling you how incredibly stupid you were today.”

He winced. “Yeah, okay, I guess I deserve that—”
“You could have *died*, Chat! What were you trying to prove, anyway?”

“I wasn’t trying to prove anything! I just—you were busy with the other coralized victims, and I saw an opening.” He showed her his right hand. “Besides, I had my Cataclysm.”

“Which you *did not know* would work that way,” Ladybug snapped. “Chat, you could have killed Matilda, all her victims, and *yourself*. Do you even understand how messed up that is?”

He looked like he wanted to argue, but his ears drooped in shame and he averted his gaze. “I’m sorry, I just…”

“Just *what*?”

“I just wanted to be useful to you, okay?” He ran his claws through his messy hair and gritted his teeth. “I wanted to do my part to help you.”

Ladybug was taken aback. “Is that what you think? That you’re not useful to me?”

He grimaced. “I was there for our last tango. We weren’t exactly in sync, and look how that ended.”

She stared at him. Alya had said something similar to Marinette at their dinner party the other night, but Ladybug had not considered that Chat may have picked up on the same problem and been letting it get to him. She sighed. “Chat, of course you’re useful to me. Honestly, it was me who was practically useless the last time. My yo-yo snapped five minutes in to the fight. I would’ve been coralized if you hadn’t shown up when you did.”

He looked up at her cautiously. “You seemed pretty sturdy this time around.”

“Yeah.” She shifted in her suit, muscles flexing against the super-hard exoskeleton that coated her from head to toe. “Tikki said my suit changed to suit our new coral enemies.”

Chat snorted. “Plagg didn’t mention anything. What a surprise.”

“Well, we know now. And it’s not that I’m upset with how today went. In fact, I don’t think it could’ve gone better if we’d planned it. Just… Just talk to me, okay? Please, don’t try to take everything on by yourself. We’re supposed to be a team. Partners. You can lean on me.”

He stepped closer, the light of hope in his eyes so nostalgic that Ladybug almost forgot they were not fourteen anymore. “Does this mean you’re not mad at me anymore?”

Ladybug bit her lip. “Of course I’m not mad at you. Look, Chat, I’ve…been thinking. About what you said, about giving you another chance.” She held up her hand to silence him when he tried to interrupt her. “I think I was too harsh with you before. Of course you deserve another chance. I’m sorry that I made you doubt that at all, that wasn’t right.”

“My lady,” he said, unable to hide his sheer delight. He took her by the elbows and squeezed affectionately.

Ladybug gently pulled out of his grasp, trying to ignore the flash of hurt in his eyes at her small rejection. “I’m really happy you’re back, Chat. And I meant what I said about us being partners. But I still…” She hugged herself, hating this wretched feeling in her belly. “I just need a little more time.”

He schooled his expression, and Ladybug winced. She did not like how easy that had been, like he’d had practice bottling up his feelings. What had happened to him these past years? She tried to remember what Fu had told her, tried to remember that under the mask, Chat was as human as she
was. He didn’t deserve her rejection.

“That doesn’t mean I’m not trying,” Ladybug added. “I’m sorry, Chat, I… I know you’re hurting as much as I am. It wasn’t fair of me to put it all on you. I just need some time to get used to this again. To get used to us. Is that okay?”

“It’s not like I have a choice.” He sighed. “No, that came out wrong. I mean, it’s okay. I get it. I don’t have to be happy about it, but I get it.”

She nodded and drew closer. “Thank you. You don’t know how much that means to me.”

He spared her a self-deprecating smile. “Anything for you, Bugaboo.”

Despite herself, Ladybug returned his smile. It felt so good to talk to Chat Noir after all this time. And even though she could not shake the hesitance she felt around him no matter how much he reminded her of the boy she’d once known, she wanted to get to know the man he’d become, scars and all. Fu was right—he’d come back to her. Only the real Chat Noir would have done that, no matter how hard it must have been for him.

“All this time, and you’re still using the same silly nicknames, Kitty Cat?” she said.

Chat’s smile twisted to a smirk that reminded her so much of the boy he once was, it hurt. “I didn’t know my lady expected more variety. You’ve become rather high maintenance over the years, haven’t you?”

Ladybug swatted his chest playfully. “Maybe a little.”

They shared a companionable silence then and turned to admire the city lights. Ladybug was reluctant to break it, but she knew she should. Chat deserved to know what Fu and Wayzz had divulged about the previous wielders of the Black Cat and Ladybug Miraculous.

“Hey, Chat, there’s something I need to tell you. You’re not going to like it, but you need to hear it all the same.”

He looked up at her from where he sat with one leg dangling over the edge of the rafters. “Uh-oh, that doesn’t sound good.”

His smile fell when he saw her watching him with a serious look on her face.

“What is it?”

Ladybug took a deep breath. “It’s about our predecessors. The previous Ladybug and Chat Noir.” She told him the brief history Wayzz, Tikki, and Fu had shared with her concerning Felix, Bridgette, and their tragic end, as well as Hawk Moth’s involvement. Chat listened, eerily quiet.

“I won’t lie to you,” Ladybug said. “Hearing that story is part of the reason why I wanted to apologize to you tonight for the way I treated you before. But that doesn’t mean I think what happened to Felix and Bridgette has anything to do with us,” she added quickly. “They were different people. I just… Wayzz seemed to think we should know about them as kind of a cautionary tale, considering what we’ve already been through—”

“How long?” Chat interrupted.

“How—How long, what?”
“How long have you known about the Guardian?” There was an edge to his tone that she did not like. “How long have you known about someone who knows our secret identities, that we can actually talk to about everything?”

That was what he was upset about? “I… Since I got my Miraculous. Chat, I’m sorry, I thought you knew? Master Fu is the person who gave you your Miraculous. I just assumed…”

“Well, you assumed wrong,” Chat snapped, all traces of his good mood evaporated. “How could you keep this from me?”

“I didn’t keep it from you, I honestly thought you knew. I’m sorry.”

There was a tense pause as he seemed to war with himself. “Fine,” he said at length. “It’s fine. Just tell me where to find this Master Fu.”

Chat remained short with her even after she told him where to find Fu, and Ladybug sensed that their little rendezvous was at an end. He only grunted his assent when she offered to talk to him about the revelations concerning Felix, Bridgette, and Hawk Moth’s past, bafflingly uninterested. So they went their separate ways, and Ladybug couldn’t help but wonder if she’d made things worse all over again.

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Marinette was a miracle-worker, a genius. She’d never felt more superhuman even while she was Ladybug. She had finished Jessika’s gown for her party, and without a moment to spare. Manon had just picked it up from the dry cleaner’s when Jessika and her bodyguard, Yuki, showed up for the final fitting on Saturday morning. She was delighted with how it had turned out, and Marinette was delighted that her measurements had proven accurate—no further alterations were needed.

“Marinette, how can I ever thank you for this masterpiece? Oh! I will be the belle of the ball in this tonight!” Jessika gushed as she admired her reflection in the mirror and twirled. The short train whispered about her ankles as it flared.

“I’m just happy that you’re happy,” Marinette said with a smile. And that your generous payment came through.

“I am. I cannot wait to show off your hard work tonight. Everyone will be asking me where I found such an exquisite gown… Oh, of course! Marinette, you should come to the party tonight!”

“Oh, um? That’s really nice of you, but—”

“I insist! I cannot properly show off my new gown without the creator herself there to take proper credit. And you wouldn’t deprive my friends of their own chance to commission your work, would you?”

The gears began to turn in Marinette’s head as she considered that. Manon gave her an excited thumbs from the doorway to her design studio, and Marinette discreetly shooed her off.

I could meet some high profile actors and producers, the kinds of people who want to be seen wearing something nobody else has…

Not many people had Marinette originals in those circles. The exposure could open up a lot of previously closed doors. She could already hear Alphonse’s voice in her head yelling at her to quit being so modest and take the opportunity before it disappeared.
“Well, I do love parties, and I’m not busy tonight,” Marinette said.

Jessika lit up like Christmas morning. ‘Fantastic! I’ll put your name on the guest list. Oh, of course you must bring a date. Surely a pretty girl like yourself has a boyfriend, a fiancé perhaps?’

Marinette flushed. “Oh, no! I-I mean, I don’t have anybody like that, but…”

She thought of Adrien and his pretty blushes. Adrien in his black leather jacket. Adrien leaning across the table toward her, his fingers in her hair. She flushed harder, and Jessika giggled like a gossiping school girl, an image which oddly suited her girlish demeanor.

“Of course, I understand,” she said knowingly. “All the same, I look forward to seeing you and your, ah, not-a-boyfriend tonight.”

She soon left with Yuki, and Marinette had one of her staff prepare the dress for same day delivery to Jessika’s apartment. While Marinette finished up some work and thought about her suddenly busy Saturday night—what the hell was she going to wear?—Manon invaded her studio, laptop open to the Ladyblog page, and wriggled her way onto Marinette’s chair.

“Hey, I’m pretty sure this is a safety hazard,” Marinette said as she tried not to fall out of the chair.

“Shh, you have to watch this. My video of Ladybug and Chat Noir fighting that coralized supermodel the other day made it on to the Ladyblog! Look how many hits it has!” Manon said.

Marinette suppressed a groan. She’d been deliberately avoiding the Ladyblog and all mentions of Ladybug and Chat Noir’s latest appearance. Unfortunately, the videos of them—especially in the aftermath of the fight—had gone viral in a matter of hours after they were posted to Youtube and the Ladyblog, among other places. And now, the Internet was fangirling over their OTP becoming canon.

“Manon, I don’t really care about this,” Marinette said as Manon played the video for her anyway.

“Oh please, everybody cares about this. Look at that! Look how Ladybug just swooped in and swept Chat away when she saw that he was hurt.” She made a squeeing sound that curdled Marinette’s blood. “Oh my god, this is my favorite part—the hug. No, it’s more than a hug. Look how she’s basically climbing him—”

“She was not climbing him!” Marinette said, horrified.

To be fair, from the shaky cell phone video, it did kind of look like Ladybug had become part vine and curled her way around Chat Noir. Marinette repressed another groan—what the hell had she been thinking embracing him like that in front of so many people?

Oh, right, I thought he was dying.

Marinette really hoped there was a free open bar at Jessika’s party tonight.

“It’s just so beautiful,” Manon said, about to fake cry. “Look how happy Chat Noir looks. I swear, all he’s ever wanted is Ladybug’s love. He’s so pure and good.”

“What? Let me see that.” Marinette shoved Manon out of the way so she could see better. Chat was gripping Ladybug’s forearms and looking at her with the most endearing expression that reminded her so much of the boy he used to be. Except this was not a boy, but a man grown. And that was not the infatuation of puppy love in his cat eyes, but something more tranquil, more sincere. A genuine affection for Ladybug’s concern.
Marinette bit her tongue and pushed the computer away. This was ridiculous. Chat Noir had been infatuated with Ladybug in their youth, everybody knew that, but that had been fourteen years ago. They’d grown up, grown apart. He couldn’t possibly still—

“Well, I ship them,” Manon said. “And so do half the Ladybloggers.”

Marinette frowned. “What about the other half?”

Manon shrugged. “The other half is obviously blind.”

*Or they saw us arguing on the Eiffel Tower and know this whole thing is a farce.*

That thought put a damper on her mood, and Marinette rose from the chair. “Listen, Manon, I still have some work to get done. I was going to put it off, but apparently now I’m going to Jessika’s premiere party—”

“Well, I’m your intern!”

“The intern who convinced me to take her to that Agreste Fashion show where a coralized victim showed up and attacked everybody. Don’t think I didn’t see you jumping into the action and endangering yourself. I doubt Ladybug was very happy with you.”

“Oh, please. I bought Ladybug some precious time to save her not-so-secret cat lover. My presence was invaluable, obviously.”

Marinette’s eye twitched. *Cat lover?*

“…Anyway, the answer is no. One event per week is more than enough.”

“Come on, don’t be like that. It’s not like you have anybody else you’re already taking!”

“Sure I do.”

“Oh, yeah? Who? And it’s not Alya ‘cause I know she’s out of town this weekend on assignment.”

“No, it’s not Alya,” Marinette hedged.

“Well?”

“It’s, um… It’s—”

“You don’t have anyone, do you?”

Marinette crossed her arms, baffled by how a nineteen-year-old could back her in to such a corner. “I do, for your information.”

“Who?” Manon rose and got in her face, daring her to lie.

Marinette swallowed. “Well, it’s…”

“Yeah?”

“I-I was just about to call him to confirm!”
Manon watched her, nonplussed. “Really. Right now?”

“Yup! Right now…”

“Okay, then go on.”

Was that a smile on Manon’s face? Was she **enjoying** this?

“I want to know about this guy who’s apparently higher on your list of priorities than your favorite intern,” Manon pressed.

“**Fine,**” Marinette huffed, pulling out her phone and scrolling through her contacts. “Here’s his number.”

“Great, I hope he picks up.”

Marinette got the eerie sensation that Manon was enjoying this way more than she should have been, but the younger girl kept her expression carefully schooled and casual. Marinette tapped the green phone icon on her touch screen with a shaking finger and pressed the phone to her ear. On the fifth ring, the line connected.

“**Marinette?**”

“Hi, Adrien!” Marinette said a little too cheerfully. “Hey, um, how’s it going?”

Manon made a face. “Wait, the DTF guy? With the winky-face emoji?”

Marinette covered the phone’s microphone and glared daggers at Manon. “Shut. **Up.**”

There was muffled talking on the other line, as though he was in the middle of a hushed conversation with somebody else.

“Um, is this a bad time?” she asked.

“No, no it’s perfect. **Your timing couldn’t be better.**” Adrien sounded a little terse.

“Are you sure? I could call back…”

“No, really!” She heard a door close, some shuffling. “Hey, please don’t hang up. I’m here, I’m all yours. What’s up?”

Marinette’s heart fluttered at his choice of words, feeling very much the insecure fourteen-year-old for a moment there. She cleared her throat to mask her nervousness—**why am I nervous? It’s just Adrien!**—and switched the phone to her other ear.

“Oh, great!” She tried to sound calm and sane and totally not infatuated with her high school crush. “Well, there’s this thing I got invited to tonight. It’s really last minute, and I’m sure you have a million other things to do—”

“When and where?”

Manon waggled her eyebrows suggestively, and Marinette bit back a smile. “I haven’t even told you what it is yet.”

“So?”
“So I could be dragging you over to clean my parents’ industrial-sized oven with nothing but a toothbrush, and you’d be none the wiser.”

“Marinette, I’d clean that oven out with my tongue as long as I got to spend time with you.”

“Oh come on, I’m sure we could put your tongue to better use elsewhere,” Marinette said before she could stop herself.

Manon looked absolutely wicked with delight, and Marinette realized that yes, she had actually said that out loud. In real life. Shit. Her shame went straight to her cheeks and painted them Ladybug-red.

On the other end of the line, Adrien chuckled darkly. “What did you have in mind?” he purred.

And that was when Marinette a) temporarily lost her sanity imagining him saying her name in that voice, and b) manhandled Manon out the door and locked it. She sank to the floor by the door, phone pressed between her cheek and shoulder, and hugged her knees.

“What was that?” Adrien asked.

“S-Sorry,” Marinette said. “Nosy intern… So anyway! About tonight, it’s a premiere party, actually. I designed the lead actress’s dress, she invited me, it’s a whole thing.”

“I see. Damn, so no ovens for me to lick clean?”

Marinette grinned. “No, sorry to smash all your hopes and dreams.”

“I’m not sure how I’ll go on now that you’ve crushed them.”

“Yes, I’m terrible, I know.”

“You are. I was so looking forward to putting my tongue to good use for you, Princess.”

Marinette’s throat went dry, and the next sound to come out of her mouth was a pitiful squeak. Thankfully, Adrien did not seem to hear.

“…Princess?” she managed not to sound completely pathetic.

“It’s a party, and knowing you, you’ll look the part better than any of those movie stars.”

Marinette’s smile was something stunning, and it was a damn shame he wasn’t around to see it. How could Adrien could go from borderline tempting her with phone sex to showering her with genuine affection? She was suddenly very much looking forward to seeing him tonight—it had been nearly a week since the dinner party at Alya and Nino’s.

“Then it’s a date,” she said, a little breathless.

“It is. Text me the details. I’ll pick you up.”

A real date. With Adrien Agreste. He would pick her up. Marinette could have died right there.

“I can’t wait,” she said, meaning it.

“Me, too. See you tonight, Princess.”

She bit back her silly grin at that nickname. “See you.”
She sat there just staring at her phone for a few minutes after they’d hung up in a dreamy, romantic daze. Marinette had had her share of boyfriends and flings in her day, some far more satisfying than others. But there was something about Adrien that made her feel like she could fly, like she was fourteen again in the best way possible—young and free and full of fragile, beautiful hope. More than anything, there was possibility with him like there had never been with the others before him.

*After him. They all came after him.*

He had been the boy who made her like boys. And now he was dropping everything just to spend time with her, just because she’d asked. From the way he’d been on the phone, she cautiously hoped they’d be doing more than simply spending time together tonight. The thought made her smile wider as warmth filled her chest. She hugged her phone close and let herself bask in that precious feeling, for just a few moments unafraid of the very real possibility that she was perilously close to falling for him all over again.

“Marinette! I know you’re still in there, open up! What did DTF Adrien say?” Manon pounded on the door.

“He said yes!”

“Damnit! Now I have to be happy for you, don’t I?”

Marinette laughed herself silly, her mood soaring. If anybody had asked her, she could not have told them with any certainty that she’d ever felt happier in all her life.

Adrien tossed his phone on the passenger seat of his black Jaguar F-Type and started the engine. He cast a last glance at Agreste Mansion and his father watching him from the window of his study, his shadow long and dark and disappointed. Adrien’s fleeting good mood soured at the sight of him, and he almost gave in to the juvenile impulse to flip him off. But he swallowed it—Gabriel Agreste would not get a second more of his attention today, thank you very much—and pulled out of the roundabout courtyard onto the streets of Paris.

Alone and without an audience, Plagg phased out of Adrien’s jacket pocket and plopped down on the plush passenger seat with a dramatic yawn. “Yeesh, glad that’s over.”

“You and me both,” Adrien said darkly as he wove through the morning traffic on his way to the office. The detour to his father’s home had already cost him an hour, and now he was stuck in the middle of rush hour. Just great.

Plagg peered at him askance, his expression unreadable. “You really hate that guy, don’t you?”

Adrien scoffed. “He’s my father.”

“What’s your point?”

Adrien opened his mouth to argue, but thought better of it. What was the point? He’d learned long ago that Plagg had Opinions and he stuck to them like fucking fly paper. For an ancient, all powerful cat deity, he was surprisingly ignorant on the nuances of familial dynamics.

“I don’t hate him,” Adrien said at length. “He’s my father.”

Plagg rolled his eyes. “You’re such a Dutiful Princess, Adrien.”
“And you spend way too much time on TV Tropes.”

Plagg shrugged. He wasn’t about to deny it. Ask him, and Plagg would tell you humans were nothing but a series of cliches and tropes repeated over and over and over again, ad infinitum. They never learned from the past, never cared to change, and always fell back on stereotypes and generalizations. As far as Plagg was concerned, TV Tropes was the best-kept record for understanding true human culture.

“You know, it’s okay to hate him a little,” Plagg said offhandedly, like he wasn’t really paying attention. “Just because he impregnated your mom back in the day, doesn’t mean you owe him anything.”

Adrien bristled at Plagg’s typically crass brand of brutal honesty. Still, he supposed he had a point, sort of.

“I don’t hate him,” Adrien repeated, more for his own edification than for Plagg’s. “I just don’t understand him. I never have.”

He hadn’t known what to expect when confronting his father about his involvement with the police’s investigation into the coral murders. He may have had Chief Raincomprix and even Ladybug fooled, but Adrien knew his father—Gabriel never offered his checkbook with one hand without offering the sharp end of a sword with the other. He wanted something for funding the police, of that Adrien was dead certain. And he was pretty sure it had everything to do with Gabriel knowing Adrien was Chat Noir.

“If you insist on running around while a murderer is out there hunting you, then you leave me no choice,” Gabriel had said after Adrien confronted him and all but physically forced him to explain himself.

“What I do is none of your goddamned business,” Adrien had said.

“You made it my business when you decided to throw your life away for that woman, again!”

Adrien hissed and slammed on the breaks, nearly rear-ending the car in front of him. Plagg swore as he was jostled in the passenger seat and shot Adrien a scathing glare.

“Hey, watch the road, Drama Queen.”

“I thought I was a Dutiful Princess,” Adrien said.

“Depends on how bratty you’re being.” Plagg crossed his little paws and peered up at Adrien. “So spit it out, already.”

“Spit what out?”

“Your feelings or whatever. Come on, let’s just get it over with so I can get to my nap. I don’t have all day.”

“Wow. Has anybody ever told you you have a real way with words?”

“Kid, please. I’m the pinnacle of charm. I’m a cat.”

Adrien didn’t see the logic there, but decided it was best not to argue. He crept along at a snail’s pace with the traffic. Well, there was nothing better to do, he supposed.
“I know he’s genuinely worried about me,” Adrien said softly. “But he’s acting like I’m still a kid under his control. It’s like he doesn’t trust me to make my own decisions.”

Plagg rolled his eyes. “Yeah, wow, imagine that. A controlling, emotionally abusive father having trouble accepting his only son’s independence. I never saw that one coming.”

“Don’t call him that,” Adrien said, but it came out sounding way more pathetic than he’d intended. “He’s gotten much better.”

“Adrien, he found out your secret, moved you halfway across the world just to get you away from Ladybug, and he’s still treating you like a fragile trophy instead of his son. But sure, yeah, okay, I guess he doesn’t lock you in your room anymore. Real father of the year, right there.”

“Just shut up about it,” Adrien snapped. He ran a hand through his hair, frustrated. “I get it, okay? I know what he is, what he’s done. Mom left, and it broke him. It broke us both.”

Plagg sighed and flopped on his back, defeated. “Even now, you’re still making excuses for him.”

Adrien bared his teeth. “I know he’s a shitty father. Are you happy now? I’m fucked up, and no matter how hard I try, one day I’ll end up just like him. It’s the oldest trope in the book.”

Plagg was suddenly right in front of his face, and Adrien slammed on the brakes. “Stop that. Right now.”

Adrien was so taken aback at Plagg’s sudden ferocity that he forgot he was staring down a being that could fit in his palm. No, this was Plagg the Pestilent, God of Destruction and Chaos, and he would be heard.

“You’re not fucked up, and you’re nothing like him. Don’t confuse destruction with self-destruction. I chose you, Adrien, not because you embody destruction, but because you were made to survive it. Your resilience gives you the power to wield me without losing yourself in the process. You’re more worthy of me than almost any human I’ve ever chosen before you.”

Adrien was truly at a loss for words as he stared at Plagg. He was pretty sure he had never, ever heard Plagg praise him. And all he could do was stare dumbly.

Cars honked behind him, and Adrien jumped, the moment passed. He stepped on the gas and merged with traffic once more, while Plagg returned to the passenger seat, subdued. They drove in silence for a few blocks, but it wasn’t uncomfortable so much as contemplative. As was their custom, Adrien was the first to break it.

“Do you really have that much faith in me?” he asked softly. “Even… What I did to Ladybug…?”

“Yes,” Plagg said flatly.

“Why?”

Plagg took his time answering. So much time, in fact, that Adrien wasn’t sure he would respond at first. “Because I learned from my mistake. I got it right this time.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you just missed the turn for your office. Where are you dragging me to now? There better be cheese waiting.”
Shit, Plagg was right, he’d missed the exit and now he was driving uptown. It would take forever to loop back around in this traffic. It was Saturday, though, and no one would miss him if he just worked remotely from his apartment. A part of him was tempted to drive off, as far as he could get on a three-quarter tank of gas, just leave it all behind.

But then he remembered Marinette. They had a date tonight. He was picking her up. The thought of her lifted his spirits, there was no doubt about it, but thinking of her also meant thinking of Ladybug, and the secrets she’d kept from him.

All this time, there was a person who knew everything about his double life, someone he could have talked to in his times of need, someone whose very job was supposed to be to help him. And she’d never mentioned it until now. She said she thought he’d known, but still he couldn’t help but hold it against her. Why had she never even mentioned the Guardian until now? Surely he would have remembered if she had before.

“Helloooo, anybody home?” Plagg said. “Why do you suddenly look constipated?”

Adrien glared at Plagg. “There’s cheese in the glove compartment. If I let you have it, will you be quiet for—”

Plagg had phased through the glove compartment before Adrien could finish talking. Over the hum of the engine, Adrien could hear him chewing on a block of gooey brie, completely lost to the world. Adrien leaned back in his seat, resigned.

Marinette, he told himself. Think about Marinette.

She was looking forward to seeing him tonight. She liked Adrien, and he wanted to keep it that way for as long as he could. Because every time he saw her, every time she smiled, every time she touched him, whether in or out of the mask, he knew he was in mortal danger of falling for her all over again. Maybe it was selfish, maybe even a little manipulative, but he wasn’t a saint. He spent his days in the company of the avatar of ruin and mayhem—who could blame him?

He could sweep her off her feet, and she’d let him. He could spoil her, adore her, ravish her, and she’d let him. She liked Adrien.

But Adrien was a lie.

He stepped on the gas as he pulled out of the busy, uptown traffic on to wider, quieter streets leading out of the city. Maybe it was a lie, but what did that matter? If she was happy? Why should he take that from her? From both of them? Even if Ladybug didn’t trust Chat Noir, why couldn’t Marinette trust Adrien?

“Just a little longer,” he promised himself, picking up speed. Just let me stay with her a little longer, please.

Hadn’t he waited long enough for this? Just for a taste of what could have been, what could be. Because it wouldn’t last, and one day soon, he would have to tell her the truth. He would lose her all over again.

But not yet. Just for a little while, she could be his.

Just for a little while, let me be hers.

Chapter End Notes
Next time: Adrinette and Lukloe try their best to survive the premiere party (for real this time). Also maybe some Plot, I don’t know, who needs pacing when we have Even More Character Development.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

In which blonds have more fun, until they don’t.

Chapter Notes

You guys, this chapter is 15K words—after splitting it from the last one. What is sanity?

WARNING: This chapter contains mature sexual content. Please read at your own discretion. I’ve marked the short section with ♦ symbol, so you can easily skip it if you prefer. Otherwise, enjoy sinners.

Adrien parked his Jaguar at the curb outside Marinette’s apartment uptown and texted her to let her know he was outside. In the end, he’d driven all the way to the Bois du Boulogne, spent a blissful half hour there enjoying the silence of nature, and then had to go back to his apartment to deal with a sudden work emergency. It had been a trying day, and he’d only barely had time to shower, change, and make it to Marinette’s on time. His dark suit was sleekly trimmed, and he knew he wore it well. Even so, he hoped he’d get a reaction from Marinette all the same when she saw him dressed to impress. Adrien was more than a little vain, a hazard of the supermodel life, and yes, okay, he wanted to impress Marinette. What was the harm in that?

She came down five minutes later, and Adrien pushed off from his perch against his car to greet her. He stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of her, and suddenly forgot all about his vanity. She wore a long winter coat, but underneath he could see a long-sleeved, fuchsia, body con dress that clung to her curves and made her look like some kind of fay nymph. Her hair was loose and styled wavy, framing her face. Adrien’s gaze lingered on her plunging neckline, and he wondered seriously if she was trying to murder him.

“Hi,” she said, flushed from the chill but smiling as brightly as her dress.

Adrien opened his mouth to respond like the sentient human being he was supposed to be, but all that came out was a pathetic squeaking sound. Marinette took his reaction the wrong way, and her smile fell.

“Adrien? Are you okay?” She reached for him, concerned.

Adrien snatched her wrist before she could touch him, because she was going for his face, and if she touched him like that, he would lose whatever shred of self-control that remained to him, push her up against the wall, and have his way with her right there.

“No, Marinette, I’m not,” he said, his voice hoarse. “Your dress…”

She retracted her hand and blinked at him, self-conscious. “Oh, um, I guess the color’s a little much
“It’s gorgeous,” he said before she could get the wrong idea. “You’re gorgeous. I just wasn’t prepared for…”

His gaze fell to her loose hair, and a wicked part of him wondered if she’d worn it down just so he could run his fingers through it. He suddenly longed to do just that. She flushed as he stepped closer, and he regained some of his confidence with a promising smile.

“Forgive me,” he said. “It’s not often I’m rendered speechless.”

Her lips parted in surprise as she looked up at him, and fuck, he was trying, okay? But if she kept looking at him like that, he wouldn’t be able to resist her for much longer. Thankfully, she soon recovered, but her blush remained.

“Well, as nice as that is, I much prefer the sound of your voice,” she said.

He couldn’t help the silly grin that spread across his face. “Your wish is my command.”

She matched his smile, and they stood together on the sidewalk grinning at each other like a pair of smitten idiots. Until Marinette shivered a little from the cold, and he realized she must be uncomfortable standing outside in heels and bare legs despite her heavy, woolen coat.

“Here,” he said, opening the passenger door for her. “Your chariot awaits.”

Marinette laughed. “Are you always this corny?”

“You bring it out of me.”

He checked that she was safely seated, closed the door, and headed for the driver’s seat. She was busy running her hands over the expensive black leather interior of the two-seater, luxury sports car when he started up the engine.

She looked so pleased, so excited, and his stupid, romantic heart soared at the sight. That was his doing, her joy. Feeling cocky, Adrien reached across her and tugged her seatbelt over her shoulder. He could smell her perfume so close to her neck and allowed himself a satisfied smirk when he felt her tense at his sudden proximity.

“Ready, Princess?” he whispered close enough to taste her if he dared.

“Yes,” she said.

Yes.

His favorite word. He could have listened to her say it over and over again, but no. This was not the time. He’d promised her a date, a real date, and he was going to deliver. His baser instincts could wait. He snapped the seatbelt in place, and soon they were off.

Chloe smoothed the thick, flared skirt of her sapphire party dress, her practiced eye searching for wrinkles she knew were not there. Her hair was twisted in a rope-like fishtail braid over her shoulder, her Miraculous comb tucked snugly behind her ear. Pollen was vibrating happily, off the walls excited by the prospect of a party.
“Where is he? He’s late!” she complained.

“No, he’s not. And we’re meeting at the party, not here. I already told you that,” Chloe said, distracted as she fiddled with the clasp of a diamond choker.

“He should’ve been here by now,” Pollen insisted, deaf to Chloe’s reason. “Ooh, I can’t wait to see him! What do you think he’ll wear?”

“I don’t know, a suit?” He better wear a suit, and it better have been dry cleaned in the last five years.

Chloe bit her tongue at the thought and reminded herself to rein in her inner mean girl tonight. For his sake. And, you know, she was technically on the job. So what if Luka was also going to be there? It wasn’t like she was such a smitten fool that she’d let his presence distract her. Who was smitten? Not her. He was just some guy she sometimes had passionate, wild sex with. ‘Sometimes’ being almost every night for the past week and a half. Totally casual and not serious at all.

“A suit.” Pollen hovered and stared dreamily into space as she tried to picture it. She was doing that buzzing-purring thing again. “Mmm, yes… Hey, Honey Bee? What’s a suit?”

Chloe smirked. Oh, the great wisdom she could impart to this tiny, omnipotent bee god. Really, Pollen was in excellent hands with her. “It’s a magical outfit that makes hot men look even hotter.”

Pollen was practically salivating. Could bees salivate? Chloe wasn’t sure. “Really? Oooh, where is he?!?”

A part of Chloe wondered if she should feel a little jealous of Pollen’s affection. As skeptical as Chloe had been, after Pollen first ‘met’ Luka at the coffee shop date, she had instantly transformed into his number one fan girl (fan bee?). Chloe supposed that was better than if Pollen had disliked Luka, considering how much time she’d been spending with him lately, but still, it made her wonder. Could kwami love?

“Oh, what the hell,” she said, not liking that train of thought. Nothing about what she was doing with Luka came even remotely close to love of any sort. What an inappropriate thought. Maybe Pollen’s enthusiasm was affecting her. They were bonded, whatever that meant.

The doorbell startled them both, until Pollen took off in a black and yellow blur and Chloe felt a stroke coming on.

“Pollen! What are you doing?!”

“Someone’s at the door, Sweetness!”

“Yeah, which means you need to hide!”

Pollen stopped short, and her antennae fell dejectedly. “Oh…right. I can’t be seen.” She sniffled, and her big, compound eyes shone with unshed tears. “I-I guess I’ll just b-b-buzz off.”

Goddamnit.

Chloe was going soft, and there seemed to be nothing she could do to stop it. Silently, she offered Pollen her hand, and Pollen dutifully landed on her palm. Chloe planted a kiss on her head—forgiveness was easily earned with Pollen—and gently set her in the hidden pocket in her skirt before peering through the peep hole. She could just make out Luka’s profile over a bouquet of—oh for fuck’s sake, were those yellow roses?
Freshly annoyed that he’d come here instead of meeting her at the party as they’d previously agreed, Chloe opened the door ready to tell him to leave and let her finish getting ready for work when the sight of him paralyzed her to the spot.

He wore a suit, all right. Wore the shit out of it. He was dressed in tailored black from head to toe, save for a skinny, white tie. ‘Sleek’ was not a word she would have ever used to describe Luka. Moody, yes. Dark, absolutely. Edgy, sure—those frosted, teal tips were hard to miss, for better or worse (better). But tonight, he looked like Armani had gotten their hands on a J-Pop idol for how… put together he looked.

“Wow,” he said, more coherent than her at the moment as he drank in the sight of her. His dark eyes practically shimmered with unconcealed appreciation. “I know you don’t care to hear it, but you’re stunning, Chloe.” He held out the wrapped bouquet for her and smirked. “For you.”

And like a dumbass teenager, Chloe almost tripped over herself blithely accepting the offering. They smelled sweet. She didn’t even like flowers, but goddamnit she liked these. She liked his flowers. What was he doing to her?

“Chloe?” he said, stepping closer.

She swallowed the butterflies in her stomach at his proximity and clutched his flowers to her chest like a talisman. “You brushed your hair,” she blurted out.

He looked bemused and touched his styled hair. “Aw, you noticed?”

His teasing snapped her out of her stupor, and she swallowed hard. Steeling herself, she put on her best Disappointed Face. “Thanks for the flowers, but I thought we were meeting at the party.”

He shrugged, easily brushing off her brusqueness. “I couldn’t wait to see you.”

So honest, so easy. How did he do it? How did he make it look so effortless? Chloe was sure she had never met anyone so immune to self-conscious insecurity as Luka.

“Well,” she said, unable to hold on to her annoyance when he was looking at her so earnestly, “here I am.”

He chuckled and leaned an arm on her doorframe. “Relax. It’s just me.”

Pollen squirmed in her pocket, and Chloe pressed a hand to her skirt, hoping Luka hadn’t seen the weird movement. “I’m just, uh, gonna put these in water. Wait here.”

She felt his eyes on her back as she padded through her hotel apartment to the kitchen, grabbed a crystal vase from the cabinet, and filled it with water. Pollen zoomed out of her pocket and immediately buried herself in the yellow rose petals.

“I love them!” she gushed as she rolled around amongst the petals and shoved her face in their centers to inhale the subtly sweet scent. “I have to say, I was skeptical at first, but you picked a good drone, Honeycomb. So thoughtful, so loyal… Ah! I think I’m pollen for him!” She buzzed happily while Chloe transferred the flowers to the vase and set them on the island counter.

Chloe was about to comment on that particularly heinous bee pun when she heard footsteps approaching. Pollen magically phased out of sight amongst the rose petals, and Chloe whirled to find Luka coming toward her. Barefoot, he had nearly a head of height on her, a fact of which she was acutely aware when he backed her against the opposite counter and took her chin in hand.
“Sorry,” he said, a playful glint in his eyes that suggested he wasn’t sorry at all. “I don’t feel like waiting right now.”

He watched her silently, an unspoken question passing between them, and Chloe gave in to the temptation she’d had the minute she saw him to grab his tie and pull him down for a searing kiss. She could feel him smiling through his desire, could taste his joy when she opened her mouth for him, and it drove her half mad with power. This was her doing, her effect on him. Plenty of people had wanted her, but not like this. Not with such raw intensity of feeling, like every touch, every kiss was a little piece of himself he molded to her simply because he wanted to keep her, all of her, and he didn’t care that it made him vulnerable.

His hands found their way to her thighs, and he lifted her onto the black, granite kitchen counter. Chloe wrapped her bare legs around his middle and locked him in place. He hissed as she pulled him closer, and she felt him harden against her thigh. Immediately, his lips were on her neck and his hand found her breast, a thumb teasing her through the tight silk of her dress.

“Mm, Luka,” she gasped, raking her nails over back. “The party, I’m on the clock.” Her excuses sounded feeble even to her ears as she tightened her legs around him.

He laughed—god, she was really starting to love the sound of his unguarded laughter—and pressed a long, sensuous kiss to her neck. “Yeah, I can tell you’re in a big hurry to let me go.”

She opened her eyes and had half a mind to tell him off when he bit down on her earlobe without warning. Chloe forgot her own name for a blinding moment of pleasure and rocked her hips against him. He had the nerve to pull away then, and she couldn’t help the whine of protest at the loss of him. There was heat in his gaze as he watched her shudder against him, her fingers curled in his lapels and her lips parted. And something else she couldn’t name, something silky and soft that set her skin ablaze with something other than raw, carnal desire.

“Tell me what you want, Chloe.”

“I want you to put out or get out. I don’t have all night.”

A hand on her waist drew her impossibly closer, so that there was no question that he wanted to finish this as much as she did. She bit back a moan, and then instantly regretted it at the look in his eyes. He much preferred her unrestrained.

“Then say it,” he commanded, and the sound was liquid heat between her thighs.

Where had all her power gone? Right now, she didn’t care as she wrapped her fingers around his neck and surrendered the last of it. “I want you,” she said, the longing for him a physical ache. “Luka, fuck, I want—ah!”

His clever fingers hiked up her luxuriously flared skirt and stroked her, stoking the heat ever hotter. He slipped a finger inside her to the knuckle, and then another, and she writhed, panting and completely at his mercy.

“That’s my girl.”

Chloe’s whole body hummed in tune to the sound of his voice. He knew exactly what to say to make her melt—my girl.

Mine.
He watched her all the while, sleepy eyes half-lidded with a kind of carnal reverence and an arm around her waist to support her while he fucked her with his fingers. Until she couldn’t take it anymore, she was coming undone and couldn’t hold on to anything except him, except his stupidly pretty hair, except his soft lips once more on hers as she finally let go. He swallowed her pleasure greedily, stealing every last drop of her, and she happily gave it to him.

Chloe slowly came down from the high, barely able to catch her breath as Luka drew out their kisses and traced lazy circles in the small of her back. They were not the sensual kisses from before, but softer, more intimate, with no expectation of escalation. He simply kissed her because he liked kissing her, and that thought brought a strange, but not unwelcome, warmth to her chest. Tender Luka could be just as intoxicating as dominant Luka.

They lingered there a couple minutes, neither wanting to let go. Chloe fantasized about just staying here with him all night. Her kitchen counter was well and good, but she had a very soft bed big enough for two in the next room. He’d look exquisite splayed beneath her on her down comforter…

But these were thoughts best left for later, like when she wasn’t supposed to be managing a huge party at her own hotel. As if reading her mind, Luka pressed a last kiss to her jaw and drew away so she could stand on the floor again. She wobbled a little, but he steadied her with a hand around her waist.

“Feel better?” he asked. He had the nerve to look a little smug, the jerk.

But Chloe couldn’t find it in her extremely satisfied heart to hold it against him. “As if you didn’t know.”

“I thrive on positive feedback.”

“Spoken like a true attention-whore.”

“Nah, yours is the only attention I’m interested in.”

Chloe bit her lip and tried to ignore the flare of butterflies in her stomach at his candor. “What about you? I mean, we’re pressed for time, but—”

He smiled and trailed his fingers up the bodice of her dress. “This isn’t a transaction. You don’t owe me anything, ever.” He was watching her carefully, watching her reaction to his touch. “Believe me, I got as much out of that as you did.”

“You know what? You’re kind of a voyeur,” she said even as she stepped closer and gazed up at him, letting him see her reaction to his butterfly touches.

“Well, you’re beautiful when you’re honest.”

She blushed faintly and smiled, secretly thrilled at his obvious affection.

He pressed their foreheads together and sighed contentedly. “Horechau yo, kimi ni.”

Chloe loved the sound of his voice in Japanese, even if she could not understand the words. “What did you say?”

He smiled and pressed a chaste kiss to her mouth. “Come on, we have a party to get to.”
Right, that. Chloe supposed they couldn’t stay here away from the world all night. Reluctantly, they parted and she picked up the vase with his flowers. “I’ll be five minutes. Wait here, okay? For real this time.”

He saluted her. “Yes, Boss.”

Damn right.

_Hello, power, nice to see you again._

Chloe locked herself in her bedroom and set the vase on her dresser. Pollen phased out of the flowers covered in, well, actual pollen. “Oh, I’m so happy! Was there ever a more perfect drone for my Queen Bee?”

Chloe rolled her eyes and headed to the bathroom to clean up. Luckily, her dress had been spared the effects of their intimacy, though she was not happy to see a few faint wrinkles in the knee-length skirt. Oh well, every battle suffered a few casualties. She’d just have to make do. “I don’t know about perfect, but he knows what he’s doing, I’ll give him that.”

Pollen’s only response was a dreamy sigh. “You were right: suits are magical.”

Cleaned up and feeling rather fantastic, if she did say so herself, Chloe slipped on her ludicrously high heels and admired her glowing reflection in the mirror. She side-eyed Pollen, who was lying blissfully amongst Luka’s yellow roses, and she just couldn’t help herself. “Yeah, they’re bee-witching, all right.”

Suddenly, Pollen was buzzing right in her face, her compound eyes so wide they almost looked manic. “Honey Bee! Did you just—”

Chloe held up a finger to silence her. “Yes, and it was a one-time thing. You just looked very cute for a minute there.”

Pollen burst with happiness and buzzed about, full of energy. “I knew you were my true match!” She bumped into Chloe’s chest in what could only be described as a hug, if bees could hug. “I love you, Honey Bee!”

Chloe was a little taken aback at Pollen’s intensity. And for a moment, she was reminded a little of Adrien—emotionally starved, gullible, hopeless Adrien, who overreacted and indulged in even the slightest show of affection. Chloe’s expression softened, and she cupped Pollen close to her chest.

_A hundred years she was locked up._

Even for an immortal god, a hundred years without so much as a friendly voice to listen to was an awfully long time to be alone in darkness.

“You know? I think I might be falling for you, too,” she said.

Pollen looked up at her, grinning from ear to ear (antenna to antenna?). “Duh, it’s me!”

Oh, they were a match, all right.

“Come on, it’s party time. You know the drill. Be good for me, okay?”

Pollen nodded vigorously. “Anything for you, Sweetness!”

Shoes on and Pollen tucked safely in her skirt’s roomy pocket, Chloe grabbed her clutch, checked
her reflection one last time, and headed back out to find Luka.

The party was a lavish affair that hit Marinette with such a slap of déjà vu that she had to take a minute to catch her breath. She’d known it was at Le Grand Paris Hotel, but she had not quite put together that it would be in the same room as the Trefoil Gala had been.

The same room where she had met Adrien again after fourteen long years.

And now, here she was again, her arm in his, as the hotel staff checked their coats and welcomed them to enjoy the party. Marinette had to hand it to the staff—they really knew how to throw a party. The glass ceiling showed off the starry night sky, a DJ supplied a steady stream of classic beats, and the monochrome decorations gave the room a sleekly professional air that made the guests pop in their many colors, Marinette included. Her fuchsia dress drew passing eyes, and she felt Adrien tighten his hold on her arm.

“Marinette, hello!” Jessika waved to her from a nearby table, where she’d been in conversation with a small group of people. “I’m so glad you made it. Oh! Look at your handiwork, isn’t it just stunning?” She twirled in the heavy winter gown, not at all shy about her pleasure.

“Hi Jessika. And it’s you who makes the dress look stunning, really! Thank you so much for inviting me tonight, this party is amazing.”

Jessika laughed and waved her off. “So modest! You know, it’s perfectly all right to indulge your pride now and then. Your talent is extraordinary—don’t be shy to show it off a bit more.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Adrien said, grinning magnificently and making Marinette blush at his praise.

“My my, and who is this?” Jessika asked, holding out a hand for him to kiss.

Adrien was quick to oblige and placed a polite kiss on her ringed fingers. “Adrien Agreste. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Fujiwara. I’ve been a fan of your work for years.”

Jessika giggled appreciatively. “Agreste, you say? How interesting! You Agreste men are all such silver-tongued charmers, aren’t you? Marinette, well done.”

“Thanks,” Marinette said lamely, her soul still floating on a distant cloud as she basked in Jessika’s and Adrien’s praise of her skill.

“You’ve met my family?” Adrien said, making conversation. “I wasn’t aware charm was a family trait.”

Jessika’s dark eyes glittered with secrets. “Oh, trust me, it is. But enough about us! Marinette, please come and meet some of my colleagues. They’ve all been dying to meet the seamstress behind my fabulous dress.”

“Oh, um, all right.” Marinette allowed Jessika to pull her along, slipping out of Adrien’s hold. She cast a glance back at him, but he just smiled for her.

“Go on, network a little. I’m not going anywhere,” he said.

Marinette looked at him strangely—an odd choice of words, but she couldn’t figure out why. She
mouthe[d an apology, but didn’t want to be rude to Jessika, who had just spent enough money on *Marinette Designs* to cover all their expenses for the next two months.

Adrien blew her a kiss, and Marinette blushed furiously. He grinned cheekily, and oh she was *going to get him back for that, so help her.*

But for now, she had to put on her professional face and greet Jessika’s colleagues.

“Here she is, the designer I was telling you all about,” Jessika gushed as she led Marinette to a standing table. “Marinette Dupain-Cheng.”

Everyone gathered was dressed to impress in glitz and glam, as one might expect of famous actors at a party. But as Marinette shook hands and listened to their genuine compliments on Jessika’s dress, she could not help but feel her pride swell. Jessika was right—it didn’t hurt to be proud of her talent. Alphonse was always telling her so.

“Lila, darling, over here,” Jessika said to a woman over Marinette’s shoulder.

“Jessika, you look lovely, as always.”

Marinette turned just as Jessika exchanged greeting kisses with the newcomer, and she could not help but gape. “Lila *Rossi?*”

Sure enough, she was the same Lila who had spent a brief yet tumultuous semester at Dupont before transferring to a private academy back in Rome to be closer to her family. Lila was tall and willowy, a vision in a white, empire waist gown that made her look like she’d stepped out of a Greek myth. Haughty, green eyes fell to Marinette, and a slew of bad memories came rushing back.

“Sorry, do I know you?” Lila said.

Marinette’s eye twitched in annoyance.

“Lila, my dear! This is Marinette Dupain-Cheng, my personal designer.” Jessika indicated her dress and smiled magnificently. “Marinette, Lila plays my adoptive daughter in the show. She’s quite the rising star, if I do say so myself.”

The light of recognition crossed Lila’s almond eyes, which she narrowed in Marinette’s general direction.

“Okay, you thirsty party fools, I come bearing libations for all,” said an extremely fit Asian man in a suit that looked near to bursting at the seams over his tall, muscular frame. He had his hands full with a few open bottles of beer and a small tray carrying a couple glasses of wine and mixed drinks, which he set on the table for everyone to help themselves.

Marinette forgot all about Lila for a moment as she found herself shocked for the second time that night in as many minutes. “Kim?!?”

Kim Lê Chiến was a sight for sore eyes as he lit up, instantly recognizing Marinette unlike his frosty companion. “No way! Marinette? Aw man, what an awesome coincidence! Come here, you!”

He pulled her into a bear hug before she could protest, and Marinette eagerly hugged him back.

“Kim, wow, what’re you doing here? It’s been a long time!”

He let her go and grinned. “I’ll say. I’m an actor now, ta da! I mean, this is my first big break, so I’m still learning the ropes, you know, but everybody’s gotta start somewhere, right?”
Lila rolled her eyes. “Well, you’re not wrong.”

Marinette soon learned that Kim had a supporting role in Silver Soul, for which he’d been filming on location in Florence with Lila and some of the other cast members over the past few weeks. It was a much larger production than Marinette had been led to believe, bringing actors and producers together from Tokyo, Milan, and Paris for a romantic drama that would span three generations. It was the kind of thing Tikki would have binge watched—the lucky kwami had always been fascinated by tales of love and family and happy endings, so much so that she had her own profile on Marinette’s Netflix and a queue of sappy shows and movies in her Watchlist.

“I heard from Nino that you’d finally made it big, congratulations!” Kim said.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Marinette hedged. And then she remembered that she wasn’t going to let modesty rule her tonight. “Maybe not big big, but I did design Jessika’s dress tonight.”

“Well, I don’t know anything about fashion, but it looks awesome if you ask me!”

Lila, however, was watching her with a critical eye. “It’s not bad,” she admitted. “I don’t remember you having a keen eye for glamour, but I guess things change.”

Marinette bristled at the backhanded compliment. Lila could not know, of course, but Marinette had a particularly foul memory of her time spent as the akumatized Volpina and how she’d practically molested Adrien for attention. But that was Ladybug’s memory, not Marinette’s. And as unpleasant as Lila had been (and possibly still was), she had been Hawk Moth’s victim as much as any other others.

Just as Chat Noir had been a victim.

“Aw, c’mon, Lila, don’t be such a tease. I saw the way you looked at Jessika’s dress,” Kim teased. “It’s okay to say what you really think. Oh, hey! Maybe you can commission Marinette next time, huh? We’re gonna be in Paris for the rest of filming, anyway.”

Lila and Marinette shared a flush—Lila in embarrassment at having been called out, and Marinette in shock that Kim had actually had the audacity to scold Lila. It seemed things had changed, indeed.

Lila cleared her throat and smiled gracefully. It was a practiced smile made for cameras, and she pulled it off annoyingly well. “Maybe I will.”

Marinette set her jaw at the thinly-veiled challenge. Two could play at that game. “Let me give you my card. I’m always happy to take on custom orders.” She pulled a business card from her purse, careful not to disturb Tikki curled up in a silken handkerchief, and handed it to Lila.

“Thank you,” Lila said, though it came out sounding a little more like a threat than genuine gratitude. “Excuse me, I have other people to greet.”

She sashayed away, and with Jessika pulled in to animated conversation with even more people, Marinette found herself huddled with Kim at the table and helping herself to one of the glasses of wine he’d procured.

“Kim, can I ask you something?” Marinette said.

“Uh, sure! What’s up?”

“Are you… with Lila?”
Kim blinked guilelessly. “With her? Oh, you mean, like, dating?” He burst out laughing. “No way, that’d be so weird! She’s like my sister, man.”

“…Your sister?” Somehow, that was even more bizarre.

“Yeah, we’re close.” He shrugged. “I mean, look, I know she can come off as, uh, kinda difficult.”

“Just a little,” Marinette quipped.

“She’s just got a lot going on, you know? Her dad’s the director, and she’s got all these expectations to live up to. I mean, shit, she’s an amazing actor, like seriously. I’ve learned so much from working with her. But she just has this complex, like she doesn’t think she’s good enough, you know what I mean? She tries really hard, but I think it kind of intimidates people sometimes. Sorry if she made you uncomfortable before. She’s working on that.”

Marinette shook her head in disbelief. “No, that’s… Okay, wow, I feel a little silly now. I had no idea you were so close.” With Lila Rossi. What was the world coming to?

He grinned. “She’s cool, once you get to know her. I mean, it wasn’t easy! She’s got all these walls, but…she’s cool, seriously.”

Marinette was reminded of what Chloe had said to her at Firefly about not being in high school anymore. Was she unfairly holding on to past perceptions of people who didn’t really exist anymore? Lila, and Chloe, and Adrien, and…and…

“Are we too far gone?” Chat had asked her that first night at the Eiffel Tower.

*No, Chaton,* she vowed. *We’ll find a way back to us. I promise.*

Perhaps it was time to leave the past in the past, where it belonged.

“Hey, that a smile I see?” Kim said, grinning down at her.

Marinette raised her glass to his. “Thanks, Kim. I’m glad you’re friends with Lila. She’s really lucky to have you.”

“Aw, thanks!”

They clinked their glasses together and shared a drink.

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Adrien had no problem mingling with the crowd while Jessika showed off Marinette to her colleagues. He missed her at his side, but the last thing he wanted to do was distract her from work. Marinette obviously put her heart and soul into her craft, and Adrien admired that about her so much. She strived for excellence in everything she did, as Ladybug and as Marinette. And they had all night, besides; he could find her later after she’d passed out a few business cards.

He headed to the open bar and ordered a whiskey neat, content to people-watch for a bit. His eyes were inevitably drawn back to Marinette in her loud, fuchsia dress that flattered her figure more than it should. It would look even better on the floor of his bedroom, decided. But those were not thoughts fit for tonight, at least, not yet. She liked him, but he didn’t want to push her too far too soon. That strategy had never ended well in the past.

“Adrien Agreste, why am I not surprised to find you here?”
Adrien turned to the familiar voice and came face to face with Aramis Legrand, Marinette’s investor and owner of the American hedge fund where Adrien had spent a busy summer as an MBA intern.

“Mr. Legrand,” Adrien said, accepting his drink from the bartender. “I suppose I should say the same about you.”

Aramis grinned. His trimmed, silver beard and mustache gave him a ruggedly handsome look, but those piercing blue eyes belied his age. He wore a smart, navy suit, and his shoulder-length black hair was tucked in a low ponytail. “Oh, I have my hands in many cookie jars,” he said in perfect English. “Just Aramis, please.”

Adrien was a little thrown by the sudden switch from their shared mother tongue, but having spent most of his formative years in the States, he was as fluent as any born and bred American and answered back in fluid English, “Aramis, of course. I can’t say I’m surprised. I remember back at Legrand Capital, you were known as a regular Wolf of Wall Street.”

Aramis laughed at that. He had a deep and pleasant laugh that set Adrien at ease. “Those fuckers. Well, when there’s blood in the streets…”

“Feast.” Adrien held out his glass for a toast.

Aramis clinked his empty glass to Adrien’s, an unreadable glint in his eyes. “You’re a predator, Adrien. This is your game, I can see it.”

Adrien blinked, unsure he liked that word. “Well, maybe it was for a summer.”

“Oh, I doubt that.” Aramis peered at him—had he even blinked once? Those blue eyes were intensely focused, searching. “You remind me a little of myself at your age.”

Adrien smiled self-deprecatingly. “Arrogant?”

“Ambitious.”

“Is there a difference?”

“For men like you and me? Absolutely.” He nodded at Adrien’s drink. “What’s your poison?”

“Glendronach 18,” Adrien said.

“Excellent.”

He ordered the same, and soon they stood shoulder to shoulder, their backs to the bar, once more conversing in English. Adrien learned that Aramis was an executive producer for the show, hence his presence here. Even retired, he liked to keep busy, keep his mind occupied and his schedule full.

“Idle hands are the devil’s workshop,” Aramis said. “Or so they say. And what brings you here?”

Adrien nodded toward Marinette, who was across the room talking with a group of people Jessika had introduced her to. “I’m here for her.”

“Ah, idle hands indeed.” Aramis sipped his drink. “I had heard she designed Jessika’s dress. Quite lovely, of course.”

“I doubt Marinette’s hands are ever idle.”

“Oh, I wasn’t talking about her, son.”
Adrien frowned at that diminution. It wasn’t unpleasant coming from Aramis, no, just…well. He did not want to think about his true father right now.

“Good for you. Both of you. But I meant what I said the last time our paths crossed. Marinette has talent, and I’ll become quite cross if I find out AF is getting ready to acqui-hire her. You don’t want to see me cross.”

Adrien spared him a friendly chuckle. “My interest in Marinette is purely personal. I could never imagine her anywhere near AF, anyway.”

“Is that so? You almost sound bitter, and trust me when I say you’re far too young to be bitter.”

Adrien was suddenly grateful that they were speaking in English. There were far too many people about, and the last thing he needed was gossip getting back to his father. “Not bitter, no. It just wouldn’t be the right place for her.”

“It’s your company.”

“It’s my father’s company.”

“Ah, and therein lies our proverbial wrench.” Aramis cast him a sidelong glance. “Perhaps AF isn’t the right place for you, either.”

Adrien nursed his whiskey, watching Marinette. She was talking to a buff Asian man now, someone she appeared to know already. “I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to.” Aramis reached in his suit jacket pocket and produced a heavy, black business card embossed with a silver phone number and nothing else, not even a name. “This is my direct line. Call me when you’re ready to join the hunt again. I could use ambition like yours on my team.”

Adrien accepted the ostentatious card, nonplussed. “Thank you,” he said, meaning it. It wasn’t every day a powerful, obscenely wealthy financier personally offered him a job. “I appreciate the offer, but I really am happy at AF.”

“Oh course, I believe the son of Gabriel Agreste would be happy at AF,” Aramis said, smiling slightly. “And as long as you remain at AF, you’ll always be the son of Gabriel Agreste.”

Adrien frowned, though not Aramis. Was that true? It wasn’t as though he hadn’t thought about it before. AF was his father’s company, his father’s brand. Adrien had always been defined by his relationship to his father, it was true. But he’d grown up, educated himself, and he was working hard putting all his talent and learning to good use.

But he was doing it at his father’s company. Just as he’d always done as a supermodel in his younger days. Then as now, Gabriel Agreste was the looming shadow over his life, both personal and professional, and Adrien had never really questioned it much.

“Call me,” Aramis said again. “The sins of the father need not be visited upon the son.”

Adrien looked up at that odd turn of phrase, but Aramis had set down his empty glass and was already being pulled in to conversation with others—this time in sing-song Italian. Adrien watched him go.

That was…

He wasn’t really sure what it was. Something about Aramis intrigued him. In a way, anyone as
cultured, articulate, and experienced as Aramis was bound to intrigue and seduce. He supposed it was a kind of professional seduction, what they had just done. And if he was being honest with himself, Adrien was not completely opposed to being wooed. He’d spent his entire working life at AF, save for that one summer in business school. What could he accomplish outside his father’s sphere of influence?

Aramis’s business card was heavy in Adrien’s hand, the simple, silver phone number glowing in the muted light. He pocketed it, and tried not to think about what his father would say.

Luka would be lying if he said he wasn’t a little bit overwhelmed by the spectacle of it all. He’d been to some wild parties in his day—some he even remembered in full—but nothing quite like this. On the surface, elegant dresses and drinks poured from crystal decanters gave the appearance of opulence, indulgence, a feast for gods gathered for some cosmic purpose. And these were gods after a fashion, many of their faces worshiped on the silver screen or the small screen by faithful believers tuning in to their latest mythology.

But underneath the glitz and glamour, they were merely people looking for an excuse to forget their tedious lives for a few hours, get plastered, and dance the night away in the arms of a willing partner. Well, Luka could not fault them for that. Even celebrities needed some time to unwind now and again. He chuckled to himself, content to watch these beautiful creatures in their unguarded, natural element.

One such beautiful creature was speaking into a thin, metal headset, her brow furrowed in consternation and her back rigid as she gave soft-spoken commands to some underling who’d no doubt fucked up some small detail. But that was Chloe, always sweating the little things. It was probably why she was the boss. Luka had been watching some of the staff discreetly going about their business, and not a hair appeared out of place. Chloe ran a tight ship, and her guests were none the wiser.

He let her be for now. She’d already made it clear that she had work to do, but promised she would find him soon. Luka suspected she didn’t really have that much work to do—keeping an eye on staff and being available should anything go sideways did not require her complete attention—but decided not to belabor the point. Chloe had been a little skittish when Jessika invited him to this party, and while she seemed fine now, he knew her well enough to know that even the littlest thing could cause a disturbance in the Force. Best to wait until she deemed herself on a break, and then he could distract her all he wanted.

“Can I offer you a drink?” asked a passing server in a crisp, black and white uniform.

He had a tray neatly stacked with fresh beers and champagne flutes. Luka selected a beer and offered the guy a grateful smile. “Thanks, good timing.”

“You’re welcome.” The server returned his smile. He was a young guy, maybe early twenties at best, freckled and fresh-faced with big, brown doe-eyes. “Uh, hey, this might sound weird, but would it be okay if I shook your hand? I’m, uh, sort of a fan.”

Luka tilted his head. “You know me from Hardrock?”

The server—Marc, from his name tag—brightened. “Yeah, I do! You guys’re great. I’ve been to a bunch of your shows. Well, not lately since we’ve been really busy with a bunch of events and stuff…but! I’ve been meaning to get to the next one as soon as I get a night off.”
Luka laughed, and it put Marc at ease, as intended. “That’s awesome, man, thanks. I’m always happy to meet a fellow music fan.” He held out his hand, and Marc happily set his tray down on a nearby table to shake it vigorously. “Good to meet you, Marc.”

Marc looked surprised that Luka knew his name.

“You’re wearing a name tag,” Luka said.

Marc blinked, flustered. “Oh, right! Hah, I always forget that. I mean, one time I actually did forget it, and Chloe wasn’t too happy with me…” He reddened. “I-I mean, uh, you know, I know you’re here with her, so I didn’t mean anything—”

“Chill, it’s totally fine.” He leaned in conspiratorially. “I know what a handful she can be when things aren’t 100% perfect.”

Marc laughed, and some of the tension left his shoulders. “Sorry, it’s just… You’re sort of the last person we all expected to see here with the Chloe. N-Not that that’s bad! Actually, it’s kind of awesome.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, you know, you’re this super talented musician and, like, obviously a really chill guy.” Marc gestured at him, a little embarrassed. “What I mean is, it’s really, really great seeing the boss so happy.”

“She’s happy?”

“Oh, yeah! I mean, not that she wasn’t before. It’s just, you’re not like those socialite types she’s brought around in the past. That’s a good thing!” he added quickly. “Chloe’s a great boss, seriously. This is the best hotel in Paris because she runs it that way. She works harder than all of us put together, and she’s scary good at her job… But it’s nice to see her, you know, enjoying herself.”

Huh.

Luka had noticed some of the staff eyeing him discreetly, though he was used to looks from people unused to his particular style, especially in a crowds like this where he stuck out like a sore thumb. It never bothered him—people would always form their own opinions, and all he could do was be true to himself while treating others with the basic respect all people deserved. But he hadn’t been expecting this. It was…nice. Really nice.

If Marc was at all representative of the rest of the staff, Chloe had cultivated a loyal team that respected and cared about her, personally and professionally. Luka couldn’t help the small swell of pride.

That’s my girl.

“Thanks,” he said, meaning it. “You didn’t have to tell me all that, but I appreciate that you did. Chloe’s got a good team here.”

Marc grinned toothily. “No sweat! Anyway, I guess I should get back to work before she catches me goofing off, haha! Hopefully I’ll catch your next show.”

He gathered his tray and melted back into the crowd, leaving Luka to sip his beer. Luka peered around the room and noticed Chloe following Marc with her eyes, her expression unreadable. She really did see everything. He hoped he hadn’t gotten the poor kid in trouble and made a note to talk
to Chloe about it later just in case.

Luka made his way through the crowd looking for his aunt; she would want to know he was here and probably introduce him to a slew of people she barely knew herself, but that was just her way. Jessika, unlike Anarka, her younger sister and Luka’s mother, had always been the type to make friends with everyone and anyone wherever she went, and forget them again when she was gone. Well, as long as she was happy. And Jessika was always happy at the center of attention.

“Luka, hey! What’re you doing here?”

Luka was surprised to find Marinette approaching him with another man he vaguely remembered from high school, but whose face he couldn’t quite place. “Hey, Mar. I should ask you the same thing.”

“Actually, your aunt invited me,” she said with a smile. “I designed her dress tonight, so it was kind of her way of saying thank you.”

Luka grinned. More like her way of flaunting what’s hers in front of all her friends. But Jessika meant well. There wasn’t a manipulative bone in her body. “Right, Juleka mentioned something about that. Good for you.” He glanced at her own dress, a vibrant, fuchsia number that complemented her light complexion and brilliant, blue eyes. “Pretty dress. Who are we impressing tonight?”

She blushed, and he grinned wider. Even after all these years, she still reacted so predictably. It was endearing.

“Adrien Agreste,” said her companion with a knowing smile of his own. “I finally got her to spill some deets, and then she saw you and just had to say hi.”

Marinette running from a difficult or awkward situation? Yup, some things never change.

“Oh, really? So that’s happening, then,” Luka teased. “Took you long enough.”

“Oh cut it out, both of you!” she complained. “It’s just our first real date.”

“Aw, did he ask you to go steady, too?”

Marinette swatted at him, and he just laughed.

“Hey man, Luka, right? You’re Juleka’s brother, yeah! I remember now.” The man Luka sort of recognized raised his hand as if for a high-five. “Kim Lê Chiến. I was at Dupont with Marinette and Juleka.”

Ah, so that was it. He clasped his hand to Kim’s in a bro-five. “Kim, yeah, I remember. You a part of all this?”

“Kim’s a hot shot actor now,” Marinette said proudly. “I suggest we get his autograph now before he becomes too famous for us little people.”

“Congrats,” Luka said, tipping his beer against Kim’s. “From what I hear, this show’s gonna blow up.”

“Man, I hope so!” Kim fished his cell phone out of his pocket and powered up the camera. “Hey, better than an autograph, let’s take a selfie! C’mon, Marinette, you get in front since you’re so short.”
“Hey! I’m not short, I’m petite,” Marinette said, feigning indignity even as she shuffled in between the two of them.

Kim made a peace sign with his free hand and grinned for the camera. Marinette did the same, and Luka sighed, giving in.

“Say ‘Asian bloc,’” Luka said, smirking.

“Asian bloc!” Kim said, totally unironically.

Marinette laughed, and Kim ended up taking upwards of ten selfies in succession. Some of them even came out all right.

“Sweet! Aw man, these came out so good!” Kim said enthusiastically. “Here, I’ll tag you guys.”

“In all of them?” Marinette said with a laugh. “There’s, like, ten pictures there. They’re all the same.”

“Nah, it’s a burst shot. Ten pics, one epic experience. You know!”

“I’m pretty sure there’s a stereotype here, and we’re playing right into it,” Luka said, but he pulled out his phone all the same so they could all check in together at Le Grand Paris Hotel.

“Playing without us?” said Adrien, drawing up behind Marinette and slipping an arm around her waist.

“I think they are,” said Chloe, arms crossed and looking a perfect mix of put off and amused. “How rude.”

Luka grinned at Chloe and moved a hand to the small of her back. “Impossible. I hear blonds have more fun.”

She tensed under his fingers, and it took an Effort on his part not to kiss her neck right there just to tease out that reaction some more.

Marinette looked between them, came to the same realization that, apparently, Adrien already knew, and raised her eyebrows so high Luka was sure her hairline might swallow them. She mouthed a not-so-discreet ‘oh’ at him.

“Definitely true,” Adrien said, pressing his nose into Marinette’s hair and whispering something in her ear that made her smile like the smitten fool she clearly was.

“Adrien! Hey man, what’s happenin’? Marinette told me you were back, that’s great!” Kim said.

“Kim, yeah, hey,” Adrien said, flashing a hundred watt smile. “Good to see you.”

“Back at you.” Kim glanced at Chloe and, inexplicably, blushed a little. “Hey, Chloe.”

“Kim,” Chloe said politely, if not a little disinterested. “You look good.”

Kim’s blush deepened, and he scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “Aw, really? You think so? Haha…”

Luka watched their exchange, intrigued. Did they have a history? His loss. He smiled at the thought.

“We’re going to dance,” Adrien said, already leading Marinette away. “Catch up later, yeah?”

He flashed her a shit-eating grin, and she rolled her eyes, a smirk tugging at her painted lips. Luka had the sudden urge to kiss those pretty lips.

“Well, uh, I should probably get back,” Kim said, not really looking at Chloe as he continued to fight off his blush. “I’ll catch you cool kids later, bye!”

Luka observed Chloe as she pulled out her phone and checked her messages for anything work-related. She hardly saw Kim go.

So that’s how it is.

“So, how long has Kim been in to you?” he asked.

Chloe looked up. “What?”

He smiled. She had to be the most oblivious man-eater he had ever met. Damn, Couffaine, you really know how to pick ‘em. “He clearly likes you, or at least never got over you. You didn’t notice?”

Chloe looked at him like she was trying to decipher what language he was speaking. “Why would I notice something so irrelevant?”

“You noticed me,” he countered.

This sobered her, and she clammed up, guarded. “You made it impossible not to. And you’re hardly irrelevant.”

Well, that was true. Luka was pretty sure Chloe would not notice a burning building unless it somehow affected her personally. The trick was to affirmatively grab her attention so she had no choice but to face what was right in front of her. He took her chin in hand and smeared her perfect, pink lipstick with his thumb. Immediately, her gaze darkened dangerously, but before she could act on it, he withdrew and licked his thumb clean. An innocent enough gesture to anyone watching them from afar, but Chloe knew exactly what he was doing.

“You’re so lewd,” she said.

He smiled sweetly. “You taste like me.”

“What? No I don’t—”

He silenced her with crushing but swift kiss that was over as soon as it had begun, but left them both breathless all the same. “Now you do.”

She looked up at him with those big, blue eyes, kiss-swollen lips parted in his absence, cornflower bangs framing her gorgeous face, and he knew right then that he was in trouble. He was always in trouble when it came to women, but Chloe was Trouble with a capital T. If he wasn’t careful, his big heart would run away from him before he could appreciate the danger.

Unfortunately, Luka had never been very careful.

“I need a drink,” Chloe said with the absolute certainty of one who did not need a drink, but was going to have one anyway or her head might explode otherwise.

“Great, I happen to know an excellent bartender.”
At his teasing, she relaxed and spared him a rare, affectionate smile. “Watch it, drone. You’re on thin ice as it is after that PDA.”

He looked at her, bemused. “Drone?”

And for some reason, Chloe flushed like a tomato. It was utterly fantastic. “Forget it! I didn’t mean that!” She turned and all but dashed to the bar. “I’m just really thirsty!”

He didn’t really get it, but it didn’t bother him. He followed her to the bar, intent on distracting her for the rest of the evening, if he could help it.

Marinette could have died right now with no regrets whatsoever. For surely, there was nothing quite so wonderful as the feel of Adrien’s arms around her as they danced, the world around them forgotten and unimportant. If she were to accept the sweet release of death now, at least it would feel like hugging Adrien.

“Marinette,” Adrien whispered against the shell of her ear. “Are you happy?”

She smiled. “Yes. More than you know.”

He smiled back, and there was such warmth in his pretty, green eyes that her heart soared. How could she have ever forgotten him? Fooled herself into thinking she could get over him in time? It was like trying to get over air.

“I think I have a pretty good idea,” he said, pressing his forehead to hers as they swayed lazily to the music. “I’m happy, too. With you.”

“Really?” she asked, daring to hope. Because this was Adrien Agreste: charming, millionaire playboy who could have anything and anyone he wanted in all the world, and the kindest, silliest, most coquettish person she had ever met. She was just Marinette, Mediocre Woman by day and Struggling Superhero by night. How could she ever make someone like him happy?

He looked at her, his smile falling. “Come with me.”

He didn’t wait for her to follow on her own, instead taking her hand and pulling her along after him to the balcony. It was cold in spite of the heat lamps blazing, and there was no one else crazy enough to be out here. Adrien ran his hands over her arms and held her close at the railing.

It was the same balcony they’d stood on the night they reunited after fourteen years apart, the Champs Élysées a sea of white light below them. The same balcony where he’d apologized so profusely, so poignantly for a wrong he didn’t really commit, that even now she did not quite understand beyond that he needed to say it, for whatever reason. As far as Marinette was concerned, there was nothing for Adrien to be sorry for. She was just happy he was here and hers.

“Marinette, I’m,” he began, struggling with his words. “Fuck.”

“Adrien, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he said quickly. “Sorry, it’s just… I mean, there’s something I have to tell you.”

Oh no.

That sounded bad. Immediately, her mind began racing through the possibilities of what horrible,
life-shattering news he might have for her. She imagined everything from him secretly being gay and just needing her as a beard, to having a secret wife and family back in America, to perhaps the worst possibility of all—that he just wasn’t that in to her.

At which point, of course, she felt like the biggest idiot in the world, because how the hell could that be the worst option?

He saw something of the panic (existential dread) on her face, because immediately he was running his hands over her back to reassure her. “Hey, no, don’t panic, please.”

“Adrien,” she said, her voice shaky, “do you… Are you not happy? With me?”

The look on his face could only be described as abject horror. He took her by the shoulders and pulled her close for a fierce hug, burying his face in her hair. “No, of course that’s not it. I’ve never been happier in all my life than when I’m with you.”

She froze. “W-What?”

He hugged her tighter, if that was possible, like he was afraid she might fade away. It reminded her of Alya and Nino’s dinner party, when he’d held her hand so tightly to the point of painful. There was fear here—how had she not noticed it before? But fear of what? Rejection? What else made hope doubt more than that?

She wrapped her arms around him and pressed her nose to his neck, breathed him in. “Adrien, I’m here, I’m yours. I’m not going anywhere.”

He tensed against her and moved his hand up her back to entwine with her loose, long hair. He pressed soft kisses to her shoulder, her neck, as if searching for purchase somewhere he would not slip away.

“Marinette, I’m so sorry.”

“Please,” she said, running her fingers through his hair to comfort him. “Please, don’t say that. You have nothing to be sorry about.”

Slowly, excruciatingly, he pulled away and looked down at her. There was such turmoil in his sparkling, green eyes that it broke her heart a little. How could someone look so beautiful when they were in so much pain?

“I’m afraid,” he confessed. “There’s so much… My life, my—my family, what I’ve done… I’m afraid you won’t want me once you know the truth.”

The truth.

So that was it, what Chloe and Alya had warned her about. The cracks in him hiding a darkness nursed over fourteen years spent apart. No, Marinette supposed she did not know its true shape, and she was not so naive as to think that didn’t matter. But for the life of her, she did not see what they supposedly saw. It didn’t mean it wasn’t there, that she wouldn’t face it one day, but she didn’t care. Whatever it was, it did not have the power to frighten her away, not anymore. Adrien had shown her a piece of himself, a true piece grown from the memories of the boy she’d once fallen in love with, and she was not about to let it go. Whatever he was hiding, whatever frightened him, it would not frighten her.

He may be good at breaking the things closest to him, but Marinette was titanium. She was more than human. She would not break, not for him, not for anyone.
“There’s no force on Earth that could stop me from wanting you,” she said, taking him in her hands and savoring the silken feel of his hair between her fingers. “I want you. So please, let me have you.”

She barely finished her thought when his lips were on hers.

In truth, Chloe did not have much work to keep her busy. She was a bit of a micromanager, okay, she could admit that, but her staff was highly competent and knew how she operated so well, they practically managed themselves. Really, all that was left was to keep an eye on the guests and make sure nobody caused a scene—even then, she had designated staff standing by in case anything got out too out of hand.

She should have been enjoying the party. And she was, sort of. Except she felt eyes on her—her staff was watching her, watching Luka with his hand on the small of her back, watching as they briefly kissed, watching as they stood together and bantered and he managed to coax a genuine smile out of her. One of them had even approached Luka—why? To question his presence here? What did that judgment meant? Luka was, to say the least, different from the usual boyfriends or acquaintances she brought over. Even Adrien, her most frequent visitor, was so completely other compared to Luka that it was no surprise her staff wondered.

This was not their professional, ice queen boss, but a different person entirely, a person they did not know.

A person they maybe did not respect.

It shouldn’t have bothered her. She was the boss; she could do whatever she wanted.

But it did. Just a little.

“So, Luka, right? What do you do?” asked one of the producers Chloe had been in contact with organizing this premiere party. He was a balding man, not so easy to look upon but sharp as a tac and nice enough. He was also a frequent guest at the hotel, and someone Chloe had come to know quite well. Rich men like him could have stayed anywhere for any price, but it was for Chloe and her impeccable staff that they always returned to Le Grand Paris.

“I’m a musician,” Luka said.

“Oh, really? That’s wonderful—what label?”

Luka smiled politely. “We’re more of an independent group at the moment.”

Meaning, they had not been able to make it in the cutthroat music business yet. And probably never would, considering the odds alone. Chloe could almost see that train of thought going through the producer’s head as he nodded, equally as polite, and his eyes glazed over a little.

“I see, and how did you and Miss Bourgeois meet? I’m sure there must be a story there!”

Translation: what the hell was Chloe Bourgeois, hotel heiress and all-around HBIC, doing with a struggling musician who could barely make rent?

“Actually, Chloe came to one of my shows,” Luka said, immune as usual to social niceties—or, in this case, cruelties.
“Hey, look, isn’t that Jessika over there?” Chloe interrupted. “Please excuse us, sir. I’ve been meaning to personally welcome Jessika tonight.”

“Not at all,” said the producer, already turning away from them, relieved the conversation was over.

“Chloe? What was that about?” Luka asked as she pulled him along after her through the crowd.

“Nothing! Don’t you want to say hi to your aunt?”

“I mean, sure…”

Chloe almost ran in to Jessika in her haste.

“Chloe, hello!” Jessika said, all smiles as usual. “My goodness, you look lovely. Not working too hard tonight, I hope?”

“Hi Jessika,” Chloe said, smiling. “Not too much, no. I wanted to come say hello. I hope you’re enjoying the party?”

“Very much. Can’t you tell?” She twirled the train of her dress, obviously proud of it.

“Aunt Jess, hey,” Luka said.

Jessika brightened even more. “Luka, you’re here! Iya, omae suutsu no sugata de yappari ikemen! Atarimae dakedo ne, uchi no kazoku nanode.” She ran her hands over the lapels of his suit jacket, fawning like an appreciative mother hen.

Luka just grinned and let her have her fun. “I try,” he said in French so that Chloe would not feel left out.

Jessika winked knowingly. “Chloe, please excuse me, I just can’t help but speak my native tongue with Luka and Juleka. I become so nostalgic!”

“It’s all right, I understand,” Chloe said.

“Speaking of nostalgia, I have a very nice surprise for you. Come, quickly!” She beckoned them both to follow her through the crowd, and so they did until Jessika stopped before a group of people in conversation punctuated by rounds of raucous laughter as they listened to one their number tell a story. Jessika broke her way through the wall of people like they were no match for her (they weren’t), and gesticulated excitedly. Chloe was grateful for Luka’s hand in hers then for something to hold on to.

“Jessika, my love, join us! I was just regaling our friends with the story about the time you and I stole that gondola in Venice. You remember, for the Countess’s fortieth birthday?”

Jessika laughed prettily. “Of course I remember! Oh, Audrey, you wicked thing, you must not share such frightfully embarrassing stories about me with my colleagues!”

And that was when Chloe froze. Like, literally froze, like Princess Anna from that American Disney movie, right before the vile villain cut her down with his sword.

Okay, she did not literally freeze, but there may as well have been a sword coming at her to cut her down, because the look on Audrey Bourgeois’ face eviscerated her where she stood.

“Mother?!” Chloe blurted out.
She was kissing Adrien Agreste.

Marinette Dupain-Cheng was kissing Adrien Agreste.

And all she could think of for those first few, mind-blowing seconds was shit, he's a much better kisser than me.

But then she stopped thinking entirely because, again, she was kissing Adrien Goddamn Agreste.

Luckily, her body was not as uselessly incompetent as her brain and responded to him in the only way one ought to respond to kissing Adrien Agreste, former supermodel and teenage dream.

He backed her up against the stone railing, and the cold bit into the small of her back, but she hardly felt it over the fire blazing upon her skin where he touched her. She buried her hands in his hair, remembering his provocative teasing about tables and grabbing and she grabbed—

He moaned against her and twisted her own hair in his fingers. The sound revived Marinette from her braindead stupor because that was her, she had made him do that, and by god she would make him do it again.

He tasted like summer. She didn’t know how that was possible, but she kissed him and tasted sunshine and warm, starry nights and so many days wasted apart, pining, memories of a youth long lost. Pressed against him, she could feel every part of him, but it wasn’t enough.

As if sensing her frustration, he tugged back on her hair and trailed kisses to her neck, at once sensuous and insistent. Marinette whimpered and raked her nails across his back, imagining smooth, warm flesh and sinewy muscle under her fingers instead of his designer suit jacket.

“Adrien,” she said in a throaty, husky voice that only encouraged him even more.

He pulled back and caught her eye, and that look alone almost unraveled her completely. Marinette was sure she had never been on the receiving end of such honest, unadulterated desire—or maybe it was just him, his intensity of feeling, volatile, electric.

“Tell me again,” he said. “Tell me your mine.”

Marinette felt her breath hitch as all the heat he radiated pooled in the pit of her belly. “I’m yours,” she said. She touched his cheek, and immediately he took her hand and pressed the heel to his lips for a kiss that curled her toes. “And you’re mine.”

That snapped something in him, and he pulled her in for another powerful kiss that Marinette could swear shifted the tectonic plates beneath her feet. It was bruising and needy and possessive, but right now she wanted to be possessed, and to possess him. She threw her arms around his neck and held on as he swept her away.

I’m yours, she willed him to hear her as she bit down gently on his lip.

He made that desperately beautiful moaning sound again, and Marinette smiled against him.

And you’re mine.
“Daughter.”

Audrey Bourgeois’ smile was an ancient evil summoned from broken mirrors in the dead of night. And very much like staring down a demon come to collect its dark toll, Chloe could not look away, or she would be defeated.

Un fortunately, Audrey felt no such compulsion as her vacuous, blue eyes slithered to Luka, whose hand Chloe was no doubt crushing in her shock. She arched a perfectly threaded brow, and her smile curled, saccharine.

“And who is this?”

“Audrey, this is my precious nephew, Luka Couffaine,” Jessika said. “He’s an aspiring musician with his own band.”

Luka, who somehow remembered how to be a sentient human being with a tongue and a full vocabulary, smiled politely. “Mrs. Bourgeois. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Audrey, please,” Audrey said, her tone like silken steel. “Mrs. Bourgeois was my mother-in-law. I’m in no hurry to be lumped together with her.”

“Audrey, of course,” Luka said, not missing a beat. “I didn’t know you would be here. Chloe didn’t mention it. What a nice surprise.”

“Isn’t it?” Jessika said happily.

“Yes, it was a rather last minute decision,” Audrey said. “When I heard Jessika’s premiere party would be held here at Le Grand Paris, I had Andre send the jet to me in London. I would have called…”

But I wouldn’t have answered, Chloe finished the unspoken thought.

“That’s great,” Luka said, because he was a Certified Nice Person who actually gave a shit about people’s feelings, even when those people were swamp demons wearing people-masks.

The guests Audrey had been regaling with her story had moved away to give them space to talk. Audrey’s unblinking gaze settled on Chloe.

“Luka, it was delightful to meet you. I wonder, would you mind terribly if I stole Chloe for just a few minutes? Mother-daughter business, you understand,” Audrey said.

Luka letting go of Chloe’s hand to allow Jessika to drag him away to some other vapid conversation was the loneliest Chloe had felt all evening. And just like that, she was alone with her mother for the first time in two years.

Two fucking years.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Chloe said.

“Now, Chloe, don’t make a scene. We’re in public,” Audrey said. She flipped her dyed, chestnut hair. Audrey was a handsome woman, and in her youth she had been radiant, to hear Andre tell it. She’d been a model, and she’d landed her first job at a small, start-up fashion boutique run by a young, unknown, highly ambitious designer named Gabriel Agreste. The rest, as they say, was history.
Now, Audrey was a full-time socialite and fashion icon, attending the best parties all over the world and starting new fashion trends even in the gray years of her life. If Chloe hadn’t sworn to loathe her for all eternity, she may have had a grudging respect for the woman’s stellar career and continued success. Audrey Bourgeois was a master at reinventing herself and staying relevant and influential.

“This is my hotel,” Chloe said as calmly as she could. With her mother, the surest path to fiery, burning failure was to lose her temper. “You can’t just waltz in here like you own the place anymore.”

“Is that so? The last I checked, your father owns this hotel, and all the rest. You’re just the caretaker. Speaking of which, I expect my usual room is available?”

The fucking nerve of this woman—

“Caretaker?” Chloe hissed. In her skirt pocket, Pollen wiggled, and she shoved a hand in to keep her still. Pollen latched on to her thumb. “I run this place. Me, Mother. Not Daddy, me.”

“Yes, yes, all right, whatever you say, Darling.” Audrey waved her off like she was swatting an annoying fly. “Anyway, I’ll be in Paris for a few weeks, perhaps longer—it really just depends on Pippa and James, you know how things can be with the Brits.”

Of course, leave it to Audrey Bourgeois to name-drop to her own daughter. “No, absolutely not. You can’t stay here.”

Audrey looked at her like she’d just told a hilarious joke. “Of course I can. I always stay here when I’m in Paris.”

“You have a fucking mansion in Saint-Germain-des-Prés. You know, the one you share with Daddy, your husband.”

Audrey frosted over, her patience with her stubborn daughter gone. “Chloe Louise Bourgeois, hold your filthy tongue.”

Chloe snapped her mouth shut, a mixture of shock and old habits ingrained in her bones at the sound of that voice coming from that woman. She was so taken aback that she barely put up a fight when Audrey took her by the elbow and pulled her closer to the wall, where they would not draw unwanted attention.

“Honestly, I cannot believe you. I leave Paris for a little vacation—”

“You’ve been gone for two years,” Chloe snapped, her voice low and venomous. “You didn’t even call for months. I came back from grad school to find Daddy living alone unable to tell me even what country you were in—”

“An extended vacation,” Audrey said just as poisonously. The two of them stood clustered in such a way that passersby may have thought them old friends sharing each other’s confidences, such was their practiced performance. “And anyway, that’s not the point.”

How the fuck is that not the point?! Chloe wanted to scream.

“I come back ready to congratulate my only daughter on her many accomplishments, and here you are shacking up with some starving artist—”

“I’m not shacking up with anybody!”
“Oh please, Chloe, I was young once, as you so often forget. I know his type—you like the danger, the thrill of chasing everything you know is wrong for a girl like you. Have your fun if you must, but for god’s sake, don’t bring a tin pot to a tea party.”

Chloe was silent as her rage boiled her skin. She could not believe the things coming out of her mother’s mouth.

Except, yes she could. This was Audrey Bourgeois, and Chloe was her daughter. It was not long ago that Chloe herself had been questioning everyone’s perception of Luka, too.

“He’s your BFF Jessika’s nephew,” she said in a pathetic attempt to fight her own insecurities.

Audrey turned up her nose. “Yes, foul luck, that. I feel sorry for her, you know, but don’t tell her I said that. You know I adore Jessika.”

Chloe stared in horror at this creature wearing her mother’s skin.

Who are you?

And worse, who was Chloe to let those words needle their way under her skin and stoke the embers of doubt? No one had ever been able to cut her open and bare the ugliness within like her mother could. Two years was a long time—she had forgotten just how powerful Audrey Bourgeois was, and how weak Chloe was at her mercy.

“Anyway, get rid of him quietly. I’ve already had to dodge more than a few questions from our ilk asking about him. No need to thank me, I’m your mother and I would do anything for you, as you know. Of course, I can’t do much about the help. This is your hotel now, as you say, so you’ll have to regain their respect on your own, Darling.”

Adrien could have made out with Marinette on the balcony of the grandest hotel in Paris all night if she’d let him, but her without a jacket in this winter weather was pushing it. So when she shivered against him not in pleasure, he immediately felt like a horrible person and wrapped his suit jacket around her shoulders.

“S-Sorry,” Marinette said, braving a smile despite her shaking. “I guess I didn’t realize how cold it is out here.”

“No, it’s my fault,” Adrien was quick to apologize. “I sort of held you hostage out here.”

Marinette smiled wider. “You and your clever tongue. I seem to recall promising to find a better use for it.”

The cold was suddenly the furthest thing from Adrien’s mind. He once more captured her with another crushing kiss with every intention of showing her just how clever his tongue could be. Marinette opened her mouth in a gasp, and he deepened the kiss until there was nothing left between them.

They pulled apart after a moment, breathless and content. She was looking at him with such longing ardor that it was a miracle he hadn’t already dragged her to the nearest empty hotel room.

“How are you so good at that?” she complained.
Adrien laughed. “I think you’re biased.”

“And I think you’re a wizard, Harry.”

“Mm, yeah, I just need a thunderbolt scar and glasses.”

Marinette giggled. “Yeah, and a tragic childhood backstory to make it official.”

She’d meant it as a joke, just going along with the inane fantasy, but all the same Adrien clammed up, and she noticed.

“Adrien? Are you okay?”

Oh no.

What the hell am I doing?

Throwing your life away for that woman again, answered his subconscious in his father’s voice.

“Adrien,” Marinette tried again. “Did I say something wrong?”

He was so fucking selfish. What had he been thinking, kissing her like this? He hadn’t been thinking, only reacting. She liked Adrien, and he’d thought that was enough, just for a little while. For just a short, sweet while, they could live out a fantasy.

But Adrien was a lie.

He was lying to her.

“I don’t know if I’m ready to trust you again.”

Ladybug. She’s Ladybug.

And Ladybug did not trust him. Why should Marinette?

She shouldn’t. I’ve been lying to her this whole time.

“Hey,” Marinette said, taking his face in her hands. “Come back. Adrien?”

There was such concern, such affection in her worried gaze, that if his heart belonged to her, surely it would break now. A piece of it did all the same.

This wasn’t fair. She didn’t deserve his duplicity when she’d done nothing but open herself to him.

“Marinette,” he said, taking her hands from his face and stepping back.

There was hope in her pretty eyes, but it was shadowed by fear at his reluctance. He could practically hear the thoughts going through her head, the excuses, the justifications, the questions. Questions that, fool coward that he was, he was not ready to answer.

“I like you,” he said, imploring her to believe him.

“I like you, too,” she said, her voice high and tinny. It didn’t suit her at all.

“I really like you,” he went on, “but…”

“Yes?”
Yes.

She wasn’t making this easy at all. No, it should not be easy. He didn’t deserve easy. And yet, the thought of losing her a second time, for good this time—for how could she ever forgive him once she learned the truth, no matter what she said?—tore him apart.

“I—"

_Just tell her._

_Tell her, you fucking coward._

“Is this… Are we going too fast?” Marinette asked.

Before Adrien could properly think about it, the crippling weakness in him latched on to that generous lifeline.

“Yes,” he said, wincing. “No, I mean… Maybe a little. Not that that’s your fault in any way!”

She peered at him, searching him for any sign. He could see the disappointment in her eyes, but it was a far cry from the hurt and betrayal Ladybug had shown him when she cried and beat his chest and cursed him for abandoning her like trash. There was still hope there, hidden just below her disappointment.

Adrien could not bring himself to crush it.

“Marinette, really, it’s not you at all, it’s me.” He cringed at that laughably cliche excuse.

Marinette, however, had a little more class than to laugh at him. “Oh…I see.”

“No—look, that sounded bad.” He moved his hands to cup her face, his fingers in her hair. “I _like_ you. So much that I don’t want to do anything to fuck this up. You’re so good and…” He averted his gaze in shame. “I’ve ruined so many good things.”

It was the most honest thing he’d said to her since they’d come out here.

“You won’t ruin this,” Marinette said, drawing his gaze. He was taken aback at the steel in her eyes—Ladybug’s eyes. God, even now she was tapping in to that endless reserve of strength, for him. “You couldn’t.”

“You don’t know.”

“I do. I trust you, Adrien.”

It took everything he had not to choke.

“And this isn’t all on you. Relationships… Whatever they are, they take two. You’re not alone. You can lean on me.”

_I could love her._

The epiphany was so clear and true that it rang out over all his muddled doubts and fears, his father’s voice in his head, the memory of her tears. He could love her if he let himself, as he’d loved her once before, a long time ago. She’d made the same promise to him as Ladybug, and all he wanted to do was believe her.
“We can slow down,” Marinette went on, oblivious to his inner turmoil. “As slow as you want, it’s okay. Just…talk to me, okay? That’s all I ask. Don’t hide.”

He laughed, hoping she could not hear the bitter agony hidden beneath. Of course she would ask for the one thing he was too afraid to give her.

But there was someone else he might have more luck with. A stepping stone, something to tide him over, help him build up his courage. He’d never had anybody like that before, and as it was wont to do, his stupid hope flared wild and outrageous for an easy way out.

“Marinette, I’m so sorry,” he said. “I have to go.”

She visibly tensed. “N-Now?”

Adrien wished he could punch himself in the face right about now. “There’s someone I need to talk to. I know it doesn’t make any sense, and I’m being vague. Please, just… Just trust me. It’s better this way. The last thing I want to do is hurt you.”

She looked like she didn’t really believe him. Why should she? He wouldn’t believe him after that bullshit excuse. But he had to get out of here right now or he would burst into flames and burn her up with him.

“Okay,” she said, doing her best to mask her hurt and disappointment. “You should do what you think is best. I understand.”

He hated himself so much.

“I swear I’m not rejecting you, Marinette. I want you so much, just…there’s something I need to do first. Please believe me.”

“Of course I believe you, Adrien. It’s all right, really. You should go, it’s fine.”

It wasn’t fine. He was hurting her, and she was letting him.

“I’ll call you,” he said lamely. “And I’ll get you a cab home, of course.”

“I’ll be fine, don’t worry about it.”

It was time to go before he made this even worse than he already had.

“I’m sorry,” he said yet again, pulling away.

She smiled bravely for him, and he reluctantly turned away from her to head back inside. The last sight he saw of her was as she leaned over the balcony, clutching his suit jacket tightly around herself and shivering, alone.

“Chloe, what’s wrong?” Luka asked her once they were reunited and she nervously fiddled with her cell phone.

She snapped her head up. “Wrong? Why would anything be wrong?”

He looked at her pointedly. “You were fine earlier, but ever since talking to your mother, you’re completely closed off. Did she say something to you?”
Chloe felt like laughing. She could feel a particularly manic one coming on, and it was only years of training in etiquette and abject fear of her mother’s judgment that she expertly held it back. “Let’s not talk about her, okay?” She glanced at her phone again—no new work messages. “Actually, I should really get back to work…”

They were at an unoccupied table a little removed from the rest of the crowd where it was quieter. Luka continued to watch her.

“No, you don’t,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“You’ve been checking your phone every thirty seconds. I have eyes, Chloe. Nobody’s trying to get ahold of you. Your staff is perfectly fine handling things without you.”

She frowned, not liking that tone of voice. “Oh, and you know so much about how to run a hotel now?”

His expression remained placid and patient, but she noticed the slightest thinning of his lips that betrayed his frustration. “She said something to you. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Back to that again, were they? “It’s not your problem, so just drop it.”

“Chloe.” He reached for her, but she leaned away just out of reach.

She felt eyes on her—her mother’s eyes—*don’t bring a tin pot to a tea party*. She could feel all their eyes on her, crawling.

*She’s just daddy’s little heiress, just the caretaker.*

Why should anybody take her seriously? *Just look at her.*

“Hey, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

She couldn’t do this anymore.

“I just have a lot of work to do, okay? I need to go.”

He grabbed her wrist before she could get away. “Stop lying to me. This isn’t you.”

Chloe snapped before she could stop herself. “How do you know? You don’t know anything about me.”

Luka’s expression changed then; his dark eyes flashed with hurt. “We both know you don’t mean that.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. Just because we fooled around a few times doesn’t mean you get to tell me who I am.”

“What? Of course that’s not what I meant.”

“Isn’t it?” she said defensively.

He released her. “Chloe, what’s happening? What is this? Why are you being so—”

“Bitchy? Mean? This is me, Luka. I thought you knew me so well.”
He narrowed his eyes. “For your sake, I’ll pretend you didn’t say that. You’re obviously upset, and you’re lashing out.”

“I think you should go,” she said, hating herself with every treacherous word that came out of her mouth, but she couldn’t stop now. She couldn’t face failure a second time tonight.

He looked at her like he was really seeing her for the first time—and he didn’t like what he saw. Chloe gritted her teeth hard enough to hurt, anything to outdo the crushing feeling in her chest as he looked at her like that.

“Are you…ashamed of me?” he said, tentative and almost afraid, like she’d never heard him sound before.

No, she wanted to say and pull him close, fuck what anybody, especially her mother, thought.

But she hadn’t even wanted him to come to this ridiculous party in the first place. Why else, if not because she didn’t want to be seen with him? They were from different worlds, as her mother so clearly reminded her. And really, what was she doing with Luka, anyway? What future was there with him? What could he realistically offer her, who already had everything? What could he do but bring her down, after all the work she’d put in to rise so high?

Chloe wasn’t sure when her thoughts began to sound like her mother’s voice in her head, poison in her ears.

Old habits died hard, indeed.

“I see,” Luka said, taking her silence as all the answer he needed. “Thanks for clearing that up for me. I’ll see myself out.”

He was leaving.

There was a version of this in which a much braver Chloe ran after him, threw her arms around him, and kissed him passionately in front of everyone. In that version, he kissed her back, swept her off her tired feet, and reminded her that none of the glamour mattered, that nothing and no one but the two of them mattered.

But Chloe wasn’t brave tonight, and he was already gone.

Chapter End Notes

Like Luka, I also thrive on feedback! Feel free to rage at me in the comments—I think I probably deserve it after this shit show of a chapter. *twirls mustache and sips red wine*

Also, for those of you who did read the sin, yea or nay? Honest feedback is very much appreciated, as I find these quite challenging to write convincingly and would really love to improve! We’re all going to hell anyway, so we may as well get there in the most elegantly written way possible.

Next time: Our dumbass heroes will learn the importance of honest communication and the power of friendship if the author has to beat it into them with a stick.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Our heroes receive a beating from the author's Stick of Emotional Intelligence, and the lovely readers get some kwami lore.

-or-

Yeah, yeah, girl power, blah blah.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chat Noir sat on his haunches before a crackling hearth trying his best to act natural—at least, as natural as one could appear unironically wearing a skin-tight, black, leather cat suit in a stranger’s house. His host, however, did not seem to mind as he returned from the kitchen with a cup of tea and handed it to him before taking his seat in a plush, leather lounge chair. And then he waited.

It was amazing how much more Adrien felt as Chat Noir. Aside from the heightened super senses that came with being infused with all the power of a supernatural (su-purr-natural) cat, his emotions and perception of self were also far more acute and raw than they were in his human skin. It was like going from imagining scenes from a book to seeing them acted out in full-color, 4K high definition.

Right now, his super senses were telling him to tread carefully around his man, even though he’d come here specifically because this man, Master Wang Fu, was the only person in the world he could supposedly trust. At least, that was what Ladybug—Marinette—had told him. She’d never lied to him outright, at least not on purpose that he knew of, and yet, Adrien was wary. Cats were skeptical by nature.

And he had never voluntarily shared his secret with anyone before.

“It is good to see you, Chat Noir,” Fu said, sipping his own tea and smiling kindly.

It did not escape Chat’s attention that the old man politely chose to use his Miraculous name, a small courtesy that nonetheless put him more at ease. After all, Chat had shown up unannounced at all hours of the night demanding to speak with the Guardian, and said Guardian kindly granted him leave to barge in despite his rudeness.

“It’s been many years since I last laid eyes on you,” Fu continued. “You look very well, though I suspect you are not here for idle conversation.”

Chat said nothing as he let his senses tell him what he needed to know. Nothing here smelled of a threat, and there was no one else in the vicinity close enough to hear or see them through the walls. Fu had apparently chosen his abode with some special care for privacy, considering his role. All signs pointed logically to trust, but Chat had a long and complicated history with the idea.

Also, this Guardian for whatever reason had never seen fit to reach out to Chat himself in all these years. Why? Surely he had to know what Chat had done, what had led to his separation from Ladybug for fourteen long, lonely, miserable years.
“You don’t need to say anything,” Fu said. “If you would prefer it, we may sit a while and enjoy the
fire. It’s quite cold tonight, though I fear it will only grow colder as the days grow shorter.”

Chat had no intention of remaining silent, however. “Why did I never know about you?”

Fu looked at him thoughtfully, but it was not him who answered.

“That is a question you should be asking Plagg, not my master.”

A small, green creature—a kwami, Chat was certain—floated toward him, his arms crossed. He
looked a bit like a turtle, bug-eyed and sort of cute, but those eyes were old and wise and full of
secrets.

*Plagg.*

Chat bared his too-long incisors, understanding. Of course Plagg would have known. So why had he
never mentioned the Guardian?

Well, there was one way to find out, and it was worth the risk he was about to take.

“Plagg, revert me,” Chat commanded.

A flash of lime green light later, and Adrien sat on the floor in his three-piece suit sans jacket, while
Plagg hovered, slumped over, and looked more miserable than he’d ever looked for as long as
Adrien had known him.


“Hello, Plagg. How nice of you to join us,” said the turtle kwami.

Plagg shot him a spiteful look. “Wayzz. Nice for you, maybe.” He suddenly materialized in front of
Fu without warning. “Old man, you better at least have some cheese for me.”

Adrien cringed at Plagg’s indecorous familiarity. Wasn’t the Guardian supposed to be revered and
respected, or something? But Fu merely smiled.

“Of course, Plagg. I remember your proclivities quite well. I already prepared a plate for you.”

He retrieved said plate from the side table next to his armchair, and Plagg was on it like a fly on shit,
devouring an entire triangle of camembert in one bite. Plagg tried to say something, but it only came
out a gooey, garbled mess of sounds that sounded suspiciously like meowing.

“You’ve been away for some time,” Wayzz said reprovingly. “You could have called.”

Plagg snorted and cheese literally came out of his little black nose. “Pah! You got your own private
line now, Wayzz? Catching up with modern technology, eh? Pollen would be so proud.”

Wayzz frowned deeply, and Adrien marveled at the sight—could turtles frown? Wayzz could. “Do
not mention Courage to me. She is not your concern.”

“Heh, I bet you keeping her locked up for the last century’s gonna sting just a tad when she gets her
hands on you, oh *Wise* one.” Plagg popped another piece of cheese in his abnormally large mouth
and swallowed it whole. “I felt it when she woke up. You know I can’t stand her.”

“Pollen and the Bee Miraculous were activated by Mayura,” Fu said. “As is her right as the wielder
of Truth. They are both in good hands with Pollen’s Chosen.”
Plagg’s expression darkened menacingly at the mention of that name—Mayura. “So that’s how it is.” He glared at Wayzz. “Leave it to the ultimate shield to bury his head in the sand and fortify his defenses while the rest of us’re kept in the dark. I see nothing’s changed at all. And you wonder why Tikki’s the only one I can stand.”

Wayzz narrowed his buggy eyes at Plagg, but Adrien had had quite enough of whatever the hell this was. “Plagg, why didn’t you tell me about the Guardian?” he demanded.

Plagg had the nerve to roll his eyes. “I saved you a world of frustration, kid. You should be on your knees thanking me.”

Adrien bared his teeth. “You let me believe I had no one! Not a single person in the whole world I could talk to about all this! How could you do that? After everything?”

Plagg was unmoved. “You have Ladybug.”

“Ladybug doesn’t know who I really am!”

“And whose fault is that?”

Silence.

Adrien could not help the hurt that twisted like a knife in his gut at Plagg’s accusation. Traitor, he wanted to say. But Plagg was right, wasn’t he? It was so simple, such a little thing, and it had somehow ruined not only Adrien’s night, but Marinette’s as well, and landed him here, intruding on the hospitality and goodwill of a man who was all but a stranger to him and did not deserve to be subjected to Adrien’s emotional bullshit.

“Wayzz, perhaps you could take Plagg to the kitchen for more cheese? It seems he’s finished what I brought out for him,” Fu said.

It didn’t sound like a suggestion to Adrien’s ears, and Wayzz, despite the clear animosity between Plagg and himself, nodded respectfully. “Of course, Master. This way.”

Plagg shot Adrien a look that seemed to him a warning, but Adrien could not begin to imagine what. The two kwami floated to the kitchen, leaving Adrien alone with Fu.

“I’m sorry,” Adrien said, unsure what else to say. “Plagg can be such an asshole sometimes.”

Fu laughed at that. “I would not expect the essence of Destruction to be the paragon of virtue and politi. It is nothing. Adrien, do not concern yourself with it. Plagg is wedded to his nature, just as Wayzz is. I imagine it’s quite a trying task, to embody one idea for eternity, never knowing much of anything else.”

Adrien had never thought about it that way, but hearing it aloud now, he supposed it made sense. Plagg was not a god of kindness or compassion; he was the embodiment of ruin and reaving. What did Adrien honestly expect from him?

Except.

“Plagg said I was worthy of him because of my resilience,” Adrien said. “Because I wouldn’t let his power destroy me, even as I use it to destroy the things around me.” He looked up at Fu. “Is that true? Is that why you chose me for him?”

Fu was a wizened Chinese man, though Adrien could not place his age. He looked thoughtful now
as tapped his chin. “Each of the Miraculous has a positive and a negative trait. Yin and yang, this is how we maintain balance in the universe, and within ourselves. For example, Wisdom is Wayzz’s trait. At best, it manifests as prolific knowledge to be shared and passed down, and at worst, inertia born of caution and indecision. We are all constantly struggling to achieve balance within ourselves, Adrien. Sometimes one side triumphs over the other, but in the end, it is the balance that keeps us moving forward and growing.”

“So what about me and Plagg?” He was almost afraid to ask.

“Hm, yes, Plagg the Pestilent. His trait is Destruction. As you know, resilience is his most noble manifestation, something you hold in spades.”

“And the worst?”

“Loneliness,” Fu said softly. “Destruction is at its most violent when it has nothing left to fill its vastness. It can become wanton, blind to everything but the power of ruin, even against the self. I know…you have succumbed to the pain of loss before, Adrien, though not by choice.”

“Oh Chaton, I’m sorry you’re suffering.”

Adrien hung his head in shame. “By choice or not, I remember every moment of it. It was me the whole time.”

*The power.*

Never had he felt so powerful as when he was Chat Blanc, stripped of the burdens of emotion and inhibition. Destruction was freedom, he remembered thinking as he hunted Ladybug like an animal simply because he could. It had made him drunk, until he didn’t care anymore, didn’t care that he broke her, broke himself. There was only the hatred, the power, the desire to see this world burn. He remembered it very well.

“In truth, I had intended to summon you after those unfortunate events,” Fu said. “But your father whisked you away to America so soon afterwards that I lost my chance. I was too cautious, and I made a grave mistake.” He cast a heavy gaze on Adrien, sad. “I am so sorry, Adrien. I failed you as your Guardian. I should have reached out to you much sooner.”

“Yeah, you should have,” Adrien said, not caring that it sounded bitter and callous.

Fu nodded in resignation. “I’m afraid that, for all the Wisdom I am supposed to embody, I am as vulnerable to imbalance as anyone. I promise, Adrien, I will do everything in my power to rectify my mistake.”

*That’s not good enough!* Adrien wanted to shout at him, shake him. Surely he could have still done something. This was the age of Twitter and Facebook, not the goddamned Stone Age. But Adrien caught himself—what was the point? What was done was done, and there was no changing it. Just as there was no changing what he had done to Ladybug as Chat Blanc. That was the real issue, anyway. Adrien was here because of his own mistakes, not because of Master Fu’s.

“Thank you,” he said, subdued.

Fu peered at him curiously, and his expression softened like he’d just realized something. “You’re really quite something, Adrien.”

“What do you mean?”
“Even after all this time, all that you have experienced, at your core you are still the same young man you were fourteen years ago. I was not sure when I tested you, but Plagg was quite adamant that it had to be you…”

Before Adrien had a chance to question him about that, Fu changed the subject.

“But I imagine you must have a great deal on your mind to seek me out,” he said. “I don’t know what Ladybug has told you, but as Guardian, I am here to provide sanctuary and guidance. I cannot, however, give you all the answers you seek.”

“You don’t even know what questions I have.”

Fu smiled knowingly, and Adrien wondered if perhaps he did. His chosen trait was Wisdom, after all. “I know you are at an impasse, and that you are afraid. In truth, most Black Cats of the past rarely, if ever, sought out their Guardian unless absolutely necessary. They were survivors, loyal but very independent. I sense these traits in you, too.”

Adrien ran his fingers through his hair in frustration, and a sudden memory of Marinette’s fingers in his hair made him freeze. What he wouldn’t give to feel her touching him again, holding him, kissing him. “Loyal, you said.”

Fu nodded. “Very much so. The Black Cats of old were often quite loyal to their Miraculous companions, but especially to Ladybug. You are no exception.”

Adrien smiled bitterly. “I don’t feel very loyal these days.”

“I see. Would you like to tell me about that?”

No.

But he did it anyway. He’d acted enough of a weak fool for one night. If he couldn’t talk to Marinette yet, then he would at least force himself to talk to their Guardian. And once he got going, Adrien could not stop. The truth poured out of him like vomit, bitter and vile on his tongue. He told Fu everything, about becoming Chat Blanc, what it had felt like, the power, hunting Ladybug and discovering her secret identity. He talked about Marinette, meeting her again after so long, his days spent teetering between desire and dread as he grew closer to the woman beneath the mask, all while keeping his own secret from her. And tonight, their intimacy, her raw, beautiful faith, how he did not want to shatter it and hurt her more than he already had, even if he knew it wasn’t fair.

“I see,” Fu said when Adrien finally came up for air. “So you’ve known Ladybug’s true identity beneath the mask all these years.”

“I tried to tell her tonight,” Adrien said. “But I just… I couldn’t do it.”

“Why do you think that is?”

Adrien sat back against the wall and hugged a knee to his chest. “Because I’m weak.”

Fu looked at him, but there was no judgment in his patient gaze. “Fear is not weakness.”

Adrien buried his face in his hands. “I just… I want to make her happy. After everything I’ve put her through, I don’t ever want to see her hurt again. If I tell her everything…”

“…Then she may reject you,” Fu finished.
Adrien could not bring himself to look at the old man. “Yes.”

There was a shuffling sound, and Adrien looked up to find Fu standing over him, a wrinkled hand on his shoulder. “Adrien, by keeping these secrets, you are not even giving her the choice whether to accept or reject you. You say you want to make Marinette happy, but happiness is a choice. We choose to be happy not in the absence of sorrow, but in spite of it. Without that choice, we are but shadows of our whole selves—hollow and easily extinguished.”

“So, you’re saying I should tell her everything.”

Fu clasped his hands behind his back and sighed. “As Guardian, it is my duty to guide and shield, not to lead and command. I cannot tell you what to do, nor can anyone. You must be ready to tell her of your own volition, for the right reasons—not merely because you feel obligated. It is not an easy task, and the reason Tikki and Plagg choose to keep their Chosen’s identities a secret for as long as possible. Unlike the other Miraculous Chosen, the Black Cat and the Ladybug are at their most powerful only when they are in harmony. To upset that harmony by involving their Chosen’s personal lives and dilemmas has, in the past, led to unresolvable conflict, even all-out war. I do not think this is the case with you and Marinette, but there are rules for a reason. Even the best intentions can lead the unsuspecting astray.”

So what am I supposed to do?

He’d come here for answers, but all Fu had given him were cryptic suggestions and more questions.

Happiness is a choice.

Adrien thought about that. It sounded so simple, for who wouldn’t choose to be happy if given the chance?

Ladybug might not.

She didn’t trust Chat Noir, and once he and Adrien were revealed as one and the same, it was just as likely that Ladybug’s suspicions would win over Marinette’s trust as the other way around. Which was stronger: Ladybug’s doubt or Marinette’s faith?

Adrien wasn’t sure, but one thing was becoming clearer the longer he lingered here.

“You’re right, Master Fu. I have no right to take away her choice.” He smiled sadly. “Even if she doesn’t choose me.”

Fu returned his sad smile. “No, I’m afraid not. And as your Guardian, I must advise you to prepare yourself for the worst. Come fire or rain in your personal lives, you and Marinette are Chat Noir and Ladybug, as you must remain until you draw your last breaths. This is the vow you made when you accepted the mantle of Miraculous Chosen. It is not so easily broken. However…”

Adrien looked up at him expectantly.

“Speaking as an old man who’s seen much and more of life, I’ve known Marinette a long time. Whatever her reservations, she is not the type of woman to give up all hope without a fight. She never gave up on you all these years, after all.”

Adrien didn’t care if it was premature or foolish; he clung to that sliver of hope like a dying man clings to his last breaths. He got to his feet and embraced Fu. “Thank you, Master Fu,” he said shakily.
Fu was surprised by the sudden display of emotion, but he returned the gesture with a comforting pat on the back. They made a strange sight—Adrien hunched over to accommodate Fu’s short stature, and Fu patting him gently as a grandfather might a young boy, rather than a man grown.

*Maybe it’ll be okay,* Adrien dared to hope.

Either way, he had decided. He would tell her the truth, all of it. If she wanted nothing more to do with Adrien, he would continue supporting her as Chat Noir, as he’d vowed to do fourteen long years ago.

And if she chose him, well…

*I’ll make her the happiest woman in the world.*

Marinette needed an intervention.

It was Monday, already two whole days since the party, which had somehow been the best and worst day of her life. She had not heard from Adrien, nor had she reached out to him, wanting to give him some space. She had no idea who he’d gone to talk to so late on Saturday night, but figured it had to be his therapist, or maybe his father. Who would be available to talk about whatever heavy issues were on his mind at such an hour? Marinette had no idea, and she did not have the fortitude to call him and ask.

And so, since her restless hands could not text him, they turned to other, simpler past times—namely, eating as many eclairs as her father could spare from his Monday morning batch. Groaning, Marinette realized with shame and horror that she had eaten her third chocolate-frosted pastry in the span of two hours. And they weren’t helping.

Manon and Alphonse sensed something was wrong when Marinette locked herself in her studio, that pink pastry box tucked under her arm like she was smuggling narcotics across the boarder and would shoot to kill if apprehended. They had made attempts to draw her out for lunch and coffee, but when Manon asked about the party on Saturday, Marinette chucked the empty pastry box at the door out of spite. And now she was out of eclairs.

*Great, what else can go wrong?*

*Nothing you can’t bring on yourself, Mari-nut.*

And now she was arguing with herself. Where was that intervention? Oh, right. Alya was still out of the country on assignment, and this wasn’t a phone call kind of conversation. And honestly, as guilty as Marinette felt for thinking it, she didn’t really want to talk to Alya about Adrien after Alya’s comments about him at the dinner party. Alya had Marinette’s best interest at heart, and she made no secret that she was willing to prioritize that over Adrien’s best interest. Alya could be critical, too critical even, and right now Marinette just wanted answers, not a psycho-analysis of her love life.

Which was about the state of her mental merry-go-round as she sat at her drawing desk, a half-eaten eclair in one hand and her phone in the other, opened to a contact she had been staring at for the last ten minutes in utter indecision.

“Tikki,” she said. “Look at me a minute.”

Tikki hovered over. “Yes?”
“Is this the face of desperation?”

Tikki, bless her kind heart, had the grace to look abashed. “Oh Marinette, don’t say that. I’m sure everything will work out with Adrien. You said he needed time, right?”

For all Tikki’s blessings and gifts, her ability to see the best in people was not helping right now. And she did not know Adrien any better than Marinette.

This is my best option, she reasoned. There’s no reason not to try.

If she didn’t at least try, she would implode. And so, Marinette finished off the last bit of eclair, licked the chocolate from her fingers, and pressed the call button. The line rang and rang, and rang, and Marinette worried that it would go to voicemail—or perhaps the call had simply been ignored and would ring forever.

But eventually, the line connected, and a skeptical voice answered. “Hello?”

“Hey, Chloe, it’s Marinette. Are you busy right now?”

The cafe Chloe designated for them to meet at was elegant and chic, one Marinette had never been to, though she rarely made it downtown unless she had a specific reason to go. Chloe was already seated toward the back, where the foot traffic was light and patrons had more privacy than at the tables by the front windows. As usual, she looked professional and put together, probably having come directly from work, but there were faint splotches under her eyes that suggested a lack of sleep.

“Thanks for meeting me,” Marinette said, sliding into the wooden booth across from her and shrugging off her winter coat to stuff in the corner. “I’m sure you’re really busy.”

Chloe sipped her macchiato, cobalt eyes observant but otherwise guarded. “You’re welcome. I am busy.”

“Right, and I really appreciate it.” Marinette nervously ate a piece of the lemon cheese cake she’d ordered, because three eclairs were clearly not enough sugar for one day. “I just… I thought you’d be the best person to talk to.”

“About Adrien,” Chloe said. “So, what’s he done now?”

“Why do you think it’s him who’s done something?”

Chloe gave her a withering look. “He’s always done something. I know him, Marinette. He’s careless.”

“Careless, huh?” Marinette thought about that. “I can see that…”

Chloe peered at her, and once again Marinette got the distinct impression that sleepless nights haunted her. Perhaps Chloe was dealing with some issues of her own. “What did he say to you?” she asked.

Marinette took a deep breath. She didn’t want to come off like she was going behind Adrien’s back or anything, or like she didn’t trust him—she did, more than he seemed to believe, and that was just the problem, wasn’t it? “The party on Saturday,” she began, tentative, “he, well, he sort of left…”

She began recounting what had transpired on the balcony, and Chloe just watched her quietly as she
listened. And as the words left her mouth, Marinette found that they simply would not stop.

“I must have upset him,” Marinette said, staring at her hands. “And I know you said he’s fragile, that there are things I don’t know, things you couldn’t talk about, but I just…” She held her face in her hands, momentarily overwhelmed by the force of her emotions. She sniffled. “There’s something he said he has to tell me, something…something bad, I think, but he’s afraid to. And I can’t help but fear…”

Chloe remained silent, and Marinette wiped her nose and collected herself after a moment, looking up. Chloe was simply watching her, jaw set, eyes hard and unreadable.

Marinette swallowed hard. “I don’t want to lose him. I didn’t realize how much I…” She shook her head, trying to clear it. “Please, Chloe. I’m not asking you to break his confidence or anything like that, only…ugh, I don’t even know. Maybe just being able to talk about what happened with someone who won’t unfairly hold it against him is all I really need.”

Chloe snatched her untouched fork and took a large bite of Marinette’s lemon cheesecake. She chewed like she had never tasted food before, and swallowing was an effort. Marinette could do little else but stare, unsure what to expect.

“You’re a piece of work, you know that?” Chloe said at last.

“I… I’m sorry?”

Chloe looked annoyed as she waved her fork absently. “Not to bring up our irrelevant high school days, but I remember you having a temper. What happened?”

“Temper? I’m not angry.”

“Why the hell not?” Chloe brandished her fork at her. “The guy you like leads you on, gives you every reason to fall for him, and then just leaves you hanging with some shitty excuse about being afraid to talk to you?” Chloe narrowed her eyes. “You should be furious.”

Chloe looked so convinced that Marinette started second-guessing herself. “I mean, I guess I’m upset, sure. But I’m more worried than anything.”

“Oh my god, stop. I’m going to tell you something now, and you’re going to hear me, okay?”

Marinette blinked. “Okay?”

“Nobody, and I mean nobody, loves Adrien Agreste more than me. I love him at his best, and at his tortured, dumpster fire worst. Because ever since his deadbeat mom walked out on him when we were twelve, Adrien’s slowly lost every other person in his life who ever gave a shit about him, starting with his dad.”

“His dad?” Marinette remembered Nino mentioned something about Adrien’s complicated relationship with his father.

Chloe’s eyes flashed. “It’s not my place to air out Adrien’s dirty laundry, but let’s just say that his mom leaving changed his dad for the absolute worst. The point is, Adrien has always blamed himself for his parents’ shitty behavior, and everybody else’s, for that matter. Moving away in high school after he finally started making real friends was the last straw. Why hold on to anybody he’d never be able to keep?” She crossed her arms. “He even tried to push me away, the dumbass. Money can’t buy love or whatever, but it can buy plenty of plane tickets to New York for visits. That counts for something.”
There was a pause as Chloe remembered something unpleasant, her pretty face twisted in a scowl. She averted her gaze. “We were sixteen, and I just happened to be visiting for spring break, couldn’t pass up an opportunity to visit my Adrikins. I caught him before…before he could do any permanent damage.”

The color drained from Marinette’s face as she understood what Chloe was trying to tell her. She felt tears welling in her eyes, and she clenched her fists.

Adrien, you…

“Anyway, I had a decision to make then, so I did. And I never looked back.” Chloe steeled her expression and looked directly at Marinette. “Nothing like the raw, ugly truth to make you grow up and start putting in real effort before it’s gone forever. I’ve always been a sore loser.”

“Chloe…” Marinette was not sure what to say.

“Like I said, nobody loves Adrien more than me.” She stole another bite of the cheesecake without asking. “That’s the whole problem.”

What would it be like to be so utterly alone in the world that to vanish seemed a better option than to continue getting up in the morning? Marinette had no idea; she’d always had her loving parents, wonderful friends and coworkers who supported her dreams, and of course Tikki. What kind of person would Adrien be if he didn’t have Chloe?

Maybe not a person at all.

Marinette bit her tongue hard enough to hurt at that terrible thought. For all the years he had been just a distant memory, she could not imagine her life now without Adrien in it.

“It was a long time ago,” Chloe said. “Took a while, but eventually he accepted that I wasn’t going anywhere, that I wasn’t going to leave him alone. He got better, got help, still is. It’s a process, and it’s a part of him. Always will be. I couldn’t convince him to get away from Gabriel, but I’m a businesswoman, not a miracle worker. Anyway, the reason I’m telling you any of this is because I’ve seen him all clammed up the way he’s being with you only once before.”

“What do you mean?”

Chloe licked her fork clean. “One girlfriend got pretty serious for a couple years in college, but…” She shrugged. “Let’s just say it didn’t end well with her when she started finding out more about him. Adrien’s had plenty of women in his life since then, but nothing serious. I guess you could say he learned from his mistake.”

“But that’s awful,” Marinette said, angry and sad and frustrated at the whole situation. “You make it sound like he’s afraid of intimacy. Like he thinks he doesn’t deserve it or something.”

“He is, and he doesn’t. But it’s also the one thing he’s always wanted, so he takes it where he can find it, in whatever form it appears. Ever since college, he’s had a bad habit of conflating physical attraction with genuine affection. Which, you know, fine, there’s nothing wrong with that in a general sense. But it’s hard to tell the difference with a face and a pedigree like his.” She shot Marinette an unforgiving look. “I understand the appeal, but I swear to god, Marinette, if there’s even a remote chance that you’re not serious, that you’re just in it to ‘fix’ him or some crap, then this is the part where I tell you to fuck off.”

Marinette’s pride flared hot and offended at the blatant threat. “Of course I’m serious. I’m not trying to fix him. Just because he might have issues doesn’t mean he’s defective or something, Jesus. He’s a
person, not a product—of course I know that. And I wouldn’t be here asking you for help if I wasn’t serious.”

They faced off, neither backing off for a tense couple of seconds. Until finally, Chloe tossed her fork on the plate with a clatter and leaned back. To Marinette’s supreme annoyance, she’d eaten the last bite of cheesecake. “I believe you.”

“You do?”

“Well, you wouldn’t be here talking to the heinous bitch who bullied you in high school if you weren’t.”

Marinette’s expression fell. “Don’t say that.”

“What? I gave you more than a hard time back then. It’s not a secret. I guess I should apologize for that, or something. Little late, though.”

“No,” Marinette said, searching Chloe’s guarded gaze. She was wound tight behind the sleepless shadows—why hadn’t Marinette noticed it before? “You’re not a bitch, heinous or otherwise. If I gave you that impression at all since we got reacquainted, then it’s me who should apologize. You’re a true friend to Adrien. I knew that before, but now… He’s more than lucky to have you. And I’m really glad I came to you. I think you’re pretty amazing.”

Chloe looked uncomfortable—embarrassed? “Well, that’s nice to hear or whatever, but I don’t feel particularly amazing these days.”

“Why not?”

“Oh, you know, just a surprise visit from my absentee, train wreck of a mother disrupting my life, as usual. Talk about a heinous bitch.”

Marinette winced. There was real resentment behind Chloe’s caustic words, the kind Marinette had luckily never known personally. She had a great relationship with both her parents, and she could not help but feel a deep sadness at the knowledge that both Adrien and Chloe, apparently, did not have that with theirs. Her parents were her rock, her unconditional support when she was at her lowest, the people who would have her back no matter how badly she messed up or failed. To not have that safety net, that source of unshakeable faith and love…what could it do to a person? To a young child?

Perhaps it would force them to make a tragic decision: give up, or find unconditional love elsewhere. As Chloe and Adrien had found each other.

Oh, Chloe…

Marinette smiled, finally understanding. Chloe and Adrien weren’t friends at all; they were a found family.

“Anyway, whatever, not your problem,” Chloe said.

“It can be,” Marinette said. “I mean, if you don’t mind sharing.”

Chloe looked at her like she’d suggested they go streaking.

“I admit, I’m a mess when it comes to my own life and relationships,” Marinette said, “but I’m pretty
good at listening to my friends.”

“You and I aren’t friends,” Chloe said. It wasn’t mean, just matter-of-fact. “It has nothing to do with you.”

“Well, maybe we should be. Friends, I mean. If… If that’s okay? Seems to me like you’d be a really good one, considering how Adrien turned out.” Marinette smiled. “And you know, I think I already mentioned I have a weakness for blonds.”

That got a shadow of a smirk out of Chloe. “Starting a collection, are we? You’ll have to do better than that. I’m not as easy as Adrien.”

“Oh, of course not.” Marinette eyed the clean plate between them and waved to a passing server. “Which is why I fully intend to prove my pure intentions with more cheesecake.”

“I suppose that’s a start.”

Hm.

Bantering with Chloe Bourgeois? Marinette felt ridiculously proud of herself. The server brought them another slice of cheesecake and fresh forks, and the girls each took a bite.

“Mm, why is this so delicious?” Marinette moaned.

“I think they put crack in it,” Chloe said, savoring her own bite.

“Just what every cake needs.”

They were quiet as they enjoyed the treat. The coffee shop was cozy and warm despite the grey, winter sky that threatened snow, and other patrons were huddled together around their overpriced lattes and artisanal pastries. There was something very relaxing about the warmth of this place, and Chloe seemed to be relaxing a little more herself. Marinette cleared her throat.

“So,” she ventured, grateful to have someone to worry about other than herself for a change these last few days, “your mom’s in town?”

Chloe grimaced. “Ugh, don’t remind me. I finally managed to get Daddy to make her stay at their house. She had the nerve to demand a room at my hotel—free of charge, of course. Ridiculous.”

“You said it was a surprise visit? You didn’t know she’d be coming back to Paris?”

“Yeah. Jessika invited her to the party on Saturday. I had no idea.” If possible, Chloe’s frown deepened as she dwelled on bad memories. “What a shit show that was…”

“Saturday? But I remember seeing you a few times that night. You looked like you were having a good time with Luka—well, when you weren’t working, of course.” Marinette smiled. “Actually, that reminds me. Luka and I have been friends for years, and even though I admit I was skeptical at first, I stand totally corrected. I haven’t seen him looking so happy since, well, since too long ago.”

Chloe tensed. “Yeah, well, don’t go picking out baby names. We’re over.”

Marinette gaped. “Wait, what? You broke up?”

Chloe was as rigid as a flagpole. “We were never really together, but if you want to call it that, then yeah, whatever, it’s done.”
“But… I don’t understand. You guys looked so—so good together. I thought—”

“You thought wrong, okay?” Chloe crossed her arms and sat back in the booth, closed off. She was staring out the window as if looking at Marinette would only piss her off even more. “It was just an extended fling. Now it’s run its course, and that’s it. I’m back in my world, and he’s back in his.”

Marinette was not at all convinced. Chloe was so taut she looked ready to snap at any minute. That was not the poise of someone who was indifferent to the transitory nature of casual hookups. And the way they had been together, even that first night at Firefly… Marinette did not believe for a second she was okay. But she also had a feeling Chloe would not want to hear that. “And it’s better that way, is that it?”

Chloe side-eyed her. “What?”

“No, I get it. You’re a successful hotel heiress, and he’s just a struggling musician. It would never work.”

Chloe blinked, suspicious. “…That’s right.”

Marinette gestured vaguely. “So it’s over, fine. But it was fun while it lasted?”

Chloe shifted in her seat. “Sure, I guess.” She shrugged. “I mean, yeah, it was fun.”

“What’d you like about him?”

“The sex.”

Marinette smiled. “Well, obviously. You can’t have a fling without good sex.”

Chloe narrowed her eyes. “I mean, it was more than just sex. Like, don’t get me wrong, it was good sex. Really good. He’s a quick study, and I have very little patience for training boyfriends as it is. It worked.”


“I don’t know, I mean, it’s not like I dislike him or whatever. He’s…”

“He’s...?”

“He’s good.”

“What’s good?”


“He makes you want to try harder at what?” Marinette prodded, fighting back a growing smile.

Chloe dropped her fork. “Just, like, try to be better. Than I am. Ugh, whatever, what does it even matter? We’re done.”

Marinette rested her chin on her clasped hands and let her smile spread. “Doesn’t sound like it to me.”

Chloe looked at her like she might be carrying some contagious disease. “Oh, really? And what does it sound like to you?” she said rhetorically.
“It sounds like you like him. A lot. And anybody with eyes can see he likes you, too.” And knowing Luka, the poor man was probably halfway to falling in love with Chloe, if his attention to her on Saturday was anything to go by. He’d always been something of a free-faller when it came to women, and Chloe seemed like the type to make men jump out of planes without a parachute.

Chloe glared at Marinette, but her flush betrayed her. “You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Marinette blinked guilelessly.

“You know what I mean. Getting me to say all those things out loud doesn’t make them true.”

“I’m pretty sure it does. And I didn’t ‘get you’ to say anything; you did that all on your own.”

Chloe slumped over the table, picked up her fork, and poked at the cheesecake crumbs on the plate between them. “It’s too late, anyway.”

“Chloe,” Marinette laid a comforting hand over hers and ceased her fork tapping. “He likes you. It’s never too late.”

Chloe opened her mouth to respond, decided against it, and dropped the fork again. “You don’t know what I said to him.”

“No, but I know Luka. He doesn’t spook easily. Whatever it is, I’m sure it can be fixed with an apology.”

“Not this.”

Marinette sighed. “Chloe, really, whatever it is can’t be so bad as to—”

“I told him I was ashamed of him,” Chloe cut in, her voice a venomous hiss. “That I was ashamed to be seen with him.”

Marinette resisted the urge to wince, careful to keep her expression calm and patient, but inside she was reeling. “You said that to him?”

Chloe smirked bitterly. “Not in as many words, but he got the message loud and clear.”

Okay, that was not great. Still, Marinette would not give up hope, even if Chloe clearly seemed ready to do just that. “You mentioned your mom showed up at the party, and you weren’t very happy to see her. Is that connected to what happened with Luka at all?”

Chloe said nothing, and Marinette knew she was on the right track.

“Did your mom disapprove of him or something?”

Chloe laughed, but there was no joy in it. “Disapprove, right. She basically compared him to a villainous peasant whose mere proximity to me would compel the landed gentry to get ahold of my entire family and put us all in the stockades.” Chloe closed her eyes and breathed through her nose to control her building temper. “And I fucking let her.”

So that was it. Chloe was not ashamed of Luka at all; she was ashamed at herself for even entertaining her mother’s bigoted views.

“So you don’t agree with your mom?” Marinette said.

“I—” Chloe grimaced. “I…considered it. And yeah, I know that makes me piece of shit, so go ahead
and say it. It’s not like I don’t deserve it.”

“I don’t think you’re a piece of shit.”

“I didn’t want him to come to the party because I was worried about what other people would think. People I couldn’t care less about except that they have money and influence and might move the needle on my social and professional reputation. Normal people with hearts and fucking human decency don’t think like that. Pieces of shit do.”

“You’re not a piece of shit,” Marinette said again, this time more forcefully. “If you were, Luka would never have had anything to do with you. And I wouldn’t be here right now. Chloe, look, you made a mistake. You’re human. I mean, I don’t know your mom or what it’s like to have enough money to fill a swimming pool, I guess.”

“That’s not how it works.”

Marinette raised a hand for silence. “You know what I mean. The point is, you’re just a regular person who made a mistake, and you feel awful about it because, spoiler alert, you’re actually a good person. You feel bad because you hurt someone you care about, and his feelings matter to you. And you know what? That proves that you really do care about him.”

Chloe looked at her like she’d never looked before. There was something raw about that look, like a cut wire or an open wound, exposed. “I was so weak,” she said, barely a whisper. “Not even my mom, just…just me.”

“So next time, be brave. Hey, you’re Chloe Bourgeois! You’re a total boss who gets shit done. And to be honest? Even back in high school, I secretly admired your courage no matter what people thought about you. Nothing could ever stand in your way, not then and definitely not now.”

Chloe gripped her fork so hard, her knuckles turned white. “Well,” she said, composing herself, “I do work pretty hard.”

“And that’s all this really needs: a little work. Call him. Tell him what you just told me. There’s nothing Luka values more than honesty, trust me. All you have to do is talk to him.”

Chloe cracked a real smile and dabbed at her eyes, but no tears fell. “Jesus Christ, I’m fucking tearing up over here. Too much crack in that cheesecake.”

Marinette laughed. “Yeah.”

“Ah, I really hate talking about my feelings. Gross.”

“But just think of how much better everything will be after you do.” Marinette waggled her eyebrows, and that got a small laugh out of Chloe.

“Maybe you should take your own advice,” Chloe said, giving her a pointed look.

“Oh?” Marinette’s smile was starting to hurt her face.

“Don’t ‘oh’ me, Marinette. Adrien might be bottling shit up, but I don’t see you jumping to tell him how you really feel about it.”

It was Marinette’s turn to take her fork in a death grip. “W-Well, you know, he’s dealing with some stuff, a-and he wasn’t ready to—”
“Talk to him,” Chloe interrupted her. “Because trust me, that guy is so worried about offending the fucking air that chances are he won’t be the first to start that conversation. A little work, your words. Put it in, and maybe you won’t have to come back to woo me with more cheesecake next time.”

Marinette bit back a smile. “Point taken.”

“Great. Now let’s get the check before I order another of these sin slices and birth a crack baby.”

They got the check and headed back out into the biting winter cold. Today was shaping up to be quite an ugly day, and nobody wanted to be caught outside.

“Hey, Marinette,” Chloe said behind the folds of her thick scarf. “Thanks. For listening, I mean. I feel like I should endorse you on LinkedIn or something.”

Marinette put a hand over her heart. “Why Chloe, you move me! LinkedIn, really? How thoughtful.”

She huffed. “Okay, ha ha, fuck you. Look, I’m not… I don’t have a lot of friends besides Adrien, really. So, like, whatever. I’m just trying to say this wasn’t a total waste of time.”

Marinette grinned. “Yeah, yeah, girl power, blah blah.”

Chloe stared at her, remembering how she’d said those same, self-deprecating words to Marinette that first night at Firefly, and Marinette laughed.

“You’re welcome. And back at you. I, um, I really appreciate you telling me a little more about Adrien, what happened back then… I guess I do have a lot to talk to him about.”

It may have been her imagination, but Marinette could have sworn Chloe looked a little softer as they stood together on the sidewalk, cars and a few pedestrians bundled up for the weather passing them by.

“Yeah, you do that,” Chloe said. “I’ll see you later.”

They parted ways, Chloe back to Le Grand Paris and Marinette to the metro to head back uptown. And despite the last couple of days wallowing in uncertainty about Adrien, where they stood, and how in the hell she would face him again, her steps were lighter than they were before. And she couldn’t help but smile, tentatively optimistic about the difficult conversation that lay before her.

She was just about to duck in to the metro underground when a loud crack resounded not far from her location. People all around cried out their surprise at the earsplitting noise, and the soft rumble underfoot that accompanied it. Marinette’s heart leaped into her throat, and she ran back out onto the sidewalk, eyes searching until they landed on a red flag flying high over a building a couple blocks away: the police station.

There was a huge crack that had opened up down the face of the building.

“Oh, shit.”

Marinette dashed into a nearby alley, quickly transformed, and ran.
Y’all I am the biggest sucker for positive female friendship and you better believe there will be a lot of that still to come. I wonder what Alya will think of Marinette hanging out with Chloe? Hmmmmm...

Next time: Adrien reaches out to Aramis, and Ladybug gets some unexpected help from a new masked hero during another coralized attack.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Nino knows best, Adrien has lunch, and Ladybug learns the heavy cost of leadership.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nino was seriously regretting taking Adrien up on his offer to work out together. It wasn’t as if Nino was terribly out of shape—no, he was pretty average, neither sluggish nor super fit. But next to Adonis—er, Adrien—any guy would feel a little, ahem, underserved.

“My ass is sore,” Nino complained after they finished their Monday morning workout and regrouped in Adrien’s obnoxiously upscale apartment to clean up and grab breakfast, as usual. “I didn’t even think that was possible!”

Adrien rolled his eyes. “Sore is good. Means you’re putting in the work.” He grabbed two Fiji water bottles from the fridge and tossed Nino one.

Nino caught it and grimaced. “Dude, even your water’s designer. You know what I love about living in a first world country? You can drink the tap water—for free.”

Adrien gasped and covered his mouth. “Really? I had no idea! You know how much I love my tap water with a healthy serving of sediment!”

“You’re such a snob, you know that? And it’s called a Brita filter, dude. Even us peasants can afford them.”

“Eh, blame Chloe. She swears by this stuff.” Adrien took a healthy gulp of water. “Guess it’s just second nature to keep up a supply for her.”

Right, there was that. “I gotta say, man, it boggles my mind that you and Chloe Bourgeois stayed as close as you did over the years.”

Adrien shrugged. “She’s family.”

Nino’s expression softened. “Well, whatever the reason, I’m glad you had someone who stuck around. We should all be so lucky.”

Adrien looked at him, stunned, and then smiled. “Thanks.”

“But hey, I seem to recall being a pretty awesome friend to you back in the day. And you may be intrigued to know that me and my mad skills have aged impeccably.”

“Like a fine wine, I’m sure.”

“I’ve been told I pair well with artisanal cheeses and mood lighting.”

“Hah, I bet you have. All right, man, I’m going to start on breakfast. Shower’s all yours.”
“Cool, thanks.”

Nino took his half-drunk Fiji water with him and headed to Adrien’s room to grab the small duffle bag he’d brought with his day clothes. He winced as he walked—goddamn, his ass really was sore. How the hell did Adrien do so many squats and still find the energy to walk upright? Nino figured he had a long way to go before he was a worthy partner. Something told him Adrien hadn’t been entirely truthful when he’d claimed not to have much time for the gym lately.

Lost in thought, he let his gaze linger on Adrien’s Spartan bedroom—king-sized bed, red duvet, sleek black dresser and matching armoire, a charcoal painting of a winter forest over the bed. There were no pictures hanging up anywhere, save for two frames on the dresser. One looked like a selfie given the amateur angle—it was of Adrien and Chloe at some beachy location, big sunglasses and hats and tan lines, and they were both laughing at something out of frame as they held on to each other. Nino smiled. Adrien looked happy in the picture, like he didn’t think anyone was watching.

The other picture was a folding frame with two separate pictures in it. One was of Adrien with his father, the latter of whom had barely aged a day since last Nino had seen him in the flesh fourteen years ago. Still steely-eyed and severe, Gabriel Agreste did not smile as he stood with an Adrien several years younger than now, both of them dressed in crisp suits at some formal function. Nino frowned; he’d never cared for Adrien’s father. That man was as cold as a Klondike bar—Nino recalled that he wouldn’t even let Adrien celebrate his own birthday with friends back in high school. Adrien smiled in this photograph, too, but it was a far cry from the joy captured in the selfie with Chloe.

The remaining picture was of a woman—a stunningly beautiful woman—whom Nino did not recognize. She posed alone, her smile small and enigmatic, as if she held a secret. Her green eyes were muted and dark against the backdrop of a Parisian sunset, and they glowed with a hidden warmth, perhaps for the photographer who’d taken her picture. Nino did not know her, but he could see the resemblance as plain as day.

This was Emilie Agreste, Adrien’s vanished mother.

Adrien had spoken of her only once to Nino when they were kids, and only in passing.

“She left,” he’d said with an air finality.

“Where’d she go?” Nino wanted to know.

“Away… Away from us.”

Away from his father. Away from Adrien. Nino would be the first to admit that he was not going to win a Nobel prize, or cure cancer, or even really do anything that would make a dent in human history one way or the other. He was no Alya, who was halfway to earning a Pulitzer nomination, if he did say so himself. But Nino had always had a flair for reading people more than he’d ever had for reading books. And despite his practiced smiles and courtesy armor, Adrien was as plain to him as the light of day.

Even now, Adrien was still looking for a way to hold on to them, these ghosts who had long ago left him behind in their own ways. But who would hold on to Adrien as he chased what wasn’t there?

Ghosts don’t haunt us; we haunt them.

Nino sighed. “Don’t worry, buddy,” he said, eyeing the younger Adrien standing with his father and trying to remember what happy looked like. “I got your back.”
He found his duffel bag in the corner and slung it over his shoulder. Something else on the dresser caught his eye as he was heading back out to the main apartment and gave him pause. It was a black business card embossed with a silver phone number.

“Hey, Nino, you want eggs?” Adrien called from the kitchen. “I’m making omelettes.”

Adrien had turned on his surround sound system, and Christina Aguilera’s Genie in a Bottle was playing softly around the apartment.

Nino picked up the card and turned it over. There was nothing on it except that flashy phone number. He wandered back to the kitchen and found Adrien wearing an apron, spatula in hand, as he leaned over the stove top and poked at the eggs in a frypan while singing along to Genie in a Bottle. Nino cracked a smile.

“Aw, honey, you’re cooking for me?” he teased.

Adrien winked coyly. “Of course, babe.”

Nino laughed. “Thanks. Hey, I found this on your dresser.” He tossed the card onto the counter. “Pretty mysterious.”

Adrien glanced at it. “Oh, yeah. That.”

“Don’t leave me hanging! What is it? Some, like, exclusive millionaire playboy club thing?”

Adrien snorted. “No, god. What do you think I do in my free time?”

Nino shrugged. “Hell if I know. But they make reality TV shows about that kind of shit.”

“Honestly, Nino, the most exciting thing that happens on any given weekday is our morning workout.” He cast a teasing look over his shoulder. “When you manage to actually haul your ass out of bed and show up.”

“Hey, don’t antagonize my ass. It’s very sensitive today.”

Adrien snickered. “Fine, fine. Anyway, that card’s just a personal phone number.”

“Oh? Anybody I should know about?”

Adrien flipped the eggs and added seasoning. “Just some guy who offered me a job.”

Nino rolled his eyes. “Jesus, Adrien, do I have to put out or something to get you to tell me? Who’s your mysterious suitor?”

“It’s not like that. It was just an offer to talk, that’s it.” He poked at the eggs experimentally. “You ever heard of Aramis Legrand?”

Nino blinked. “You mean, Marinette’s investor? That loaded hot grandpa?”

Adrien dropped the spatula and swore. Nino frowned at his uncharacteristic clumsiness. “Yeah, uh, same guy. I worked at his hedge fund while I was an MBA student. Long story short, I ran in to him at the premiere party on Saturday, and he wanted to give me a job.”

“Seriously? That’s awesome.”

“It is?”
“Uh, yeah. Why wouldn’t it be?”

Adrien looked uncomfortable. “I mean, I already have a job.”

“So what?”

“Nino, you know what. You know who I work for.”

“My point exactly.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Nino sighed dramatically. “Oh, Adrien. My son. Pull up a chair and let me talk to you about this magical thing called Being A Grown-Ass Adult Who Makes His Own Decisions.”

Adrien rolled his eyes and pulled out two plates from the cupboard to serve up the eggs.

“Let me ask you something,” Nino said, taking a bite of omelette. “Did Aramis propose marriage?”

“What? No, what kind of question is that?” Adrien said.

“Did he hold you at knife point?”

“Nino.”

“Did he make you sign a blood contract promising your first born?”

“Okay, I get it.”

“Do you?” Nino leaned forward, amused as Adrien did his best not to pout like a child. “Dude, it’s an offer. As in, he shows you around the office, treats you to a free lunch, and spends a day flattering your ego to get you to jump ship. No strings, no commitment, and you get to see how the other half lives.”

Adrien stabbed at his food petulantly. “I know that.”

“Well, shit.”

“Then what’s the problem? If you decide you don’t want to work for the guy, then politely decline.”

“I just… I don’t know.”

Nino shot him a withering look. “I think you do. And seriously, what’s Gabriel going to do about it? People get poached all the time, that’s just life. And again, it’s just lunch. What do you have to lose, like, in real life?”

Adrien rubbed his eyes. “Nothing I didn’t already lose a long time ago.”

Well, shit.

“Dude,” Nino said as gently as possible as he did his best to steer them away from that can of worms. “Look me in the eye and tell me you’re happy working for your dad.”

Adrien met his gaze. “I’m happy working for my dad.”

“…Okay, that was convincing. I kind of don’t want to know how you got so good at that.”

Adrien smiled his fake smile, and it made Nino’s skin crawl.
“Ugh, cut that out. You’re giving me the creeps,” Nino said.

Adrien’s smile fell, and he just looked thoughtful. And a little bit sad.

“You know,” Nino said, “you’re allowed to choose what makes you happy. And you’re allowed to change your mind about what that is. Nobody can make that choice for you.” Especially not your dad.

The unspoken thought nonetheless seemed to resonate with Adrien. “You sound like someone I know,” he said. “He told me something similar, about choosing happiness.”

“Sage advice,” Nino said with a grin.

“Yeah,” Adrien said, a small but true smile forming.

“Hey, I know it hasn’t been that long since we started hanging out again, but you know I got your back, right?”

“Nino…”

“I’m serious. Look, I know it’s been a long time, but I get it, with your dad. I can see nothing’s changed. Just, like, know that when you do decide to walk away, you won’t be alone, okay? Whenever you’re ready, I got your back.”

The silence that passed was almost tender as Adrien watched him, bewildered, like he could not for the life of him believe that a living, breathing human being could actually care about his emotional well-being. And it was kind of a nice moment, Nino thought. Until the music changed and Complicated by Avril Lavigne began blasting around the apartment.

“Oh for—you know what? Remind me to hack your Spotify and delete everything in it,” Nino said.

“Hey, chill out, Nino. Whatcha yellin’ for?” Adrien said.

Nino cringed. “Don’t you dare. I’m grabbing that shower and getting the fuck outta here before your bad taste incepts me.”

Adrien grinned and grabbed the spatula to hold like a microphone as he followed Nino toward the bathroom. “You’re trying to be cool, but you look like a fool to meeeeee. Tell me—”

“I’ll tell you where you can shove that spatula,” Nino said, dashing to the sanctuary of the bathroom.

Adrien was laughing even when Nino slammed and locked the door. Through the door, he could still hear the muffled music as Adrien sang along with the chorus.

He laughed to himself. “Well, whatever makes you happy.”

Ladybug raced as fast as she could over the rooftops to get to the crumbling Municipal Police headquarters. When she touched down in front of the building, she was met with civilians running and screaming in the opposite direction, and it was not long before she saw why.

A man—or what had once been a man—lumbered, as if drunk, down the broken steps of the station, swinging his too-long, clubby arms and cracking the steps with every footfall. He was covered in coral.
From head to toe.

Ladybug stared, horrified, at the creature, for this was not a man anymore, but a mindless golem. He had no eyes, no mouth, no face at all under the twisting coral and covered every part of him like armor. It slithered over him like snakes, alive, and crunched with his every step.

He was not alone. More coralized victims were emerging from the police station, two more as completely devoured as the first, the rest newly turned and only lightly afflicted. Ladybug did not understand. Even if there was a new coralized victim running around turning people, how the hell had the infection progressed so quickly on some of them?

“Mariquita!” shouted a familiar voice.

It was Professor Lopez. He was limping and bleeding from his thigh, but still mobile. Ladybug immediately went to help him. “Professor Lopez! What happened? What’s going on?”

He panted, his eyes wide with fear. “The coral, it’s attacking! The victims—Fashionista’s victims—they have woken up!”

“No…”

*How is that even possible?*

The first coral golem swung at a fleeing woman and sent her tumbling down the stairs. She landed in a heap, bleeding from a wound in her head and unmoving. The sight spurred Ladybug into action.

“Professor Lopez, get to safety. I have to stop this!”

He tried to protest, but Ladybug was already running. She threw her yo-yo, leaped into the air, and swung around hard into the closest coral golem. His shell cracked where her armored legs slammed into him, and he went crashing down. But unlike in her previous encounters with coralized victims, his coral did not break off and reveal a man’s shape beneath. There was only more coral, dark and engorged with blood, like veins. There was no trace of the man this creature had once been.

Her interventions drew the attention of another coral golem and three freshly coralized people who looked like they might have been on the forensics team examining Matilda Moretz and her victims. Gritting her teeth, Ladybug ran at them, yo-yo flying and fists swinging.

“Get out of here!” she shouted at the uninfected people still streaming out of the police station. “Don’t let them cut you!”

“Help us, Ladybug!” cried one police officer whose shirt front was bloody. “He’s gone mad!”

Ladybug snared a crazed coralized lab worker with her yo-yo before she could attack a fleeing civilian and yanked her to the ground. “They’re not mad, they’re just sick!” Ladybug said.

“No, you don’t understand!” the police officer said, his dark eyes glazed with fright. “The chief, he’s —”

There was another loud smashing sound, and the crack in the building’s façade groaned as more rubble fell. Chunks landed on a man in handcuffs who was running for his life, and he went down, buried. Before Ladybug could even process the sheer scale of violence unfolding right before her eyes, a man emerged from the broken double doors and dug a huge, clawed hand through the rubble. He dug out the buried felon and yanked him up by the arm, dusty and bleeding.
“No one is escapes justice,” he bellowed. “You will atone for your crimes, villain!”

“Chief Raincomprix?!” Ladybug said.

It had once been the chief, at least. Coral growths enveloped his right arm, half his face, and snaked down his left leg, like some kind of pink cyborg. And over his heart pulsed a glowing rose pin.

Chief Raincomprix’s lone visible eye swiveled to better see Ladybug as he continued to dangle the unconscious felon. “I am Chief Justice, and I will cleanse this foul city!”

“No, wait—!”

But his crab claw fist slammed his prisoner down into the rubble, hard, and Ladybug recoiled at the ear-splitting crack with which the man’s body hit the rocks. Dark blood mingled with dust and rubble as it flowed down the steps.

Ladybug’s vision blurred with tears as she shook, momentarily overcome by fear and grief.

*This can’t be happening.*

“It’s that rose!” said the police officer who’d tried to warn Ladybug before. “Chief took it, wouldn’t listen to Dr. Devereux. He just wouldn’t put it down, and now—!”

*No, Ladybug thought miserably. But I cleansed that rose pin, so how…?*

“You, insect,” Chief Justice said, each footfall a tremor underfoot as he slowly lumbered toward Ladybug and the cowering police officer with her. “You’re next. No one is above the law!”

“Ladybug, look out!” the police officer shouted as he scrambled out of the way.

A coralized lab worker had flung himself at Ladybug, and she was forced to dodge. Chief Justice roared, civilians screamed and ran for their lives, and the coralized golems Ladybug had punched her way through earlier were back on their feet and converging on her. Ladybug swung her yo-yo and braced herself for the fight of her life, one desperate thought ringing out above the rest in her addled brain:

*Chat Noir, where the hell are you?*

“Adrien, I’m so pleased you called,” Aramis said as he handed the waiter back his menu. “And so soon since we last had the pleasure of speaking. I appreciate your decisiveness.”

Adrien folded his napkin in his lap and clasped his fingers together on the table. “Not to disappoint you, but I haven’t made any decisions. I’d like to test the waters, learn more.”

Aramis smiled warmly. “Of course. All decisions are best made with a full belly and a good night’s rest, I say. But that won’t stop me from doing what I can to make your decision as easy as possible.”

“I’m sure it won’t.”

Adrien had taken Nino’s advice and called Aramis that morning on his way to work, and to his surprise, Aramis had insisted they meet for lunch today to discuss what a future at Legrand Capital Paris could look like. They had shown up at *Maison*, a Michelin three-star restaurant downtown, and had been seated immediately without a reservation. They had barely settled in to their seats when the
head chef-owner himself came out to personally welcome Aramis and his guest, promising to catch up for a drink soon as if they were old friends.

If Aramis were anybody else, Adrien would have cringed at the easy opulence with which he went through life, but there was a humility to Aramis that shone through his inescapable status and privilege. He was a man who appreciated the finer things in life, but he did not appear to take them for granted.

“You know, I haven’t been here in ages,” Aramis said, loosening his blue tie to get more comfortable in their booth by the window overlooking a stone garden. It had begun to snow lightly. “Christian, the owner and chef, is an old friend. We met years ago, while he was still in training. He made me dinner, and I wrote him a check halfway through the second course to put a downpayment on this place. He’s an artist, truly. Well, don’t take my word for it. You’ll sample his art for yourself.”

Adrien smiled. “You seem to be very generous with artists of all persuasions.”

“As we all should be in any way we can. Art is the essence of life, for what is life without beauty? And what is beauty without passion? Marinette, for example—she reminds me very much of Christian when he was just starting out. That passion, whether for food or fashion or any other creative pursuit, is a treasure. It would be criminal not to nurture it, when it’s so rare to find it flourishing naturally in our modern world.”

The mention of Marinette sent Adrien’s heart to pounding. He had been putting off talking to her about everything, again. Fu was right, he needed to be ready to tell her his deepest secret not out of obligation, but because he wanted her to know. And while a part of him wanted to share this with her more than he’d ever wanted to share anything with anyone, he continued to hesitate. He told himself he just needed time to find the right moment, but he wasn’t sure he would recognize it if it hit him in the face.

The aperitif arrived before Aramis noticed the tension in him, and Adrien forced himself to relax and focus on this conversation happening now, instead of the fantasy one that would inevitably happen soon enough. He was not here for Marinette, but for himself. And Nino was right, there was no harm in simply exploring his options. What did he have to lose?

“I agree,” Adrien said. “About passion being hard to find these days. In truth, it’s what I enjoy most about my current position at AF. I work closely with some of the most talented designers all over the world. Seeing them turn their visions into reality is a kind of magic. I like being a part of that.”

“Mm, yes, there’s a noble purpose in helping others achieve their maximum potential.” Aramis looked at him thoughtfully, those icy blue eyes intense and searching. “You know, Legrand Capital is much more than just a hedge fund these days. You can make money just as easily shorting stocks as you can recognizing and investing in the right people and ideas. As you know, I’m not as involved in the day-to-day business anymore, but autonomy will always be central to my company’s culture, whether in New York or here.”

“So, you’re saying if I come work for you, I could manage my own portfolio? Pick my own companies?”

“Why not?”

Adrien looked at him pointedly. “You don’t even know if I’m any good.”

“Oh, I know. Your resume speaks for itself, but it’s the killer in you that I’m after.” Aramis watched him thoughtfully.
“You said something like that to me before,” Adrien said. “What makes you so sure about me? I could just be showing you what I think you want to see.”

Aramis laughed at this, but it was not a happy laugh. “Believe me, it takes one to know one. You could no sooner hide your true nature from me than shadows could hide from the sun.”

Adrien wondered about that as their server brought out their food.

“Why me?” Adrien asked. “I’m sure you have your pick of the cream of the crop and no need for the extra effort to convince them.”

“In truth? On paper, there will always be better qualified candidates. There’s no dearth of smart, driven people when you reach a certain level of success and wealth. A dime a dozen, as our American friends like to say. But what I need is someone who sees beyond the raw numbers game. Finance is as much an art as it is a science. To borrow your words, there’s a magic to it as much as there’s magic in music or cinema. Anybody can blindly crunch the numbers; it takes vision to see why they add up. The best business schools in the world can’t teach that.”

“And you think I have that?”

“You tell me.”

Adrien wanted to think he did. His MBA internship had been very successful, and he’d be lying if he said he hadn’t enjoyed the fast-paced thrill of the game. But to be able to seek out leads on his own terms instead of simply following the ones he was handed, to find the future Christians and Marinettes of the world, invest in them, and watch them grow, that was something he could see himself doing. Loving, even. Helping people, opening up a space for them to fill with their dreams…

He smiled to himself. What could Destruction do better than carve out a space for Creation to flourish?

“I think I’d like to find out,” he said truthfully.

Aramis raised his glass. “Well then, I better give you a good reason to try.”

They clinked glasses, and Adrien let himself enjoy being wined and dined. If happiness was a choice, then he resolved to make an informed decision.

“Agh!” Ladybug grunted pain as she took a coralized punch to the gut from Chief Justice that sent her crashing into the side of the sandwich shop across the street. Luckily, her reinforced armor was sturdy enough to absorb nearly all her pain and keep her bones from grinding to dust, but damn if it didn’t piss her off. This was already the fourth time she’d been slammed into a stone wall today.

Unbelievably, people were filming the fighting with their smartphones, and a local news station had gotten wind of the commotion and sent a cameraman and a reporter to cover the scene. It had also begun to snow, lightly at first, but it was picking up as the fight wore on. There was something macabre about the snow as it moistened the stretches of blood and offal where Chief Justice’s victims had fallen, turning their remains to a slippery, pulpy mush.

The police officer who’d helped Ladybug before—Henri Durand, she’d learned his name—proved his mettle by taking charge of the other officers scattered around looking lost as their trusted chief went on a killing spree. He had them work together to escort civilians out of the vicinity of the police
headquarters and warn off people trying to film everything, while Ladybug dealt with the many coralized victims and Chief Justice himself. Or tried to, at least.

“All I can deliver swift justice to the villainous!” shouted Chief Justice. “Insect! I judge you ill-fit to protect Paris! Now, come quietly!”

He swung at Ladybug, and she scrambled as fast as she could out of the way. She barely made it with the help of her trusty yo-yo before he smashed his fist into the building where she’d landed. A huge crack opened up in the stone, windows burst, and somewhere inside a dog barked like his life depended on it.

Ladybug landed hard on her knees and threw her yo-yo again, this time ensnaring Chief Justice. He struggled, but the cord held taut. Something smashed into Ladybug’s back without warning—a coralized victim, this one a public defender in a tattered suit bulging with squirming coral fingers. Ladybug cried out and went down, losing her grip on her yo-yo and giving Chief Justice the slack he needed to wriggle free. She shielded herself with her arms just as the coralized lawyer came in for another swing, but a gun went off and the lawyer jerked erratically, stumbling back.

Ladybug whipped around and saw Henri, his revolver smoking as he leveled it at her coralized attacker. His dark eyes were hard, his expression pained, but his grip was steady, professional. He’d hit the coralized lawyer in the thigh, a nonlethal wound.

“Ladybug, move!” he said, already moving himself.

She didn’t need to be told twice and snatched up her yo-yo.

“What should we do?!” Henri said as they regrouped. “There’s so many of them!”

I don’t know.

“I’ll think of something!” Ladybug said, but it sounded pathetic even to her. If neutralizing the rose pin had not been a permanent solution, then what could be done? How could there be no other option but to put down the afflicted like rabid animals? And even then, she didn’t have the power to do that—only Chat Noir did.

If he didn’t show up soon, a lot of people were going to die today.

Ladybug forced herself not to panic. She had to think of something, and she would have to do it without wasting her Lucky Charm. Without Chat Noir around, she could not take the risk of having to revert while so many coralized victims were on the loose.

“We have to neutralize them,” Ladybug said, hating that this was her only option right now. “Shoot them if you have to, but not to kill. A bullet in the leg is better than the alternative.”

“Okay, but what about the chief?”

Ladybug was about to respond to that when she noticed Chief Justice going after one of the other police officers who was trying to help a skinny teenaged boy and his grandmother flee.

“Dead or alive, justice will be served!” he shouted.

Responding to his enraged promise, one of the hideous coral golems ran after the officer and her charges.

“No!” Ladybug sprinted after them, yo-yo swinging.
Henri fired off a few shots at the golem, but the bullets ricocheted off it, at best chipping the surface layer of coral. Not even gunfire could deter these mutated versions of the coralized. It was with chilling horror that Ladybug realized she was too far away; she would not make it to the kid and his grandmother in time. The police officer with them, a young woman who could not have been much older than Ladybug herself, was wide-eyed with fear as she fired her gun at the coral golem in vain until her bullets were spent. Ladybug threw her yo-yo in a last-ditch, futile effort.

*Ssshhing!*

All of a sudden, the coral golem stumbled and lost its footing. It groaned, a terrible clicking noise that flayed the senses, and before Ladybug’s eyes, its leg sliced clean off at the knee. It fell and tried to catch itself with a hand, but its arm slid off at the shoulder, and it crashed face-first on the cobblestone street. Slowly, the severed coral began to grow back, like vines wriggling free. They were coated red with blood, and the golem writhed in pain.

“What…” Ladybug said.

A droning sound like buzzing filled the air, and someone landed between her and the struggling golem. She was a blonde woman in a black and yellow striped jumpsuit, and she wielded a wicked, silver rapier, bloodied. Translucent wings folded over her back.

“Mindless and brittle. You coralized aren’t nearly as tough in person as you look,” she said.

“You,” Ladybug said, rooted to the spot. “Who are you?”

Her savior turned, revealing a mask that obscured her face and dark, blue eyes as sharp as her blade. “The answer to your prayers, obviously.” She lowered her weapon. “I’m Queen Bee.”

“Another insect for me to squash, fine!” Chief Justice said menacingly. “Vermin have no place in a just world!”

He came barreling in, another golem and two coralized people flanking him. Ladybug swore and threw her yo-yo, latched on to a metal fire escape beam, and swung out of the way. Queen Bee took flight, and they both came in hard around the backs of their attackers. Ladybug roundhouse kicked Chief Justice himself and sent him falling to his face, while Queen Bee sliced the coral golem from nose to navel, peeling it like a banana. Ladybug touched down and punched one of the coralized people hard in his armored stomach, and he fell back against the other one.

Chief Justice tried to get up, but Queen Bee was ready for him and stabbed him through his coralized shoulder, impaling him to the ground on his back.

“What the hell is your problem, anyway?” she demanded. “This isn’t justice, and you’re straight-up murdering innocent people!”

“Annoying flea! Justice may be blind, but I am not! Only I can discern the innocent from the damned!” Chief Justice said as he struggled against her weight and unbreakable blade.

“Yeah? Well, I wish I was blind so I wouldn’t have to look at your ugly face!” She stomped on his shoulder, but swore in pain when her foot connected with his coral armor. Chief Justice struggled to his knees, and she was forced to withdraw her rapier and back off.

“Their coral armor’s as tough as steel,” Ladybug said, backing off, too. “My suit’s reinforced, so I can attack it directly, but it looks like yours isn’t. Don’t let them land a hit you, or you’ll be out cold.”

Queen Bee grimaced. “Thanks for the tip, Bug. Feel free to share any others you have before I find
Ladybug frowned at that nickname, but it was the least of her worries at the moment. “Duly noted, Bee.”

There was no time to question what another Miraculous Chosen was doing here helping her. Ladybug trusted that whatever the reason, Queen Bee was clearly on her side, and with Chat MIA, she would take all the help she could get.

“Ladybug!” Henri came running with a couple more officers. “We managed to subdue some of the coralized victims. There are more inside, and survivors trapped in the basement. We’re going in after them.”

“What? No, you can’t. I only count three coral golems out here, but there were five who came in with Matilda Moretz, which means there are at least two more still inside. Your guns won’t work on them,” Ladybug said.

“But Dr. Devereux is still in there. My colleagues are trapped in there with those creatures. We can’t just let them die!”

“Then don’t,” Queen Bee said. “The fewer regular people out here to get in my way, the better.”

Ladybug had half a mind to tell her off—who did she think she was, coming in here and giving out orders all of a sudden?

Queen Bee took something from her ponytail—a small peacock feather—and handed it to Henri. “Take this. Keep an eye on it so you don’t get ambushed in there. Help should already be on the way.”

Henri accepted the feather without question.

“Hey, wait just a minute,” Ladybug said. “You’re not going in there, Henri. Not while there’s still a bunch of coralized victims loose in there.”

“I’m sorry, Ladybug, but I swore an oath when I became an officer. We all did. No one gets left behind.” Henri nodded to his small team. “Let’s go!”

“Leave them,” Queen Bee said, her focus already back on Chief Justice and his coralized minions. “We have bigger fish to fry.”

The coral golems Queen Bee had taken out before had reformed and were on the move again, as was Chief Justice himself. All around, Ladybug counted coralized victims in police uniforms, lab scrubs, suits. So many infected.

Her throat clenched painfully at the thought of the end, for try as she might, she could not think of any other way to stop them.

Knocking them down proved merely a temporary reprieve, as they inevitably rose up again, impervious to physical pain and force. Queen Bee picked up right away on Ladybug’s desire not to use lethal force. Her cuts and jabs were delivered to slow down rather than shut down. The three coral golems, however, showed no signs of slowing, even when she decapitated one of them. The head grew back like a mass of wriggling vipers, curling and fusing until they formed a new pink helmet. It was as if they were no longer human at all. And as the coral festered and encircled Chief Justice and his coralized minions, Ladybug understood intuitively that eventually, they would all end up like that in time. Isolating the rose pin had slowed the cancer, but it hadn’t cured it.
What if there’s no cure?

“This isn’t working!” Queen Bee said, landing once again beside Ladybug and wiping the blood from her rapier on an unconscious coralized victim’s jacket. “We have to take out Chief Justice, it’s the only way.”

“No, destroy the rose pin and we kill all these people,” Ladybug said.

“Then what’re we supposed to do? If we don’t stop them, they’ll kill us and all the survivors still hiding out inside!”

Ladybug glared at her. “And you just had to tell Henri and the others to waltz on in there, anyway!”

Queen Bee returned her glare. “They’ll be fine. Mayura won’t let them die.”

“Mayura?” That name sounded so familiar, but where had she heard it?

“She’s like us, Miraculous. Never mind right now, there’s no time. Look, when I signed on to this, I knew it wasn’t going to be unicorns shitting rainbows and glitter. Our options suck, but we have to make a decision, anyway. That’s what being a leader means.”

The snow was coming down relentlessly now, and Queen Bee shook her head to shake it out of her ponytail. Ladybug didn’t want to admit defeat.

If I do, I’m no better than a cold-blooded murderer myself.

Who was she to decide whether all these victims lived or died? She was no god. She was just a woman, unremarkable in every way.

Except, she wasn’t. She was here, when it could have been some other girl in her place. Queen Bee was right. She needed to make a decision.

In a last ditch effort, she threw her yo-yo into the air and shouted, “Lucky Charm!”

Scarlet light exploded, and a spotted sword that matched Queen Bee’s rapier landed in her hands. She stared at it numbly and felt Queen Bee’s eyes on her.

“Chat Noir usually handles this part, right?” Queen Bee said grimly, brandishing her rapier as one of the coral golems lumbered toward them, clubby fists swinging. “I don’t have claws, but my ultimate sword stings like a bitch.”

Ladybug looked at her. She was a young woman, perhaps of an age with Ladybug, and underneath the mask of tough airs and grim confidence, Ladybug sensed fear. Her sword hand shook. But despite her trepidation, she was willing to make the hard choice and bear the guilt in Ladybug’s stead, just as Chat would have done had he been here.

Ladybug clutched her spotted rapier to her chest and clung to the twisting pain inside. She wanted to feel it, every part of it, a small penance for what she was about to do. “Do it,” she said.

Queen Bee’s wings buzzed, and she rose in a hover. She lifted her rapier over her head and whispered her Miraculous chant, “Buzz Kill.”

And then, she vanished.
Adrien lost track of time talking with Aramis. They had quickly moved on from work to Aramis’s life, a subject which soon became utterly fascinating to Adrien. The man had lived in a dozen countries and spoke as many languages. He had Nobel laureates, artists, politicians, even princes in his shortlist of contacts. And above all, he was a man in love with all things beautiful.

“I paint—well, I shouldn’t say I paint so much as I fail repeatedly and learn too little from my mistakes,” Aramis said as he sipped a glass of Chardonnay that cost as much as a month of Adrien’s rent.

“It’s good to have a hobby,” Adrien said with a smile.

“Indeed. It’s been a life-long affair at this point. My wife was a painter, far more skilled than me, of course, but I caught the bug, so to speak.”

“Oh, really? Is her work featured anywhere?”

Aramis smiled wistfully. “I’m afraid not. I keep most of what she produced in her day. She passed away, many years ago.”

Adrien’s smile fell. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know.”

“It’s quite all right. It was such a long time ago, though I do think of her often these days.” His gaze was far away. “She was fierce, full of passion for her craft. The light to my darkness, if you know what I mean.”

Adrien thought of Marinette as she’d been on Saturday. Marinette in her fuchsia dress making him speechless, her fingers in his hair, her soft kisses, asking to have him.

“I have an idea,” he said, holding on to those happier memories.

“Ah, thinking of my favorite designer, by chance?”

Aramis laughed. “My apologies, I didn’t mean to pry. In any case, my wife’s love for painting was the seed that sparked my own passion for art in all its forms. Hence the hobby. All work and no play, as they say. The trick is to make work your play. I’m deeply fortunate to have found a way to do what I love, and enable others to do the same.”

Adrien couldn’t agree more. “That’s exactly it. That’s what I want to do one day. What’s the point of having power and influence, unless you can use it for something worthwhile? To do something meaningful? Especially if it’s for somebody who deserves it?”

“You would go far as a philanthropist, Adrien,” Aramis said. “The sad truth is most do it for the tax breaks or the reputation, or simply out of boredom. As in everything else in the world, there’s so little passion to be found. You have passion, ambition, and strong convictions. Most people only have two out of the three—I’ll let you guess which two. But I think you and I are of a like mind in this. All you need is a chance to cultivate that, a place that won’t inhibit you.”

“A place like Legrand Capital,” Adrien said.

Aramis laughed. “Well, you said it, not me. Here in Paris, I’m more interested in cultivating a venture capital project, something in the spirit of Silicon Valley’s Sequoia Capital or Accel. I want to attract the brightest minds in finance, and then I want them to forget everything they think they know. I want to teach them to see, beyond profits and losses, beyond ROI, and ask why.”
“I thought you said vision can’t be taught.”

“I fancy myself an exception to most rules, son.”

Adrien smiled. Unlike the last time, the diminution didn’t feel strange coming from him. “I don’t doubt it.”

They enjoyed dessert with coffee, and Aramis picked up the check.

“Aramis,” Adrien said as they got ready to leave. “Can I ask how you got in to this business? Most people I’ve met in your line of work are more, well…”

“Cutthroat?” Aramis supplied with a self-deprecating smiled. “Ruthless, perhaps? Don’t be fooled, Adrien. You don’t get to where I am without stepping on a few toes, I’m sorry to say.”

Christian popped out briefly to bid them both goodbye. He bade Adrien return anytime he wished, no need to call ahead. A friend of Aramis’s was a friend of his. Adrien thanked him for the delicious meal, and he and Aramis waited for the hostess to retrieve their coats.

“You know the difference?” Aramis said. “I’m a self-made man. Growing up, I came from a lower middle-class family here in Paris. Everything I accomplished, I accomplished on my own. No one, not even my family, ever lifted a finger to help me.”

“I suppose my situation is the reverse, then. Everything I’ve ever accomplished has been because of who my father is.”

Aramis looked at him, and Adrien got a sudden chill. “Then perhaps it’s time you made a clean break. I like you, Adrien. I think you’re exactly what I’m looking for in a mentee. As for compensation, benefits, whatever Gabriel is giving you, consider it doubled.” He put a hand on Adrien’s shoulder. “We could do great things together, you and I. All you have to do is say yes.”

Adrien had not intended it, but he felt the overwhelming urge to just say yes and be done with it. What Aramis was offering—a chance to make a real difference, to be successful and help people at the same time—was the kind of freedom Adrien had always craved. He was happy at AF, sure, the way anybody is happy in the routine of daily life. But Aramis was right: he would always be the son of Gabriel Agreste for as long as he remained in his father’s shadow.

Was it so bad to want more than that? Was it really the betrayal his instincts were telling him it was? What were those instincts, anyway? The knee-jerk reaction of a boy who’d wasted years trying to earn the love of a man whose heart had perished when his wife walked out on him. But Adrien was resilient—even a god said so, so it had to be true. He would never stop trying, not really.

But maybe it was time to try at a distance.

His phone rang, and Adrien checked the caller: Father. Immediately, his heart began to pound, as if he’d been caught in a lie.

“Do you need to take that?” Aramis asked.

Adrien hesitated for a split second. “It’s my father.”

Aramis raised his eyebrows. “Ah, caught out past your curfew?”

Adrien frowned, not liking that analogy. Still, if he didn’t answer, Gabriel would only find some way to guilt trip him later. He answered the call.
“Father?”

“Adrien, please tell me you’re not at the Municipal Police Station,” Gabriel said, his voice tense.

“The Municipal Police Station? No, why? What’s going on?”

There was a pause, and then, “Where are you?”

Adrien did not quite understand what was going on. “I’m at lunch with…a friend,” he hedged.

“What’s going on? Did something happen?”

Aramis gestured to him. “May I?”

Adrien looked at him strangely and covered the microphone. “You want to talk to my father?”

Aramis smiled. “Just want to say hello to an old friend. Don’t worry, I won’t say a word about the purpose of our meeting today.”

It was a bit of an odd request, but harmless enough, he supposed. “Hold on, Father.” He passed Aramis the phone.

“Hello, Gabe,” Aramis said with a smile. “It’s been a long time. I trust you’re well?”

Adrien couldn’t hear what his father was saying on the other end, and Aramis simply continued to smile.

“Yes, I’m with Adrien now. We just had lunch. He’s quite something. Bright, ambitious, a compassionate heart. You and Emilie raised a good one.”

Silence again, and Adrien shifted his weight. He wondered if he should not have passed Aramis the phone, after all. Surely his father would get the wrong idea. Aramis was rather famous in their world, and what interest could he possibly have in Adrien except to recruit him? However, there was admittedly something deliciously satisfying hearing someone as accomplished as Aramis praise him to his forever disappointed father.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Aramis interrupted whatever Gabriel had been saying, “I’ll be sure to have him home at a reasonable hour. I’m sure you’re missing him. You and I will see each other soon, I’m sure. For old time’s sake.”

He passed Adrien back his phone and winked. Adrien raised it to his ear. “Father, it’s me,” he said.

There was a pause on the line, and then, “Adrien, listen to me very carefully. Come to the mansion. I need to speak with you in person, urgently.”

Aramis had his own phone out and was scrolling through a news report. “Oh no,” he said. “It looks like there’s been another coral attack, this time at the Municipal Police Station downtown.”

Adrien froze. “Wait, what did you say?”

“I said you need to come to the mansion right away—” Gabriel said over the phone.

“Sorry, not you, Father. What’s this about the police station?” Adrien asked Aramis.

“The attack is still underway. This is terrible…” He shook his head. “Ladybug is on the scene, but it doesn’t look good.”
Adrien couldn’t think of anything else. Ladybug was on the scene. Another coralized attack. And he was here having goddamned lunch at the most pretentious restaurant in the eighth arrondissement while people were literally dying. He was going to be sick.

“Adrien, listen to me,” Gabriel said harshly.

“Father, I have to go.” He hung up the phone, jammed it in his pocket, and headed for the door.

Aramis was right behind him. “Going somewhere safe? I can give you a ride,” he offered.

Outside, the snow was coming down something fierce, but Adrien barely noticed it. “Thanks, but I’ll be okay. And thank you for today. I’m sorry to duck out on you like this, but there’s somewhere I need to be.”

Aramis put up his hands. “Perfectly all right. It was my treat. But do let me know what you decide, all right? I do have my pick of the crop, as you said, and I hate to keep people waiting.”

“Of course, I’ll be in touch soon. Thanks again, Aramis.” He waved and dashed away around the corner to transform in a nearby alleyway.

Soon, Chat Noir was leaping tall buildings and heading east. Up here, he could see the red signal flag Chief Raincomprix agreed to fly when he had something to report. He also saw the ominous crack down the center of the building, as if the two halves might collapse back into the earth at any moment. All Chat could think of as the biting cold and snow smacked him in the face with each super powered jump was how utterly useless he was, after all.

*Wait for me, my lady. I’m coming.*

He prayed he wasn’t too late.

The seconds ticked by.

*One…two…three…fo—*

All of a sudden, Queen Bee reappeared next to Chief Justice panting, her rapier glowing white-hot and dripping with blood. For a moment, Ladybug did not understand.

And then, they fell. All of them.

Like dominoes, the coralized victims popped and cracked and fell to their knees. Their coral growths were sliced to bits, down to the last wriggling root, and shattered on the ground. The coral golems toppled, nothing but Jenga pieces cut down to chunks of rubble no bigger than Ladybug’s fist. All around her, Ladybug watched them fall at her feet, leal subjects kneeling before their queen.

*The ultimate sword…*

It was no Cataclysm, but it was the most systematically ordered destruction Ladybug had ever seen, and without a single lethal blow. She was running, slipping on the snow-slick cobblestone, the cold filling her lungs with a biting vengeance. It was so quiet now, as if Queen Bee had cut through sound itself and forced it, too, to kneel before her.
Chief Justice was slumped over on his knees. His coralized arm, leg, and face had been flayed clean of their growths, revealing raw, bloody skin beneath. He was covered in oozing sores, and Ladybug flinched at the sight. Even now, slowly but surely, tendrils of cancerous coral began to wriggle forth from inside him, relentless. And at his breast sat the pulsating rose pin, similarly flayed to expose the raw heart of him, ripe for the picking.

“I’ll take that,” Queen Bee said. A lightning-fast swipe of her rapier, and the pin and the roots it had wormed around Chief Justice’s heart were sliced clean off. The pin rolled on the ground, pulsing like a true heart.

The coralized victims all around them fell unconscious, as they had before with Fashionista, and the glazed, crazed look in Chief Justice’s eyes faded as lucidity returned, however briefly. When he looked up, he was Chief Raincomprix once more.

“Ladybug,” he said, his voice hoarse and cracking. “What have I…”

He looked around at the bodies that surrounded them, and Ladybug’s heart broke as he understood the reality of what he had done. Queen Bee averted her gaze and clutched her rapier, which no longer glowed. The comb tucked securely in her hair chirped, and the jeweled bee curled up on its handle lost a stripe. Ladybug’s earrings echoed soon after.

“No,” Chief Raincomprix said, his voice shaking as tears streamed down his face. “Please, I didn’t…”

“It wasn’t you,” Ladybug said, her own tears getting the better of her watching this strong, brave, kind man crack before her. “You couldn’t control yourself.”

His tears fell freely, and he looked up at her, lost. “But I did it,” he said. “All these people, and I—”

“No, please don’t say that,” she pleaded with him. “You’ll be okay. They all will be. I just have to find a way to reverse the damage for good, that’s all.”

Beside her, Queen Bee tensed. “Bug, I don’t think—”

“Some—some magic, something, I don’t know.” She showed Chief Raincomprix her yo-yo. “I’ll purify the rose pin like before, buy us some time until—”

Chief Raincomprix smiled through his tears. “No, Ladybug. I don’t think so.”

No? What did he mean, no? He was just giving up? She could fix this, she knew she could. She was chosen by Tikki, the literal God of Creation. She could fix anything.

Chief Raincomprix reached for her hand, and she gave it. His other hand took Queen Bee’s. “Thank you, both of you,” he said shakily, “f-for stopping me. I’m so sorry.”

“Chief, don’t,” Ladybug warned him, sniffing and wiping her tears. “Please don’t.”

Beside her, Queen Bee hung her head. “I’ll do it,” she said, barely a whisper.

“Do…” Ladybug saw where she was looking at the rose pin on the ground between them melting a hole through the falling snow. “No. No way.”

“Bug—”

“I said no!”
Chief Raincomprix’s grip on her hand tightened. “Ladybug, please. I don’t want to hurt anybody else.” He looked beyond her at all the coralized people he had infected. “They don’t deserve to turn into monsters. Please…give their families the faces they know and love.”

It was too much to ask, too great a price to pay. It was not fair, to ask this of her. All those people—what kinds of lives had they lived? What would they have gone on to do if they hadn’t been cruelly unfortunate to end up here today? Would they hate her for this? Would their families curse her? She hoped they would, for it was the least she deserved.

“Stand aside,” Queen Bee said, angling her rapier over the rose pin.

But Ladybug stayed her hand. “No,” she said, and met Queen Bee’s gaze, blue on blue. “I’ll do it.”

Queen Bee looked at her with wide eyes, a far cry from the hard and tough woman prepared to step up at a moment’s notice and support Ladybug, no questions asked. There was fear there, sorrow, and a small glimmer of relief that it would not be her hand to deal the final blow. For all that she had done in Ladybug’s hour of need, this was the least she could offer her mysterious new ally.

After all, this was her decision to bear as the leader. Not everybody could be saved.

Ladybug raised her spotted sword and clenched her teeth. She spared a final look at Chief Raincomprix, willing him to understand, to hear her sorrow, her apology, her unequivocal admiration for his bravery. He closed his eyes and choked on a sob, and he smiled.

Ladybug brought down her sword. The rose pin smashed to pieces, and Chief Raincomprix fell back.

Ashes rose to meet the falling snow as all around them, every last remnant of coral disintegrated, as if it had never been there at all.

No more evil-doing for you, Ladybug thought bitterly.

Queen Bee took Ladybug’s trembling hand, and they stood there together over the bodies of the fallen, victorious.

Chapter End Notes

I just want to say thank you so much for bringing this fic over the 100 kudos mark! I am so humbled by your support and enthusiasm, lovely readers! <3

And thank you especially to those of you who have been kind enough to leave comments! It may seem like such a small thing to all of you, but it really means the world to me to hear your thoughts, reactions, and feedback. And it helps me improve and gauge what’s working/not working.

Next time: Shit gets real.
Chat Noir made it to the Municipal Police Station in record time and spotted Ladybug standing over
the body of a large, unmoving man. Relief flooded his system upon seeing her upright and okay. But
when he touched down in the square in front of the broken station house, the carnage all around gave
him pause.

There were bodies everywhere, full of holes. *Coralized victims*, he recognized the signs. But he and
Ladybug had agreed not to destroy the rose pins last time, to study the coral and try to find a way to
reverse the damage without killing anybody. So why were they all dead? And then, another thought
struck him:

*How could Ladybug do all this by herself?*

He was running again, toward her, and when she looked up, he almost collapsed right there at the
look in her eyes. Her tears fell freely, her eyes were red and puffy to match her scarlet mask, and in
one hand she grasped a spotted rapier. The other was clasped firmly in another’s.

“Ladybug,” Chat said, approaching. His chest knotted uncomfortably at the sight of her suffering.

Ladybug shuddered as a fresh sob racked her body, and she bit her lip. She turned away from him
and wiped her eyes vigorously. The person standing with her, a masked woman Chat did not know
gave her some space.

“Miraculous Ladybug,” Ladybug choked out, tossing her spotted sword into the air.

Her scarlet creation magic did its job quickly. The police headquarters knit back together, storefronts
were restored, and blood and dust were swept clean, leaving only the broken bodies littered about the
square.

“Where were you?” Ladybug said softly. Her long, loose hair hung in her face and hid it from sight.

“My lady, I—”

She looked up at him, and he flinched at the hurt there—the anger, the sadness, the *fear*. It all melted
the moment they locked gazes, leaving only a desperate longing. He was at her side in a heartbeat
and pulled her to him. She shuddered violently in his embrace, but he held her close and stood tall for
the both of them.

“You weren’t here,” she said against his shoulder, her fingers digging in to his arms. Her voice was
meek, and it didn’t suit her at all. “Why weren’t you here?”

“I’m sorry,” was all he could say. What else was there to say? He’d promised he would support her
as Chat Noir, always, and he hadn’t fucking been here when she needed him most. “I’m so sorry.”

A Miraculous chirped, and Chat looked up at their third companion. “You did this? You helped Ladybug?”

“Yeah.”

Chat set his jaw and nodded grimly as he ran his fingers up and down Ladybug’s back to soothe her. “Thank you for being here when I should have been.”

She nodded and relaxed a little. “You’re welcome.”

Ladybug slowly extricated herself from Chat’s embrace and sniffled. “Right, um, Chat, this is Queen Bee. As of today, she’s part of the team.”

“I am?” Queen Bee said at the same time as Chat said, “She is?”

“I’d be dead if it wasn’t for you,” Ladybug said. “And I welcome the help, if you’re willing to give it.”

Queen Bee pressed her lips in a grim line and nodded stiffly. “That’s why I signed up for this.”

“About that,” Chat said, glancing down at the man he now recognized to be Chief Raincomprix, dead. “What happened to not killing the coralized victims?”

Ladybug tensed. “I didn’t have a choice.”

“But what about purifying the rose pin? That worked before—”

“I said I had no choice! My purification didn’t work, the infection spread, and Chief Raincomprix became the new host. There was no other way to stop it.”

“But, I thought last time—”

“Last time only made things worse.” Her tears had started up again, angry and bitter. She looked away, ashamed. “I made a decision. It’s over. If you want a say, next time maybe bother showing up on time.”

She stalked off toward the restored station and ran a hand through her hair to shake the snowfall from it. Chat was about to call out to her, but Queen Bee held up a hand.

“I wouldn’t,” she said. “She feels shitty enough as it is.”

Chat frowned at her. “I appreciate the concern, but Ladybug and I have been partners a long time. I know how to talk to her.”

Queen Bee glared at him and was about to respond when voices drew their attention from the station. A group of uniformed officers emerged escorting a number of civilians in various states of injury. Chat recognized Dr. Devereux among them. She appeared unharmed but badly shaken. He and Bee both started toward them when all of a sudden, a blue blur shot out from the roof. They landed on the next building over, stopping only momentarily to catch their footing, and then took off at a sprint, soon disappearing. Whoever they were, they were not normal—normal people did not jump so high and so fast across half a city block.

“Mayura,” Queen Bee said, following the mysterious figure’s retreat.
“Who?”

Queen Bee’s Miraculous chirped again, and she touched a gloved hand to the comb in her hair. “Damnit, my time’s almost up.”

“Wait, tell me about Mayura. Are they another Miraculous Chosen?”

“Yeah, the Peacock. She’s on our side, and that’s about as much as I know about her. Looks like she helped Henri and the other police officers get the survivors out.”

Ladybug was talking with one of the officers and Dr. Devereux, while the rest of the group that had emerged began wandering around the square. Some collapsed next to the bodies of the fallen, overcome with sorrow and anger at the loss of their comrades and loved ones. Onlookers filming on their phones and news reporters followed by cameras also wandered the square, cataloguing the carnage. A couple opportunistic reporters were making a dash for Ladybug, cameramen hot on their heels. Chat bared his teeth in a snarl.

“Here come the vultures,” he said, going to catch up with Ladybug. Queen Bee followed.

“I’m fine, Tony, please,” Dr. Devereux was saying. “There’s no time. Ladybug needs to know what we discovered.”

Professor Lopez, nursing a bad cut in his leg, was clammy and pale from blood loss, but looking quite determined. “Fine, but we don’t have much time.” He indicated the approaching reporters. “We’re about to be swarmed.”

“What’s going on?” Queen Bee said.

“You must be Queen Bee, the one Mayura mentioned,” Dr. Devereux said. “And Chat Noir, good, you’re all here. I’ll tell you what I told Mayura.”

Chat tried to catch Ladybug’s eye, but she was focused intently on Dr. Devereux. Her eyes were still red from crying, but she’d managed to pull herself together and stood tall.

“Tell me there’s a way to stop the coral,” Ladybug said, almost pleading.

Dr. Devereux looked grim. “There isn’t. It spreads very much like a cancer. Radiation destroys it, but it spreads so fast that it inevitably returns. I’ve never seen anything so virulent.” She glanced at Chat. “Whatever you did before, modern science hasn’t progressed enough to replicate.”

No shit.

“So even my sword didn’t do anything,” Queen Bee said.

“The only thing that works is to destroy the source,” Dr. Devereux confirmed. “I didn’t want to believe it. I should have listened to Chief Raincomprix when he insisted.” She averted her gaze in shame. “Perhaps I could have prevented all this.”

“He wanted to destroy it?” Ladybug said. “The chief did?”

“Yeah, he kept talking about it,” Henri the police officer confirmed. “Spent so much time just looking at it. I didn’t think anything of it. Chief always got invested in his cases. He cares—cared so much.”

“He wasn’t just looking at it,” Professor Lopez said. “It was calling to him.”
“What does that mean?” Queen Bee said.

Professor Lopez and Dr. Devereux shared a significant look.

“What?” Ladybug said. “What did you find out?”

Professor Lopez looked very grim. “The coral, it’s one organism—one mind. This is the only way I explain why the host is able to command the other coralized victims.”

“You mean, like, a hive mind?” Queen Bee said.

“There are a number of similar natural phenomena—entomopathogens, for example. There is a fungus that infects ants, forces them to behave unnaturally, and coopts their bodies to grow spores. This process is fatal, of course. There are many more examples found in nature,” Professor Lopez explained. “But in coral… I have never seen anything quite like this.”

“So the coral is mind controlling the coralized victims?” Chat asked.

Queen Bee shuddered. “Ugh, gross.”

“Exactly. And Chief Raincomprix was its latest victim. The coral called to him, and he answered.”

“What does that mean?” Chat asked.

“The coral emits a radiation wave of its own,” Dr. Devereux explained. “It was most subtle after you first brought it to us for examination.”

“After I purified it,” Ladybug said.

“Yes. The radiation only grew stronger in time, until it got a response.”

*So the only way to stop it is to destroy it and anyone infected.*

“So even my ultimate power isn’t strong enough to neutralize it,” Ladybug said, more to herself than to anybody else. She clenched her fists at her sides, and her earrings gave another beep.

“Why Chief Raincomprix?” Queen Bee asked. “Why not you? Or anybody else who was exposed to it?”

Before Dr. Devereux could answer that, fast footsteps approached and several news reporters with cameras surrounded the group.

“Ladybug!” said one female reporter. “Can you confirm that Chief Raincomprix was the culprit behind these latest murders?”

“Is it true that you kept Fashionista here at the police headquarters instead of finishing her off last time? Is that why the murders started up again?” asked another reporter.

“Hey, everybody back away,” Henri said. He and a couple other officers attempted to push back the reporters and their cameras, but there were a lot of them, and they were pushy.

“Is this a new hero? What do you call yourself?” One of the reporters shoved his camera in Queen Bee’s face.

“I’m Queen Bee. Get that camera out of my face unless you want it back in pieces.” Queen Bee put a threatening hand on the hilt of her rapier, and the cameraman withdrew immediately.
“Chat Noir!” asked the first reporter. “You were missing for the fight. How does it feel to be replaced by Queen Bee?” She shoved her microphone at Chat’s face, and he flinched.

“I—what?” he said.

“Chat Noir, are you and Ladybug no longer partners? Is that the reason you decided not to show up today to help?”

“Ladybug! What can you tell the families of those coralized victims you executed today?”

Ladybug covered her mouth in horror, and that was the last straw. Chat snatched the microphone from the reporter who’d just asked Ladybug that question and crushed it with his bare paw. The reporter gasped and scrambled to get away from Chat’s violent outburst.

“You want a statement?” Chat said, glaring at the cameras all turned to him now. “Ladybug made a hard call today, and if she hadn’t, the coralized victims would still be loose in the streets claiming even more victims.”

“But does that justify putting them down like animals?” another reporter asked, brave. “You may have super powers, but who gave you the power to judge who lives and who dies?”

“What? It’s not like that at all! Who’re you to judge? You’d all be dead if it wasn’t for Ladybug.”

“That’s enough!” Ladybug shouted, here eyes wide and fearful. “Please, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Dr. Devereux pushed her way forward. “My name is Dr. Rochelle Devereux. I’ve been working with the police studying the coral murders. I’d be happy to take your questions.”

The cameras all angled to Dr. Devereux and Professor Lopez, who began fielding questions with the practiced professionalism of those used to dealing with reporters.

Ladybug’s and Queen Bee’s Miraculous chirped again, twice this time. They were out of time.

“We should go,” Queen Bee said, already turning away.

Ladybug nodded numbly. “Yeah. There’s nothing more we can do here.”

“Ladybug, wait.” Chat reached for her, but she evaded his grasp.

“Not now, Chat.” She cast him a wounded glance.

“But, my lady, I—”

“I don’t have time for you right now!” She grimaced and looked away, ashamed. “I’m sorry, I just really have to go.”

Queen Bee had already taken off, and Chat could only watch as Ladybug swung her yo-yo and disappeared over the roof of a nearby building. Chat bared his teeth in anger—anger at her dismissal, at this hopeless situation, at himself.

Most of all, at himself.

I broke my vow.

He pushed past the reporters, extended his staff, and launched himself into the air. It was still snowing, but the flakes melted on his cheeks as he ran, barely felt. There was a twisting ache in his
chest like a knot, pulsing with every frantic beat of his heart. He ran faster, leaped higher, pushed himself beyond his limits, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not outrun this incandescent agony.

*I failed her.*

All he had ever done was fail her, as Chat Noir and as Adrien. She could have died today because he wasn’t there, because he’d put his capricious professional aspirations first. How could he have been so selfish? She was waiting for an explanation from him, and he was avoiding her like a child. If it hadn’t been for Queen Bee, Ladybug could be… Marinette would have…

He wanted to see her. He wanted to comfort her. Even strong and brave, Ladybug—*Marinette*—was only human. The reporters’ accusations had snapped something in her, Chat could see it plain as day. She was suffering, and she was all alone. He hadn’t been there to ease her burden, and now she was cracking under the weight of it.

He could just find her at her apartment, surely that was where she’d gone. But when he slowed, realizing his legs had already carried him there without him realizing it, the window was dark. No one was home. Where could she have gone? He knew Alya was out of town on assignment, so that couldn’t be it.

*Her parents’ bakery.*

That had to be it. Yes, he would find her there, he was sure of it. He would find her, apologize for failing her yet again, and tell her everything. He would make this right, whatever it took. He would prove he was committed to earning back her trust once and for all.

By the time Chat made it to the bakery, the snow had begun to stick to every available surface, fluffy and thick. He nearly slipped a handful of times and had to slow down, but eventually he landed on the roof of the building across the street from the Dupain-Cheng bakery. People moved inside on the third floor, so he leaped to the fire escape and crouched by the window.

Inside, he found Marinette, just as he knew he would. She was sitting on the couch with her mother, Sabine, while her father, Tom, returned from the small kitchen with a tray carrying three steaming mugs of hot chocolate. Chat pressed a paw to the window pane, careful to remain out of sight. He would just have to wait until she left or retreated to her old room upstairs to approach her. For now, he lingered and watched them, his sensitive hearing able to pick up on their conversation even through the closed window.

“I’m so sorry for coming over like this out of the blue,” Marinette was saying. She fist the blanket over her lap and sat rigidly, uncomfortable.

“Honey, there’s nothing to apologize for.” Sabine soothed her with a hand on her back.

Tom sat down on Marinette’s other side and put his huge arm around her. “Your mother’s right. We’re glad you came. In fact, you should stay with us for a few days. I’d sleep better knowing you were safe, what with these horrific coral murders going on.”

Sabine took a tissue from the box on the coffee table and dabbed her eyes. “I just can’t believe it. All those poor people, just gone. And Roger was the gentlest, kindest man. How could this happen?”

Marinette shrank into the couch and her father’s embrace. “Yeah,” was all she could manage.

But Chat saw her pain clearly, even if her parents did not. The guilt, the remorse, the anger. It was all over her face, try as she might to hide it. He bared his teeth, hating that look on her. If her parents
had any idea what she was going through, how alone she felt, they wouldn’t be so insensitive about what had happened. But how could they? No one knew the truth. No one except for Chat.

“Poor Ladybug,” Tom said. “The news cameras caught it all. I just can’t believe she had to take all that on her shoulders alone. She’s so young.”

“Yes, it’s not fair,” Sabine agreed. “No one should have to make such an impossible choice. I’m just glad she has that new hero, Queen Bee, helping her. And Chat Noir, of course.”

“No,” Marinette said. “Chat Noir wasn’t there today.”

The ache in Chat’s chest twisted, and the pressure from his claws cracked the window glass. He withdrew before Marinette and her parents noticed him and pressed his back against the stone wall, breathing hard. He could still hear them talking.

“Well, either way, I’m glad it’s over,” Sabine said. “As soon as I saw the news, I was so worried about you, honey!”

“I’m fine, Mom,” Marinette said. “I wasn’t there.”

“We know,” said Tom, “but all the same. We want to know you’re safe. We love you, you know.”

It got quiet then, and Chat’s curiosity got the better of him. He chanced another look in the window. Marinette was hugging her father and sobbing into his broad shoulder while her mother rubbed her back. She was shaking like a leaf, so small in Tom’s arms.

“I love you guys, too,” she said, her voice cracking with emotion. “I love you so much, and I’m so, so sorry.”

“Oh honey,” Sabine said, wiping her own tears. “It’s all right, it’s all going to be all right, you’ll see. We’ll all pull through this together.”

“Shh,” Tom said. He wrapped his arms around Sabine and held them both, rocking gently.

Chat watched the intimate moment, unable to look away. The longer he watched them together like that, the uglier the pain in his chest became. It clenched and warped, a creature waking from slumber, hungry. He recognized the shape of it now.

Marinette wasn’t alone at all. This was her sanctuary, the place she retreated to when she was at her lowest, and her parents welcomed her with open arms and loving hearts. Chat Noir—Adrien did not have this. He hadn’t even recognized it until it was staring him in the face.

And he envied her for it.

He pressed his claws to the cracks in the window pane and felt the agony of this loneliness wash over him. I was an old friend, tired and true, but the years had tempered it. Adrien Agreste had so many privileges that others would never know—wealth, status, looks, connections—but he was looking at the one he could never have, for it had been lost to him the day his mother left and took the pieces of his father’s broken heart with her. But Marinette…

_How could I take that from her?_

He shouldn’t be here. He’d thought telling her everything now, after what happened at the police station, would fix everything. To know she wasn’t alone, that he understood every part of her, that he was the same as her, would be catharsis. It was all she wanted, all she had asked of him that night.
No, he thought as he watched her with her parents, it’s all I want.

Chat had been selfish enough for one day.

So he slipped away, a shadow in the falling snow, fading into the grey, Parisian evening. Never seen, and not missed.

It was dark when Chat arrived back at his apartment. He let himself inside through the balcony door, easily scaling the seven stories to his floor. He was in a black mood and had every intention of raiding his liquor cabinet after he fed Plagg. But the moment he slid his balcony door shut behind him, he froze. His senses were on high alert and blaring—something was not right.

He was not alone.

Green cat eyes adjusted easily to the murky darkness of the quiet apartment, and he peered over his shoulder to the living room. A figure sat on the sofa, arms and legs crossed, and looked up at him. The dim moonlight caught the glare of his glasses. Chat could smell him from the across the room.

“What are you doing here?” he growled.

Gabriel rose and approached him. “I told you to come to the mansion hours ago.”

Chat bared his teeth, and his cat ears flattened over his head. Gabriel had known his secret for years, ever since that fateful night fourteen years ago. They never spoke of it, Adrien having all but given up being Chat Noir while he was living in America. Without Ladybug or even Hawk Moth around, there was no point in being Chat Noir. It was only recently, when the coral murders had started up, that Adrien donned his mask anew, and Gabriel had been relentlessly hounding him to stop before he got himself killed.

Gabriel glared at him, icy blue eyes unforgiving. “You went to the police station.”

“Of course I did, I’m Chat Noir,” Chat said. “It’s my job.”

“You deliberately disobeyed me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Father. Have you come to discipline me?”

Gabriel stood opposite him. They were of a height, but unlike Adrien, Chat towered confidently before him. Despite Gabriel knowing his identity, Chat had always felt close to invincible in the mask, as if Adrien were nothing but a shadow of another’s life, another’s fear. Gabriel knew it, too, and stopped a few paces from him, out of arm’s reach.

“Often I wonder if some discipline might do you some good,” Gabriel said venomously. “This is your life, Adrien.”

Chat advanced a pace, and Gabriel tensed but held his ground. “I’m not Adrien when I wear this mask. Don’t presume to address me so informally.”

Impossibly, Gabriel’s icy gaze turned icier. “In or out of the mask, you’re still my son.”

Chat held his tongue. Somehow, Gabriel always knew what to say to dismantle him, no matter how
dour his mood. He thought of Marinette, safe in the arms of her own loving father, and the pang of bitter jealousy he’d felt watching them together. And despite everything, the shadow of Adrien hidden beneath Chat’s mask cried out desperately to give Gabriel a chance—what did it matter if this one would inevitably be ruined, just like all the others before? At least for a little while, they could pretend.

“I know that,” Chat said.

Gabriel sensed the lull in Chat’s hostility and cautiously took a step closer. “You’re my son, and I only want you to be safe. Your life means something to me.”

Chat looked at him, half in shadow and half in moonlight. It was like looking through the filter of a lucid dream, that moment between worlds just before waking, where fantasy is vivid and reality is just an idea. “I know,” he said.

“Good,” Gabriel said. “Which is why I think it’s time you gave up your Miraculous.”

Adrien would have stared dumbly, would have questioned Gabriel—why? What reason could he have to ask such a thing? He had asked before, of course, even begged, but backed off when Adrien had assured him he had no further reason to become Chat Noir, until now. Adrien would have protested, would have argued, and eventually, he may even have agreed to some sort of compromise, especially after the utter failure of a day he’d had. After all, Gabriel was his father, and Adrien was his only son. Who could blame a father for wanting to see his son safe?

But Adrien was not here.

Chat bared his teeth, exposing too-long incisors, and snarled, “You must be joking.”

“Adrien, listen to me. You don’t understand—”

Chat was on him faster than the human eye could have detected. His claws were snug around Gabriel’s throat as he pinned him to the wall. “I understand that you just tried to manipulate my feelings to get what you want.”

Gabriel closed his fingers around Chat’s wrist, but he did not struggle, and he showed no fear—only supreme frustration. “Adrien, don’t—”

“I understand that no matter how many times I fall for it, it gets me every fucking time.”

Gabriel struggled more, but his efforts were in vain against Chat’s super strength. “You’re misunderstanding. If you’d just let me—”

“What I don’t understand,” Chat all but hissed in his face, “is why you even bother anymore. I know it’s all a farce. I know you don’t love me. Maybe you did once, before Mom left, but not anymore, not for a long time.”

Gabriel bared his teeth in anger. “Stop this. That isn’t true, and you know it!”

“I know I love you!” Chat released Gabriel roughly and stalked across the room, needing to move before he did something stupid like injure his father. “I know I’ve tried, that I’ll never stop trying, no matter how many times you spin the same lie.”

Gabriel remained at the wall, but Chat could feel his gaze on his back. “Whatever your issues are with me, they’re not important right now. Adrien, this is not a joke. I need you to listen to me—”
“Stop calling me that!” Chat shouted. “If you can’t even tell me I’m wrong, then at least have the
decency to stop lying to me!”

“This isn’t about you!” Gabriel shouted back. “Everything I’ve ever done since the day we left Paris
has been to spare you!”

“Spare me? You ripped me away from my home! From everyone I knew! The first real friends I ever
made, and for what?”

“For you! I did it for you!”

Chat laughed bitterly and flexed his claws. The nails clicked, sharp as knives. “God, you’re good at
that. You really make it seem like you believe it. I never stood a chance against you, did I?”

“I’m not the villain here.”

“You’ve always been the villain!”

“You’re my son!”

“And you’re my curse!” Chat’s throat twisted as a familiar agony welled up, suffocating, and he
shook. “I’ll never break you. I’ll never even try, not really. But you’ve always known that, haven’t
you?”


“Aramis was right,” Chat said as the first hot tears fell silently over his mask. “I don’t want to be the
son of Gabriel Agreste anymore.”

Gabriel’s face was shrouded in shadows, but Chat’s keen eyes saw every angle of him. He flinched.
“Aramis Legrand,” he said the name as if the very shape of it offended him. “How long have you
been meeting with him?”

“Long enough to know he’s treated me more like a son than you ever have.”

Gabriel set his jaw, and a flicker of…something flashed in those unforgiving eyes. Anger? Betrayal?
Fear?

“That man harbors no love for you, I promise you that. You cannot trust a word he says.”

“Because you just know everything,” Chat spat.

“I know him,” Gabriel spat right back. “And I know you’re no match for him as you are.”

“No,” Chat said, unable to help his shaking hands as they clutched his staff. “No, you don’t get to do
this. You don’t get to look out for me now when you never did before. I won’t fall for it again,
goddamnit.” He angrily pawed at his tears, hating that no matter what he did, Gabriel always
managed to eviscerate him to the core with a few choice words. “I don’t want to want your love
anymore, but I can’t help it. So please, just let me go.”

Gabriel was silent, perhaps taken aback. But his face was once more a cold mask, and there was no
telling. “If that’s how you truly feel about me, then so be it. I know I’ve been a poor parent to you
over the years.”

Chat stared at him, incredulous. Gabriel may as well have admitted that water was wet.
“Clearly you harbor some…opinions about me, opinions with which, admittedly, I can empathize. And if…talking…about them, about our relationship, will convince you to listen to what I have to say, then you have my word that we’ll talk all night if you want. But right now, I need you to hear me.”

Un-fucking-believable. The knot building in Chat’s chest ached, demanded release. But it would get none. He swallowed it whole, a familiar tonic, and fixed Gabriel with a hollow look.

“Have you ever once thought about anybody but yourself?” he asked, truly curious.

“Adri—Chat Noir.” Gabriel’s face twisted in frustration. “Damnit, if you’d just listen—”

“No,” Chat interrupted. “I’m done listening to you. Get the hell out of my apartment.”

“No without your Miraculous.”

“I’m not going to tell you again.”

Gabriel began approaching again. Chat’s enhanced senses immediately registered a threat, like a primal, knee-jerk reaction. “Enough,” Gabriel said, incensed like Chat had rarely seen him. “Hand over the ring. Rage at me all you want, but you’ll thank me later.”

Chat brandished his claws. He couldn’t quite say how the dull ache in the pit of his stomach morphed into something as vile as hatred, but that was all he felt in this moment—for Gabriel, for the situation, for himself for ever letting it come to this. For one powerful moment, he was terrifically unafraid of his father. “Go fuck yourself.”

Gabriel stopped, and despite the gloom of the apartment, Chat read the shock clearly on his statuesque face, and the hurt. Sadness, as fleeting as the wind, suddenly weaponized. Gabriel was steel made man, and a little thing like family would never sway him from his intended path.

“You’re upset,” Gabriel said. “I can see that you won’t give it up willingly. I had hoped… Well, it doesn’t matter now. You’ve left me no choice.” He slipped a hand in his jacket and retrieved something small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. It moved.

And then, it talked.

“Master, please,” came a small voice. “I don’t think this is a good idea. He’s much too unstable right now!”

“All the more reason to put a stop to this before it’s too late,” Gabriel said.

What…

“Adrien,” Gabriel said, that flicker of regret a shadow over his ice-white eyes. “Forgive me.”

Chat opened his mouth to speak, but the words escaped him. He could only stare at the two dark, compound eyes looking back at him, the creature’s bulbous head, and the delicate, lilac butterfly wings as soft as silk.

No.

Please, anything but that.

“Nooroo, transform me,” Gabriel commanded.
Bright, indigo light seared Chat’s sensitive eyes, and the sound of a hundred fluttering wings thundered like an avalanche.

Nooroo’s power rose around Gabriel like wings taking flight, feather-light. A hundred incandescent butterflies filled the apartment, banishing the shadows, moths of flame drawn back to him. His helmet offered reliable protection, and the armor woven in to his super suit had tempered blades and fists alike in times past. The last time Hawk Moth had come face to face with Chat Noir, he’d barely escaped with his life.

But that was a long, long time ago, and Hawk Moth had been a young man, fit and full of life. Now, he was a shadow of his former strength, weathered and jaded by time and failure. A new Chat Noir stood before him, strong and determined and just as foolhardy as the last. As splintered as the last, too, but not yet too far gone. There was hope, there had to be.

*He is my son,* Hawk Moth reminded himself even as he rose to his full, imposing height and tapped his steel cane on the floor, a warning. *I will not fail him.*

And if he had to fight his own son to keep him safe, then he would.

The fiery butterflies that fluttered around Hawk Moth pulsed with colors only he could see—sapphire for sadness, lilac for confusion, yellow for fear, and the deep, bloody crimson of unrestrained rage. Chat Noir stared, open-mouthed and shaking like a leaf, at the shape of his nightmare.

“You,” Chat said, his voice cracking. He clutched his staff close to his chest like a shield.

“Me,” Hawk Moth said, soft but firm. His butterflies fluttered around Chat, changing colors as they reflected the tidal wave of emotions pouring out of him. “If you’d only let me explain things, it wouldn’t have to be this way.”

Chat bared his teeth, and the butterflies around him blazed crimson in his fury. “If... You’re blaming me?”

“I’ll use force if you make me. Hand over your Miraculous, and I’ll tell you everything.”

“You’re Hawk Moth!” Chat said, his voice breaking on a sob. Red pulsed blue and back to red as he teetered on the edge of insanity, his emotions roiling like a hurricane.

*I don’t have much time,* Hawk Moth knew instinctively, watching Chat unravel like a frayed hem. *I have to stop him before it’s too late.*

“I’m still your father,” Hawk Moth said, daring to approach, a hand on his cane ready to draw the hidden rapier within if it came to that.

“You’re a monster,” Chat said, stronger this time as yellow fear brightened his crimson fury. “You’re the villain! You’re—you’re my…”

As if seeing was finally believing, Chat finally lost the last of himself. He collapsed to his knees, dropped his staff, and doubled over, retching all over the living room carpet. The butterflies flashed around him in a strobe-lit disco, hazy and dizzying. Hawk Moth felt his son’s pain as if it were his own, and something else. Something...cold.
“Adrien,” he said, mustering his confidence. “I mean you no harm. Please, I’m trying to help you.”

Chat shuddered on the floor on all fours. His tears joined the stain of vomit on the floor, the smell sour and putrid. “All this time,” he said weakly. “Fourteen years ago…” His razor blade nails ripped in to the carpet.

“I didn’t know it was you then,” Hawk Moth said, though the words sounded pathetic even to him.

The butterflies pulsed bright orange around him, ashamed for him.

“You… It was you,” Chat said in a broken voice as his sobs robbed him of his strength.

Hawk Moth saw his own breath mist as he hissed. The cold was no longer in his head, but as real as the floor beneath his feet. The crimson butterflies around Chat had all since faded to a deep, navy blue as his melancholy, his betrayal took root. The cold made Hawk Moth sluggish, and he would have liked nothing more than to shy away from this heavy despair lest he catch it. Transformed, he felt others’ emotions like needles in his skin, injected straight to the bloodstream. He imagined Chat’s claws digging in to his flesh, flaying him raw.

“I’m sorry,” Hawk Moth said, afraid like Chat, despairing like Chat, but strong enough yet to dull the pain.

“You ruined me,” Chat said, barely a whisper. The kaleidoscope of lights had dimmed to a low, muted blue, growing ever darker. Hawk Moth failed to notice that Chat had stopped shaking. It was so cold in here.

“Please, I can explain everything. Adrien.” Hawk Moth reached a hand for him, slowly so as not to provoke him. The cold was strongest this close, and it moved.

*That’s it, let it out.*

He was so close.

“Stop calling me that,” Chat said, but the voice came from everywhere at once.

Hawk Moth looked up, and all the butterflies had bled to black. They swirled like locusts, but every flutter was silent. He grew very still, and with his hand outstretched, he focused on Chat still hunched over and channeled all his feelings into a single touch. White wings blossomed between his fingers, shy at first as they uncurled and searched for purchase in the broken man below.

“Chat Noir,” Hawk Moth tried, coaxing the pale, pure butterfly toward him. He was so close, and it would all be over soon. He would fix his mistake.

Frost bloomed on his gloved hand, burning cold, and the white butterfly between his fingers seized. Dark tendrils unfurled over Chat’s back, growing thicker as the little, black akumas hovered above like carrion flies.

*Just a little more.*

Hawk Moth thought of Adrien, as he’d been as a small child, so curious and full of wonder, always smiling. He thought of the pure joy he’d felt watching him take his first step, fall asleep under his watchful eye, coo at his mother.

*Emilie…*
He thought of her, too, as she had been before. Those blazing green eyes so full of love, impulsive and fierce, yet unwavering in her loyalty. So beautiful, so strong, so much like the son they shared.

The white butterfly fluttered, encouraged against the frostbite, and descended on Chat, fearless.

“Guess again,” Chat said.

In the next five seconds, everything happened so fast but so clearly, so enunciated, that Hawk Moth felt their passage like stabs to the gut. The black wings opened up over Chat and swallowed the white butterfly whole. The akumas circling overhead swarmed, broke formation, and exploded, tearing cracks in the walls, the ceiling, the furniture, Hawk Moth himself. Each one was a razor blade, hatred-cold. He stumbled back, drew his sword, and swung in an attempt to fend them off, but sliced only shadows. Frost filled his lungs, and he choked.

Before him, Chat rose, an inky black mass under those wings that refused to leave him no matter how tempting the bait. Gabriel Agreste’s fondest memories were a small price to pay for his son’s life, for while Empathy could draw on the strength of others to fight, its greatest power lay in imparting the self to others without shame. He would gladly part with every one of his cherished memories if it meant he could pull Adrien out of the war path, even if the price was his son’s eternal hatred.

But what a hatred it was.

It coiled, spread its great wings, and screamed, rising with Chat until Hawk Moth was staring at the shape of his selfish desire, corrupted beyond repair. It burst, abysmal and freezing, and all at once receded, hidden, controlled. Destruction was chaos, disorder, emotional and passionate. Art. But strip away emotions, take away feeling, and all that was left was a ruin, ocean-deep, insatiable. Fourteen years was a long time to nurse an appetite.

Malevolent magenta stared back at Hawk Moth behind a bone-white mask. His tears still fell, and bile glistened on his lips. He wiped them with the back of his white, gloved paw. And when he smiled dispassionately, it only amplified the frigid despair he radiated like a bad smell.

“Hello, Father,” said Chat Blanc.

Hawk Moth was too slow to evade the lightning-fast swipe, and he went crashing into the glass coffee table, shattering it on impact. Pain exploded in his cheek where Chat’s nails had torn into his flesh. His helmet had protected him from the worst of it, but his blood was vile iron on his tongue as he scrambled to his feet and swung out with his sword blindly.

He struck something, at once relieved to have bought some time and horrified that he’d just struck his own son. But Chat did not seem to care that he was now bleeding heavily from his shoulder where the blade had kissed him, and he gleefully rebounded on the sofa and lunged once again, staff in hand. Hawk Moth was on his feet in an instant and parrying the attack. Thus commenced their duel in the darkness, Chat’s magenta eyes and the shy moon the only light by which to see.

Hawk Moth could not think as he parried his son’s expert blows, recalled from years of grueling fencing training he had insisted upon, a family tradition. Old bones were not what they used to be, even under Nooroo’s Miraculous protection, and he was tiring faster than Chat. He needed something to give him a leg up, just long enough to get Chat’s ring.

Get the ring, he told himself. Extract the akuma. Save him before—

But Chat was blindingly fast and ruthless, seemingly impervious to pain even as blood soaked his
wounded, dominant shoulder. And he was laughing. *Cackling.*

“I should thank you,” Chat said as he put all his weight behind his staff, forcing Hawk Moth to take a knee. “I forgot how much fun this could be!”

“Adrien, listen to me,” Hawk Moth said, reaching for the latent empathetic connection he shared with all the akumatized. “I know you can hear me in there. You have to fight this!”

Chat lashed out with a claw, uncaring that the weight shift let Hawk Moth’s blade slice the side of his jaw all the way to his mouth like a bloody smile. It was just enough to throw Hawk Moth off balance and give Chat the opening he needed to sink his claws deep into Hawk Moth’s chest.

Hawk Moth cried out in pain and shoved with all his might, but the damage was done, and he now had four deep, bloody gashes across his chest. It shouldn’t have been possible—why was Chat Blanc so much stronger than Chat Noir?

*Does he hate me so much?*

Hawk Moth did not have time to think about that.

“Metamorphosis!” he commanded, releasing his ultimate Miraculous power. He reached for the akumatized butterflies still fluttering around haphazardly and thought of the joy he’d felt the first time he’d sold a design, the first time he’d laid eyes on Emilie, the day Adrien was born and placed in his waiting arms, such a small, perfect little thing. The nearest butterflies shed their black like ashes and pulsed bright pink. Weaponized, they swarmed to do Hawk Moth’s bidding.

Chat grunted in pain when the butterflies slammed into him, and he swatted in vain at them with his staff. They phased through his staff and his claws, pummeling him with magic and sinking in through his leather super suit, searching for a hold. The assault slowed him down, but it wouldn’t for long.

Hawk Moth swallowed his pain, sheathed his cane sword, and swung as hard as he could. He hit Chat in the back of the head, and he went down hard. And then, silence.

Hawk Moth slumped against the nearest sofa, torn asunder under his blade and Chat’s claws. His Miraculous pin chirped a warning, and Hawk Moth sighed tiredly. He needed to call for help before Chat lost too much blood.

“Nooroo, revert me,” he said.

The remaining butterflies disintegrated, and Nooroo emerged from the Miraculous pin, leaving Gabriel in his ruined, bloody suit on the couch. Immediately, the pain of his injuries spiked without magic to dull it, and he hissed and clutched a hand to his flayed chest.

“Master!” Nooroo cried out, afraid. “Oh no, this is very bad! You need help!”

“I’m fine,” Gabriel wheezed. “Adrien, he needs help more than me.”

Nooroo fluttered to examine Chat Blanc, who was out cold on the floor and still bleeding. “I sense such a hopeless despair in him. And this hatred… He’s suffering so much.”

*Because of me,* Gabriel thought, squeezing his eyes shut to stop the tears that threatened to fall. *I did this.*

He’d always feared this would come back to haunt him. But when he’d tried fourteen years ago to
extract the akuma from Adrien’s ring while he slept unawares, nothing had happened. It was as if there was no trace of it in Adrien at all. It was odd, but even Nooroo did not have the answers. And since Adrien had never transformed into Chat Noir again after they left Paris, it was eventually forgotten.

But now…

Gabriel fished around his pocket for his cell phone and dialed the police. “Hello, this is Gabriel Agreste. I need to report an attack on myself and my son, Adrien Agreste,” he spoke slowly and gave Adrien’s address. “Please, send an ambulance.”

The operator on the other line asked for more details, but all Gabriel said was, “Get a message to Ladybug. Tell her Hawk Moth was behind this attack, I witnessed it myself. Please, hurry.”

He hung up before the operator could press for more information and lay back.

“I’ve never seen an akuma behave like this before,” Nooroo said as he continued to hover over Chat. “Can you help him?” Gabriel asked. “Anything, whatever it takes. Just tell me what to do. He can’t be Chat Noir anymore.”

Nooroo sniffled, holding back his tears. He often became emotional over the smallest things, and Gabriel was honestly impressed at how well he was holding it together in this dire situation. “I don’t know. I think… I need to speak with Plagg.”

“Plagg?”

“The Black Cat’s kwami. He won’t like it, but…” Nooroo trailed off self-consciously.

Gabriel set his jaw. Keeping his secret from Adrien had been a non-starter over the years, despite Nooroo’s pleas for the sake of the akuma that had infected Adrien. Nooroo had given up, especially when it appeared the danger had long since passed, but now there was no point in hiding anything. The damage was done, and Gabriel would have to face the consequences.

But as long as Adrien is safe, it doesn’t matter what happens to me.

He struggled to stand, clutching his chest. His fingers were slick with blood, and his face ached where Chat had sliced him. It hurt to talk, even to grimace. Slowly, he kneeled down next to Chat Blanc and slid the Miraculous ring off his finger, careful not to touch it directly. In a swirl of magenta light, the transformation forcefully reverted, and Adrien lay on the floor face down. The ring itself smoked white from a small crack in the metal.

“Plagg is bound to the ring,” Nooroo explained. “He can’t come out unless he’s bonded to Adrien. You have to return the ring now that Adrien’s reverted.”

“I will do no such thing,” Gabriel said. “Not while that fiend is alive and well. I won’t risk my only son.”

“A father’s love, how touching,” said a voice from the shadows.

Gabriel stiffened. That voice awakened something dead inside, something that should have stayed buried. “What do you know of love?”

“Quite a lot more than you, clearly. Your own son prefers me over you.”
Gabriel turned, ready to transform again if necessary to finish the job he thought he’d completed years ago, but blinding pain exploded in his chest, and his vision doubled. The agony was so intense and so abrupt that he could not even form a coherent thought as he sank to his knees on the ground. Somewhere, Nooroo wailed as if the blow had been meant for him instead.

Baleful, pink eyes watched him from the gloom, the figure swathed completely in shadows and silent. But impaling Gabriel was a gnarled branch of coral, slick with his blood. And though it had pierced his heart—*how can you live without a heart?*—he was somehow still breathing. The coral throbbed, pumping in place of his shredded heart. He coughed, and the bloody slices in his face smiled.

A man stepped out of the shadows. And though he had changed—older, burlier, bearded, golden hair dyed jet black—those glacial, blue eyes were just as harsh, just as unforgiving as they had always been.

“How can you live without a heart?” Felix spat, disgust twisting his features.

“Actually, it’s ‘Aramis’ these days. I couldn’t very well let you realize you didn’t finish me off that day,” Felix said. He paused and looked down at Gabriel, passingly curious. “You don’t look very well.”

“Master!” Nooroo gasped, fluttering to his side. The little kwami blubbered, his tears pearly and thick as he pawed at the coral embedded in his Chosen, helpless. “Please, no!”

“How like Empathy to shed tears even for the wretched,” Felix spat, disgust twisting his features.

“Nooroo,” Gabriel said, struggling to breathe. The pain was a continuous wave, ripping through him like lightning. “Go, now. Take the Miraculous.”

Nooroo sobbed openly. “I w-won’t leave you!”

“Such loyalty. You’ll do just fine,” Felix said.

His grievous wounds and lethargy made Gabriel too slow to struggle when Felix plucked the Butterfly Miraculous from his collar. Nooroo screeched in protest, but he was silenced as soon as the Miraculous touched another. He faded in a cloud of purple sparkles. Gabriel reached for Felix, but the coral impaling him twitched and sent a lancing pain through his body. He seized and coughed up blood.

“Oh, careful now,” Felix chided. “Pravala is quite mercurial.”

*Pravala…*

The wraith-like figure said nothing, but those glowing eyes seemed to smile at the mention of their name, almost gleeful with affection.

“How can you live without a heart?” Felix had turned his attention to Adrien still unconscious on the floor, and the discarded Black Cat Miraculous lying next to him, dormant. He kneeled down and examined it, but dared not touch it. “My own nephew… Plagg, you greedy son of a bitch.”

Gabriel heaved. “Leave him alone,” he said. “Take the ring if you must. Adrien’s no threat to you now.”

“He’s something, you know,” Felix said, ignoring him. “So much like his mother, I’m sure you’d like to think, but no. He’s your son, Gabe. Such passion, such drive, the desire to help others… Well,
not all others, as I recall.”

Gabriel said nothing even as he bristled at that awful diminution. Felix had always been the only person to call him that, and he’d never abided it from anyone else. Gabriel’s head swam. The pain was nearly unbearable, and yet he hadn’t passed out yet. It was as if something was tethering him, forcing him to stay awake.

“So lonely, but so goddamned devoted… It’s almost like you served him up to Plagg on a platter yourself. Or was that your intention all along?”

Gabriel bared his teeth. “Never. I never wanted this for him.”

“No, I imagine your son’s life means a little more to you than your brother’s ever did. Although, that isn’t saying much. Adrien had a lot to say about you, you know.”

“Fuck you, Felix.”

Felix smiled, but it didn’t reach his vacant eyes. “Is that any way to talk to your beloved older brother after all this time?”

Gabriel glared up at him, but the pain made him flinch and gasp. “Please,” he begged, no longer caring for his dignity or even his anger. “Just leave him out of it. You have your revenge.”

“Gabe, you wound me. You honestly think I would harm my own nephew? I’m not a monster.”

Felix’s smile was almost enough to make Gabriel lash out and claw his eyes out, but the pain was so great that he could barely remember his own name.

“And besides,” Felix said, laying a hand on Adrien’s head affectionately, “he and I understand each other. He’ll help me achieve my goals, like you never did.”

No, don’t you dare touch him!

Gabriel wanted to protest, but all that came out was a strangled, bloody choke.

“I admit, I didn’t expect to grow fond of him, but life is so full of surprises…” He pulled a silken handkerchief monogramed with the initials ‘A. L.’ from his suit jacket pocket, picked up the smoking Black Cat Miraculous, and gently slid it back onto Adrien’s finger. “Even rabid animals have their uses, especially Ladybug’s favorite pet.”

A mass of black magic swirled over the Black Cat Miraculous, and the ring’s kwami materialized. Plagg shook erratically on the floor as fronds of magic smoked from his jet-black fur, thick and white. Unseeing eyes cracked open, delirious and the same malevolent magenta as Chat Blanc’s had been. He crawled toward Adrien, mumbling something incoherent, but soon lost his energy and passed out.

“Why?” Gabriel asked, though of course he knew why. Ever since he heard Felix’s voice through Adrien’s phone this afternoon, he’d known why. But why did Adrien have to suffer for Gabriel’s sins? If only the boy hadn’t been so stubborn about giving up the ring, he wouldn’t even be in Felix’s path.

“You know, I never did have children of my own,” Felix mused. “Lost my chance, as you well know.” He continued to stroke Adrien’s hair as he bled out on the carpet. “I think I could do a much better job than you, although admittedly that bar is set quite low.”
It was too much. Just the thought of Felix anywhere near Adrien made Gabriel sick with dread.
Once, he would have jumped at the chance to involve him in Adrien’s life, the brother he’d loved more than anyone in the world, and who’d loved him back until everything fell apart. But that person had died a long time ago, after all. This man was nothing but a husk filled with nightmares and old grudges. He would self-destruct, and he would drag down anyone who came too close. Gabriel could not abide it.

“Don’t you dare,” he said in as scathing a tone as he could.

Felix looked at him. “Oh, I dare, Little Brother.” He reached out and took Gabriel’s face in hand, digging his fingers into the gashes Chat Blanc had drawn down his cheek. Gabriel cried out. “Don’t worry, I won’t leave you to die alone like you did to me. Family always comes first.”

Pravala twisted the coral embedded through Gabriel, and he felt more than heard something snap. His hazy vision slid to Adrien, thankful that at least he wouldn’t have to see Gabriel reduced to this. It was more kindness than he deserved, he knew. He had failed Adrien spectacularly, and in the end he couldn’t help him at all.

“Please, just let me go.”

Gabriel’s tears mingled with the blood on his cheek, stinging. Perhaps, at least, Adrien could be free without him now. It was a small kindness, but a kindness nonetheless.

It was his last thought as closed his eyes to the darkness for the last time.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Mourning.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Our heroes gather for Gabriel’s funeral.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Marinette approached the mahogany casket and stopped a moment to look at the framed picture of Gabriel Agreste perched next to it. He was not smiling for the camera and he stood ramrod straight in a pressed, grey suit. The funeral was closed-casket to spare the guests, but Marinette—Ladybug had seen all there was to see that dreadful night last week. She tried not to think about that as she laid her white rose on top of the others, a small offering to a man she had not known personally, but whom she had admired greatly from afar.

Alya laid her rose down after Marinette, and they linked arms and headed back to their pew to take their seats. The church where Gabriel’s funeral was being held was large and high-vaulted, beautifully rendered with brightly-colored frescoes, stained glass windows, and white marble. A string quartet and pianist played a dirge, slow yet elegant. Several hundred guests dressed in their mourning blacks had all come to pay homage to Gabriel’s memory and legacy. Marinette was blown away by the sheer number of people Gabriel had apparently affected in one way or another in his prolific fashion career—for that was who these people were. Everything Chloe and Adrien had said about Gabriel painted the picture of a man very much alone on his throne, with almost no personal life or friends to speak of. Yet even so, it felt as though the whole of the Parisian fashion industry had turned out to mourn his passing. If nothing else, he had left an indelible mark on their world.

“Hey,” Nino said, scooting over to make room for Alya and Marinette in the pew next to him. “Shit day for a funeral.”

Outside, a storm raged. Snow and sleet battered the high windows of the church, and the wind howled as if it, too, was in mourning.

“Shit week for a funeral,” Alya said sedately. “Why does it feel like people are dropping like flies all of a sudden?”

“Because they are,” Marinette said, her eyes drawn to the front of the cathedral, where two blond heads—Adrien and Chloe—stood together greeting guests. Or rather, Chloe greeted everyone and thanked them for coming, while Adrien just stood there looking half a corpse himself. His cheek was no longer bandaged, but black stitches zigzagged from the back of his jaw nearly to the edge of his mouth, the skin raw and pink.

This was the second funeral Marinette had been to this week. Roger Raincomprix’s funeral two days ago had been a sad engagement, but uplifting as members of his team told stories of happier times, old cases cracked, memories that would live on. But today’s event was distinctly more somber, quieter, as people whispered to each other and kept their grief to themselves, as if afraid to speak too loudly and draw the dead’s ire.

But many and more funerals were being held all over the city for the coralized victims this week, too.
Marinette had considered attending some of them as Ladybug, but ultimately decided against it. The last thing the coralized victims’ families would want to see was the face of the woman who had stolen their loved ones from them.

“I know his dad wasn’t the greatest guy in the world,” Alya said, “but I can’t even imagine what Adrien’s going through now. I wish there was something I could do for him.”

“Just being here for him is enough,” Nino said, pulling at his suit tie, uncomfortable in the crisp formalwear. “The last thing Adrien needs is to feel like he’s alone.”

“Did you hear?” whispered a man in the pew in front of them. “Apparently, Gabriel was murdered by Hawk Moth. That’s what the papers said. Hawk Moth’s back.”

“I can’t believe it,” said the woman seated next to him. “First the coralized murders, and now Hawk Moth?”

“And to do it right in front of his son.” The man sighed, as if this knowledge was a burden he alone carried. “I feel so sorry for Adrien. First his mother leaves without so much as an explanation, and now his father’s been killed for no reason anybody can name. It’s like the poor man is cursed or something. Bad luck follows him like a second shadow.”

“What the hell is Ladybug doing? This has to stop,” the woman said, annoyed. “Honestly, if Hawk Moth and these coral people aren’t caught soon, all of Paris will take up arms and start doing her job for her. This is getting ridiculous—who’s next?”

Alya must have seen something of Marinette’s growing distress overhearing the conversation, because she tapped the man and woman each on their shoulders and told them they’d be next if they didn’t stop gossiping at a freaking funeral. A man was dead, in case they forgot. They got up to find other seats, embarrassed, and Marinette shrank in on herself.

“Assholes,” Alya said, taking Marinette’s hand in hers. “Honestly, who talks shit at a funeral? There’s probably a special circle in hell reserved for them.”

“It’s fine, Alya,” Marinette said.

“No, it’s not,” Nino said. “Adrien’s not cursed. Don’t listen to them, Marinette. They don’t know what they’re talking about, okay? Trust me.”

Marinette wasn’t so sure. Adrien seemed to be having terrible luck these days as one unfortunate event after another brought him ever lower. Marinette was ashamed to be one such problem—they still had not cleared the air between them since Jessika’s party, and at this point, Marinette knew it was not going to happen anytime soon. How could it, when Adrien obviously had more important issues to deal with? And those people were right—Ladybug wasn’t doing shit to make it right.

It was by chance that she’d gotten Henri’s signal to meet. She’d been at her parents’ house in her pajamas on the couch and flipping through channels late on Monday night after the coral attack. Her parents had long since gone to sleep, but Marinette was awakened by nightmares about the fight earlier that day, and soon gave up trying to sleep. Live news coverage caught the telltale red flag being raised anew over the Municipal Police Station, and Ladybug raced over despite her exhaustion and dread over the thought that there could possibly be another attack so soon.

From there, Henri had briefed her on the distress call they’d received from Gabriel Agreste and his message for Ladybug, and he took her to Adrien’s apartment to examine the scene of the crime. The police were already going through it when she arrived, and an ambulance had already taken Adrien
to the General Hospital for treatment. He was alive but injured, but Gabriel was found dead when the police arrived, his body badly mangled. Ladybug looked through Adrien’s apartment as though she were watching another in her skin. The whole experience had been surreal, like something out of a nightmare, and she wondered more than once if she was still at her parents’ home sleeping fitfully. But no, it was as real as the deep gashes in Adrien’s couches, the shattered coffee table where someone had crashed during the struggle that had taken place here, the blood stains on the white living room carpet where Adrien had fallen, where Gabriel had drawn his last breaths.

“These look like claw marks,” Ladybug had said as she forced herself to look at Gabriel’s ruined body while the M.E. took preliminary notes.

“Could be, they’re shallow enough,” said the M.E.

But Hawk Moth didn’t have claws—had he akumatized someone? Nothing made any sense. Nothing, that is, until Professor Lopez confirmed that the strange bits embedded in Gabriel’s chest were pieces of coral. Somehow, Gabriel’s death and Hawk Moth’s involvement were linked to the coral murders, though this one was nothing like anything Ladybug had encountered previously. Until they knew more, the police had decided to keep the coral element of Gabriel’s death a secret, even from Adrien.

“Makes you wonder how Adrien managed to survive whatever happened,” Henri had commented as the M.E. oversaw transport of Gabriel’s body out of the apartment to the morgue for autopsy. “Looks like a couple of wild animals tore through here.”

Unable to stomach the smell of death and bile in Adrien’s ruined apartment a moment longer, Ladybug headed for the hospital to check on Adrien. The staff allowed her access when they saw it was Ladybug following up on the attack that had landed him there in the first place. Someone had stitched him up, cleaned him up a bit, and bandaged half his face. The sight of him made her queasy with shame and fury—how could she let this happen? On her watch? Was no one safe anymore? Hadn’t Adrien been through enough already?

She approached his bedside and gingerly ran her gloved fingers through his dirty hair. Whoever had cleaned him up got most of the blood out, but there were trace amounts, dry and crusty on his scalp. Even pale and moribund, he looked so peaceful, as if none of his worries could reach him here.

“I’m so sorry, Adrien,” she’d whispered, her eyes watering with tears.

“Marinette,” he said softly, green eyes cracking open.

Ladybug had frozen then, unable even to breathe as she locked gazes with Adrien. Did he just…?

“No, it couldn’t be. He couldn’t possibly know—

“Please, I need Marinette,” he said, his tongue thick in his mouth and slurring his speech. “I want…”

Ladybug breathed a sigh of relief. “I’ll call her, Adrien. Don’t worry, you just rest.”

“Wait, please,” he said, reaching for her. “Don’t leave me.”

She smiled for him and squeezed his hand gently. “I’m watching over you. You’re not alone, I promise.”

It was Alya’s hand she was squeezing now as they rose for the priest’s sermon about valleys of shadow and death, Marinette wasn’t sure. She hadn’t been paying attention, so lost in the onslaught of memories leading up to this terrible and tragic end. Soon enough, everyone was once again seated, and Adrien approached the podium. A hush fell over the room that seemed to echo like white noise,
deafening. Marinette held her breath as she watched Adrien, wishing she could go to him now, hold his hand, anything to ease his pain even a little bit.

He’d been grateful to have her at his side as he recovered, and Alphonse had graciously told her not to worry about *Marinette Designs*, her personal life was more important right now. But Adrien had been reticent, unwilling to talk about what had happened beyond what the police had questioned him about. Ladybug was privy to the investigation’s details in a way Marinette could not possibly be, so she played it safe and didn’t press him for more information than he was willing to give. Mostly, he simply wanted her physically there, at his side, for as much time as she was willing to spend. He didn’t want to feel alone, and Marinette could not begrudge him that. It was such a small favor when she would have given him the world if he’d only asked.

At the podium, Adrien had some notecards with him that he was staring at. No one spoke as they waited for him to speak. Gabriel’s picture frowned solemnly next to him. At length, Adrien pocketed his note cards and looked out across the room. His gaze was empty, as if he hardly saw them at all.

“Thank you all for coming,” he spoke into the microphone. There was another pause, and he drummed his fingers along the edges of the podium, took a deep breath, and then another. He rubbed his eyes as though he was tired, or perhaps just fed up with all the spectacle. “This is so stupid.”

No one spoke, but many of the guests exchanged questioning looks.

“My father wasn’t religious at all,” Adrien said, gesturing at the priest who was standing off to the side respectfully. “Neither am I, but…I guess this is what you do when somebody dies. You go through the motions, say the words, put them in the ground. And then, it’s over. Life goes back to normal…or something.”

Someone coughed. A baby gurgled. Marinette clutched Alya’s hand so tightly she was sure to cut off the circulation.

“I had a whole speech prepared,” Adrien went on. He tugged at his black tie to loosen it. “All these words about sacrifice, and loss, and family, forgiving but never forgetting. What a load of bullshit.”

Whispers rose, and the priest shot Adrien a reproachful look, but Adrien didn’t even notice him.

“Half of you I’ve never even met before, and the other half are names I never bothered to learn. But we’re all here for the same thing, to remember the life of Gabriel Agreste: fashion pioneer, world-class designer, businessman, family man.” Adrien laughed, but there was no joy in it. “The truth is, I knew my father about as well as most of you, which is to say, not at all.”

The whispering continued as Adrien took a moment to look at Gabriel’s photo perched next to him.

“Here’s what I do know,” Adrien said. “Gabriel Augustin Agreste, born February 23, 1956 in Paris. Married to Emilie Delphine until she walked out on him sixteen years ago, at which point he closed himself off from the world and everyone in it, including me. He lived alone, had no real friends, no family… And the night he died, I told him to go fuck himself.”

The priest looked nervous and gently tried to get Adrien to sit down, but Adrien shot him a scathing look, and he backed off.

“The truth about my father?” Adrien continued. “He was a liar and a thief. He was a subtle beast, pernicious like cancer. A monster by choice, and I’m his son.” Adrien closed his eyes, and his shoulders fell, resigned. “I wonder what that makes me?”

Some people had gotten up to usher Adrien off stage, including Nathalie Sanceour—Gabriel’s
personal assistant—and Audrey Bourgeois who overshadowed everyone in an enormous, black hat. But Chloe was faster than all of them and at Adrien’s side in a flash. She took his arm in hers and hissed something at the priest as he just stood there flabbergasted. Chloe escorted Adrien through a side door out of sight, and awkwardly the priest took the podium again and invited everyone to join him in a hymn of remembrance. But people were too busy whispering and gossiping among themselves.

“Shit,” Nino swore, already ducking out of the pew. He grabbed Alya’s hand, and Alya dragged Marinette along with them.

Marinette reeled, barely registering her feet carrying her after Alya. Her skin shivered with the chilling effect of Adrien’s fury, because that was the only way she could describe what she had just witnessed: raw fury, despair, even hatred. It was not the first time she had seen Adrien react so viscerally, but it didn’t disturb her any less.

She’d been at the hospital with Henri and another officer as Ladybug, and they were taking Adrien’s official statement about the attack. He’d barely given more than one-word answers to Henri’s questions, and Ladybug got the impression that he was only half paying attention as he stared off into space, dead-eyed.

“So, Hawk Moth attacked you and your father,” Henri read back the notes he’d taken based on Adrien’s statement, “and you defended yourself?”

Adrien stared back at him, unblinking. He looked gaunt after that long and horrible night, shadow rings around his eyes, unshaven, pale as a corpse. Ladybug didn’t expect him to look glamorous, but there was something almost haunted about him, as though he’d been the one to die that night instead of Gabriel.

“So, Hawk Moth attacked you and your father,” Henri read back the notes he’d taken based on Adrien’s statement, “and you defended yourself?”

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“Yeah,” Adrien said.

Henri looked a little bit uncomfortable. “All right… And you said you don’t remember anybody else being there?”

“No.”

Henri nodded and rummaged through his notes awkwardly. “Right, okay…”

Ladybug hated to bring it up when Adrien was clearly not in a healthy state of mind, but someone had to. “The blood under your fingernails—the M.E. tested it, and it was Gabriel’s blood. There was no trace of another’s, not in the entire apartment, actually. How did you say you got his blood on you, again?”

He hadn’t said, and the vacuous look he fixed on Ladybug then sent a chill down her spine. This was not the Adrien who had reached for her and begged her not to leave his side when he came to, the Adrien who had clutched at Marinette when she came to him and wouldn’t let go. Ladybug didn’t recognize this person staring back at her as though she had done this, as though she was to blame for it all, as though she had dealt the killing blow herself.

“Hawk Moth attacked me,” Adrien said. “I fought back. Gabriel fought back. The space isn’t big, and it was dark. I ran into him.”

“With your nails,” Ladybug said.

Adrien’s gaze darkened ominously, but he swallowed whatever troubled him and looked away. “Yeah. I guess.”
Henri had put an end to the questions then, noting that Adrien was tired and still reeling from the trauma of his father’s sudden and violent death. Anyone would be, and Ladybug readily agreed, apologizing to Adrien for her intrusive questions so soon after the event. He had been through something horrific, and no matter what his relationship with his father had been, anyone would have been suffering after an ordeal like this. But she couldn’t shake the nagging feeling like something didn’t quite add up. Hawk Moth had never displayed such a level violence before—why start now?

The memory, and Marinette’s discomfort revisiting it, took a back seat as Alya and Nino dragged her out a side door in the main congregation room to the hallway, where Chloe and Adrien were huddled together and having a conversation in hushed, heated tones.

“Look, I’m not telling you off,” Chloe was saying, “but a little warning next time before you drop the f-bomb in a church would be nice.”

Adrien looked like a put-off teenager enduring a scolding as he stood with his arms crossed.

“Whatever, it’s not like any of those people give a shit either way. They’re only here to keep up appearances and network.”

“I know, but Jesus, Adrien, we talked about this. That’s why I made you those notecards. Ugh, forget it, what’s done is done.”

“Hey, man, you all right?” Nino said as their trio approached.

The two blonds stiffened at having been overheard, but Chloe relaxed when she saw who’d ambushed them. Adrien remained as taut as a bowstring and crossed his arms tighter. The black stitching in his face grimaced with him, a ghastly sight.

“Peachy,” Adrien said, still holding on to the anger he’d displayed back in the church but visibly reining it in. He locked eyes with Marinette and let his arms fall to his sides.

“Adrien,” Marinette said, moving to his side. “Hey.”

He said nothing, but he didn’t pull away when she touched his arm.

“Marinette, perfect timing,” Chloe said. “Stay with him for me. I have to go back in there and make sure nothing’s on fire.”

“I don’t need a babysitter, Chlo,” Adrien said with an edge to his tone. “I’m not gonna snap and shoot up the place.”

“Whoa, everybody just chill for a sec, okay?” Nino said, getting in between Adrien and Chloe.

“Nobody’s babysitting anybody. What we are doing is grabbing some of those free donuts they set out by the entrance. How’s that sound?”

Marinette latched on to that peace offering eagerly. “That sounds great, Nino. I could use something sweet. Chloe?”

Chloe rubbed her tired eyes. She looked almost as gaunt as Adrien. Marinette knew she’d been heavily involved organizing the funeral arrangements, but she wondered what else Chloe was up to. She looked like she hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep in days.

“Save me a chocolate sprinkles one,” she said, already heading back inside. “I have work to do. Make sure he gets to the burial—half an hour, Marinette, I’m not joking.”

“You got it!” Marinette said, but Chloe was already gone back inside.
Adrien sighed and scratched at his stitches. Alya looked between Marinette and the door Chloe had disappeared behind.

“So I think I saw an espresso machine out there,” Alya said. “Who wants a cappuccino? I’m making cappuccinos.”

Adrien stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Sure, whatever.”

Marinette squeezed his arm reassuringly and caught his eye. She smiled for him, and something in him melted a little bit. He leaned on her, as if it had become too much to hold himself up alone, and she accepted his weight.

“Hey, you guys won’t believe the scoop I got over in Beirut,” Alya said as they all made their way toward the church’s entrance. “One of my sources smuggled me in to a secret meeting and everything. It was wild.”

Nino sighed dramatically. “Woman, are you trying to give me a heart attack? This is how journalists get kidnapped!”

Marinette appreciated Alya’s efforts to change the subject of conversation when Adrien’s visible discomfort seemed to dissipate, and he grew quiet but subdued. Perhaps they would get through this trying day yet.

Chloe was among the last to leave the church and arrive at Père Lachaise Cemetery in the twentieth arrondissement that afternoon. It was a shitty, grey afternoon that would have been better off succumbing to nightfall rather than dragging out this dreary faux-dusk. The cemetery staff were nonetheless prepared for all varieties of inclement weather and had set up a large tent to house the mourners as they gathered around the Agreste family tomb. It was a newer structure, black and white granite commissioned by Gabriel himself years ago during his meteoric rise to fame and fortune. Here, he had interred his parents and grandparents, among others. And it was here that he would join them, sooner than he’d imagined, no doubt.

Chloe wasn’t paying much attention to the final prayers the priest gave. Everything was on schedule. Of course it was—she had planned it all. It was the least she could do for Adrien. Nathalie Sancoeur, Gabriel’s personal assistant, had been an emotional wreck in the wake of the news, though she did her best to put on a brave face. Chloe knew how close she and Gabriel had been—a working relationship that spanned the better part of two decades was nothing to sneeze at—and so she had taken it upon herself to deal with Adrien while Nathalie handled things with the fallout at AF.

Chloe had been at home with Pollen recovering after the shit show that was her debut as Queen Bee helping Ladybug deal with the coralized victims at the Municipal Police Station when she received a phone call from the General Hospital. Adrien had listed her as his next of kin. He’d been attacked in his home, and Gabriel had been murdered.

And so, cutting short an extremely uncomfortable conversation with Pollen about what the hell she was doing messing up her amazing life by pushing Luka away, Chloe dropped everything and rushed to the hospital.

Adrien was awake when she arrived. They locked gazes, he reached for her, and Chloe threw her arms around him. Neither of them said a word as they crushed each other, like it was a competition. Adrien shuddered and wept on her shoulder—an ugly cry, all hiccups and snot and shuddering—and
she wormed her way onto the bed next to him and let him. He smelled like blood.

“Fuck,” he said, the only coherent word she could make out as he gasped for air between sobs.

“Yeah,” Chloe said, holding him closer and rubbing his back.

Adrien’s relationship with his father was strained at best, toxic at worst. There were times when Adrien had openly fantasized to her about a world without Gabriel in it. But for it to happen like this…

She learned the story from the nursing staff who’d treated Adrien’s wounds. The idea of Hawk Moth returning after all this time and lashing out violently—murderously—left Chloe reeling. The police would not be long in coming to question Adrien about what had happened.

“What’re you going to tell them?” she asked once they were alone and Adrien’s face was freshly stitched up and bandaged.

“I don’t know,” he said numbly, eyes red and puffy from crying. “God, I just… I don’t even know. I didn’t see it.”

“But it was Hawk Moth who attacked you.”

Adrien looked at her. “He was there. I…saw him.”

Christ, A. This was not good. Chloe took his hands in hers and sat on the edge of the bed. She kept her voice quiet. “Then that’s all you need to say. You didn’t see it happen, right?”

“I…no. Not exactly.”

“Then tell them that. You were fighting Hawk Moth, and somewhere along the line, you passed out. Blow to the back of the head, that’s what the doctor said. End of story.”

Adrien’s gaze was unfocused, but he began to understand what she was trying to tell him. “I know it looks bad,” he said, barely a whisper. Afraid. “We had a fight.”

Chloe squeezed his hands. “Families fight. They don’t magically impale each other through the chest with enough force to pierce concrete. A, look at me.”

He looked at her, and for a moment, they were sixteen again, scared shitless in the face of something twisted and ugly, a secret that would tear them apart forever. Chloe had not given up on him then, and she would not give up on him now.

“You didn’t do this,” she said fiercely. “Whatever happened in your apartment, you did not do this. No matter how much Gabriel fucked up, all you’ve ever done is try to love him.”

“Chlo…”

“Say it. ‘I didn’t do this.’ I want to hear you say it.”

At length, Adrien said, “I didn’t do this.”

Chloe took his bandaged face in her hands and searched his eyes. “I believe you.”

He let her lay him back on the cot, and they sat there together in silence a moment. Chloe listened to him breathing, and his grip on her hand relaxed a little. She loved this man more than any flesh and blood family, but god did he love to play the martyr. The last thing either of them needed was Adrien
implicating himself in something they both knew he was incapable of doing just to punish himself for some perceived guilt. Gabriel had always had a special talent for turning Adrien into his own worst enemy, even in death, it seemed.

_Not this time._

“A,” Chloe said. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

Adrien stared at the ceiling, dead-eyed and distant. Chloe imagined the fog of memory parting behind his glazed eyes, revealing a twilit world hazy with half-truths. After a while, Adrien responded.

“White,” he said. “I remember…everything faded to white.”

Chloe had not known what to make of that and could only suggest not to say something so strange to the police when they questioned him. When she’d asked the doctor overseeing him, the doctor had advised her that head traumas were tricky. It was not uncommon to suffer from lapses in memory after getting hit in the head. The likeliest explanation was simply that Adrien had tried to defend Gabriel from Hawk Moth, taken injury, and then passed out after getting clocked in the back of the head, end of story. Chloe was no lawyer, but she was pretty sure there was no chance in hell one could plausibly claim that Adrien had killed his father, even with the literal blood on his hands. It simply wasn’t possible for a human being to inflict the kind of damage Gabriel Agreste had suffered.

In fact, there was something distinctly super human about it.

Chloe had asked Pollen about it once more details came to light about the terrible wounds that had taken Gabriel’s life.

“Nooroo’s tool is a cane sword,” Pollen said rather snottily—she was still steamed at Chloe for the way she’d treated Luka at the premiere party, but she was making a very special exception to talk about the attack on Adrien given the supernatural elements involved. “If Adrien was slashed up, it could have been from that.”

“Yeah, but what about Gabriel? He had a hole through his chest bigger than my fist. A sword can’t do that, Miraculous or not,” Chloe said.

Pollen shrugged and lay back among the yellow roses Luka had given to Chloe. They were still in bloom in the crystal vase she had set the up in, and even seemed to be flourishing somehow. Chloe suspected that was Pollen’s doing, but she didn’t ask.

“It’s not like I have all the answers,” Pollen said with a huff. “And even if I did, it’s not like you listen to me.”

Chloe rolled her eyes. “I know you’re upset about Luka, but this is not the time, Pollen. Hawk Moth is back and apparently graduated to murder.”

Pollen buzzed angrily in her face. “It’s never the right time because you’re scared. I only choose the bravest humans to wield me, but right now you’re being weak letting your fear control you.”

“I’m not weak,” Chloe said, glaring down at Pollen. “I’m just more concerned about Adrien right now than Luka.”

Pollen gave her a look that may been the bee equivalent of an eye-roll. Her antennae drooped and she plopped back down among the soft petals. “Fine, fine. You want to know about Nooroo? He’s agreeable, always wants to please his Chosen. He doesn’t have a counterpart like the rest of us
because he doesn’t need one. He’s Empathy, and he has the power to bring out the best or the worst in others. In others, Honey Bee.”

“So you’re saying whoever killed Gabriel, it wasn’t Hawk Moth?”

“I’m saying he wasn’t alone. Empathy never is.”

Chloe had chewed on that as she planned Gabriel’s funeral and made arrangements for Adrien to move into Agreste Mansion—his apartment was an active crime scene and totally destroyed. She had been against the move, even offering to give him a room at Le Grand Paris at a discount rate until they could find him a new apartment, but Adrien declined the offer.

“You hate this place,” Chloe had argued as they walked the halls together after he was discharged from the hospital. A grave painting of Adrien as a young teenager with his father looked down on them as they passed. “Honestly, I’m not a fan, either.”

Adrien stopped and leaned on the railing overlooking the downstairs main entrance. “Everything I hated about this place is gone,” he said. “It’s just a house now.”

Chloe did not know what to say to that. She had never heard Adrien say he hated his father, even at his lowest points. But then again, Gabriel had never died before. And she couldn’t blame Adrien, anyway. If she were him, she’d hate the guy, too. She did, in her own way. Now, it just didn’t seem to matter anymore.

It didn’t matter as she stood with the other mourners around the Agreste family tomb and watched as a small team of staff carefully slid the coffin into a stone alcove, which they would then seal with concrete and cover with an engraved plaque. Adrien stood with Marinette on one side and Nino on the other opposite Chloe. He had a far away look in his eyes, as if he were somewhere else. Marinette looked up and caught Chloe’s eye, but didn’t smile. She nodded resolutely, as if to say, ‘I’m here with you, too.’

Most of the people who had turned up for the main service were not here—they would be at the formal reception later, hosted at Le Grand Paris. It was Audrey’s only good idea to have it there instead of at Agreste Mansion, and Chloe had agreed—anything to keep these vultures out of Adrien’s hair. Chloe had asked her to go ahead to the reception to greet the guests, and Audrey had taken the bait like the socialite she was. She was nothing if not consistent.

The priest waxed on about how Gabriel would be missed, gone but not forgotten. Chloe’s eyes wandered as she thought about what the hell was going to happen now. Adrien had problems with Gabriel around, but with him gone? Aside from the outburst in church earlier and his initial reaction breaking down crying at the hospital, he’d been strangely reticent, gloomy. It was to be expected, but something about his dourness ran deeper than usual, a wound that was slowly festering beneath the surface. Gabriel’s death affected him deeply, there was no doubt about it, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to it than that.

All that blood on his hands—Gabriel’s blood. Why?

Something didn’t add up. There was something Adrien wasn’t telling her, but what? She didn’t know, and a part of her didn’t want to know.

The priest asked for everyone gathered to take a moment of silence to pray or reflect or simply remember Gabriel, and all fell quiet save for the winter winds outside the tent. Chloe didn’t pray, and she didn’t care to think about Gabriel. She thought instead about Adrien, about how he’d truly lost both parents now, and the only family left to him was her.
I'm not going anywhere, she thought, clenching her fists.

Whatever danger the coral murders and now Hawk Moth could throw at her, she would not die like Gabriel had. And she would never, ever abandon Adrien like Emilie had.

“Thank you all,” the priest said as he stepped aside to let everyone pay their respects as they wished. “Go in peace.”

Pleasantries were exchanged, and Chloe only half heard them as she made her way aimlessly through the small crowd toward Marinette and Adrien. They’d disappeared behind the moving people, but Chloe spotted a shock of blond hair behind a balding man she recognized as one of the AF executives and started making her way toward it. When she got closer, she realized the person was moving in the opposite direction, as if to leave the tent entirely. Chloe opened her mouth to call out to Adrien, but a glimpse between two taller heads revealed a feminine figure all in black. She donned a black bonnet and ducked out of the tent, but not before shooting a final glance back at the mourners and the tomb behind them.

That woman…

“Chloe,” said Marinette. A hand tugged on her sleeve.

Chloe turned to find her there with Alya, while Adrien was a ways off with Nino talking with the AF executive Chloe had spotted earlier. “Hey,” Chloe said.

She turned back around, but the woman in black was gone without a trace.

“We’re going to head out, I think,” Marinette said. “Adrien wanted to leave earlier, but now that it’s over, I figured, you know…”

It took Chloe a minute to understand that Marinette was asking permission to take Adrien. “Oh. Yeah, sure, take him.”

“What about the reception?”

“Forget it. He’ll be better off staying away, trust me.”

“After his speech at the church, I’d have to agree,” Alya said soberly.

Chloe glanced at Alya. They’d never been close by any stretch of the imagination, but Chloe had nothing against her. “Yeah, well, he’s going through some shit, obviously.”

Alya frowned. “I know that.”

“No, you really don’t.” The look on Marinette’s face gave her pause. Chloe pinched the bridge of her nose. “Sorry, that came out bitchy.”

“Chloe, you should get some rest, too,” Marinette said, touched her wrist. “You don’t have to go to the reception either, you know.”

“Unfortunately, I do. My mother’s there, and I’d rather not see anyone get possessed by a demon at my hotel.”

Alya looked at her suspiciously, but Marinette just nodded sympathetically. “Okay, well, I’ll stop by later or something.”

“Yeah,” Chloe said. “That’d be nice.”
They parted, Chloe said goodbye to Adrien, and then she was left to oversee the rest of the mourners until they departed, as well. Eventually, the storm had died down to a quiet, grey sleet and the winds quelled. She was back at Le Grand Paris in time for dinner. The night was a bit of a blur, and Chloe broke her one-drink rule at work-related functions and nursed her second glass of wine, because fuck this entire goddamned day and everybody in it. Pollen didn’t know how lucky she was to have been able to sit this one out. Chloe was tempted to go up to her room and talk to Pollen, put this stupid animosity behind them, and just apologize. Anything was better than watching her mother put the ‘party’ in ‘funeral party’.

She took out her phone to check her messages—none. Of her old texts, most were from Adrien, some recent ones from Marinette, and up until last Saturday night, from Luka. Liquid courage in hand, she was half tempted to text him and say hi, maybe see if he’d even respond, but her thumb hovered over his contact card, unmoving.

**Hot Luka.**

Pollen still called him that, like it was his actual name. She was so ridiculous, honestly. What did she know about human relationships, anyway? She was a talking bee. A talking bee who’d been asleep for a century, totally unversed in the ways of twenty-first century romance. And this wasn’t a romance by any stretch of the imagination, anyway.

And yet, she couldn’t get Marinette’s words out of her head. “*There’s nothing Luka values more than honesty.*”

Well, that was just great. It didn’t matter, since clearly she wasn’t going to see him again. He hadn’t spoken to her once since the party. What was his problem, anyway? He couldn’t manage even one lousy text? Had he moved on that fast? Chloe imagined him singing with his band at Firefly, some other girl in the audience listening, enraptured, and him finding her after the show for a drink, a hand on her knee, a whispered invitation to go somewhere quieter. The image got her so worked up that she squeezed her phone just to give her fingers something to dig in to.

She realized too late that she’d accidentally clicked on his contact card, and the phone was ringing. He picked up after two rings.

“*Chloe,*” he said on the other line.

Chloe’s throat clenched at the sound of his voice, but it was too late now—he’d already picked up and it would be crass to try to pass it off as a butt dial. Even so, her voice would not obey her.

“I—” she began. She what? She didn’t have a clue what to say to him.

“All black’s not your color,” he said.

“What?” She looked around. “Are you…?”

“Your two o’clock.”

Chloe glanced to her right, and sure enough, through the crowd, she found him watching her from a table alone, phone to his ear. And despite everything, she stared. He wore jeans and a collared shirt, nothing fancy, appropriately black for the occasion. Just seeing him in person now after everything that had transpired on Saturday literally made her weak in the knees. How was he able to draw such a visceral reaction on sight? It felt like she hadn’t seen him in months.

“What are you doing here?” she said over the phone.
“Marinette called me.”

Meddling Marinette. Chloe would have been annoyed if not for Marinette’s genuine concern about her having to oversee this reception alone. And goddamnit, a part of Chloe was so relieved to see him here that she couldn’t be pissed at all.

Luka started toward her, and soon he was here, standing in front of her, an arm’s length away. He hung up the phone and stuffed his hands in his pockets, but he didn’t try to touch her. He hadn’t even smiled.

“I wasn’t sure if I was going to come over here,” he said. “But then you called, so…”

“I didn’t mean to,” she said.

He looked at her, and they both knew she was lying. And yet, he said nothing.

Chloe bit her lip. It was so stupid, this unbalance between them. And it was her fault entirely. “Look, I’m…not great at this.”

“Try,” he said, calm but stern.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” she said a little defensively.

“It looks like you’re making excuses and wasting my time.”

Ouch. But Chloe guessed she deserved that and more. He was being frighteningly civil about the whole thing after she’d basically called him low-class and kicked him out of her hotel. Why?

“I deserve that,” she said.

Luka frowned, and she read the hint of frustration in his sleepy eyes. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Oh my god, stop. Don’t apologize for my shitty behavior.”

“Chloe—”

“No, let me say this,” she interrupted him, smoothing her bangs self-consciously. “Just…just give me a sec.”

He gave her the time she needed to steel herself and work up her courage, because goddamnit if she could be brave for Adrien on one of the worst days of his life, she could be brave for herself, too.

“What I said to you on Saturday, I meant it. At least, a scared, insecure part of me meant it. And I know that sounds horrible, but I hear honesty’s the best policy with you, so this is me being honest.”

She wrung her hands and forced herself to look him in the eye. “I’ve done some shitty things in my time, and I’ll do more shitty things in the future. I’m not like you. And I know that’s not an excuse or anything, but you’re so… You’re so good, and I’m just…not.”

Luka reached for her then, and Chloe almost lost her nerve at the feel of his fingers curling around hers. “That’s not true.”

“It is, and that’s the whole point,” she said, careful to keep her voice down so as not to attract the attention of the funeral-goers. “There are things about me, about my family, my background, that are ugly. I used to be worse, but Adrien… He helped me be better. He gave me a reason to get better, because if I didn’t, I’d lose him. But you…” She took a shaky breath and held on to his hands like he might slip away at any moment, but she had to get this out. It was the only way forward without
regrets. “I’m not a good person, but I want to try to be. With Adrien, I try for him. But you make me want to try for myself. I’ve never had someone like that before, someone… Someone who makes me feel like I’m worth…” Her voice cracked. “Like I deserve to be adored. All of me.”

Luka was quiet as he waited for her to finish. Chloe swallowed the knot in her throat and closed her eyes.

“I don’t have the words to tell you how sorry I am,” she said. “You’re the last person in the world who deserves to be treated like trash, and I’m so sorry I made you feel even for a moment that I thought less of you in any way.”

His fingers under her chin forced her to look up at him, and the look in his eyes stole her breath. There was such raw, beautiful affection there. “Thank you,” he said. “That’s all I wanted to hear.”

“Are you… You’re forgiving me?”

He smiled. “How could I not forgive you for being honest?”

She couldn’t help but tear up at how easy he made it sound. It almost didn’t feel fair. “But I was such a bitch to you. I was so…” So weak. “I was such a coward.”

“And today you’re brave.” He took her face in his hands. “I told you, Chloe. You’re beautiful when you’re honest. And I’m tired of being mad at you. I miss you.”

She sniffled and put her hands over his. “You miss me?”

“How many times do I have to tell you I want you?” He pulled her close and touched his forehead to hers.

“I’m afraid I’m not good enough for you,” she whispered her deepest insecurity against him.

“You just proved that you are,” he said fiercely, pressing a kiss to her mouth and tracing her temples with his thumbs affectionately. “And I’ll do whatever it takes until you believe that.”

Chloe blinked a few stray tears away and found that she couldn’t control the silly smile that spread across her face. His grin matched hers, and soon she was biting back a laugh as he pressed chaste kisses to her mouth, her cheeks, her forehead. A few of the guests saw them together and looked, but no one approached them. Chloe hardly noticed them.

“Damnit,” Chloe said, dabbing at her eyes and hoping her makeup wasn’t totally ruined.

“What?” Luka said, still smiling.

“I think I owe Marinette a really expensive cheesecake for calling you here.”

He took her waist in his arm. “Sounds right. She’s one of the greatest friends you can have, trust me.”

“I think I’m figuring that out.”

“So, what now? You have to stay and keep an eye on things here?”

Chloe looked around. Her parents were both engaged in deep conversation with some other guests, and neither seemed to be aware of anything going on around them. “No,” she said. “If there’s one thing I can count on my mother for, it’s to throw a party. No one will miss me.”
“You want to get out of here?” He tightened his grip on her waist in not-so-subtle suggestion.

“Come upstairs. I’ve been wanting to see how you look on my bed.”

Luka smirked. “You’re the boss.”

She grabbed his wrist. “Yes. And I’m putting you in charge for the next few hours, if you think you can handle the responsibility.”

Luka’s gaze darkened and he pressed a discreet kiss to the shell of her ear. “I think you could do with a good hair pulling.” His fingers curled around the back of her neck, promising.

Yes, I could.

Chloe had to stop herself from practically running out of the room to the elevators.

Marinette took Adrien home to Agreste Mansion after the funeral services. It was strange being here after so many years. She’d only ever been in the foyer, but Adrien had moved in to the master bedroom, and she was sitting on a king-sized bed with a scarlet comforter thinking about how just last week, this had been Gabriel Agreste’s bedroom. She supposed it made sense that Adrien, as the sole occupant, would take the master bedroom for his own. But something about it felt weird all the same, as if Gabriel’s presence still lingered in these walls, his corpse only freshly interred not three hours past.

Nino and Alya had gone home, but Marinette did not want Adrien to be alone today. She’d sent Luka to Chloe in the hopes that Chloe could take a little bit of time for herself after all the time and energy she’d been spending on Adrien lately, and hopefully make up with the guy she was clearly far more interested in than she let on.

Adrien hadn’t said too much, but he also hadn’t left her side since the burial, hardly breaking physical contact. She wanted to ask him about his harangue back at the church, but didn’t want to make him upset or feel like she was interrogating him. She’d done enough of that as Ladybug already. It just wasn’t fair to push him so soon after Gabriel’s death, no matter how curious she was. Instead, she resolved to be here for him in any way she could, to show him he was not alone, that she would never push him away, just as she’d promised at Jessika’s party.

Adrien got a phone call just after they arrived at the mansion, and Marinette was surprised when he put it on speaker until the caller identified himself.

“Adrien, it’s Aramis. I don’t mean to bother you, but I just wanted to convey my deepest condolences for your loss. I’m so sorry,” Aramis said.

Marinette was surprised to find him calling Adrien, and even more surprised at Adrien’s apparent ease of familiarity with him.

“Thanks, Aramis, I appreciate that,” Adrien said tiredly. “Marinette’s here. I’ve got you on speaker.”

“Excellent, I’m glad to hear it. In our darkest hour, we are lucky to have those we love and trust to support us. I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Hello, Aramis,” Marinette said, blushing at his sincerity. “You’re not interrupting. I’m glad you called.” She glanced at Adrien. “We both are.”
“I won’t keep you two lovebirds long,” Aramis said, a smile in his voice. “Adrien, needless to say, please take whatever time you need. Business can wait. Let me know if there’s anything at all I can do, son.”

Adrien cracked the ghost of a smile at the endearment. “Thanks, Aramis. That means a lot. But I don’t need any more time. I made my decision about the job. Count me in.”

So that was it. Marinette should have guessed Aramis would be interested in recruiting Adrien. But for him to jump ship and join Aramis so soon? He’d lost a father, and AF had lost its leader.

“I’m pleased to hear it, but are you sure? AF will be in turmoil losing not only their founder and president, but their new majority shareholder if you decide to leave now.”

“I’m sure,” Adrien said readily. “I’m all in. This is what I want. The sooner I can get to work, the better.”

“Then consider it done. My team will be very happy to hear it. And I mean it, Adrien. Anything you need, anything at all, you give me a call. We’re family now.”

Marinette held Adrien’s gaze. He didn’t smile. “Yeah,” he said. “Thanks, I will.”

He hung up the phone, and Marinette took his hand. “Hey,” she said. “Not that it’s any of my business, but that’s a big decision you just made. Are you really sure this is what you want?”

He frowned at her. “Yeah, I’m sure. I may be walking landmine right now, but I’m not stupid, Marinette. I know what I’m doing.”

“Of course I don’t think that. I just meant that it’s a really big change, and so soon after everything that’s happened—”

“Maybe I want a change, okay?” Adrien interrupted her. “I want this. Is that so bad? For me to want something for myself?”

“Of course it’s not bad,” Marinette said, shocked that he would even entertain such a depressing thought. “You deserve to be happy, Adrien. If this is what you want, then I support you one hundred percent. I just meant that you have a lot going on right now. I’m worried about you, that’s all.”

He tightened his grip on her hand. “I want you, Marinette.”

Marinette stared at him, surprised at the sudden change in his look from pained frustration to dark, needy desire. He reached for her arm and locked her in place on the bed.

“I want you so much,” he confessed. “You make me happy.”

Marinette remembered that she required air to stay alive and sucked in a breath. Heat raised a fantastic flush upon her neck and cheeks to match his duvet. “You make me happy, too.”

“Then let me have you,” he said, leaning in close and pressing his lips to her temple. His sutures tickled her skin, rough spun.

She reached for him automatically, her stomach a whorl of butterflies and pulsing heat hearing him repeat her own words back to her. It was sudden and intense, this desire, and it threatened to sweep her away. She soon forgot all about their worrisome conversation from before as she lost herself to the moment. His kiss was bruising and hungry, like he needed to feel her to breathe, and soon Marinette was on her back on the bed, sinking in to his expensive duvet as he pinned her.
“Adrien,” she moaned when his fingers trailed up her thigh under the hem of her skirt. She buried her fingers in his hair, a thumb carefully brushing his stitches.

There was nothing Marinette wanted more right now than to have him, to shower him in her growing affection, to heal these raw wounds no stitches could ever sew back together. And despite her questions, despite Hawk Moth, she wanted him, as much as he was willing to give. The rest could come later, in time when he was ready.

“Please,” he said, digging his fingers into her hip in a crushing grip that would surely bruise later. “I want to feel happy.” He pulled down the shoulder of her dress and ripped a seam in his haste.

Marinette froze, but he either didn’t notice or didn’t care. His kisses were insistent, teeth on her collarbone, a thumb hooking under the lacy strap of her panties. She tried to grab his wrist to slow him down, but he was stronger than her and brushed her off.

“Adrien, wait,” she said.

He rocked his hips against her, giving her every reason to believe that yes, he meant it when he said he wanted her, and any other day Marinette would have jumped at the opportunity to feel him so intimately close. But not like this.

“Adrien,” she said more forcefully, tightening her grip in his hair. “Just wait a second, please—”

He silenced her with a kiss so forceful it was almost feral. Marinette could not breathe. Eyes wide, she summoned her strength and pushed against him with all her might. Adrien gasped and rolled off of her. Immediately, he was on his hands and knees, eyes narrowed as if looking for danger.

Marinette pushed herself up into a sitting position and did her best to look calm and understanding.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I just… This is fast, with everything you’ve been through.”

His expression slowly morphed from alert surprise to something that looked alarmingly like resentment. “You’re rejecting me?”

Marinette quailed. “N-No, of course not! That’s not what I meant at all.”

“But that’s what you’re doing,” he said, unable to hide the hurt he clearly felt. On his hands and knees on the bed, he reminded her of a cornered animal, untrusting and potentially hostile.

Marinette tugged at her sleeve, which was too big to stay on her shoulder now that the seam had been ripped. “That’s not what this is. I just think we should slow down. You’re not in a good place right now, and I don’t—”

“You’re pitying me?” he said, aghast.

“What? No, I’m not—”

“Then you don’t trust me.”

Marinette was taken aback at his growing hostility. Where was this coming from? When had she ever given him reason to believe she didn’t trust him implicitly? Now more than ever, she was convinced stopping was the right move. Adrien was clearly not in a healthy emotional place right now, understandably, and complicating things further with their relationship could only make things worse for him.

“What on earth ever gave you that idea?” she said, not bothering to hide her offense. “I just don’t

“Adrien—”

“That’s what you want to know, right?” he said, not giving her time to explain herself. “About my father, our relationship. Would it bother you to know I’m glad he’s dead?”

“Don’t say that,” she said, struck by a gripping despair for him, for the pain that was so plain to see. “We both know you don’t mean that.”

“How would you know? He was a monster, Marinette. A villain. He was—”

“It doesn’t matter what he was! No matter what problems you had with him, you need time to grieve because you’re human, not a machine. Adrien, look around—we’re in the room he slept in until, like, a week ago. You can’t erase him just because he’s gone. This isn’t normal.”

He looked at her with that deadened look she’d seen on him before, when he bottled up Adrien and presented as something else, something she didn’t recognize. “So you think I’m fucked up.”

“No,” Marinette said readily, reaching for him. He moved away out of reach, and that hurt. She tried to ignore the rejection as best she could and stay calm. “I’ve never once thought that. I like you, Adrien. I even…” She blinked rapidly to stop herself from tearing up. “I want to do this right. Everything you’re going through, all the things you say you haven’t told me, I want you to want to trust me. But this isn’t the way.”

“I think you should go,” he said after a moment. “I want to be alone.”

“Adrien, please. Don’t push me away.” She reached for him again, but he got off the bed and showed her his back.

“Just go, Marinette. Before I say something we’ll both regret later.”

Every instinct told Marinette that leaving him alone now was the worst thing she could do, but what choice did she have? This was his house, and he didn’t want her here. He was rigid, shaking a little, like it was all he could do to keep from physically lashing out.

“Okay,” she said, defeated. “But you have me, Adrien. Whatever you need, I’m here. Please don’t forget that.”

“Yeah,” he said, still not looking at her.

It felt like the hardest thing she’d ever done, leaving him like that. She thought about texting Chloe to check on him later, but Marinette didn’t want to interrupt what she hoped was a night of much-needed resolution with Luka.

_Nino might have better luck than me._

She resolved to call him later. Maybe he could get through to Adrien where she had just spectacularly failed. Marinette’s footsteps echoed in the huge, empty house, and Gabriel Agreste’s portrait above the grand staircase looked down at her sternly as she let herself out the front door.
Chapter End Notes

FYI that I’m out on a vacation starting from the time of this posting and won’t have Internet access until the 10th. So there won’t be any updates until after that, sorry! Hopefully this chapter will tide all you lovely readers over until I get back.

Also, thanks to all the people who commented on the last chapter!! Your tears sustain me.

Next time: Mayura goes on the hunt, and Ladybug has partner problems.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

In which the author is finally back from the land of no Wi-Fi and exuberantly throws together some fight scenes, some more fight scenes, Angst™, QueenLuka (!!!), kwami lore, and #SufferingWayzz.

Chapter Notes

So I had no Internet and one of the only movies to watch in downtime was Les Mis. Needless to say, I was inspired.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The thing about the Miraculous was that there was no single, all-powerful Miraculous; rather, each possessed a unique gift which, in certain circumstances, made each individually the most or the least powerful of the set. The Peacock, for example, was known as the perfect sight, bearer of universal Truth. It was a weak shield, for Truth is meant to bare and expose, not armor and protect. Perception was Truth’s weapon, and Mayura had honed hers to a wicked point.

Her feathered Eyes saw all—a couple kissing in an alley away from prying eyes, a madame counting the night’s earnings as her girls entertained paying Johns, a concrete basement at the Municipal Police Headquarters where officers and medical examiners puzzled over a mountain of research nobody quite knew how to resolve. Tonight, Mayura’s Eyes followed an elusive figure in the shadows along the banks of the Seine. She kept her distance, cautious, but her jumps along the rooftops were quick and anticipatory—she could not lose them this time, not when she was so close.

Movement along the water, and Mayura grew nervous. Had she been spotted so soon? No, she would not let them slip away again, not when she was the only one capable of tracking this yet unknown enemy. Ladybug’s team had their part to play, but this was not a job for swords and shields. Mayura spread her oversized fans like iron wings and leaped off the edge of the building she’d landed on. They controlled her descent to the stony banks of the Seine, and she steadied herself on the railing.

There was not a soul in sight. She took a peacock feather from her cap and brushed her blue-gloved fingers over it. The Eye shimmered and blinked like a true eye, revealing a hazy picture of the Seine upriver. She swiped her fingers across it, and the image changed to a shadowy street not far from here. But as she scrolled through the images, the only figure she saw in them was herself, each angle different and distant. Another dead end. It was the fourth time in as many days.

Perhaps Fu was right—she needed help. The perfect sight was all but useless without anything to lure out her prey. Mayura had had help once, many years ago, though not from her true match. It was so long ago now that she hardly remembered what it was to have another watching her back, coming to her aid in her time of need. And in any case, what was done was done. If she had to do it all over again, she would make the same decision, as painful as it had been.
But that was before Gabriel Agreste was found murdered in his son’s apartment. The police officially attributed the killing to Hawk Moth, returned with a violent vengeance after years off the grid, but Mayura knew the truth; she knew her old partner could not have killed Gabriel Agreste simply because they were one in the same. And thanks to her Eyes, she knew what the police knew: that whoever was behind the coral murders was also linked to Gabriel’s murder. All she needed was proof.

And so, here she was, risking everything she had worked to protect all these lonely years for a chance to bring down her old partner’s killer. It was too much, and she could not remain hidden in the shadows any longer. The consequences? She would simply have to deal with them if and when they came to fruition, and hope she had trained Queen Bee enough to support Ladybug and Chat Noir when the time came.

Mayura deftly leaped over the railing and landed on the unprotected stone walkway lining the bank of the Seine. Down here, it was dark as pitch away from even the few foggy, yellow street lamps. A thin layer of ice crunched beneath her boots, black as the night sky and treacherous to the unwary. She began to walk, her fans open at her sides, eyes wide and dilated as she peered through the gloom.

The waters were dark and still. It was not snowing tonight, but inky clouds blotted out the moon and stars, and Mayura felt the chill of winter bone-deep even through her Miraculous glamor. She parted her lips, her breath misted, and she listened. Nothing, only the gentle flow of the water below, languid in the cold. It crunched softly, its edges frozen over where the river met the stone banks.

If not for her heightened Miraculous senses, she may have missed the distinctly unnatural rush of water beneath the babble of the river. But she felt it more than heard it, and her body reacted on instinct honed over years of running and hiding and surviving. She jumped and spun in the air, her fans spread and spinning with her. They sliced through something hard and moving, and the force tipped Mayura off balance and into the stone wall below the railing.

There was no time to catch her breath because another deadly projectile came hurtling straight for her out of the Seine, and she was forced to roll ungracefully out of the way. Thick, gnarled coral embedded in the stone where her head had been just seconds ago, ramified and dripping water. Mayura was already running toward higher ground as a figure rose out of the water on a bed of rose coral that squirmed, alive. Even in the darkness, she could see a pair of baleful, pink eyes lock onto her. The figure raised a delicate arm covered in a thin, spidering layer of coral, and with a flick of the wrist, two more thick branches shot out of the water like tentacles hunting for prey to squeeze.

Mayura jumped just in time to avoid one of them narrowly, but she was not so lucky with the second. The coral pierced her super suit and cut a deep gash in her side. She bit back a curse and slashed hard with her fan, slicing clean through the coral. She threw her other fan as hard as she could at her attacker directly and heard a shriek when the blades ripped through coral and flesh.

“Exedo,” hissed the leviathan.

Mayura froze for a second, and it was a second long enough to foresee her demise. The roiling coral tentacles took on a life of their own and expanded like so many serpents. They plunged through water and stone alike, unstoppable in every direction, and they converged on Mayura.

She jumped and called upon her Miraculous’s ultimate power. “Divination!”

The coral branches rushed at her and impaled her ten times over. She was dead before she hit the ground.
The scene changed, and this time she twisted right, avoiding the brunt of the rushing coral, until at the last moment two more tentacles swung around and ran her through from behind.

Again, this time left, but she lost her balance, hit the ground, and ended up buried under the writhing coral fingers.

Over and over again, each scene different than the last, but each outcome the same, bloody end. Mayura rejected them all, until finally one showed her a way out with her life and person intact. She ran headlong toward the coral, leaped high with the help of her remaining fan, and dove into the Seine. Unable to see her, the coral bent and thrust erratically, shots in the dark, and she swam as best she could away. Her super suit dulled the freezing water to pulsing numbness, and adrenaline got her to the other side of the river. She’d chosen her fate, and releasing her power, she followed it to the other side of the Seine.

Behind her, the waters churned furiously as the enemy tried to fish her out, but Mayura had seen every possible path the coral could take, and she maneuvered around it as deftly as she could. When she reached the other side, she found her second fan embedded in the stone wall, bloody and crusted with bits of coral. She quickly drew it, ignored the beep of her Miraculous, and leaped into the air. The fans gave her lift, and she shot toward the figure in the water still stabbing out blindly. Pink eyes and a face covered in snaking coral stems slackened in shock when Mayura collided with them, and the two of them plunged into the freezing river waters.

The struggle lasted only seconds, and when they broke the surface, the telltale chirps of two Miraculous forced them apart. The enemy was more graceful in water than on land and managed to disengage on the opposite shore, but not unscathed. Mayura’s fan had grazed them before, and now the coral growing around their face had cracked and peeled away in places. The lighting was poor and Mayura struggled to stay afloat nursing her wounds, but she could have sworn the smooth jawline had a distinctly feminine contour to it underneath the mask of coral—a woman?

The Miraculous chirped again, and the enemy cast her one final, furious glare before dipping below the water once more. The river churned, and she shot off faster than Mayura could ever hope to follow, a bullet below the surface.

Now I know how she’s been avoiding detection, Mayura thought bitterly.

And a new piece of information—the source of the coral was a Miraculous wielder, as Mayura had suspected already. It didn’t narrow things down too much, but it was a something.

It was time to pay the Guardian another midnight visit.

For the record, if this was how Chloe’s life was going to be from now on, she needed to start charging by the hour. Luka had literally just said goodbye to her this morning as he headed for the metro station down the block from Le Grand Paris when panic broke out. Someone was terrorizing people—probably another coralized victim—and it was fucking pandemonium right here on the Champs-Élysées.

Chloe immediately dialed the police and told them to put out whatever signal they had to summon Ladybug and Chat Noir, and then she dashed back inside the lobby and locked herself in the small back office. Pollen was out of her pocket in an instant to transform her, and soon Queen Bee was out the window and flying over the streets, her blue eyes searching for the source of the panic.
What she found was… Well, it was something.

“Fellow countrymen! No longer shall we be oppressed by our bourgeois betters! I am Guillotine, and together we shall rise up and take back our beautiful Paris!”

The highly offended party—Guillotine—was a man transformed into a series of knives and swords linked together. He was a man and a half tall with legs like stilts and blades for feet. They cut into the cobblestone as if it were styrofoam. He swung his arms around, and the blades armoring them sliced through anything they touched—mostly expensive sports cars, a couple lamp posts, and an unfortunately placed mail box. But he’d set his sights on Le Grand Paris and the well-dressed people streaming in and out of it in an attempt to find safety, and now he was swinging at them.

An akumatized victim? Queen Bee stared openly. Adrien had been attacked by Hawk Moth, after all…

“We shall have our cake and eat it, you aristocratic scum!” Guillotine said as he slashed at a fleeing restauranteur, slicing clean through his paper chef’s hat and sending the poor man tripping over the curb.

“Yeah, and I’m Javert,” Queen Bee said through gritted teeth. “Fucking perfect.”

She was about to draw her blade and go after Guillotine when Luka, that frosted cupcake too pure for this world, dashed from the metro station to help a fleeing gentleman with two young children who were slowing him down and crying. He tried to rush them away from the five star restaurant next door to Le Grand Paris, but Guillotine saw them attempting to escape and came in swinging.

“This is a revolution!” Guillotine shouted.

Queen Bee took off flying, rapier drawn, and intercepted Guillotine’s attack just in time. The clang of steel on steel racked her body, but her super suit gave her inhuman strength and absorbed the shockwave. She pushed back with all her might and sent the akumatized victim reeling, wincing as he crashed into a parked, cream-colored Lamborghini. The owner shouted a curse as she scrambled to pull some shopping bags from the passenger side and also maybe avoid getting chopped up as an afterthought.

“Get out of here!” Queen Bee shouted at Luka and the gentleman he’d been helping.

The children cried louder, and Guillotine was already getting up.

“Hey, I know you,” Luka said, winded. “You’re Queen Bee, that new hero who helped Ladybug and Chat Noir before.”

Queen Bee couldn’t help but cast him a cursory glance to make sure he was okay. “Yeah, and I’m a little busy, pretty boy. So move—”

She didn’t have time to finish her thought when Guillotine came in swinging again. Queen Bee parried, which was easier said than done when her opponent’s body was literally made of blades, any of which could slice her to ribbons on contact.

Good thing she could fly.


“Beetle?! I’m obviously a bee, you asshole! And I’ll impede you all I goddamned want!” Queen Bee
came down hard, forcing him to catch her blade with both arms, and they were locked in a momentary test of strength.

*If he’s an akumatized victim, then Ladybug should be able to cure him, right?*

It had been a long time since Paris had seen any akumatized people, but Queen Bee remembered them all too well, having caused more than a handful of them herself. Well, nobody ever said she was perfect. And anyway, once Ladybug got here, she could purify the akuma infecting this otherwise innocent person. Easy.

But of course, nothing could ever be easy. When more screams erupted down the street, Queen Bee paled at the sight of several coralized people grabbing anyone in range and spreading their infection. And of course, Luka was among the courageous and able-bodied trying to help the very young and very old avoid certain demise. She was seriously going to kill him later if the coralized people didn’t get to him first.

Abandoning Guillotine in favor of the more deadly concern, Queen Bee flew as fast as she could down the block and slashed at the nearest coralized victim, relieving her of the hefty shield on her arm and exposing bloody flesh beneath.

“Everybody, get as far away from here as you can!” she shouted to be heard.

“I shall not be silenced!” Guillotine was at it again, this time defacing a chic coffee shop.

“I beg to differ!” said a blessedly familiar voice.

Ladybug had arrived on the scene, picked up the totaled Lamborghini from before, and tossed it at Guillotine like it weighed nothing at all. He easily defended and slashed the car to ribbons, but it was enough to draw his full attention to her and allow the frightened coffee shop patrons to escape to safety.

“About time, Bug!” Queen Bee said.

Ladybug caught her eye and nodded grimly. She drew her yo-yo and began to spin it as she circled Guillotine. Queen Bee, meanwhile, focused on the coralized victims and their fleeing human targets. To her horror, a couple coral golems were among them—how the hell had the coral progressed so fast? There was no time to worry about it, and Queen Bee flew in with her sword poised to go all Kill Bill on their asses. As before, the golems were slow and ungainly compared to their partially armored comrades, and her sword cut cleanly through them like butter. She was paring down the second one to size when suddenly a coralized victim clocked her hard in belly.

The air rushed out of Queen Bee’s lungs, her ribs cracked and pliant under the coralized fist. She crashed unceremoniously into the side of a building and dropped her rapier a short ways away. Groaning, she struggled to sit up under the rubble and coughed from the dust, which stung even worse.

“Shit, are you okay? Can you stand?”

Queen Bee opened her eyes and found Luka hovering over her, his face a mask of worry and concern. He had her rapier in one hand and reached for her with the other. There was dust in his hair and blood trickling from a cut in his hairline. She took his offered hand and managed to stand awkwardly.

“I’m fine. I’m a superhero, obviously,” Queen Bee said with a wince, wiping blood from her lips. Thankfully, her super suit was already working to absorb the pain from her injuries enough to make
them tolerable, but she could not afford another direct hit from the inhumanly strong coralized people.

“Right, yeah, of course. Uh, here.” Luka handed her back her rapier.

“What’re you still doing here? I told you to get the hell away.”

He had the decency to look abashed. “Well yeah, but if I hadn’t been here, who would’ve brought you back your sword?”

Queen Bee was about to answer that when the first golem she’d dismantled (now fully reformed—seriously, were they getting better at this?) came charging straight for Luka and her. Without time for so much as a warning, she threw her arms around Luka and jumped with all her might. Her wings carried them up, and not a second too soon before the golem collided with the wall and opened up a hole to the shop on the other side.

Luka gasped in fear and clung to her, and Queen Bee struggled to keep them airborne with the added weight unbalancing her.

“Stop squirming!” she shouted.

“I’m sorry!” Luka said, fumbling for a better grip on her that wouldn’t interfere with her buzzing wings. Unfortunately, his hand passed over her butt and startled her enough to veer them off course. Luka held on as Queen Bee did her best to maneuver them to a nearby rooftop, where they landed in a heap.

“Ow,” he said, rubbing his back after the hard landing.

Queen Bee was instantly on her feet and out of his hold, flushed red. “Hands to yourself!”

“It was an accident!” Luka said.

“Yeah, well your girlfriend might not see it that way!”

He looked at her strangely. “How do you know I have a girlfriend?”

Queen Bee realized her slip too late and scowled deeply. “Well, you won’t for much longer if you go around groping smoking hot superheroes!”

“Real paragon of modesty, aren’t you?”

A sudden crash, followed by Ladybug’s scream, drew Queen Bee’s attention, and she all but forgot about Luka as she ran to the edge of the building and surveyed the scene below.

“Oh, fuck,” she said. Below, the coralized had suddenly changed their trajectory and converged on Ladybug all at once, as though lured. Chat Noir had arrived at some point, and he was pummeling his way through them with his staff in an effort to get to Ladybug while she did her best to dodge one of the coral golems and Guillotine coming at her together. Her left arm hung limply at her side, and there was a hint of desperation in her blue eyes.

“Go, I’ll be fine,” Luka said, joining her at the edge.

“Don’t you dare leave this rooftop, or I’ll punish you myself.” Queen Bee took off without waiting for his acknowledgment, sword drawn for a killing blow, and swooped into the thick of battle to help Ladybug and Chat Noir.
By the time she got down there, Chat had beaten his way through upwards of ten coralized victims and was now engaging Guillotine. Queen Bee came in hard and fast at the coral golem and slashed him down the middle, breaking him apart just as he lunged himself at a cornered Ladybug. Coral bits and blood landed on her, but she was spared a deadly pummeling at the last minute.

“Are you okay there?” Queen Bee said.

“I am now, thanks Bee,” Ladybug said. “But I need to purify the akuma.”

“Do you hear the people sing?!” Guillotine bellowed as he swung his sword arms around violently.

Chat’s skill with his staff was even better in person than Queen Bee remembered seeing on television. He moved with the grace and confidence of one trained in the art of the sword, and he seemed to grow more powerful with each parried blow.

“All I hear is the sound of your death rattle, akuma,” Chat snarled as he delivered a vicious blow to Guillotine’s head.

“Chat! We have to find the akumatized object!” Ladybug said as she dodged another coralized victim and snared him with her yo-yo.

“Look out!” Queen Bee said.

Ladybug took a nasty kick to the gut from a rabid, coralized woman and went down hard. Queen Bee swooped in and sliced the offending leg clean off, and the woman screamed her fury.

Chat, meanwhile, was getting the upper hand on Guillotine and pummeling him with his staff. The metal blades covering his body dented and even cracked, some of them falling away. What they revealed underneath, however, was not the human host, but a layer of pink coral. Chat seemed to come to the same realization as Queen Bee in that moment, sheathed his staff, and flexed his claw.

“Cataclysm,” he snarled, activating his ultimate power.

Ladybug saw what was happening and struggled to her feet. “Chat, no!”

But there was no stopping him now. He slammed his hand on the ground, and Queen Bee watched in disbelief as the black miasma coating his claws ripped through cobblestone, concrete, and anything else unlucky enough to stand in its path. Guillotine saw the danger, too, and leaped out of the way, but the path of destruction changed course and followed him like a homing missile.

The ground split where Cataclysm opened it up, revealing a deep crag that leaked more black miasma. A coralized victim stumbled across it, and the dark energy caught him like fly paper, clinging to him. He roared and tried to claw his way free, but the force entrapped him and slowly disintegrated him where he stood. His legs turned to ash, and the rest of him followed as he clawed his way over the street in vain.

“Holy shit,” Queen Bee said, momentarily stunned.

Chat hardly seemed to notice or care, his eyes dark with determination as he directed his attack to follow Guillotine. When it finally caught up to him, he tripped and hit the ground hard. Only then did Chat rise and pounce, claws bared.

“Chat Noir, stop!” Ladybug screamed.

Queen Bee was faster, and she slammed into Chat before he could reach Guillotine. They fell
together, and a parked car cushioned their landing. Chat immediately shoved her off him and bared his teeth in a snarl. Queen Bee stared at him in shock. Those were not human teeth, far too long and sharp, and those luminous, green eyes flashed with something sinister and violent—a trick of the light? For a moment, she could have sworn they’d almost changed color.

“Stay the hell out of my way!” he said.

But the damage was done. Guillotine’s blades disintegrated, revealing the coral rot beneath. A black akuma fluttered helplessly, shedding ashes as it fought against the effects of Chat’s Cataclysm.

Ladybug was on her feet again and half running, half limping after the akuma. “No, no! Wait!”

She threw her yo-yo and caught it, purifying it in a matter of seconds, but her magic was not enough to reverse the effects of Cataclysm. It was already eating through Guillotine’s coral armor, revealing an old man underneath. He gasped for breath, and his eyes rolled back in their sockets as he clutched at his heart and the rose pin embedded there. The other coralized victims fell where they stood, their fate linked to his, and soon all was quiet.

“No!” Ladybug wailed, falling to her knees over the old man, his eyes glassy with death.

Chat loomed over her, his expression cold and unreadable. “You couldn’t have saved him, anyway. He was coralized.”

“So you put him down like an animal?! We could have at least talked to him, like we did with Chief Raincomprix! What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong with me. I just see things clearly now. There’s no middle ground here, Ladybug. It’s kill or be killed. I thought you learned that the last time.”

“We’re not here to kill indiscriminately!”

“Maybe we should be! The enemy obviously is!”

“Hey, cool it, pussy cat,” Queen Bee said.

Chat shot her a venomous look. “You stay out of this. You have no place here.”

Ladybug held out her hand as if to shield Queen Bee. “Yes, she does. Bee’s as much a part of this team as you are.”

The look on Chat’s face made it clear how he felt about that. Queen Bee returned his glare, not liking his attitude. Something was off about him, and she didn’t like it one bit. But there was not going to be much time to hash it out now that the threat was neutralized. People were already emerging back out on the streets, their cell phones taking video and pictures. Most of them were angled at the three heroes, recording their argument. Police were also on the scene and attempting to cordon off the area until the medical examiners could come for the bodies of the fallen. Chat’s Miraculous gave a warning chirp, and he scowled.

“Whatever, I’m out of here,” he said. “We’ll talk about this later.”

“Chat, wait a minute,” Ladybug said.

But he was already leaping away with the help of his staff.

“Bug, anything you can do about the damage? My ribs could use your yo-yo magic,” Queen Bee
Ladybug sniffled and looked around at the gathering crowd with their cell phones recording everything. “Yeah, okay.”

A Miraculous Ladybug spell later, and everything was back to normal, including Queen Bee’s injuries.

“Bee, I think we should talk later about what’s been going on,” Ladybug said.

“You want to have a team meeting?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, after Chat Noir’s little performance today…”

“Let me worry about Chat. Listen, there’s a person called the Guardian.” Ladybug looked around at the people with their phones. “With Hawk Moth back and possibly working with whoever’s behind the coral murders, I think it’s time we all sat down together.”

Marinette received Fu’s summoning later that week, and it could not have come soon enough. She’d hardly slept much between work responsibilities, worrying about how to patch up her relationship with Adrien after their unfortunate encounter after his father’s funeral, and of course everything going on with the coral murders. It felt like everything in her life was going wrong all at once—all except work, that is. Jessika had been so pleased with Marinette’s work on her gown for the premiere party that she’d commissioned five more to start. She’d become one of Marinette’s top customers practically overnight, and Marinette had her team working on Jessika’s custom orders day and night to satisfy the hefty price tag Jessika was paying. At least it was one aspect of her life that wasn’t in the gutter.

She and Tikki made the trip to Fu’s place out of costume together, and Marinette fretted the entire way there. Would Chat Noir be there? Would she finally meet him under the mask? After the stunt he’d pulled fighting Guillotine, a part of her wasn’t sure she wanted to meet his civilian self. And what about Mayura? Marinette had so many questions, and she hoped that this time, Fu would have some answers for her.

He was in the living room with tea and a fire blazing in the hearth when she arrived. Wayzz hovered toward her and welcomed Tikki and her.

“It’s good to see you, Marinette, Tikki,” Wayzz said politely.

“Hello, Wayzz,” Tikki said, smiling.

“Marinette, please come in and have a seat,” Fu said.

Marinette did as she was bade and looked around. “Am I the first one here?”

“You are. We are waiting on Queen Bee. She will arrive soon.”

“What about Chat?”

Fu regarded her. “Chat Noir will not be joining us today.”
Marinette frowned over her tea. “Why not? Were you unable to reach him or something?”

Fu and Wayzz exchanged a look. “It’s not that,” Fu said. “I’m afraid what we have to discuss today may be best done without Chat Noir present, at least for now.”

“But he’s my partner,” Marinette said. “He has a right to be here.”

“One thing at a time,” Wayzz said. “You’ll be meeting Queen Bee out of costume today. After that, we can discuss what to do about Chat Noir.”

Marinette wasn’t sure she liked that answer, and she caught Tikki’s eye. Tikki only looked apologetic as she munched on a cookie. Before she could say anything further, there was a knock on the door. Fu got up.

“That will be her now, I expect,” Fu said.

He went to open the door, and Marinette was momentarily left alone with Tikki and Wayzz.

“Hey, I don’t like leaving Chat in the dark,” she said. “What’s this about?”

Wayzz was inscrutable. “I know you have questions, Marinette. Trust that all will be revealed in due course. If there is one thing I’ve learned about you humans in my eons in this dimension, it is that you have certain emotional proclivities and instincts which often lead to poor decisions.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Wayzz sipped his tea from a thimble. “One thing at a time.”

Tikki just nodded, and Marinette realized she would get no help there. Before she could say anything more, she heard Fu talking with a woman as they approached the living room.

“So you’re what, like, the Miraculous equivalent of Professor X?” said the woman.

“I don’t know about ‘Professor’, but I am the Guardian,” Fu said.

“Ooh, I like this game! Who does that make us, Honey Bee?” said a high-pitched voice Marinette didn’t recognize. “Storm? Ooh! Maybe Mystique?”

“Pheonix, obviously. She’s the best one.”

Nothing could have prepared Marinette for the sight of Chloe walking into the living room with Master Fu and a tiny, talking bee that could only have been a kwami. As soon as Chloe set foot in the living room, she and Marinette locked gazes and stared at one another.

“Chloe Bourgeois?” Marinette said, not recognizing her own voice.

“Oh my god,” Chloe said. “Marinette Dupain-Cheng?!”

Under any other circumstances, Marinette may have laughed at their reversion to using each other’s full names.

Fu smiled. “Oh how wonderful, you already know each other out of costume. That makes things much easier.”

“No way,” Chloe said. “The whole time?”
“Y-Yeah, since high school.” Marinette stood up. “Sorry, I’m just… Wait, that day at the police station, after the cafe, you—”

“Yeah, Mayura came and got me, said Ladybug—you needed help…”

“Oh my god…”

Meanwhile, Chloe’s kwami buzzed over to Tikki.

“Hello, Pollen. It’s so good to see you,” Tikki said politely.

“Of course it is!” Pollen puffed out her furry little chest. “A hundred years without me is a tragedy.”

Tikki only smiled. “It has been a long time, yes.”

“Pollen,” said Wayzz.

Pollen turned on Wayzz and narrowed her compound eyes. “Well, well, well. If it isn’t my favorite little turtledove. Don’t you look happy to see me?”

Bizarrely, Wayzz looked a bit flustered and averted his gaze. “I am happy to see you…”

Pollen’s buzzing intensified and she got right in his face. “Oh, really? Is that why you kept me locked up for a hundred years with no Chosen?”

“Pollen—”

“Oh no. I get it. You just couldn’t find anybody worthy of me, huh? I’m sure you searched far and wide—but wait. That’s right, it wasn’t you who picked out my Chosen at all.”

Pollen was getting noticeably worked up, and Wayzz shrank into his shell a little. “Pollen, please, I can explain—”

“In fact, you didn’t help at all, did you? No, it was that whiny featherbrain who finally remembered to wake me up! Ugh, how insulting!”

Wayzz was nothing but a pair of wide eyes and a floating shell now as he trembled under Pollen’s wrath. For a bee that could have fit in Marinette’s back pocket, she packed one hell of a punch.

“It wasn’t the right time,” Wayzz said feebly.

Pollen didn’t seem to care about his excuses. “And now that I’m finally awake again, what do I find? Humans have invented an entire Inter-webbing full of amazing new things! There’s Tweeter and Buzzfeed and Netflix and—”

“It’s Twitter, Pollen,” Chloe said. “You post Tweets, but the site’s called Twitter. We literally went over this last night.”

“Well?” Pollen asked, still focused on Wayzz.

“Whatever, the stupid bird one, you know,” Pollen said, still focused on Wayzz.

“Pollen, I’m sorry you were asleep for so long,” Fu said gently. “For quite some time, there was no need to initiate more Miraculous Chosen, but I’m afraid that time has passed. You are needed now more than ever, and I am very grateful to have your and Chloe’s assistance now.”

Pollen rushed at Wayzz, and the poor turtle kwami was so startled that he retreated completely in his shell and zoomed backwards. Tikki caught him with an ‘oomph’. Pollen smiled triumphantly.
“Yeah, yeah, Guardian, I’ve heard it all before. You only summon me when things get really sticky.” Pollen peered at Marinette. “Tikki tends to pick the soft and sweet ones, but I remember how you stood up to my honeycomb when she was sulking about Hot Luka. I guess you’ll do.”

“Um, thanks?” Marinette said, glancing at Tikki.

Tikki had managed to coax Wayzz out of his shell and sighed, as if to say, ‘It’s not worth it.’

“Chloe, Pollen, may I offer either of you some tea? Perhaps with a bit of honey?”

Pollen turned up her nose. “Only if Wayzz mixes it for me. Or did you forget how I like my tea the way you also forgot about me?”

Wayzz looked about as miserable as a turtle could look. “I remember…” He floated off to do Pollen’s bidding like a whipped puppy.

Marinette could only stare. Wayzz had always come across as so composed, like nothing could get under his skin or set him off.

“So, the turtle’s your counterpart I’m guessing?” Chloe asked Pollen.

“That’s right,” Fu answered for Pollen. “The Bee Miraculous embodies the ultimate sword, while the Turtle Miraculous embodies the ultimate shield. If wielded together by capable Chosen, they have the strength of a hundred warriors.”

“Try a thousand, Guardian,” Pollen said proudly.

“Well, I’ve seen what Queen Bee can do,” Marinette said. “I’m glad you’re part of the team, Chloe. And you too, Pollen.”

Chloe crossed her arms self-consciously. “Yeah, well, I’ll be honest—you’re not at all what I expected. But…I guess I could get used to the idea.”

Marinette smiled. “I hope so. I’ve never had a friend I could share everything with. This is actually pretty cool.”

Chloe looked at her strangely, like she couldn’t quite believe it. Wayzz returned then with Pollen’s thimble of honeyed tea and offered it to her like a manservant hoping to assuage his lady.

“Not quite as sweet as I like it,” Pollen said after taking a sip, “but I guess I can live with this.”

Wayzz frowned at his little feet, and Tikki gave him a reassuring pat on the shell.

“Marinette, Chloe, please have a seat. There’s much to discuss.” Fu ushered them both around the living room table, where they sat next to each other with Fu across from them. The fourth chair remained empty.

“Wait, what about Chat Noir and Mayura?” Marinette asked. “I thought… I mean, if Chloe and I get to know each other’s identities, Chat Noir deserves to know, too.”

“Mayura does her own shit,” Chloe said dismissively. “Even I haven’t seen her under the glamor.”

“Yes, I know this is not the answer you may want, Marinette, but Mayura’s function is to support you indirectly. The Bee and the Turtle are your sword and shield on the battlefield, but the Peacock and the Fox are your eyes and ears. They are best left in the shadows unseen, gathering information and intelligence discreetly. Mayura won’t be joining us today. The less you know about her, the safer
you both will be.”

“But what about Chat Noir?” Marinette insisted.

“What about him?” Chloe said. “Didn’t you see him basically lose his shit against that coralized akuma? Maybe it’s better that he’s not here.”

“How can you say that? I meant it when I said you’re part of this team, but the same goes for Chat.”

Chloe was unmoved. “I get that, but I’m telling you, something about him was off. Like, creepy off. He went after Guillotine after you specifically told him not to. You said yourself that he wasted any chance we could’ve had to talk to the guy, even if his fate was sealed. That doesn’t seem even a little weird to you?”

Marinette wanted to respond to that, but she couldn’t find the words. After all, Chloe was right. “… He’s my partner. He has some issues, I know, but he’s always been my partner.”

“Well I’m your partner now, too, and I don’t know if I want him to know who I am after what I saw go down.”

“Marinette,” Tikki said sadly, touching a tiny hand to her clenched knuckle.

“I just feel really weird about this. It feels wrong to exclude him,” Marinette said.

“I understand that,” Fu said, “but please trust me—what Wayzz and I have to tell you both today is best said without Chat Noir present.”

“Why?” Marinette demanded. “He’s on our side. He deserves to be here as much as we do.”

“It’s not Chat Noir that concerns us, but his kwami,” Wayzz said, recovered somewhat after Pollen’s temper tantrum.

“Plagg? What does he have to do with anything?”

Pollen and Tikki exchanged a look, but neither of them said a word. In fact, it seemed to Marinette that aside from Chloe, everyone present knew something she did not. And it kind of pissed her off.

“More secrets,” Marinette said. “Why are there always more goddamned secrets?”


Wayzz shot her a reproving look, but Pollen ignored him.

“Secrets are no more evil than truth is good. It depends on the purpose, the circumstances,” Fu said. “Balance is key. Mayura has been a Miraculous Chosen for far longer than the two of you, and even though her trait is Truth, she understands very well how the keenest insight may be perceived as callous, even dangerous. Please trust me. Wayzz and I have spent quite some time coming to this difficult but necessary conclusion.”

“Fine,” Chloe said. “I’m listening.”

Marinette looked at her, but Chloe looked determined. She supposed there was nothing she could do for now, but she didn’t have to like it. “I’m listening, too.”

Fu and Wayzz shared a look. Then, Fu said plainly, “To get right to the point, we are now certain that the person behind the coral murders is a Miraculous Chosen.”
“Wait, you mean like, one of us?” Chloe said.

Marinette, however, was beside herself. “A Miraculous Chosen? But that can’t be!”

“I’m afraid it is. Mayura confirmed it. She managed to track down the fiend and engaged them in battle. It was a risk she ought not to have taken considering the danger, but her encounter has given me the confirmation I required to be absolutely certain.”

“But I thought you had all the Miraculous. You’re the Guardian, isn’t that your job?”

“There are many Guardians,” Wayzz spoke up. Despite his pocket size, he looked very serious as he folded his arms on his lap and leaned back on his shell. “And many more Miraculous. Every time a new idea is born, a kwami is created to embody it. You humans have amassed many ideas over the years—Truth, Courage,” he nodded toward Pollen. “Wisdom.” He indicated himself.

“So this other Miraculous,” Chloe said, more composed than Marinette, “you’re saying it’s, what? From a different place?”

“We believe so, yes,” Fu said. “There are Guardians scattered all over the world, each charged with guarding a set of Miraculous. We do not communicate with each other for safety reasons. In the event that a Miraculous Chosen uses their power for ill, they will not be able to endanger other Guardians and their Miraculous. The danger, of course, is that these rogue Miraculous Chosen may attempt to recruit others to their cause. By remaining separated and hidden, it becomes much more difficult for them to recruit others.”

“Well it’s a little late for that,” Chloe said grimly. “Considering our last fight, Hawk Moth is definitely working with the coral murderer.”

Marinette suddenly felt ill.

“Yes, that is grave indeed,” Fu said, staring thoughtfully at his tea.

“It was not always this way,” Wayzz said. “We learned to stay divided from other Guardians and their Miraculous charges the hard way, many millennia ago.”

“So, there was… a Miraculous war or something?” Marinette said.

“Yes,” Tikki said sadly. “It’s how Wayzz, Pollen, and I ended up together, with the rest of the Miraculous in our set. The Chosen who survived became the first Guardians and fled to the ends of the Earth, never to see each other again. We’ve been separated ever since. I can hardly remember most of our fellow kwami, it was so long ago.”

“So that’s it,” Chloe said. “You think whoever’s behind the coral murders is trying to build an army.”

“And Hawk Moth is the first recruit,” Marinette finished the thought. She and Chloe shared a sobering look.

“Unfortunately, it does appear that way,” Fu said. “And despite Mayura’s efforts, we still do not know who wields the Coral Miraculous.”

“The Coral Miraculous.” Saying it out loud made Marinette shiver. “Why would anyone use their Miraculous for such a dark purpose?”

“Because that is the Chosen’s wish. Kwami do not live by the same moral and ideological codes as
humans. Good and evil are abstract concepts with no more or less significance than, say, knowledge or sadness. They are all parts which add their weight to the great balance of the universe.” Fu sighed. “It is also most likely why Nooroo, Hawk Moth’s kwami, remains with him. He is the embodiment of Empathy and always sees a way to understand the wishes of his Chosen. In the end, one Chosen may last as long as a human life, and often not quite so long. In the grand scheme of things, a Hawk Moth who uses his powers for personal gain is as much a drop in the bucket as a Ladybug who uses her powers to bring him to justice.”

“That’s depressing,” Marinette said. “So you’re saying everything we do is basically pointless in the end?”

“Pretty much,” Pollen said.

“No, of course not!” Tikki said. She frowned at Pollen. “It’s not pointless at all. It matters so much. The universe and time itself are vast and infinite, just like we kwami. But you humans, you’re each a universe unto yourselves. Your actions matter. They affect those around you, even the rest of the world sometimes. Master Fu only means to say one Hawk Moth, or one Coral Miraculous gone astray, won’t doom humanity or the universe. We will always return to balance in the end, even if it may not seem that way right now.”

“Well full offense, but it really doesn’t seem that way right now,” Chloe said. “The body count’s past sixty with that last attack. And that was before Hawk Moth decided to crash the party. Shouldn’t you, like, be prepared for something like this? If you’re the Guardian, shouldn’t you have some kind of contingency plan? There’s no way this is the first time something like this has happened.”

“There are some Miraculous that naturally embrace a darker purpose, to borrow your turn of phrase, Marinette,” Wayzz said. “And you’re correct, Chloe: this is not the first time we have seen violence such as this. The Coral Miraculous is the embodiment of Pride. She is an Ancient One, one of the very first kwami to ever exist, and one of the most powerful.”

“You know this kwami?” Marinette said.

Wayzz shook his head. “I do not. Very little is known about her, including her true name…” He glanced at Tikki, who said nothing.

“Tikki?” Marinette pressed. “Do you know something?”

“No, Marinette, I don’t, but…”

“But Plagg may,” Wayzz said. “His Chosen have often, ah, wandered. I heard a rumor that many eons ago, Plagg may have had contact with Pride and the other Deadly Sins—”

“—which is just a rumor,” Tikki interjected. “And anyway, Plagg and I have always been together. Whatever contact he may have had was passing. I would know.”

“Ancient Ones,” Pollen said, clutching her tiny teacup. “They’re not so tough. Maybe you don’t care to remember, but I never forget a fight.”

“Pollen,” Wayzz said, a warning in his tone.

“You fought this coral kwami?” Chloe said.

“Not Pride, no, but there are other Ancients.” She peered at Chloe. “You know, Honey Bee, I wasn’t always fun size. My stinger was the sharpest in this dimension and the next. Not even Fear can stand up to Courage when I get going.”
“There’s a kwami for Fear? Seriously?” Chloe did not look happy to know it.

“He’s a weak little worm. We haven’t heard from him since the Dark Ages.”

“Well, Pride is no worm,” Wayzz said, “she’s an Ancient One—a Sin. I may not remember the fighting, but I remember brute force never worked against them.”

Pollen sighed dramatically. “You’re still so cautious. You always get like this when I’m asleep too long!”

Marinette was no longer paying attention to them as she reeled at Fu’s revelations. She paled with dread as she finally understood his reasons for keeping Chat Noir in the dark today. It just wasn’t possible. Even if he was upset with her for whatever reason, there was nothing in this world that would ever pit him against her. He was her partner, and even a fourteen-year absence—even a near fatal attack had not been enough to turn him against her. It was simply impossible.

*But what about Plagg?*

Tikki was awfully quiet while Pollen and Wayzz continued to argue about Ancient Ones and Deadly Sins and other kwami business Marinette did not fully understand.

“As fascinating as your reminiscing is, I’m more concerned about what’s going on right now,” Chloe said impatiently. “What are we supposed to do about this problem? People are literally dying in the streets.”

“Mayura and I will focus on gathering more information about our enemies,” Fu said. “Chloe, Marinette, you now have no secrets between you. I want you to make the most of this opportunity. You must learn to work together as partners, both in and out of costume. It is imperative that you trust each other implicitly.”

“What about Chat?” Marinette said defensively.

“I will speak with Chat Noir,” Fu assured her. “For now, I would like to keep what Wayzz said about Plagg between us. The ways of kwami are different from ours, and I do not want to alarm Chat Noir unnecessarily.”

By the time Marinette and Chloe left Fu’s place, it was already growing dark. Marinette was supposed to meet up with Alya for coffee today, but she was still in such shock after everything she’d just learned that she didn’t have the energy to put on a smile and pretend like everything wasn’t falling apart. It wasn’t fair to Alya—she didn’t know what Marinette knew.

“I need a drink,” Chloe said as they walked down the sidewalk to a busier street where they could grab a cab. “There’s a bar I know a few blocks from here. They’re nothing fancy, but they open at four.”

It took Marinette a moment to understand that this was an invitation—not for a fun girl’s night, but for the very thing she needed now more than ever. The one thing she’d never had before.

“Aren’t you busy with work?” Marinette asked.

Chloe snorted. “Please. I’m the boss; I can do whatever I want. And right now, I want to sit down with a glass of wine and feel like I’m not losing my fucking mind.”

Marinette nodded. “I know the feeling.” She pulled out her phone, debating.
Should I cancel on Alya?

She would have to if she was going to spend time with Chloe. Alya would understand. They were both busy, things came up all the time, it was just life, at least as far as Alya knew. How many times had Marinette swallowed her true feelings and thoughts for her best friend’s sake? For the sake of this secret she’d carried half her life? Walking next to Chloe, she’d never quite realized just how lonely it was, how empty.

Alya would understand, like she always did. After all, what she didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her. Maybe for once, it wouldn’t hurt Marinette as badly, either. She pulled out her phone and texted Alya that something had come up, she couldn’t meet for coffee today.

“A glass of wine sounds good right now,” Marinette said.

“Or three,” Chloe said grimly.

“Yeah.”

Marinette had no idea what would come next for them. She had no idea what would happen now that Hawk Moth was in the mix, or how Chat would react when Fu spoke to him. But for the first time in her life, she didn’t have to not know alone.

They approached the bar, and Marinette held the old painted door open for Chloe. A blast of warm air and the smell of cloves hit them like a wall.

“Hey, Chloe?” she said.

“Hm?”

“Thank you.”

Chloe’s expression softened just a little, and Marinette couldn’t help but stare a bit. All these years, was this the Chloe that Adrien had always known?

“Yeah,” Chloe said.

They went inside and left the cold behind.

Chapter End Notes

You guys, I watched the new Anansi episode today and I was SO HAPPY to see that Carapace’s whole deal is pretty much in line with my own headcanons for him. Also Alya was so fab, ugh. She’s the best. If you haven’t watched it already, please do and come fangirl with me in the comments.

Fun fact: Argus was one of the Greek goddess Hera’s attendants who watched over Io in the Garden of the Hesperides. He was kind of perfect for the job, because his body was covered in a hundred eyes (versions vary on the exact number). Hermes slew him, and Hera, in return for his loyalty and service, placed his many eyes on her favorite bird, the peacock. Hence, peacock feathers having ‘eyes’. That myth inspired most of
Mayura’s Miraculous abilities in this fic.

Next time: Adrien gets a double helping of the wayward son treatment from Nino and Master Fu.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Not all heroes wear masks (but maybe they should).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luka sat up in bed and rubbed his tired eyes. A quick glance at the nightstand clock told him it was very late. He yawned and scratched his bed head as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Beside him, Chloe slept like the dead. She wore a T-shirt she’d stolen from him, her long hair loose and splayed over the pillow. Under her short sleeve, he could just make out the shadow of a fading bruise—fencing practice, apparently. She’d gotten back in to fencing and trained in the mornings. Luka didn’t know anything about fencing, but he found it just a little odd that such a traditionally aristocratic sport would make the same physical demands as jiu jitsu. She assured him it was perfectly safe and, also, none of his business, and that was the end of that conversation. He supposed she had a point.

He gently ran his fingers through Chloe’s golden hair, softly so as not to wake her, though considering the way he’d found her back here more than a little tipsy after an extended happy hour with Marinette, he wasn’t surprised. She didn’t want to talk much about it, and Luka didn’t press her. Considering how both women were close with Adrien Agreste, he didn’t have to wonder much about what they could have to commiserate about together. He just hoped this was a sign that Chloe had found a real friend in Marinette—knowing her, she could really use one these days.

Luka slipped out of bed and grabbed his phone from the nightstand for a light to guide his way through Chloe’s spacious bedroom. He was wide awake, much to his dismay. He briefly considered waking Chloe up, but decided against it. She needed the sleep, and he had access to her 4K television in the living room. He’d just browse YouTube or something, maybe watch a movie, doodle some chord progressions he’d been thinking about until he passed out. Insomnia was a tried and true nemesis, one he’d been fighting a losing battle against for years. Sometimes, it was best not to resist it. Yawning, he padded through the living room to the kitchen sink for a glass of water.

The yellow roses he’d brought Chloe on the night of Jessika’s premier party were resting in a crystal vase on the kitchen counter, and he stopped to admire them. On closer inspection, he was a little surprised to find them still in dazzling full bloom despite how much time had passed. Cut flowers could last a while with proper care, but there appeared to be no signs of wilting in these at all. Chloe didn’t strike him as the type to have a green thumb.

Luka leaned in close and smelled the flowers. Their scent was heady and saccharine. He felt suddenly warm, and he smiled a little. Their water was getting low, so he poured his glass out over them.

“Hey! I’m trying to sleep here!” shouted a high-pitched voice.

Luka was so startled that he gasped and dropped the glass. It would have shattered on the floor, but it never hit because something swooped down and caught it, lightning fast. Something small, yellow, and soaking wet. It frowned up at him as it balanced the empty glass in its little hands.
“Watch it! You break it, you buy it.”

There was a protracted silence as Luka stared openly at what he could only describe as a talking bee. It—she?—twitched her antennae quizzically, and Luka regained his motor functions. He scrambled back until he bumped the corner of the counter, lost his balance, and fell to the floor ungracefully. The bee abandoned the empty glass and buzzed right in his face, a look of inexplicable concern in her compound eyes.

“Oh no! Hot Luka, are you hurt? Say something!”

Did that bee just call me hot?

Before he could say anything at all, the bee buzzed around him and poked at his shirt, in his hair, searching perhaps for signs of injury.

“Please say you’re okay!” she pleaded with him, sounding a little frantic.

“I—I’m fine,” Luka said.

I’m talking to a bee.

He was dreaming. This was a dream. Bees didn’t talk.

“Oh good!” The bee brightened like the morning sun, all traces of her concern gone as she practically vibrated.

Luka rubbed his eyes. He didn’t feel like he was asleep. Was he high? He couldn’t even remember getting high. That…was never a good sign. “Sorry, are you…real?”

The bee giggled. “I’m real crazy about you. Oh! I’ve been wanting to meet you ever since Honey Bee first showed you to me! But she said it wouldn’t be a good idea…” Inexplicably, the bee fell into a depressive slump and sniffled like she might burst into tears at any moment. “I-I thought maybe you w-wouldn’t like me.”

Luka had experimented a fair amount in his day, but nothing had ever made him hallucinate talking, emotionally vulnerable insects. He tried to remember the last time he’d smoked. Was that tonight? No, last night. He was stone cold sober right now. “Um, how could I not like you when I don’t even know you?”

The bee trembled self-consciously. “W-Well, I’m Pollen…”

“Pollen, huh? I guess that’s a perfect name for a bee.”

Pollen’s antennae quivered hopefully. “You think so?”

I think I’m losing my goddamned mind. “Sure I do.”

Pollen lit up again, and before he knew it, she had slammed into his chest and seemed to be hugging him. Solid and kind of warm, there was no doubt now that she was, in fact, tangible and sentient.

Okay, then.

“You are the perfect drone!” Pollen gushed.

Drone? “Chloe called me that before…”
Yes, he remembered now. It was at Jessika’s premiere party. He hadn’t given it much thought, though he remembered it being a strange choice for a pet name. When he’d asked her about it, she blushed furiously and snapped at him to forget about it, so he did.

“Duh,” Pollen said, looking up at him cutely. “Every Queen Bee has to have a perfect drone to keep her happy!”

Wait.

Queen Bee…

“The superhero?” he said.

No way.

She had saved him the other day from those coralized people. She’d all but lost her temper with him for foolishly putting himself in the danger zone trying to help others. He hadn’t thought much of it at the time, but she had been very short with him, almost personally offended even though they’d never met before. And she’d known about Chloe…

Pollen glowed with pride. “The one and only.”

Oh god, he couldn’t unsee it now. Of course it was Chloe—brash, brave, beautiful Chloe. All those bruises from her ‘training’ had to be because of this. And yeah, okay, the presence of a talking, magical bee was pretty damning evidence. No wonder she was exhausted all the time—she was practically working two full-time jobs.

She could get herself killed.

That sobering thought snapped him out of it, and he gently pried Pollen off of him. She sat in his palms and looked up at him like he was the most beautiful sight she’d ever seen. “Pollen, if Chloe’s Queen Bee, that means her life is in danger whenever she fights those coralized people.”

Pollen scoffed. “Please! She’s got my magic to keep her safe. Besides, I wouldn’t settle for anybody but the bravest as my Chosen.”

Luka had seen the news coverage of Chief Raincomprix’s tragic demise, and he’d witnessed what happened to Guillotine just recently. There was no saving those afflicted, so it seemed, and Queen Bee was putting herself right in harm’s way standing up to them.

“Magic or no, it’s really dangerous for her. For Ladybug and Chat Noir, too,” Luka said.

Pollen’s expression fell, and another extreme mood swing hit her as she gazed up at him forlornly. “You… You don’t like my magic?”

Luka wasn’t sure what to say to appease her. “I can’t honestly say I’m thrilled at the idea of my girlfriend risking her life like that.”

Pollen sniffled, and pearly tears welled under her huge eyes. “B-But we’re strong! A little coral won’t s-scare us.”

“I believe you, but it sure as hell scares me.”

To Luka’s horror, Pollen burst into tears and began to bawl like her life depended on it. Suddenly afraid all the racket would wake Chloe, he cupped Pollen and held her against his chest to muffle her
sobbing. Her tears dampened his T-shirt and smelled faintly of burned sugar.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” he said. “Hey, I didn’t mean to make you cry—”

“You hate me!” Pollen sobbed.

“Wha— Of course I don’t hate you!” Luka tried to keep his voice down and prayed Chloe was still passed out oblivious.

“You hate Queen Bee!”

“Pollen, come on, I—”

“And n-now you’re gonna l-l-leave us again!” She trembled inconsolably against him, her wings buzzing furiously.

Luka was honestly at a loss. Somehow, he was sitting on Chloe’s kitchen floor at 3 a.m. clutching a crying bee who happened to have magical powers that could transform his girlfriend into the most drop-dead gorgeous superhero he had ever laid eyes on so she could fly around cutting up bad guys and saving people, and really it would have been so much easier if he was just blazed. But no, this was his life, and he’d made a bit of a mess of it just now. How a talking bee could make him seriously question his worth as a person, he was not entirely sure, but damn if he didn’t feel like the scum of the earth for making her cry.

“Hey, Pollen,” he said gently, lifting her up and rubbing her furry mane with his thumb. “Please don’t cry, I’m sorry.”

She continued to cry and clutch her eyes as her tears dribbled down her body and disintegrated into glitter between his fingers. “B-But you don’t want us.”

“Did I say that?”

“You s-said I’m dangerous!”

“I said fighting the coralized people is dangerous, and that makes me worried. But I never said I didn’t want you.”

Pollen sniffled and peeked at him from behind her tiny arms. “You didn’t?”

“Of course not.”

“So…you don’t hate me?”

“I don’t know you very well, but I’m convinced nobody could ever hate you, Pollen. You’re the cutest bee I’ve ever met.”

Her antennae flattened, almost embarrassed. “R-Really?”

“Really.”

“So…you’re not leaving again?”

“Why would I leave the woman I love?”

Pollen’s tiny jaw dropped, and her eyes got so big that Luka was sure they might pop out of her head. It was such a heart-wrenchingly adorable sight that he could not help but smile.
“Y-you love my honeycomb?” Pollen said, nearly shaking with hope and excitement.

He hadn’t said them out loud before, but the words came out so easily and naturally that he knew they were true. “Yeah, I really do.”

As if the last five minutes had not happened, Pollen suddenly burst out of his hand and buzzed around the kitchen giggling. “Oh, I knew it! Ah! I’m buzzing with joy!”

Luka shot up and caught her as she flew by, and she squirmed in his hold. “Shh, not so loud, okay? Chloe’s asleep.”

Pollen hugged his thumb and pressed her face against the pad. “I knew you were her perfect drone! I said it the first day I met you—this one’s perfect. Oh, I’m so happy! Ah!” She flew out of his hand and got in his face again. “Does this mean you’ll stay forever? You won’t go away again?”

Luka could not help himself. He laughed at the absurdity of it all, the strange magic of it all. He had psyched himself up for a myriad of unknown and even uncomfortable situations related to dating Chloe Bourgeois—opulent parties, a culture of wealth and class he would never understand, aristocratic disdain—whatever they could throw at him, he could handle. But a magical, talking bee? A secret superhero identity?

My girlfriend is a literal queen.

That thought made him smile self-deprecatingly.

“No Pollen,” he said, bringing her close to his eye level. “I’m not going anywhere, I promise. But for now, let’s maybe keep this between you and me, okay? I’m guessing Chloe’s secret identity is very important to her, and I don’t want to come between you two.”

“Only if you promise to bring me more flowers!”

He laughed. “Deal.”

Pollen buzzed with pure, unadulterated joy and began talking his ear off. For such a small creature—a kwami, he learned soon enough—she had a lot to say. Her questions were rapid-fire. Did he have a Twitter account? What was his favorite flavor of donut? Which Kardashian was his spirit animal? Luka soon learned that Pollen had an obsession with Buzzfeed quizzes and pop culture stories, and when he offered to let her use his phone to go online and browse for a bit, she practically exploded with delight.

When she’d calmed down a little, he queued up Rashomon and explained the film’s quintessential place in cinematic history, which was all it took to get her engaged. At some point he fell asleep, and when he woke a few hours later, the credits were rolling and Pollen was curled up on his chest, fast asleep. He gently deposited her back among the yellow roses and slipped back into Chloe’s room. She stirred as he got under the covers and rolled over against his chest. Luka wrapped an arm around her waist and held her close.

“Time is it?” she muttered, her words slurred with sleep.

“Time to go back to sleep,” he said.

“Mm.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead and breathed in her scent. “Goodnight, my queen,” he whispered.
“You can do five more,” Adrien said. “Come on.”

“Dude, my abs are killing me here,” Nino complained.

“Your negative attitude’s killing me.”

Nino did his best to do one more curl-up, lost his grip on the hand holds, and crumpled on the floor in a heap. Adrien looked down on him with mild disdain.

“That was pathetic,” he said. “You have to keep working at it, or you’ll never get stronger.”

Nino tried to laugh it off as he got on his feet. “I know, you’re right. I’m tryin’ here, seriously!”

“Try harder.”

Adrien tossed him a water bottle, which Nino caught with a look of surprise.

“Hey man, you okay?” Nino asked.

Adrien wiped the sweat from his forehead with a towel, adjusted the weights on the TRX, and began a new set. “I’m fine.”

Nino approached, an unreadable expression on his face. “You wanna talk about it?”

“I said I’m fine, Nino.” He counted reps in his head and pushed through the burn in his arms.

“I don’t think you are,” Nino said. “And that’s okay.”

“I don’t want to talk about my father. He’s dead, and that’s it. It’s over.”

Nino didn’t so much as flinch. “Okay,” he said evenly, “but that’s not what I meant. I talked to Marinette…”

Adrien let the weights fall with a loud clang, and Nino winced at the harsh sound. “You talked to Marinette.”

Nino seemed to pick up on something in his tone of voice and nodded cautiously. “She just mentioned she was worried about you. Can you blame her? After everything you’ve been through?”

A flash of hot fury pooled in the pit of Adrien’s stomach and spread through his veins like wildfire, unbidden. It was so sudden, so fierce, that he was momentarily stunned at his own visceral reaction. He steadied himself on the TRX’s frame and pressed his sweat rag to his forehead. Nino mistook his reaction for dizziness.

“Whoa, head rush? Maybe you should sit down for a minute, dude.”

Adrien let him guide him to the bench next to the TRX and sank down without a fuss.

“Jesus, Adrien, this weight is insane! No wonder you almost passed out.” Nino adjusted the setting on the TRX to something more humanly reasonable.

The flash of fury abated almost as quickly as it had come on, and Adrien was left to catch his breath.
“Yeah,” he said. For there was nothing else to say. These flashes had come on since he woke up in the hospital and been given the news about his father. Here and there, only lasting a second or two, they came on without warning and hit him like a punch to the gut. And transient though they were, he felt them acutely, incandescently. The first one had been when Ladybug interrogated him.

“Hey man, why don’t we call it a day? It’s Saturday, time to relax a little,” Nino said.

Adrien just nodded. These flashes of white-hot fury left him feeling oddly drained and lethargic, like they sucked up all his energy. He got up and followed Nino upstairs to the main floor of Agreste Mansion.

“So listen,” Nino said, “about Marinette—”

“I don’t want to talk about her.”

“Well, I kinda think we should. Look man, I know it’s none of my business what you guys do—”

“Then drop it already. You’re right, it’s none of your goddamned business what I do with Marinette.”

Nino stopped in the middle of the hall that led to the foyer, and Adrien was forced to stop and face him. “What’s goin’ on with you, Adrien?”

“Are you seriously asking me that?”

Nino was unmoved. “I know things are really hard for you right now, and I’m not blaming you for that. But you’re being kind of a dick, like, unrelated to what happened.”

“I don’t know, Nino, maybe I’m a little upset that my father was brutally murdered and I got the shit beat out of me.” And Ladybug suspects my involvement somehow.

Ladybug. Marinette.

How could she interrogate him like a goddamned suspect one day and promise to stay by his side and support him the next? Was it truly so easy for her to live the double life? Which was real, the woman in the mask or the one without?

“Yeah, I get that. But come on, dude, I’m on your side. So’s Marinette. You can trust your friends to have your back.”

Trust? She had rejected him. She doubted him. Not just Chat Noir, but Adrien now, too. How could he believe Marinette when Ladybug gave him every reason to doubt?

She doesn’t trust you, a voice whispered in a dark corner of his mind. She’s afraid of you.

The Miraculous Ring on his finger grew hot, burning, and he twisted it.

“Dude?” Nino said.

Adrien looked up to find Nino watching him with open concern. How long had they been standing there?

“She turned me down,” he found himself saying. “So I told her to leave.”

Nino sighed. “I know, she mentioned that. But look, I’ve known Marinette a long time. She’s just worried about you because she cares. She’s totally in to you, but shit’s a little crazy right now. She
just wants to give you time to, like, recover, you know?”

Adrien clenched his jaw. The anger roiled in the pit of his stomach, screaming for purchase, but Nino looked so earnest. His hand on Adrien’s shoulder was cool to the touch.

“I guess what I’m tryin’ to say is remember who’s in your corner, okay? I know you probably feel alone right now, but you’re not. You got me ‘n Alya, Chloe, Nathalie, your work colleagues, and Marinette, too. Lotsa people want to help you, but it’s a two-way street. You gotta want to let us help.”

“Adrien... Forgive me,” Gabriel said just before the light consumed him, transformed him into the shape of the monster Adrien had never been able to escape.

“I don’t know if you can help me with this,” Adrien said.

“Not unless you give me a chance, bro. C’mon, whaddaya got to lose, right?”

Adrien felt suddenly very ashamed. He did not want Nino to see him like this, so defeated, so melancholy. Maybe... Maybe he had a point. Maybe this was all in his head, and he was only being his own worst enemy. The real enemy was in his grave now, after all, even if Adrien did not quite know how. Even if he couldn’t quite remember. Even if those flashes of lucidity—claws, fluttering wings, white-hot hatred—made no sense. Nightmares were only dreams; they weren’t real.

Right?

He covered his ring with his other hand and forced himself to smile. “Right.”

Nino peered at him, but just when he thought Nino might call him out, he just nodded. “Okay.”

They made their way to the foyer, where an unexpected visitor was waiting for them.

“Adrien, hello,” said Fu. He was bundled up in a poofy, blue winter jacket and rubber boots to fend off the weather, and his plump cheeks were red as apples from the chill. Wet footprints behind him suggested he’d been waiting a few minutes. “I hope you don’t mind—your assistant, Miss Sancoeur, let me in.”

“Master Fu,” Adrien said, surprised. “What are you doing here?” He glanced at Nino.

“Just dropped by for tea. I thought we could chat for a bit, but I see you have company. Perhaps I should stop by another time?”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Nino said. “We just finished. Alya’s expecting me back soon, anyway. We’re tasting wedding cakes today, and there’s no way I’m missin’ that.”

Adrien blinked. “Sorry Master Fu, this is Nino Lahiffe.”

“It’s my pleasure to meet a friend of Adrien’s,” Fu said, extending his hand. “Wedding cakes, you said? I gather congratulations are in order.”

Nino grinned. “Thanks! Yeah, my fiancé’s plannin’ most of it, but I feel like the cake’s gotta be a joint effort, you know?”

“Absolutely, it’s the most important part of the celebration.”

“Totally! Well, good to meet you, Master Fu,” Nino said. “I’ll catch you later, dude,” he said to Adrien. “And call Marinette, okay? Like, for real, though.”
Nino left, and Adrien led Fu upstairs to the study where they would not be disturbed. A staff person appeared with a fresh pot of tea, having taken Fu’s request when he arrived, and once poured, left the two of them alone.

“Sorry for the smell,” Adrien said. “I just came from a work out.”

“No need. I should apologize for dropping by without invitation. I hope I did not disturb your time with your friend.”

Adrien averted his gaze. “It’s fine, he was leaving anyway.”

Fu peered at him, but Adrien was too busy examining the wide desk by the window. This had been his father’s study until recently. Staff had cleared out Gabriel’s personal belongings and thrown them in storage at Adrien’s request, but the desk had remained. It was an imposing piece of furniture, older than Adrien himself.

He had a sudden vision of himself as a toddler crawling on that desk as his father took a work call, cooing and grabbing at a crystal paperweight until Gabriel couldn’t help but smile and pick him up.

“You’re lucky to have someone like Nino as a friend,” Fu said.

Adrien blinked and snapped out of it. He rubbed his eyes; he could feel the beginnings of a migraine coming on.

What the hell was that?

Not a memory he could ever recall before, though he felt its familiarity in his bones. It had been so vivid…

“What?” he said. “Oh, yeah, I guess.”

Fu watched him thoughtfully. “Forgive me, but I overheard a bit of your conversation with him. He is right about help being a two-way street. I could not have said it better myself.”

Adrien looked at him. “Really?”

“Wisdom is learned from experience; it’s not innate. I have lived for many years, but time is merely one measure of experience. Nino knows you quite well. This, too, is a kind of valuable experience, don’t you think so?”

Adrien chuckled humorlessly. “I’ll tell him you said so. Pretty sure nobody’s ever called Nino wise in his life.”

Fu simply smiled. “If you say so.”

They lapsed into a short silence as Fu sipped his tea.

“So, what did you want to talk to me about?” Adrien said. “I could’ve come to you. You didn’t have to come all the way here.”

“I thought some fresh air would do me some good,” Fu said. “And I’ve been thinking about you, Adrien. I don’t want to open up fresh wounds, but please know that you have my deepest condolences.” To Adrien’s surprise, Fu laid a hand over his. “Your friend is right: you are not alone. I hope you won’t forget that.”

Adrien watched their touching hands and, slightly uncomfortable, pulled away. “Listen, Master Fu, I
appreciate that and all, but I really don’t want to talk about it. I just want to put it behind me.”

Fu looked at him strangely, but in the end he nodded. “I see. Then of course I’ll respect your wishes.”

“Thanks.”

Fu set down his tea. “May I ask where Plagg is today?”

At the mention of Plagg, Adrien visibly tensed. “Around,” he hedged. “Napping, probably. He sleeps a lot.”

“As cats do, yes, I’m aware.”

At the mention of his kwami, Adrien noticed that Fu was missing his usual green shadow, too. “Where’s Wayzz?”

“At home. I thought it best to speak with you one on one.”

That didn’t sound good. “What’s going on?”

Fu took his time responding. “Some new information has come to light. Information you should know about…but that I would prefer to disclose to you alone.”

Adrien got the message loud and clear. “Without Plagg.”

“I’d like you to hear it first,” Fu said. “And…I would like to ask you to speak with Plagg separately. As you probably recall, he is not as warm to me as he is to you.”

Adrien recalled just fine. Plagg had given him an earful when they made it home after that first meeting with Fu, about how the Guardian couldn’t necessarily be trusted, how he’d gotten blindsided in times past, and all other kinds of cryptic warnings Plagg refused to elaborate upon except to insist that Adrien trust him, he had chosen him for a reason, and he would always do right by him come hell or high water. Adrien had let it go, more concerned about Marinette at the time, but now…

“Tell me,” Adrien said a little more forcefully than necessary. “Whatever it is, tell me everything.”

Fu nodded gravely. “Of course.”

Adrien listened as Fu told him about Mayura’s discovery, about Pride and the Coral Miraculous, and about Hawk Moth’s involvement heralding what he suspected to be the start of a Miraculous war.

“Two Miraculous may not seem like much,” Fu said, “but two is all it takes to raise the strength of an army. My fear is that this may only be the beginning.”

“And you think Plagg might know something about this Coral Miraculous?”

Fu had an uncanny ability to remain placid and calm no matter how uncomfortable the conversation became. “Tikki claims it was only a rumor, but Wayzz seems to think there may be some truth to it. I was hoping perhaps you could persuade Plagg to confide in you.”

Adrien was quiet for a moment. “Tikki? So you’ve already told all this to Marinette.”

And she hasn’t said a word about it to Chat Noir.
He clenched his fists in his lap as a fresh stab of anger cooked him in his gym clothes and raised new sweat on his brow. His burgeoning migraine flared.

“I’ve spoken with Ladybug and Queen Bee, yes,” Fu confirmed. “I wanted to speak with you separately due to the sensitive nature of Plagg’s potential involvement.”

*Ladybug trusts your replacement more than you*, said the voice needling his headache deeper.

Adrien bit down on his cheek and tasted blood. He grabbed his half-empty water bottle and swallowed the rest in three huge gulps.

Fu took his discomfort the wrong way. “Rest assured, even if Plagg does know something, it would have no bearing on you or your role as Chat Noir. Remember, you are defined solely by the choices you make, Adrien.”


To his credit, Fu looked at him with enviably gentle, even nurturing understanding. “Do you remember our conversation about loneliness and resilience?”

Adrien swallowed hard. “I remember.”

“I imagine these days you must be feeling quite alone. Nino isn’t the only one to see that, I’m sure.”

Adrien inevitably thought about Marinette and her rejection of him.

“*I want to do this right,*” she had implored him to understand.

But he didn’t care what was right and what was wrong. He just wanted to feel something other than this crushing pain, this burden that he alone carried. Yes, Adrien had Marinette and Chloe and Nino and many others in his life, all of whom cared in their own way, in their own degree. Yes, Chat Noir had Ladybug and Fu and hell, even Queen Bee in a way. But none of them knew, really knew. Only one person had, and he was dead now. He was dead, and part of Adrien knew he had killed him.

What other explanation was there? Ladybug was right, the blood was literally on his hands. Who else could have done it? Who else had reason? Who else could have known? Adrien couldn’t remember—*he couldn’t remember*—but he knew the truth. One way or another, his father and all his terrible secrets were Adrien’s burden to bear alone, and there was not a soul on this earth who could help him now.

“Yeah,” Adrien said. “I do feel alone. I feel…”

Helpless. Vulnerable.

Afraid. *You reek of it.*

“Wrong,” Adrien said, ignoring the insidious voice in his head.

Fu nodded. “I understand.”

“I don’t think you do,” Adrien said, doing his best to ignore the ache in his head. He poured himself some tea and let the hot liquid scald his tongue for something to distract him.

Fu considered a moment. “I have never been Destruction’s Chosen, no, but I’ve lived a little longer than you and seen the previous Chat Noirs and Ladybugs rise and fall. So indulge an old man for a
Adrien said nothing, and Fu took that as his cue to continue.

“Destruction’s true, primordial form is the void,” Fu said. “Endless, eternal nothingness. It is no more good or evil than the space you and I are inhabiting now, in this room. It simply is. Like all ideas, it is our interpretation of them that gives them shape and form.”

“How do I do that?”

“You don’t; that is Creation’s job.”

“Creation… Tikki, right. Ladybug’s kwami.”

“Yes, Tikki the Pure. Most of the Miraculous in the set I guard have a match: Wisdom and Courage, Truth and Guile, and Empathy to unite them all despite their opposing natures. Purity and Pestilence—the ones you know as Tikki and Plagg—are a different sort of match. They are both Ancient Ones, like Pride. They are more powerful than any of the other Miraculous in my set combined when they are united. To give you an idea of the scale I’m talking about, consider that from their first union came the universe as we know it, and the eternal equilibrium.”

“That’s…” Adrien was not sure what to say to that.

“Yes, it’s quite awe-inspiring. I have not had the privilege of seeing the true depths of Tikki’s and Plagg’s powers myself even in all my years. I fear that with the threat of another Ancient One standing against us, however, that day may well be on the horizon. You have already seen some changes in your abilities as Chat Noir, and I believe you will continue to access greater power as the day you and Ladybug inevitably face Pride’s Chosen draws near. Which is why it is so important for you to understand what I’m about to tell you, Adrien.”

“I’m listening,” Adrien said, and hoped he really was.

“At times you will feel lost and alone, even rejected, and to cling to that negative emotion too fiercely will lead you down a dark path, make no mistake about that. But Destruction is at its most resilient in absolute darkness, because only in the darkest void can even the faintest light find a place to shine.

“Destruction gives Creation a place to grow, and Creation depends on Destruction to maintain the constant cycle of life, death, and rebirth. So no matter how much you feel you have lost, or how far you fear you’ve fallen, remember that you are never truly alone. You hold the greatest power of all.”

“What’s that?” Adrien asked.

Fu only smiled knowingly. “That’s something no one, least of all I can tell you. You’ll need to accept that truth—and the shape it takes—for yourself, when you’re ready.”

Fu left soon after, and Adrien immediately headed for the master bathroom to pop some painkillers for his growing migraine before a much-needed shower. His phone was on the nightstand by his bed where he’d left it, and a quick check revealed a slew of work emails from colleagues at AF, mostly condolences and well-wishes for his departure. He’d turned in his formal resignation earlier in the week and planned to start working for Aramis on Monday.

There was a missed call from Chloe and a voicemail checking on him and telling him he better call her back one of these days, or she’d send a singing telegram to accost him if that was what it took to get his attention.
A single text from Marinette gave him pause.

[Marinette: I miss you.]

His ring pulsed with heat all of a sudden, and Adrien hissed. He twisted it and fingered the tiny crack in the enchanted metal. The band was black with Plagg’s power, as it had been for many days now.

“Just for a few days,” Plagg had promised him. “I just need some sleep.”

Not that Adrien had much of a say in the matter. Plagg simply phased into the Miraculous Ring without so much as a ‘see you later,’ and that was that. The silence in Plagg’s absence was strange. He hadn’t realized just how used to Plagg’s caustic humor and scathing conversational skills he’d become over the years, and without them this house was so empty, so cold.

He’d said a few days, but that was after Adrien had checked out of the hospital, before the funeral. Fu might have known what to do, but Plagg specifically told him to keep it between them. This was not Guardian business. Who was Adrien to argue with a god? He could still become Chat Noir as normal, just without the snarky cat yammering in his ear in between shifts.

Maybe…

*Maybe Nino’s right.*

Adrien was so tired of being lonely. He took his phone back to the bathroom, opened up Marinette’s text, and typed back a short reply while he waited for the shower to warm up.

[Adrien: (=^・^=)]

Her response was immediate.

[Marinette: Have dinner with me? Please?]

Adrien hesitated, and he hated himself for it. It should not have felt this way with her. He should not be second-guessing her or her motives. He wanted to believe her and her promises, but Ladybug’s doubt ate at him like acid.

“I have to tell her the truth,” he said. Maybe this was what Fu meant about knowing when to accept the truth, being ready. Maybe it started with this.

There was no one but his reflection to hear his confession, and he took a good look in the mirror. Steam began to gather at the edges from the shower, and he took in his haggard, sallow appearance. Shadows under his eyes, gaunt cheeks, stubble that really needed shaving, stringy hair shiny with drying sweat from his work out.

*But secrets are more fun.*

The voice in his head manifested as a stab of pain in his head—damn migraine and the damn painkillers taking forever to kick in. Adrien hissed and pressed the heel of his palm to his eye to ease the pang.

His reflection leaned over the sink and grinned at him. “I want to see the surprise on her face, don’t you?” it said.

Adrien gasped in fright and dropped his phone. It cracked on the tiled floor.
Let’s play a game.

I don’t like games.

You’ll like this one. It’s fair, it’s fun, and if you win, you get a prize!

What kind of prize?

What do you want? Anything, anyone, you can have it all, you lucky boy. Just say the word.

Her… All I want is her. Please, please, let me have her.

Yes, if you win, you get her.
If you win? What do you get?

Alya should have had her own reality TV show to catalogue the crazy fucking situations she ended up in, _like seriously_. One minute she was minding her own business grabbing a coffee at Firefly on her way to taste wedding cakes with Nino, and the next she was running for her life from a cartoonishly caricatured super villain.

“I will exterminate this city’s vermin one disgusting fly at a time if I have to!” shouted the akumatized victim as he commanded his coralized minions to attack anyone and everyone in the vicinity.

“Look out!” shouted Luka, the barista on duty, as he lunged over the counter, tossed Alya’s coffee aside, and tackled her to the floor just as a coralized victim smashed through the bar window and scattered glass and splinters everywhere.

They both went down hard, but luckily were spared a splintering from the coralized victim who turned her attention on a couple other patrons fleeing the vicinity. Alya shoved Luka off and fumbled for her phone.

“What the hell, Alya!?” Luka said, understandably concerned upon seeing her get up and run after the coralized victim rather than search for cover like a normal person.

“I have to document this!” Alya said. “I’ve been MIA from the Ladyblog for way too long, no way I’m going to pass this up!”

She was a professional, goddamnit. Action, danger, intrigue—this was her _thing_. The world needed the truth, and she was finally here and in a position to give it to them, rather than relying on submitted shaky-cam videos. Alya turned the camera to face her.

“This is Alya Césaire reporting live from the latest coral attack. Like the last incident, it looks like this one’s being led by an akumatized victim. Once is coincidence, but twice is the beginning of a pattern, dear listeners: Hawk Moth and the coral murderer are officially working together to terrorize Paris!”

Alya turned her camera phone to record the akumatized victim spray some kind of poisonous gas at a couple fleeing people and a barking dog. “I am the Fumigator! The greatest exterminator in all of Paris! And I will cleanse our beautiful city of all vermin!”

He was a small man, but he wore what looked like cannons on his arms that expelled noxious gas. A helmet protected his head, and coral armor protruded from rips in his hazmat suit. Alya grimaced. Another coralized victim-turned-akumatized. It was the same as what had happened with Guillotine previously. Once coralized, these poor souls were as good as dead.

Luka had gotten up and was at her side with an arm in front of her protectively. “Alya, we should
really get somewhere safe.”

“No way, I have to report on this,” Alya protested. “You get to safety; I have work to do.”

Luka was a nice guy, really, but he did not understand the impetus of her calling at all. He was sort of a friend, or used to be when Marinette had been dating him years ago. Marinette still hung out with him, and Alya had always been the type to be affably social. But it wasn’t until Marinette let slip that Luka was dating Chloe Bourgeois now that Alya became intensely interested. Marinette had been spending more time with Chloe lately, to the point where Alya suspected she might actually enjoy hanging out with Chloe, which was all kinds of weird. Firefly was on her way, and Alya figured that it was as good a place as any to begin her investigation into the ‘What the Hell Is Up with Marinette Being Friends with Chloe’ case.

Until the Fumigator attacked.

“Not so fast, Fumigator!” shouted Ladybug.

She swung onto the scene rather heroically, if Alya did say so herself. She got a great shot of Ladybug swooping low on her yo-yo and landing dramatically in front of the Fumigator.

“So, the queen pest finally arrives!” the Fumigator bellowed. “I will exterminate you!”

“The only queen around here is me!” said Queen Bee as she flew down to join them.

Alya angled her phone to capture Queen Bee’s image. The newest Miraculous Hero was mysterious and intriguing, a powerhouse with her sword and camera-shy as all hell, considering the dearth of submissions the Ladyblog had gotten since her first appearance. That would change today.

Alya ran outside and found a car to climb on top of, the better to follow Ladybug and Queen Bee as they swooped and slashed and punched their way through the coralized minions to get to the Fumigator himself. A couple coral golems lumbered on thick, ungainly legs, and Ladybug came at one hard with an uppercut that knocked him into the air, while Queen Bee caught him with her rapier and slashed him clean in half. Alya recorded it all.

“Check it out, Ladybloggers. Queen Bee’s sword is sharp enough to cut through all that coral! Good thing, too, with no sign of Chat Noir yet,” Alya reported.

“Alya, look out!” Luka said.

Alya turned in time to see both Luka and the coralized woman from before sprinting straight for her. Luka looked ready to recklessly lunge at the coralized woman to knock her off her course and spare Alya. There was only a split second to panic before buzzing filled her ears and a blur of black and yellow slammed into the charging coralized woman barely an arm’s length from the car Alya was standing on. Her knees shook from the shock, but her hand was steady as she whipped her phone around to record Queen Bee’s amazing save. The coralized woman lost an armored arm and went crashing into a lamppost. Queen Bee panted from her effort, but she immediately turned and shot a scathing glare at Luka.

“Are you insane?!” she said. “What the hell did I tell you last time?!!”

“Sorry,” Luka said, also out of breath.

“Sorry? You’re sorry?” Queen Bee advanced on him and brandished her rapier like she meant to use it. “You could have died!”
“Never,” Luka said as if it were the indisputable truth. “Not while you’re here looking out for me.”

Queen Bee hesitated, and Alya recorded it all.

“Hey, do you two know each other or something?” Alya said, hopping off the car and coming closer.

“Yes,” Luka said at the same time that Queen Bee said, “No.”

“Are you recording this?” Queen Bee said to Alya. “Give me that!”

Movement behind Queen Bee drew Alya’s attention, and she gasped. “Behind you!”

The Fumigator sprayed a stream of noxious, green poison from his arm cannon, and it ate through anything it touched like acid—cars, the sidewalk, a coral golem too slow to avoid the line of fire. Queen Bee took off in a flash and scooped up Luka, while Alya was left to dash away on her own in the opposite direction. She tripped over rubble in the street, fell, and lost her phone. It skittered under an overturned car.

“Shit,” Alya swore, wincing in pain. Her arm was bleeding from a nasty cut, and her hip ached where she’d landed hard on the ground. She scrambled to the overturned car for cover and to find her phone.

“Only I can clean up this filthy city!” shouted Fumigator. He sprayed more acid poison and melted a storefront—stone, glass, and all.

Got you!

Alya’s fingers closed around her phone, and she sat up on her knees to look around. All around her there was chaos in the streets. Many civilians had managed to flee to parts unknown, but in the mayhem others were trapped in their cars or cornered by fire. Fumigator’s acid was flammable, and several fires were burning openly in the streets and only growing. Nearby, a coralized victim—a child, holy shit—was using his armored fist to try to smash through a crashed car and get to the couple trapped inside. The driver was passed out and bleeding, while his wife screamed and struggled to extricate them both through the passenger door before the coralized child could attack them. Ladybug was busy elsewhere, and there was still no sign of Chat Noir. Gritting her teeth, Alya ignored the pain in her hip and ran to help.

“Hey, over here!” she said, drawing the coralized child’s attention. Even blood-shot and mutated, the boy could not have been much older than twelve or thirteen. Alya’s heart wrenched at the sight and the knowledge of his inevitable, cruel fate. “That’s right, fresh meat over here! Follow me!”

Behind him, she could make out the woman in the car using the opportunity to break out of the car. The sound of her shattering the glass window drew the coralized kid’s attention back, but Alya picked up a chunk of rubble and threw it at him.

“Eyes on me!” she goaded him.

That did it. He came at her, hissing and arms swinging. Alya turned tail and ran in search of safety, but the coralized kid was damn fast. She skidded over the hood of a car and ran around the back of it back in the direction of Firefly, and the coralized kid chased her. His pursuit, unfortunately, drew the attention of one of the coral golems, reformed but still smoking and limping after taking a hit of the Fumigator’s poison. True fear gripped Alya as she came face to face with the lumbering behemoth, and she skidded to a halt. The coralized kid was right behind her and jumped just as the coral golem swung his clubby fist.
Alya sprang right with all her might and braced for impact. The cobblestone street kissed her shoulder, and she twisted painfully in an effort to protect her face. Above and behind her, the coralized kid collided with the coral golem with a sickening smack. The coral golem’s punch was too much for the half-mutated kid, and he hit the pavement with a bone-crushing splat. Bits of bloody coral flew off him like bullets, and the coral golem’s fist kept going and hit the ground, where it too exploded.

_Shhhing!_

Alya’s eyes watered from the dust and the fumes from the Fumigater’s poison, but she caught the tail end of Queen Bee’s better-late-than-never intervention. Her rapier moved faster than the eye could follow, and where before the coral golem had stood, now there were only neatly cut slabs of coral collapsing like Jenga pieces. Beyond, there was no sign of the woman and her unconscious husband trapped in their car. But there was no time to worry about them because suddenly, strong arms lifted Alya, and she was flying.

“Oh, shit!” she said in a fright, grasping for purchase on anything solid lest she fall to her death.

“Hold on!” Queen Bee shouted to be heard over her buzzing and the sound of bedlam in the streets below.

The flight was a short one, and Queen Bee deposited Alya on a nearby rooftop where Luka and a couple other civilians were already gathered. To Alya’s relief, she saw the woman and her husband among them, safe. She took one look at Alya and broke into a teary smile.

“Oh, thank god you’re okay!” she said. “You saved our lives!”

She clutched her husband’s bleeding head in her lap.

Alya was so stunned that she had no words; she simply nodded and waved in acknowledgment. Luka was in her line of sight all of a sudden, fingers poking gently into her hurt shoulder. The touch sent lancing pain down her arm, and Alya cursed colorfully.

“Feels dislocated,” he said.

“Goddamnit, Alya,” Queen Bee said.

“Hey, Luka, long time no see,” Alya said sharply. To Queen Bee she said, “Well? A little help, Hero?”

Queen Bee’s blue eyes were hard, and she said nothing. But she kneeled down, braced a hand on Alya’s good shoulder, and snapped the other one back into place without warning. Alya gasped and saw stars, but then her arm grew warm and her fingers twitched with feeling as the blood rushed back in.

_“Ouch,”_ Alya said through gritted teeth.

“Yeah, I *hope* that hurt,” Queen Bee said. “I’m not a fucking Uber, and I can’t waste my time going around picking you out of danger every five minutes. Both of you.” She glared at Luka for good measure. “Promise me you’ll stay put this time.”

“Cross my heart,” Luka said, placing a hand over his heart.

Queen Bee flushed and averted her gaze, uncomfortable.
Alya angled her phone at Queen Bee. “I’ll promise, too, if you’ll say a few words for the Ladybloggers.”

Queen Bee narrowed her eyes. “You’re lucky I’m such a kind and benevolent soul with very little time to spare, or I’d smash your stupid phone right here.” She lowered Alya’s phone. “Stay. Put.”

And with that, Queen Bee buzzed off to help Ladybug. Alya was on her feet in an instant and recording her flight. Luka was right next to her at the edge of the roof looking down.

“She’s delightful,” Alya said sarcastically.

“She’s just doing her job,” Luka said. “We didn’t exactly make it easy on her.”

Alya harrumphed. “Speak for yourself, lover boy.”

“Lover boy?”

Alya side-eyed him. “Please, I’m an investigative journalist. Like I wouldn’t notice you being so transparently attracted to her.”

Luka blushed like a tomato. “Transparent?”

“As a pane of glass, kiddo.” Alya considered this a moment, then angled her phone to record Luka. “Actually, why don’t you tell me a little about Queen Bee? Since you seem so focused on her.”

Luka gathered his wits and glared into the camera. “No comment.”

“Oh, really? Then I guess you’ll have no comment about the fact that half the Ladybloggers ship her with Ladybug.”

“They what?”

“I know, that’s what I said. There’s no reason Ladybug can’t just have both Queen Bee and Chat Noir.”

Before Luka could respond with more than a flustered stare, there was a crash, and they both turned to see Chat Noir, who had just arrived, smash headlong into a coral golem. He swayed on his feet, perhaps from the impact, and shook a little before taking off to pummel the Fumigator directly.

“Oh my god,” Luka said. “Is he drunk?”

“Wait, what?” Alya zoomed in for a closer look, and she and Luka both peered at her phone screen. “Holy crap, I think you’re right!”

Chat Noir stumbled as he ran and slashed at anything in his path, as though disoriented. Ladybug shouted a command at him, but he completely ignored her and lunged at the Fumigator, who fought back with a spray of acid. Queen Bee came in fast to catch Chat, but she took a hit of acid on her calf and screamed. The two of them crash-landed against the side of the building where Alya and Luka were perched, and Chat shouted angrily at her to get off.

“She’s hurt,” Luka said, angry like Alya had rarely heard him before. “Shit, shit.”

“She’s a superhero,” Alya reassured him, though she did not quite believe her own words. “I’m sure she’s okay.”

“Why would he show up wasted?” Luka said, his knuckles white as he leaned dangerously over the
edge to try to see what had become of the two heroes. “What the hell is wrong with him?”

Alya had no idea, but she had a really bad feeling about it. This wasn’t like Chat Noir at all.

The other civilians gathered on the roof were drawn to the commotion and joined Luka and Alya at the edge. A crunching noise behind them was their only warning when three coralized victims clambered over the opposite edge of the building like spiders and began closing in on them.

“Shit on a stick, you have to be kidding me,” Alya said, pocketing her phone. “Everybody, to the roof access door! Hurry!”

Luka was quick to move and helped shoulder the unconscious husband of the woman Alya had previously saved. Alya gauged the distance between the hurt civilians and the coralized victims coming at them, and it did not look good. They were not all going to make it to the roof access door.

Thinking quickly, Alya shouted to draw their attention. “Hey, uglies! Over here! Come and get me!”

They all turned on her, a mess of clicking and crunching limbs and tattered clothing, hardly human at all. Their changed trajectory bought Luka and the others just enough time to make it to the roof access door, but Luka turned back.

“Alya!” he said, his fear palpable.

Alya had bigger things to worry about right now, though, like running for her life. “Just go!” she said, dodging behind a large vent.

It quickly became clear, however, that the idea of being a hero was a lot more glamorous than actually executing said idea. Now, she was stuck on a rooftop with no means of egress with three coralized victims, a scratch from any of whom would turn her into one of them.

One of the coralized victims was drawn to Luka’s voice and jumped at him. He managed to slam the roof access door just in time, and the coralized victim began pummeling it to get inside, warping it. There was no way Alya was getting through there now, and even if Luka sprinted to the bottom and got one of the heroes to come back and help, it would be far too late for Alya.

The other two were coming at her now from both sides. She was trapped.

“Alya!!” shouted a familiar voice.

Alya whipped around and saw Ladybug swinging toward her from across the rooftops. It was a sight that lifted Alya’s spirits, but they were crushed just as quickly again when she realized that Ladybug was too far away from her. She would not make it in time.

“Chat Noir, wait!” Queen Bee shouted somewhere below.

It happened way too fast. Alya looked down over the edge of the building, dizzy with vertigo fifteen stories up. Queen Bee was struggling, her leg badly bleeding. The civilians who were trapped with Alya before were streaming out, Luka bringing up the rear. He immediately went to Queen Bee’s side and looked up, locking eyes with Alya. Even so high up, she could see the fear in them.

Chat Noir was crouched on the ground. “Cataclysm!”

“No!” Queen Bee said desperately.

“Alya!” Ladybug said, swinging hard.
The building began to collapse all around Alya. Chat’s magic worked quickly, and dark energy seeped through the cracks at her feet like wriggling worms. The nearest coralized victim took a swipe at her, and in her panic Alya launched herself backwards. She screamed, and she fell.

Above, the building was coming apart at the seams as Chat’s Cataclysm devoured it into nothing, insatiable like she’d never seen it before. And maybe it was the wind, or maybe just her imagination, but she heard screaming—wailing, as if the stone itself suffered under his power. A coralized victim fell after her, but he was touched by Chat’s destructive magic and disintegrated to ashes. They sprayed Alya as she tumbled through the air, cold as black snow.

The ground rushed to meet Alya, and she knew she was going to die. She pushed her arms in front of her to brace for impact, not that it would matter when every bone in her body was crushed like Chat had crushed the building and the coralized victims behind her. There was a sudden flash of red, arms like steel crushing her ribs, and her whole body coming apart as it was jerked and twisted mid-fall. Alya had not realized she was screaming the entire time until the embrace forced all the air out of her lungs and pinned her against Ladybug’s armored chest. Alya clung to her, mouth open in a silent scream, tears in her eyes, and prayed.

The impact was swift and forceful, like a sudden drop on a rollercoaster that separated the soul from the body. Alya’s head slammed against Ladybug’s shoulder hard, and the whiplash made her head swim. Somewhere in her fall, she’d lost her glasses, and all she could see now was red and black.

Wait, she could see.

And when she sucked in a breath, she tasted the freezing, noxious air. She was alive, and she was flying.

Or rather, Ladybug was flying. They hovered a short distance above the ground, clutching each other for dear life. Ladybug’s exoskeleton armor had cracked down her back, revealing hardy, buzzing wings working tremendously hard to keep the two women airborne. It took Alya a moment to realize that shaking sensation wasn’t her, but Ladybug. She was crying.

“Ladybug?” Alya croaked.

That seemed to snap her out of it, and Ladybug slowly lowered them to the ground. Alya’s knees gave out when her feet touched solid ground, but Ladybug’s tight embrace held her up long enough to regain her balance.

“I thought I was too late,” Ladybug said, her voice cracking with emotion as she continued to hug Alya like her life depended on it. “I thought I lost you.”

Alya didn’t understand why, but she was suddenly overcome with emotion herself and swallowed a sob. “I’m glad you didn’t,” she said.

Ladybug pulled back a little, and the two of them looked at each other. They were both a mess, covered in dust and blood and grime, and Alya didn’t know why, but she felt so close to Ladybug in that moment, closer than she’d ever felt to another person. She wasn’t some distant superhero or idol right now, but a person who cared deeply, who had risked her life, who was devastated at the thought of losing Alya. There was something so achingly familiar about Ladybug, something Alya had never quite seen before…

“I’m so sorry,” Ladybug said hoarsely.

“It’s okay,” Alya said, stunned by the forced of her emotions. “I’m okay.”
Nearby, Chat Noir’s Miraculous chirped a warning, but he was too busy steadying himself on a smashed car to notice. He’d just vomited all over a pile of rubble. Queen Bee was miraculously on her feet again, her bum leg be damned, while Luka helped her balance on his arm.

“There you are, nasty bugs!” the Fumigator bellowed. “Prepare to be exterminated!”

“Motherfucker,” Chat hissed.

“Bug, any ideas?” Queen Bee said, all business.

Ladybug had recovered somewhat and released Alya. Her wings folded back under her armor of their own accord, and she drew her yo-yo. “Yeah. You take out the coralized victims for good. I’ll handle the Fumigator. Lucky Charm!”

She tossed her yo-yo into the air, and it came back with a spotted gas mask. Ladybug donned it, swung her yo-yo, and took off directly at Fumigator.

“Works for me,” Queen Bee said grimly. She rose into the air, high enough out of reach of Alya and the others on the ground, and brandished her rapier. “Buzz Kill!”

In a blur, she vanished out of sight, and the sound of ominous buzzing filled the air. The whole thing was over in a matter of minutes. The coralized victims dropped like flies, slashed to ribbons as Queen Bee did not hold back her devastating power at all. Ladybug took an acid spray from the Fumigator head-on, impervious to his poison thanks to her reinforced suit and Lucky Charm gas mask, and clocked him square in the jaw. He went down hard, and his own gas mask broke, releasing the akuma possessing him. Ladybug purified it just as Queen Bee finished her bloody business and sank back to the ground on her good leg, exhausted. The threat of the Fumigator and the coralized victims negated, Ladybug cast her Miraculous Ladybug spell, and scarlet magic passed over the downtown area repairing broken buildings and broken people.

It was over.

It was not over. Ladybug stood over the Fumigator. With his akuma purified and his coral armor smashed, he was reduced to his frail, human form, shaking and bleeding and terrified.

“I—I’m so sorry,” he babbled. “So sorry, please, f-forgive me.”

“I know,” Ladybug said forlornly, her eyes drawn to the rose pin pulsating over his heart. She didn’t have much time. “Please, sir, tell me what you know. Tell me about Hawk Moth and the coral murderer, anything at all.”

He looked up at Ladybug with wide, blue eyes. “H-Hawk Moth…”

“Yeah, Hawk Moth,” said Queen Bee, joining Ladybug now that her leg was healed. “Did you see him?”

“I…I—ah!” The man’s face contorted in agony and he seized.

Ladybug kneeled down by his side, but he soon calmed and fell still, as if the spell had never happened at all. “What—”

His eyes snapped open, and Ladybug gasped at the sight of unmistakable lucidity there, glassy and
“Purity,” he said in a strange voice. “I had nearly forgotten your aura, it’s been so long.”

Ladybug tensed. It made no sense and she could not explain it, but she knew instinctively that this creature was not the man formerly known as the Fumigator, but someone else speaking through him.

“Pride,” she spat the word like a curse. “It’s you, isn’t it? Come out and face me.”

The possessed man smiled sinisterly. Blood coated his crooked teeth, and his blood-shot eyes were feverish with delight. “Soon,” he said. “Pride cometh before the fall, and yours draws near.”

Queen Bee was less moved by the stunt and tapped the rose pin with her sword. “Coward. You send puppets to do your dirty work.”

The man’s breath was a rattling wheeze, and his unblinking stare shifted to Queen Bee. “Puppets, you say? I only free what is trapped within.” He looked her up and down, and there was something disgustingly lascivious about it. “I could free you, Courage.”

“Hawk Moth,” Ladybug pressed before Queen Bee could lose her temper and kill him. “Why would you help him? What do you want? Answer me!”

Pride looked back at Ladybug. “I only want the same thing you want.”

Queen Bee pressed her sword down harder, and Pride choked. The possessed man’s body was not long for this world. “No more riddles, you piece of shit.”

By now, others had gathered to watch, including Alya, Luka, and other civilians caught up in the crosshairs. Ladybug paid them no mind.

“Patience. Wars are not won in a day.”

Ladybug paled. “So you are trying to build an army. You’ll never get another Miraculous, I swear to god.”

Pride laughed, a ghastly sound that reminded Ladybug of rattling bones. “Are you so certain?”

Ladybug was about to respond to that when Chat swiped the rose pin from right under Queen Bee’s sword and crushed it in his claws. The man Pride had temporarily possessed convulsed, and with a final, strangled choke, he fell limp and lifeless.

“Vermin,” Chat spat.

Ladybug and Queen Bee both whirled on him, and Ladybug took him by his bell collar. “Goddamnit, Chat!”

He looked at her with unfocused eyes, and this close she could smell his breath. Her anger boiled.

“What the hell?” she said in a low, dangerous voice. “Are you drunk?”

“Well, it’s five o’clock somewhere, my lady,” he drawled.

Ladybug could not believe this was happening. “Are you kidding me? How could you be so irresponsible?!”

“He just Cataclysmed that building while those civilians were still trying to escape,” Queen Bee said
darkly. “While Alya was still stuck on the roof.”

Chat shot her a scathing look. “Mind your own beeswax. You don’t get a say in this.”

Queen Bee glared at him. “Like hell. I took an acid spray to save your sorry ass!”

“Enough!” Ladybug shouted over them. She turned on Chat. “Bee’s a part of this team, Chat, and she’s right. You put her and everyone else here in serious danger.”

“I took out those coralized victims before they could kill Alya!” he said.

“And you almost killed her in the process!” Ladybug shouted at him. “How could you do this?”

Chat pushed her off, but he stumbled and nearly lost his balance if not for his staff to steady him. “What does it matter? You have Queen Bee to clean up your messes now. I’m superfluous.”

“You are as long as you show up wasted and act like a complete asshole! Seriously, Chat, I don’t even know who you are right now. What’s going on with you?”

Chat bared his teeth, and Ladybug flinched at the sight of his long incisors. “Nothing,” he said. “I’m out of here.”

He leaped away, swaying as he went, and soon disappeared from sight. Ladybug was so angry that she was shaking. She had half a mind to go after Chat, but her earrings and Queen Bee’s comb beeped in warning. Their time was up.

“Bug,” Queen Bee said, angling her head.

Ladybug nodded, and then turned back to Alya and the others. They were back to themselves, healed by her magic. Alya looked like she wanted to come and talk to Ladybug, but Ladybug wasn’t sure she trusted herself not to say something she’d regret in her anger over Chat. She needed to cool down.

“Let’s go,” she said to Queen Bee before Alya or any of the others could stop them.

They dashed away at high speed and found an empty alley to revert in. Chloe made no effort to hide her fury.

“I can’t believe him!” Chloe said, hugging herself for warmth as she and Marinette slipped out of the alley and quickly headed away from the site of the battle. “Seriously, what the fuck was that? He could’ve gotten us all killed!”

“I don’t know,” Marinette said, “but something’s going on with him.”

“Yeah, you think?” Chloe scoffed. “We have to do something about him. That was beyond reckless, like seriously.”

“I know, I know…”

Marinette’s phone rang. It was Alya.

“Marinette, you are never going to believe what just happened to me!” she said, out of breath like she was running.

“Hey, Alya, I’m really sorry, but can I call you back later?”
“What? No way, girl, you have to hear this. It’s about Ladybug—she saved my life just now. There was an attack downtown, it was nuts. I have to shower, but seriously, come over to my place and we’ll—”

“Marinette,” Chloe said. “This is kind of important.”

“Yeah, I know,” Marinette said. “Alya, look, I’d love to hear all about it, really, but I’m kind of busy right now.”

“Was that Chloe I heard? Are you hanging out with her or something?”

“Uh, yeah, we’re— It doesn’t matter. I’m really sorry, but I’ll call you back later, okay? I promise,” Marinette hedged, hating that she couldn’t be honest with Alya.

“This isn’t me fangirling about superheroes. I literally almost died today, and I… Look, I just really need to see you, okay?”

Marinette closed her eyes and took a shaky breath. She tried to tell herself that this was the right thing to do, no matter how shitty it made her feel. “I promise I’ll call you later. I’ll come over and we’ll talk, just… Just not right now. Alya, please, I’m so sorry. I wouldn’t do this if it wasn’t really important.”

There was a pause, and then, “Okay.”

Marinette bit her lip. “Alya, I’m—”

“I have to go, the police are here and I’m a witness. I’ll talk to you later.”

The line went dead before Marinette could get another word in edgewise, and she just stared at the screen blankly.

“Marinette,” Chloe said. “Are you going to be okay?”

She checked her texts briefly. The last one she’d sent was to Adrien, asking if he wanted to do dinner tonight. There was no response. She pocketed her phone.

“We have more important things to worry about right now,” she said, ignoring the pang of hurt. It seemed both Alya and Adrien were closed avenues to her today, and she didn’t have time to worry about them now.

“What’d you have in mind?” Chloe asked as they walked briskly down the street together.

Marinette clenched her fists in her coat pockets. “I think it’s time I met Mayura.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Marinette reaches out to Adrien. Something reaches back.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

In which Plot, that fickle mistress, finally decides to drop in and get tanked.

Chapter Notes

Jesus take the wheel, here we fucking go. Full disclosure: I have a thing for psychological spooky. I also have a thing for the villain/hero trope. Stop me if you dare!
(Don’t you dare.)

WARNING: Slightly graphic mentions of suicide.

WARNING: This chapter contains mature sexual content. Please read at your own discretion. Look for the ♕ symbol to skip it if you prefer, but please note that it actually is relevant to the plot and character development. Enjoy sinners!

Adrien nearly slipped and broke his jaw on the stone balcony railing outside his father’s old bedroom —his bedroom now. His transformation reverted with barely enough time to haul himself over the railing and not fall three stories, and he all but crawled inside and slid the balcony door closed behind him.

The room was just as he’d left it: the bed unmade; clothes he’d picked out unworn and still hanging over the chair next to the dresser; an empty, crystal decanter that once contained whiskey shattered on the floor. He was still in his gym clothes, unshowered and sticky.

A shower, yeah, that was what he needed. Cold water, no, freezing water—that would bring down this delirious heat and numb his splitting headache. He stumbled into the bathroom and found a fingerprint-mottled glass of whiskey, the last from the decanter before he’d just turned to drinking it straight from the bottle. He downed the few sips and barely felt the burn, he was so hot as it was. He turned on the cold water all the way and drummed his fingers on the sink, impatient. He made a point of not looking at the mirror.

It was cracked something fantastic from the punch he’d given it.

The shower shocked him to the bone, and he cried out when the freezing water hit his bare back, but he persevered and scrubbed himself raw. By the time he was out and clumsily pulling on some clean, loose clothes, he was still shaking like a leaf, but it was a thousand times better than the staggering, fever-dream trance he had been in for the last several hours. He swallowed four painkillers dry and washed them down with another glass of whiskey from the minibar, collapsed into bed, and passed out.

Hours later, it was pitch black outside, and Adrien was no longer drunk. He rubbed his tired eyes and shifted in bed, his thoughts nothing but a blur of muted, soundless color, blessedly monotonous.
He lay there for a bit, simply relishing the nothingness. It was so quiet in here.

A soft beeping sound drew his attention. It was coming from the bathroom. Groaning, he rolled over in bed and fumbled at the night stand for the light. He inadvertently knocked over the glass of whiskey there, spilling it on the floor.

“Damnit,” he muttered, getting up and dragging himself to the bathroom, the mess could wait.

The beeping sound was coming from a corner in the bathroom, and even in the gloom he could make out a flashing, red light on the floor: his phone. Adrien bent to retrieve it and unlocked it. The battery was dangerously low, hence the beeping. The screen was badly cracked, but the phone still functioned fine. He checked his messages and found the latest one from Marinette that he’d received earlier that day.

[Marinette: Have dinner with me? Please?]

He had not responded, and it was now after 1 a.m., far too late to reply. He stared at the screen and wondered how it had gotten so late. Where had the day gone? It felt like no time had passed—his migraine still throbbed, dull like a distant echo, but slowly picking up steam. His phone beeped again. He’d have to get a new one, but for now, he plugged it in to the charger on the sink. The flipped on the light to help him find the painkillers in the sink drawer, and splashed water on his face. The hand towel felt good on his face, until he set it aside and caught his warped reflection in the cracked mirror.

His reflection smiled back at him, though Adrien himself did not smile at all. And while Adrien knew without a doubt that his true eyes were luminous green, his reflection gazed back at him through burning magenta.

“You really think a few pills will get rid of me?” the reflection taunted.

When it smiled, it revealed white teeth just a little too long, a little too sharp to be quite human. The cracks in the mirror transformed its face, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that didn’t quite fit together. Adrien stared, wide-eyed and disbelieving.

A dream, he thought distantly. I'm dreaming.

“Dream or waking, I’m always here,” the reflection said. It spread its hands over the sink and leaned forward, as if tempting the glass barrier dividing them. “I’ve always been here.”

Adrien shook his head. Reflections could not talk. They couldn’t smile on their own. This…thing that wore his face—it wasn’t him.

“Still in denial even after all these years? Tsk tsk, you know better,” the reflection said, as if even Adrien’s thoughts were not safe from it. “I’m more you than you’ll ever be. I’m the best part of you.”

“No,” Adrien said, his voice scratchy from drunk sleep. Real or not, he wasn’t about to spend another minute in here staring through the cracks in his reflection. He stumbled back out of the bathroom.

Movement from the dark, balcony window. “Running away, chaton? But we haven’t finished our game.”

Adrien stiffened at that diminution. Only she had ever called him that. The creature that wore his face leered at him through the opaque glass. It was shadows vaguely in his shape, and those magenta eyes glowed, unblinking, like some denizen of the deep that had never seen the light of day.
“I’m not playing any games,” Adrien hissed.

Lancing pain shot through his temple; his migraine was back with renewed vigor, and he swore. The pain was enough to make him stumble, and he barely caught himself on the edge of his dresser.

“Don’t be like that. I promised you a fair chance,” said the reflection, its voice following him even as he turned away from the reflective window.

“Get out of my head!” Adrien clutched his aching head, desperate to make the throbbing pain subside somehow. He spotted the tray of expensive alcohol separated into crystal decanters on a cabinet across the room, headed over, and poured himself a generous glass.

The whiskey was smooth as silk and went down easily. He ignored the churn in his stomach and set down the decanter, steadying himself on the mahogany cabinet to catch his breath. He was shaking —so much alcohol would surely inebriate him in a matter of minutes, but it wasn’t enough. Last time, he’d barely managed to banish that infernal voice long enough to last him through most of the emergency akuma attack. With a shaking hand, Adrien raised his refilled glass to his lips and drank.

“It’s only a matter of time, you know,” said the abomination, its face—his face—pixelated in the hand-cut crystal decanter. “You’re getting weaker, and I only grow stronger. Soon, you won’t be able to resist me, so why try?”

Adrien glared at the broken reflection. He refused to address it, to acknowledge it.

“Don’t you remember how it felt?” the reflection taunted him. “All that power, the freedom, no restraints and no limits.” It laughed playfully. “Not even that fool Hawk Moth stood a chance.”

At the mention of his father, Adrien snatched the offending decanter and poured out a few more fingers of whiskey. Absolutely not, he would not engage a fucking hallucination. Not now, not again.

His fingers trembled, and the decanter slipped from his grasp, splashing alcohol on the cabinet and floor. Playful laughter echoed all around him, directed at him.

“Oh, come on,” it said, reading his thoughts, “that was a long time ago. And besides, that wasn’t my idea at all. You did it all on your own.”

“Shut up.”

In his shame and anger, Adrien made the mistake of facing the window again. The presence haunting him draped itself against the glass, as if lounging. It tapped a taloned finger on the glass, and each tap sent a sharp pain through Adrien’s temples.

“A-dri-en,” it called to him, smiling coyly, childlike. “Let me in.”

Adrien staggered to the window, grabbed the curtains roughly, and dragged them closed. Shaking and shuddering, he gripped the thick, heavy drapery and squeezed his eyes closed.

“It’s not real,” he thought desperately.

But when he closed his eyes, he was skinny and sixteen again, alone and trembling in tepid bath water. His palms were slick with blood as his fingers shook, just like now, too clumsy. Too afraid. God, he couldn’t do anything right.

“So let me,” said the voice, a cold shiver down his spine. “Just sleep, and I’ll take care of
everything.”

Adrien did not often think of that harrowing night in the years since. A day like any other, really, nothing special about it. Nothing even particularly cold that his father had done or said, just the usual. If he tried, he could not pinpoint a specific action or conversation that had led to him drawing that bath, sitting there alone, pondering, hoping for…what? That he would wake up? That it was all a bad dream? He was back in Paris, school in the morning, Nino joking around during class, Alya and Marinette passing notes when the teacher wasn’t looking. And then patrol afterwards, a sunset over the Eiffel Tower, a girl in red with eyes just for him when they were so high up. If he opened his eyes, he would be there, and all of this would be someone else’s sad story.

But when he opened his eyes now, he saw the dimness of that bathroom, the off-yellow tiles, the bear claw tub, the busy New York City traffic nine floors down, blood on his hands where he’d tried and failed—it hurt, and he wasn’t doing it right.

“Adrien,” said the detached voice, and he shivered.

Leave me alone.

Shaking fingers, tender flesh, itchy blood. So much blood.

“Adrien!”

“I said leave me alone!” he said.

“Like hell!”

Chloe.

Chloe? What are you—

She was there, looming over him, taking his trembling hands—he cut her by mistake, and she hissed in pain, but she didn’t let him go.

“Adrien, oh my god,” she sobbed.

She tried to pull him out, but he struggled.

No, let me go! I don’t want you here!

But she fought him and pulled him closer. He clawed and scratched, nails and teeth, razor-blade sharp.

“Get away from me!” he snarled in a voice that was not his.

Not me, not me, not me—

Not him, and not her, either. His hateful strength left him, and she didn’t bleed at all. Golden hair and soft hands held him close, and when she smiled, her eyes reflected his.

“Adrien,” she said in a voice that wasn’t Chloe’s.

For it was no longer her, and he was no longer him. There was no water, only soft sheets on his skin, and the sunlight was low and muted through the golden curtains that matched her hair.

“Adrien?” he heard not-himself say. “I suppose…”
She smiled shyly. “Do you like it?”

There was a strange warmth between them, familiar and foreign at the same time, and so achingly nostalgic that it broke his heart.

“I like that you chose it.”

Not his voice, not his memory, not his at all. Except…

*Except.*

Her smile brightened, pearly white, and the morning light shone in her brilliant, green eyes. His eyes. “Adrien,” she said again. “Our little love.”

Her arms pulled him close in a tight embrace, and he felt it—*he felt it.* Her warmth, her closeness, her love, so close and real, and the love she received in return.

“Mom?” Adrien said.

Like a spell, he rose up and loomed over the memory that wasn’t his, couldn’t possibly be his, and watched helplessly as they faded beneath him. Young and golden, just a memory, his parents slipped through his fingers like smoke. And this time when he opened his eyes, it was to the sight of his dimly lit room back in Agreste Mansion, a death grip on his curtains, and the pain in his head inexplicably dulled to negligible.

Panting, Adrien looked around and tried to control the spinning in his head brought on by the starkly vivid vision. For the first time in over twenty-four hours, he could hear himself think clearly, no echoes.

Looking around, he saw no looming figures in his reflection, no burning eyes, heard no voices but his own. The vision, whatever it had been, had brought him up for air. He straightened, and it was a mistake because the alcohol he’d downed to drown out the hallucination had caught up to him, and he wavered. Even so, he stumbled to the bathroom where he’d left his phone, a singular purpose in mind.

It took him several tries to unlock the phone, but he finally managed and opened up Marinette’s last text.

[Marinette: Have dinner with me? Please?]

He forewent any attempt to drunkenly text her and instead pressed the call button and braced himself on the counter. It rang once, twice, three times—

“Damnit, pick up,” he said.

He drummed his fingers on the counter nervously, counting the seconds and each long, monotonous ring. On the seventh ring he growled in frustration and pulled at his hair. Even Marinette—*Ladybug* hated him, even if she was angry with him, even if she mistrusted him and would never want to see him again after this, he had to tell her. He had to warn her, just as he’d vowed he would.

The ringing stopped. Her voicemail picked up, but the box was full and not accepting new recordings. Adrien swore and mashed the disconnect button. He began to pace. The alcohol did not help, and he shuffled his heavy feet precariously.

*Chloe,* he reasoned. She didn’t know his secret, but she would believe him when he told her. He
hated the idea of dragging her into this mess when it had nothing to do with her, but what choice did he have? She would help him no matter what, like she had that dark day in the tub.

Leaning over the sink, he scrolled through his favorites list and selected Chloe’s contact to call. The line rang and rang, and eventually it cut to voicemail. Adrien glared at his reflection in the broken mirror—his true reflection. The voicemail beeped, signaling the beginning of the recording.

“Chlo, it’s me,” he said. “Listen, I know this is going to sound completely crazy—” He hesitated. Where should he even begin?

His Miraculous Ring picked that moment to burn, and Adrien yelped and dropped the phone. Smoke rose from the ring where it cooked his flesh, and he clutched it helplessly. As he reached to turn on the cold sink water, he saw his shade’s cracked reflection in the mirror suddenly looking right at him.

It stood just behind him, one long-fingered hand curling over his shoulder, and those baleful, magenta eyes fixed on his as it leaned in close to his ear and said, “My turn.”

Adrien grunted as the reflection pressed a finger to his temple, and his migraine suddenly came crashing down again in all its agonizing glory. The cracked mirror burst and broke, and Adrien threw his arms up to protect himself as the blast blew him back onto the floor. Glass fell around and through him, cutting and splintering, and he choked as his reflection wrapped its fingers around his throat and leaned in close, nose to nose. Adrien could no longer discern reality from fantasy as he clawed desperately at the hands slowly killing him.

His vision swam, and the creature looming over him slowly changed shape, until he could not tell its face from his own. It laughed—he laughed, his voice—and the shadows behind it rose up like great wings. When its grip tightened around him, it was his own hands he felt, squeezing and clawing. He was looking down at himself, sputtering and squirming on the floor.

So fucking weak, he thought, disgusted.

It would be a mercy to put him out of his misery before Ladybug ever got the chance.

He raised one hand and brought it crashing down into those tearful, green eyes, digging and churning. Terrified eyes, fearful and weak, he couldn’t stand the sight of that broken face any longer. With all his might, he curled his fingers through the sockets and ripped the offending face off with a grunt of effort.

Shaking and panting, he slumped on his hands and knees on the bathroom floor, alone. He curled his clean fingers into fists and took a long, lungsful breath. And then he rose.

The phone had fallen into the sink, the voicemail to Chloe still recording. Silently, he picked up the phone and cut the line. The bathroom mirror reflected him perfectly, not a crack to be seen in the glass or in him. He leaned closer, studying his handsome face. Magenta eyes stared back at him, alight with laughter. He laughed with them.

Finally.

Adrien cut the lights and receded to the shadows.

Somewhere on the other side of Paris, a dead man woke from his slumber. The jeweled pin at his throat had grown warm. He touched a finger to it—four delicate butterfly wings joined by a
shimmering pearl, and a thin web of coral caging them in place to keep them pliant. Something had woken it, just as it had woken him.

Felix Agreste rose from his bed and went to the balcony, where he had a beautiful view of the Seine and the city lights in the distance. The air was unpleasingly cold so late at night, but he relished its biting kiss on his cheeks. The sky was overcast and starless, a tired night following a tired day. They say the dead sleep, but he could not have felt more awake and alive than he did in this moment.

And if the pulsing insistency of his brand new Miraculous was to be believed, he was not the only one resurrected on this dreary night.

He pulled out his phone and placed a call to his personal assistant, on call at all hours of the day and night to fulfill any whim that struck his fancy.

“Mr. Legrand, good evening. How can I help you?”

“I need you to set up a meeting,” Felix said. “Tomorrow morning, with Adrien Agreste. As soon as possible.”

“Of course, sir. May I tell him the reason for the meeting?”

Felix smiled. “Tell him it’s a family matter.”

He hung up the phone and leaned his weight on the balcony railing, shivering in the cold under his robe.

A family matter.

He liked the sound of that.

[Adrien: Sorry, missed your texts.]
[Adrien: Free tomorrow?]
[Adrien: My treat.]

Marinette steadied herself on a manikin in her studio at Marinette Designs to catch her breath as she read Adrien’s newest texts. After a whole weekend of radio silence save for a single, impressive cat emoji, she had begun to wonder if she’d well and truly messed up any hope of ever getting back together with him. It was Monday, and from the way her heart thundered in her ribcage, she could no longer deny that she’d been going stir crazy hoping for some sign of life from him.

She immediately set to replying.

[Marinette: Hey!! Don’t worry about it, totally fine!]
[Marinette: Tomorrow is perfect. I can’t wait! Where should I meet you?]

She chewed her lip waiting for a reply. After what felt like the longest three minutes of her life, the little chat bubbles began to bounce as he typed back.

[Adrien: My place. I’ll cook.]
“Seriously?” Marinette gaped at her phone, a little in awe. Since when did Adrien cook? Didn’t he have a personal chef or something? What did this mean?

_Dinner at his place. And he’s cooking for me…_

She chewed her lip red and typed back.

[Marinette: I’m intrigued. Dress code?]

[Adrien: Something red.]

[Adrien: I like you in red.]

Marinette stared at his reply. She rubbed her eyes and stared some more. Did he really just say that? Her stomach began to flutter.

[Marinette: So demanding. You have something special you want to do?]

[Adrien: Yes.]

[Adrien: You.]

“Oh my god.” Marinette dropped her phone, and it landed on the floor with a bang. Swearing, and hoping she hadn’t cracked the screen, she hastily picked it up.

_I guess he’s feeling better?_

He wasn’t usually this forward. Well, okay, he could be very forward, as she’d learned. Maybe it had just been a while since the last time they flirted. Their previous intimate encounter had not exactly ended on the most romantic of notes. As much as she would have been down to hop in a cab and go to him right now (why wait?), she didn’t want to take advantage of him in a vulnerable emotional state. She would rather stay celibate for the rest of her life than do that to him, however unintentionally.

[Marinette: I hate to ask, but are you being serious?]

[Adrien: Ask me tomorrow. 7 pm]

[Adrien: Don’t be late.]

[Adrien: ;)]

“We meet again, winky-face emoji of unresolved sexual tension,” Marinette said darkly.

And yet, he seemed fine. Better, at least. As better as someone could sound over text. That was it, she decided. Tomorrow she would definitely talk to him, as much as he was willing to tell her, about everything that was bothering him. If it took all night, then so be it. And if he seemed even a little bit unstable, she would not pin him down on any tables or remove any of his clothing with her teeth.

_Good plan. Sensible, easy to remember._

_Maybe a little bit extremely specific._

_But still._

It was fine. She was fine. And she really, really hoped Adrien was fine, because even Marinette
Dupain-Cheng, Mediocre Woman by day, could transform into a sexy, fierce femme when she donned some red—and she didn’t even need superpowers to do it. Honestly, it was almost criminal to keep it from him, and Marinette was nothing if not a sharer.

For the first time in possibly her entire life, she knew exactly what to wear.

Leave it to Chloe to have a rare day off from all work responsibilities and no boyfriend to spend it with while he worked an exhausting double shift. Never in her life had Chloe been so sorely tempted to dabble in the sugar lifestyle than she did this dreary French Tuesday. Alone. In the cold. Running around this godforsaken city in her cutest Frye boots (because Chloe Bourgeois had one true calling in life, and that was to look objectively amazing no matter what she did or where she went).

Not that Luka could really accompany Chloe on this particular rendezvous even if he didn’t need to work long hours to keep up with the bills (but also not like she would have wasted a day off even going on this wild goose chase if he was free). But no, here she was taking the fucking metro, of all the things, because caution was a Thing and no one in their right mind would ever expect her, of all people, to take the poor man’s Uber.

In her favorite Chanel handbag, Pollen sat snuggled up with a magical peacock feather that had stubbornly refused to do the one job it was specifically meant to do: contact Mayura. As soon as the attack on Saturday ended and Marinette guiltily blew off Alya for the slightly more important mission of saving Paris, Chloe and Marinette headed back to Le Grand Paris and immediately attempted to get in contact with Mayura. The feather was an Eye, one of Mayura’s special powers, and it was only to be used in the direst of emergencies because it could open a directly line of sight to Mayura’s whereabouts. Dangerous information in the wrong hands, indeed.

That is, if the damn thing would work.

In the end, they’d called it a night, both of them exhausted from the earlier attack as it was. Chloe had been trying to get the Eye to work ever since, but unfortunately it did not come with a charger to reboot it if it was out of juice. So now, she was doing the only other thing she could think to do: talk to the Guardian.

When she got to her stop, she emerged outside the city proper. The afternoon was drab and dull, and she was not in the highest of spirits (see: Luka’s double shift, above). As she began the twenty minute trek to Fu’s secluded villa, she checked her phone. A voicemail from Adrien sat in her inbox, undeleted since the night he’d left it. She’d listened to it five times over, trying to make sense of it. She’d even called him back the very next morning, only to get his voicemail. And so on, so forth, until finally he’d picked up later that afternoon.

She’d asked him about the voicemail, how strange it was. He had something to tell her? Something crazy? And what was with those weird noises? Like scuffling, or a voice straining.

“Oh, that,” Adrien had said casually. “Sorry, I was drunk.”

“With who?” Chloe had said, incredulous. Because Adrien was not what one might call a social butterfly these days, no matter how complicated his feelings for his late father may be.

“Just friends.”

“A, I’m your friend. And I know you don’t have random sloshed-at-2-a.m. – ‘just friends’.”
“I was out, okay? You’re not my keeper.”

Chloe narrowed her eyes. “Well, it was bizarre, okay? And honestly, it kind of freaked me out. What did you have to say that was so crazy?”

“Nothing. I was drunk, that’s it.”

“Hey, listen to me. All bantering aside, just… Just tell me if something’s wrong, okay? You know I’m here for you, whatever it is, however crazy or stupid or whatever you think it sounds, you can tell me. I’ll never judge you.”

“Touching, but I already told you, it’s nothing. Just drop it, already. I don’t need you checking up on me for every little goddamned thing, Chloe. We’re not sixteen anymore.”

At that, Chloe’s infamous temper flared. Did he seriously just compare a slightly worrisome, drunk voicemail to the worst experience of both their lives? “Okay, Big Boy Pants, consider yourself unchecked. But you don’t have to be a jerk about it. I’m just trying to make sure you’re okay—”

“Well, stop. I’m fine, I’m just busy with my new job. I really don’t have time right now, okay? I’ll talk to you later. Bye.”

Chloe had not been super convinced, but his attitude pissed her off. What, so it was a crime now to check in with someone she cared about? The fucking nerve. Just because he was going through a terrible time didn’t give him a free license to be a dick.

It wasn’t until much later, when her head was clearer from a full night’s sleep, that she realized he’d called her by her full name, rather than the diminution he always used. Adrien never called her ‘Chloe’ unless it was for the benefit of other people around them. A small thing, perhaps, but one that did not go unnoticed.

First Chat Noir starts losing his mind, and now Adrien’s acting suspicious. What the hell is going on with everyone?

She must have said that out loud, because Pollen had jumped into her scarf while she made her way along the mostly deserted, suburban street toward Fu’s place.

“What’s the buzz with Adrien?” Pollen asked. “Did he get drunk and recklessly endanger Alya’s life, too?”

Chloe frowned at Pollen. “No, of course not. I don’t know, he’s just going through a hard time, obviously.”

Pollen snuggled close for warmth, greedily fluffing Chloe’s yellow scarf around her and generally messing up its flawless arrangement. “Maybe he needs a drone of his own to make him feel better?”

Chloe snorted. “I really wish I could tell him you said that.”

Maybe she could tell Marinette. She’d get it. Possibly even get it sometime this century. Chloe smirked at her own pun. And then she immediately felt sick.

…Pollen must never know I just did that.

Just as she was approaching the modest garden outside Fu’s house, she got a text from Marinette.

[Marinette: Help!! Adrien’s cooking me dinner tonight, and I need to bring something to be polite!}
“What should I bring???”

“Cooking? In what universe?” Chloe typed back, and Pollen, ever entranced by the methods of indisputably bee-inspired human communication, practically salivated.

[Chloe: Bring take-out. He should never be allowed to cook anything.]

[Marinette: I think it’s romantic (●♡∀♡)]

“Ugh, my eyes.” Chloe shielded her eyes at the sight of that heinous heart-eye emoji. Where the hell had Marinette even learned to type such a monstrosity?

“What is that?” Pollen said, throwing caution to the wind and buzzing directly over the phone. “I can’t read it.”

Chloe swallowed what little was left of her dignity (she had just crossed the city on the fucking metro, excuse you). “It’s an emoji. Like a face. The hearts are supposed to be the eyes. Some simple-minded people find them cute, but—”

“It’s adorable!” Pollen gushed, ecstatic. “Oh, I see it now! The hearts! The eyes! Honey Bee, you do one back, okay?”

“Absolutely not.”

Pollen looked very serious then. “I get it. It’s a very important picture, so you have to be careful to choose the right one to show your true feelings. You’re right, maybe you shouldn’t send one.”

Chloe groaned. “That’s completely the opposite of how and why most people use emojis. Ugh, whatever, forget it.”

Marinette had already texted her again.

[Marinette: But seriously, help me! What should I bring? Wine? Maybe an appetizer?]

[Marinette: ?????]

Chloe rolled her eyes and typed out a reply.

[Chloe: Maybe go easy on the wine. I’m guessing you’ll want to hash it out before the clothes come off.]

[Marinette: Good point.]

“Ooh! Tell her something sweet! Something extra sweet. That always cheers me up,” Pollen said.

Chloe considered. That wasn’t a terrible idea, actually. Hm.

[Chloe: Dessert. Your parents run a bakery, so just steal something from them.]

[Marinette: Of course! He loved my dad’s cake last time… Great idea!]

“You’re welcome!” Pollen preened.

Chloe cracked a smile.

[Chloe: Pollen’s idea.]
Marinette: Thank you, Pollen! Buzz buzz!

Pollen gasped in delight. “A bee? That’s me!”

Well, it’s not the Queen of England, thought Chloe.

“Mmm I love texting!” Pollen said. “Honey Bee, tell Marinette I love texting!”

“If I didn’t think you’d blow up her phone constantly, I’d be tempted to just get you your own so you don’t try to use mine.”

Pollen giggled. “Don’t be jealous. If you got me a phone, I’d text you, too!”

Chloe planted a kiss on Pollen’s head, and that earned her a very cute buzz. As for Marinette, she hoped dessert would be enough to help her get Adrien talking a little. After the way he’d been on the phone before, and his eerie voicemail…

Chloe: Hey have fun tonight. He could really use it.

Marinette: Fun is all I have to give. And dessert.

Marinette: I think I could use a little fun these days, too.

Marinette: Do you think I’m selfish?

Chloe frowned.

Chloe: No, obvs not. Take the night.

Marinette: What about Mayura? Did you find her yet? I could come help when I’m done at work.

Chloe: Don’t worry. I said I’d handle it. No Mayura yet, but trying another avenue. Will let you know.

Chloe: Just do me a favor and get laid tonight. I can feel the nuclear radiation from your UST across the Seine.

Marinette: Ha ha, dick.

Marinette: I hope he’s okay.

Marinette: Not cuz I want to get laid but just in general…

Marinette: You’d tell me if I’m being selfish right?

“Jesus, who knew Ladybug was such a nut head all this time?” Chloe said, smiling to herself. She was pretty sure she would never be completely, 100% over the fact that Marinette had always been Ladybug.

Chloe: To your face. You know I love making people uncomfortable.

Chloe: But you’re not so shut up already.

Chloe: Just talk to him. Wear something slutty. You know the drill.

Chloe: Also send pics. I obvs give amazing fashion advice.
“Hmm, I wonder if Adrien will wear a suit?” Pollen waggled her nonexistent eyebrows at Chloe, which ended up being an awkward antennae twitch.

[Marinette: Uh oh you just opened yourself up to unsolicited fashion selfies.]

[Marinette: No going back now Bumble Bee.]

Chloe scoffed. “Bumble Bee? Please.”

[Chloe: Come over here and call me that to my face, Beetlejuice.]

[Marinette: …This means war you know. Selfies are my weapon of choice, you’ve been warned!]

Marinette then sent a selfie of both Tikki and herself frowning very dramatically at the camera. Pollen was beside herself.

“Let’s do one! Come on, Honeycomb! Let’s take a selfie!” she pleaded.

“And leave evidence on the Cloud of your existence? Hard pass,” Chloe said.

“The clouds aren’t going to tell anybody!”

Chloe let that one slide because she was an extremely gracious person by nature, obviously.

“Pleeeease?” Pollen puffed up her furry little chest, which was completely unfair because she knew that look was impossible for Chloe to resist.


Pollen eagerly buzzed right next to Chloe’s cheek so they could both fit in the shot.

“What should we do?” Pollen said. “Smile? Stick our tongues out?”

“The number one rule of a good selfie is that it always has to make you look hot and amazing. We’re winking, like this.” Chloe winked seductively.

Pollen couldn’t wink because she had no eyelids, but she made do by covering one compound eye with her little arm and smirking at the camera in what Chloe could honestly say was the most convincing bee smirk she had ever seen. Chloe sent the selfie off and hoped no one ever hacked her iCloud account, because Jesus Christ.

[Marinette: You fiend!]

[Chloe: You started it, Buginette.]

And then, for good measure and because Chloe was all about being ironic:

[Chloe: <beetle noises>]

Pollen positively cackled.

[Marinette: I came here to have a good time and I’m honestly feeling so attacked right now.]

Chloe couldn’t help but share in Pollen’s laugh. “Okay, Meme-nette. You wanna dance?”

[Chloe: That is so sad Alexa play Despacito.]
“Oh my fucking god, I’m putting an end to this,” Chloe said as she tried to stifle a laugh.

They tabled their texting for now, with Marinette promising to send fashion selfies later, and Chloe promising to update her on whatever she found about about Mayura.

Chloe knocked on Fu’s door and waited to see if he was home.

“Chloe, what a pleasant surprise,” Fu said when he opened the door. “And Pollen, of course. Please come in, it’s quite cold out there.”

“Guardian,” Pollen greeted, a mixture of cool and cool, because she was without a doubt Chloe’s bee form if ever there was one.

“Thanks,” Chloe said.

She and Pollen followed him inside.

Marinette sent an impressive fourteen selfies to Chloe, meticulously detailing her ‘getting ready’ process and the scarlet, long-sleeved cocktail dress she was wearing tonight, which Chloe aptly dubbed the Cersei Lannister Dress. Tikki thought it was a bit much to send so many selfies, but Marinette gently reminded her that she and Chloe were currently at war, and Marinette was nothing if not a sore loser. She would not be outdone. Tikki wished her good luck tonight, because no, she would not be joining Marinette on her date when she had a full Netflix queue of romantic comedies to keep her busy.

As Marinette sat in a ride share on her way to Adrien’s, she fiddled with her phone and the last message she’d sent to Alya hours ago this morning, asking for a truce and a chance to apologize in person. There was no response yet. She was probably still upset with Marinette for bailing on her after the last coral/akuma fight. Marinette hoped she would give her a chance to make it up to her.

[Marinette: Hey I know you’re still mad at me and I’m not saying you shouldn’t be, but I have a date with Adrien tonight. I’d cancel it right now to hang out with you just say the word.]

No response from Alya. Forlorn, Marinette busied herself looking out the window at the Parisian city lights passing her by. It was a cold night, the kind of night made for loneliness and black and white movies, but Marinette had other plans. No matter what she was hoping for tonight, Adrien came first. She would make sure he was comfortable and stable, whether he wanted her to make sure or not. They could not have a repeat of their last encounter.

Just as the driver pulled up in front of Agresté Mansion to drop Marinette off, her phone buzzed.

[Alya: Hey girl. Enjoy your date. We can catch up later.]

Marinette almost jumped out of her heels and furiously typed.

[Marinette: Please see me tonight.]
[Marinette: I’m so sorry for bailing on you. Let me make it up to you. I’ll even bring dessert!]

[Marinette: Alya? Please say something…]

At length, the driver told her he needed to go pick up someone else and she had to get out. So Marinette gathered the box with the chocolate cake she’d brought along with her purse and stood alone and cold in front of the imposing, iron gate. She shivered.

At last, Alya texted her back.

[Alya: I know you can’t live without me]

[Alya: So lmk if you go home tonight]

[Marinette: Absolutely! It’s just dinner, then I’m out of here. I’ll text you as soon as I’m free!]

[Alya: Girl no, you better not text me until you’ve taken the full tour of Agreste Mansion]

[Alya: ;)]

Marinette stared at that winky-face. Do I have a type? she thought, slightly horrified.

[Alya: Also bring all the dirty details]

[Alya: Asking for a friend]

[Alya: It’s Nino]

[Alya: ;__;)]

Despite her anxiety about the Alya situation, Marinette couldn’t help but laugh.

[Marinette: I’ll take notes for him.]

[Alya: Good now shut up and give 14-year-old Marinette what she’s always wanted before we all waste away and die]

Feeling daring, Marinette texted back:

[Marinette: ;)]

She put her phone away and rang the doorbell of the enormous Agreste Mansion, shrinking in her woolen coat for warmth.

Well, now all my friends know I’m seeing Adrien tonight.

She just hoped there wouldn’t be some shamefully celibate story to tell them later. Before Marinette could properly berate herself for such a self-serving thought in typical Marinette fashion, the door swung open and revealed the shining, earthly avatar of Helios, Greek god of the sun.

I mean, Adrien.

Marinette swallowed hard. He was in a suit sans blazer and smiled like he was genuinely happy to see her.

“You made it,” he said.
And damn, it must have been a while, because Marinette felt his smooth baritone down to her toes. Fourteen-year-old Marinette would have been proud, and also probably passed out by now.

*What the hell, self? It’s just Adrien. I am an adult! I am mature!*

“Hi,” Marinette said dreamily.

Adrien looped an arm around her waist, pulling her inside. “Hi,” he said against the shell of her ear, leaving a whispery kiss in his wake.

Marinette was grateful for his hand leading her inside, because without his support she may have melted on his doorstep and had to call it a night right there. Perhaps it really had been a while since they had simply enjoyed each other’s company, no tragedies or Ladybug worries getting in the way.

Maybe Chloe was right, and she could take the night. Even a few hours would be enough, if Adrien could manage. She bit back a smile and let him take the box containing the chocolate cake she’d brought.

“Dessert,” she said when he shot her an inquiring look from behind the granite-top kitchen counter. “I figured I should bring something sweet.”

He checked the box’s contents and smirked. She shivered. His green eyes looked particularly intense tonight. “Chocolate’s more sinful than sweet, don’t you think?”

Marinette said nothing to that, not trusting her voice. He laughed lightly and set the box on the counter for later.

“Let me take your coat.”

It was then that Marinette regained some of her confidence and speech power, because the look in his eyes was worth everything. He all but dropped her coat over the back of a chair, too focused on her dress—lightly flared skirt, lace, plunging neckline, bell sleeves, and all a bloody shade of scarlet to match her lipstick.

“I seem to recall a request for red,” Marinette said playfully.

Adrien wasn’t even trying to hide the way his eyes roamed over her body as he slowly walked around her. His hand on her waist was noticeably warm as he dragged his fingers over the intricate lace brocade. There was nothing playful about the way he was all but undressing her with his eyes.

“You didn’t disappoint,” he said.

He had her by the waist as he stood directly behind her, and his breath warmed the back of her neck where she’d swept her hair up in a bun. Marinette sucked in a sharp breath at the feel of him hovering over her, his lips not quite touching her skin but close enough to notice. Across the room, she caught their joined reflections in a decorative, silver mirror on the wall.

“Adrien,” she said, short of breath.

The way he surrounded her, nose pressed to her hair and a flash of teeth behind parted lips, he may have been about to take a bite out of her. His eyes caught hers in their reflection, and Marinette was rendered speechless at the heat in them.

As if sensing her thoughts, his fingers lightly pressed against her belly, and he laughed softly. “Relax,” he said. “It’s just me.”
He pressed a kiss to her neck just below her ear, and Marinette couldn’t stand it any longer. She turned around and took him in her hands, but before she could properly kiss him, he stopped her with a finger on her painted lips.

“Dinner’s getting cold,” he said.

He released her and headed back to the kitchen, and Marinette could honestly say it was the saddest sight she’d seen all day, watching him go.

What the hell is wrong with me?

She shook out her hands and tried to control her breathing. She was extremely attracted to Adrien, which was news to exactly no one, but this was slightly ridiculous. She had to remember not to get ahead of herself. They needed to talk, and she needed to figure out where he was dealing with the traumatic events of the last couple weeks. Determined, she plastered a smile on her face and followed him back to the kitchen, where he was pouring out two glasses of red wine.

“Thanks,” she said, accepting one of the glasses. “What are we drinking to?”

He held her gaze, and Marinette realized for the first time that he was wearing contacts. So, even the perfect ex-supermodel had some physical imperfections.

“To us,” he said, clinking his glass to hers.

Dinner was everything Marinette didn’t know she needed tonight. The formal dining room table was large enough to seat twelve, but Adrien had set up two places at the head and directly next to it, cozy with candle light and a fire blazing in the adjacent living room. Despite what Chloe said, Adrien’s cooking was good, and also despite what Chloe had said, there was plenty of wine to go around. Marinette was happily sipping her second glass when the conversation shifted to Adrien’s new work.

“How’s the first week going?” Marinette asked.

“Good,” Adrien said. “Busy, but good.”

“Is it everything you were looking for?”

He considered a moment. “It’s…liberating. I feel like I’ve found a place where I can really…let loose. Live how I want to live.”

Marinette beamed at him. “That’s great! I’m really happy to hear it. Aramis is amazing. I’m almost jealous you get to work with him so closely.”

His gaze met hers. “You think very highly of him.”

“Are you surprised? You know how much he’s done for me.”

Adrien didn’t return her smile, and Marinette felt hers falter as the seconds ticked by. Just when she started to wonder if she’d said something odd, he got up and headed back to the kitchen.

“Salt,” he said by way of explanation, and briefly disappeared around the corner.

Marinette frowned at her plate. Had she said something wrong, after all?

You’re way overthinking things. Stop being so nervous.

Maybe she was a little nervous. She took a sip of wine and reminded herself to loosen up a little.
Adrien returned shortly after with the salt, and they resumed dinner.

“Hey,” Marinette said. “Are you… Did I say something weird?”

He swallowed the bite he’d eaten and looked up at her. “ Weird? No, why?”

“Well, you just ended a conversation by literally getting up and leaving, so…”

He blinked, and then smiled warmly. “Oh, sorry.”

It didn’t look like he was going to say anything else. Marinette was even more confused now. Had she drunk too much wine? She’d barely started on her second glass, but nonetheless, she pushed it away.

“Adrien,” she said, “did something happen? With Aramis?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just… I don’t know, did something happen? Something that’s making you not want to talk about him?”

He laughed. “Of course not. Aramis is great. I told you, I love my new job.”

“Are you sure? Because, well, if there’s anything… I mean, you know you can talk to me, right? About anything.”

He set down his fork and put his hand on hers. “I know that.”

Marinette had the urge to link her fingers through his, and so she did. He responded by rubbing his thumb over her knuckles, and her heart fluttered.

“Okay,” she said. “Good. Great, that’s really great. That you know that. Yup.”

He’s just holding my hand and I’m melting like a popsicle in summer. What is up with me tonight?

As if he could read her thoughts, Adrien gave her a smile that she felt down to her toes. “Actually, there is something.”

“Oh?”

“I met my uncle recently.”

Marinette lost control of her jaw momentarily as she processed what he had just said. “I— Your uncle? As in, your uncle-uncle?”

“That’s usually how it works when your father has a brother,” he said, teasing.

“Wow, that’s… That’s so great! I didn’t think you had any other family!”

“Neither did I, until a few days ago. That’s kind of why it took me a while to get back to you.”

Marinette’s heart fluttered for a completely different reason that had nothing to do with how distracting his hand in hers was. “Wow, sorry, I’m just really happy for you. Can I ask, how did you never know you had an uncle? Gabriel never talked about him?”

“They had a falling out years ago.”
“Damn, it must have been really bad for him to never even tell you he had a brother.”

“They were out to kill each other, to hear Felix tell it. So to speak.”

_Felix Agreste._

It had a nice ring to it. She wondered what Gabriel Agreste’s brother could possibly be like. If he’d had a falling out with Gabriel so bad that they were estranged for years without Adrien ever even knowing he existed, then Marinette guessed that the brothers were as different as night and day.

She thought about her last encounter with Adrien, how painful it had been seeing him break down at Gabriel’s funeral, and afterwards when they were alone. “That’s really sad. But you know, whatever happened between them has nothing to do with you. I’m glad you could finally meet Felix. You deserve the chance to get to know him. I’m just sorry it took so long.”

She raised their clasped hands to her lips and kissed his knuckles. The look in his eyes changed then, a little surprised, a little vulnerable.

“Thanks, Marinette,” he said.

She smiled. “Thank you for telling me.”

Marinette couldn’t quite place it, but something about Adrien tonight seemed different. His downright seductive welcome followed by the odd, almost cold end to the conversation when she brought up Aramis, and now this glimmer of vulnerability, of sincerity that reminded her of the night of Jessika’s party, when she’d promised him that there was nothing he could reveal about himself that would push her away—it was difficult to keep her balance.

“So, do I get to meet Uncle Felix sometime?” she said.

“Not yet,” he said. “He doesn’t know about you. Us.”

Marinette shivered when he suddenly ran his fingers through her long bangs and tucked them behind her ear.

_Us._

“Oh?” She smiled and tried to focus on his words, rather than on his electrifying touch making her head spin. “Keeping my identity a secret?”

“Something like that.” He traced her jawline with his fingers and lifted her chin to expose her neck. “For now, I want you all to myself.”

Marinette’s eyes fluttered closed under his touch, but when he rose from his chair to loom over her, she stared up at him. He was leaning over her, one hand flat on the glass tabletop, the other sliding to her throat, feather light. She felt his breath on her lips, and all she saw was consuming, stormy green.

“Well,” Marinette said, barely a whisper, “you have me.”

It was all she could do not to drag him down and kiss him senseless. Adrien could be playfully flirty, she’d seen that first hand, but the way he held her now, as if he might devour her, was almost carnal. Almost wrong, and yet she could not help wanting to see where it led them. His hand at her throat was sinfully dangerous, a thrilling threat.

“Right where I want you,” he said.
He tightened his grip on her throat just enough for her to feel the pressure, and she gasped, taken aback at her own carnal reaction to him. It was so unexpected—he was unexpected, like she’d never seen him before, not even the night of Jessika’s party before he cut their encounter short and revealed his fear of disappointing her.

That sobering thought snapped her out of the moment, and she raised a hand to his chest. “Adrien,” she said.

“Dessert?” he said.

Before Marinette could respond, he released her and pulled away. He gathered their dinner plates to take to the kitchen, leaving Marinette by herself for a couple minutes. She took the opportunity alone to draw a shaky breath, suddenly uncomfortably chilled.

“Hey, Adrien?” she called.

“Yeah?”

“Can we, um, maybe do dessert in the living room? By the fire?”

She heard him rummaging with plates. His light laughter soft and playful. “Is my lady cold?”

Marinette stilled at that peculiar turn of phrase. Not for the first time, she got the uncanny feeling that Adrien knew something he couldn’t possibly know. Back on their first date at Firefly, and again at the hospital when he woke up after the incident with Gabriel’s death, and now tonight—

“Grab the glasses?” he said, interrupting her thoughts as he approached from the kitchen carrying two plates each with a slice of decadent chocolate cake.

“Oh! Yeah, sure.”

Marinette blew out the candles and followed Adrien to the living room with their wine glasses. They settled on a supple, leather couch in front of the hearth and set the cake and wine on a sleek coffee table. Behind them, windows offered a view of the inner courtyard.

Adrien passed her a fork, and they sampled the dessert.

“My dad is a genius,” she said, all but forgetting her previous train of thought as she focused single-mindedly on the perfection melting on her tongue.

“It’s delicious,” Adrien agreed, taking another bite. “Good choice.”

The firelight and muted lamplight cast a warm, golden glow on them. Adrien cast her a glance, and the shadows simmered in his eyes. He took a sip of wine and grinned at her.

“Something on your mind?”

He draped an arm over the back of the couch behind her shoulders, inviting. Marinette was suddenly nervous. She sipped her wine and tried to avoid staring at him, no easy feat.

“Actually, yeah,” she began. “And… Well, it’s not exactly a mood setter.”

He shifted, crossed his leg over his knee, and invaded her space with his sinewy presence. “Uh-oh,” he said.

Marinette folded her hands in her lap. Between the fire and Adrien radiating heat beside her, she was
no longer cold. “It’s…” She sighed. “Adrien, I want to talk about Jessika’s party.”

“What about it?”

She looked at him, but he seemed perfectly content to half drape himself over her side of the couch. “You left before we could, well.” She gestured noncommittally. “Look, I know it’s uncomfortable, but I think it’s important that we finally talk about whatever was bothering you. You seemed really upset.”

He said nothing as he continued to watch her, unblinking.

Marinette chewed her lip and turned to sit facing him with her legs folded under her. “The last time I saw you, we didn’t exactly part on the best terms. I think part of the reason for that is whatever you feel like you can’t talk to me about. And I get it,” she added quickly. “There are things that are private, or that are hard to say.”

Inevitably, Marinette remembered Chloe’s warning about the show Adrien put on for people, and about the tragedy that had almost ended his life. And then there were Adrien’s own self-defeating words that night at Jessika’s party.

“I’ve ruined so many good things.”

“I’m not trying to pressure you,” she went on. “That’s the whole reason I cut it short the last time. But I meant what I said at Jessika’s party.” She placed her hand on his between them and clutched his fingers as she looked him in the eye. “There’s no force on Earth that could stop me from wanting you. All of you. Do you understand?”

It was a subtle shift, and perhaps she would not have noticed if she hadn’t been watching him carefully, her hand in his, but Adrien was suddenly as taut as a bowstring, ready to snap. Like a cornered animal, he was ready to lash out or bolt at the slightest provocation.

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” he said in a voice that lacked its former enigmatic confidence.

“Yes, I do. I like you. So much. And that’s why I never want what happened last time to happen again. I care about you too much to make a reckless decision you could regret later.”

“Why are you so…” He trailed off and winced, as if in pain. He pulled away from her and pressed his fingers to his temples.

“Adrien?” Marinette said. “Hey, are you okay? Are you feeling sick or something?”

He was so tense he was shaking slightly. He let out a curse under his breath, and Marinette laid a hand on his shoulder, worried.

“Adrien,” she said, a little more forcefully.

Almost immediately, inexplicably, he calmed down and let his hands fall. “Sorry,” he said smoothly, as if it hadn’t happened at all. “Been fighting a killer migraine on and off.”

“Really? That sounds bad. Do you want to lie down or something?”

He laughed that coy laugh he’d had all night, like he was amused by something she couldn’t see. “No, I’d rather stay here with you.”
His hand was on her knee all of a sudden, and he’d shifted to face her again.

“Oh.” Marinette’s pulse spiked at the feel of him touching her, but she couldn’t get past the strangeness of the last few minutes. “You’re sure? I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“I’m fine, really. And about your…concerns.” He played with the hem of her dress. “Forget them. I’m okay.”

She wanted nothing more than to believe him, but… “You’re just okay? That’s it? What about… About the things you were afraid to tell me?”

He laughed again and brought his other hand to her cheek. He dragged his thumb from her temple to her jaw. “There’s not much to tell. I know Chloe told you the worst of it. The rest is just insecurity and self-loathing, mostly because of my father. But he’s gone now, so…”

Marinette couldn’t quite believe how nonchalant he was being. “Chloe did tell me a little, but the rest, your father… I don’t think it’s possible to just get over that.”

“Maybe I’m just tired of putting my life on hold for him and all the bullshit that came with being his son. Are you holding that against me?”

“What? No, of course not, it’s just…”

“Marinette, I’m fine. Really. I’m not going to shatter. This is me of sound mind telling you it’s okay.” He let his hand roam higher on her thigh and leaned closer. “So give in, already. We both know you want to.”

A small voice in the back of her mind protested, shouted that something was not quite right, that he was still holding something important back from her. But one of his hands closed around the back of her neck, and the other snaked around her thigh and pulled her to him. Marinette slid onto her back on the couch, and suddenly he was looming over her, flooding her presence, and all she could see and smell and feel was him.

His fingers teased the hem of her thigh-high stocking as he held her quite literally in his clutches. “Come on, Marinette,” he crooned. “Tell me what you really want.”

Marinette had lost the ability to form a coherent thought. Her body was on fire, and her heart thundered in her chest almost painfully. Her fingers slipped around his arms, clinging, clawing. Whatever reservations she’d had, she couldn’t seem to remember them anymore as he held her like he wanted nothing more than to never let go.

“I want you,” she said, tightening her grip on him. “All of you.”

He grinned, and Marinette’s heart skipped a beat at the sight. Never had she been on the receiving end of such raw, lascivious desire. She had never quite thought Adrien to be the type, but if he kept looking at her like that, she would come undone.

“Then I want you to remember,” he said as he took her earlobe between his teeth and bit down. Marinette bit her lip to stifle a whimper. “Remember that you asked for this.”

Marinette didn’t have a chance to respond to that when he suddenly kissed her hard. She tasted chocolate and wine on his lips, and she parted for him. He deepened the kiss, ravenous, and she dragged her fingers to his hair and gripped him—hard. There was nothing quite so satisfying as
feeling him writhe in her arms, and when they parted briefly, she saw the promise in his heated gaze, almost threatening.

Something passed between them in those few seconds, a silent understanding that made her toes curl. They were crossing a line, and there was no turning back now.

“Well?” Marinette said, surprised at her own boldness. “I’m waiting.”

His grip on her thigh tightened dangerously, and Marinette gasped when he pressed another kiss to her mouth. His knee between her thighs ground her deeper beneath him, and she thrashed, too hot.

She must have looked a sight with her skirt riding dangerously high, her fingers entwined in his hair, and her back arched and blooming beneath him. She was almost disappointed when he moved from ravishing her lips to her collarbone, until she felt his tongue on her bare skin. If she had been of sounder mind at the time, Marinette may have congratulated herself on her excellent fashion sense in regards to plunging necklines. As it was, she could only moan as he tasted her. His thumb ghosted her nipple and she sucked on her lip, but when he pinched her through her dress, she saw stars.

“D-Do that again,” she said.

Adrien smiled against her, but when he touched her again, he used his teeth. Marinette gasped and pulled him closer. They were still fully clothed, and yet she had never felt more desirable and wanton than she did now.

“I was right,” he said. “Red is your color.”

Marinette sat up and pressed a swift, needy kiss to him while she made short work of his tie. She was undoing the third button on his dress shirt when he pinched her nipple again, and she lost her concentration. At this rate, she would collapse before she had a chance to really enjoy him, and that would not do.

Emboldened by his unexpected but entirely welcome audacity, she reached for his pants and squeezed him back. Adrien hissed into their kiss, but she caught his lip in her teeth and returned his bite two-fold.

“Fuck,” he said before pushing her back down for a crushing kiss.

Marinette continued to tease him through his pants, but their clothes were becoming a hindrance. She removed his belt and tossed it on the floor. Before she could do anything about his pants, however, he took her by the thighs and pulled her flush against him. They locked gazes for a split second, just long enough for her to realize what he was doing, but not long enough to stop him.

Adrien rocked his hips roughly, and Marinette was too slow to stifle a sharp cry at the feel of his cock pressed hard against her. Arms shaking, it was all she could do to hold on to his shoulders as he rutted against her once more and pulled her thighs around his waist.

“Adri—ah!” she gasped.

He was going to make her lose her mind, and she hadn’t lost a single article of clothing yet. Madness, and yet feeling him so close and so clearly infatuated, she didn’t mind going a little mad. She kissed him again, thrilled at the rumble of his moan against her lips. She tightened her thighs around him.

When he pushed her away, though, she thought she’d done something wrong. He soon dispelled those thoughts when he looped his thumbs around her panties and slid them down her thighs.
Marinette moved to help him, and soon she was bare under her skirt and he was hovering over her again. Waiting.

Why was he waiting?

She was about to ask him to get on with it, when he held out two fingers and waved them in front of her face, a silent question. Except he wasn’t asking, and the look in his eyes was a challenge that electrified her to the core. There was something so lewd, even animalistic in that look, and the help he wasn’t merely asking for.

Silently, Marinette took his wrist in her hand and drew his two fingers into her mouth. Her eyes never left his, and she was duly rewarded for her acquiescence when his lips parted and he sucked in a sharp breath.

Tantalized, she ran her tongue along the length of his fingers, wetting them thoroughly. In this unspoken game they were playing, she had suddenly gained the upper hand. For a few delicious seconds, she watched as Adrien Agreste melted in her mouth.

The moment was over too soon, and though she wondered if she would get the chance to taste more of him tonight, the temptation was all but forgotten when he drew his slick fingers between her thighs without warning. It was Marinette’s turn to melt, and melt she did as he caressed her.

He passed his finger over her clit, and she thrashed her head. It was suddenly very hard to breathe in here, and she had the urge to bite down on something. Adrien would have to do. She reached for him and dragged him into a messy kiss, only half conscious of her fumbling hands as he pressured her again. She whimpered against him, shaking as he pleasured her senseless.

The playful rumble of his laughter may have embarrassed her if she was more coherent, but as it was, she couldn’t care less as long as he kept doing that, right there, fuck—

“What’s wrong?” he said, voice thick with lust beneath the laughter. “Too much?”

“No, don’t—ah! Don’t s-stop,” Marinette said.

But he did stop, and before she could properly protest, he slipped a finger inside her to the knuckle. Marinette hissed and pushed her hips up to meet him. He obliged and slipped a second finger in.

“Stop?” he said, feigning innocence. “Are you sure?”

“F-Fuck,” she swore, digging her fingers into his shoulders. She hooked her ankle around the back of his knee for leverage. “Don’t you dare.”

“Ask me nicely.” He thrust his fingers deeper, and she gasped.

In the soft firelight, he was swathed in shadows above her as he watched her. No, he wasn’t just watching her, he was feasting on her, on the mess he’d made of her.

“Please,” she said, “don’t s-stop—mm!”

The loss of him was a tragedy indeed, especially as she felt the heated pressure he’d built up begin to wane rapidly. Frustrated, she sat up on her elbows, but the sound of a zipper gave her pause. Adrien had pulled his pants down enough to get serious, and he used his weight to push her flat on her back once more. Marinette’s stomach knotted at the sight of him, bared and wanting her as much as she wanted him. She reached for him and grinned at the feel of his hardness under her fingers.
Adrien shuddered and bit back a groan—she’d caught him by surprise.

“Playing dirty,” he said, trying very hard to keep his composure and failing.

She tightened her grip on him and pumped her hand, thrilled at the sight of him so close to the edge at her mercy.

“You bring it out of me,” she said, biting down on his earlobe just as he’d done to her before.

That set something off in him, because he grabbed both her wrists and pinned her down without warning. He leaned down and breathed deeply against her neck, and Marinette remembered how he’d tasted her skin, the valley between her breasts, what little was exposed. That thought went straight to her core, inflaming a wave of pleasure that racked her entire body.

He laughed softly against her. “I’m going to enjoy fucking you senseless.”

Marinette whined in anticipation, and she didn’t have long to wait. He still had her wrists pinned over her head when he slid inside her, and she writhed.

“Oh my god—”

A rough thrust silenced her, and Marinette was helpless but to meet him at the hips as he took her again and again. Pinned down, she couldn’t reach him to touch him or kiss him, and she struggled. Through the haze of blinding pleasure, he caught her watching him. There was an intensity in his gaze that she did not quite understand, like he wasn’t really there with her in the moment. She shivered as he watched her, exposed and not necessarily in a good way.

Marinette hooked her ankles around his waist and pulled him down. He lost his balance momentarily, and it was all she needed to get free and throw her arms around him. She kissed him desperately, smearing her lipstick on his lips as he kissed her back.

“Adrien,” she gasped between thrusts as she fought to hold on to control just a little longer. “Stay with me.”

Her voice awakened something in him, and suddenly he was holding her in a crushing embrace, his face buried in her neck as he shuddered, and they found a rhythm together.

She kissed his mouth, his cheek, his temple, his neck, anywhere she could reach, and gripped his hair for something to hold on to. He moaned his approval and clung to her like she might disappear. Marinette closed her eyes and smiled. What had started out as power-driven fucking had become something much more intimate, and she desperately wanted more.

“Stay with me,” she said again.

Adrien pulled away enough to look her in the eyes. There was such a yearning there that it took her breath away, and she couldn’t help but kiss him again.

His thrusts became more insistent as he came closer, and he pulled away again long enough to slip a hand in between them. Marinette gasped when she felt him caress her clit and release wave after wave of earth-shattering pleasure down to her finger tips. She fell back, unable to hold herself up any longer, but he caught her and fell with her.

Her orgasm ripped through her with seemingly no end in sight. Tears gathered in her eyes, unbidden, and she cried out as the final wave came crashing down on her. Adrien cut her off with a bruising kiss, tongue and teeth, and he finished soon after.
Breathless and floating on her post-coital high, Marinette took him in her arms and kissed his forehead. They stayed that way for a couple minutes, catching their breath and simply existing together.

Marinette lay there running her fingers through Adrien’s hair, spent and wiping the few stray tears that had escaped. It had been a long time since she’d had such an intense experience. Maybe her unresolved sexual tension really was getting to her. Or maybe it was something else. The way he’d looked at her just before the end, that earnest longing…

*I could love him.*

The realization hit her like a punch to the gut, and she was short of breath all over again. Where that hell had that come from? It was just sex, not some magical, soul-rending spell. And yet, as she cradled him to her chest, she couldn’t imagine going back to before, to pining alone, to walking on eggshells, to worrying about what a fool she could be around him. She wasn’t fourteen anymore, and she wasn’t afraid to admit her true feelings to herself.

She sniffled and wiped her eyes, careful not to smear her makeup. Adrien sat up, and they untangled themselves, limbs limp and heads fuzzy with afterglow.

“Marinette?” he said in a voice that sounded tentative, even diffident as he peered up at her.

She smiled for him. “Hey, I think I should go clean up really quick. Where’s the nearest bathroom?”

He directed her to a powder room, where she cleaned herself up and gathered her wits. She leaned on the pedestal sink and studied her reflection.

“I could love him,” she said aloud, testing it out.

It felt strange to say it. She’d professed her undying love for him more times than she could count as a teenager, standing in front of the bathroom mirror in her room, dreamy-eyed and hopeful. Now, though, there was weight to her words, a gravity that hung heavy on her shoulders. It was real now, attainable, possible.

*I’m falling for him all over again.*

She smiled to herself, but it was tentative and a little afraid. These feelings were both old and new, and they had taken her completely by surprise much like Adrien himself had when he kissed her hand and removed his mask at the Trefoil Gala months ago. So much had changed in the last few months, between Adrien coming back in to her life and the horrific coral murders starting. Even Chat Noir had shown up again after fourteen years apart.

Chat Noir, who was going through a strange and difficult time right now, lashing out and pushing her away.

Chat Noir, who wore a mask and kissed her hand.

Chat Noir…

Marinette stared at her reflection and slowly began to smile nervously. “What a silly thought,” she said.

Chat Noir, who had disappeared around the same time as Adrien fourteen years ago, never to be
heard from again until now.

“Oh my god, get a grip, Marinut,” she said, forcing a laugh. “There’s no way.”

Chat Noir, who always called her his lady.

Chat Noir.

Marinette frowned at her reflection, suddenly angry. This was ridiculous. Was acknowledging her feelings for Adrien really making her so insecure about the other important man in her life? How could she be so self-important? Not everything revolved around her life and her issues. Chat Noir was her partner, albeit somewhat wayward at the moment, and Adrien was her boyfriend. They were two different people, completely dissimilar in every way.

Except the mood swings.

Except the timing.

He called me his lady.

“No,” Marinette said. “Shut up, brain. We are not having this conversation.”

Resolved, she returned to the living room and found Adrien on the couch, dressed and composed once again, taking a drink of his wine.

“Hey,” she said, smiling and sinking down next to him.

“Feeling better?” he asked.

“Much, thank you.”

He smirked. “I aim to please.”

“Consider me extremely pleased.”

She leaned in and kissed him, soft and languid. He was looking at her with an unreadable expression when she pulled away, gauging. But after a moment he smirked and draped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her flush against him.

“Tell me,” he said, “have you been dreaming about that as long as I have?”

Marinette laughed. “Aren’t we full of ourselves?”

“Fourteen years is a long time coming.”

Marinette side-eyed him. “Flattering, but I’m perfectly aware that you hardly knew I existed fourteen years ago.”

“You’d be surprised,” he said. “You left quite the impression.”

Marinette watched his profile, torn between wanting to kiss him again and wondering about what he’d said. It was almost as if he was keeping something from her, something just beneath the surface. In fact, it seemed to her that he’d been playing this game all evening, a game to which she did not know the rules and he had no intention of telling her. Before, Adrien had been fun and straightforward, flirty but sincere in his affections to a fault. Tonight, he’d shown her a different side of him, something more subtle, more primal, more…
His arm was around her shoulders, and his fingers had found a few stray wisps of her hair at her neck. They traced along her jaw, just beneath her ear.

“What kind of impression did I leave?” she asked.

He glanced at her askance. “One I’ve never forgotten.”

Marinette laughed it off, or tried to. “You’re being weirdly cryptic. Just tell me.”

Adrien shifted slowly, every move protracted and carefully considered like a wild animal coming upon unsuspecting prey. There was something animalistic about him tonight, now that she considered it. And not just the sex, but before, too. His hand on her throat, at the same time sensual and threatening. She swallowed.

“Am I?” he said. “But I thought you liked secrets.”

“Secrets? What’re you… T**alking about?** she wanted to say, but his fingers on her neck silenced her. As before, his touch was light and caressing, but she could feel her pulse when his fingers pressed against her carotid artery. She didn’t know why, but she was starting to feel uncomfortably vulnerable.

“Ladybug,” he said, “seemed to think I have a secret.”

“What?” Marinette said, but inside her heart was pounding.

“She interrogated me after my father’s death. I guess my involvement was suspicious.”

Marinette had no idea where he was going with this all of a sudden, but she felt a desperate need to put him at ease and put an end to this topic of conversation. “I’m sure she was just doing her job, covering all her bases, you know.”

Adrien shifted and faced her fully, and Marinette felt the inexplicable urge to pull back at the look in his eyes. She got a sudden chill.

“You have so much faith in her.”

The way he said it, Marinette got the impression that it wasn’t a good thing.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say,” she said.

“Yes, you are.”

Marinette just stared at him. His fingers at her neck applied a little pressure.

*What’s happening?*

She almost didn’t want to know, didn’t want to finish that thought. Because if she did, something told her that everything, this night, the last few months, it would all crumble to ash between her fingers.

“I think you’ve known for a long time, really,” Adrien said.

Marinette wasn’t sure when she’d stopped breathing. She could no longer feel the warmth of the fireplace, or hear its crackling. She couldn’t feel Adrien touching her, except for the chills his caresses sent trilling down her spine.
The mood swings.

The drunkenness.

His nonchalance about his own trauma.

He called me his lady.

His fingers had found her earlobe, and they were playing with her Miraculous Earring. Marinette suddenly felt a panic attack coming on. Her breathing became labored, and her hands began to shake.

“What’s wrong, Marinette?” Adrien said, leaning in. “Cat got your tongue?”

Marinette abruptly shot out of her seat. She looked down at him still on the sofa, those green eyes dark like they never were, and he slowly began to smile.

She was going to be sick.

“It’s late,” she said. “I should really be going.”

“So soon?” he said.

Marinette was already headed for the foyer, however, and retrieved her coat from the chair he’d laid it over, along with her purse. “Big day tomorrow. Thanks for dinner, I had a great time.”

He followed her.

“If you say so,” he said, walking slowly, hands in his pockets, a sly smile on his handsome face.

Marinette caught a glimpse of him and wished she hadn’t.

I’m such a fool.

Dread pooled in the pit of her belly, and she thought she really was going to be sick. She was already calling a ride share on her phone as she headed for the door.

“Don’t I get a goodnight kiss?” he asked as she bundled her scarf around her neck.

Marinette froze. It took immense effort to force herself to smile back at him. “O-Of course. Thank you for a lovely evening. I’m sorry I can’t stay.”

He approached, and Marinette was painfully aware of their size difference. He seemed to loom over her like a castle gargoyle, watchful and silently snarling.

“Goodnight, Adrien,” she said, leaning in to press a kiss to his cheek.

He moved his face and caught her in a real kiss to her surprise, and snaked an arm around her waist.

“Goodnight, Marinette. I’ll see you again soon.”

“Yeah.” She was already pulling away and heading out the door. Her ride share had just pulled up.

Marinette all but ran to the car waiting for her, and it wasn’t until she was safely inside that she chanced a look back. Adrien was standing in the doorway watching her as the driver pulled out. She shrank into her coat and scarf, shaking like a leaf.
And then, she began to weep silently.

She texted Alya:

[Marinette: Date’s over.]
[Marinette: I need to see you. Please can you come over?]

Alya responded almost immediately, and Marinette bit back a sob.

[Alya: Are you okay?]

She typed ‘no’, but then stared at her phone for a while. Slowly, she deleted it and typed a new message.

[Marinette: I don't know.]
[Marina: Leaving now. Sit tight girl.]

Marinette was so wound up that she was sure she held her breath the entire car ride back to her apartment. The whole way all she could think was one stark and horrifying thought, unable to contradict it the longer she held on to it.

*Adrien…is probably Chat Noir.*

But it was more than that. Chat Noir was her partner, and she loved him. So why was she so afraid? Why had the look in his eyes tonight set her so on edge?

When she arrived home, she shed her coat and dumped her purse at the entrance, and she headed straight for the bathroom to puke. Up came her dinner and a few stray bile tears. Shaking, Marinette braced herself on the sink as she ran the water and tried to get back the control she’d left behind at Agreste Mansion. She looked in the mirror at her haggard reflection and felt weak in the knees.

Because if Adrien was Chat Noir now, then he’d been Chat Noir the entire time.

And that meant he wasn’t just Chat Noir, but something else.

*I never purified that akuma.*

Marinette remembered Tikki, whom she’d left behind to enjoy a night to herself while Marinette had her date with Adrien. She had to talk to her right away. But just as she left the first floor bathroom, the doorbell rang. Marinette was instantly flooded with warm relief, because Alya had come straight here like she’d promised she would. Fight or no fight, it was an unspoken rule that Marinette and Alya were always there for each other when things were truly and royally fucked. Adjusting her dress and wiping her tears away, Marinette went to answer the door.

“Hello, my lady.”

Adrien stood in the doorway, hair windswept and cheeks red from the cold like he’d run here in record time, impossible for a mere human. Without waiting for her invitation, he stepped inside, forcing Marinette to back up. His eyes never left hers.

“A-Adrien,” Marinette began.

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her to him. It was then that Marinette realized just how vulnerable she was as a normal human, two-thirds of his weight and half his physical strength.
“You left before we could finish our conversation,” he said, tightening his grip. “That was very rude of you.”

Tikki was upstairs, likely sleeping, and Adrien had her by the wrist. Marinette began to tremble, well and truly afraid for the first time in fourteen years, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

“Please don’t do this,” she said.

He gave her a withering look. “It’s already done.”

He backed her up against a wall and put his hand around her throat, just like before. But this time, he didn’t go easy. Marinette gasped and yanked at his wrist, but to no avail. Adrien watched her with that same dark gaze from before, the one she’d mistaken for desire and dominance. But she was wrong.

There was only hatred there, simmering and screaming, and all for her.

Chapter End Notes

Shoutout to all the amazing readers who have been kind enough to leave kudos, and especially to those who have taken the time to comment. You guys are my inspiration to keep the updates coming reasonably often! Thank you so, so much for your dedication and enthusiasm, it really means the world to me.

Next time: Shit gets real, part deus.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

We all fall down.

Chapter Notes

Over 200 kudos! Thank you guys so, so, SO MUCH! I never thought I'd hit a milestone like that, and it's really humbling. Please enjoy this super fast update as my way of saying thank you. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What brings you to my humble corner of the city?” Fu asked Chloe once they’d sat down with hot tea and cookies.

Wayzz had managed to remain out of his shell for now, though he sat opposite Pollen while she feasted on cookies, perhaps thinking he might escape her notice. When she looked over at him, he immediately averted his gaze. Pollen giggled.

Chloe was grateful for the tea after freezing her ass off outside texting Marinette (seriously, what was with Chloe these days? Wasting time texting? Friends took up so much time, and it was going to take some getting used to.). She warmed her hands on her tea cup and snuggled into her scarf.

“I came to ask about Mayura,” she said. “I haven’t been able to get in contact with her.”

From her purse, Chloe produced the enchanted peacock feather Mayura had given her. Fu accepted it, donned a pair of thick spectacles, and examined it carefully.

“Hm, yes, this is an Eye, no doubt about it,” he said.

Wayzz was also curious and floated over. He tapped a club foot on it, but nothing happened.

“I’m not surprised you haven’t been able to reach her,” Wayzz said. “Mayura’s Eyes only function when she is wearing her Miraculous glamor.”

“So she’s reverted right now? What a useless power,” Chloe griped. “I mean, wouldn’t it make more sense if they always worked? Like, in case something happened to her and she couldn’t transform?”

More and more, Chloe was beginning to wonder if the so-called Guardian actually had any contingency plans for when shit went wrong. So far, she was not impressed.

Fu seemed to consider that. “When was the last time you heard from Mayura? I understand that she continues to train with you, yes?”

Chloe had been so wrapped up in the latest attacks and her various responsibilities at work and to Luka that she hadn’t much noticed Mayura’s absence from their morning training ritual. “Maybe a
week ago?"

“I see.”

“Care to elaborate?”

Fu sipped his tea. “Mayura has operated independently for many years. She hardly ever checks in with me. Her absence now is not out of character.”

“But she took on Pride by herself, didn’t she?” Pollen said after swallowing a mouthful of cookie.

Chloe immediately jumped on that. “You don’t think—”

“She suffered injury, but she should have recovered by now.” Fu interjected. “Unfortunately, I also do not have a way to contact her other than through her Eyes. It’s safer that way.”

Chloe wasn’t sure if it really was anymore. “Well look, Master Fu, I’m not trying to tell you how to do your job, but maybe in the future you might consider getting Mayura’s phone number or something. I really need to talk to her.”

If Fu was offended, he did not show it. He merely leaned across the table and looked serious, but calm. “What’s happened?”

Chloe told him about the last two fights against the coralized victims and the akumas, and how Chat Noir’s behavior was becoming increasingly problematic, even depraved.

“I know what you’re going to say,” she said, warming her hands around her tea. “Chat’s a part of the team, I should trust his intentions, blah blah. I know, and I’m trying, okay? I know I don’t have the history he has with Ladybug, but I’m starting to wonder if that same history is clouding her judgment. He’s been nothing but hostile to me, he showed up drunk to the last fight, and he only didn’t Cataclysm Alya to death by sheer dumb luck. I mean, am I really being unreasonable here?”

“Who is Alya?” Fu asked.

“Alya Césaire, Marinette’s best friend. You know, the one who runs the Ladyblog.” Chloe grimaced as she remembered that dark day. “It was either jump off a building and fall to her death, or get Cataclysm’d. Ladybug even awakened a new power to save her at the last minute. Honestly… I didn’t think she’d make in time.”

She was staring at her tea, unable to banish the memory of seeing Alya and Ladybug plummeting to their certain deaths. For a second, she had feared the worst. And it was all Chat’s fault. He just didn’t seem to care at all.

“That’s… very interesting,” Fu said.

Chloe looked up at him, incredulous. “It’s interesting? Is that seriously all you have to say?”

“Chloe, please,” Wayzz said placatingly.

Chloe could not help her growing irritation. Why did it feel like she was the only person on this stupid team who actually recognized the danger closing in on them? “You’re supposed to be wise, right? Not to be a critic, but sitting here doing nothing doesn’t seem like the wisest decision to me.”

“I agree,” said Pollen. “We should be taking action! Take the fight to the enemy!”

“Is that what you think?” Fu asked Chloe. “Is Chat Noir your enemy?”
“I didn’t mean it like that. He’s just… I don’t know, he’s just being kind of a sociopath these days. That’s why Marinette and I want to talk to Mayura. Chat’s obviously not super reliable right now, but these attacks are just going to keep coming. We need help.”

Fu appeared to be deep in thought, and Wayzz looked like he wanted to say something but was too afraid to say it out loud.

Chloe crossed her arms, uncomfortable. Maybe she’d been too harsh? She did have a tendency to come on a little strong. She forced herself to take a deep breath, thinking it was probably not a good idea to offend a Guardian over two hundred years old.

“What I’m trying to say,” Chloe said, doing her best to keep her voice even and professional, “is that Pride’s building an army. Maybe it’s not a bad idea to build one ourselves.”

“Oh, I like that,” Pollen said. “Wayzz, it’ll be just like old times!”

Wayzz looked a little more green than he usually did. “Well, that’s, ah…”

“I’m afraid that would be a bit too much to ask, Pollen,” Fu said. “These old bones are not what they once were. I wouldn’t be much use on a battlefield these days.”

Pollen pouted, but Chloe wasn’t so easily convinced. “Well, there’s got to be something you can do. At the very least, you could help me try to find Mayura.”

Fu looked very old all of a sudden, world-weary and grim. “Chloe, I appreciate you telling me all this. Please understand that I take your concerns very seriously. The fact that Pride spoke to you directly is worrisome, to say the least. I’ll need to think on this.”

“Well, please think as fast as you can. I have a really bad feeling about this, and I’m right about a lot of things.”

Fu seemed hardly to hear her as he hunched over, deep in thought. Wayzz looked even more nervous than usual, and Chloe looked between the two of them.

“Okay, well… I guess that’s all I wanted to say,” she said.

“Oh? Oh, yes, of course,” Fu said. “Forgive me, I’m a bit under the weather today. Actually, there is something I’d like to say to you, if you’re not in any rush to leave.”

“Oh. Um, sure. I don’t have anywhere to be.”

Fu was a kindly old man, but Chloe did not really know him like Marinette did. Mayura had given her the Bee Miraculous and trained her. Mayura had taught her about this world, what they were up against, the stakes, and her role in it all. Fu may have been the Guardian, but Chloe did not feel very guarded by him.

“I just wanted to say that I had my reservations about awakening Pollen. Perhaps my relationship with Wayzz is partly to blame, and my cautious nature. But I believe I’m starting to see what Mayura clearly sees in you.”

“You mean perfection?” Pollen said, smirking.

Fu smiled politely, but didn’t otherwise acknowledge the wise crack.

“Courage is tricky because it is a force of extremes, unlike the other Miraculous in my set. At worst,
it manifests as recklessness. I’ve seen previous Queen Bees lose more than their lives trying to shoulder too much too quickly.”

Pollen’s antennae fell, and she scooted close to Chloe’s hand self-consciously.

“So what is this, a warning? You think I’m being reckless doubting Chat Noir?” Chloe asked, unable to help the defensive tone in her voice.

“I privately questioned your motives the last time we spoke about Chat Noir, I won’t lie to you. But...well. Wisdom and Courage have often had difficulty seeing eye to eye, and it has cost me dearly in times past. My flaw is inertia, and the thing about flaws is that we can only overcome them on our own terms. But first, we must accept that we have them.”

“Master,” Wayzz said, and Chloe could not help but think that he looked a bit sad in that moment.

“I’ve misjudged Mayura’s decisions in the past, and in so doing, I’ve alienated her in a way I know I’ll never be able to rectify. I do not want to make the same mistake with you.”

Chloe was at a loss for words. She did not expect to feel so... Well, anything at all from him. Maybe she had misjudged him a little bit, too.

“Pollen, you’ve chosen very well, I see that now,” Fu said to Pollen, smiling. “I have the utmost faith in you both.” To Chloe he said, “Thank you for trusting me with your concerns. I promise you I will look in to them right away. And should I hear from Mayura, I will ask if she has a cell phone.”

Chloe smiled a little. “Thanks, Master Fu.”

He showed her to the door once they’d finished their tea, and Chloe made sure Pollen was wrapped up discreetly in her scarf.

“I will be in touch very soon,” Fu said.

Marinette gasped for breath, but Adrien’s grip on her throat was like iron. Any attempt to kick or shove him was summarily quashed when he pressed his larger body against hers and the wall behind her, pinning her. So close, she could see the freckles on his nose and feel his heartbeat.

He smelled like her, of their lovemaking, and she was going to be sick all over again. Tears welled in her eyes.

“A-Adrien,” she said.

He reached for her Miraculous Earring with his free hand and rubbed its smooth, black surface. “Adrien’s not here right now, love.”

Marinette tugged at his wrist, but all her strength had fled her. She had never felt so helpless in all her life, or more pathetic.

I should have known.

There were so many warning signs, and she’d ignored them all, chalked them up to personal issues and human insecurities. But that was what had landed them here all those years ago, when Chat Noir had sought out Marinette and confessed his pain to her. Pain that Hawk Moth fed on like a fucking leech. Fourteen years, and it had only festered in darkness, spreading, lying in wait.
“Right now you’re probably thinking, am I going to die?” Adrien said.

Marinette struggled, but all she got for her efforts was a playful laugh. Like this was all a game to him.

“The honest answer is I don’t know,” he went on. “God, that’s so liberating, just being honest with you. So here’s the truth, I seem to be warring with myself here. Part of me wants to rip those little earrings out with my teeth and see what you really taste like.”

He gave her earring a sharp, painful tug, but didn’t rip it out. Marinette whimpered.

“But another part of me,” he said, touching his nose to hers, “wants to fuck you until you cry.” He pressed a kiss to her lips, and Marinette took the opportunity to bite him as hard as she could.

He squeezed her throat hard enough to make her see stars until she let go, but instead of unbridled fury, he gave her another laugh and licked his now bloody lip.

“My lady, are you trying to seduce me?”

“Adrien,” Marinette said, trying to ignore the taste of his blood on her lip. “T-This isn’t you.”

“You’re right, it’s better. Do you know how long I’ve waited to tell you everything? To just be free? I feel fucking amazing.”

Was he right? Was Adrien no longer the man she knew? How could this happen, and why? How could she have missed this so spectacularly? Hot tears fell down her cheeks and wetted his fingers.

Tikki, Marinette thought frantically. If I can just alert Tikki—

“Help!” she shouted as loudly as she could, but she sounded more like a mouse with smoker’s lung than a woman in need.

“Seriously? Even if your kwami were right here, we both know you wouldn’t last the time it takes to transform.” He showed her his left hand, and the black-banded ring there. “I could rip you apart in seconds.”

“T-Then do it,” she said. “If you think you c-can.”

Adrien narrowed his eyes. “Careful.”

Marinette forced herself to smile. She eked out a raspy laugh. “Coward.”

Come on, Tikki, seriously!

She had to have heard their struggle by now, surely. But the seconds ticked by, and there was no sign of the little red kwami.

“Don’t test me,” Adrien said. “I—”

He suddenly jerked erratically, and his eyes rolled back in his head. Convulsing, he released her and fell back, sputtering, on the floor. Marinette sucked in a ragged breath and clasped her hands around her aching throat protectively. There were tears in her eyes, blurring her vision, and her knees were weak with fear of her own mortality. She blinked, half slumping against the wall, and looked up at the face of her savior.

Alya stood over Adrien’s shaking body, a deployed Taser in her hand, and her eyes as wide as
sauces. She and Marinette stared at each other for a few seconds, both shocked beyond words.

“Alya,” Marinette said, her voice cracking with emotion and pain where Adrien had crushed her windpipe.

She tried to move, but her knees gave out. Alya swooped and caught her before she could fall on top of the still-twitching Adrien.

“What the fuck,” Alya hissed, softly like she didn’t want them to be overheard. “Marinette, what the actual fuck??!”

Marinette did not know Alya even owned a Taser, though admittedly if anyone did, it would be Alya. The charge on it had fizzled out, and Adrien was left groaning on the floor. Something told Marinette he wouldn’t be down for long given his Miraculous powers.

Adrien is Chat Noir.

Unbidden, a memory from long ago resurfaced and hit her with the force of a tidal wave. A particularly sweltering summer night, a rooftop picnic for two, and Chat Noir collapsed on the ground like Adrien was now, except he wasn’t Chat Noir anymore, and he changed right before her eyes. That terrible thought kicked off Marinette’s adrenaline reserves and got her standing on her own two feet. She needed to move fast.

Alya was still talking, not privy to Marinette’s internal struggle.

“I-I can’t believe—I mean, it’s Adrien, but I saw him strangling you, and I just—shit, shit,” Alya babbled. She took Marinette’s face in her hands. “Oh my god, you’re bleeding!”

Marinette wiped her lip, and her hand came away bloody—Adrien’s blood. “I’m okay, I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine, obviously! What the hell’s going on? It’s Adrien, for shit’s sake!”

Adrien coughed and began to move a little. He muttered something under his breath, unintelligible, but Marinette’s fear spiked and she grabbed Alya’s hand in hers. She dragged her to the rickety, spiral stairs to the loft bedroom above, and Alya stumbled after her.

“Marinette, seriously—”

“I know this is insane, but I need you to trust me right now,” Marinette said. “Please, he’s going to wake up, and I need to deal with him.”

“Deal with— Are you out of your mind?! We have to call the police!” Alya fished her phone out of her jacket pocket.

They burst into Marinette’s loft bedroom, and Marinette instantly began throwing pillows off her bed in a mad search for Tikki. “No, Alya, listen to me. I need you to call Chloe and get her here right now. Tell her it’s an emergency.”

“Chloe? Why the hell would that help?”

“Please, I don’t have time to—Tikki!”

Tikki suddenly phased out from the throw pillows and yawned. “Marinette? What’s going on?”

Alya stared at Tikki in understandable shock and confusion. Tikki stared back, wide-eyed and curling in on herself.
“A-Alya?!” Tikki squeaked. “Marinette, what’s—”

“No time, Tikki,” Marinette said. She reached for the little kwami, but hesitated a split second and looked back at Alya, who was still staring dumbfounded at them both. “Alya, I’m…” she said, her voice hitching with emotion. “I’m so sorry. Tikki, transform me!”

A burst of blinding, crimson light inundated the room, and Alya shielded her eyes from the glare. In a matter of seconds, Ladybug emerged from the light, suited up and infinitely grateful for Tikki’s magic dulling the crushing pain in her throat. She met Alya’s eyes, and her broken heart cracked a little bit more. She had thought about what it might be like to share her secret with Alya one day, imagining the shock and awe on Alya’s face, and always the genuine delight at finding out that the hero she’d idolized growing up was always there, looking out for her.

But beneath the expected surprise was a kind of pain so raw that Ladybug momentarily lost her composure.

“You,” Alya said, her voice cracking. “All this time…”

“Please, there’s no time—”

Ladybug stilled at the sound of shuffling downstairs. It sounded like something was moving, something Adrien-sized and undoubtedly out for blood.

“Shit,” Ladybug swore. “Alya, listen to me. Call Chloe, now. I need her here.”


“Marinette!” Adrien said from downstairs. He coughed violently, and it sounded like he was struggling to get up.

Ladybug grabbed Alya’s arm and shook her lightly. “Because Chloe’s the only person who can help me save him now.”

“I—” Alya began.

“I can hear you,” Adrien said. He spit blood on the floor from his split lip and looked to the loft entry. “Is that Alya with you?”

True fear gripped Ladybug, and she went to the railing. Below, Adrien was on his feet looking disheveled with his hair a staticky mess and blood on his white dress shirt. And when he looked up at her, it was through a mismatched stare: one eye was that same strange, darkened green, but the other was a shade of magenta that cut her like a knife.

Alya was at her side in an instant and gasped at the sight of him. “What the— Adrien, your eye!”

He blinked and touched a hand to his eye. “Oops. Damn contacts.” He removed the other one, and soon Marinette was staring down a chillingly familiar pair of baleful, magenta eyes. “Better?” he said, and he had the nerve to grin as blood dribbled down his chin.

Ladybug reached for her yo-yo.

“Bugaboo, you started without me,” Adrien said, twisting the ring on his finger. “Cheater.”

“And now I’m finishing it!” Ladybug leaped onto the cast-iron railing and launched her yo-yo at him.
At such close proximity, she was guaranteed to make her mark and snag him. If she could just restrain him before he transformed, she could put a stop to this without Queen Bee’s help at all.

Adrien threw up his arm, and her yo-yo caught on it.

*Impossible*, Ladybug thought. *His human reflexes would never be so quick against my super powers—*

His coy laughter filled the room. “Oh Ladybug, don’t you get it yet? I’m free.”

He fisted his hand, the one with the banded ring on it—*the Black Cat Miraculous*, Ladybug knew instinctively—and without so much as a word, it burst with glaring, magenta light. Before her eyes, Adrien melted away and something else emerged. White leather, hungry eyes, and a smirk that haunted her nightmares.

Alya gaped. “Adrien…is Chat Noir?”

Chat’s gaze slithered toward Alya, and his smile fell. “Not anymore.”

Without warning, he yanked on the yo-yo string entrapping his arm, and Ladybug went flying. She heard Alya scream, and she twisted in mid-air, desperate not to end up in Chat’s clutches a second time. The layer of armor on her back split in response to her desperation, and her wings unfolded to catch her. With a grunt of effort, Ladybug yanked back on her yo-yo and beat her wings as hard as she could. There was a split second in which she and Chat locked gazes, and his cold fury warped to gut-wrenching shock. He left the floor, pulled along with her, and went crashing into the wall. Ladybug hit the floor hard and tasted blood—hers this time.

She scrambled to her feet just as Chat slipped to one knee, plaster crumbling all around him. He clutched his staff over his knee and glared up at her. The yo-yo string still entangled his arm.

“Alya!” Ladybug shouted. “Remember what I told you!”

Chat pushed himself to his feet and glanced at his arm. Ladybug didn’t have much time, so she launched herself into the air with the help of her wings and punched through her window. Chat tried to pull back, but Ladybug pushed off the shattered sill with all her might, dragging him with her into the night.

Luka was exhausted. Double shifts at Firefly, followed by a Hardrock show at a wedding reception had left him utterly drained. It was close to midnight, and he was dragging his feet as he entered Le Grand Paris with a large bouquet of bright orange tiger lilies for Pollen—he had a bargain to maintain, after all. Chloe had promised to wait up for him and have a nice, relaxing bath to welcome him. The latter was probably more for her benefit, but Luka didn’t mind so long as he got to spend time with her. He’d been looking forward to tonight all day, though he wondered seriously if he would be able to stay awake to enjoy her fully. Passing out sounded pretty nice right about now.

He moved on autopilot past the front desk. Nicole, the receptionist most days, knew him well by now and waved politely as he passed. He waved back and headed for the elevator, stifling a yawn and adjusting the weight of his bass over his shoulder.

Just as he approached the elevator bank, he passed by the hotel bar and the two women leaving it.

“Luka! *Nande omae ga koko ni*?” Jessika said, smiling brightly.
It took Luka a moment to respond, he was that tired. “Aunt Jess? Ore no serifu da.”

She giggled girlishly and put a hand on his shoulder. “I was just having a girl’s night out! You remember Audrey, yes?”

Luka indeed remembered Audrey Bourgeois, who sauntered up to him with her arm looped through Jessika’s. “Audrey. It’s nice to see you again,” he said, stiffening.

Audrey, like Jessika, was dressed for a night out on the town, glamorous and flushed from their revelry. She looked him over, and her gaze lingered on the bouquet he carried.

“Luka,” she said. “I imagine you’re here to see my daughter.”

“That’s right.”

Audrey smiled with her mouth, but her eyes were hard and cold as she held his gaze.

Luka was not one to worry much about what other people thought about him. People were always going to pass their judgments and form opinions no matter what he said or did. He had learned long ago that it was a waste of time and energy to fight that, and eventually he’d stopped caring.

But Audrey wasn’t just some random person whose opinion didn’t matter; she was Chloe’s mother, and no matter how strained her relationship with her daughter was, she would always be a part of Chloe’s life in some sense. Which meant that she would be a part of Luka’s life for as long as he was with Chloe. He couldn’t just dismiss her or ignore her, no matter how much he might have liked to.

“Oh, and you brought her flowers! How romantic!” Jessika swooned. “I just adore sweeping romantic gestures.”

“I find them saccharine,” Audrey said. “As I recall, Chloe was never the type to enjoy receiving flowers, but then, I suppose much has changed while I’ve been abroad.”

Luka forced himself to smile. “Funny how that works.”

Audrey narrowed her eyes, but like the socially aware debutante she was, she made no other sign of her displeasure with him in public.

“Come now, Audrey, I remember you being a hopeless romantic when we were younger. What did Emilie used to call you? Madame Chérie?”

Audrey flushed slightly and fiddled with a loose lock of hair. “That was a long time ago. And I remember that you were always the flirtiest among us. You still are, darling.”

Jessika simply laughed. “Perhaps! But I never did manage to snag a man of my own. I was always pining away while you and Emilie blossomed.”

Audrey rolled her eyes, but she was doing her best not to smile. It was such a Chloe look that Luka momentarily forgot his dislike for this woman. “Please, have you met Andre? He’s a doll and I do adore him in his way, but he’s remained a bud all his life, the poor thing. You had the right idea staying single. Emilie would be the first to agree. See how she ran off the first opportunity she got? Hmpf! Such a waste, if you ask me.”

“Andre is such a doll, I agree,” Jessika said. “Ahh, the life of a single woman is exciting, and I’m never bored, it’s true. But I may soon be blossoming myself, you know.” She winked coquettishly.
Luka was not privy to the details of their conversation or whoever Emilie was, but this caught his attention. “Wait, are you seeing someone, Aunt Jess?”

Jessika blushed fantastically and fanned herself. “So forward! Don’t go running to Anarka and telling her everything, or she’ll make such a fuss.”

“Who is this mystery man?” Audrey said, more curious about Jessika’s love life than she was annoyed with Luka’s presence for the moment. “And why is this the first I’m hearing about him? Jessika, I thought we had no secrets between us.”

Jessika squeezed her arm playfully. “Not a secret, just a little surprise I’ve been holding on to. One day I’ll introduce you.”

“Well, it better be soon.”

“I’m working on it, don’t you worry.” Jessika winked.

“Well, that’s great, Aunt Jess. I’m happy for you,” Luka said. “Listen, I’m pretty beat, so I’m going to head up now. Do you need me to call you a cab or anything?”

Jessika immediately began to fawn over him. “Sweetling, you are such a gentleman. No, I’ll be fine on my own. You go on. Tell Chloe I long to see her again soon, all right?”

“Sure.”

Audrey cast him a last, slightly disappointed look, and then pulled Jessika away toward the lobby.

“I can’t believe you’ve met someone,” she said to Jessika. “And you didn’t tell me, you naughty minx!”

Luka stepped inside the elevator as he heard Jessika giggle conspiratorially. “I’m telling you now! We only started seeing each other recently, but I feel as though I’ve known him in my soul. Audrey, do you know the red thread of fate? We have an old tradition in Japan…”

The rest of their conversation faded as the elevator doors closed. Luka wondered how on earth someone as guileless as Jessika could ever be close with someone like Audrey and remain as sweet as she was.

Then again, Chloe had turned out quite well in his humble opinion, and she’d been raised by the woman. He shook his head.

The elevator opened up on Chloe’s floor, and he used the key she’d given him to let himself in. “Chloe? It’s me.”

“In the bathroom,” Chloe said, her voice muffled.

Luka had barely gotten his shoes off when Pollen suddenly phased through the wall and buzzed around him.

“Hot Luka!” she said in the most excited whisper she could manage. “I missed you!”

Luka grinned. No matter how many times he corrected her, she insisted on calling him ‘Hot Luka’. At this point, he wondered if it was simply a matter of principle. Either way, it was an argument he was clearly never going to win.

“I missed you too, Pollen,” he said quietly so as not to draw Chloe’s attention. “I brought you a
Pollen squealed in delight and face planted in the bouquet of tiger lilies. “They’re so soft! Mm, delicious!”

He laughed and headed for the kitchen to put them in water. “I’m glad you like them. How was your day?”

Pollen hastily began rattling off the events of the day like it was a timed competition. Luka got the vague gist of it, something about selfies, a Guardian, and a missing peacock, whatever that meant. Luka listened intently as she talked and promised he would come back and say goodnight later, when Chloe was asleep. Appeased, Pollen burrowed into her new flower bed and sighed contentedly, while Luka headed for the master bathroom.

Chloe had drawn a bubble bath, as anticipated, and she was soaking in it while enjoying a glass of wine with her hair up to keep it dry. A second, empty glass sat on the table next to the bath, along with the bottle. She leaned back against the head cushion and cleared her throat.

“You really know how to keep a girl waiting,” she said.

“Sorry, it was a shit-long day,” Luka said, stripping to join her in the tub. “Believe me, I wanted to be here sooner.”

“Tired?” she asked, scooting to make room for him.

“A little.”

She pulled him down by the hand and openly stared as he lowered himself into the bubbly water. “Then I’ll have to wake you up somehow.”

He grinned. “And here I thought you’d fallen for my sparkling personality.”

He settled in behind her and pulled her to his chest. She smelled like lavender and honey. Surrounded by warmth and her, he could have fallen asleep right there. She pressed a kiss to his chin.

“Nope, I’m just using you for sex. Although, you also have some bonus utility as a bath pillow.” She snuggled against him, and he wrapped his arms around her.

“I’m a man of many talents.” He pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

“Mm, a regular Jack of all trades.”

She sighed against him, and they stayed that way for several minutes, simply enjoying the soporific heat and each other. Luka felt himself slowly begin to relax.

“Hey, Luka?” she said after a while. “Would you actually be okay if we just stayed like this? I mean, not in the tub, obviously, but you know…”

He pulled her up higher on his lap and kissed her cheek. “Yeah, that’s more than okay.”

“I mean, I know I say a lot of shit, but you know, like… Like I’m not serious. About it being just about the sex.”

He laughed. “Is my queen releasing me from her service so soon?”
She shifted in his lap so she could look at him over her shoulder. “I’m being serious.” She averted her gaze. “I mean, you know I…”

“Hey, of course I know. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t believe you were serious.” He studied her face, concerned. “What brought this on? Something happen?”

She met his gaze. “No, just… I guess I just want to make sure you know I care. I want that to mean something, like that you care that I care, and it’s not annoying to you. I don’t know, forget it. It’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid. Chloe, hey.” He took her chin in hand and kissed her softly. “I love that you care. That’s all I want, is for you to care.”

She put her hand on his shoulder and kissed him back. “Really?”

“Really.”

She bit her lip. “You’re such a hopeless romantic.”

“Guilty.” He smiled. “Is that okay?”

“It’s…” She considered. “It’s not what I usually go for.”

He remembered Audrey’s flippant comment about his flowers downstairs. “Does it bother you?”

“No,” she said readily. “No, I… Not from you. I like when you…”

“When I…?” He drew a hand up her back and touched their foreheads.

Chloe’s eyes fluttered shut, and she leaned into his touch. “When you’re… When you…”

“Romance you?” He massaged the back of her neck.

“Mm.”

“A queen deserves to be romanced.”

She opened her eyes and gazed up at him. “I love it when you call me that.”

“My queen?” He kneaded his fingers lower between her shoulder blades, working out the knots she’d built up. “I love calling you that.”

She laid her head on his shoulder and sighed dreamily. “What else?”

“Let’s see.” He draped her legs over his lap and rubbed his thumb against her thigh, gently. “I love telling you how beautiful you are.”

She snorted. “Brown-noser.”

He laughed. “Well, it’s true, and it’s entirely your fault.”

“Fair enough.”

“I love watching you work,” he went on. “Seeing you in your element, in charge and confident. Watching you earn your team’s respect and loyalty.”

“You make it sound so glamorous.”
“Passion is glamorous. You have passion for what you do, and I love that about you.”

She said nothing, and he took that as permission to continue.

“I love that you understand your flaws, and you don’t hide from them, even if it’s hard.”

She tensed a little, and he wrapped his arm around her waist for a better hold on her.

“I love that you admit when you’re wrong, and you apologize. I love that you care about being a good person for yourself, not because someone’s telling you to be.”

She was quiet and still, so still, as if to move might break whatever spell had settled over them.

“I love how you make me feel like I matter.”

Chloe lifted her head and looked at him. “Luka…”

He stared into her eyes, hypnotically blue, and could not for the life of him look away. “I love that you see me.”

There were tears in her eyes, but they only made her glisten all the more. He raised a hand to her cheek and wiped them away with his thumb.

“Chloe,” he said haltingly. “I…”

Brrrrrrriiiiing!

Luka and Chloe both jumped at the shrill sound of her cell phone ringing. They smacked their foreheads together, and Luka hissed in pain. Chloe pulled back and pressed a hand to her forehead, teeth gritted against the sting.

“Damnit,” she said. “My phone—”

“Here, I’ve got it,” Luka said, rubbing his head as he passed her the buzzing iPhone. The water had lost some of its bubbles, and he felt his skin begin to prickle with goosebumps where she’d left water prints on him. He tried to convince himself he wasn’t going to hunt down whoever had interrupted the tender moment, which was surely gone now.

Chloe answered her phone immediately. “Marinette, hey, is everything okay—” The voice on the other end cut her off, and Chloe frowned deeply. “Alya? It’s like 1 a.m., what the hell are you doing calling me from Marinette’s phone—”

Luka took a sip of Chloe’s wine. His heart was racing a little, damn nerves. He’d been so close…

“He did what?!” Chloe said.

Luka was suddenly very interested in Chloe’s conversation. He took one look at her and stilled at how pale she looked, like she’d seen a ghost.

“Chloe? Is something wrong?” he asked.

Her expression darkened. “Where are you?”

Alya spoke on the other end, but Luka couldn’t make it out.

“I’m on my way.” Chloe hung up the phone and got to her feet so quickly, the water sloshed over
the edge of the tub and she wobbled, almost losing her balance.

Luka was quick to stand with her and laid a steadying hand on her shoulder. “Chloe, what—”

“I have to leave. Right now,” she said, stepping out of the tub without a care at all for modesty. She grabbed her towel and all but ran to her bedroom to throw on some clothes.

Luka followed her example, and by the time he wandered into her room, she was dressed in thick leggings and wrestling her way into a sports bra. She grabbed the errant sweatshirt on her bed without slowing down on her way out the door—an old Jagged Stone sweatshirt Luka had left here on a previous visit. He didn’t have time to pull on any clothes himself, so he tied off the towel around his waist and jogged after her into the kitchen.

“Chloe, what’s going on?” he said a little more sternly. “Is Alya okay? Did something happen?”

“I can’t explain right now,” Chloe said, struggling with a pair of boots. “I just have to go.”

Luka’s mind immediately went to the worst case scenario, which involved some version of Alya being attacked by coralized victims. Why would she be calling Chloe, though? Did she know her secret, too? She hadn’t the last time Luka saw her just a few days ago at the last attack, but…

Chloe was hovering over the flowers in the kitchen and whispering too softly for him to make out, but he knew she was getting Pollen. Whatever was going on, he suspected he was not far off in his concerns. He hung back while she slipped Pollen into the baggy sweatshirt pocket. Chloe did not know that he knew her identity as Queen Bee, and now seemed like not a great time to drop that bomb on her.

When she was ready, she approached him and looked very uncomfortable. “Luka, I know this is going to sound really fucked, but I have to leave, and I need you to not ask me where I’m going or why.”

Because Alya was in trouble.

Because she needed Queen Bee’s help.

Because Luka was not supposed to know any of that.

“Oh, I said, immediately regretting it.

Because there was no way anyone with half a brain wouldn’t protest, wouldn’t ask, wouldn’t doubt even a little bit. Unless there was nothing to question. Unless they already knew.

But there was no choice, and no time. The look of utter incredulity on Chloe’s face hardened, cold with a suspicion all her own at his easy acquiescence.

“Go,” he said, hating the palpable tension growing between them, stifling. “I’ll be here.”

Every muscle in Chloe’s body told him she wanted to protest, to ask, to doubt as he should have. But she was out of time.

“Then I’ll see you back here later,” she said, more warning than parting words.

She bypassed him to leave, but he caught her by the wrist.

“Please be careful,” he said, unable to stop the small quaver in his voice.
She set her jaw, and so many unspoken words passed between them in that silent, strained moment. It was over all too soon, however, and she turned to leave.

But she did not head for the front door. Instead, she threw open the balcony sliding door and let in a blast of frigid, winter air. The curtains fluttered around her, and she stepped out into the darkness.

Luka hugged his bare arms and shivered, still wet from their truncated bath. A brilliant flash of golden light burst on the balcony all of a sudden, momentarily blinding, and he was moving before he realized it. The long, linen curtains fluttered in the freezing night breeze, and he batted them aside just in time to see—

In a blur of black and yellow, she tore into the night sky and disappeared.

Alya dropped the phone back into Marinette’s purse after Chloe hung up, her hands shaking badly. She had just explained something insane to Chloe, something no normal person would ever take seriously, and Chloe had immediately believed her and promised to get there right away. Like it was perfectly normal.

Like it didn’t surprise her that Marinette was Ladybug and currently fighting a deranged version of Chat Noir.

Like she’d known all along.

Joke’s on you, sucker.

“What the hell,” Alya said to herself, her head swimming as her gaze drifted to the shattered window where Marinette—where Ladybug had forcibly dragged Chat out into the night.

Marinette is Ladybug.

Tears stung her eyes, and her breathing came in shallow, panting gasps. Was she having a panic attack? She’d never had one of those before and couldn’t be sure, but she was sure as fuck panicking like she never had before.

Marinette was Ladybug, and Adrien was Chat Noir—or some version of him that had lost his mind and would have killed Marinette if Alya hadn’t—

Alya slumped against the wall as her body quaked with the shattering force of epiphany. All this time, years of a friendship, a bond as close as sisters, and she’d never known. She never knew when they were teenagers and Alya had found her calling in life by chasing after Ladybug, learning how to be a journalist, discovering her love of her future craft. She never knew when Ladybug disappeared, the symbol of Paris’s hope gone without a trace just a few months after her partner. She never knew when she was falling to her imminent death, and Ladybug was there, saving her, doing the impossible, torn asunder by emotions so raw and real at the thought of losing Alya.

Marinette never said a goddamned word.

Something heavy crashed into the side of the building, and the floor shook slightly underfoot. Alya pushed off the wall. Ladybug—Marinette was out there literally fighting for her life. That thought spurred Alya into action despite the gut-wrenching hurt of realizing her best friend had been lying to her face for years. Laughing at her ridiculous pining and idolizing. Alya ran out the door of Marinette’s apartment, down the stairs, and burst outside.
She was greeted by the sickening sight of Chat Noir—inexplicably clad in sinister white from head to toe—slamming Ladybug into a gnarled tree with his staff. Alya gasped at the sound of Ladybug hitting the trunk and her impact splitting it, like lightning striking. Unbelievably, she landed on all fours, wings abuzz, and with nothing but a grunt for her effort, pushed off the sleet-slicked ground and launched herself into the air.

“Chat Noir! I know you’re in there!” she shouted as she rushed him.

Chat was faster than her, however, and leaped from the rooftop he was on to avoid her punch. Her fist landed in concrete, shattering a small crater in the architecture. He laughed.

“Try again, Bugaboo!”

He came in hard and fast, and it was all Ladybug could do to roll out of the way as his staff came crashing down into the concrete where she’d been lying mere seconds ago. She swung her yo-yo and tried to snare his ankles, but he flipped out of the way and doubled back. Their game of cat and mouse was destroying the city block and drawing people out of their homes, wondering what all the racket was.

Alya was running before she could stop herself, desperate for some way to help Ladybug. No matter how much it hurt knowing the truth, that her best friend had never trusted her with her most precious secret, there was no way Alya was going to let her get killed before they had a chance to hash it out.

Alya dashed up the fire escape to the roof Chat and Ladybug had just shredded, picked up a baseball-sized chunk of cement rubble, and chucked it as hard as she could at Chat on the next building over. She’d been aiming for his head, but he moved lightning-fast and knocked the rock away with his staff. White cat ears twitching, he leveled Alya with a look that petrified her in place. Those magenta eyes were so full of malice that she felt physically ill just to look upon them. It was enough to make her forget her purpose in distracting him, and she whimpered in fear.

“Alya,” he said in a voice that froze her blood.

Before Alya could process a coherent thought, Chat had leaped high into the air and was plummeting straight for her, staff extended. She opened her mouth to scream, but Ladybug was suddenly there and slamming into him. They crashed together and fell ten stories to the street below.

Regaining herself, Alya rushed to the edge of the roof and spotted them as they wrestled. To her horror, Chat had Ladybug by the throat again and used his staff for leverage to force her to her knees. Ladybug struggled against him, but they were fairly evenly matched in terms of brute physical strength.

“Well, this is familiar,” Chat taunted, pushing her harder to the ground.

Alya was so afraid for Ladybug that she momentarily forgot about her own safety. “Adrien!” she shouted.

Chat’s cat ears flattened dangerously on his head and he turned to look up at her over his shoulder. It was the split second of distraction that Ladybug needed to heave against him and use his leverage against him. She grabbed his staff and rammed it against him with all her might, shoving them both into the wall of a nearby building. Some people in that building screamed and disappeared from their windows to avoid the structural damage and danger posed by the two supers.

Ladybug let out a battlecry and let him have it with a wicked punch to the gut. In the gloom, Alya had a difficult time seeing them well, but from the sound of stone cracking and the window above
them shattering, it seemed like Ladybug had broken more than a rib or two.

“I don’t want to fight you!” Ladybug said, the pain in her voice palpable.

Chat’s hands shook on her shoulders, and he appeared to slump against her. “Ladybug,” he said in a tinny voice that didn’t match his previous sinister bravado.

Ladybug’s breath hitched, and Alya realized she must be crying.

“Please,” she said. “Chat… Adrien, I’m—ahh!”

“No!” Alya screamed.

Ladybug had let down her guard, and Chat had used the opportunity to strike where it would do the most damage. Impervious to his own pain, he lunged and sank his claws in her belly, pushing with all his might. They both went flying across the street and crash-landed against a parked car, totaling it on impact. The pale light of a street lamp overhead cast them in a sickly glow, and Alya saw the glisten of Ladybug’s blood on the cobblestone underneath her. Chat’s white-gloved claws came away bloody and dripping.

“Do you really think I’m so weak?” he all but screamed at her lying in the twisted remains of the car. “That I don’t know the truth?”

Ladybug struggled to get to her feet and pressed a hand over her bloody middle. “Chaton, please, I—”

“You’re so fucking two-faced!” He extended his staff and raised it over his head.

Alya’s blood ran cold as she foresaw the potentially mortal damage he was about to do, but still on the roof and tragically, painfully human, there was nothing she could do but watch it happen. She barely even registered herself screaming, wailing for him to stop as she raced down the fire escape.

Chat swung his staff with all his might, but in a blur of light too fast for Alya to follow, he never hit his target. The staff clattered to the ground some distance away, and Chat himself slammed into another building with a sickening crack. Furious buzzing filled Alya’s ears as she tripped on the slick, iron stairs and split her lip on the railing catching herself. She barely felt the pain, desperate to reach Ladybug.

But the sight she saw paralyzed her all over again, because hovering over Ladybug and helping her out of the demolished car was Queen Bee in all her blonde, blue-eyed glory.

“I’m going to murder him,” Queen Bee said venomously, drawing her stinger sword when Ladybug was safely out of the car and on one knee, heaving.

Ladybug looked up at her, agony in her eyes. “N-No, you can’t—”

But Queen Bee had already taken off after Chat, sword drawn. Magenta locked on blue, and Chat hauled himself unsteadily to his feet. With a burst of speed he should not have possessed after the beating he’d taken, he disappeared in a blur of white just as Queen Bee let him have it with her rapier. The enchanted iron cut through stone and concrete alike, slicing clean through the foundation of the building where Chat had crash-landed. People who had gathered on the street screamed and ran back inside as pieces of foundation went flying and sprayed bystanders.

Chat sprinted and scooped up his staff just in time to parry another devastating slash from Queen Bee’s sword. The harsh clang of steel made Alya’s ears ring as the two of them began a deadly
dance of swords too fast to follow with the naked eye.

Alya watched in horror, both at the uncontrollable violence unfurling before her, and the dreaded confirmation of her suspicions when Marinette had ordered her to call Chloe. There was no way to unsee it now.

*Chloe is Queen Bee.*

And despite the gravity of the situation, the literal life and death stakes at hand and the horrible irony watching Chloe and Adrien try to tear each other apart without even realizing it, Alya could not help but give a little more of herself to the churning, ugly hurt slowly consuming her like a poison.

Chloe was Queen Bee, and she knew Marinette was Ladybug.

Because Marinette had trusted her with the precious secret she’d kept from Alya all their lives.

“You fucking traitor!” Queen Bee screamed as she hacked and slashed.

Chat parried her blow for blow with all the finesse and training of one schooled in the art of the sword. Queen Bee, however, had the advantage of flight that exposed him to her blade from every angle, and she was not holding back at all. Her rapier kissed him, and soon Chat’s pristine, white suit was smeared with his blood. He was beginning to tire, and Queen Bee’s fury knew no end.

“Bee, no!” Ladybug shouted, seeing the mortal danger. “He’s Adrien!”

As though Ladybug’s words had shackled her, Queen Bee’s sword faltered and her eyes widened.

“What—”

Chat had no such reservations, however, and took advantage of her momentary hesitation. He swung his staff and caught her in the ribs. Queen Bee didn’t even have time to scream before he smashed her into the ground.

“No!” Ladybug said.

She took off with the aid of her wings to intercept them, but Chat had Queen Bee by the back of her neck and forced her to her knees as she gagged. Her wings buzzed furiously, but his hold on her was too strong and kept her grounded. He leaned in close and raked his claws teasingly up the back of her super suit.

“So goodnight, Queen Bitch,” he said.

Queen Bee shrieked loud enough to wake the dead as Chat jammed his claws into the base of her wings and ripped them out at the roots. The delicate, translucent wings ran red with her blood, shredded to a sticky, stringy pulp in his sharp claws.

He shoved her to the ground roughly, a shaking, quivering mess, and leaped to safety just as Ladybug came in swinging hard. Alya covered her mouth—she was too afraid even to breathe.

Chat shook the ruined remains of Queen Bee’s wings from his bloody claw and brandished his staff a safe distance away. All traces of his previous deranged glee were gone as he glared at Ladybug shielding Queen Bee.

“Oops. Looks like I broke my replacement,” he said darkly, goading her.

Ladybug was no longer crying as she returned his glare with a cold fury that did not suit her at all.
“Queen Bee is Chloe,” she said scathingly. “You just attacked the person who loves you most.”

A pregnant silence descended between them as Chat lowered his staff slightly without realizing it. His hand was suddenly shaking. “You lie.”

Ladybug, sensing the turmoil in him, dared to approach. She clutched her stomach, her fingers slick with her blood. “It’s the truth,” she bit out. “Look what you’ve done, Adrien. That’s Chloe’s blood on your hands!”

Queen Bee, still on her hands and knees and bleeding from the holes in her back, nonetheless managed to look up at him, tears in her eyes. “A,” she said, her voice cracking.

Chat’s eyes widened, and suddenly he winced and cried out. He dropped his staff and clutched at his head, as if in pain. “No, no! Not now!”

Ladybug advanced, wary but not about to pass up the chance to finally subdue him and put an end to this. Before she reached him, though, he looked up, and Alya gasped. He stared back at Ladybug with luminous, green eyes, wide with fear.

“Chlo?” he said.

Ladybug lost her composure and choked on a sob. “Adrien, is that—”

He looked at her like he didn’t quite recognize her. “I can’t hold—ahh!”

Chat sank to his knees and clutched his head again. Queen Bee struggled to stand, her face drawn in agony, but she pushed through.

“A, can you hear me?” she said, swaying on her feet and breathing haggardly.

Alya had made it to the street level again, and there was nothing she wanted more than to help Ladybug, like she’d helped all those people in the last attack. But as she looked on, knowing who it was beneath the mask, she had never felt so far away from Ladybug as she did in this moment. Here was her best friend, her soul mate after a fashion, coming apart at the seams trying to save a man for whom she cared deeply, with whom she shared something so intimate, so transcendent that even not knowing it until tonight, it only entwined their lives tighter.

And Chloe, the person who had been the furthest from a friend to Marinette all their lives, was right there with her now, closer to her—to Marinette than Alya had ever been. There was nothing Alya could do for any of them but get in the way and watch as Adrien—what was left of him—was devoured by the demon wearing his skin.

Alya had never felt so alone in all her life as she did in that moment, helpless and useless and utterly forgotten.

Felix froze mid-pour, the glass only a third of the way full with wine. The Butterfly Miraculous pulsed at his collar, and he was suddenly overcome with a wave of malice so intense that he almost dropped the bottle of wine in his hand.

“What is it?” his companion said, concerned.

He held up a hand for silence as he closed his eyes and followed that cold dread to the source.
“Chat Blanc,” he said, as much to himself as to his companion. “He’s wavering.”

The mood in the room shifted from warm and whispery to dead silence. They both understood instinctively the gravity of such a development.

“Go,” Felix said. “There’s no time.”

His companion said something, but Felix barely heard it as he focused on following that deadened path to the source, searching for a way in. He found none—as before, his path was blocked by something stronger, an impenetrable wall to which he could press his ear but not pass through to the source. He did not understand it, but he had his suspicions about what may have caused it.

*Oh Gabe, still resisting me even in death. More fool you.*

But for now, Chat Blanc was not his concern. Another path opened up, veering off deeper into star-studded darkness. And at the end of it, he saw delicate, emerald wings blooming, searching for a light to nurture them. Felix laughed out loud. He was getting so good at this, and soon would not need Pravala’s assistance to control his puppets.

With a tap to the Miraculous Pin, lavender light enveloped him and forced the transformation. Suddenly, the path he’d treaded illuminated in stark contrast to the void around him, and he could see a version of himself treading it, the sound of his footsteps and the enchanted cane sword in his hand echoing in the infinite dream space. He passed the impenetrable wall that sealed off the path he would have rather taken, pausing only to hover a gloved hand in front of it. Millions of pink butterfly wings recoiled at his approach, entwined so tightly together that there was no seeing past them. He swallowed his annoyance and continued on the other path he’d found, to the greenish light at the end that now called to him, enticing.

It struggled, as all fledglings do without help, and he kneeled down on the starlit path and scooped it up in his hands. Rumpled, emerald wings shook in his fingers, tentative.

“You poor creature,” he said, his voice disembodied in this hollow place between souls. “So alone… I’ll help you.”

He covered the broken wings with a hand and felt his power surge. A rush of emotions, as intense as a sword to the gut, passed through him. It was enough to drive a lesser man mad, and Felix gritted his teeth. This power was unlike the Black Cat’s in every way, full where the other was empty, warm instead of cold. But cold was what he needed now, and so he fed the creature more and more until it was strong enough to be weaned.

“That’s it,” he said, giving the creature room to grow. Mighty emerald wings spread and fluttered, shedding black ash as it rose up.

*Fly away, little akuma.*

Queen Bee wondered if this was what it felt like to be on fire. The pain in her back where Chat had ripped out her wings was making her see colors that weren’t real, and that was with the aid of her super suit to dull the pain. She was dizzy, drunk on agony, and somewhere deep inside, she could feel Pollen’s essence writhing, suffering as she shouldered as much of the pain as she could handle.

But all of it paled in comparison to the crushing revelation of Chat’s true identity as Adrien. All this time, and she’d been none the wiser. None of them had. If she could hate herself any more than she...
already did for not doing something more to stop Chat before her suspicions came to fruition, then she would have.

She had failed Ladybug, and now she had failed Adrien, over and over again. Spectacularly.

“A, it’s me,” she tried again, gritting her teeth to the pain and leaning on her rapier for support.

*Please, be okay.*

But he wasn’t okay, and when he looked up at Ladybug and her again, suffering green had morphed into malevolent magenta once again as the devil inside crushed whatever was left of him. The sight brought fresh tears to Queen Bee’s eyes. She could hardly stand the sight of him like this.

“That was a dirty trick, my lady,” Chat said, getting to his feet. “And you call me a monster.”

“No,” Ladybug said. “You’re not a monster, Chat. And I’m not giving up on you. Neither of us will, I swear to you.”

This only seemed to anger him, though, and he bared his teeth. “Stop *lying to me!*” He cracked his knuckles and raised his hand threateningly. “Cataclysm!”

Fear cut through the pain, and Queen Bee was suddenly sprinting on an adrenaline high. “Bug!” she screamed.

Ladybug was also fleeing from Chat’s terrible destructive power that tore through the street like white lightning and demolished everything in its path. White magic slipped through the cracks like grasping fingers, desperate to grab hold of something and tear it apart. Its power and reach grew exponentially, stronger and faster and more ravenous than any previous Cataclysm Queen Bee had ever witnessed. Dark storefronts collapsed and the earth opened up under her feet, as if a massive earthquake threatened to swallow the world whole.

People screamed in a nearby apartment complex as they watched a few innocent bystanders brave enough to watch the fight from a closer vantage scramble to escape the malignant magic. Ladybug flew and scooped three people up in her strong arms and barreled into a fourth, narrowly escaping Cataclysm’s violent trajectory. She crashed into an unfortunately placed mailbox, but cushioned the civilians’ impact with her already abused body.

Queen Bee, without her wings, was forced to try and outrun the path of destruction chasing her. Other civilians had turned to flee back inside, away from Chat’s line of sight, but one woman was running ahead of her. Queen Bee recognized that wild auburn hair instantly.

Cataclysm roared its fury behind her, nearly upon her. She wasn’t going to make it unless—

“Alya, look out!” she said, jumping with all her Miraculous might.

Alya whirled just as Queen Bee slammed into her, and they went flying. Cataclysm was too slow to adjust its trajectory and hit a parked car instead. White haze devoured it like acid in a matter of seconds, disintegrating it before Queen Bee’s eyes as she looked on, shaking in fear and pain and her spiking adrenaline rush.

Alya squirmed in her grip, and Queen Bee was too stunned to hold on. Groaning, she was back on her hands and knees and gasping for breath. Alya scrambled away, eyes wide behind her cat-eye glasses and trembling.

“No,” she said, her voice quavering. “Not you.”
Queen Bee struggled to stand up. Movement caught her eye—Ladybug had survived, and it looked like the civilians she’d saved did, too. But where was Chat? She looked around for him.

Sniffling drew her attention. Alya had tears in her eyes as she stared between Queen Bee, the utter ruin Chat had wrought, and her own hands. Before Queen Bee had a chance to ask her if she was okay, the sound of fluttering wings caught her ear. To her abject horror, a black butterfly was fast descending toward them.

Her own pain momentarily forgotten, Queen Bee gritted her teeth and forced herself to her feet. “Fuck, not now!”

Alya noticed her trepidation and looked up. She gasped, recognizing the akuma for what it was, and did her best to shimmy out of the way. But she was too late. Black wings dissolved when they hit her glasses, and Alya seized.

“No!” Queen Bee was on her feet and staggering.

This can’t be happening!

“Bee!” Ladybug shouted. “What’s—”

But Chat’s staff cut her off, and Ladybug was forced to defend herself against him as he pursued her relentlessly with renewed vigor. Queen Bee was on her own. She rushed to Alya, desperate to put a stop to this before it was too late, but a massive wave of energy burst from Alya and hit Queen Bee with the force of a freight train. She screamed and was blown back half a city block, where a street lamp broke her fall and bent under her super-powered impact. Its light sputtered and snuffed out, plunging her behind a veil of shadows.

Shit, shit!

She had to get up. She had to get to Alya before—

A banshee wail cut through the night. It came from Alya—or what had once been Alya. In her place, a horrifically desiccated figure emerged from a pool of shimmering green light. Engorged ribbons of emerald light snaked around her emaciated form and bit into her with shadowy fangs, serpents feasting on her flesh. Her eyes were two dark pits, and poison dripped from her lips. The sight was enough to make Queen Bee stop, momentarily too terrified to move.

“You,” said the akuma that had possessed Alya, her voice thick with malice. “You ruined everything!”

She approached, and Queen Bee held her ground and clutched her sword. She was weak and in a great deal of pain, and she did not know if she had it in her to fight a freshly akumatized victim at full power.

Ladybug, meanwhile, had managed to evade most of Chat’s attacks to stay on her feet, and her wings helped her remain out of his reach. His Miraculous Ring chirped its warning, but he showed no signs of slowing.

“Exedo!” shouted an unfamiliar voice.

Out of nowhere, huge coral branches burst from the weeping wounds in the ground Chat’s Cataclysm had opened up and went on a rampage, smashing walls and whatever lay behind them. Self-preservation won over any immediate fear and confusion, and both Queen Bee and the akuma dispersed to avoid death by coral bludgeoning. Queen Bee dodged the coral branches as best she
could, but there were so many, and they moved far too fast. Thinking quickly, she tapped into her deepest reserves of strength.

“Buzz Kill!”

The familiar drag of time slowing all around her took her breath away, and the world came to life in a garish, golden light. She didn’t have much time, but it was the best she had. Taking off at a sprint, Queen Bee slashed and cut every tentacle of coral she came across while they slogged, slowed to a snail’s pace under the effects of her Miraculous power.

She spotted Ladybug above, about to be impaled by a jagged coral branch, and ran along the path of an adjacent branch to reach her. Queen Bee cut the coral just a finger’s width from piercing Ladybug’s chest and shoved Ladybug’s time-frozen body higher into the air out of danger.

On and on she went, cutting and carving as she went and trying desperately to ignore the crippling ache in her back that was also blessedly dulled in the temporal vortex. The coral tentacles were sprouting from a singular wellspring, and Queen Bee ran as fast as she could to find it. She came upon a person in the shadows draped entirely in fine-spun coral, even their face. The thick coral tentacles came from beneath the hem of the strange, coral dress they wore. Twisting branches covered them like a suit of pink armor, snaked around their neck, and tapered over their head like some kind of crown.

“Pride,” Queen Bee spat, knowing instinctively that this must be the Miraculous Chosen’s true shape, not some coralized puppet. Their massive power was on a completely different level than the coralized victims she had faced in the past.

Glowing, pink eyes swiveled and found Queen Bee’s—they could see her. Queen Bee recoiled in fright at the immense display of power and control even at the mercy of her ultimate sword.

“Hello, Courage,” Pride’s Chosen hissed from behind their coral mask.

Queen Bee moved instinctively and brought her sword down through Pride’s armor.

*I can end this! I can do it!*

That thought compelled her, and she almost forgot her fear at the feel of that coral crown shattering under the superior might of her rapier. Down the blade carved, past temple and chin, shattering half the mask and revealing smooth skin beneath—a woman’s skin. Pride’s eyes widened, but not in fear. Impossibly, she moved her arms, and the coiled coral serpents at her feet groaned and rose up.

Queen Bee’s time was up.

The spell broke, and light and sound came crashing back down. The sprawling coral that Pride had unleashed popped and exploded, crumbling to dust where Queen Bee had slashed it to nothing. But there was no time to admire her work when heavy, coral tentacles smacked Queen Bee aside at point-blank range and sent her careening high into the sky. She didn’t even have the breath to scream.

“Bee!”

Rushing wings came to her aid, and Ladybug somehow caught her before she could fall to her death. They landed on a rooftop nearby, arms tangled and bodies shaking. Ladybug was alive and not impaled to death, Queen Bee was relieved to see.

*At least I could do one thing right.*
She tried to tell Ladybug off for taking so long to get to her, but it came out as a strangled cough. The pain in her midsection was so elemental that Queen Bee dropped to her knees and wretched. Tears filled her vision. Surely this was what dying felt like.

Below, there was some kind of commotion as Pride, in her true form, released her magic, the damage done. She had somehow gotten ahold of Chat.

“Chat Blanc,” she said in that creaky, broken voice that reminded Queen Bee of cracking ice. “Come with me.”

“You,” Chat said, his speech slurred as he fought to remain standing with his many injuries. His ring chirped again, and he grimaced. “So you’re Pravala… Sorry, but I don’t trust you.”

“Butterfly sent me,” she said, extending a hand to him. From somewhere in her coral dress, her Miraculous beeped its own warning.

Chat spit blood and extended his staff. “He’s not my keeper.” His gaze flickered to Queen Bee and Ladybug, and then somewhere behind them. “Looks like my time in the spotlight’s done for tonight.”

Before Pride—or, rather, Pravala—could do anything about it, Chat leaped high into the air with the help of his extending staff and landed on a rooftop across the street. He cast one last, lingering look at Queen Bee and Ladybug, his expression unreadable in the gloom. And then, he was gone.

“Shit,” Ladybug swore. “We can’t let him get away! He’ll revert, and then we can subdue him!”

Queen Bee’s Miraculous Comb gave a beep. “Bug, wait, there’s something—”

Queen Bee sensed more than heard the presence coming for them, and she gripped Ladybug’s arms instinctively. Ladybug picked up on it, too, and soon she had dragged them both over the roof’s edge. Queen Bee barely had time to grab her rapier before she was falling with Ladybug. Above, the presence stalking them poured over the edge on a river of writhing, green serpents.

“I am Invidia!” the akuma possessing Alya shrieked. “I will devour you, Queen Bee!”

Chapter End Notes

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Next time: Ladies’ night.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Raise your hand if you’ve been personally akumatized by Chloe Bourgeois.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“The akuma’s in her glasses!” Queen Bee said.

“She’s not wearing any glasses!” Ladybug said as Invidia closed in on them and she got a look at the akuma’s emaciated, howling face. Spinning her yo-yo, she separated from Queen Bee and decided to cut her losses—the more quickly she could get to the akuma, the better. Invidia, however, seemed to be out for Queen Bee’s blood and tore after her. The shimmering, green energy coiled about her lashed out like hungry snakes, their maws opened wide and fangs tapering to shadows.

“I will rip you apart!” Invidia shrieked as she raced impossibly fast after Queen Bee.

Even injured and exhausted, Queen Bee was not going down quietly. She ran headlong toward a building, leaped at the last minute, and flipped up the wall with her super strength just as Invidia crashed into the wall behind her. The cement façade groaned and split under the impact, and the wall split and crumbled. Queen Bee landed hard on the metal fire escape and lost her balance, panting and in pain.

Invidia, dazed but still fighting fit, shook the debris from her wild hair and righted herself. She barely had time to regain her composure when Ladybug came in hard and swinging. Invidia went flying across the street and crashed into a parked car, totaling it.

“Why the hell is she after me?!” Queen Bee said as she struggled to her feet.

“I don’t know,” Ladybug said, “but we have to stop this fast. I don’t know how much longer either of us can keep fighting.”

Queen Bee’s Miraculous Comb gave a warning beep just then, and she swore. “If I revert, she’ll tear me apart. Damnit!”

“I’m not going to let that happen. Just get out of here before she—”

A terrible shriek burst from the crash site, and Invidia burst from the wreckage. The shadowy serpents she wore like ribbons hissed even as they sank their fangs deeper into her. The sight was enough to turn Ladybug’s stomach—what kind of akuma drew strength from self-harm?

“Alya, snap out of it!” Ladybug said, throwing her yo-yo in an effort to restrain Invidia.

But Invidia was too slippery and quick, and she was once again lunging straight for Queen Bee. Queen Bee raced up the fire escape to the roof, but the night’s fighting was finally taking its toll on the last of her strength, and she was too slow. One of Invidia’s snakes lashed out ahead of her and coiled around Queen Bee’s ankle, tripping her just as she made it to the roof. But still, she fought. She slashed at the snake with her sword, but the blade passed right through the incorporeal energy.
Ladybug took off flying to the rooftop, ignoring the stinging ache in her belly where Chat had sunk his razor sharp claws into her, and threw her yo-yo. It snagged Invidia’s arm, and Ladybug yanked as hard as she could. Invidia came hurtling straight for her, and the two of them tumbled together with Ladybug unfortunately taking the brunt of the impact when they crashed into a huge vent on the opposite side of the roof.

Scrambling to her feet, Ladybug quickly activated her Lucky Charm. In a flash of bright, scarlet light, a spotted hand mirror materialized in her hands, and she caught her own reflection.

“What the hell am I supposed to do with this?”

“I don’t know, but you better figure it out fast!” Queen Bee said as her Miraculous gave its final warning beeps. “Shit, shit!”

Invidia was getting up again, and while Queen Bee tried to put some distance between them, golden light enveloped her and stripped her super suit away. Chloe, in her civilian clothes and completely powerless, caught Pollen as the little kwami fell, wingless.

“Pollen? Pollen!” Chloe said, clutching an unresponsive Pollen to her chest.

“So, you finally reveal your true face,” Invidia hissed, advancing once more on Chloe. “All the better for me to peel it off!”

“Alya, stop this!” Ladybug said.

But Invidia could not hear her, and she ran straight for the now defenseless Chloe. Thinking fast, Chloe bolted to the roof access door to put something between Invidia and herself, but as a civilian she could never hope to outpace the furious akuma. Cold dread sank its claws into Ladybug, but Chloe’s desperate cry as she turned her back to shield Pollen from harm spurred her into action. With an incredible burst of speed and strength Ladybug did not know she possessed, she flew to intercept.

In the split second before impact, Ladybug caught a brief glance of Chloe bracing herself for something far worse than pain. They locked eyes, and Chloe twisted, her fear compounding as she must have realized what was about to happen. Ladybug spread her arms to make her body as large as possible.

Invidia’s serpents attacked all at once, their shadowy fangs sinking into Ladybug’s arms, thighs, belly, chest—anywhere they could reach. Ladybug jerked with whiplash and saw stars as a burning pain spread through her veins like wildfire, alive. Somewhere behind her, Chloe screamed—or was that her own voice? Ladybug gagged and squeezed her eyes shut; even seeing hurt. The serpents bit down harder, and the venom in her veins sang with an apoplectic rage the likes of which Ladybug had never felt before.

It wasn’t her rage; it was Invidia’s—Alya’s. And that rage gave way to an anguish so corrosive that Ladybug was sure her blood had turned to acid in her veins. In those few agonizing moments, she felt Alya’s pain as if it were her own, terrible and ruinous and all-consuming. Anger at Ladybug for hiding her secret, sadness at the realization that she had never trusted Alya with it despite everything they had been through, and soul-crushing anguish over her own inability. The serpents sank their fangs in deeper, and Ladybug felt their scorn, their vicious envy for Ladybug’s incredible strength and importance, and above all their poisonous jealousy of Chloe.

Chloe, whom Ladybug had trusted with her secret over all others.

Chloe, the last person in the world who would have ever been called a friend.
All these years, so many secrets and wishes shared, and it was Chloe who got to share Marinette’s deepest, most sacred truth?

How could Marinette lie to the person who loved her best? Who had stuck by her side through hell and high water?

“How could you choose her over me?” Invidia screamed.

Ladybug opened her eyes, and through her stinging tears, she could see Alya’s warped face, drawn with pain and betrayal, so angry, so afraid, so lost. And it broke her heart.

Invidia’s sunken eyes were mad with grief. “Why was I never enough for you?”

“Alya,” Ladybug said, shaking as she reached for Invidia’s leathery face. “I’m so sorry I hurt you.”

Invidia stared at her, trembling, and Ladybug felt the serpents loosen their jaws just a little. It was all the hesitation she needed, and she shoved the Lucky Charm mirror in front of Invidia’s face. Invidia screamed at the sight of her own wretched reflection, what she had become, and recoiled in fright. Air rushed back into Ladybug’s lungs, and she felt the ground beneath her feet again as she serpents dissolved and Invidia withdrew. She sank to the ground and pulled at her face, shaking like a leaf and wailing.

“Alya,” Ladybug said, approaching. She sank to the ground in front of Invidia.

“Don’t look at me!”

Ladybug’s Miraculous Earrings chirped a warning, but she ignored them. Invidia seemed to shrink beneath her own shame as her serpents turned their fangs back on her, their jealous rage never sated. Ladybug blinked her tears away, unable to stomach the sight of her best friend in so much pain.

She had lost one person dear to her tonight already; she’d be damned if she lost another.

Ladybug threw her arms around Invidia and pulled her close, shuddering as a sob racked her abused body. “You were always enough. I’m so sorry I let you down.”

Invidia shuddered, and slowly returned the embrace. “M-Marinette…”

Ladybug choked on a sob. “Yeah, I’m here. I’m right here for you. I love you so much, Alya.”

The serpents began to recede and coil at Invidia’s back until they melded together in the shape of an oily, black butterfly.

“I love you, too,” Invidia said in Alya’s voice.

Ladybug watched, stupefied, as white light bloomed beneath her arms and absorbed into the akuma. It shed its darkness like ashes. Slowly, a brilliant, emerald butterfly took to the skies, where it dissolved into pale fronds of light, purified. All that remained was Alya, small and trembling and clinging to Ladybug. She didn’t quite understand it, but right now she didn’t care.

Her Miraculous gave its final warning beeps, and Ladybug quickly scooped up her Lucky Charm mirror and invoked her final enchantment. Scarlet magic burst from the mirror and swept through the neighborhood, righting what was wrong and washing away the blood and tears and sweat of the battle.

Marinette sat shivering in her ruined dress on the deserted roof. Chloe caught her eye over Alya’s
shoulder, Pollen still clutched protectively to her chest and unshed tears in her eyes. She nodded, and Marinette smiled up at her sadly.

It was finally over.

Alya sat on Marinette’s couch with a blanket over her lap and her phone in hand. She had four missed calls from Nino and three texts, all asking for updates on Marinette, if she was okay, when Alya would be back, woman please answer so I know you’re not in jail, etc. etc. That last one drew a small but true smile out of her, and she texted him back to let him know she was, for now, still a free woman.

[Alya: I’m fine.]

[Nino: Everyone okay with Mar? You left in a hurry. Want me to swing by?]

Alya chewed her lip. How was she supposed to answer that? No, Nino, everything was not okay with Marinette—she’d just spent the night fighting her boyfriend almost to the death because, surprise, she’s Ladybug and Adrien’s Chat Noir, or some twisted version of him, oh and also, I was akumatized and almost killed Chloe—

“That should do it,” Marinette said, cleaning up the last of Adrien’s blood on the floor from his split lip before he’d transformed.

Alya stared at the wall where he’d had Marinette in a chokehold earlier that night and shivered. She began to delete the run-on madness she’d typed out to Nino.

[Alya: Everything’s fine. I’m staying here tonight. Don’t wait up.]

She hated herself when she read his quick reply.

[Nino: Okay. Luv u babe.]

[Alya: I love you too.]

She stashed her phone and tried to ignore the horrible, stinging guilt over having lied to the love of her life. Hadn’t this very lie been the reason for so much of tonight’s grief? But what could she do? How could she explain this to Nino? How would he react knowing what Adrien was, what he’d done?

What I almost did.

She sniffled and removed her glasses to wipe her tears before they could fall. A bottle of tequila slamming down on the coffee table startled her, and she jumped. Chloe methodically began to pour out the golden liquor into three shot glasses. She didn’t even look at Alya, but she pushed a shot glass toward her.

“Seriously?” Alya said, dubious.

Chloe met her gaze, and she was chilled at the hollow look there. Defensive. Maybe a little afraid. “Almost dying makes me thirsty.”

Alya put her glasses back on just as Chloe downed her shot and sat back on the chair she’d pulled up opposite the couch. She folded a knee against her chest and pulled out a small creature from the
pocket of her baggy Jagged Stone sweatshirt.

“Honey Bee, I’m so tired,” said the small creature, a bee.

“I know, Pollen. Just let me see them.” She gently turned Pollen in her hand and ran her fingers over the delicate wings folded over the bee’s back. They were small and translucent, shiny. Chloe looked a little anxious as she examined them, but satisfied that there was nothing she could really do, she kissed Pollen’s head.

“No, Chloe, I can look after Pollen,” said the other magical being—Tikki—floating over and clutching a half-eaten macaroon in her little hands.

“Will she be okay?” Chloe asked in a small voice that sounded very…un-Chloe-like.

Tikki smiled softly. “Yes, with some rest. Don’t worry, my magic can fix almost anything. Come on, Pollen.”

Pollen lifted her head, and her antennae drooped listlessly. “I can’t fly…”

“It’s okay, I’ve got you. Just try and relax now, okay?”

Tikki lifted Pollen on her back, and together the tiny creatures floated upstairs to Marinette’s loft without another word. Alya watched it all in silence, because for once in her life, she had no clue what to say to that. Instead, she reached for the shot Chloe had poured for her and downed it in one gulp. The tequila burned going down—Marinette wasn’t exactly keeping Patrón Silver in her pantry, but it did its job well enough. The burn subsided, and a warmth settled in the pit of her stomach. It was almost enough to take the sting off.

Until Marinette joined them and sat down on the other end of the couch. Silence fell, and the three women looked at each other, none of them knowing what to say. No one had protested when Marinette told them to come back to her place as onlookers once again emerged from their homes and the police had arrived on the scene to investigate. It was a stroke of sheer luck that the three of them had been on the deserted roof of a nearby building when they reverted to their civilian forms. News reporters had swarmed the scene outside, speculating as to the nature of the super fight with as many theories as there were stars in the sky. In the chaos of the bloody battle, it seemed no one had gotten a clear sense of what exactly had happened. Perhaps it was for the best. What the world didn’t know about Chat Noir turning full Anakin Skywalker would not hurt them. Chloe and Marinette were hurting enough as it was.

Marinette reached for her own shot glass and drank it dry. She winced and shook her head to clear it, grabbed the bottle, and refilled all three shot glasses. “So, I think we need to talk. I’m just…not really sure where to start.”

“Adrien tried to kill us tonight,” Chloe said, glaring a hole in the coffee table. “Seems like a good jumping off point.”

Marinette hung her head in her hands and sighed like she carried the weight of the world on her shoulders. “Fuck.”

Chloe grabbed her glass. “Fuck everything.” She drank her refilled tequila and made a face as it went down.

Alya clasped her hands to keep them from shaking. She looked between Marinette and Chloe, both of whom seemed to be shrinking in on themselves. Neither of them looked like they would be coming up for air anytime soon. Alya took a deep breath, grabbed her second drink, and drank it
down. Liquid courage had never tasted so bitter.

“I’ll start. I owe you an apology.” Alya looked up at Chloe and squeezed the empty glass in her hands. “Both of you.”

Chloe stared at her as though she’d only just realized Alya was sitting there. Alya felt Marinette look up from her slump. Everything in her was screaming at her to defend herself, to rationalize her actions, to find some justification for her pain. But there was nothing left to hide behind.

“You couldn’t control yourself,” Chloe said, to Alya’s surprise. “It’s not your fault.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Alya,” Marinette said.

“No, Marinette, it is my fault. Akumas prey on negative emotions, and I let mine totally consume me. I…” She winced, but forced herself to look Chloe in the eye. “I was jealous and—and insecure.”

“It’s not your fault. All of this, everything that’s happened tonight is my fault. If I’d only been honest with you, with…with Chat Noir, then he wouldn’t…” She sniffled. “I shouldn’t have kept my secret from you all these years. Alya, I’m so sorry for lying to you. I thought…”

“You thought you were protecting her,” Chloe said. “That’s not wrong, Marinette.”

“It doesn’t matter what’s right or wrong anymore,” Marinette said. “All that matters is I seriously messed up, and now Adrien’s…”

Alya was not over the shock of finding out her best friend and the superhero she had idolized for half her life were one and the same, but she had never seen Marinette so unraveled before, and it scared her. Marinette had always been the type never to lose hope, never to give up. But the trembling woman next to her was barely holding on. Alya could not stand to see her like this.

“Hey, stop that. Whatever happened to Adrien obviously wasn’t because of anything you messed up. I walked in here to find him trying to strangle you. That’s 100% on him.”

Marinette began to cry. She bit her lip and hugged her knees to her chest, and she shook. “You don’t understand. It’s all my fault. It’s always been my fault.”

Chloe glared at Marinette. “It’s absolutely not your fault. So you better cut that shit out—”

“No, you don’t get it. He changed because of me.”

Marinette’s voice was becoming shrill as her tears fell freely, and Alya could not help but scoot close and lay a hand on her shoulder. “Come on, girl, don’t say that. You know that’s not true.”

“It is true. It was true fourteen years ago, and it’s true now.”

“Marinette, seriously, you can’t possibly think—”

“He became Chat Blanc because of me! I brought it out of him, and he—he tried to…”

Chloe’s deadened gaze had morphed into concern, and she leaned forward in her chair. “Marinette, what’re you—”

“He tried to kill me, okay? Fourteen years ago, the akuma, and—and Chat, he…” She sniffled and wiped her eyes, but it was no use.
Alya pulled Marinette into a fierce hug, wrapping them both in her blanket, and Marinette shuddered against her. “Marinette…”

She fistedit Alya’s shirt in a white-knuckled grip. “It’s all my fault.”

Alya and Chloe listened as Marinette confessed the truth about what had happened fourteen years ago. Adrien’s abrupt disappearance and Ladybug’s relentless search for her missing partner around the same time suddenly made sense. Chat had thought Ladybug rejected him, wanted nothing to do with him, and Hawk Moth had exploited that vulnerability when they had least expected it.

“Jesus Christ,” Chloe said, rubbing her temples as she tried to process everything Marinette had just told them. “No wonder he was so depressed. I had no idea—” She clutched her face as if she couldn’t bear to wear it any longer. “I had no fucking idea all this time…”

Alya had never seen Chloe look so miserable, and despite their past animosity, she couldn’t help but feel for her. It was hard to believe what Nino told her about how close Adrien and Chloe were, but the way Chloe seemed to fall apart now in front of her, who was she to deny it?

“Chloe, stop, please,” Marinette said, regaining some of her composure and taking Chloe’s hand in hers. “You couldn’t possibly have known.”

“Okay, everyone just chill out for a minute,” Alya said. “Let’s all agree that whatever happened to Adrien—Chat Blanc, whatever—it was Hawk Moth’s fault. He’s the one who akumatized him, not you. So let’s move on, because all that’s in the past, and we have to deal with the fallout now. Adrien’s still out there, and that…that thing that came to help him.”

Chloe seemed to latch on to that and grabbed the tequila bottle to refill her glass. “Pride. Or Pravala, I guess, whatever. That asshole broke my Buzz Kill.”

“She what?” Marinette said, aghast. “What’re you talking about?”

Chloe explained how Pravala, apparently another super chosen by something called a Miraculous just like Ladybug and Queen Bee, had broken through Queen Bee’s ultimate attack and would have killed her if not for Ladybug’s timely intervention.

“She’s strong,” Marinette said grimly, sipping her drink. “An Ancient One, that’s what Master Fu said. A Sin or something.”

“I’m strong,” Chloe said darkly. “She’s something else entirely.”

“And Adrien’s working with her?” Alya said.

“It kind of looked like that, yeah,” Marinette said. “And the Butterfly… That must be Hawk Moth. That’s what Pravala called him.”

Alya shivered. “So you’re saying Hawk Moth—I mean, Butterfly—has both Adrien and this Pravala person on his side?”

“That, and anyone they akumatize or coralize,” Chloe said, her gaze briefly flickering to Alya.

Alya hugged herself. Her shame was still raw, and Chloe must have seen something of her discomfort.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean—”
“No, you’re right. I let myself go, and the Butterfly took advantage.”

Marinette wiped her tears and took Alya’s hands in hers. “No, Alya, the only reason you were upset was because of me. Because I wasn’t honest with you. I should’ve told you about Ladybug a long time ago. I’ve wanted to for so long.”

“Then why didn’t you?” Alya said, unable to help herself and the pain that was still so close to the surface. “Did you think I’d be upset? That I’d judge you or something?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I know I always thought I was protecting you and everybody else by keeping it a secret, but after Chat left, I was so alone.”

“But you weren’t alone. You had me. Girl, you know I’d walk through fire for you, and you couldn’t trust me with the biggest, most important secret of your life? I’m your best friend. If anyone deserved to know, it was me.”

The silence that followed was deafening as the memory of Invidia lingered like a bad smell.

“I’m doing it again,” Alya thought, ashamed anew. But she couldn’t help it.

“You hurt me, Marinette. And I know that’s not really fair to hold against you considering the circumstances. I know you had your reasons, but goddamnit, I’m your best friend. I’m your sister. How could you not trust me?”

Marinette wept silently, and when she looked up at Alya with those big, blue eyes, it was almost enough to pacify her. But Marinette had no words, no explanation, and that hurt the most. Alya swallowed a sob that threatened to choke her, and instead reached for the bottle to refill her shot glass and take another drink.

“It’s because she didn’t want to be Ladybug with you,” Chloe said. “She wanted you to love her as Marinette. The real thing, not the flawless hero you put on a pedestal.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Alya said. “You have no idea what Marinette and I have been through. How could you possibly say that when you don’t know a thing about me?”

“I don’t have to know you. I just have to know myself.” Chloe met her gaze, and Alya shivered at the raw emotion boiling in her blue eyes. “Why do you think Adrien never told me his secret?”

Silence ensued as Alya realized just how insensitive she’d been. Of course Chloe would know. Chloe would know better than anyone what Alya was going through. She was going through it herself right this very moment.

Chloe averted her gaze and reached for her shot glass, but Alya did not miss the glint of unshed tears in her eyes. Marinette felt no such compulsion to hide her feelings and sniffled loudly.

“What the hell are we going to do?” Marinette asked no one in particular.

“We have to stop Adrien,” Chloe said. “Somehow, we have to get through to him. I know he’s still in there somewhere.”

“It took everything you and I had just to stay alive tonight.”

Alya looked between the two heroes, as scared and shaken as the mere mortals they were under the masks. She had no idea what to say to assuage their fears, but something in her compelled her to try. “We’ll fix this. Not tonight, but next time. We’ll fix this.”
“We?” Marinette said.

“Yeah, we. I may not be a superhero, but I’ve got some mad skills of my own, thank you very much. And after all the times you’ve saved my life, I owe you big time.”

“No offense, but what can you do?” Chloe asked.

Alya swallowed her knee-jerk instinct to snap back at Chloe. It was a fair enough question. “I’m an investigative journalist. Uncovering shit is my wheelhouse, and that Pravala person reeks.”

“You think you can figure out who Pravala is? Not even Mayura’s figured that out.”

“Another Miraculous Chosen,” Marinette answered Alya’s unspoken question. “She’s with us, but she’s been missing for a while.”

Alya shook her head. “I don’t know Mayura, but I know me. I won’t stop until I know the truth.”

“I don’t know. This is really dangerous for Chloe and me, let alone for you. Adrien knows you know his secret identity now, and that makes you a target. I’d feel a lot better if you got out of the city for a while until this is all over.”

“I’m not afraid of Adrien, so don’t even think of trying to cut me out. No way, Marinette, I’m involved now. I know too much. So use me, let me help.”

Let me atone.

Marinette looked at her sadly, and Alya wondered if she’d heard the words left unspoken.

“I think it’s a good idea,” Chloe said.

“You do?” Alya said.

“I was just telling Master Fu earlier that we need more help. Mayura’s MIA, but having a civilian help could be the last thing Pravala expects.”

Alya didn’t know who Master Fu was, but at the moment she didn’t care as once again, Chloe rendered her a little speechless.

“Thanks,” Alya said, meaning it. “I just want to help.”

“I know.”

Alya felt Marinette’s gaze on her, and she knew if she looked, Marinette would look away. In truth, Marinette had changed very little since Alya had first met and befriended her in high school. She was still shy, kind to a fault, and in need of a helping hand to bolster her confidence every now and then. But the Chloe sitting opposite Alya now seemed to be a completely different person from the girl she’d once been.

That, or Alya had misjudged her all these years. Severely so.

“Actually, speaking of our not-so-secret identities,” Chloe said, “I should probably tell you that Luka knows mine. Has for a while, apparently. I have no idea how, but I’d bet money it’s somehow Pollen’s fault.”

Marinette’s jaw dropped. “Pollen told him?! Is that even legal? Like, in kwami rules?”
“I don’t know, but the fact is he knows about me. I don’t think he knows about you or Adrien, but he was pretty shaken up when I left tonight.” Chloe pursed her lips. “He’s still at the hotel waiting for me to get back.”

“Huh,” Alya said. “No wonder he was all over Queen Bee during the Fumigator fight. I suspected as much at the time.”

“He what?!” Marinette was beside herself.

Chloe flushed. “…Actually, that does make sense in retrospect. Damnit, Luka.”

“Hey, you should text him,” Alya said, ignoring Marinette. “Let him know you’re okay. By now, some version of the fight’s going to be all over the news, and knowing him, he’ll worry himself into an early grave.”

Chloe frowned, but she was already pulling out her phone. “And say what? ‘Hey babe, sorry to run out on you, but my best friend went all Freddy Kruger on my ass and I was almost murdered by an angry Ladyblogger, but other than that everything’s fine.’”

“You can’t tell him that!” Marinette said unhelpfully.

Alya rested her chin on her clasped hands. “Yeah, that’s a little too visual. Just cut out the part about Freddy Kruger and let him know you’re staying here.”

“Oh my god,” Marinette said. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

Chloe ignored Marinette. “Since when am I staying here?”

Alya shrugged. “Well, it’s not Le Grand Paris, but I know for a fact that Marinette keeps a stash of Tom Dupain originals in the cupboard, so you won’t go hungry.”

And then, the strangest thing happened. Chloe actually looked intimidated. “But I’d be intruding.”

Alya’s expression fell.

“Chloe, of course you’re not intruding,” Marinette said. “You’re my friend, my partner. How could you ever think that?”

*Because I made her think that.*

Alya felt queasy with guilt and shame. And why? It was Chloe Bourgeois, the high school bully who’d been nothing but cold at best, nasty at worst when they were teenagers. But they weren’t teenagers anymore. And even in the throes of akumatized madness, Alya remembered the look on Chloe’s face when Ladybug threw herself in between them like a meat shield, the incredulity that anyone, least of all Ladybug, would sacrifice herself to save her. Almost like she didn’t believe she was worth saving.

Alya hesitated too long, and Chloe rose out of her chair. “I should get going, actually. I’ll just call a ride share or something. Pollen’s still recovering, so…”

“What? No way, you should stay. Tikki’ll take care of Pollen,” Marinette said.

“Marinette, really—”

“I want you to stay. Please, I’d feel so much better with you here.”
Chloe bit her lip, and inevitably her gaze fell to Alya. “I’m not—”

“I think you should stay,” Alya said suddenly.

“…You do?”

Alya nodded. “Yeah, I do. It’d make me feel better, too, knowing I’ve got both Ladybug and Queen Bee watching out for me.”

Chloe still did not look convinced, and Alya could not help but feel bad. She’d really blown it tonight, hadn’t she? Marinette looked as uncomfortable as Alya felt, and she knew she had to make this right. If not for herself, then for Chloe. No one deserved to feel like they weren’t worth saving.

“I mean, on Wednesdays we wear pink, but today’s Saturday, so I guess you can still sit with us,” Alya said.

“Seriously?” Chloe said, caught halfway between shock and awe, for which Alya could not help but congratulate herself.

“With an alter-ego named ‘Queen Bee’ you can’t tell me you didn’t see that one coming,” Alya said.

Chloe smirked. “Fair enough.”

“So you’ll stay?” Marinette asked, her big, blue eyes wide with hope.

“Well, since you’re practically begging me here…” Chloe fired off a quick text to Luka, who responded instantly. “He’s not happy I’m not coming home tonight, but he understands.” She sighed and put her phone away.

“Wait, what exactly did you tell him?”

“Nothing about you or Adrien, don’t worry. But after tonight, it’s going to be impossible to keep all this from him. He has enough of it figured out that it’ll be pointless to lie to him. And honestly? I really don’t want to.”

Chloe’s words hung in the air, and no one had the courage (or naïveté) to deny them.

Marinette slumped back in her chair and hung her head. “This is so crazy. Yesterday, everything was fine, and now…”

“No, yesterday everything was the opposite of fine,” Alya said. “Yesterday, I had no idea what kind of danger my best friend was in. Marinette, I know you’re in a lot of pain right now. Believe me, I get it. This feels like a hopeless situation. But you have to know that going it alone was never the answer. So Luka knows, and I know, and maybe tomorrow someone else will know. I don’t know. But I do know that for every person you trust with your secret, that’s one more person in your corner who’ll support you.” She looked at Chloe. “You said so yourself—you need more help in whatever form it comes. So how about you just let it happen?”

“She’s right,” Chloe said. “I think it’s pointless to deny it any longer. We do need help, Marinette. If Mayura’s not around to give it, then we need to find it elsewhere. Maybe it starts here, with Alya and Luka.”

Marinette nodded numbly. “I’m sorry, you guys, I just can’t get over how dangerous this is. Alya, if anything were to happen to you because of my secret, I could never forgive myself.”
“I know,” Alya said. “But that’s not really your decision to make; it’s mine. My life, my choice. And I choose to help and support you. I’ll always choose that.”

Marinette smiled sadly and hugged Alya. “I don’t deserve you.”

“I beg to differ.” Alya smiled and let herself hug and be hugged. It felt warm and safe, and after tonight, she could do with a little warm and safe.

Marinette extricated one of her arms and tugged Chloe over. Chloe hadn’t expected it and ended up landing on the couch practically on top of them. She squawked in protest, and Alya instinctively tried to pull away, but Marinette locked them in with an arm around each of their necks.

“I don’t deserve such amazing friends,” Marinette said, her voice muffled by the cosmic power that was Chloe’s hair. “But I’m so happy you’re both here.”

For a few, transient moments, Alya relaxed and felt Chloe relax as the three of them awkwardly cuddled on Marinette’s sofa, the half-empty tequila bottle forgotten.

Chat Blanc did not return to Agreste Mansion after fleeing the fight with Ladybug and Queen Bee. Instead, he found himself at his former apartment-turned-crime scene. Police tape still cordoned off the front door, but the balcony was open to anyone with super powers, and the locked sliding door was no impediment to his claws. Once inside, he collapsed to his hands and knees, exhausted and agonized from his many wounds. His head felt like someone had taken an iron peg to it and was steadily hammering it deeper into his skull. Even now, under the waves of grey flooding his consciousness, he could feel fingers grasping for purchase, a voice howling to be heard, to reclaim some semblance of control. Seeing Chloe under Queen Bee’s mask had given it a handhold, and it was taking everything he had to beat it back into submission. If it grabbed ahold of him, if it gained some traction, then it would throw open the floodgates and sweep him away. And he was not ready to face what lay beneath.

The Miraculous Ring chirped its final warning, and magenta light flashed around him as his super suit dissolved into nothing. Gagging, Adrien pressed his fingers into one of the deeper gashes Queen Bee had torn open in his skin until he could feel his blood gushing over his knuckles. He gasped in pain and saw stars, and he clung to them desperately. The voice in his head begging for mercy faded beneath the waves, and there was only the agony left, predictable and all-consuming and entirely his. Shaking, he leaned into it until the physical overwhelmed the mental. Things were so much simpler this way.

He couldn’t say how long he stayed that way, hunched on the floor of his ruined, dark apartment beaten and bloody, but it must not have been long. Soon enough, Ladybug’s magic found him and fixed him, just as it must have fixed Alya and the three city blocks they had torn asunder in their fight. Adrien gasped for breath on the floor, feeling hollow as even the physical pain slipped through his fingers, leaving him with nothing.

His migraine had dulled to a manageable ache, almost negligible. Getting to his feet, he couldn’t help but chuckle hoarsely—betcha didn’t see that one coming, my lady.

Magenta eyes glowed in the darkness as Adrien surveyed the trappings of his former life. The police had combed the living room with a fine-toothed comb searching for evidence relating to Gabriel Agreste’s murder, and the crime scene cleaners had not yet been through here. Dirty footprints marred the living room carpet around the shattered coffee table where officers had come and gone.
repeatedly. The sofas were shredded to hell, their down guts exposed like some kind of prolific fungus slowly devouring the cushions. There was blood on the carpet, on the sofa, a spattering on the walls, and a thick, musty puddle of it on the hardwood floor. Adrien loomed over this spot, eyes hooded and jaw tight. This was where his father had breathed his last.

“I thought I might find you here.”

Adrien glanced at his visitor over his shoulder. “Checking up on me?”

Butterfly approached, cane in hand and coattails fluttering behind him like folded wings. Unlike his predecessor, he wore no steel helm. Instead, a spectral domino mask covered his eyes and the entire right side of his face to the jawline. “In a sense. I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

Adrien stared at him, this man who was more of a mystery to him than even his father had been. A part of him wanted to project his hatred and scorn for Gabriel and Hawk Moth onto him. Another part wanted to flee from him and never look back. And a small, pitiful part of him begged to turn, to listen, to take the only hand reaching for him. Instead, Adrien looked away, unmoved.

“I’m fine.”

Butterfly slowly approached, his cane clacking on the hardwood floor. There was a flash of bright, lavender light, and a bare hand came down on Adrien’s shoulder, warm but heavy. “Adrien.”

Adrien had the instinctual urge to brush off the touch, but he swallowed it. “What did you really come here for, Felix?”

Felix walked around him, his hand never leaving Adrien’s shoulder. “Ladybug’s magic healed you, then.”

“Felix, you didn’t come here to check on my health,” Adrien said, baring his teeth. “What do you want?”

Felix studied him. It was uncanny how much he resembled Gabriel. Adrien was surprised he hadn’t put it together before Felix, as Aramis, called him to his home the morning after the Fumigator fight and revealed everything to him. It was Felix who had unleashed Pravala on Paris, Felix who had taken the Butterfly Miraculous for himself, and Felix who had killed Gabriel. His own brother.

Adrien’s uncle.

Plagg’s former Chosen.

And suddenly, everything made sense—why Gabriel had moved him to New York fourteen years ago, why the attacks started soon after Adrien returned to Paris and took up the mantle of Chat Noir again, why Aramis Legrand had sought him out. Felix had been waiting, planning, biding his time as he built his empire. And now, he was ready to strike.

“You understand why I had to eliminate him,” Felix said, glancing at the old blood on the floor. “A life for a life. My relationship with him had nothing to do with you.”

Adrien remained silent. There was hardly anything to say. His father had been Hawk Moth, a villain who had terrorized Paris and literally caused the most traumatic experience of Adrien’s adolescent life. And even then, his father was the man he had always been: cold, distant, and cruelly unaware of Adrien’s life-long mental and emotional struggles. At the end of the day, Gabriel Agreste’s passing was as inevitable as it was mundane, like paying taxes or changing the car oil. After the shock had passed, and the fury after it, there was only a familiar emptiness, a void that Adrien had long ago stopped trying to fill in. There was no longer any point.
He was free now, as much from his father as from himself.

“I know,” Adrien said, because it was what Felix wanted to hear.

“Good. Because you know I only want things to work out between us. There’s no reason we can’t both get what we want.”

“I told you I would get you Ladybug’s Miraculous—after I’ve dealt with her on my terms.”

“And I have no doubt that you will. But I have to ask—why didn’t you simply take it tonight when you alone with her?”

Adrien stared at him. His headache remerged with teeth, but he ignored it. He didn’t have to ask why Felix knew he’d been alone with Ladybug tonight, or how. The fact that he knew was all the answer Adrien needed. Felix smiled as he watched Adrien process this revelation.

“Funny thing, an akuma,” he said, tapping a finger to the coral-caged pin at his throat. “It doesn’t bestow, it bridges. Like shared pain, in a way. I could feel Invidia’s jealousy and pain when she saw Queen Bee’s mask melt away and reveal Chloe Bourgeois.” He let that hang a moment, and then: “And when she desperately called for her best friend, Marinette.”

Adrien moved so fast, he didn’t even realize he was moving until he was already up against the wall with Felix in the middle. His hand was fast around Felix’s throat, and his magenta eyes boiled with seething rage the way a feral animal would rage at anything encroaching on its territory.

“Are you threatening me?” Adrien hissed.

“Merely sharing information.”

“We had a deal.” Adrien tightened his grip on Felix’s throat, but still the older man did not struggle.

“And I have every intention of honoring it. Kill me now, and you’ll never get what you want.”

Adrien blinked. Every instinct in him screamed at him to rip Felix apart, to transform and sink his claws into him, tear a hole through him just as he’d torn a hole through Gabriel—

“I gave you my word,” Felix said. “I won’t go after Ladybug, no matter how easy it would be now that I know her true identity.”

A pause.

Adrien slowly retracted his claws from around Felix’s throat and stepped back. He was on high alert, searching for any signs of hostility. The beast in him bellowed for blood, but the voice buried in the deep begged for caution.

“And Queen Bee,” Adrien said through gritted teeth. “She’s off limits.”

Felix rubbed his abused throat but somehow managed to look entertained. “Queen Bee wasn’t part of our deal.”

“She is now.”

At length, Felix said, “Very well. I’ll ensure Pravala gets the message. But she won’t be pleased, and I dislike upsetting her.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”
Felix’s eyes flashed with something dangerous, and without meaning to, Adrien took a step back. “Careful, Adrien. You’re my blood, but you will know your place. Pravala has room in her heart for only one Agreste. Take care not to antagonize her, or I fear even I won’t be able to protect you.”

*Let her come,* he wanted to say. But even a seasoned predator knows when to bow his head in the face of the bigger monster.

“Now then, about my price for Queen Bee’s safety.”

Adrien narrowed his eyes. “I already agreed to hand over the Ladybug and Black Cat Miraculous when I’m finished.”

“That was in exchange for Ladybug’s safety.”

Adrien snorted. “What happened to the family discount?”

“Believe me, we would not be having this conversation if you were anyone else.” Felix walked past him and examined the shattered coffee table. “I have every intention of being quite generous with you. I promised you total transparency. I intend to honor that promise. After all, you’re a part of my vision now. I’d like you by my side when this is all over.”

*Why do you want my Miraculous?* Adrien had demanded of him when they met as their true selves that first morning.

*For the same reason your father wanted it,* Felix had said.

“What reason is that?”

*The only reason to covet any form of power: to trade it for something precious.*

Felix had promised him transparency, but Adrien could not have cared less about his true motivations or desires. A part of him was curious, needed to know, banged on the walls and hollered to be heard in the depths that he should care. But that voice was becoming easier to silence and ignore. He imagined smothering it, brick by brick, watching the cement dry in the cracks as it sealed off even the air that lent it breath with which to scream. And if he rapped on that brick wall, all he heard was an echo.

“What do you want?” Adrien asked.


It wasn’t a question. Adrien said nothing.

“Go to him. Kill him if you must, but make sure you destroy the Miraculous he guards. There should be two: the Turtle and the Fox.”

“Even if I had the power, why would you want them destroyed?”

“Your Cataclysm has the power. Maybe not before, but as you are now…” Felix glanced at him askance. “You’re strong, Adrien. And you may not realize it, but you grow stronger every day. A benefit of confining your kwami to its Miraculous.” He tapped his own Miraculous.

“That doesn’t explain why you’d want them destroyed. Why not use them?”

“A king may use his sons to help him conquer his kingdom, but eventually they will want their chance to rule in his place. And I’m not the only one looking to conquer.”
“You think Ladybug will try to activate them to pad her ranks.”

“It’s a risk I don’t plan on taking, now or ever.”

Adrien wondered what that meant for him, and even for Pravala. After all, they also wielded Miraculous, and whatever his bargain with Felix, Adrien had no intention of being discarded or disinherited. But that was tomorrow’s battle.

He closed his fingers around his Miraculous Ring. “Fine. I’ll take care of it in the morning.”

“You’ll take care of it tonight.” It was not a request.

Adrien clenched his fists so hard, his nails pierced his palms. With his heightened sense of smell in his perpetual demi-Miraculous state, he could smell the sharp, coppery tang of fresh blood. His pupils shrank, and the hair on the back of his neck rose on end.


Felix nodded and turned to leave. He paused at the open balcony door and transformed in a burst of lavender light. He approached the railing but abruptly halted, as if stunned, and reached above the doorway. In his hand was a peacock feather, which he stared at briefly before casting an unreadable glance in Adrien’s direction. Before Adrien could ask about it, Butterfly closed his gloved hand around the feather, crushing it.

“Goodnight, Adrien,” he said, an edge to his voice that had not been there before.

He leaped over the railing and disappeared into the night.

Alya found Nino cooking when she made it home the next morning. He had his Beats headphones on as he hunched over the griddle making pancakes for brunch. He didn’t hear her come in.

Alya planted a quick kiss on his cheek, and he immediately stopped his cooking, removed his headphones, and gave her his full attention. “Babe, you’re back!”

“And in need of a shower,” Alya said.

“Wait, about last night—”

“I’ll just be a few minutes.” Alya was already halfway through their bedroom door before he could stop her, and she closed the door behind her and locked it. Then, she let out the breath she’d been holding.

Home for five fucking minutes, and I can’t even keep a straight face around him!

Alya would have slapped herself if it wouldn’t have been absolutely ridiculous. She was an investigative journalist, for crying out loud. Her job was keeping secrets. But one endearing look from Nino melted her? Really?

She decided to ignore the problem until after brunch. That should give her enough time to figure out how in the hell she was going to drop the biggest bomb on him without him losing his shit. Nino rarely lost his shit over anything, but something told Alya that learning about her getting akumatized, Adrien trying to strangle Marinette to death, and all of them nearly being ripped apart by the embodiment of one of the Seven Deadly Sins was going to come on a little strong.
While showering, Alya got a flurry of texts from Marinette and Chloe, who had agreed to keep her in the loop now that they were all on the same page about certain revealing information.

This morning when they’d woken on the living room floor after their odd sleepover, Chloe remembered a man she referred to as Master Fu, the so-called Guardian tasked with guarding other magical Miraculous. Now that they knew Adrien had gone rogue, it was possible that Fu was in danger, and he needed to be warned. Chloe had promised to group text Marinette and Alya about whatever she found out, while Marinette headed to Agreste Mansion in search of clues about Adrien’s current whereabouts.

[Chloe: The place was ransacked, like a tornado blew threw. Police are still investigating.]

[Marinette: And Master Fu? Any sign?]

[Chloe: None.]

[Marinette: Shit. This is bad. Right, this is super bad? Where could he be? Is he okay?]

[Chloe: Just talked to Henri. No signs of foul play. Looks like a thief broke in to rob the place, but no blood or other signs of a fight.]

[Marinette: Oh my god.]

[Marinette: Someone broke in??]

[Marinette: Wait you don’t think Chat did something.]

[Chloe: Don’t know. Want to think no. Adrien would never, but Chat Blanc might.]

[Marinette: I’m at Agreste Mansion now but no sign of him.]

[Marinette: Crap this is so so bad.]

Alya read through the texts and typed out her own reply.

[Alya: If no sign of Master Fu, maybe he wasn’t home when it happened.]

[Alya: Was anything stolen?]

Chloe was quick to respond.

[Chloe: Henri’s questioning the neighbors if they saw anything. Not sure if anything was taken yet. Will keep you posted.]

[Marinette: Me too. I’ll keep looking for Adrien. We have to find him before he does anything stupid.]

Alya put her phone away and forced herself to focus on cleaning up. She didn’t know Fu, but she knew how much he meant to both Marinette and Chloe. She hoped for their sakes that the old man was okay.

Twenty minutes later, Alya was showered, dressed in comfy loungewear, and seated at the breakfast table across from Nino, a stack of pancakes in between them.

“Pass the syrup,” Alya said, already reaching for it.
Nino passed it. “Alya, we gotta talk.”

“Hm?”

“Obviously about last night.”

_Shit._ She was not ready to have this conversation just yet. “What about last night?”

“Uh, I dunno, maybe the fact that you were in the same area where Ladybug was fighting some akumatized people? Maybe you recall the massive earthquake we felt all the way over here?”

Alya smeared butter on her pancakes. “Oh, yeah, that.”

“Yeah, that? C’mon, Alya. You can do better than that.”

Alya chewed on her food. Damn if it wasn’t delicious. Nino deserved a kiss for this. A long, handsy, _leggy_ kiss. “This is so good. Can we just finish eating first?”

Nino was not impressed. “They said some kind of sea monster attacked, like some _20,000 Leagues Under the Sea_-meets-tentacle porn kind of monster. And some were saying Queen Bee lost her wings, and even Chat Noir went berserk or something. _Alya._” Nino reached across the table and snatched her hand. “You were right there. If I’d known last night, I would’ve come right over. I mean, shit, you get why I’m freakin’ out over here, right?”

Alya squeezed his hand back, realizing her mistake. “I’m sorry. I’m okay, really, see? I’m so sorry I worried you.”

Nino sighed. “Yeah, I know. Look, it’s just kind of _seriously_ scary hearing all that on the news this morning at once. I mean, with all the coralized people running around, and now Hawk Moth, you know… I just got really scared. We’re living in some wild times, and I just get this creepy feeling like none of us is really safe or somethin’.”

Alya studied him. Perhaps she should just come clean now, no point in prolonging the inevitable. Nino looked like he was slowly losing his mind. “Nino, there’s something… I’m not sure how to tell you this, to be honest, but I really need to. I was going to wait until after brunch, but…”

“What’s up? You okay?”

“Yeah! I’m fine. I mean, well, actually, I’m not sure if I’m _fine_-fine, you know?”

“Babe, what’re you talking about?”

Alya bit her lip. She tightened her grip on his hand. “There’s something I have to tell you. And I need you to believe me.”

“Believe you.”

“No matter how crazy it sounds.”

“Crazy, right.”

“You’re definitely going to think it’s crazy, and I get that. I kind of still think it’s crazy, to be honest.”

“Alya, you’re starting to freak me out. What’s wrong?”
“It’s… It’s about Adrien.”

Before Nino could respond to that, the doorbell rang. Alya held Nino’s gaze in question, but he just shrugged. They both got up and went to the door. Nino answered it as Alya hung back and peered around his shoulder.

An old, Chinese man stood in the doorway clad in an oversized parka with a woolen hat and a large roller suitcase. His dark eyes were bloodshot, and his face was drawn, as if he had greatly overexerted himself. Alya did not recognize, but Nino did.

“Master Fu! Hey, I remember you,” Nino said.

Fu smiled. “Hello, Nino. It is good to see you again.”

Alya’s jaw dropped. “Master Fu? Wait…”

The old man glanced at her huddling behind Nino. “You must be Alya Césaire. I have heard such lovely things about you.”

Before Alya could ask what the hell was even happening here, Nino stepped back. “Uh, hey, you wanna come in? I mean, it’s cold out there and all, you know?”

“Thank you, that would be most welcome.”

Fu came inside and shook the light layer of snow from his jacket and boots in the tiny foyer, while Alya and Nino gave him some space.

“Master Fu,” Alya found her voice. “Marinette and Chloe have been looking for you all morning.”

The old man smiled tiredly. “Yes, I imagine they have been. I’ve probably worried them so much with my unplanned absence. I suppose I should have given Chloe’s cell phone suggestion a bit more credence…”

Now that Alya got a look at him, Fu appeared bedraggled and tired, as if he’d been up all night. Come to think of it, Chloe had mentioned that there was no sign of a struggle at his home. Before Alya could ask, though, Nino was already leading Fu into the living room.

“Uh, sorry, do you guys know each other?” he asked.

“Not personally, no,” Fu said. “Only by reputation. But that’s why I’m here.”

“To see Alya?”

“To see you both, actually. I came to see you first, Nino, but to think that you would be together… Well, after all, those two always manage to draw the worthy into their most intimate circles. I should have expected no differently from this generation.”

Alya drew up to Fu and looked him in the eye. “Listen, Master Fu, Chloe and Marinette have been out of their minds worried about you all morning. I’m not sure if you’re aware, but there was a break-in at your home sometime last night. Chloe’s there now with the police. I think you better give them a call and let them know you’re okay.”

She held out her cell phone to Fu, but he did not accept it. “I anticipated as much.” He scrutinized Alya. “It seems you know much.”

“I do.”
“Then you’ll understand why I cannot contact Chloe and Marinette just yet.” He closed his hand over Alya’s and gently pushed her cell phone back. “Unfriendly eyes and ears are all around us in the most unexpected places.”

_Adrien._

She hated that he was her first thought. Nonetheless, she pocketed her phone. “All right.”

“Hold up,” Nino said. “What’s going on? Who’s unfriendly? And did you say a break-in? Dude, are you in some kinda trouble or something?”

Fu gestured. “May I?”

Alya and Nino escorted the old man to their living room, where they offered him pancakes and coffee. He politely declined, and instead bent over his suitcase and unzipped it.

“I understand that you both have questions, which I will be happy to answer in due time. To answer yours, Nino, I myself am not in trouble. In truth, I matter very little. But that’s where you come in.”

Nino looked at Alya in concern, which was highly appropriate considering a strange, old man had come over unannounced after what was almost certainly a night spent on the run.

“I admit, this has been on my mind for some weeks now,” Fu said as he lifted the grey plastic shell of his suitcase. “But it was not until Chloe spoke honestly with me yesterday that I realized just how dire the situation had become. Leave it to Courage to show this old man the dangers of excess caution, after all…”

“Okay, seriously. What’s going on? Why do I feel like I’m the only one in the dark here?” Nino said.

“Nino, that thing I was about to tell you before…”

“You mean about Adrien? Did… Did something happen to him? Is that why he’s here? Alya, you’re seriously starting to freak me out.”

Fu lifted an ornate, wooden box out of his suitcase, unlocked it, and set it on the dining room table. “Here we are.”

Alya peered at the cache within. It looked like a jewelry box, lacquered wood and very old, possibly antique. Within lay two delicate pieces of jewelry: an amber and mother-of-pear necklace and a jade bracelet.

“Alya Césaire and Nino Lahiffe,” Fu said. “You have been chosen.”

“Chosen for what?” Nino was beginning to grow uncomfortable.

“For the most noble calling of all, should you prove worthy.”

Alya could not take her eyes off the teardrop necklace, and without thinking, she plucked it from the box. The amber was warm to the touch, as if it had recently spent time near a fire—or as if it radiated the heat itself. As soon as her fingers made contact with the delicate piece, it vibrated and warmed even more in her hand, and began to glow.

“What the hell?” Nino said.

Alya was blinded by a flash of bright, orange light, and she gasped. It was gone as suddenly as it had appeared, and in its place was a tiny, floating creature with thick, orange fur, pointed ears, and
intelligent eyes. Its tail—or tails, perhaps, it was difficult to tell—undulated and shimmered with heat and seemed to fade in and out of focus.

“Well, well, well,” said the fox creature in a distinctly feminine voice, almost sultry, as she bared her tiny fangs at Alya. “Don’t you look delicious?”

Alya stared, Fu smiled, and Nino hit the floor with a low thud, out cold.

Chapter End Notes

What do you get when you mix a dogged investigative journalist with an insatiably curious, mischievous fox spirit? Nino fainting is probably a logical start.

In other news, I watched the Queen’s Battle episode specials recently, and oh my god. Malediktator. You guys… If anyone reading this has even a remotely passing interest in Chloe (and if you’ve come this far in my fic, I imagine you do), please watch it and appreciate the truly fabulous (and earned) character growth they finally gave her.

Anyway.

Sorry for the long wait on this update. I’m on a crazy deal at work that’s sucking up all my nights and weekend time lately. Being a lawyer is cool but often hectic, and unfortunately fanfic doesn’t count toward my billables. Rest assured I am actively working on this fic and plan to finish before the year’s end, which I think is a realistic goal at this point. Thanks so much for all the comments and kudos!!! This fic now has over 100 subscriptions, which is astounding to me. You guys blow me away with your support! It truly means the world to me.

Next time: Where in the world is Mayura?
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Have some DJWiki/kwami banter and ChloLuka fluff because goddamnit we deserve it after the last few chapters. Also, like, plot I guess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Manon sighed and sank deeper into her hands as she leaned listlessly over the register. *Marinette Designs* was slower than it had ever been, and Manon had been lucky to see a couple women pause and glance at the display before ultimately moving on. They hadn’t even come inside. Neglected dresses collected dust on the racks, and Manon wondered how long it would take her to count the specks. At least it would be something. Alphonse was in meetings all day, Marinette was out again doing god knows what (not training her favorite intern, how dare), the staff had their work for the spring preview to keep them occupied, and poor Manon had nothing better to do than man the boutique. Which would have been fine if it wasn’t so damn slow.

She considered texting Marinette again, but the last response she’d gotten was a vague “I don’t know” when Manon asked if she would be in today. There wasn’t even any studying to do now that her final exams were finished and everyone was on an extended winter break from classes. She was supposed to be here learning how to be the next Coco Chanel, but until Marinette decided to get her butt back here and actually work, Manon was stuck behind the register.

Bored out of her mind and alone in the small boutique, Manon dragged herself out of her chair and wandered to a nearby dress rack. She ran her fingers over a violet satin gown, relishing the soft fabric and marveling at the hand stitching. One of the other seamstresses had put this together, but the design had been hers. Well, the first draft had been hers, and Marinette had taken her pen to the baseline like a surgeon wielding a scalpel. The end product was a Marinette original, but little details of Manon’s initial idea still shone through in the transformed design. It had hurt a little to see her design so brutally dissected and turned inside out, but Marinette made sure to praise her instincts. Manon had a lot to learn, but Marinette promised that she had the raw talent—now she just needed the experience to hone it.

Manon slipped the dress from the rack, held it against her chest, and twirled the skirt.

“That color is lovely on you.”

Manon gasped and dropped the dress on the floor. “Oh, shit!” She scrambled to gather it up before it could get dirty, but in her fluster, the fabric slipped through her fingers like water.

Two larger hands grasped the fabric gently and rose with her to pull it up, and Manon found herself staring into the face of the one person who was probably more important than Alphonse and Marinette put together.

“M-M-Mr. Legrand!”

Aramis Legrand smiled and reached for a hanger on the rack. “I seem to have startled you, my
apologies.”

Manon shook her head vigorously. “No! Not at all! I mean, yes, a little. But that’s fine! Super fine!”

He merely laughed politely at her antics and smoothly slipped the dress back on the rack. “Forgive me, I seem to have forgotten your name, Miss…?”

“Miss Manon,” Manon said. “I-I mean, just Manon! No ‘Miss’, obviously. Oh crap…” She slapped her hand over her mouth, eyes wide and twin tails bobbing nervously. “I mean—”

He put a hand up. “Please, Manon, take a breath. I’m as human as you are, there’s no need to be nervous.”

*Yeah, human and obscenely wealthy and important and my boss’s boss.*

So relatable.

She decided to stop acting like such a twat and took a breath before she embarrassed herself further. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I just wasn’t expecting you. Alphonse didn’t mention you’d be stopping by. I can get him for you if you like?”

“Thank you, but I’m actually here to see Marinette.”

“Oh! Of course, right.” *Duh, Manon, you nutcase. Just stop talking already.* “Actually, Marinette’s not in right now.”

Aramis’s charming smile fell. “I see. Do you know when she’ll be back? It’s very important that I speak with her.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t. I texted her earlier, but she’s been out and basically unresponsive. Probably off with her boy toy… I-I mean! Work! I’m sure she’s doing work and not slacking off at all!”

*Shit, way to go, loser. Marinette’s gonna fire you for sure.*

Aramis seemed mildly intrigued and not at all upset at the thought that Marinette may be cutting work to put the F in DTF with her admittedly gorgeous but way too clingy boyfriend.

“I see,” Aramis said, like this all made perfect sense to him. “Well, the heart wants what it wants, as they say.” He winked at her.

Manon blinked. What? Yes, this rich grandpa had just winked at her. It took her a split second to realize that no, it was not a creepy-sexual-predator wink, but a knowing two-can-keep-a-secret wink. It took her another split second to realize that Marinette’s top investor-slash-boss was, in fact, a Chill Dude. She smirked deviously.

“In Marinette’s case, it *really* wants,” Manon said. “But really, I’m sure she’ll be back later today. I can pass along a message if you like?”

“No no, it’s all right. I’d rather speak with her in person.” He paused and looked back at the violet dress Manon had dropped earlier. “Manon… You’re the intern, I remember now. Marinette mentioned you before. You have an interest in fashion design?”

Manon brightened. “I do. I’m at university now, but Marinette gave me this internship so I could get a head start learning about the job.”

“Then you’re very lucky to be learning from her. Tell me, do you have any designs of your own?”
“My own? Oh, well, I mean, I’ve mostly been practicing, and I’m really just a novice…”

“All butterflies were caterpillars before they learned to fly.”

He held her gaze, and something in it bolstered Manon. This was a man who was used to looking inside people and drawing out the blood that made them breathe. Perhaps that was what he’d seen in Marinette. Whatever it was, Manon was feeling it now, and she smiled.

“That violet dress there. Marinette did most of the modifications and polishing, but the original base design was mine.” Uncharacteristically, Manon flushed in embarrassment. “She said it needed a lot of work, but the structure was sound.”

Aramis took the dress from the rack and admired it properly. “Yes, it’s an exquisite piece. That’s quite an accomplishment for your ideas to make it in to the final product. I doubt most interns even get to hold a pen at your age.”

Manon felt like she’d grown wings hearing his praise. “Well, I am Marinette’s favorite intern.”

And her only intern.

But still.

Aramis returned the dress to the rack. “Well then, in that case I look forward to seeing you flourish as a designer in your own right. Who knows? Perhaps one day, I’ll have an opportunity to invest in you.”

Manon could have died right there. It took all her efforts to fight off the urge to squeal like an anime character. Just wait until Marinette heard about this. She’d be so proud!

Aramis excused himself soon after, but before he left, he held out a small, white box to Manon. “I was going to give this to Marinette. A token of my appreciation, in a sense. I had hoped to give it to her personally, but I’m sure you can see that she gets it in my stead.”

Manon accepted the box. “Of course! I’ll keep it here for her.”

“No peeking, now.” He winked again and smiled. “It’s quite fragile.”

He left, and Manon eyed the small box. It was plain and white, not too heavy. What kind of gift could a man like Aramis give to Marinette? She was tempted to shake the box, but remembered what he’d said about it being fragile. Still, curiosity niggled at her. There was a thin seal on the lid that she’d have to break to open it.

Better not.

She carefully placed the small box on a shelf behind the counter, resolved to ignore it until Marinette came back.

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When Nino came to, he was on his back on the floor with his feet raised on Alya’s lap to help the blood flow to his head. The world was blurry as consciousness slowly returned, and he could hear muffled voices.

I had the weirdest dream just now.
You were there, and that wise old zen master.

And there was a miniature, floating, fox demon flirting with you.

“Aw, looks like someone’s jealous,” snickered a sultry voice overhead.

Nino’s vision adjusted, and he came face to face with the offending, flirty, fox demon. She bared her tiny, razor-sharp teeth in a wolfish grin, and Nino jerked hard. He hit his flailing arm on the leg of the table, swore, and rolled over in pain.

“No! Jesus, Trixx, you're scaring him,” said Alya, who dropped his feet and sank down at his side.

“I have that effect on little boys,” said Trixx, a hint of pride in her voice.

“What the hell?” Nino groaned.

Alya helped him sit up. There was Fu looking more concerned than zen at the moment, and the impossible, magical creature with her many shimmering tails taking up residence in Alya’s luxurious hair.

Wait.

“Holy shit, this is real,” Nino said.

Alya put both hands on his shoulders. “Yes, it is. Are you okay? Do you need a minute, babe?”

Nino rubbed his stubbled chin. “I think I need a lot more than that.” His eyes found Trixx again, and she continued to grin at him like he was the next course on a prix fixe menu. He swallowed. “Alya, I need you to explain to me why a fox demon is nesting in your hair.”

Trixx giggled, and Alya frowned. “Okay, first of all, she’s not a demon, she’s a kwami. And this is her—well, my Miraculous.” Alya showed him the necklace she now wore, the curling amber and mother-of-pearl flame.

“Yes, and this one is yours,” Fu said, holding up the lacquered jewelry box with the lone, jade bracelet still tucked inside.

Nino stared between the three of them and shook his head. “Okay, okay, everybody just chill for a sec.”

“I’m feeling very chill,” Fu said unhelpfully. “Perhaps you would like a glass of water, Nino?”

“I’ll get it,” Alya said, getting up.

“I’ll come with,” Trixx said, her golden eyes glittering as if something as banal as retrieving a glass of water held the promise of fun and mischief and, like, maiming probably. Nino was immediately suspicious of her.

Definitely a demon.

Fu fixed Nino with a heavy look. “Nino, I realize this is quite a lot of new information to take in, and that’s difficult for you. Unfortunately, we do not have the luxury of time on our side. As we speak, our enemies gather strength and plot against us.”

“Whoa, back up. What enemies? I don’t have any enemies.”
“You will, as soon as you don the mantle of Miraculous. Ladybug’s enemies will become your enemies.”

“…Okay, so, just in terms of feedback, you’re really not selling me on whatever this is.”

“Please,” Fu interrupted. “Just take the bracelet. I believe Wayzz will accept you, as I know him best, but we must be certain before we go any further.”

Nino was about to protest that no, he absolutely did not want to take jewelry from this old Chinese man, but the moment he laid eyes on the bracelet, he couldn’t look away. Something about it... called to him. God, what a trite way to put it. Bracelets didn’t call; they were inanimate.

“It’s not trite,” Fu said. “It’s Miraculous.”

Nino realized he’d voiced all his thoughts out loud, but at the moment he couldn’t seem to remember why he cared about that as his focus remained fixed on the small bracelet. Slowly, he reached for it just as Alya and Trixx returned with a glass of water each for Fu and him.

The second Nino picked up the bracelet, a flash of emerald light scintillated, and a small, turtle-shaped creature emerged. Dark, knowing eyes met Nino’s, and the turtle cleared his throat.

“Well met, Human. I am Wayzz the Wise, kwami of the Turtle Miraculous, and I accept you as my Guardian and master.”

Nino dropped the bracelet in shock, and Wayzz suddenly faded out of existence.

“Nino!” Alya said.

“Silly boy, he’s as dense as a rock,” said Trixx, floating down to pick up the bracelet. “I guess you are a good match for Wayzz. Catch.”

“What—”

Nino caught the bracelet on instinct, and suddenly Wayzz reappeared looking winded.

“Oh no,” Wayzz said, swaying and clutching his head.

“Whoa, watch out!” Nino caught Wayzz without thinking before he could hit the ground. The turtle—er, kwami—fit snugly in the palm of his hand.

“You must keep the bracelet close to you at all times,” Fu said. “Otherwise, Wayzz could fade from existence on our plane. The Miraculous is his tether, so please be careful with it.”

“I feel faint,” Wayzz said.

Nino lifted him to eye level. “Uh, head rush?”

Wayzz blinked at him. “A rush to the head, yes, I suppose that adequately describes this feeling. Phasing out of existence is a kind of rush.”

“Shit, I’m so sorry. That’s my fault. I didn’t mean to hurt you, little dude.”

“It is fine, Master.”

Nino cringed. “Uh, yeah, no, ’Master’ was my middle school flower arranging instructor. You can just call me ‘Nino’.”
“Wait, you took flower arranging classes?” Alya asked.

Trixx snickered.

“It was very relaxing,” Nino said defensively.

“I’m pleased that Trixx and Wayzz have accepted you both as their Chosen,” Fu said. “Although, seeing as you were already found worthy by Ladybug and Chat Noir, I was confident there would be no problems.”

“Wait, what? Are you saying, like, Ladybug and Chat Noir put you up to this?” Nino jostled Wayzz gently in his hand.

Wayzz cleared his throat. “Not directly, but I suppose you could say they surround themselves with the worthy. Generation after generation, most Miraculous wielders’ lives are closely intertwined.”

“So wait, like… Ladybug and Chat Noir know me? Do I know them?”

He turned on Alya, but she was looking at him with a strange mixture of anticipation and trepidation.

“Babe?”

“So don’t freak out, okay? I just found out myself last night.”

“Found what out?”

Wayzz cleared his throat and used Nino’s thumb to help himself balance. “The ones you know as Marinette Dupain-Cheng and Adrien Agreste are the Ladybug’s and Black Cat’s Chosen.”

Nino stared at Wayzz. Wayzz stared back. Somewhere in the luscious jungle that was Alya’s hair, Trixx wheezed with laughter.

“Tell. Me. Everything.”

Between the two of them, Alya and Fu did tell Nino everything. To his credit, he took it all in in relative silence, absorbing and processing like a cute, Nino-shaped sponge. Trixx had taken quite a liking to Alya’s hair, which was something they were going to have to work on considering its tangled state—and was that smoke she smelled?

“Are you burning my hair?” Alya demanded.

The sly fox kwami giggled. “No, that’s my natural musk. Lovely, isn’t it?”

“Smells like toasted marshmallows,” Nino deadpanned.

“Hmm, I could toast your marshmallows, Human,” Trixx hissed. She phased out of Alya’s hair to hover in between them, and eerie, blue fire flashed in between her many twirling tails.

Alya snatched her out of the air and marveled at the way the flameslicked at her fingers, painless and heatless. “Wow, that’s amazing. How are you doing that?”

Trixx grinned toothily. “Fox fire is illusion magic. I can bend reality to my will. You can, too, when we merge.”
“Lies are not reality, Guile,” Wayzz said. “There are limits to your power, like all of us.”

Trixx harrumphed. “Wisdom, always such a downer. Don’t listen to him, Alya. Reality, illusion, there’s no difference if your prey can’t sense it. What could be more real than perception?”

“Actually, Trixx, since you’ve brought it up, there’s something I’d like you to use your magic for now,” Fu said, holding out a peacock feather.

“What’s that?” Nino asked.

Trixx floated over to the feather and ran her little paw over its dark eye. She bared her teeth in a hiss. “So cold. This hasn’t been activated in weeks. Where is my little sweet pea?”

“Duusu is missing,” Fu said. “As is his Chosen. I was hoping you could help us locate them.”

Trixx narrowed her eyes. “Missing? Surely a competent Guardian would never let such a thing happen.”

“Mayura has been an independent actor for many years,” Wayzz defended his old master. “This one is very different from Duusu’s previous Chosen.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Trixx said, snatching the dormant peacock feather from Fu. She fixed her fierce glare on Nino next. “I hope you’ll prove to be a more competent Guardian, Human. Although, clearly the bar is set very low.”

Wayzz phased in front of Trixx and puffed out his little chest. “That’s enough. The only one to judge my Chosen will be me, and I’ve made my decision. You will accept him as your new Guardian, as I have.”

There was a tense silence as the kwami faced off in which Alya had no idea what to do. But as soon as the tension reached a breaking point, it fizzled out entirely when Trixx nuzzled against Wayzz, her tails wrapping around him and popping with blue shimmers. “Well well, listen to you. That was almost brave. Courage would be so proud of you, Turtledove.”

Amazingly, Wayzz blushed like a tomato. “Do not call me that.”

Nino plucked Wayzz from Trixx’s nine-tailed clutches and drew him back. “I’m just gonna put a stop to…whatever’s going on here.”

“Thank you, Nino,” Wayzz said a little shakily.

Trixx all but sauntered through the air back to Alya and presented her with the feather. “So, are you ready?”

“Ready for what?” Alya asked.

“Why, to bend reality, of course. You didn’t think I’d keep you waiting too long, did you?”

It took Alya a moment to understand what Trixx was saying. “You mean, now? As in, transform like Ladybug?”

Trixx licked her lips. “Oh, I promise, it’s entirely different from Creation’s sugary purity.” She hovered right in front of Alya’s face. “You have a hunger in you. I can smell it, even taste it in your aura.” Her tails shimmered, hypnotic. “You crave answers to your every question. Tell me, what is your deepest wish?”
Alya was pretty sure that somewhere, she’d heard about fox spirits in myths and legends being tricksters, weaving lies to fool the unwitting and lure them into traps. They were mischievous beings, selfish and narcissistic, and always a step ahead of their prey. But what if one was on your side? What kinds of avenues would that open up for her? Alya didn’t know, but damn she wanted to find out.

“The truth,” Alya said. “I want to find the truth of things.”

“Truth.” Trixx seemed to vibrate in anticipation. She held out the peacock feather. “Well then, let’s go and find the little bird.”

Chloe was a ghost on autopilot at work over the next few days. With Pollen still shaken from Chat Blanc’s vicious destruction of her wings and the revelations about Adrien troubling her, Chloe welcomed the distraction of work but couldn’t throw herself into it with her usual gusto. Her staff noticed, and she’d been approached a handful of times about whether she was ill, if she needed to take a vacation (when was the last time she even took a vacation?), if there was anything they could do to help.

“Not unless you have Pravala’s secret identity hidden in those last season pumps,” Chloe grumbled under her breath as the concerned receptionist, her latest interrogator, walked away.

She checked her phone for any new updates from Marinette or Alya, but it was as blank as it had been three minutes ago when she last checked. And then there were Luka’s unanswered texts.

[Hot Luka: I need to talk to you.]

[Hot Luka: Chloe it’s been three days. Please.]

It wasn’t that she was avoiding him. Actually, quite the opposite. He’d been gone by the time she got home after the impromptu sleepover at Marinette’s, jammed with work, and she’d been splitting her time between her day job and as Queen Bee liaising with the police about a certain missing Guardian. Henri had been good about keeping her informed on the status of the investigation, but so far no one had been able to locate Fu. A neighbor said they saw an old man leaving in the middle of the night with a suitcase, leading Chloe to believe that at best, he was unharmed and had gotten out before the vandals had trashed his home.

But what if they’d found him? What if it was Adrien? What if Fu was dead, the Fox and Turtle Miraculous in enemy hands?

Adrien.

Every time she thought of him, she felt sick. Maybe her coworkers were right: she was ill, and she needed a break.

He had disappeared as mysteriously as Fu had. Marinette was leading that front, and so far there had been no sign of Adrien at his home, at his new office, or anywhere he may have turned up in the past. It was as if he’d disappeared off the face of the Earth, but Chloe knew that was a lie. He was out there—Chat Blanc was out there. He was hiding in the bowels of the city, alongside Butterfly and Pravala and whatever new akumatized and coralized victims they forced into servitude. And it was just a matter of time before they resurfaced.

These thoughts haunted Chloe as she walked toward her office, phone in hand and open to Luka’s
old texts from this morning. It was just too much. She needed a fucking break. Yeah, so the world was coming to an end, possibly literally if Pravala and Butterfly got their way, but what good was Chloe running on fumes? If it wasn’t for Marinette and hell, even Alya at this point, she wasn’t sure she’d even be running at all.

Her phone buzzed: a new message from Luka.

[Hot Luka: Please let me help you.]

The screen blurred, and Chloe realized she’d begun to cry. Sniffling and wiping her eyes (thank god for waterproof mascara), she ducked into her office and shut the door. Taking a deep breath, she pressed the call button.

“Hey,” Luka said when he picked up.

“Yes,” Chloe said.

“Yes what?”

“Yes, I want your help.” She sniffled and bit back a fresh sob. “I can’t… I don’t think I can do this anymore. Not like this.”

“I’m coming over.”

“What—now? But you’re booked for the whole week—”

“I don’t care. I’m calling a cab now.”

“You’re in Orléans. A cab to the city will cost you your first born.”

“Then we’ll just have to plan for a big family.”

He was joking at a time like this. Honestly. Still, it worked, and she cracked a smile as she wiped her tears. “Luka… I’m not doing great over here.”

“I know, baby. And I know you wanted me to get out of the city, but this is stupid. You’re Queen Bee. You can protect me.”

Her breath hitched. It was still so strange to hear him say it out loud, to have no secrets between them anymore.

“I may have to ask you to return the favor.”

“You know I’d do anything for you.”

She knew, and it scared the shit out of her. If anything happened to him, she could never forgive herself. But Adrien wouldn’t do that to him. To her. Would he? It terrified Chloe that she honestly did not know anymore. She didn’t know him anymore.

But she did know that if she didn’t see Luka, if she didn’t have someone here to hold her, to tell her she mattered, to believe in her no matter what, she would break down. Even now, she could feel the loss of her wings as Chat Blanc cruelly shredded them to bloody bits. Like a phantom limb, she felt Adrien’s loss, too.

Luka promised he would be back in the city to see her in a few hours, and she just had to get through the rest of her day until then.
Chloe stood there alone in her office in silence for a few minutes. Pollen was resting upstairs in her room, and so when her phone buzzed suddenly, she forgot that the kwami was not here.

“Pollen?” she said, but there was no one there.

Instead, it was a text from Alya.

[Alya: Tracking Mayura. I think I’m close.]

“What the actual fuck?”

[Chloe: How? Where are you?]

A reply came soon after, but not from Alya.

[Marinette: What about Pravala?]

[Alya: Thinking there’s a connection. Mayura disappeared after her fight with Pravala, right? Find one, and I might find the other.]

Chloe did not like the sound of that.

[Chloe: Don’t go after them. Either of them. Seriously Alya it’s not a joke.]

[Alya: I know. I’ll bee careful.]

Chloe’s eyes stung with fresh tears at the attempt at levity. She couldn’t bring herself to respond and pocketed her phone. A mountain of paperwork sat on her desk, a sweetly mind-numbing distraction. She sat down and got to work.

Hours later, Chloe was up in her private suite with Pollen. She stroked Pollen’s fuzzy back, careful around her delicate wings. They were completely back to normal thanks to Tikki’s magic, but Chloe suspected it would be a long time before Pollen herself was completely back to normal. Before either of them was.

“Honey Bee, don’t be sad,” Pollen said.

“I’m not sad, I’m angry.”

“But you’re also sad.” Pollen latched onto her finger in a little hug. “It’s okay to be sad, but it’s better to channel it into something positive. Like stopping Butterfly and Pravala.”

“We’re trying, but we can’t fight what we can’t find. And honestly…I don’t think we can fight them even if we do find them.”

_Not without Mayura, at least._

But where was she? Every day that passed convinced Chloe more and more that something terrible had happened to her. In a weird way, she’d grown fond of Mayura’s brutal brand of training. There was care there, underneath the serious exterior, the kind of care that bred patience and even nurturing. Not for the first time, Chloe wondered who Mayura really was under the glamor. It had to take someone special to spend all this time around someone like her, Chloe would be the first to admit.

“You can,” Pollen said with conviction. “You can do anything.”
“I appreciate the vote of confidence, but I’m only human, even with your help.”

“You’re wrong, Chloe.”

Chloe stared down at Pollen. She never called her by her real name, always insisting on various ridiculous, bee-related pet names.

“You’re so much more than human,” Pollen went on. “You’re my Chosen. You’re Courage incarnate, and there’s nothing you can’t do if you believe in yourself.”

Heat stung Chloe’s eyes as she found herself beginning to tear up for the second time that day. “It’s a little hard to believe in myself these days,” she said, her voice shaky and soft.

“I know. But I believe in you. So does Marinette. And even if it’s hard to accept right now, I know Adrien believes in you, too. Do you remember I told you that my Miraculous is the strongest of them all?”

Chloe sniffled. “Yeah, but—”

“No buts. Ladybug and Chat Noir are strong in a different way. They have each other. But we’re strong because we don’t, and that doesn’t scare us. Courage, the true courage, is the power to face your fears head on, never waver, and fight for what you want to protect. The others, they depend on us to be brave when they can’t be. Like Marinette’s depending on you now. She’s lost a part of herself, and she’s hurting.” Pollen laid her little foot on Chloe’s hand. “She needs you to be brave now more than ever.”

“But I’m hurting, too,” Chloe said, all pretenses of being tough gone. “How can I be brave when my best friend is so lost?”

“Because you’re a queen, and right now, your king is under siege and can’t win the game without you. Because you’re needed. And because no matter how much it hurts right now, you haven’t failed. You can never fail as long as you keep trying.”

Chloe bit her lip to distract herself from her tears. “You really believe all that? You really…about me?”

“Of course I do, Sweetness. I told you: I chose you, and I’m picky. There’s no one I’d rather bestow with my amazing powers and gifts.”

Chloe smiled and clutched Pollen close to her chest. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Pollen.”

Pollen clutched her shirt. “I get that a lot.”

“I’m being serious right now.”

“Me too.”

Chloe laughed. “God, you’re impossible.”

“Hey, Honey Bee?”

“Hm?”

“I love you.”
Chloe smiled and hugged Pollen close. “I love you, too.”

She was rewarded with Pollen’s happy buzzing. Not long after, Luka knocked on her door. Even though it had only been a few days, Chloe could not believe how much she’d missed him, how much she’d longed to feel his arms around her. For all her power, she had never felt safer than in the arms of her un-Miraculous boyfriend.

“I’m sorry,” she said when they’d settled in her living room with a blanket and Pollen on Luka’s lap.

“For what?” Luka asked as he absentely rubbed Pollen’s head with a finger as she dozed.

“For everything, I guess. For running out on you. For not coming home. For telling you to leave Paris with the band. For keeping all these secrets. Just… everything.”

“Hey, slow down. I get it. Chloe, look at me. I get it.”

Chloe studied him. “I don’t understand you.”

“What’s not to understand?”

“Everything. Why you. Why me. Why you’re still here.” She took his hand and ran her thumb over his knuckles. “I’m glad you’re here, but… I don’t know. I don’t understand you.”

He brushed his fingers over her cheek, still a little red from her crying earlier. “I think you do, though.”

“I do?”

He smiled softly, and the affection in his dark eyes melted her. It was a look she had rarely seen, least of all from men in pursuit. “Do you want me to say it?”

Chloe was sure half of Paris could hear her heart thundering in her chest. This feeling was like nothing she’d ever felt before, at once terrifying and exhilarating, the feeling of weightlessness right before free-falling, the ground rushing up to meet her. With everything going to hell in her life, she’d had very little time or energy to dwell on it, but now there was no escaping it. It was here between them, in the air around them, in his half-lidded eyes that saw her, all of her, and couldn’t look away.

Don’t look down, her father had told her as he held her close on his lap for her first helicopter ride. But Chloe had looked down the whole way, and instead of being paralyzed by the crippling fear of a child first facing her own mortality, she’d reached for it. Vertigo was a game of chicken.

“Yes,” Chloe said, dared, feared, hoped.

Luka ran his fingers through her long bangs around her neck, his thumb caressing the smooth line of her jaw. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

He shifted, unfolding like pieces of armor, each carefully and methodically peeled back to expose the vulnerable flesh beneath. He was so close that she felt his warm breath on her lips, and she could see nothing else.

“Chloe,” he said, a smile in his eyes. “You’re the most incredible woman I’ve ever met. I’m so in love with you that I can’t even remember knowing love before you.”

No one, least of all Chloe, was brave enough to face such a raw and pure declaration and survive it
in one piece. But damn if she wouldn’t try.

Fighting back tears and clutching Luka’s shirt, Chloe looked up at him. “I’m… I mean, I—” Her throat clenched and she fought to steady her breathing. “Oh my god.”

“It’s okay,” he whispered, kissing her lips, her cheeks, gentle yet ardent, and Chloe could not believe she hadn’t realized his true feelings much sooner.

“Oh my god,” she said again, pressing her face into his shoulder and holding on. “I’m so in love with you.”

As soon as she said it, she knew it was true. She couldn’t pinpoint exactly when or how, but the when and how didn’t matter so long as it was true. She was so in love with Luka that she couldn’t imagine not loving him, not knowing him. How had she gone for so long without this? Like seeing in color after a lifetime of muted grey, or the first breath after drowning, or free falling watching the ground rush to meet her, only to grow wings and fly.

Chloe had never felt braver in all her life than when she was honest with him, and she laughed as she cried.

“It’s okay,” Luka said again. “I’m here for you. I got you.”

In between them, Pollen yawned. “Well, it’s about time you declared your fealty to your queen, Hot Luka.”

Chloe laughed and hugged Luka tighter. He scooped up Pollen. “Consider me at your service, both of you.”

Pollen buzzed happily, kissed Chloe’s cheek, and floated off to the tiger lilies Luka had brought for her previously to give them some privacy.

“You love me,” Chloe breathed.

“I love you,” Luka said.

“Like, a lot.”

“A lot a lot.”

“Like, you-hate-all-the-same-things-I-hate kind of a lot.”

Luka laughed. “Chloe, I’ve sworn off California rolls for you.”

“They’re not authentic sushi! And you’re Japanese!”

“I learned how to make a proper Floradora for you.”

“You’ve made a valiant effort, and because I love you, that’s all I’ll say about it.”

He pulled back, smiling as he held her face in his hands. “I own three suits now because of you.”

“And you look like sex on legs in them. You’re welcome.”

He laughed again, genuinely happy. Happy with her. Chloe gave in to her urge to kiss him full on the lips, and he let her. It was long, slow, and languid, a kiss for two people who had time, who had trust.
They stayed that way, wrapped up in each other, and for a little while, Chloe could not have been happier. They queued up Netflix and Luka held her under their blanket, his chin on her head, and she almost forgot about everything else in her life that was quickly falling apart. For a few precious hours, she took her long overdue vacation.

It ended all too soon, however, when Luka got a phone call he decided he needed to take.

“Hey, Rose,” he said, pausing to listen.

Chloe got up to check her own phone—nothing new from Alya or Marinette. No news was good news, she supposed. Or at least not any worse than things already were. Pollen yawned when she approached and stretched out among the flowers.

“No, she didn’t mention anything like that,” Luka said from the living room.

Chloe poured herself a glass of water and lingered, waiting for him to be done with the call.

“I’m sure it’s a misunderstanding—” Luka was cut off mid-sentence. “Okay, listen, I’ll just head over there and see what’s going on, okay? I’m sorry you got stood up. That’s not like her at all.” A pause. “Okay, yeah. I’ll let you know. Bye.”

Chloe returned to the living room with Pollen on her shoulder. “Everything okay?”

Luka was frowning at his phone. “No. I mean, I’m not sure. That was Rose, Juleka’s girlfriend.”

“Yeah, I remember. We were in the same class in high school.”

“Right. Well apparently, she was supposed to get dinner tonight with Juleka and Aunt Jess, but they never showed. She got this text from Juleka.” He showed Chloe his phone with the text Rose had forwarded.

[Juleka: Sorry, something came up tonight and we can’t make dinner.]

“Okay? So she couldn’t make the dinner. What’s the big deal?” Chloe asked.

“Juleka doesn’t text. Especially not to cancel a dinner with her girlfriend.”

“Well, she’s missing out,” Pollen quipped.

Chloe ignored her. “So, what? You’re worried something else is going on? Luka, it’s just a text. If you’re worried, call her.”

“I just did. It cut to voicemail. Aunt Jess, too.”

Be nice, Chloe reminded herself. You adore this man. Be nice.

“Okay,” Chloe said, trying to see it from his point of view even though she really thought he was overreacting for no reason. “So you’re worried about Juleka and Jessika. Why don’t we just go see them? Where would they be?”

“Probably Aunt Jess’s apartment, I’m guessing. Rose said Juleka was heading there after work to pick her up, and they’d meet at the restaurant.”

“Oooh! An adventure together! A love-venture!” Pollen said.

“Oh my god, Pollen, that’s almost as bad as the ’pollen for him’ one you did a while back,” Chloe
“Look, I know you think I’m blowing this out of proportion, but Rose is worried and upset. I think she’d feel a lot better if I talked to Juleka and figured out what’s going on. It’s probably nothing, but Rose can be sensitive, and Juleka’s usually really good about that.”

Chloe sighed. “Fine, fine. Let me just get my bag.”

“You don’t have to come, you know.”

“I know, but now Juleka’s ruining *my* romantic evening, so consider me on Team Rose.”

He grinned, and soon they were out the door waiting for a ride share. Chloe’s phone buzzed just as the ride pulled up for them.

[Alya: I’ve got Mayura.]

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Chloe blurted out as Luka greeted the driver and opened the back passenger door.

“What?” he said.

[Chloe: Wtf Alya what did I fucking say before.]

[Chloe: Are you insane? Not a rhetorical question.]

[Marinette: Where are you? Are you safe?]

[Alya: Everything’s fine. With Mayura. Master Fu is here too. Everyone’s fine.]

“Chloe?” Luka said, holding the door for her. “Is everything okay?”

Chloe barely heard him as her fingers flew over the keys.

[Chloe: Where are you? I’m coming over.]

[Alya: Safe house outside the city. Sending a map now.]

“A fucking safe house?” Chloe muttered. What the hell was going on?

“Chloe?”

She looked up. Luka was watching her with concern. She suddenly felt like the world’s biggest asshole for what she was about to do. “Luka, I’m really sorry. That was Alya. She apparently found Mayura and Master Fu.”

Luka’s eyes widened. “Shit, really?”

Chloe had told him everything about the fight with Adrien, aka Chat Blanc. It was the only way to convince him to take a job for Hardrock in Orléans well outside the city. He’d taken it surprisingly well, even remarking that he should have known about Marinette being Ladybug long ago given her flighty tendencies. But perhaps most of all, when one’s girlfriend was Queen Bee herself, one was surprised by very little.

“You should go,” Luka said.
“But what about Juleka?”
“I can handle it. No superpowers necessary, just family talk. Go, really.”
She kissed him quick. “I’m sorry. I’ll let you know what’s going on. Let me know about Juleka.”
“I will. And Chloe?”
“Yeah?”
“Be careful.”
She nodded. “I will.”

Ladybug raced across the rooftops of Paris as fast as she could. The evening lights were in full bloom tonight in spite of the chilling winter night. In the distance she spied the Eiffel Tower lit up, a silver knife gutting the thick, fleshy night sky. Her wings carried her away from the old haunt tonight, however, to a place far outside the city proper.

The building was dark and empty, abandoned by the looks of it. Ladybug knew she was in the right place, however, having followed Alya’s directions. She lingered outside a moment. She couldn’t help but feel like she was standing on a precipice over a dark chasm, and she couldn’t see the bottom. All week she’d walked along the edge, peering over, searching for that which she’d lost and longed for, to no avail. Adrien had disappeared, and it looked like he wasn’t coming back.

There was no denying it anymore. The Adrien she knew, the one she’d fallen for harder and deeper than she ever had at fourteen, was gone. As long as the part of him that had given over to darkness ruled, he would remain lost to her, to everyone who loved him. And yet, Ladybug couldn’t help but cling to hope. He’d recognized Chloe under Queen Bee’s mask, and it had been enough to break the clutches of darkness that strangled him. If he could do it once, he could do it again, surely.

And he’d recognized Marinette, too. When they were together, he had seen her, and she had seen him. The true Adrien beneath the façade of Chat Blanc, the one that had stayed with her when she’d asked him to as he held her close, desperate, afraid to let go lest he lose her. If only she’d known.

Where did Chat Blanc end and Adrien begin? All this time, all the hours and days spent combing through his life, the places he inhabited, the life he lived, and Ladybug had been asking herself that question over and over and over again. Because there had to be a line. There had to be a clear demarcation between the man and the monster. They were not the same.

Aren’t they?

She tried to imagine what it would be like to be akumatized, to have all her worst fears and loathings take control. She couldn’t imagine it, couldn’t believe in a version of herself that would ever let darkness win, even for a little while.

And yet.

What if…

“What if I’m wrong?” she whispered.

The way he had looked at her when he held her, made love to her, whispered her name in those
precious moments that were beyond passion, beyond feeling, beyond…

What if?

“Hey, Bug.”

Queen Bee landed next to her, and Ladybug glanced at her wings. They seemed to be back to fighting fit, though Ladybug couldn’t help the twinge of regret she felt. Could she have stopped what happened? Could she have done anything differently? Would Chloe and Pollen really ever be okay, knowing it was Adrien who had inflicted such a violation on her, akumatized or not?

“Hey, Bee,” she said instead, swallowing those morose thoughts. The last thing Queen Bee needed was a reminder of the trauma she was clearly doing her best to move past for the sake of the mission.

“You ready for this?”

No.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Yeah, you do.”

Ladybug almost wanted to laugh. A choice. Hilarious. She bet Adrien would not have laughed. Chat Blanc would have. Gleefully.

Stop.

“We always have a choice,” Queen Bee said. “I think…I finally get that now.”

Ladybug swallowed and her throat clenched painfully. “I think I’m still getting there.”

Queen Bee nodded like this made all the sense in the world. Ladybug wanted to hug her for it.

“Let’s go talk to Mayura,” Queen Bee said. “I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to get some goddamned answers.”

They headed inside to the top floor, and when they knocked on the door with a flicker of orange light seeping out from under it, Fu opened it for them.

“Ladybug, Queen Bee. It is very good to see you both,” he said.

Ladybug threw her arms around him and hugged him tight. “Master Fu. I’m so glad you’re okay. We were so worried.”

“Yeah, same. What happened to you?” Queen Bee said.

Fu parted from Ladybug and laid a hand each on her shoulder and Queen Bee’s. “Much has happened. I appreciate your concern. Queen Bee, in truth I have you to thank for my safety. If you had not warned me about Chat Blanc, I may not have had the foresight to leave my home in time.”

Ladybug glanced at Queen Bee, but her expression was stony and unwavering. Now more than ever, she regretted all the secrets between them, all of them. If only they had all been honest with each other from the beginning. If only Adrien had told her the truth. If only she could go back to that rooftop on a sweltering, summer night, when a lonely cat had come calling, looking for a friendly shoulder to cry on. If only.
“We’d like to see Mayura,” Queen Bee said. “Alya said she’d be here.”

“Yes, of course, come inside. Everyone is here waiting for you.”

Ladybug and Queen Bee followed him in. A gas fire blazed behind a glass hearth, and an old, wooden table had been set up in front of it with three chairs. A ratty divan was shoved against the wall, but otherwise the room was bare, save for the people.

Ladybug froze at the sight of two masked people that seemed to fill the space. One was uncomfortably familiar, clad in orange and white, with a pair of twitching fox ears on her head. The other was a hooded man all in green armor, a wide shield strapped to his back.

“Whoa, what the hell?” Queen Bee said. “What is this?”

“This is Rena Rouge and Carapace,” Fu said. “Your new partners. Ladybug, Queen Bee, I would like you to meet the new wielders of the Fox and Turtle Miraculous.”

Ladybug stared. Words escaped her.

“Wait, what? So Butterfly and Pravala didn’t get them? We thought for sure that was why your place was ransacked.”

“Well, we’re not akumatized or coralized,” Carapace said, grinning. “So, yeah, consider us the good guys.”

“I don’t understand,” Ladybug said. “Who are you? And Master Fu, I thought you wielded the Turtle Miraculous?”

“Not anymore. I am far too old to aid you in battle, and unfortunately, this is one battle where I believe you will need all the help you can get, Ladybug. I have passed on the Turtle Miraculous, and the mantle of Guardian, to Wayzz’s new Chosen.”

“But what will happen to you?”

Fu smiled. “You are good to worry for me. But I am not the one you should concern yourself with. Just as winter has arrived here in Paris, I, too, feel the cold winds rattling at my door. I will live out the rest of my days as a normal human, however long they may be. But more importantly, you shall have the army you require to finally defeat Butterfly and Pravala. And Chat Blanc.”

Ladybug didn’t know what to say, but she didn’t get the chance to say anything when Rena Rouge approached and put a comforting hand on her shoulder. Her auburn hair flickered in its ponytail, giving the illusion of nine fox tails shimmering with heat. “Hey girl, we’ve got your back, always. It’s going to be okay.”

Ladybug frowned. There was something so familiar about this woman. “Who…are you?” She looked at Carapace. “Both of you? Why would you agree to help us? You know how dangerous this is, right? This is war. Life and death. I can’t ask you to put your lives on the line in good conscience without knowing that you understand all the risks.”

Carapace laid a fist over his chest. “It’s cool, dude. I’m the ultimate shield, so, like, bring it on. I’m basically invincible.”

Queen Bee scoffed. “You haven’t met my ultimate sword. Don’t be so cocky, Yoshi.”

Carapace glowered. “Okay, lame. Really? Yoshi’s not even a real turtle. He’s way more dinosaur.”
“He’s got a shell and he’s green.”

“That’s a gross generalization!”

“What’re you going to do about it, Yoshi?”

“Seriously?!”

“Oh, Queen Bee, stop trying to make fetch happen,” Rena said.

Queen Bee gaped. “What did you just say to me?”

“Wait a minute,” Ladybug said, staring at Rena. “…Alya?”

Rena smirked. “That’ll be five euros.” She held out her hand to Carapace.

“Oh for— You gotta be kidding me! That was way longer than five minutes!”

“That was four minutes and forty-four seconds.” Rena waggled her cell phone—Alya’s cell phone—at Carapace. “Read it and weep, babe.”

Babe?

*Oh god.*

“Oh Nino?!” Ladybug said.

Rena and Carapace grinned at each other, and together, they released their transformations, leaving Alya, Nino, and two very adorable kwami in their place.

“Dude, your face!” Nino said, stifling a laugh. “Classic! Wayzz, pound it, buddy.”

Stoic, placid Wayzz actually fist bumped Nino like a true bro. Ladybug reached for Queen Bee’s sword to poke herself, because this had to be a dream.

“So this is the new Ladybug?” said a grinning fox that Ladybug guessed must be Rena Rouge’s—Alya’s kwami. “A little thin for my tastes. Tikki, you’re not starving your poor Chosen, are you?”

Ladybug felt a stirring deep inside as Tikki’s essence responded. Seeing the futility of keeping up appearances, she released her transformation.

“Of course not, Trixx. There’s no one who loves food more than Marinette, trust me.”

Marinette blushed. “Hey!”

Queen Bee released her transformation, and Pollen rocketed into Trixx like a yellow bullet.

“Trixx! Ahhhh, I missed you!”

“Majesty,” Trixx said with a grin. “I’ve missed us.”

Together, they turned on Wayzz, who visibly shrank in on himself until Nino got behind him and crossed his arms. “Okay, I get that you little dudes are kwami and you do your thing, but let’s get one thing straight here. You mess with Wayzz, and you mess with me. Got it?”

Trixx giggled, and Pollen got right in Nino’s face. “Correction, Guardian. If you mess with Wayzz, then you’ll deal with me.” She grabbed Wayzz’s arm and clutched him to her side. “We’ve been
together for millennia, and now that we finally have a chance to unleash our true power, I won’t let anything stand between us. So you better be ready to defend my Honey Bee, you hear me? I want a yes, Guardian.”

Nino gulped. “Uh, yeah, sure, whatever.”

“Yeah-sure-whatever what?”

Nino looked uncomfortable. “Um…” He glanced at Chloe, who rolled her eyes. “Your Bee-ness?”

Pollen smirked. “Good enough.”

She let Wayzz go, and he immediately phased into Nino’s hands.

“Well, that backfired on me in a totally unexpected way,” Nino said.

“You did your best,” Wayzz said gravely.

“T-Trixx?” came a shy voice.

All eyes turned to the floating, blue kwami that appeared through a door to an adjoining room.

“Sweet Pea!” Trixx gushed, and scooped her fellow kwami up in her paws, flashing with fox fire.

Tikki gasped. “Duusu! Oh my goodness, we were so worried about you!”

“No we weren’t,” Pollen said, and Chloe shot her a look.

Duusu, the peacock kwami, clung to Trixx with tears in his eyes. “I-I’m so happy to see you all! It’s been s-so long.”

“There there, now. You know I can always find you.” Trixx soothed.

“You mean, we found him,” Alya said. “It took a while, but Mayura’s feathers made a trail I could follow. I would’ve told you sooner, but Master Fu thought it was better to keep it all under wraps until we could all meet off the grid.”

Marinette’s heart sank. She knew exactly why they had seen the need for secrecy. She averted her gaze and tried not to think about Adrien.

“Well, I think that’s utterly ridiculous,” Chloe said, crossing her arms. “You could’ve texted us, at least. What the hell, Alya?”

“For the record, I said it was a bad idea and we should just tell you both right away,” Nino said sulkily. “I was overruled.”

“Honey, don’t quit your day job,” Trixx said. “Leave the sleuthing to the professionals.” She nuzzled Alya’s cheek affectionately.

“Ladybug?” Duusu said, approaching Marinette.

“Um, yes?”

He sniffled, and Tikki rubbed his back. He had a magnificent tail of bright peacock feathers that fanned out behind him. “I-I just wanted to s-say I’m sorry.”
“Sorry? For what?”

“F-For Hawk Moth, and everything…before.” He averted his gaze. “If we’d known how things w-would turn out, we n-never would have…” He folded in on himself and sobbed. “I’m s-so sorry!”

Marinette had no idea what he was talking about, and she looked at Fu. He held his hand out for Duusu to sit upon.

“Oh Guardian!” Duusu sobbed. “I’m so s-s-sorry!”

“It’s not your fault, Duusu,” Fu said gently. “If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s mine. I was Guardian when Nooroo was given to Hawk Moth. I should have discovered his true identity at the time.”

“The former Guardian is right,” Pollen said. “Stop whining already, Duusu. Obviously it wasn’t your fault.”

Duusu looked at Pollen forlornly, as if all his absolution lay with her.

“Hey, pause. What’s going on here? What are we talking about?” Chloe said.

“I think I can answer that.”

A tall, blonde woman stood in the doorway where Duusu had come from previously. She was older, old enough to be Marinette’s mother, but she had been beautiful once. Stunning, even. Her fine hair was dyed blonde and woven into a thick braid over her shoulder. Her face was long and her cheekbones high. She had a pleasant mouth that would have looked lovely in a smile, and her green eyes were bright but tired. Wrinkles ringed her lips and eyes, betraying her age. Marinette did not recognize her, but assumed that this must be Mayura beneath the mask.

“Oh my god,” Chloe said, suddenly rigid. “You.”

“Hello, Chloe,” the woman said. “It’s good to finally see you without the mask.”

Duusu floated over to her, and she wiped a pearlescent tear from his cheek with a finger.

“You know her?” Marinette asked.

“Yeah, I know her. I’ve known her my whole life,” Chloe said. “That’s Emilie Agreste—Adrien’s mother.”

With her parents out for dinner, Manon was alone in the house. Which meant blasting her favorite music and cooking breakfast for dinner, a habit her mother frowned upon severely. Also because her mother wasn’t around, Manon was free to raid the liquor cabinet and opened up a bottle of wine.

“After all, this is France,” Manon quipped as she poured herself a glass.

It had been a long week, and it was only halfway done. Marinette had shown up at the office only once, and she’d been gone so fast that Manon hadn’t had a chance to ask her what the hell was up, let alone pass along the gift Aramis had left for her.

And she hadn’t meant to take it home. She’d just slipped it in her bag without thinking when she packed up the rest of her things. He’d said it was fragile, so leaving it at the boutique didn’t seem like a great option. What if they were robbed? Manon did not want to be responsible for losing something
from someone so important. No, best to keep an eye on it.

It sat on the kitchen counter now, just a plain, white box affixed with a bit of tape to keep the lid on. It watched her as she flipped her croque madame on the stove top, taunting. If boxes could taunt.

“I don’t care about you,” Manon said.

Except she looked again. There it was, still sitting on the counter, unassuming and wretchedly there. So it was a gift. A gift meant for someone else. It was none of her business, and she was not so lacking in self-control that she just had to open it.

But.

What if it was perishable? What if whatever was inside needed to be in the fridge? What if it needed light? Or water? Wouldn’t she be doing Marinette and Aramis a great disservice by not ensuring that the gift remained pristine until such time as she could deliver it to Marinette safely?

“You make an excellent point, brain.”

Also, she had tape. She could just tape the lid back on again after checking. No harm done. Why had she not thought of it before?

She had thought of it before. She just hadn’t gone three days without knowing what the hell was in that stupid, teasing box at the time, and really? It was the box’s fault for being mysterious. Fuck that box.

“Come to mama,” Manon said, brandishing a cheese knife to lay into the damn thing.

Like a regular Pandora, she greedily dug into the tape, peeled it back, and popped open the lid to release whatever mysterious, glorious thing lay inside. Nestled atop a cushion of red tissue paper was…a dead bug.

A dead butterfly, to be precise.

Correction: Aramis was kind of a creepy old dude, after all.

Because what?

Was it some kind of inside joke? Did Marinette secretly collect dead butterflies? Was she actually a spy receiving instructions from her handler, and a dead, black butterfly was code for Someone Gon’ Die 2Nite?

As Manon pondered these equally appealing and 100% realistic possibilities about her boss, she failed to notice her croque madame burning until the smell caught up to her. Cringing, she snatched the spatula and flipped it, only to come face to face with the crusty, burned manifestation of her everlasting shame.

Maybe she could scrape off the burned bits, just slice off a thin layer with a knife. Or maybe a vegetable peeler? That could work. She rummaged in a drawer to find it. When she had it, she went back to the stove top, passing by the opened box.

It was empty.

Manon stared at it, not quite understanding what she was seeing, or rather, not seeing. Wasn’t there a creepy, dead butterfly in there just a moment ago?
Fluttering.

Just behind her.

A chill on her neck.

A finger of cold brushed the back of her neck, and she dropped the vegetable peeler. She dropped herself soon after.

The croque madame burned in its pan.

Chapter End Notes

I can’t believe it, but we’re getting to the final battle like really soon. Might even start in the next chapter.

Again, apologies for the delay. Work is crazy these days and will continue to be through this month. This is still my priority fic-wise, and will continue to be until it’s done.

Next time: Sad story time with Emilie.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

The calamity before the storm.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Emilie discreetly watched the entrance of the Agreste family mausoleum from a grave marker a short distance away. Her wide-brimmed hat and large sunglasses obscured her face as she appeared to contemplate the headstone before her, just another mourner out to pay her respects to the dead on this dreary, cold afternoon. In the collar of her heavy, blue coat, Duusu squirmed, nervous.

“What if he doesn’t come?” he whispered in a tinny voice.

“He’ll come,” Emilie said.

Cats, after all, were curious to a fault.

“Just remain vigilant in case this goes south.”

“Yes, Mistress. I-I’ll do my best.”

He came at long last, ten minutes late to her invitation, but Emilie suspected that was a ruse. Even casual in civilian clothing, wrapped up like any other mourner out for a stroll through foggy memories, Adrien had a presence to him that froze colder than the winter wind on her cheek. He casually scanned his surroundings as he lingered near the entrance to the mausoleum, eyes hidden behind dark glasses. From her location, he would not be able to see her, but she was free to observe him as she pleased.

And she could not help but be pleased in spite of everything. He had grown into a tall, strong man, confident of stride and proud of poise. So like his father had been at his age, young and full of possibility. She was closer to him now than she’d been in sixteen years, since she’d kissed his sleeping face and tore herself away from him in the night, though looking upon him now, she knew she’d left a piece of herself with him. She felt its absence every waking moment, as raw as an open wound. It pained her now, and ached for reprieve. Unconsciously, she reached a hand toward him.

But he vanished inside the mausoleum to wait. Wait for her. Or, rather, for Mayura. It was time.

Emilie crossed the yard to the mausoleum. The last time she’d been here was to bury her late husband, unable to stay away despite the risk, despite the noose that tightened around her neck every moment she lingered in plain sight. It had almost cost her everything when Chloe had spotted her, and it was all she could do to slip away among the mourners, disappear. Emilie had had years to perfect her vanishing act.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped inside the mausoleum and prayed to the little god tucked in her collar that she would not have to bury her only son today.

“Who are you?” Adrien demanded.
Emilie froze where she stood. He’d been looking at Gabriel’s plaque when she walked in on him. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine it was Gabriel speaking to her, that same mellifluous baritone.

“The one who called you here,” she said.

Adrien paused. “…Mayura. No glamour today? I don’t know whether to feel honored or insulted.”

“I have a life outside the mask, just as you do.”

He removed his sunglasses, and Emilie could not help her gasp at the sight of two smoldering, magenta eyes staring back at her, supernatural in their terrible beauty.

No, she thought, her heart wrenching. For though she had seen him through Duusu’s Eyes, mirrors could be fickle. What she saw now was no mirror image warped and remastered, but the truth laid bare. After all these years, she’d thought she’d be used to the flaying.

He sensed her fear like a beast smelled weakness in its prey. “Not what you were expecting?” He pulled a note from his pocket, and a rumbled peacock feather along with it. “‘If you want to know the truth about everything, come to your father’s grave at noon tomorrow,’” he read the note before crushing it and the feather. “No return address, but the peacock feather was a little on the nose, don’t you think?”

“I didn’t think you would come for just anyone.”

“About that—how did you find me? I know Ladybug’s been scuttling all over the city looking for me, but you… You knew exactly where I would be. That I’d find your little secret admirer note.”

Emilie chose not to respond to that. “If you weren’t interested, you could have stayed away.”

“Now, why would I do a stupid thing like that? The way I see it, this is a win-win situation for me.” He took a step toward her. “On the one hand, you reveal…whatever apocryphal drivel you think will make me see the light, so to speak.” Two more steps. “And on the other, you actually have something useful to say.” Another step, and he made a show of closing his hands into fists. “Either way, I have two hands that I think will be a perfect fit around that little bird neck of yours. So… worth the trip.”

Emilie would be lying if she told herself she was not afraid. This man was her son, but he was also something else. Something unknowable. They say the truth sets you free, and yet Emilie had never felt more like a caged bird than she did staring down the consequences of her all her ruinous choices.

“Adrien,” she said, her voice hitching. “I promised you the truth of things.” She reached for her hat and sunglasses with shaking hands. “And if you want to rip me apart after, I’ll submit with open arms.”

The clatter of her designer sunglasses on the granite floor echoed loud and foul, like an untuned instrument. But she didn’t hear it over the sound of her blood pumping fast, invigorated, because suddenly she was looking at her little boy, face to face.

Adrien dropped the rumpled note and peacock feather, his fingers limp, his jaw gone slack, and stared at the impossibility in front of him. “M-Mom?”

Tears clawed their way down Emilie’s cheeks as she finally looked her son in the eye after so many tortured years apart. Even masochists have their limits, but this precious, imperfect moment was worth every fearful night on the run, every nightmare in which she gave in to her broken heart and
stumbled home only to find him drowned in his own blood, Gabriel lifeless next to him, and the dread that haunted and hunted her closing in all around them.

In that moment, she knew she would do it all again, just to see that divine flicker of recognition in his eyes that were no longer his.

“My little love,” Emilie said, her voice cracking. She used the nickname she’d given him when he was small and innocent and hers.

He lost his balance and steadied himself on the wall, eyes still wide as saucers as he hyperventilated. “You…”

Emilie was beside herself. She had reached him through the haze of his akumatization, his trauma, the grudge he carried for both his parents. He was still her little boy, her little love. She could pull him out if only she reached for him now.

“Oh, Adrien,” she said through her tears, “I don’t even know where to begin. I’ve missed you so much.”

He clutched his head with his free hand, fisted his hair. “You’re…Mayura, my… All this time—”

“Yes. Yes, it’s me.” She dared to approach, close enough to touch him. Oh, how she’d dreamed of holding him all these years when instead, she had to suffer watching him from a distance, like a leper in the shadows, never to be seen. “Adrien, please, I’m so—I love you so, so much.”

There were tears in his eyes as he looked up at her, and it was her undoing. She reached for him, curled her fingers in his lapels, and pulled him in.

It was her mistake.

A hand closed around her throat, and the other ripped hers from his collar in a crushing grip. The wind left her lungs as she found herself pushed roughly against the wall, the handle to Gabriel’s plaque digging painfully into her back. Adrien was right in her face, magenta eyes glazed with tears freely falling down his cheeks, teeth bared, desperate. Unseeing.

“You,” he said, a strangled whisper. As if to speak it would raise the ghosts that lived here and invite their wrath upon them both. “You left.”

Instinct told Emilie to struggle, to fight for her dwindling, pathetic life. Duusu whimpered in her coat pocket. “I know.”

A bird throat. Bony, thin, snaps like a twig.

Snap!

Emilie swallowed fire and looked her broken son in the eyes that were once a mirror of hers.

“But I did it to protect you,” she wheezed.

“Protect me?” She could barely hear him over the pounding in her head. His voice, whisper-soft, touched her like acid rain. “You left me with him.”

“Adrien—”

“I was better off dead.”
His words struck her like a knife to the gut, and she shuddered.

*Oh, Gabriel, you promised me.*

But Gabriel was dead, snapped in half like a twig himself. How funny, how fragile. He had always stood so tall and proud, as Adrien stood before her now.

*Snap!*

“No,” Emilie said through her tears. “I was.”

Adrien’s grip loosened, and he stared at her like he didn’t recognize her at all. She hardly recognized herself these days. In a burst of rage, he slammed her hard against the wall, against Gabriel’s tomb, and she saw stars. He let out a guttural screech, strangled and agonized, and sank to the floor clutching his head.

Emilie sucked in a ragged breath and touched the back of her head. Her fingers came away bloody, but she couldn’t be bothered to care. She sank down to the floor, her breathing shallow and labored, and looked at the broken man laid at her feet.

“Please,” she said. “Despise me if you want, curse me, I deserve it all. But please, *please* don’t for one second think that anyone would be better off with you gone.”

“Why do you even care?” He looked up at her, and there was such a frightful fury in his eyes that she recoiled. “You haven’t given a single fuck for *sixteen years.*”

“That’s not true.”

“You left. You *abandoned me!* How the fuck is it not true?”

She flinched at his vitriol. “I only wanted to protect you.”

*Protect me from what?!”*

“From the man who killed your father! Felix has bewitched you with lie after lie despite everything I’ve done to stop him.”

“Felix,” Adrien said.

Hope seized her, and Emilie clung to it like a lifeline in her desperation. “Yes, your uncle, the one you know as Aramis Legrand. The previous Chat Noir. He’s using you to get what he wants.”

“So what?”

“So what… How can you say that? He doesn’t care about you!”

“At least he’s here!”

His words stung, tore at the hole she had carved deep inside herself when she left him all those years ago.

“I left to keep you and your father safe,” Emilie said. “Felix wanted revenge, and he was never going to stop. He lost his love, and in his mind it was only fitting that your father and I lost ours. So sixteen years ago when he came looking for me, I made him a deal: my life for yours.”

Adrien said nothing to that. Instead, he stared at the floor, teeth bared, fists clenched, as if it had
offended him personally.

“But I was always close,” she said. “I’ve watched you grow and flourish from afar. You have been my singular joy when all others have been lost to me. Adrien, please… Everything I’ve ever done has been to keep you safe.”

Emilie slowly reached for him. Her baby, her sweet boy, he was in there somewhere, holding on. He was struggling, hurting, and in his darkest hour it was easy, even vital to let the loathing win and be numb. She knew that darkness well, had known it for as long as she’d stopped knowing him. It had been her only companion these long, lonely years as an outsider looking in on the life she could have had, the life she could have lost. The life she lost, anyway.

Her bloody fingers brushed the ends of Adrien’s golden hair.

“Mom,” he said distantly, disengaged—like something in him had come dislodged.

Emilie choked on a sob. “Yes?”

“Why couldn’t you have just died?”

Emilie stared, bewildered and utterly at a loss for words. Somewhere deep inside, something fragile and tired began to crack.

*Snap*!

“Adrien—”

“Get out,” he hissed.

His nails scraped the floor as his fingers dug in, long and sharp as they began to pierce through the granite.

*“Out!”*

Emilie scrambled to her feet and ran.

Chloe was moving before anyone could stop her, including herself. As soon as Emilie had finished recounting her meeting with Adrien, Chloe had her pinned against the wall, fists clenched tightly around her. She imagined Adrien manhandling Emilie like this, and knew that whatever he had done, whatever Chloe could do now, it was not enough to make up for everything Emilie had done.

“How dare you,” Chloe hissed, like a snake about to strike.

“How dare you,” Chloe said again. “Do you have any *idea* what you’ve done?”
Emilie said nothing, only looked at Chloe with resignation, tired and beaten.

“Do you know what you cost him? Do you even care?”

“Yes,” Emilie said in a small voice. “I paid the same price.”

Chloe shook, and tears streamed down her cheeks as she glared at Emilie. “You left. I was there. I was there when he had no one, when he was so alone, when he couldn’t stand it for even one more day—” Chloe choked on a sob, and her shoulders shook.

“I know,” Emilie said. “Chloe, I’m so, so sorry.”

Chloe snapped up, her crushing sorrow temporarily forgotten. “Fuck you and your shitty apology. You don’t get to feel sorry and just move on. Not while he’s still out there.”

She bared her teeth in a snarl, shoved Emilie roughly against the wall, and stormed out of the room. It stank in there, noxious fumes making her eyes water, and couldn’t stand the sight of that wretched woman another minute.

*I let her into my home*, Chloe thought as she marched down the stairs, back outside the way she’d come.

*I looked up to her. I trusted her.*

What a fool she’d been letting Mayura—*Emilie* worm her way into her good graces. She’d put her life and safety in Mayura’s hands, relied on her abilities, trusted her judgment even in the face of Marinette’s legitimate doubts and questions. She hadn’t questioned when Mayura did not want to reveal herself to anyone, because no matter her secrets, surely Mayura was on her side. Surely she only had Chloe’s best interest at heart. Surely she was true.

“Honey Bee?” Pollen whispered when they were back outside in the cold, winter darkness. Chloe had walked a couple blocks in her fury. Behind her, she could see the single window of light from the fire in Fu’s safe house.

Instead of answering, Chloe sank down into squat on the sidewalk, covered her face with her hands, and screamed. Eyes squeezed tight, all she could see was Adrien’s face as it had been that night she’d found him in the tub, tears smearing his cheeks, the bathwater pink with his blood. It was the look of a man who had already died long ago. Sometimes she wondered if she’d ever truly helped him at all.

“Honey Bee?” Pollen said again, gentle but insistent.

“What.”

“We’re not alone.”

Sniffling, Chloe looked up to see that someone had followed her out. To her surprise, it was Nino and Wayzz. They stopped a few paces from her, as if to avoid her striking range. Chloe glared up at them through the gloom. Even with the light of the moon above, Nino was heavily shadowed.

“What?” Chloe demanded, wiping her eyes. “Was literally storming out not enough of a hint for you?”

Nino spoke with the practiced calm of one used to living in close proximity with sharp objects. “I just wanted to make sure you were all right.”
Chloe snorted. “Do I fucking look all right to you?”

Nino said nothing to that. He surprised Chloe, however, by taking a seat on the sidewalk next to her. She eyed him askance, but he was looking across the street at a parked Toyota with its windows smashed to hell and missing its hubcaps and bumpers. Belatedly, it occurred to Chloe that they were in a back alley part of the outer city limits where no one will have heard her anguished scream—or if they did, they were used to ignoring such cries.

“You know, I never understood what Adrien saw in you back in high school,” Nino said. “Never really cared to know, I guess. And when he left, I never cared to wonder after the fact.”

The changed subject threw Chloe for a loop, but Nino didn’t give her a chance to respond.

“But when he came back, I started to wonder. I wondered how a guy clinging to all these ghosts of people who’d abandoned him a long time ago managed to come out the other side in one piece.” He looked at her. “You saved him, Chloe. In every way a person can be saved, you did that for him. Not Gabriel, not Emilie, not even Ladybug. That was all you.”

Chloe stared back at Nino, whom she knew barely at all and yet who looked back at her with the tranquil, quiet understanding of one who truly knows, truly sees.

“You’ve been Adrien’s rock all these years, and you did a bang up job, seriously.”

“That’s not the point. I shouldn’t have had to do it at all. I wouldn’t have if she—if Emilie, she…”

“I know, and you’re a hundred percent right. Whatever her good intentions, Emilie’s choices caused Adrien a lot of pain and suffering. But you were there to anchor him through all the shit, anyway.”

Chloe bit her lip hard enough to hurt. She would not cry in front of Nino, at least, not any more than she already had. Courage was supposed to be brave and strong, but right now Chloe felt anything but.

“But that’s a lot to take on by yourself,” Nino said. “Too much for most people. Even for someone who’s supposed to be the avatar of Courage.”


“No, but…” He tentatively placed a hand on Chloe’s shoulder. “Maybe you can let me take on some of the weight. I’ve missed a lot, yeah, but there was a time when I could’ve given you a run for your money. I guess it’s easy to wish things had been a little different after he left.” He let his hand fall. “That one’s on me.”

Chloe didn’t have the words to comfort him, but he didn’t seem to need them. Or maybe, he recognized her need as greater than his own right now. For a moment, she was jealous of Adrien to have someone like Nino, and sad that neither of them had realized it until it was already too late.

“Me, and Marinette, Alya, Master Fu—we’re here for him. For you. Even Emilie, too. I think that’s why she came back, to do her part even if she knew it would cost her everything,” Nino said. “The point is you don’t have to do this alone anymore. None of us should.”

Chloe sniffled harshly and rubbed her puffy eyes. Just thinking about Emilie set her blood on fire. But then again, the entire reason she and Marinette had sought Mayura out was to get her help. They could not stop Chat Blanc alone. And perhaps Chloe could no longer support Adrien alone. Perhaps she should not have to try anymore.
“They sent you after me because only the ultimate shield can guard against the ultimate sword?” Chloe said, only half joking.

“No, I volunteered as tribute,” Nino said, also only half joking.

“The Peeta to my Katniss.”

“I’ve always wanted to be someone’s Peeta.”

“Isn’t that what Alya’s for?”

“Alya would choose Joanna over Peeta in a heartbeat. I know my limitations.”

Despite herself, Chloe chuckled. “You really are wise.”

They fell into a silence that could have been companionable if not for the fact that the world and the people they loved were all going to utter shit around them. Even so, Chloe appreciated his presence there next to her. It felt good not to be alone right now.

“Marinette’s going to want us all to play nice with Emilie,” Chloe said at length.

“Probs.”

There was another protracted pause before Chloe broke it once more. “All right. I’ll follow her lead wherever it takes us if it means we can save Adrien and stop Felix and Pravala.”

Nino grinned. “You really are brave.”

*I’m trying.*

And maybe trying, as Pollen said, was enough.

Chloe’s phone buzzed, and she was surprised to see that she had nine missed calls and a text message, all from Luka. She had one bar of service, and it was flickering in and out. Dread pooled in the pit of her stomach as she realized that there was no service out here, probably another precaution Fu had taken in choosing this location for a safe house.

“Shit,” she swore, reading the text.

“What is it?” Nino asked. Wayzz, who had been quiet as the humans talked, floated closer.

Pollen gasped as she read the text. “Sweetness, we have to hurry!”

Chloe was already on her feet.

“Chloe, what’s—”

“Pollen, transform me!”

In a flash of golden light, Queen Bee suited up. Nino, momentarily blinded, shielded his eyes.

“Dude, what the hell? What’s going on?”

“Luka’s been trying to get ahold of me,” she said, looking around to get her bearings and figure out the most direct route back to the hotel. “It’s Pravala.”

“What? The coral murderer? What’s—”
“She’s at Le Grand Paris, and he’s going after her.”

“He’s what?!”

“I have to go!”

“Wait! We have to tell the others!”

“No time.” Queen Bee made to leave, but Nino grabbed her wrist. “Let go! This is Luka we’re talking about!”

“I’m coming with you.”

“The hell you are! I’m not carrying your heavy ass all the way across Paris—”

“Wayzz, transform me!”

“I don’t think—” Wayzz said, but the Miraculous Bracelet sucked him in and absorbed his power before he could finish his protest. In a flash of emerald light, Carapace transformed right in front of Queen Bee, shield at the ready.

“My ass is damn heavy from all the muscle mass I’ve gained working out recently, thank you very much,” Carapace said, “but you won’t be carrying anything.” He pulled Queen Bee flush against him over her protests, raised his shield overhead, and said, “Shellter!”

A brilliant flash of green light enveloped them, and soon they were floating, weightless off the ground surrounded by an impenetrable forcefield. Carapace let her go.

“What’re you waiting for, Your Bee-ness? We got a boyfriend to save,” Carapace said.

Queen Bee flashed him a truly fantastic sneer at that stupid diminution because her standards for bee puns were far, far higher than Pollen’s thank you very much, but there was no time to argue. She took flight, and to her amazement, the Shellter forcefield—and Carapace floating inside it—flew with her. It was as if she had acquired an antigravity, impregnable hamster wheel.

“Hold on to your Koopa Troopas,” Queen Bee said darkly as she took off with a burst of speed into the night sky.

Carapace grunted as he was thrown bodily back against the forcefield wall, and like a green shooting star, they shot off into the night.

Emilie stared at the floor with an empty look in her eyes—not because she felt nothing, but perhaps because it was too much, too close, and she had long ago given up trying. And in spite of everything, Marinette could not help but ache for her and the harrowing ordeal she had survived, the sacrifices she’d made—her own and her family’s—to end up here now.

But it was no excuse.

Marinette was so shaken by the revelations about Felix and Gabriel and Emilie herself that she could hardly think straight, much less go after Chloe. It was so, so much worse than she’d ever imagined. And all she could think of was how on earth Adrien was even still holding it together.

He isn’t.
Marinette didn’t think it was possible, but her heart broke for Adrien all over again. No one, not even her worst enemy, could ever deserve the hand he’d been dealt.

Perhaps sensing Marinette’s shock in her silence, Nino volunteered to go after Chloe when she stormed out. Without waiting for permission, he ran out after her with Wayzz in tow.

“So you disappeared because Felix threatened Adrien and Gabriel?” Alya said in her no-nonsense journalist voice, concerned only about the facts free from judgment. “And you thought you had no other choice.”

“Felix lost his love, and so he thought it was justice to make me lose mine,” Emilie said numbly. “For sixteen years, I lived a life alone in the shadows. I wanted so badly to be with them, but…”

“But you thought you’d be putting Adrien and Gabriel in danger if you didn’t disappear,” Alya said. “Okay, but this was a long time ago, before Felix got the Butterfly Miraculous. Why couldn’t you just tell Gabriel what was going on and deal with Felix then? You’re the literal paragon of Truth, and Felix was just a regular person.”

Emilie wrung her hands. “It’s not that simple. Felix was a man consumed by hatred and despair, but Aramis Legrand was powerful. There are things no amount of magic can defend against, things you can’t outrun. Felix targeted me and gave me an ultimatum.” She chanced a look at Marinette. “Please, Ladybug… If I’d known things would end up like this, then I would have gladly given my life to spare Adrien this pain.”

Marinette felt Fu’s and Alya’s eyes on her, all of them waiting for her, for Ladybug’s judgment. “Ladybug is the leader of this group,” she said more to herself than to the others, wishing for strength.

Not a team, no, they were not a team. Fractured, untested, divided—they were a group of people who all happened to be gathered here tonight. But they were not a team.

“And as Ladybug, I welcome Mayura back. We can’t face what’s coming without your help. But as Marinette, I don’t know what to make of Emilie Agreste. I don’t know you or your struggle, but I know your son and his. I would do anything for him.”

“I know you would,” Emilie said. “I’ve seen you with him, with Adrien and…and Chat Noir. And I know…” She swallowed, and Duusu hid his face in her braid. “I know how much you love him.”

Marinette did love Adrien, as much as she loved Alya and Nino and Chloe and her parents and Tikki and everyone else in her life who mattered. Adrien was important to her, as they all were. But he was more than that, she was more than that. She was Ladybug, and Ladybug loved Chat Noir, her partner, her best friend, the one person in all the world who knew every part of her since the beginning, who had struggled and survived alongside her.

Love was not a strong enough word for what Marinette felt for Adrien. She wasn’t sure there was a word for it, or if she could truly describe it. Perhaps it was more accurate to say she felt its absence as acutely as if someone had cut a hole in her, left her to bleed out, to feel that which made her heart beat slowly slip away, just out of reach. She felt it every second of the day, and she clung to it, for it was all she had left of him.

But she said nothing of this to Emilie.

“I can tell how much you love him to risk everything and reveal yourself after all this time,”
Marinette offered. “Whatever happened in the past, it’s done. And no matter how much it hurts, I don’t think anyone would be better off with you dead. You’re here now, and you can help us. That’s what matters. For the rest…that’s for Adrien to decide, not me.”

Emilie covered her mouth to stifle a sob, but the tears were relentless as they burst forth and flooded down her chin. Duusu gasped and clutched her braid tighter.

Fu cleared his throat. “If I may, I’d like to point out that time is not a luxury we can afford. I understand that tensions are high, and in any other situation, I would prefer to let old wounds heal naturally. But I fear we are fast losing ground to forces we do not yet fully understand.”

“Yes,” Emilie said, gathering herself once more. “Yes, you’re right, Master Fu. We must stop Felix before it’s too late.”

“So you know what Felix wants?” Alya said.

“It’s the same thing Gabriel wanted.”

Marinette shivered. Just the casual confirmation that Adrien’s father had been Hawk Moth all those years ago made her ill to think about.

“You mean, Ladybug’s and Chat Noir’s Miraculous?” Alya said. “But why? I always wondered that when he already had his own.”

“For love,” Emilie said. “I think Gabriel wanted to find a way for us to be together again. Just as Felix wants to be reunited with Bridgette. They were both willing to sacrifice anything and everything for that wish.”

“But that’s not love, that’s obsession,” Marinette said, horrified. “Are you saying my Miraculous, and Adrien’s Miraculous…they can bring back the dead?”

“It’s possible,” Fu said gravely. “There are…whispers of it. Creation and Destruction, the primordial forces from which everything, even the universe itself, sprung forth, hold immense power. Theoretically, by uniting them, one may be able to harness that power…but not without a heavy cost.”

“Theoretically,” Alya said, “as in, no one’s ever done it before?”

“H-Humans wouldn’t be able to handle such power,” Duusu spoke, surprising everyone. “You are imperfect creatures.”

“Ah, but imperfections make things interesting,” Trixx said. “A little personality is the spice of life.” She nuzzled Alya playfully, and Duusu blushed, averting his gaze.

“I-I suppose…”

“Duusu is right,” Tikki said. “Humans are imperfect, which is why you could never embody our power in its truest form. Only if you were to…surrender to it could you wield it properly. But that would be very dangerous.”

“Surrender?” Marinette said. “You mean…”

“Devour,” Trixx said, grinning hungrily. “Or rather, be devoured. Oh, don’t look at me like that, Human. I can control my appetite. Even Plagg’s come a long way. We may be predators, but we’re not Sins.”
“My god,” Fu said, white as a sheet. “So that’s why…”

Marinette, however, was lost. “Why what? Trixx, what’re you talking about? Tikki?”

“The S-Seven Deadly Sins,” Duusu said shyly. “They’re Sins b-because they can’t control their appetites. Not like us. They don’t choose, they consume.”

“Consume,” Alya said. “You mean like Pride is… eating Pravala?”

“It’s what predators do,” Trixx said, her voice a hiss.

Marinette didn’t care about any of that, however, as she focused on what Trixx had said before in passing. “Hold on. What did you mean about Plagg coming a long way? Is he…” Is Adrien…

“Plagg used to be like them,” Duusu said. “The S-Sins. Consuming, ravenous… Plagg the P-Pestilent. He was their leader.”

Marinette could only stare in horror at Duusu. She felt his unshakeable Truth like a white-hot knife under her skin, cutting deep to the bone, and digging her up piece by piece. Madly, she wondered if this was what Emilie had lived with for so many years, unable to hide from it, unable to escape it, and how she had survived at all.

“That has not been true for a very long time,” Tikki said in a small voice so unlike her.

“You knew,” Marinette said, looking at Tikki as she hovered and stared at her little feet. “All this time, Tikki… You knew?”

Tears in her eyes, Tikki forced herself to look at Marinette. “You don’t understand. There are things you will never understand, things I would do anything to protect you from. Even…” She glanced at Trixx. “Even bend Truth to bury them.”

Trixx was no longer grinning as she looked on, all pretenses gone. “Why do you think we all ended up in the same set?”

It had been Tikki’s doing, Marinette learned. She commanded Courage and Wisdom to sever ties from the Sins and protect against them forever more, Truth and Guile to bend and bury what had come before, and Empathy to bind them all together for eternity. All to save Plagg, her other half, her tether to existence.

Sobbing freely now, Tikki clutched her bulbous head and shook uncontrollably. “He was losing himself. He w-would have destroyed everything we w-w-orked to hard to build together! I couldn’t lose him, I just couldn’t!”

Marinette hugged Tikki close to soothe her, and Fu leaned over her shoulder.

““You helped Plagg overcome his baser instincts,” he said. “There is no shame in that, Tikki.”

“I tried to change him,” Tikki sobbed. “I was so s-selfish!”

“You were bound to your nature. Even you, Tikki, for all your unfailing hope, can selfishly cling to it in your hour of desperation. Kwamis and humans are not so different in the end, I think. It’s why you are drawn to us, is it not?”

Tikki sniffled and looked up at Marinette. “I’m sorry. But…he’s right. I am selfish, and I just wanted Plagg to stay with me, and everything we built together…”
“Oh Tikki, you don’t have to apologize to me. You did what you thought was right to help the one you love the most. How could that be wrong?”

But as soon as Marinette said the words, she looked up and found Emilie watching her, and she realized what she had just said, what it meant.

“Y-You mean it? You’re not upset with me?” Tikki said.

How could she fault Emilie simply for doing what she thought was right to help the person she loved most?

*Because it destroyed Adrien in a way no one will ever be able to change.*

It was so easy not to forgive her, and it wasn’t her place anyway, but did that mean Emilie didn’t deserve forgiveness at all? Did it mean she didn’t deserve a chance to make things right in spite of it? Who was she to judge the worthy from the wanting? What kind of world had they built to damn the fallen and the forgiven in equal measure?

“No, I’m not,” Marinette said at length. “But I wish you could have found the strength to be honest from the beginning. I wish you could have known that you never had to do this alone.”

*I wish I had had that strength.*

All these years keeping her secret, all the times Chat Noir had asked to know her beneath the mask, to trust all of him and let him trust all of her—were they wasted? Were they wrong? Marinette didn’t know, but she couldn’t help but wonder if she had let her own selfishness take her down a path she would never find her way back from. Was it enough to hope in spite of it? Was she strong enough? Did she even stand a chance?

Tikki squeezed her eyes shut. “I was afraid if you knew… If you knew what Plagg was like before, maybe… Maybe you would never want to help Adrien.”

“But he’s not like that anymore,” Alya said. “Right? I mean, you said this was a long time ago. Plagg doesn’t do that anymore, um, devour his Chosen…right?”

“He hasn’t,” Duusu said, looking uncomfortable as he pulled on his tail feathers. “Until now.”

“What does that mean?” Marinette demanded. “What’s going to happen to Plagg and Adrien?”

Tikki sniffled. “The akuma brings out Plagg’s darkest tendencies, and now I think he can’t control them. If we don’t separate them, then Plagg’s power will consume Adrien. And if that happens, there will be no separating them.”

“No,” Emilie gasped.

“What?” Alya said. “*What*?”

“Adrien will become Destruction incarnate,” Fu said. “And there will be no saving him…or anything in his path.”

Luka sprinted the last four blocks to Le Grand Paris, abandoning his taxi in traffic. His lungs burned with the cold as he panted, but he ignored it as he pumped his legs and weaved in between passing pedestrians. All he could think as he ran was that he needed to run faster, that every precious second
was another second longer for people to die, or worse. He had to stop it, even if it meant destroying something precious.

When he burst inside the lobby of Le Grand Paris, his heart leaped in his throat at the sight of Audrey Bourgeois speaking with Jessika as guests and staff passed them by.

“Aunt Jess,” Luka said, out of breath.

Both women turned to look at him.

“Oh, you,” Audrey said flatly. “Where is that daughter of mine, anyway? I know you left with her earlier.”

Jessika took Audrey by the arm. “Perhaps we can go look for her together once you’ve met my new beau. I did promise you an introduction.”

Audrey scoffed. “Oh, so now I get to meet him? After all this time, your secret soul mate or whatever you’re calling him?”

Luka reached for Audrey’s other arm. “Audrey, there’s something I need to talk to you about. Can we talk somewhere more private?”

Audrey was so taken aback at Luka’s approach that she could only stare like he’d just confessed that he was going to carry her only daughter off to live out the rest of their days on distant planet or a remote island or southern Italy—the horror.

“Not now, Audrey and I have plans,” Jessika said.

“I’m going to have to insist.” Luka jerked Audrey toward him hard, and she yelped. He bit back a wince, hoping he hadn’t hurt her, but it was enough to pry her from Jessika’s grasp, and he placed himself in between the two women.

“Unhand me this instant!” Audrey screeched. “Security! Oh, I knew you were nothing but an uncouth scoundrel. Jessika, dear, I’m afraid I must make my true feelings known. The idea of my daughter and this…bohemian being in any sort of relationship is just too much to—”

“Luka, omae ittai nani wo takurandeiru no?”

“I’m not scheming,” Luka said, ignoring Audrey’s protests. “Aunt Jess, I found Juleka.”

“Honestly, security! Yes, you over there! Do you have any idea who I am?” Audrey said, flagging down a passing security guard.

Jessika held Luka’s gaze but said nothing. At this point, there was nothing left to say. He gritted his teeth and reached for her all the same.

“Please,” he said. “It’s not too late.”

“You should leave,” she said.

Security guards approached them, uniformed and surly-looking with batons and white gloves. Audrey made a fuss about how she was going to have all of them fired for their lack of attention unless they did something about Luka now, but one of the guys recognized him as Chloe’s boyfriend and hesitated.

“Mr. Couffaine?” the guard said. “Is everything all right here?”
“Everything is most certainly not all right!” Audrey said. “This man grabbed me! I demand you remove him from the premises at once!”

The other guard made a grab for Luka’s elbow, but he shrugged him off. “Aunt Jess, please. I’ve already called Chloe.”

At this, Jessika frosted over. Her dark eyes narrowed in such a way as he had never seen before, wholly unrecognizable. “Chloe. She’s coming here?”

“Mr. Couffaine, I’m sorry, but we can’t have a scene in the lobby,” said one of the guards apologetically. “If you and Mrs. Bourgeois would just follow me, please—”

“Me? But I’m the victim,” Audrey said.

“She’ll be here any minute,” Luka said to Jessika, still ignoring the others.

Jessika seemed to hesitate as she looked at him strangely. He took a step closer and held his hand out to her.

“Please, just let me help you, okay? It’s going to be all right,” he lied.

Jessika took his hand in hers, but just when Luka thought he’d reached her, she squeezed. Hard. Luka cried out, and the two guards suddenly became very interested in Jessika. She released him as the guards each took her by the arms, though she seemed unconcerned. Audrey had stopped her squawking and looked on, confused.

“Madam,” one of the guards said, calm but concerned.

“My own blood,” Jessika said, eyes wide. “You would lie to me?”

“Aunt Jess, I—” Luka said, but movement caught his eye and cut him off.

“You would choose her over your own flesh and blood?”

A creature, for it could be nothing of this world, crawled out of Jessika’s bell sleeved dress and perched on her shoulder. Luka didn’t have to recognize it to know instinctively that he was looking at a kwami, a god like Pollen. Eerie, pink eyes stared back at him through a mask of twisted coral swirled upon its face like the petals of a rose. Just as Juleka had described what she’d seen before Jessika knocked her out and locked her in her apartment before disposing of her phone.

Jessika pressed a hand to her chest, where beneath her open coat, Luka could make out the glimmer of a rose-shaped pin at her breast.

“What on earth is that?” Audrey said.

The guards were also staring, perplexed, but Luka clutched his aching hand and stumbled back into Audrey, pushing her back to shield her.

“It’s not too late,” Luka said.

“Yes, it is,” Jessika said, reaching for her kwami. “For you.”

In a flash of brilliant, pink light, the woman who had doted on Luka as a child, loved him like a second mother, and always found time in her busy life for him and his lonely sister vanished. In her place was a creature that grew and festered and spread. Coral tentacles crawled from the skirt of her dress, knocking down people and furniture and scattering them. Screams filled the room, Audrey’s
among them, and when she tried to run, a tentacle snapped her up like a damsel in a monster movie.

“Audrey!” Luka shouted, running to try to help her.

In her desperation, she reached for him as Pravala lifted her higher in the air. “Help me!”

But there was no helping her, or himself. Another tentacle closed around him, crushing, and the air left Luka’s lungs. He struggled against the coral, but it was as tough as stone, and he was only human.

“Jessika!” he shouted, but from within the coral’s tightening embrace, he barely got the word out.

Pravala slithered outside to the street, where people continued to flee in terror of her.

“Let me go!” Audrey said, her face tear-streaked and her hair a mess from her rough treatment as she was jostled like a doll.

“I’ll let you go,” Pravala said in a voice that sounded closer to breaking glass than the bubbly soprano of Jessika Fujiwara. “Once Courage comes to kneel before me.”

The last thing Luka saw was Le Grand Paris sinking behind him as Pravala slithered through the streets to the Seine, slipped into the water, and disappeared into the night.

Chapter End Notes

Yikes…

Next time: The beginning of the end.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

“War! What is it good for? Absolutely everything if you're facing the demented lovechild of Cthulhu and Corsola.” - Actual quote by Nino, probably.

Chapter Notes

Sidebar: I am super proud of the pun-tacular name I came up with for Manon’s akuma, so please confirm my extreme bias in the comments, I beg you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luka was not at Le Grand Paris when Carapace and Queen Bee arrived, but the trail of chewed up street and screaming people leading to the Seine seemed like a good place to start searching.

“Shit, shit!” Queen Bee said as she flew as fast as she could along the path of Pravala’s destruction. “She’s got Luka with her!”

“We’ll get him, don’t worry!” Carapace said as he balanced precariously inside the Shellter. But he had a very bad feeling about the path of destruction they were following. Pravala had hardly shown herself in public before, and now she was rampaging openly. It was too easy to follow her, and something about this uncharacteristic change did not sit well with him.

“Hey, just a heads up that I have to revert when I voluntarily release Shellter,” Carapace said as the banks of the Seine came into view. “You’ll be on your own for a couple minutes!”

“I work fine alone.”

They touched down amidst a few fleeing people, and Carapace released the forcefield. They didn’t have long to search—around the corner, a couple of coralized people came rushing at them. Queen Bee bared her teeth and took off to meet them. Carapace dashed into an alley nearby and reverted.

“Are you out of your mind?!?” Wayzz said. “Only fools rush in, Nino. I cannot believe you and Queen Bee left without even telling Ladybug. Have I taught you nothing?”

Nino fished around his pocket for a snack pack of nori, tore it open with his teeth, and shoved it at Wayzz. “Less talking, more eating. Gotta make this quick, little dude.”

He was already dialing Marinette on his phone as Wayzz scarfed the nori sheets greedily, still peeved but unable to resist the snack. Marinette’s phone cut to voicemail, and Nino instead texted Alya with an update on what was happening and where he was.

“They must still be at the safe house. Damn, off the grid is so inconvenient right now!”

Wayzz had finished the food and glared at Nino. “Well, we’re here now, so we must help Queen Bee before—”
There was a loud crashing sound, and the ground shook. Queen Bee screamed.

“Shit, that sounded super bad. Wayzz, hurry up and transform me!”

Carapace took off at a sprint and drew his shield. He passed a few coralized victims diced in pieces courtesy of Queen Bee’s merciless sword and tried not to look at them too long. When he rounded the corner, he saw Queen Bee on her knees, and Pravala surrounded by coralized victims. Her tentacles snapped and crunched, but she wasn’t trying to attack. They simply stood there, arrested. And as Carapace came closer, he realized why.

“No, no! Please, no!” Queen Bee wailed.

“It’s okay,” said Luka, slumped against her. “It’s okay, my queen…”

He was bleeding. Not far, the body of a coralized victim lay with his head sliced off. An older woman Carapace recognized as Audrey Bourgeois was watching Luka and Queen Bee, pale as a ghost.

“I-I don’t understand,” Audrey said tearfully. “Why would you…for me?”

“Luka, look at me,” Queen Bee said, sniffling. “Please, oh god, please…”

Luka touched her cheek and smeared a little blood on her. “Sorry… But s-she’s your mom, and I couldn’t let—” He wheezed.

Audrey covered her mouth as she understood the truth in Luka’s words. “No… Chloe? My Chloe?”

“P-Pravala, she’s—” He shuddered.

“Jessika…” Queen Bee looked to Pravala, aghast as she finally understood the truth. “How could you do this?! He’s your family, Jessika!”

Carapace’s heart wrenched for Queen Bee, for Luka, for the disaster he’d clearly been too late to help prevent. But Pravala only looked on coldly.

“Family?” she said in her creaking, broken, wet voice. “Family doesn’t betray. Family doesn’t abandon!”

In Queen Bee’s arms, Luka began to convulse violently. From the wound through his shoulder, a coral tendril began to wriggle free. His eyes grew bloodshot, his skin turned clammy. He began to mutter incoherently.

“No, no, no! Stay with me, Luka!” Queen Bee wailed.

He began pawing at her, deaf to her anguished pleas. Audrey saw the danger and stepped back, afraid, but Queen Bee only held him tighter. Carapace hated himself for what he was about to do, but he couldn’t risk Queen Bee getting coralized, too.

He ran to Queen Bee as he threw his shield at Pravala. She hissed and leaped into the water to avoid it, and it landed in the wall next to her, cracking the stone. Before Queen Bee could stop him, he yanked Luka out of her arms, clawing and struggling, and shoved him to the ground out of reach.

“Shellter!” Carapace slammed his palm over Luka’s chest.

A mystical green forcefield materialized around Luka just as he lashed out in a coralized rage. His fists beat against the shield in vain. He was trapped.
“Luka!” Queen Bee said.

“Bee, I need your help!” Carapace said. “I can’t fight Pravala and all these coralized dudes alone!”

He tried to take her arm, but she shoved him roughly away. There were tears in her eyes and Luka’s blood on her cheek. “She coralized him! I have to save him!”

“You can’t! You know that as well as any—”

A huge coral tentacle came shooting out of the water just then. Carapace tried to jump to safety and drag Queen Bee with him, but they went flying along with chunks of the street. Instinctively, he pulled her flush against him and twisted. They landed hard, with Carapace cushioning the fall for her. Pain exploded in his back, but his super suit was thickly armored and unbreakable. It absorbed the blow, and he scrambled to his feet.

“Luka!” Queen Bee said.

He was still in the Shellter, completely protected from physical damage, and he’d rolled away down the street to the railing overlooking the water. Other coralized people swarmed him, but they could not penetrate the forcefield. Still others were making their way to Carapace and Queen Bee.

“Bee, c’mon!” Carapace pleaded with her. “He’ll be safe in there, but I’m seriously gonna need your help, like, right the hell now—shit!”

He caught a coralized victim’s bludgeoning fist on his arm, hissing to the pain and thanking Wayzz’s foresight in giving him goggles to protect his eyes from flying coral shards that smashed to bits when he caught the punch so close to his face. With a heave, Carapace shoved his attacker and sent her flying into the wall of a nearby building. People inside screamed as they fled the violence.

Pravala attacked directly again with her tentacles, careless of the coralized victims she’d turned when some were crushed to death. The road was falling apart and crumbled into the Seine. Carapace spotted his shield embedded in the wall on the other side of the river and knew he had to retrieve it if he wanted to stand any chance at all, but another tentacle came crashing down right on top of him. He screamed, too slow to dodge it, but it withered and changed trajectory at the last minute. Faster than the eye could see, Queen Bee came rushing in, rapier drawn, and sliced the tentacle clean off. Carapace rolled to safety just in time and clutched his racing heart, hardly able to believe that he was still alive.

Pravala shrieked in pain and sank back to the river, where she disappeared underwater. Queen Bee yanked Carapace’s shield out of the stone wall and threw it at him.

“Carapace!” she shouted.

Miraculous reflexes kicked in, and he caught the shield just as more coralized people jumped him. They grunted and cracked as he beat them back, and when they kept coming, he tapped the front of his shield with his open palm and raised another Shellter barrier to extend his shield. Spinning, the mystical green energy cut through his attackers and shattered their coralized kicks and punches like glass upon stone.

“You fucking monster!” Queen Bee screamed as she mercilessly cut through Pravala’s coral tentacles. “I’ll kill you for this!”

“Chloe!” Audrey shouted in a panic as she clutched the railing.

Unfortunately, her shout drew the attention of a coral golem who had been pounding on the Shellter
confining Luka. It lumbered toward Audrey, clubby fists raised.

“Damnit!” Carapace shoved a coralized victim roughly and jumped over him to get to Audrey. “Look out, lady!”

Audrey tried to run, and by sheer luck, she ducked in time to avoid the golem’s swinging fist. “Oh my god!”

Carapace skidded in between them and raised his shield just as the golem came in with another bone-crushing punch. He felt the impact down to his toes as he took the blow’s full force, and if not for his super suit, he was sure the force would have shattered every bone in his body. But it was not Carapace who shattered, but the golem. Its fist cracked and splintered, and the destruction spread up its arm like veins until its entire arm and shoulder exploded. Only Carapace’s shield protected Audrey and him from the blowback. With a battle cry, Carapace launched himself at the coral golem, tackled it to the ground, and smashed its head with his enhanced shield until it, too, shattered. The thing still struggled and moved, but it would take a few minutes at least to regenerate.

“Holy shit,” he said, his voice cracking. He couldn’t believe he’d just done that. Then he remembered Audrey. “You have to get out of here!”

Audrey, shaken and wide-eyed, nonetheless shook her head. “That’s my daughter out there,” she said, as if she was trying to convince herself as much as him. “I-I can’t just let her fight that thing! She could die!”

“Ah!” Queen Bee’s pain echoed down the block, and Audrey and Carapace both looked on in horror as one of Pravala’s tentacles smacked her out of the sky and onto the pavement like a fly swatter.

“Shit!” Carapace was on his feet, but Audrey grabbed his arm.

“Wait!”

Audrey was terrified, an absolute mess covered in dust and drying blood and river water. There was fear in her eyes, almost manic, and Carapace honestly could not blame her after everything she’d been through and seen tonight. But he didn’t have time to help her right now.

“Your daughter’s a hero,” he said. “A damn good one. You want to help her? Get somewhere safe so you can be there for her when this is done. She’s seriously gonna need you.”

He didn’t wait for her answer before taking off. Queen Bee was tough and already pulling herself together when Carapace stowed his shield and swan dived into the Seine, determined to level the playing field. The dive propelled him deeper into murky water, and soon he saw the writing mass of coral that was Pravala. She was at the bottom of the river where Queen Bee’s deadly sword could never reach her. But she hadn’t counted on him.

Carapace drew his shield, pushed off the river bottom, and smashed into the nearest coral tentacles with all his might. They cracked and broke apart, and Pravala screamed. Pink eyes found him, full of hatred, but Carapace swung again blocked her attack. Out of breath and in danger, Pravala launched off the river bottom and rocketed to the surface. Carapace grabbed a tentacle and rode it to the surface, where Pravala flung him as hard as she could into the air.

“Whoa, whoa!” Carapace flailed and clutched his shield as he plummeted back toward the water, where he landed with a splash but didn’t sink. For a couple seconds, he balanced on his shield, baffled. It was like balancing on a surf board, but the moment he leaned in any direction, it moved.
Fast.

“…Okay, my imminent death by tentacle porn aside, this is awesome.”

“Carapace!” Queen Bee said.

She was back and ready for the next round, and she hovered next to him over the water. Her sword, bloody, was fresh from her latest reaping of the coralized victims, many of whom lay in pieces on the banks as they struggled to regenerate.

“Man, am I glad to see you,” Carapace said. “Any ideas?”

“We kill her.”

“Yeah, but like, how?”

“With everything we’ve got. Maybe killing her is the secret to reversing the coralization.”

Carapace’s heart sank. He knew as well as she did the irreversible damage the coralization did to its victims. “Bee…”

She glared at him. Her eyes were bloodshot from crying, and Luka’s blood was a dry smudge on her cheek. “There must be a way. I’ll make it if I have to.”

“Courage and Wisdom,” Pravala spat. “You dare to challenge me in your pathetic human forms? Fools, I’ll rip your flimsy vessels apart! And then, I’ll destroy your tethers once and for all, as Pestilence should have done eons ago.”

“Uh, what’s she talking about?” Carapace said. “She wasn’t even alive eons ago…”

“Who cares?” Queen Bee said. “She won’t be talking at all when I’m through with her.”

“Die!” Pravala screamed.

Coral burst from the water and snaked toward the heroes.

Nadia Chamack had just gotten word of the biggest scoop of the year: the coral murderer, the one responsible for all the heinous attacks that had claimed the lives of countless Parisian citizens over the last several months, had finally shown her face when she transformed in front of dozens of witnesses in the lobby of Le Grand Paris, abducted two innocent civilians, and rampaged through the streets of Paris toward the Seine.

Eye-witness accounts named Jessika Fujiwara, a famous Japanese actress in Paris shooting a new television series, as the culprit. Nadia had watched the security footage from the hotel lobby herself just before her news station played it back for the viewers, shocked beyond words at the Lovecraftian transformation that changed the demure woman into a coral leviathan no matter how many times she replayed the tape.

Now, for the first time in years, she was on-site as Queen Bee and a new turtle-themed hero were working together to fight the creature. Eye-witnesses who had miraculously escaped the brutality with their lives named them as Carapace and Pravala from their accounts watching the fighting—it seemed the heroes knew more of their murderous foe than the general population.
Nadia was with her crew filming what little they could glimpse of the fight, which had turned aquatic when Pravala took to the Seine and Carapace chased her underwater. Now, he and Queen Bee were working together to slice and dice coral tentacles as they fought to get closer to Pravala’s true body. Police on the scene kept everyone a safe distance from the fighting, but coralized victims continued to pop up and draw their fire. The question on everyone’s mind was where Ladybug and Chat Noir could be at a time like this.

“Get back!” shouted a police officer armed with a crowd-control shield and a double-barrel shotgun. “Get back, and don’t let them scratch you!”

“Dumond, look out!” shouted another officer.

Officer Dumond turned and fired his shotgun just as a coral golem came barreling toward him. The shot ruptured the creature’s tough coral skin and blew out its knee, forcing it to fall. Nadia’s crew filmed it all.

“Viewers, you’re seeing it here live,” Nadia reported to the camera. “The coralized victims, led by Jessika Fujiwara, aka Pravala, are attacking en masse while Queen Bee and Carapace are on the scene. There has been no sign of Ladybug or Chat Noir. Police have initiated a total evacuation of the area——”

A loud explosion cut her off, and Nadia ducked in fright just as a massive accumulation of coral tentacles shot out of the river and ravaged the streets and buildings like fast-growing roots. Entire roads were churned to gravel, buildings gave out as their foundations were shredded, and bodies in pieces went flying. Nadia screamed at the sight of a spiked tentacle careening straight for her and her crew, but as suddenly as it appeared, it shattered into a thousand pieces. In a literally earth-shattering display, falling debris and coral alike exploded like burst glass all in the blink of an eye, utterly decimated.

There was a shriek from the river, blood-curdling, and a massive green light flashed around Pravala’s body in the center of the writhing mass of tentacles. Carapace leaped from the water, hands flat against the green barrier, and shouted a war cry. As suddenly as the light had appeared, it shrank in on itself under his weight and crushed everything beneath it.

Nadia struggled to her feet. “A-Are you seeing this?!” she said, searching for her cameraman. “It looks like Queen Bee cut through Pravala’s coral, and now Carapace is crushing her——”

But before Nadia could finish her thought, Carapace was blown back by a force far greater and landed hard in the water. He sank below the surface. Queen Bee screamed something and dove after him, and once again Pravala’s tentacles rose, broken and bloody but steadily growing back.

Nadia turned to the camera again. Her cameraman had taken an injury and dropped it, so she picked it up and held it close to her face. “Ladybug, Chat Noir, if you’re watching this, Paris needs you!” She hoisted the camera on her shoulder, shaking, and pointed it at the Seine were Pravala, her coral-encrusted body cracked and bleeding from whatever Carapace and Queen Bee had done to her, nonetheless smashed her remaining tentacles against the water like spears fishing for prey.

“Mom.”

Nadia tensed at the sound of her daughter’s voice and, abandoning her mission, whirled to find Manon standing there surrounded by Nadia’s crew.

Except it wasn’t her crew as she knew them. Bent at strange angles and covered in chunks of stone, glass, and twisted metal like crude armor, their eyes were hollow and blackened, and their mouths
hung open lifelessly. Nadia screamed at the sight of them and dropped the camera.

Manon, who was no longer Manon, lifted a talon-tipped hand, and the camera floated like magic. Blackened lips smiled at her. “Maybe Ladybug will come if I call instead of you.”

“M-Manon!” Nadia said, stricken as she stumbled backwards in terror from her own daughter and what she had become.

Manon’s smile fell. “No.”

With another wave of her unnatural hand, broken glass and rubble rose up around Nadia and coated her, suffocating. Nadia screamed as she felt her arms bend back. Her bones snapped and her blood ran, but the telekinetic debris sealed her pain inside. She felt heavy and helpless, dangling like a doll on a string beholden to another’s will. She opened her mouth, but only a strangled scream escaped her as her jaw hung open. The last sight she saw as her vision clouded with shadows and her body betrayed her was Manon, no longer Manon, looking coldly into the camera.

“I’m Manikinetic, and I’ll paint this whole town red if I have to.” She snapped her fingers, and Nadia, no longer Nadia, snapped back like a slingshot. “Stop me if you dare, Ladybug.”

She smashed the camera, and the signal died.

“Adrien will become Destruction incarnate.”

Fu’s ominous words hung heavy in the air, and Marinette found it difficult to breathe. Emilie looked like she was in shock, and Alya was grim and uncharacteristically quiet. Marinette held Tikki close to her heart and prayed for some of her strength.

“Then that’s it,” Marinette said. “We can’t let Adrien roam free a moment longer. We have to find him. Tonight.”

Before it’s too late.

If it’s not already too late...

“I agree,” Fu said. “You must purify the akuma haunting him before Plagg loses control and Adrien is fully consumed. Do that, and there may still be a chance to save them both.”

“We’re going to need all hands on deck for this one,” Alya said. “I’ll go check on Chloe and Nino.”

She left, and Marinette took a deep breath. Focusing on the task at hand was mechanical, logical. One step at a time, and she could stand to keep moving as the world fell away behind her. “Emilie, your Eyes have the power to see things remotely, right? Is there any way you can help us track down Adrien’s location?”

“Mistress,” Duusu said, worried.

Emilie petted him. “They do, but only when I’m transformed. I haven’t used my Miraculous in a while.”

“Why not?”

“Because Felix figured out I was watching him, and keeping tabs on Adrien. He knows my powers
as well as I do. He knows the Eyes are active when I’m transformed, and he could track me that way. I couldn’t risk it.”

Marinette nodded. “Well, if he finds you now, he’ll have me to deal with personally. I can think of a few things I’d like to say to my so-called investor.”

“I agree with Marinette,” Fu said. “Perhaps Felix will be with Adrien, considering how he’s been using Adrien to further his own ends. Find one, and you will most assuredly find the other.”

“Then I’ll do it,” Emilie said. “Just let me know when you’re ready to leave.”

Just then, Alya came bursting through the door, panting like she’d sprinted all the way upstairs. “We have a major problem!”

“What? Alya, what’re you—”

She crossed the room to the ancient television set in the corner. “Does this thing work?”

“Just the local channels, no cable,” Fu said. “Why do you ask?”

Alya was already messing with the channel knobs on the set and scrolling through static until she found what she was looking for, which was a live news report.

“Alya, what’s going on?” Marinette said. “You look like you saw a ghost.”

Trixx grabbed paw-fulls of Alya’s hair and hissed. “Not a ghost, something much more real.”

“Where are Chloe and Nino?” Emilie asked.

“See for yourselves.” Alya tossed Marinette her cell phone, which was open to a recent text from Nino.

[Nino: Fighting Pravala at the Seine. Luka’s in trouble. Need help.]

On the television, a reporter was speaking into the camera shaky-cam style. Marinette recognized her as Manon’s mother, Nadia Chamack. She was speaking to someone off-screen, but soon dropped the camera and let out a strangled cry. A new face picked up the camera and stared directly into it.

“Oh no!” Tikki gasped.

“I’m Manikinetic, and I’ll paint this whole town red if I have to,” said the figure on screen.

“Manon,” Marinette said, clutching Alya’s phone like a lifeline as tears welled in her eyes. She would have recognized that voice anywhere, even under the glamor of akumatization. Oh god…

The akuma possessing Manon bared her teeth in a sinister smile. “Stop me if you dare, Ladybug.”

The screen blacked out before cutting back to a reporter in the safety of a newsroom. He reported on the currently ongoing violence downtown as Carapace and Queen Bee fought the entity revealed for the first time as the coral murderer Pravala, aka Jessika Fujiwara, while the akuma known only as Manikinetic was further terrorizing the citizens of Paris by raising the bodies of the living and the fallen alike as if by magic to carry out her will. Marinette had seen enough.

“Tikki, transform me!” she shouted.

In a flash of scarlet light, Ladybug was suited up and ready to go.
“Whoa, wait Ladybug!” Alya said. “We need a plan.”

“There’s no time. We have to get there and help Queen Bee and Carapace before it’s too late.”

Alone, perhaps they could hold off Pravala temporarily, but if Felix showed up—if Chat Blanc showed up…

Ladybug did not even want to think about it.

“We’re going. Both of you, transform now. There’s no time to lose.”

And so, Alya and Emilie did as they were asked. Fu saw them off and promised to stay hidden here so they would not need to worry about him. Ladybug barely heard his goodbye before she was jumping and flying over the streets of suburban Paris with Rena Rouge and Mayura hot on her heels.

*Chloe, what were you thinking going in without saying anything?* Ladybug would have been furious if she wasn’t scared to death for Nino and her.

And to make matters worse, it was Jessika—Luka’s own aunt—under the mask of Pride. All this time, and she was right there under their noses. Jessika had fooled them all, and now she had Luka. Ladybug gritted her teeth to the cold as she furiously wiped the tears from her cheeks.

“I have a visual on Carapace and Queen Bee,” Mayura called. “They’re fighting Pravala.”


“I can’t seem to find them anywhere,” Mayura said. “I’ll keep looking.”

“They sent an akuma to draw me out,” Ladybug said. “If they’re after my Miraculous, they’ll be where the action is.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Rena said darkly.

“I’ll deal with Chat. I need you two to subdue the akuma fast so Manon isn’t hurt.”

“Alone? I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Mayura said.

*I won’t be alone.*

Her Chat was in there somewhere, and no matter what it took, she would reach him. Fu had said it himself: they were the strongest because they had each other. Ladybug would not give up on him.

By the time Ladybug arrived on the scene, it looked as though a bomb had detonated. Huge chunks of coral, debris, and body parts littered the streets. The Seine was overflowing where the fighting had destroyed the banks. The police were searching buildings and what was left of the streets for survivors, while news teams swarmed like carrion flies as close to the action as they dared. A police perimeter had been set up with officers manning it like soldiers protecting a castle wall.

“Ladybug!” shouted a familiar voice.

Officer Henri Dumond, looking worse for wear, rushed to meet Ladybug.

“Henri!” Ladybug said.

“Thank god you’re here. There’s just too many of them!”
A couple coralized victims were assaulting the police line as officers opened fire on them, stopping them in their tracks. Chunks of coral and flesh went flying and sprayed the ground. People screamed and fled, and the police pushed the barrier back farther.

“Hold the line,” Ladybug said. “Get those people as far back as you possibly can. Pravala’s secret technique could raze this entire block, I’ve seen it before.”

“So have we,” Henri said grimly. “Queen Bee and Carapace stopped it, but this was all Pravala’s work.” He gestured at the ruined buildings and uprooted streets. Indeed, it looked as if a bomb had gone off.

“What? Already? Did she change back?” Ladybug looked back at Pravala just as Carapace streaked past her, impossibly fast on his shield in the water and raising more green barriers. They imploded and crushed everything inside, but still Pravala grew back her limbs like some immortal reptile.

“Change? No, Queen Bee disappeared for a little bit after, but they’ve been fighting this whole time.”

*Bee reverted, but Pravala didn’t?*

It didn’t make any sense. If Pravala had used Exedo, then she should have reverted back to Jessika and Carapace could have captured her. It didn’t make any sense, unless…

*Unless she can’t revert anymore.*

Queen Bee took a direct hit from one of Pravala’s coral tentacles, but the stab was blocked at the last minute by a wondrous orb of green light that surrounded her and shattered the end of the tentacle as if it were made of porcelain. Queen Bee was blown back, protected, but quickly flew in close and swung her sword. She shattered the shield and cut through the coral on the other side. Pravala shrieked in pain. Hydra-like, two more coral fingers wriggled from the bloody stump, rapidly growing back.

“Bee!” Ladybug shouted.

Queen Bee whipped around, but there was no relief to be seen in her eyes. There was no time to question it because Pravala attacked her again viciously, and Queen Bee was forced to fly away.

“Watch out!”

Mayura landed in between Ladybug and Henri, her steel fans splayed and newly bloodied where she’d sliced a would-be attacker. Ladybug stared at the figure, a man covered in chunks of stone and earth as if he’d magnetically attracted them. His mouth hung open, dislocated at the jaw, and his black eyes were sightless. The wound in his chest slowed him down, but he seemed not to feel the pain and staggered to his feet.

*What is this?*

Ladybug got the answer to her question soon enough when the akuma possessing Manon appeared before her, leading more of the zombified people. Some among them should not have been able to walk upright given the condition of their lacerated bodies. Others were covered in coral under the earth, stone, and glass. All of them parted for their leader.

“So you finally decided to show your face, Ladybug.”

“Manon,” Ladybug said, only barely recognizing her friend under her bruised skin, blackened eyes
and lips, and curling talons.

Manon sneered. “It’s Manikinetic.” To prove her point, she waved a hand and the ground around Ladybug’s feet churned and rose as if by magic.

Ladybug jumped away just as the debris smashed together where she’d been standing mere moments ago.

“Henri, get out of here!”

Henri was already running, knowing better than to get in Ladybug’s way. She was worried Manikinetic would target him, but the akuma barely noticed him as she glared up at Ladybug.

“Run all you like! I’ll catch you and make you my newest minion!”

Manikinetic waved her hand again, and her mindless minions threw themselves at Ladybug like puppets on strings, unnaturally pulled and stretched. Ladybug had not realized just how many there were. They seemed to spill out of the shadows and descended on her. Suddenly, a long, lingering note crescendoed like ringing in her ears, harsh, and all around Ladybug, blue flames materialized out of thin air. The minions screeched as they touched the flames, which grew into a roiling vortex.

They’ll burn to death!

Possessed or not, many of those people were alive and innocent of their actions. Ladybug took to the skies and escaped the fire before it could burn her up, too, but she was surprised to find that it gave off no heat. Above, Rena perched on a nearby building roof, her flute to her lips as she held her note, and Ladybug understood.

“Now, Rena!” Mayura shouted.

Rena leaped to the next building over and her fingers flew over her flute, changing notes and rhythms. The fox fire moved with her, incandescent ropes of light that swam among the minions, separating them. Hypnotizing them.

Mayura took advantage of the confusion and flew at Manikinetic directly, fans drawn. Manikinetic used her geomancy to rip up chunks of the street and fling them at Mayura, who twisted and cut through them with her bladed fans. When that didn’t work, she started throwing minions.

“Hypnotize this!” Manikinetic said, manic in her glee as she telekinetically threw a normal screaming woman at Mayura.

Mayura was forced to catch the woman, but a hail of broken glass followed, and she did her best to shield them both with her fans.

“I have to purify her akuma,” Ladybug said to herself. And fast, before Manikinetic killed anybody, if she hadn’t already.

Ladybug readied her yo-yo and looked around for Rena and Mayura, but something smashed into her from behind without warning and sent her flying. She barely had the time to scream when she hit the side of a building hard, cracking stone and glass, and landed in a tired heap. She struggled, coughing, and slowly staggered to her feet.

“You are tough, I’ll give you that.”

Ladybug looked up to see a terrifyingly familiar face looking down on her. Icy, blue eyes cut deep.
The sound of a hundred fluttering wings descended around them, smothering.

“Aramis,” she said before she could stop herself.

He smiled that same, dashing smile he had when he saw her first show, signed that first check, gave her the chance no one else would to make something of herself and her talent. And it broke her heart —this man who had given her so much and raised her so high, towered over her now ready to tear it all down.

“Marinette,” he said.

It was wrong, so wrong. Not once had she ever suspected his true nature, the beast within. But as he looked down on her now behind a mask of enchanted steel, she felt like more of a fool than ever before. The Butterfly Miraculous glimmered at his throat, its four delicate wings fluttering around a delicate net of coral. Ladybug saw her chance and lunged at him.

She never made it.

A strong hand clenched around her wrist as she prepared to punch and twisted her arm around. Another arm snaked around her middle and pulled her flush against a hard body, knocking the wind out of her. Butterfly had leaped out of reach, coat tails fluttering and a hundred white butterflies swarming him protectively.

“My lady,” Chat said, arsenic in her ear.

He nuzzled her loose, long hair affectionately. His breath was hot against her skin, his teeth painfully gentle as they nipped at her earlobe. Ladybug’s chest swelled with fresh pain that threatened to crack her open—for a maddening second, she believed he was hers again, and she wanted nothing more than to fall back in his arms.

Arms that tightened in a grip that could crush bones. Nails pressuring her neck, sharp and strong enough to pierce even her super suit if he wanted. The threat of teeth and blood as he inhaled her, drawn to the smell of her fear.

Ladybug closed her eyes and forced her body to relax against him. “Chaton.”

He smiled against her and forced her chin up with a long talon, pleased with her submission. His death grip on her wrist slackened. “Did you miss me?”

As soon as she felt his hold on her relax, Ladybug slammed her heel on his foot with all her might. He let go completely in his shock, and she jammed her elbow in his ribs hard. In under a second, she was free with only a few shallow scratches on her neck for her trouble, and Chat was doubled over and heaving. Ladybug quickly leaped out of his immediate reach, but he swiped at her all the same. There was an insidious hatred in his magenta eyes, as furious and fragile as his ego, and bared raw. Ladybug swung her yo-yo defensively and glared back at him.

“I missed seeing that pathetic look on your face,” she said.

He bared his teeth, his anger good and blazing now, and she even smirked at him. This might be over faster than she expected if he was going to do half her job for her.

“What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?” she taunted him.

He drew his staff and tore after her blindly, carelessly, stupidly. “Say that again!”
Ladybug drew him away from the others, far away from the civilians still fleeing, and he chased her, as she hoped he would.

He also caught up to her, like she dreaded he would. Sooner than she’d expected. She only prayed she’d lured him far enough away from the others to spare them his destructive hatred. With a clash of claws and steel, their bitter battle began.

Rena Rouge had her hands full directing ghostly will-o-wisps around Manikinetic’s minions to keep them occupied and unable to do her bidding. So long as she maintained the music, they followed like children after the Pied Piper.

“Rena! Clear me a path!” Mayura ordered as she sprinted.

Rena looked up and saw Mayura’s target just as he bounded away from Ladybug, who was preoccupied with Chat Blanc.

*Butterfly.*

Rena played a high note, and the blue fox fire coiled like mystical snakes. It wrapped around minions, pushing them back as they ran from what they perceived to be flesh-burning flames in their delusion. Mayura ran undisturbed and launched herself at Butterfly. He saw her coming and drew his cane sword just as she came in hard with her fans. The clash of steel was ear-splitting, but it didn’t last long before the many white butterflies following him lifted him on a platform and carried him through the air.

“There’s nowhere you can run that I won’t find you!” Mayura said as she ran up the side of a nearby building a few steps, leaped to a lamp post, and jumped insanely high into the air, spinning after him.

Rena may have been impressed if she wasn’t suddenly face to face with Manikinetic herself, hovering on a jagged asphalt platform and looking like it had been far too long since she’d skinned anybody alive.

“You!” she spat, her black lips twisted in an ugly snarl. “You’re a pain in my ass!”

Rena leaped backwards, her Miraculous super suit muffling her movements and rendering her all but silent. “Says the brat out past her bedtime.”

Manikinetic shrieked her fury and launched rocks, broken cobblestone, and a twisted, metal two-by-four. Rena sprinted across the rooftop and raised her flute to her lips again. In her mind’s eye, she conceived of a lie so real she could taste it, and played a short, sharp note.

An AC vent transformed into Rena’s mangled body when the rocks and debris collided with it, and Manikinetic sneered victorious. Until the illusion quickly faded and left her even more furious than before. By then, however, Rena was two buildings away and surveilling the other heroes in their respective fights.

“Get back here, you weasel!”

Rena snorted and messed up her note, causing the fox fire hypnotizing the minions to flicker and confuse them.

*Weasel? That’s just rude.*
Twice more Rena was able to fool Manikinetic as the latter mercilessly pummeled her doppelgängers with broken glass, metal, and chunks of building. It bought Rena precious seconds to intervene on Mayura’s behalf as she tried to cut down Butterfly and end this war once and for all.

“I warned you!” Butterfly shouted. “I warned you never to return. It’s your own fault Gabe is dead and Adrien is forever lost to you!”

Butterflies, weaponized, swarmed Mayura, but she deftly cut them away as she leaped after Butterfly, as though she’d done this a thousand times before. “You murdered my husband! Your own brother!”

Butterfly swooped in on his akuma magic carpet and struck Mayura with his cane sword. She pushed back with all her might, and the two of them came crashing to the ground, the butterflies right behind them. They descended on Mayura like acid rain, and she screamed as she tried to shield herself from them. But they burst into a rainbow of colors as they slashed her super suit and blue-glamoured skin.

“This is your fault,” Butterfly said again. “If you hadn’t come back, I wouldn’t have had to kill him. You forced my hand!”

“You’re delusional! None of this will ever bring Bridgette back!”

Mayura whirled fantastically with her fans, but for all the butterflies she sliced to ribbons, more birthed from their severed wings and swarmed in a frenzied phantasmagoria of light and emotion.

“Selfish bitch,” Butterfly spat. “What do you know? You had everything, and I lost everything! Well, no more. I’ll finish you tonight, as I should have done years ago!”

Rena saw her chance and played a long, low note on her enchanted flute. The growing swarm of butterflies took to the skies on a lie and descended on Butterfly himself. Alarmed, he stumbled back and slashed at them, unaware that he was only swinging at the empty air and falling snow. Mayura wasted no time and sprinted at him, bladed fans poised for the kill.

“Exedo!” shouted a spectral voice not of this world.

Before Mayura could reach Butterfly, the Seine exploded anew with an army of wriggling coral. They slithered like hungry serpents in every direction, felling buildings and overturning streets. Minions disappeared in the rubble, crushed, and the police line disappeared for the length of an entire city block, consumed in the dust and snow. Buildings fell, including the one Rena was perched on, and a tentacle came crashing down next to her. She went flying, and no illusion would save her from the reality of the pavement rushing to meet her.

She braced herself for impact, but the crash was more painful than anything she’d ever felt. She skidded against the wall of the building as it fell, rolled off the roof of a car, and landed on the road. No sooner had she cleared the car than the tentacle came down atop it, flattening it.

In just seconds the world was in total and utter chaos, and in seconds again it was still once more.

“Buzz Kill!” Queen Bee shouted.

In the time it took Rena to wipe the blood from her split lip, Queen Bee had sliced and diced the ravenous coral as if it were spaghetti under a kitchen knife. But as though Pravala had been expecting the intervention, another tentacle came in hard and fast and knocked Queen Bee out of the sky with the force of a meteor crashing to Earth.
Rena was on her feet and running before she had a chance to think about it. She jumped, high and fast, and caught Queen Bee just before she could crash into a bent street lamp that had already seen enough abuse for one night. The impact on the pavement made Rena see stars, and she was sure that even with her suit, her toenails must have surely peeled off in the skid. As soon as Queen Bee was knocked out of the air, Carapace’s Sheltter shield materialized around the rogue tentacle, imploded, and crushed it into nothing.

“Shit, Queen Bee! Hey, girl, pull it together!” Rena said as she laid her on the sidewalk gently.

Queen Bee coughed. She was bleeding from multiple cuts, some of them deep enough to draw concern, and a horrible bruise was forming on the side of her face. Rena guessed she must have cracked the bone getting smacked around like a fly. Her Miraculous Comb beeped.

“Maybe you and Carapace should switch Miraculous,” Bee said hoarsely. “Asshole hasn’t bothered to catch me once this whole fight.”

Despite herself, Rena grinned. “Don’t tempt me. I look super hot in green.”

Bee cracked a pained smile and touched her comb. “Pollen, revert me.”

Her Miraculous glamour dropped, and Chloe winced as she pushed herself up on her hands. Carapace came in running not long after.

“Shit, Chloe, you okay?” he said.

“No thanks to you,” she sneered.

“Honey Bee,” Pollen said, shivering. “I don’t know how many more Buzz Kills I can take. We can’t keep this up forever.”

“I know, I know.” Chloe winced as she rummaged in her purse for a packet of honey. “I’m sorry, Pollen. We have to keep fighting.”

Pollen sucked on the honey packet greedily.

“Sorry, I’m still sorta getting the hang of the timing,” Carapace said. He looked just as rough as Chloe, bleeding and bruised and soaking wet. His shield glowed with the power of Sheltter. “Babe, you got my texts.”

Rena nodded. “Yeah, and not a moment too late. Butterfly and Chat Blanc are here.”

“They are?” Chloe said. “Where?”

“Ladybug led Chat off. I think she’s worried about his Cataclysm.”

“I should be there.”

“Uh, Chloe, I kinda really need your help with Pravala. You know, the giant tentacle monster who wants to go full Alien on our asses?”

“He’s right,” Rena said. “For now, we need to stay here and do what we can—”

“There you are!” Manikinetic shrieked. “Get her!”

The horde of minions, no longer hypnotized by fox fire, came running toward the trio. Carapace scooped Chloe up bridal style, and Rena leaped to her feet. But the minions were upon them, and all
she could do was swing at the nearest ones with her indestructible flute.

“Rena!” Carapace shouted.

“Get her out of here!” Rena said, more worried about how vulnerable Chloe was in her reverted state.

Pain exploded in her back as she took a clubbing from a stone-encrusted minion, and she sank to her knees. Another blow struck her face, and she saw stars. Somewhere in the commotion, she dropped her flute.

In her peripheral vision, Rena could make out flashes of green, but the pain was overwhelming and she clutched her face. Illusion magic was only as good as the caster, and there was no substitute for reality, in the end. She couldn’t lie her way out of true failure.

_Is this all I can do? Is this the best I have?_

But just when Rena was sure she was done for, the blows relented, and the sound of steel cleaving flesh was the sweetest she’d heard all night. Mayura towered over her looking worse for wear, her fans bloody to the handles.

“Get up,” she said, her breathing labored.

Rena gasped in pain as she struggled to stand. Her flute had rolled away, but not far. “Mayura… What about Butterfly?”

“Your life isn’t worth his death,” she said simply. “He can wait.”

Rena fumbled for her flute and held it close like a talisman. She huddled at Mayura’s back, the minions closing in around them. Manikinetic hovered over them, her face warped with haunted hatred.

“What do we do?” Rena asked. “I can’t really fight like you. My power is illusion; it’s useless against reality.”

“Then you make a new reality. We have to get that akuma, or we’ll die here.”

“Courage!” Pravala screamed. “Come out, you vermin! You can’t hide from me!”

Rena shivered. God, this was seriously happening. It was real, and it was her life, and as glamorous as being a super hero sounded on paper, it was shit when faced with the blood and sweat and mortality she was facing now. But she had chosen and been chosen in turn. She was here because she wanted to be, because she needed to be. Because Ladybug needed her, and damn if she would let down her hero, her best friend in her hour of need.

Rena raised her flute to her lips as the minions rattled and shuffled closer, and she closed her eyes to reality, rejecting it entirely.

“Mirage!”

Blue fox fire materialized and swirled around Mayura and her, consuming them and the world as they knew it.
Ladybug had never been so afraid in her life than when she fought Chat Blanc. He was fast, he was strong, and he was so utterly gone that there seemed to be no reaching him. But she had to try.

“Chat!” she shouted as she dodged his deadly staff yet again and countered with a vicious yo-yo assault. “Snap out of it!”

“God, you’re so pathetic!” Chat snarled as he swung again, this time cracking the brick wall of a townhouse they leaped past. “Whine all you like, but I’m in control now! I’ll never go back to being that simpering coward!”

“The Chat I know is brave and selfless! He would never give in to darkness!”

Ladybug snagged him with her yo-yo and knocked him down. He hit his head on the pavement, split the skin, but hardly felt the pain as he got up swiftly and lunged at her. She was too slow to dodge properly, and they collided. Pain exploded in her back when they landed against a parked car, and she cried out. Thinking quickly through the haze of agony, she wrapped her arms around him, pinning his arms in turn, and squeezed with all her might. And then, she flew.

Chat struggled in her hold, and it was all she could do to hold him. Her wings strained, unaccustomed to carrying such a weight, but higher they rose. She could smell him pressed so closely against her, and she fought not to cry.

“Kitty,” she said. “Hear me. I’m so sorry for everything, for not trusting you, for pushing you away. I was so wrong, and I’m sorry. Please, come back to me.”

“Let me go!”

“No! I let you go once, and I swear on my life, I’ll never do it again. Adrien!”

He stiffened in her hold.

“Adrien, oh…” She clutched him tight, and they rose ever higher, high above Paris, above the world, where only the stars could see them. “Please… Stay with me.”

His breathing was labored and hot on her neck, and if she closed her eyes, she could almost picture it —him, her, the fire, the wine, the cake, alone together. Asking, willing, wanting, daring… For just a moment, her words had reached him.

His hand on her hip, their legs entwined, the stars aligned above them.

Reaching out.

_I can’t feel you now._

“Where did you go?” she said.

The snow fell around them, light and silent, stars cascading all around them in a void for just the two of them.

“I closed my eyes and let the devil inside,” he said.

Ladybug’s eyes snapped open and found him watching her with a look she had never seen before. There was no hatred there, no fury, no pain. No love, no yearning, no despair. Just…nothing.

Reaching out…
Lips parted, a memory, so close, so close. She knew what she had to do. Her hold on him loosened, ready to fall. But he held her closer.

“Cataclysm,” he whispered.

Ladybug opened her mouth in a silent scream. She wrenched him away, but his claws only tore at her, at the sky, at the very fabric of reality. The seams split, the stars unraveled, and darkness opened wide. Those malevolent, magenta eyes stared back at her as he fell and she rose, deep into darkness, into the void, where not even the stars can shine. She reached back for him, desperate, afraid, alone.

*I can’t feel you now.*

The abyss swallowed her whole, crushing and cold. And he fell back to Earth, taking the last of the light with him.

Ladybug was gone, and only the devil remained.

Chapter End Notes

Oh man, one more chapter before the epilogue!! I’m so pumped. Goal: finish by New Year’s so you can all have the best holiday season ever. Until then, I will have my Sad Songs Playlist looping to crush my soul and get me in the mood for the last, heartbreaking chapter of this fic. Your tears sustain me, so please ugly cry at me in the comments!

Next time: Everything is beautiful and everything hurts.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

What is love? Baby, don’t hurt me! (I’m going to hurt you.)

Chapter Notes

I promised a weekend update and I have delivered a weekend update. I accept praise, tears, and reaction gifs as acceptable forms of payment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ladybug had felt the creeping terror of sleep paralysis before, and while it was a paltry comparison, it was the closest she could come to rationalizing the current state of her existence—or nonexistence, as it were—drifting in the void. It was the sensation of being on the edge of something, grasping for a handhold but never quite reaching it. There was a feeling like floating, or sinking. Drowning, but she couldn’t see which way was up. She couldn’t see anything at all.

It was so cold here in the doldrums. Cold and dark and empty, except for her, for now. She couldn’t recall how long she’d been here, or where here was, or how she’d gotten here. The last thing she could remember was flying—falling? The sky split around her like jaws opening wide, and Chat—

Ladybug snapped open her eyes and saw endless darkness. She screamed, but the void swallowed even that. She reached out, groping blindly, but her fingers closed around nothing at all. She couldn’t even see her own fingers right in front of her face.

For a frightening moment, she fantasized about not being alone here. The space was dark and vast, perhaps endless, surely there must be someone else here. Something else. Something she could not see, but that did not mean it could not see her. Black eyes in the deep, used to the dark, a colorless, bloodless body at home in the abyss, circling her, watching her, tasting, tempted.

But time slithered passed and nothing came for her. Her breathing was short and shallow, and soon she was lightheaded and dizzy. There was nothing quite so exhausting as waiting to die, any moment now. She knew she could not stay here on the edge of fear, but there was nowhere else to go. If she lost consciousness, she could not remember it. Nor could she remember waking up. Perhaps she wasn’t. Awake, that is. Perhaps she wasn’t…

Ladybug bit her lip and curled into a ball. She buried her face in her knees as she hugged herself close for something to hold on to, but it was so cold here, so dark, and she could hardly feel her own limbs. Were they there at all? Was she?

And suddenly, clarity. It hit her so forcefully that she felt the air leave her lungs. Of course there were no monsters stalking her in the darkness, no hungry eyes leering at her. They vanished like smoke, never there at all, and they took her hope with them. All that was here, all that had ever been here, was her. Alone, in darkness, without so much as the wind to feel her.
Mayura watched, awe-struck, as the tornado of fox fire transformed before her eyes. Fiery tongues swelled to frothing waves, engorged to bursting, and in the blink of an eye they flooded the entire ravaged block and everyone on it. Manikinetic’s minions tried to run, but the cresting waves came down on them with crushing velocity, drowning. And Manikinetic herself, though she tried to fly away, did not escape. Enchanted water reached for her like grasping hands and pulled her under, splashing and screaming.

Carapace struggled to stay above the water’s surface with the help of his shield, Chloe safely in his arms.

"Are you kidding me?!” Chloe squawked as she all but climbed Carapace lest he drop her in the ferocious water.

"Uh, I think you got ‘em, babe!” Carapace said nervously.

Rena held her note, and all around them, the wall of water submerged more and more minions. Mayura, feet solidly on the ground, reached out a hand, astonished when her fingers came away dry. It was a flawless lie, and one Mayura was not about to let go to waste.

As soon as Rena finished her note, Mirage’s power vanished and her necklace gave its first warning beep. The water faded like smoke, and Manikinetic and her minions were left gagging and flailing in the throes of near-drowning madness, dry as a bone. But Mayura had eyes only for Butterfly, who had also attempted to escape the ravenous waters.

“Contain Manikinetic’s akuma,” Mayura ordered just before she took off at a full sprint.

“Mayura!” Rena said.

Butterfly didn’t notice her coming right away. She deftly leaped over twitching minions’ bodies and rubble. Pravala drove her tentacles into the ground behind Mayura, but she was Carapace and Queen Bee’s problem for now. The attack drew Butterfly’s attention, and he sneered when he saw her coming for him. He drew his cane sword, and the white butterflies that followed him took to the sky, ready to defend him. Mayura raised a steel fan, poised to strike. He would not escape her this time.

The ground in front of her suddenly split open like a wound that had popped its stitches. Mayura was so startled that her body moved on pure instinct, skidding and changing directions, but not before the ends of her dress brushed the crag and the ashes that rose out of it. The ends frayed and disintegrated on contact. A hair’s breadth closer, and it would have been her foot to dissolve instead.

Mayura leaped back to safety, but she soon realized that nowhere was safe. Chat Blanc was back, but there was no sign of Ladybug.

“Chat,” Mayura said, panting hard from her sprint.

Magenta eyes rose to meet hers, and she recoiled from the sight. Something about him was different from before. Gone was the extreme anger, the hatred, the self-loathing. It was like looking into a
corpse’s eyes—lifeless, glazed, and completely indifferent. Mayura felt a knot of dread twist in her throat.

“Good timing, Chat Blanc,” Butterfly said, removing himself to a safer distance from Mayura. “Now, kill her.”

Mayura brandished her fans. If she had to go through him to get to Butterfly, then so be it. He had already used Cataclysm, so he would no doubt revert soon and cease to be a threat. If she could just wait him out, she would not have to hurt him.

Careful to avoid the Cataclysm crag he’d opened up, Mayura ran, ready to bypass him entirely if possible. But when he raised a smoking, white claw, her heart all but stopped.

No—

“Cataclysm!”

Chat raked his hand through the air and ripped open the very sky. A dark abyss stared back at her, freezing and magnetic, like a black hole summoned from the palm of his hand.

And then, he did it again.

Mayura had no time even to scream as Chat leaped and tore at her. She barely dashed away, and he ripped through the air and earth as if they were nothing but gossamer. Another black hole opened up in his wake, and he showed no signs of tiring or slowing. His Miraculous Ring gave no telltale beep. And it was then that Mayura realized with horror that it wouldn’t. He wasn’t going to revert. And he wasn’t going to stop.

She had another chilling thought: Where is Ladybug?

He gave her no time to question him, relentless as he chased her and uprooted the fabric of reality with every killing touch. It was no good, and Mayura knew that it was only a matter of time before he caught her. All it would take was one touch, and she could be sucked into another dimension, quite possibly to her doom. Her heart wrenched. What if Ladybug—

Chat lunged for her, and Mayura had no choice but to deflect with her fan. The steel bit through his super suit and drew blood. The blow stunned him momentarily and she pushed back against him, but he swung around with his other claw. In her frantic attempt to keep her face from becoming a black hole, she sacrificed her other fan. The darkness devoured it in one gulp, and Mayura somersaulted away.

He’ll really kill me, she realized.

“Ladybug,” she said as he got his bearings and shook out his bleeding arm. “What have you done with Ladybug?”

Chat met her gaze, hollow and unfeeling. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

With only one fan left, Mayura was fast running out of moves. She had to stop Chat somehow without dying in the process, but one touch of those black holes would be the end of her. The few he had ripped open seemed to be growing as they devoured more space around them—the ground, debris, bodies, the very air itself. Destruction in its purest form.

No, Mayura thought desperately. It can’t be too late!
He came at her, fearless as a wild animal, as she called upon the power to change her fate and his.

“Divination!”

Chat sank his corrosive claws into her throat and eviscerated her, skin to bone, until she was nothing but ashes.

Again.

The sky opened wide and sucked her inside where neither air nor light nor warmth could follow, and she was gone.

Again.

She made it two steps before he slammed his hand on the ground, split it wide, and pulled her down into the abyss where her screams died with her.

Again. Again. Again.

Mayura disintegrated, evaporated, and unraveled a hundred times over. Bones shattered, blood spattered, and she met a fate worse than death every time. Until finally, death could not keep up.

She found her opening and took it. She threw her remaining fan like a spear and hit Chat’s knee. He cried out and fell, and Mayura slammed into him. The spell broke, and she struggled with Chat.

“Get off!” he snarled as he tried to slash her to ribbons.

“Tell me where Ladybug is!”

He looked up at her, and for the first time since she’d seen him, those vicious eyes flashed with hatred. “Gone.”

“No…”

“Gone?” Butterfly said, not far from them. “What do you mean, gone? Where is her Miraculous?!”

Chat struggled, that brief flash of emotion fading back into the depths of the emptiness that had possessed him. Mayura did not understand it, but she knew she was out of time.

She slugged him in the jaw. “Enough.”

Chat tensed, dazed, and it gave her precious seconds to pluck a feather fastened to her Miraculous Broach.

“It’s time to face your demons, Adrien.”

He bared his teeth, bloody from his split lip, but she slapped the peacock feather on his forehead and pressed it down. The blue fronds shriveled and fell away, leaving only the dark eye in the center.

Slowly, it opened, and Chat screamed and thrashed beneath her. Tears gathered in his eyes, and in his madness, he threw her off him.

“What have you done?!” Butterfly said.

Mayura heaved and got to her feet. Her Miraculous gave its first warning beep as Chat continued to thrash, but there was nothing he could do. Not even Destruction could hide from Truth forever.
The Eye opened wide on his forehead, and he tore at it, drew bloody tracks in his skin, but it would not be blinded. He opened his mouth in a final, silent scream as the first tendrils of darkness slithered out from the Eye, engorging as they wriggled free. Larger and thicker, they took the shape of wings as they struggled to stay afloat without a host.

The akuma…

She had never seen one so big before. Shaking, she covered her mouth in shame. How could this happen? How could Gabriel have ever let it happen? She could scarcely believe that the man she’d fallen in love with, the father of her child, the one she’d given up everything to protect, had brought such terrible pain to their only son.

The monstrous akuma hovered over Chat like it had every intention of returning to its host, but all of a sudden a searing light bloomed from the Eye, blinding. Hundreds of tiny, pink butterflies burst forth and surrounded the akuma. It wailed as if in pain, and they swarmed it until it was smothered in their light. Mayura could only watch this strange power that was not hers at all, but something else.

I know this warmth…

“Gabriel?” she gasped.

It was over in seconds. The pink butterflies disintegrated into a million shards of light, and Chat fell back on the ground. Only a single, black akuma remained, no bigger than any other, and it fluttered away.

“Adrien!” Mayura rushed to his side. “Oh god, Adrien!”

He was still Chat Blanc, still white as a corpse, but when he opened his eyes, they were that brilliant, clear green that reflected her own perfectly. Her Miraculous beeped insistently, at its limit, and her transformation reverted. The flicker of recognition in Chat’s eyes was the last straw, and Emilie burst into tears.

“Mom…” he said.

“Oh, my little love, it’s really you.”

He blinked up at her, his mask slashed to hell and his face covered in blood and tears as his eyes reflected something he could not understand.

“Adrien,” she tried again.

He stared at her, and in her arms he seemed to fall back, impossibly heavy, as if the weight of every agonizing hour that had led to this moment had become too much to bear. “What have I done…”

“Emilie?”

Emilie looked up and saw a ghost from her past life watching her, shivering like a leaf and eyes wide. “Audrey…”

From the way she was looking at her, Audrey had been standing there a while. “Oh my god, it’s really you? And…” She looked down at Chat. Impossibly, her eyes grew even wider and she covered her mouth.

“Chat Blanc! Get up!” Butterfly shouted.
Emilie tensed. On her shoulder, Duusu whimpered. “Mistress! I need something to eat, quick!”

Chat clutched his head and hissed. Butterfly was coming at them, and Emilie was totally defenseless so long as she remained in her human form. But she couldn’t just leave Chat like this.

“You have to get up!” She tried to help Chat stand, but his leg was in bad shape and he had some trouble.

“Emilie!” Audrey screamed.

She looked up and saw Butterfly right there, the akuma she had pulled out of Adrien fluttering in his palm.

“No, Felix—!”

But he was Miraculous, and he was stronger than her. It was nothing for him to wrest Chat away from her and let the akuma find its way back. To Emilie’s horror, the other butterflies that followed Butterfly everywhere had faded to black and began to swarm.

“You left him long ago,” Butterfly said. “One woman’s trash is another man’s treasure.”

Emilie screamed and would have thrown herself at Butterfly, no longer caring about her own life and safety, but Audrey grabbed her and held her back.

“I should thank you, Emilie,” Butterfly said. “Because of you, the wall Gabe built around him is finally gone.”

Chat seized in Butterfly’s arms, his eyes squeezed shut as he gagged. Butterfly dropped him in a heap and stepped back.

“Now, Chat Blanc, enough wasting time. You will retrieve the Ladybug Miraculous if it’s the last thing you do—”

The swarming black butterflies suddenly and without permission descended on Chat like a hail of bullets. They sank through him, absorbing completed. Butterfly stared in shock.

“No— What is this?” Butterfly said, stepping back.

“What have you done!” Emilie screamed. She thrashed and cried, but Audrey held on tight.

“I didn’t—”

An immense shockwave burst from Chat and sent them all careening in opposite directions. Emilie instinctively clutched Audrey to protect her, and Duusu clutched her in turn. They landed painfully, and still the blast had not subsided. Snow and sleet beat them relentlessly as the winds kicked up, and Emilie looked on in abject horror at the creature that was no longer her son.

As soon as Rena released her Mirage and the flood she had summoned evaporated, Chloe all but leaped out of Carapace’s arms. It had never felt so good to stand on solid ground.

“Mirage my ass,” Chloe said. No mere illusion could possibly be good enough to make a bunch of akumatized minions believe they had nearly drowned. And yet, the struggling bodies on the ground all around her begged to differ.
“Hurry, Sweetness! Let’s transform and cut these minions down to size before the illusion wears off!” Pollen said.

“We’ve got a bigger problem to worry about.”

Pravala, who had receded to escape the Mirage, was back and rapidly regrowing her coral armor.

_Goddamnit, doesn’t she get tired?_

“Chloe!” Rena jogged to meet her, Miraculous Necklace beeping a warning. “You okay?”

“Fine, but not for long. We have to take out Pravala for good. I can’t keep Buzz Killing her forever.”

“Master Fu warned us about this. Pride’s consuming its host. He said it could get to the point where Jessika can’t even revert if Pride wins.”

Chloe bared her teeth. “Well, that’s just _great_. As if we weren’t fucked enough as it is.”

“Hey, I got her!” Carapace said.

He was pushing a small Shellter bubble with Manikinetic stuck inside. She pounded on the sides of her jade prison.

“Hey! When I get outta here I’ll rip you all apart!” Manikinetic said.

Rena shot her a withering look. “What was that? I’m having trouble hearing you through the magical, impenetrable forcefield you’re definitely never getting out of.”

Manikinetic screeched and beat her fists against the walls, but the Shellter held. Carapace looked infuriatingly pleased with himself.

Chloe didn’t have time for banter right now. Every minute they wasted was another minute Luka lost. And if Jessika was truly lost, like Rena suspected, then what did that mean for him? Her throat constricted, and her breathing labored. She couldn’t even bear to think about it. She had to keep fighting.

“Pollen, transform me!”

Queen Bee took to the skies in all her golden glory to resume the fight.

“Bee, wait up! I’m not exactly fast over land, ya know!” Carapace shouted.

“Go after her, I’ll catch up after I transform again,” Rena said.

Queen Bee hurtled straight for Pravala. Pravala’s coral limbs parted and revealed her masked face. It was warped and covered in tapering coral thicker than it had been before, as if it truly were devouring her bit by bit. Queen Bee repressed a shudder.

_How do I beat her if she just keeps regenerating faster and faster?_

Maybe it was time to take a page out of Ladybug’s book and try appealing to Jessika directly. “Jessika, I know you’re in there somewhere!”

“Ignorant Human!” Pravala bellowed. “You know nothing. I am a god, and you shall bow before me!”
She swept the Seine with her tentacles and peppered Queen Bee with projectile coral shards. They were as fast and deadly as bullets, and those Queen Bee could not outmaneuver with her precision flying, she was forced to deflect with her rapier.

“You’re so pathetic!” she shouted. “Pride is just using your body for its own purposes! It’s not a god, it’s a parasite!”

Pravala swung around again, and Queen Bee narrowly avoided getting clobbered. She struck the tentacle with her sword and sliced off the end.

“How dare you speak to me with such disrespect!”

“Fuck your disrespect! Luka’s your family, but you’ve condemned him to a slow and painful death! And for what? The Jessika I know would never hurt anyone, much less someone she loves.”

Coral branches fell from Pravala’s face, and those pernicious pink eyes found Queen Bee’s. “You know nothing of love.”

“I know I would die for the people I love!”

“Then die!”

Queen Bee was forced to defend herself from impalement once again as Pravala renewed her assault. A low crack echoed below, followed by a burst of emerald light, and Queen Bee was relieved to see Carapace joining the fray once again. Pravala focused her attention on crushing him, but his Sheltter shields were impenetrable even against her superior strength. Not long after, curling fox fire tongues began to lick at Pravala’s coral, and she recoiled from the flames. Queen Bee had an idea.

“Carapace, Rena! Get me as close as you can!”

She swooped down, sword flying as more deadly coral attempted to murder her mid-flight. Carapace saw her coming and threw up a Sheltter around her.

“What’re you gonna do?!” he shouted.

Rena, maintaining a healthy distance from the action, took a knee and hypnotized her the will-o-wisps with her eerie music. They looped around Pravala’s tentacles and morphed into iron chains. Pravala recoiled from them, afraid to be pinned down, and Queen Bee saw her chance. She flew directly at Pravala, and the Sheltter protected her from more coral bullets that would have skewered her without it. They locked eyes just as she came in hot, and Queen Bee swung her sword with all her might.

“Jessika!” she shouted.

Behind Queen Bee, Rena manipulated the fox fire into burning jaws opened wide as if to swallow them both whole. Pravala was so taken aback that she hesitated for a split second. It was her undoing. Queen Bee brought her blade down, shattered the Sheltter, and cut through Pravala’s main body like cake. The phantom fire jaws closed down around her, and Pravala recoiled.

Queen Bee’s blade cut through Pravala’s coral armor, a bloody line down to the middle of her, and shattered most of her mask and crown. But she didn’t stop there and hurled right into Pravala directly. They crashed together on the ruined river bank, and Pravala’s remaining coral tentacles broke off in the trauma. For a few tense seconds, Jessika’s transformed face stared up at Queen Bee, twisted with hatred and fury.
“Jessika, please,” Queen Bee said. “I love him.”

“Bee!” Carapace shouted. He surfed to the shore and came running. “Get away from her!”

There was a flicker of recognition in Pravala’s eyes. “You…”

Queen Bee got to her unsteady feet, ready for another fight as Pravala got to hers. “I love him,” she said again, daring to hope. “And I know you do, too.”

Carapace and Rena joined Queen Bee, ready to fight if necessary. Pravala narrowed her eyes as she looked between the three of them.

“Love,” she said.

“Yeah, love. I know you remember what that is. Not even Pride can make you forget it, so don’t!”

“Chat Blanc! Get up!” shouted Butterfly on the other side of the block.

Pravala’s gaze slid to him, and Queen Bee followed it. She was seized by a sudden paroxysm at the sight of that wretched man and all the pain and suffering he’d brought into their lives, into Adrien’s life.

“You say you’re a god, an Ancient One,” Queen Bee said. “So why are you doing this? Why would you ever help trash like Felix Agreste?”

Pravala’s expression warped in a mask of anguish and anger so fierce, it was undeniably human. “You speak of love, and you don’t even know the first thing about it!”

“No way,” Rena said. “You and Felix… You’re in love with him? That’s why you’re doing all this, why you did any of it.”

Queen Bee didn’t even bother masking her disgust. “Are you fucking kidding me? He’s a monster!”

“What have you done!” Emilie screamed just before an immense wave of power swept over them.

Queen Bee was blown back into Carapace and Rena, and the three of them went flying. By the time they disentangled themselves and got to their feet, they had lost Pravala in the chaos. But the ground shook with another shockwave, and the wind picked up and pelted Queen Bee with freezing snow. She whipped around and covered her ears to a terrible roar that rattled her to the bone.

“Holy shit,” Carapace said. “W-W-What is that!?”

An enormous, white beast towered as tall as a house. Long, sabertooth fangs hung past its jaw, and its twin tails kicked up a vicious wind. Claws as long as swords crushed the broken pavement underfoot, and magenta eyes swept over the area, searching for something. On the ground, Emilie and Audrey were petrified where they stood staring up at the beast, and Emilie was screaming something incoherent. Even Butterfly was rooted to his spot, frozen in fear.

Queen Bee’s body betrayed her the moment she saw those magenta eyes, and she fell to her knees. “Adrien!”

The were-cat’s long ears twitched, and one eye swiveled to look directly at her. But there was no flicker of familiarity, no shadow of the man she knew. There was only the primal recognition of a hunter sighting his prey. He opened his huge maw, and Queen Bee could only watch the swirling, dark energy gathering between his fangs.
“Oh my god,” Rena sobbed.

A strong arm looped around Queen Bee’s middle and hauled her up. The other smashed Rena against her, and in an instant Carapace erected a Shellter around the three of them. But it wouldn’t be enough. Not even the ultimate shield could withstand Destruction incarnate. Fear drove Queen Bee, and she took flight as fast as she could just as the beast fired a massive, black supernova right at them.

The impact was violent and elemental, and for one frightening second, Queen Bee felt herself falling. The imploding star’s pull was greater than anything she had ever experience, and she screamed. And then, it exploded. The blast ricocheted off the Shellter, and Queen Bee smacked into the wall as she, Carapace, and Rena hurtled through the air, through the remains of a crumbling building, and skidded down the street. They landed in the river and began to sink.

Queen Bee cut through the Shellter with her sword, and immediately the freezing waters consumed her and pulled her down deeper. Her wings failed her, and she swallowed a lungful of river water in her desperation as she struggled. Carapace grabbed her wrist and hauled her up, thrashing, and together they breached the surface. Rena was already there, coughing and gagging, and the three of them swam to shore.

In the distance, the beast that had once been Adrien roared as an explosion of coral attacked him directly. Pravala’s ultimate power unfolded and crashed, but the beast launched another supernova blast that completely obliterated all the coral in its path and began disintegrating the rest.

“What’re we gonna do?” Carapace said, his voice shaky with fear. “What can we do?”

“I don’t know,” Queen Bee said, forcing herself to get up. “But we have to try.”

_Ladybug_

There was no sign of the spotted heroine as Queen Bee watched Destruction itself unleash his true power on friend and foe alike, blind to everything but the chaos. She dug her fingers into her chest. Her throat had closed up, the freezing river water burned through her super suit, and she could hardly breathe.

_I have to try._

Total silence is the loudest kind of silence. Ladybug drifted, her tears long frozen upon her cheeks, and she began to hear voices. At first, she couldn’t make them out. They were nothing but static, white noise in a black void—how poetic.

She laughed.

Or maybe she didn’t.

The voices dragged at her, and she covered her ears. Tongues she did not know, gibberish, the kind close enough to sound familiar but just different enough to stay out of reach. The rational part of her knew they were all in her head, illusions to keep her from losing her mind in a place where she’d already lost everything else. But she did not want to listen to them, and so she covered her ears.

_Leave me alone._
Ladybug tensed. Her subconscious picked a great time to be a condescending bitch.

_I do mean it._

*If I leave, you really will be alone.*

*I’m already alone._

Denial, then. She was losing her mind. What a strange way to put it, ‘losing her mind’. As if she toted it around in her pocket, and it had fallen out by mistake. Maybe someone would come across it, turn it in for pick-up.

*You’re afraid. There’s a difference._

_That, too._

*Why?*

Why? What a ridiculous question. Who wouldn’t be afraid floating haplessly in a time-space void between dimensions, viciously excommunicated by the man she had fought so hard to save, and for what? What had she accomplished, really? What had she ever been able to accomplish on her own?

_I told you, you’re not alone._

*I’ve been alone for fourteen years._

That was the truth of it, wasn’t it? The despicable truth she so desperately wanted to hide from. But there was nowhere to hide anymore, not in this place. She had been alone for fourteen years, since the day Chat was taken from her. And without Chat, who was she? What was left for her?

*You’re Ladybug._

*There is no Ladybug without Chat Noir.*

*Then who are you?*

*I’m…*

Ladybug opened her eyes, but there was nothing. A new panic took hold of her, and she touched her face, but she couldn’t feel her numbed fingers. She swallowed, but she tasted nothing. There was no smell here, no light, no warmth, no feeling. It wasn’t even dead. Death had a purpose, it left a trace, it was real and imminent. But this place was nothing, and she…

*I’m no one._

*Would you like to be someone?*

*I can’t. I don’t know how._

*Then…may I show you how?*

Ladybug did not understand. She imagined herself sinking somewhere deep and interminable, but she could not remember where or why. How had she gotten here? Or had she always been here? Her eyes drifted closed and she curled in on herself—at least, she imagined she did, unable to feel for
sure. It was difficult to remember why that mattered anymore.

Will it hurt?

Is that what you’re afraid of? That it will hurt?

No… I’m afraid it won’t.

So dark, so cold, so numb. Even these thoughts seemed trivial in the great expanse of things. Sleep… That would not hurt. That would be easy. She might even like it. But that thought scared her most of all. More than dark, more than cold, more than numb. Oblivion—

I understand.

Ladybug would have cried if she remembered how.

I believe you.

Then take my hand. And whatever happens, don’t let go.

Beyond darkness, beyond cold and numb, what would she find there? She reached out, groping blindly for something, anything at all, for surely they could not have taken everything from her. Surely not, or she would remember it.

There you are.

A hand in hers, barely touching, fumbling, but insistent. Solid, warm—real?

Real.

Breathing, she was breathing. Ladybug tasted the stale cold on her tongue and swallowed it whole. She closed her fingers and pulled close, taking more of the offered warmth. It nestled in her arms, and she cradled it, grew it, nurtured it. How can something grow out of nothing?

How else could it grow?

The warmth spread from her fingers up her arms. She could feel her toes, her ears, even her loose, raven hair. That’s right, she had her mother’s hair, thick and black and so disobedient. She smiled at the inane thought, and it grew, too.

You’re so close!

Will you help me?

I will always help you, Marinette.

Ladybug opened her eyes, blue eyes—yes, Marinette had blue eyes. More color danced in her hands, which were small and red like a summer’s sunset. She gasped.

A light? Is that mine?

It was always yours.

But how…

From darkness, from cold, from numb—
Ladybug held the light close, and she was sure she had never loved a thing more than this feeling, this soaring, warm, beautiful sense of being. She had known this feeling before, had nurtured it over the years and protected it, held onto it when she had nothing else left.

Do you trust me?

Ladybug laughed, joyful and sad and full and feeling.

I trust you, Tikki.

She lifted the light high above her head and held on tight.

If Nothing lasts forever—

Then We have all the time in the world.

Out of Nothing, Something emerged.

Ladybug pulled back the darkness as if it were a heavy curtain, and watched herself step beyond the pale. Solid ground underfoot was cold, but her toes were soft and pink, and where they touched the pavement, the Earth below rose to greet her. Green grass burst between the ravaged cracks, overeager to cushion her steps. In her wake, she left a trail of shy tulips and brash daffodils, dainty daisies and blushing violets. Vines unraveled in a carpet before her, unspoiled, and snowflakes left melted kisses on her bare shoulders.

Her shoulders, and not. Her steps, and not. She trailed, a shadow peering over the shoulder of the creature she was, and not. Long, translucent wings trailed behind her like a wedding train, and her compound eyes saw the beginning of all things, all time, all at once. Before, and now, and yet to come. Ladybug’s own eyes could only look forward, and so she did, lest she lose her way. But Tikki had promised, and Tikki could be trusted. Creation, after all, is never truly lost.

She followed his ruin wherever it led her, and she filled the cracks he had ripped open for her, the way a child colors between the lines. Ladybug imagined her long fingers dipped in paint, and she traced them along the inky abysses. A sparkling cluster of rose quartz here, an oak tree thicker around than a man’s wingspan there, a thick bush bursting with white roses there. She laughed at the power she tempted from the Earth, happy to have a new place to grow. And she could have stayed here, watching them grow, nurturing them, perfecting them.

But her eyes, unlike Tikki’s, could see only one way at a time. Her way was further still, and she could not linger here. There was not far to go now.

“There,” she said, and not.

She would know him anywhere, in any shape. The desire to go to him was so overwhelming that Ladybug felt herself diminish. Tikki’s essence was Pure, and Purity had no room for blemishes.

Tikki…
Ladybug paused and touched a tapering finger to her chest. “Ah, there you are.”

Gods, after all, are unused to sharing.

“I must—”

I know.

I know what We must do.

“Gently, then.”

Ladybug took to the skies and closed in. Something had happened here, something terrible, but she did not have the power to focus on it when she was busy focusing on herself, and on him. She landed next to a smashed car, and immediately the sidewalk cracked and parted for the fruits of the Earth to mark her path. Coral shattered in his jaws, and he bled darkness from his wounds. But the moment Ladybug touched the ground, his hackles raised and he roared. Magenta eyes leered down at her insignificant size, and jagged teeth slick with saliva parted for her.

Ladybug was filled with a numbing despair to look upon him, but her heart soared. She knew this emptiness intimately. It had given her a place to come back to.

“Chaton,” she said, and not. Chat—Plagg snarled menacingly, and Ladybug’s heart ached for him.

“What the—Ladybug?!” said Carapace, gawking.

Queen Bee landed beside him, also staring openly.

“It’s not safe!” Rena shouted.

Ladybug barely heard them, barely saw them. She only reached for Chat.

“Plagg, my love,” Ladybug said. “You’ve given me so much.”

Those magenta eyes were blind but not unseeing as they focused and dilated, in and out, struggling. He didn’t feel like himself. She didn’t know him like this.

“But it’s enough now,” Ladybug said with words that weren’t really hers at all. “It’s enough…”

She reached out with the hand that wasn’t all hers, and her fingers touched his bloodied lip, curled above sharp teeth.

Tarnished.

“No.” Ladybug reached for him, for all of him. “Just too long alone.”

I’m here now.

I’m here now.

“I’m here for you now.”

And suddenly, it all came rushing back. Feeling, cold, snow, blood, her, and him. Like stepping outside from the comfort of a heated home, Ladybug stepped back into her own skin and threw her
arms around his muzzle.

"Come back to me, Chat." She pressed her forehead to his and dug her fingers into his fur. Her tears melted between them, and she held him tighter.

The light she had grown from the nothingness he’d carved open for her bloomed brighter than the wildflowers that carpeted her feet. Invisible arms, strong and warm, held her up when she was too tired to hold herself.

Together.

"Together…"

"Please," Ladybug said. "Stay with me."

Chat closed his eyes, and shattered. Ladybug’s light burst, powerful and bright, and it swept over them both. Chat disintegrated into hundreds of pure, white butterflies. Arms, warm and real and solid, reached back through the light.

"Marinette."

Marinette opened her eyes and saw endless, beautiful green. "Adrien!"

They collapsed together and held each other fiercely.

"Oh my god," Marinette said, hardly able to breathe, to believe. She curled her fingers in his hair. "Please, tell me it’s not a dream. Please be real."

Adrien’s tears were hot on her neck, but his lips were cool and soft when he kissed her. "It’s not a dream. He twisted his fingers through her hair. "I’m real."

Marinette laughed as she cried, and she threw her arms around him. "Adrien!"

He caught her and they fell back on the enchanted flowers she had raised, teeming with life all around them. "My lady." He choked on a sob and held her tighter. "Thank you for saving me."

"You mean, us."

Adrien and Marinette looked down and saw a tiny, black kwami peering up at them with luminous, green eyes.

"Plagg," Adrien said, sniffling and wiping his bloodshot eyes. "You’re okay."

"Am I? Huh," Plagg said.

Adrien scooped him up and hugged him to his cheek. "I missed you."

Plagg’s ears drooped, but he held his tongue and allowed the contact with a sigh.

Tikki landed on Marinette’s shoulder and kissed her cheek. "I knew you could do it, Marinette."

"That was you in the void, wasn’t it?" Marinette said. "You pulled me out…"

Tikki shook her head. "It was my power, but you wielded it without surrendering to it. I gave you
the key, but you unlocked the door and saved us both. You really are miraculous!”

Marinette laughed and kissed Tikki’s head—after all, who was she to argue with a god?

“Welcome back, Ladybug.”

Marinette looked up, but a sharp pain bloomed in the back of her head, and she saw stars. Her vision swam and she collapsed on the ground as Tikki shrieked and Adrien tried to get to his feet. There was a sickening cracking sound, and Adrien fell back, his cheek red and the skin split where he’d been punched hard enough to break the bone. Marinette fumbled for him, but there were two of him and she couldn’t tell which was him and which was her addled mind playing tricks on her. Rough fingers yanked on her earlobes, and the part of her that wasn’t in the throes of a concussion recoiled and tried to defend herself.

But she was too dazed, too human. Soon Tikki’s voice disappeared, and Plagg’s soon after. Butterfly loomed over Adrien and her, their Miraculous in hand.

“Such a pity,” he said. “I really did see something in you.”

“Don’t do this,” Marinette slurred as she struggled to stop the world from spinning around her. “Please, Aramis…Felix… It’s too dangerous—”

“Dangerous? You think I fear for my safety? For my life?” He kneeled down so he could look her in the eye behind his silver mask. “My dear, I have absolutely nothing left worth living for.”

Despite all that he’d done and everything she had been through, Marinette nonetheless felt a deep, broken sadness at his words and how they fell out of him as if he’d been carrying them around for years, tormented. How could he have fallen so far to truly believe he had nothing left to him? That it was worth risking the balance of the universe to find solace? What kind of hubris, what kind of narcissistic self-loathing, what kind of unbearable loneliness could drive him to this?

“You have family,” Marinette said. “You have Adrien!”

“That’s not good enough,” Felix hissed.

Adrien’s punched eye had popped a couple blood vessels, and he clutched his abused cheek. “Felix, don’t do this…”

He looked between the two of them. “You two have no right to ask me to stop. You have each other, but I lost everything.”

“None of this will bring Bridgette back!” Marinette said.

“Yes, it will!” He closed his fist around their Miraculous. “Ladybug and Chat Noir, two hearts that beat as one. You offered your soul to a god and crossed a dimensional rift to save your love. You of all people should understand, Marinette. I will never give up.”

Marinette had no words for him. She felt ashamed to look upon him, because he was right. She knew exactly what he was feeling, what she had been feeling this whole time. Not even the cold, dark void could stop her. And as for Felix…

“You don’t deserve her,” Adrien said. “Bridgette, your Ladybug, she would be ashamed of the things you’ve done.”

“I’m not the one who let a god make me a monster,” Felix said.
“No, you did that all on your own.”

Felix regarded Adrien with a tired melancholy, pitying. “Bridgette is the only woman I’ve ever loved. I would gladly play the monster if it means I get to see her again, one last time.”

Queen Bee could hardly believe her eyes when Ladybug, or what had once been Ladybug, reappeared in the heart of the battle, sealed the rips in reality Chat-beast had made, and then purified the akumas he had absorbed. Queen Bee wanted nothing more than to go to Adrien and Marinette now, but Pravala took advantage of the leveled playing field and resumed her attacks.

“Carapace!” she shouted.

“Incoming, Your Bee-ness!”

Carapace had formed a huge Shellter and slammed into it with his shield, sending it hurtling toward Paravala. It hit her like a wrecking ball, and Queen Bee wasted no time in flying after her, sword slashing everything in reach. Pared down to a more manageable size already due to Chat’s beastly destructive powers, Pravala went down much faster than before and landed against a building wall. Carapace compressed the Shellter, and it imploded on top of her, burying her in rubble.

By the time she dragged herself out of the rubble, she had lost chunks of her coral armor and looked vaguely human again.

“None of this will bring Bridgette back!” Marinette shouted.

She and Adrien were on the ground as Butterfly towered over them.

Rena and Mayura, fresh from a new transformation, joined Queen Bee and Carapace, and they brought Luka with them. He was still in his Shellter prison, and the entire right side of his body was covered in coral armor. He continued to beat fruitlessly against the forcefield, mindless in his madness.

“Bridgette is the only woman I’ve ever loved,” Butterfly said. “I would gladly play the monster if it means I get to see her again.”

Pravala was watching Butterfly’s conversation with Marinette and Adrien intently, a strange look on her face.

Wait…

“Jessika, Audrey told me everything!” Mayura said. “I know about your affair with Felix, that you’re doing all this for him!”

Pravala hissed and attacked, but Queen Bee deftly slashed through the coral lashes she sent Mayura’s way.

“You must realize now that he’s just using you! Everything he’s done has been to get Ladybug’s and Chat Noir’s Miraculous so he can bring Bridgette back! He doesn’t care about you at all!”

“Silence!” Pravala said.

Queen Bee looked between Pravala’s fight with Mayura, and Butterfly running from Adrien and Marinette, who were still in their reverted forms. Why hadn’t they transformed? What were they
waiting for? Unless…

“Carapace!”

She found him struggling free of some heavy debris and dusting himself off. He spat blood and wiped his mouth, looking grim.

“What, does she have an endless supply of Full Restores or something? Goddamn,” he said, shaky on his feet. “I dunno how much longer I can hold out like this.”

“Hold on a little longer. I need you to go after Butterfly.”

“What? Why? What’s going on?”

“I think he may have taken Marinette’s and Adrien’s Miraculous.”

Carapace paled. “Oh, shit. We totally have to stop him!”

“Yeah, totally, so get your green ass moving!”

“What about you?”

Queen Bee brandished her sword. “I told you, I work fine alone. Just go!”

She didn’t wait for his answer and took off again. Mayura was still trying to talk Pravala down, and now Audrey had shown up.

“Jessika! If you were ever my friend, then stop this ridiculous charade!” Audrey said. Sometime in the course of the harrowing evening, she had gotten her bearings and was no longer paralyzed with fear.

“Audrey’s right,” Mayura said. “This is nothing but a farce, you must see that! There’s no scenario here that will get you what you want!”

Pravala let out a battlecry and lunged at Audrey directly, who was unable to defend herself. Queen Bee saw the danger and swooped in fast. She dragged her rapier down the length of the coral tentacle meant for Audrey all the way to the root just as Mayura shielded Audrey with her body. Queen Bee locked eyes with Pravala and pushed as hard as she could.

The coral armor was as hard as steel, and Pravala’s arms were crushing when they rose to meet her. But Queen Bee pressed on and drove her rapier clean through her. They tumbled together, and Queen Bee lost her grip. A fire hydrant broke her fall and exploded, soaking her and everything in the vicinity.

“Chloe!” Audrey cried, running to her side.

Queen Bee peered up at Audrey, but her vision swam and it hurt to breathe. She coughed and spat blood. “Mom…”

Audrey fell to her knees. Her designer pant suit was ripped and filthy, and her hair was a rat’s nest and frayed. But her blue eyes were full of concern as she reached for Queen Bee. It was such an unfamiliar look on Audrey that Queen Bee was too stunned to push her away.

“Oh, Chloe! Thank god you’re all right!”

“I’ll live.” Queen Bee got to her feet and cried out when a lancing pain shot through her abdomen.
She doubled over, and Audrey helped her stand.

“T’ve got you,” Audrey said.

Queen Bee didn’t have time to worry about Audrey right now. She spotted Pravala, still impaled with the rapier, a short ways away. Much of her coral armor had crumbled away, and she struggled with the blade through her belly. Unbelievably, she slid it out of her with a heave, and her coral was quick to grow over the bloody wound.

“Un-fucking-believable,” Queen Bee said.

Pravala struggled to stand. “You…bitch—”

Out of nowhere, Mayura came in hard with her remaining fan and clocked Pravala in the face. Pravala fell to her hands and knees. Her coral mask was completely gone now, and Jessika’s glamoured face glared up at the three women.

“Enough,” Mayura said darkly. “You have hurt so many people, Jessika, including your own nephew. I thought you would see reason, but clearly you’re too far gone. Felix doesn’t love you; he never did. But he does.” She indicated Luka slumped in his Shellter prison. “You’re destroying the only real love you have.”

Something in Pravala finally snapped. “Real love? What do any of you know about real love?” She shot Audrey a venomous look. “What do you know about family? You traded yours for a glamorous social life surrounded by people who will never care about you beyond your last name! And you.” She turned on Mayura next. “You threw your family away. What right do either of you have judge me? What makes your love more valid than mine?”

Pravala closed her eyes and wept, but her tears coralized on her cheeks and crumbled to dust. “Creation out of destruction. In the end, we’re all the same. Bodies, bonds, family… Even Ladybug and Chat Noir. To create something beautiful, we must first destroy what stands in our way. Luka… was just in my way. Like all the others.”

“No,” Queen Bee said. “You’re so wrong it’s embarrassing.”

Pravala glared up at her. “It’s your fault, you know. If it weren’t for you, Luka would never have—”

“No, it’s your fault, Jessika. What you’ve done, turning your back on Luka, is no different than what Emilie did to Adrien, and what my mother did to me.”

Queen Bee felt Mayura’s and Audrey’s eyes on her, but she ignored them.

“But there’s a difference between them and you. Whatever shitty decisions they made, whatever pain they brought us, they’re here now on the right side of things. They’re trying. But you? You’re so blinded by your pride that you can’t even see the damage you’ve done. You’ve destroyed everything you ever cared about, and you’re too afraid to admit it. You’re nothing but a coward.”

She lowered her gaze and felt her tears running down her cheeks. All her anger, all her hatred for this monster that had robbed her of something lovely she never imagined she would find, was gone. There was only a numbing emptiness left in its place, weary.

“Pride will completely devour you here tonight,” Queen Bee said. “And you’ll die alone and unloved. You’ve killed the only person here who would mourn you, and I’m done wasting my time on you instead of him.”
Queen Bee turned her back on Pravala and fell to her knees before Luka’s Shelter prison. Half his face was obscured with a hideous mass of coral, and his eyes were bloodshot and delirious. But they were his eyes, and she lost herself in them now, in their memory. She touched a hand to the forcefield as he watched her, unable to speak, unable to understand.

*Please*, she wished on the god that had given her the courage to be the hero she’d always wanted to be. *Please, let me be brave just a little longer.*

“Luka…”

He pressed his hand to the barrier against hers, as if to speak, as if to understand. Queen Bee smiled through her tears and dreamed she could feel him there, one last time.

*Give me the courage to let him go.*

Adrien struggled to get up. His head was spinning and one eye was fast swelling shut, but he welcomed the pain after so long feeling nothing at all. He reached for Marinette and pulled her close, helping her stand. There was so much to say, so much to atone for, but right now they were in trouble, and it was all his fault.

“Come on,” he said. “We have to get your Miraculous back before it’s too late.”

“Y-Yeah,” Marinette said, clutching the back of her head.

Adrien paled when her fingers came away covered in blood. A fresh wave of despair and self-loathing made his knees buckle.

*I did this.*

He had let Felix manipulate him. He had brought all this suffering upon them. And now he’d lost Plagg, possibly forever if Felix made his wish.

“There he is,” Marinette said. “We have to stop him!”

They ran as quickly as they could, which was not fast considering their injuries. Butterfly saw them coming and brandished his cane sword.

“Adrien, don’t make me kill you after everything,” he threatened.

Marinette bent down, picked up the nearest chunk of debris he could find, and threw it at Butterfly. “We’re not letting you get away with this!”

Adrien picked up a rusted metal rod just as Butterfly swung his sword, and the two of them were caught in a temporary test of strength. It did not last long when Butterfly’s Miraculous strength inevitably won out, and Adrien was forced to parry and dodge. Marinette was waiting with more rocks, and her aim was true.

“Give me back my Miraculous!” she shouted, landing a hit on Butterfly’s head that drew blood.

Butterfly roared and slashed at her, but adrenaline spurred Adrien into action and he knocked Butterfly’s legs with his metal rod. It was just enough time for Marinette to get out of the way with all her limbs still attached.
“You’re not going anywhere!” Adrien said as he swung again.

Butterfly’s reflexes aided him and he expertly parried the blow. “Get out of my way!”

Adrien caught the next blow on his rod, but Butterfly was expecting that and put all his might behind the slash. Adrien hadn’t have time to fear for his life when his feet left the ground and he went flying. He landed against something hard that knocked the wind out of him, but incredibly, he was still alive.

“Hey, good lookin’,” said the green-clad hero carrying Adrien bridal style.

“What…”

The hero set Adrien down. “Dude, am I glad to see you! Psychotic cat beast was not a flattering look on you.”

Adrien gaped. “N-Nino? Is that you?”

“Whoa, party foul! It’s Carapace. Can’t have you exposin’ my super secret identity to all my adoring fans.”

Oh my god, it really is Nino.

If they lived through this, he had a lot of explaining to do.

“Ni—er, Carapace, you have to help Marinette! Butterfly’s got both our Miraculous—”

“Chill bro, the Missus is way ahead of you.”

A woman dressed like a fox was crouched nearby with a flute to her lips. She closed her eyes and whispered, “Mirage” before beginning to play.

“Stay here,” Carapace said gravely, and he took off running toward Butterfly.

Rena Rouge wasted no time and unleashed Mirage as soon as she was in range, and not a moment too soon. Butterfly had tossed Adrien like a sack of potatoes, and now he had Marinette cornered. She tripped over loose concrete and fell. Butterfly brandished his sword, and she raised her arms defensively.

“Goodbye, Ladybug,” he spat, raising his sword high for the killing blow.

But when he looked back down, it was not Marinette he saw anymore. Shaking, he stared in utter disbelief at the woman huddled beneath him, her black eyes wide with fear—fear of him.

“Bridgette?” he said, his voice trembling. He glanced at the two Miraculous in his hand and clenched his fist around them.

Bridgette looked at him strangely and let her arms fall, revealing more of her face. Butterfly choked on a sob and dropped his cane sword in shock.

“Bridgette,” he said again. “It’s really you…” He collapsed to his knees. “Oh, my love, it worked.”

‘Bridgette’ stared up at him, slowly understanding. “Felix,” she said, tentative.
Something in him shattered at the sound of her voice after so many years of her silence, and he broke down. “I wished for you for so long.”

“I’m here now,” she said, reaching for his hand. “It’s all right. You can stop now, it’s all going to be all right.”

She gently pried his hand open, revealing the pilfered Ladybug and Black Cat Miraculous in his palm.

“Bridgette,” he said, utterly destroyed. “Please, you must know, not a day has gone by that I haven’t loved you.”

“I know.” She reached for the Miraculous. “It’s over now. Let’s go home.”

Butterfly looked up at her, those long twin tails, her freckled cheeks, sad, dark eyes, and reached for her. “You’re exactly as I remember you…”

She smiled as her fingers closed around the Miraculous. “Of course.”

But as soon as Butterfly touched her cheek, the illusion broke and Bridgette vanished on a will-o-wisp, leaving only Marinette in her place. She grabbed the Miraculous, and Butterfly grabbed her.

“No,” he said, eyes wide and unseeing. “Not you!”

Marinette struggled, but he had her by the wrist, and she cried out.

“You’ve taken everything from me!” Butterfly bellowed.

“Marinette!” Adrien screamed.

Carapace was already moving, and he smashed into Butterfly shield-first. Marinette was blown back and landed in a ditch, bloody with fresh cuts and bruises.

“I’ll rip you apart!” Butterfly shouted. “You lying virago, how dare you!”

Adrien made it to Marinette while Carapace fought Butterfly and Alya dashed away to transform back into Rena Rouge. Marinette struggled, her face smeared with blood where the rocks had cut her in her fall.

“Marinette,” Adrien said, blinking away his tears. “Marinette, please…”

“Don’t cry, Chaton,” she said softly. “I’m right here.”

He held her close, shaking with fear and relief. He’d almost lost her all over again, and for a terrifying moment when Rena’s Mirage faded and Butterfly learned of the treachery, Adrien feared the worst.

“I’m sorry,” he said, unable to hold it in any longer. “I’m so sorry for everything.”

“I’m sorry, too.” Marinette pressed something cold into his palm. “So help me make it right.”

The Black Cat Miraculous sat in his hand, dormant and no longer cracked thanks to Ladybug’s purification. He shuddered.
“I don’t deserve this,” he said. “What I did…”

“What you did was beyond your control,” Marinette said. “It wasn’t you.”

“It was me.” He forced himself to look at her. She deserved the truth, and no amount of shame would keep him from giving her that much. “The whole time, I was aware, like… Like watching through a lens. I knew what I was doing, and I—I let it happen.”

“No, Adrien, you couldn’t—”

“I let it happen,” he said again. “I couldn’t fight it because—because I’m weak. I’ve always been weak. Whatever excuse, whatever my past, it can’t change that. I won’t let it change that.” He clenched his fist around the Miraculous Ring and closed his eyes in shame. “I’m done blaming others for my problems. I won’t let you or anyone else suffer because of me.”

Her hands on his face startled him. The anger in her eyes startled him even more. Her blue eyes were fierce and glassy with unshed tears.

“Everything you’ve done, everything that’s happened, we’ll deal with it. But listen to me now, and believe me. Plagg chose you, and so did I. You’re my partner, always and forever.”

Adrien searched her face for the lie, but there was none. His hands shook as he took her wrists and confessed his deepest insecurity. “I don’t know if I can ever be worthy of you.”

She smiled sadly and pulled him closer. “Adrien, you already are. There’s never been anyone worthier than you. I loved you before I even knew what love was.” She slipped her hands behind his neck. “So please, let me have you.”

Adrien’s heart broke and mended with her confession and her kiss, and it was all he could do to hold on as she drew him in deeper. He felt it, this connection, this warmth, a spark in the darkness that could grow between them if they only let it, and he clung to it. If she wanted him, he would give her everything and spend the rest of his days, however long they may be, striving to be the partner she deserved.

He had never felt more powerful than when she held him, trusted him, believed in him. Was that not love? Was that not worth everything?

“Are you ready?” Marinette asked.

Adrien toyed with the Miraculous Ring. He wasn’t sure he was ready, or if it was even entirely his decision. But if Plagg would have him, then he owed it to both of them to try.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m with you all the way.”

She smiled and donned her Miraculous earrings, while he slipped on the ring.

“You truly love him, don’t you?”

Queen Bee was surprised to see Pravala looking at her as though she could see right through her. She said nothing.

“I see…” Pravala touched her chest where her Miraculous was pinned to her dress beneath the layers of coral, pulsing like a true heart. She looked to where Butterfly was fighting Carapace and Rena
Rouge. “So that’s what it looks like.”

“Jessika,” Mayura said, almost a question.

“My pride…” She dug her fingers into the coral at her chest. “It can’t even compare.”

Mayura was suddenly at Pravala’s side ready to strike. “Jessika, wait!”

But she was too late. Pravala ripped the Coral Miraculous from her chest, her fingers smeared with her blood. She doubled over, gagging, and at the same time, Luka began to convulse.

“Luka!” Queen Bee said frantically. She thought she was ready to let him go, but now that it was happening, she couldn’t bear it. “No, no! Please, not yet!”

She spotted her rapier on the ground where Pravala had pulled it out of her and snatched it up.

“Chloe, wait!” Audrey said, making a grab for her.

“Let go!” She brought down her blade and shattered the Shellter, and Luka tumbled out. “Luka!”

His coral was disintegrating. The very cancer slowly killing him was also the only thing still keeping him alive, but not for much longer. Queen Bee threw herself at his side and clutched his face in her hands as coral shattered between her fingers. She sobbed, no longer caring about the danger should he scratch her. It was worth the risk for these last few moments holding him.

But when his shaking calmed, he didn’t fall limp in her arms. She felt the steady rise and fall of his chest, his pulse under her fingertips, his warm breath on her neck. A hand trailed up her back and entangled in her ponytail.

“Chloe…”

Queen Bee sobbed against him, holding onto the memory of his voice. “I’m so sorry.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for,” he said.

Queen Bee froze. Those fingers in her hair, his heartbeat against her, his voice, hoarse from disuse—

“Luka?”

She pulled back and found him looking right at her. The holes where the coral had burrowed out of him steamed and shrunk, and color was returning to his face. She could hardly believe her eyes.

“Oh my god…”

He cried as he kissed her like he would never get the chance again. Queen Bee gasped and dug her fingers in his ruined jacket, unable to believe, unable to understand. He was dying, dead, like all the rest. There was no coming back from being coralized. And yet, he kissed her hard and wrapped her up in his arms, real and solid and alive.

“Luka,” she said when he finally broke their kiss. “How?”

“Jessika, you…” Mayura said, kneeling beside Pravala.

Pravala’s breath was a wheezing rattle, and her coral crumbled to dust. Her pink skin faded to ashen white, corpse-pale, and caved with sores where Luka’s healed. Her eyes faded to their human, black coloring and fell upon Queen Bee and Luka.
“I’m glad…I got to see it,” she said, barely a whisper as her skin began to crumble.

“Aunt Jess,” Luka said.

She reached for him, but her fingers turned to dust.

Luka desperately tried to reach back. “No, wait! Please!”

Pravala’s dark eyes were wide with tears, but they too turned to dust as they fell. Her lips cracked, a ghost of a smile, and crumbled to nothing. There was nothing left of her but a pile of sand and the Coral Miraculous, dormant without a wielder.

Luka fell upon her remains and gathered the sand in his hands as he cried for the loss of her. Queen Bee could only watch, torn between her joy at having him back and deep despair over seeing him suffer. And despite everything Jessika had done, and no matter how much she deserved to die for her crimes, Queen Bee could not bring herself to be truly happy that Jessika was gone.

She took Luka’s hand in hers, but she said nothing. They sat there together over Jessika’s remains, a comfort to each other.

*Thank you*, she thought, her fingers brushing the sands. *Thank you for saving him.*

She let Luka hold onto her as he mourned.

Ladybug landed in the midst of Carapace and Rena’s battle with Butterfly, silent as a wraith, and lashed out with her yo-yo just as Butterfly was getting ready to cut Rena. She knocked his cane sword out of his hand.

“Ladybug,” he said the word like a curse.

“It’s over, Felix,” Ladybug said.

“This will never be over!” He raised his hand, and out of thin air, a swarm of butterflies materialized. They flew at Ladybug, blinding, and he used the distraction to retrieve his cane sword.

“Stop him!” Ladybug ordered.

Carapace threw his shield, but Butterfly mounted the mass of butterflies and flew out of the way. Rena’s fox fire danced after him, but his butterflies were not afraid of her tricks and dispelled the fire as they flew through it.

Ladybug took to the skies after him, but he was faster than her. She threw her yo-yo after him, and he deflected it with his cane.

An ominous buzzing filled the air, and Queen Bee came hurtling in impossibly fast with her sword. It was all Butterfly could do to block her, but she mercilessly knocked him out of the sky and he fell.

Mayura was waiting for him and punched him in the jaw. Butterfly grunted in pain and clutched his face. Queen Bee landed behind him, and Mayura brandished her fan. Before either of them could reach him, though, he called upon his butterflies again.

“Metamorphosis!” he shouted.
The butterflies exploded with blood-red fury and hit Mayura. She tried to block them with her fan, but their red-hot wings burned through her super suit, and she cried out. Carapace had retrieved his shield and made it to Queen Bee just as the akumas swarmed on her next. He erected a Shellter, and the akumas peppered them but were unable to get inside.

Ladybug landed and looked for an opening to take Butterfly out while the others distracted him, but his akumas sensed her and sped straight for her.

“Ladybug!” Rena screamed.

The akumas changed color as they descended, red to black as they engorged with Butterfly’s hatred for her. She spun her yo-yo like a shield and scrambled back.

“Cataclysm!”

A blur of black leaped in front of her directly into the swarm, unafraid. Black magic ripped open the sky, and the akumas were sucked into the void, one and all. They tried to fly free, but the vacuum was too strong for them.

“Chat Noir!” Butterfly spat.

Chat glared at Butterfly as his claw smoked with the remains of his power. “No more evil-doing for you, you piece of shit.”

Ladybug confronted Butterfly with Chat at her side. The others surrounded them, weapons drawn and ready to fight.

“What, you think your little team can get rid of me so easily?” Butterfly taunted them.

“We are a team,” Ladybug said. “And you’re all alone. Give up, or there will be no mercy.”

“Insolent woman. You have no idea who you’re dealing with!”

“A psychotic kin slayer who manipulated an emotionally vulnerable woman into committing mass murder so he could bring back his dead wife?” Rena said. “Yeah, I think we got that memo.”

“So righteous, each and every one of you. As if you could stand in my place and pretend like you wouldn’t move mountains to save the person you love most!”

“Shut up, you trash!” Queen Bee said. “Even Jessika saw the truth in the end when she sacrificed herself to save Luka. She beat Pride, a Sin! All you’ve ever done is hide and scheme like a disgusting little worm.”

“This is the end,” Ladybug said. “Hand over your Miraculous.”

“Not a chance,” Butterfly said.

Chat drew his staff. “Then I’ll take it by force!” He lunged at Butterfly, and they began dueling.

“Surround him!” Ladybug commanded.

The others did as they were told and followed Chat and Butterfly as they backed up against a broken building overlooking the Seine. Butterfly managed to cut Chat, and Chat fumbled. Queen Bee was right there to pick up the slack, and Carapace charged Butterfly’s blind spot. Chat recovered quickly and lunged once more, and soon Butterfly was fending off all three of them at once.
A groaning sound reached Ladybug’s ears, and she froze. The building’s foundations were weak from Pravala’s widespread attacks, and the wall was crumbling. She feared the worst the longer they remained here.

“Chat, the building’s going to collapse!”

“Not before I get his Miraculous!” Chat said, redoubling his efforts.

Butterfly could not maintain his pace against three Miraculous heroes, and he soon faltered. Queen Bee slashed his chest, and Carapace rammed him against a wall. He tried to lash out again with his sword, but Chat knocked it out of his hand with his staff and reached for his Miraculous.

“Ladybug!” Mayura shouted.

The super-powered impact of Butterfly hitting the wall was enough force to destabilize the building, and it caved in all around them.

“Oh, crap!” Carapace raised his shield and summoned a Shellter, while Mayura grabbed Rena and Ladybug and hauled them both through a broken window back outside.

The whole building collapsed like a Jenga tower and went up in a cloud of dust. Ladybug coughed and helped Rena stand.

“Shit, they were still inside!” Rena said.

A rumbling sound followed the shifting debris, and Carapace’s Shellter grew out of the rubble. He released his power, and his Miraculous beeped its countdown. Within, Chat and Queen Bee were alive, and Butterfly was on the ground, a massive chunk of concrete smashed over his leg. Ladybug and the others joined them just as Carapace lifted the stone off of Butterfly.

Chat ripped the Miraculous Pin from Butterfly’s collar, and he instantly reverted and lost all traces of his power. He clutched at the bloody ruin of his leg, pale and perspiring as he looked up at the heroes.

“Get on with it, then,” Felix said wearily. “Take your revenge. There’s nothing else left.”

“Only because you’ve made it that way,” Chat said. “I don’t understand you! How can you be so single-minded?”

Felix looked at him with pity. “You’re the one who doesn’t understand, Adrien. I meant what I said before. I do like you. There would have been a place for you with me after all this. I could have given you the one thing you never had.”

“There would have been a place for us without any of this! But in the end, you’re just like my father. You threw away what was right here the whole time, chasing something you would never get back. What a fucking waste.”

“A waste, am I…”

Ladybug slipped her hand in Chat’s. She could feel his boiling rage as he gripped her hand hard enough to bruise.

“I’m not like you,” Chat said at length. “And I’m not like him, either.” He looked at Ladybug. “I refuse to be.”
If Ladybug had ever had any doubts about him, that he would make it through this, that he would survive it, he banished them all with that quiet vow. He was worthy, in every way a person can be worthy. And she knew he could keep his word—he would never, ever make the mistakes Gabriel and Felix had made.

Mayura approached Felix now that Chat had made his peace. “I refuse, too.”

Felix glared at her, his gaze unfocused. “It’s a little late for you, Emilie.”

“No, it’s not,” Chat said.

Mayura looked up at him, her surprise plain to see. “Adrien…”

“It’s never too late to try,” he said.

Mayura began to weep silently, and she nodded. “Then I swear, I’ll try every day for the rest of my life.”

“Yeah.” Chat glanced at Queen Bee, and they shared a significant look. “Me, too.”

“So…that’s a wrap?” Carapace asked. “Like, we saved the day? Is there a cheer or something we can do? Group selfie?”

“Oh please,” Queen Bee said, rolling her eyes. “Bug, you want to do the honors?”

“Ooh! This is my favorite part!” Rena said, bobbing.

Ladybug grinned and held out her yo-yo. “How about a little help, team?”

Rena practically squealed in delight and put her hand in. Carapace was quick to follow, then Chat, and even Queen Bee, albeit under protest. Last of all was Mayura, who hesitated until Queen Bee sighed and grabbed her arm.

“No time like the present,” Queen Bee said, holding her gaze.

Mayura braved a shy smile and placed her hand on the yo-yo on top of the others’.

“Ready?” Ladybug said. She raised their hands up and her yo-yo went flying.

“Miraculous Ladybug!” they shouted together.

The magic blossomed around them, and Paris woke up to a scarlet dawn.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, I’m allowed one cheesy group scene per fic, okay??

There will be an epilogue to wrap everything up, and also because I miss the kwamis. Also, yes, we’ll catch up with Manon, who hung out in the Shellter and then reverted when Chat took back the Butterfly Miraculous and negated all its effects. Please leave your comments below!! I put you guys through the ringer here, but I did promise a
happy ending, so I hope it was worth the hell to get here.

In other news, thank you guys so much for over 300 kudos!!! So cool!

Next time: Our heroes and their loved ones gather for an extremely long-overdue celebration—Alya and Nino’s wedding!
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Y’all know what's coming. Enjoy your happy ending!

Chapter Notes

WARNING: This chapter contains mature sexual content. Please read at your own discretion. Look for the ♕ symbol if you would like to skip it. Enjoy sinners!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Adrien stood before the engraved plaque in silence. He didn’t have to ask Chloe to give him some privacy for a few minutes; she simply waited outside the Agreste family mausoleum without a word. Now, dressed in a pressed suit and with no one around to judge him, Adrien found that he had no words. All he could do was stare at his father’s grave marker and wonder what he would say if he could see Adrien now.

“You don’t have to say anything, you know.”

Plagg licked his paw and rubbed it on his head. He sat perched on Adrien’s shoulder, seemingly disinterested in this whole charade. Plagg had made it abundantly clear what a stupid idea he thought this was, but when Adrien said he could wait outside with Chloe and Pollen, Plagg insisted on staying.

“There’s so much I want to say,” Adrien said. “So many things… Is it terrible to wish he was still alive just so I could have the chance to tell him off properly?”

“No, but he’s dead and he can’t hear you even if you whine and scream,” Plagg said.

No, Adrien supposed not. He placed his hand on the cold plaque and closed his eyes. Visions danced in his mind, memories that weren’t his, vivid and warm and real nonetheless. They were here in this room with him, fragments of the past when Gabriel had been a husband and father, when Adrien had been a son. Little moments crystallized and compartmentalized, appearing when they were needed most. He could feel his father’s embrace, those strong arms lifting him high into the air when he was just a boy, smiling and laughing and spinning him around. Another man, another time, another life. Soft and silken as a thousand butterfly wings.

Adrien snapped his eyes open. He smeared his tears with his sleeve. Emilie had explained it to him as best as she could, this Empathy that Gabriel must have imparted to Adrien in his final moments to contain the akuma’s poison and block any further interference by Felix. Feelings, unlike bodies, linger long after death, long after memories fade. And they were powerful.

“I’ll never forgive you,” Adrien said. “I thank you for helping me, but I’ll never forgive you.”

Plagg said nothing, but his weight on Adrien’s shoulder was more comfort than any words. Perhaps,
in his own way, Plagg understood this feeling better than anyone. Destruction, after all, was used to breaking so that something better could grow from the cracks. Perhaps it was their curse, but it was theirs to share. And Adrien was nothing if not resilient. He had every reason to be these days.

“Goodbye, Father,” Adrien said, letting his hand fall. *Rest in peace.*

He would not return here again.

“Hey, ready to go?” Chloe asked when he emerged, wincing at the grey winter afternoon. She looped her arm through his, and he instinctively leaned into the contact.

“Yeah, thanks for waiting,” Adrien said.

“Adrien!” Pollen thumped him in the chest and nuzzled his tie.

He smiled. “Hey, Pollen. Are you cold?”

“Shh, I want to remember you in a suit.”

Plagg rolled his eyes. “Oh please. You’re supposed to be a god. You can’t swoon over a human, especially not one that happens to be my Chosen.”

Pollen buzzed and glared at Plagg. “Someone’s a real sour puss today. You know, I saved your hairy cat butt, like, a bunch of times since I woke up. Or did you forget already?”

Plagg puffed out his little chest. “First of all, I have fur, not hair. Second, we already went through this—if I can’t remember it, it never happened.”

Chloe snorted. “Famous last words.”

Plagg shot her a withering look. “And third…”

“Plagg?” Adrien said.

Plagg flattened his ears and crossed his paws, annoyed. “I can’t remember what the third thing was.”

Pollen giggled, and Plagg’s glare intensified.

“Just admit it,” Pollen said, sidling up to Plagg simply because she knew it would make him supremely uncomfortable. “My Honey Bee is fabulous and amazing and you’re super grateful to her for stopping Pride.”

Plagg bared his tiny fangs in a grin. “Oh, the woman?” He phased out of sight and reappeared in front of Chloe’s face. “Sure, whatever. You’re the least intolerable human I know besides Adrien. You’re good for him, so I don’t mind you sticking around.”

Chloe narrowed her eyes and plucked Plagg out of the air like a real kitten and dangled him in her fingers. “Gee, thanks, Your Royal Putrescence. What an honor to have your permission.”

Plagg cackled. “Ha! *Finally,* someone who gets it. Adrien, from now on, I’m only answering to that. Write that down.”

Pollen, however, crossed her arms and turned up her nose. “Such disrespect! You haven’t changed at all, Plagg.”

Adrien scooped Pollen up in his hands and smiled for her. “Don’t worry, Pollen, he’s just messing
around.”

“I am completely serious,” Plagg said. “The next time you want something from me, you better get on your knees and beg His Royal Putrescence for permission, you get me, kid? Oh…”

Chloe began scratching Plagg’s belly, and he went limp in her hand, paws up, as he practically melted and began to purr like a common house cat. Adrien bit back a smirk at her quick thinking.

“Well, whatever Plagg says, I’m really grateful,” Adrien said. “To Chloe and to you, too, Pollen. I think you’re amazing.”

Pollen looked up at him, her compound eyes glittering with emotion. “Really? You mean it?”

“Of course. Besides, real beauty is in the eye of the bee-holder.”

“Oh my god,” Chloe and Plagg said at the same time.

Pollen lit up like Christmas morning and buzzed around Adrien’s head, delighted. “The bee-holder! Oh! I love it! I love you, Adrien!” She settled in his hair and began to roll around. “Ah! I’ll bee-keeping you!”

Adrien burst out laughing at that truly inspired pun, in his humble opinion, but Plagg was having none of it. “Hey! That’s my hair you’re trespassing in!”

“You have your own hair! Leave me alone!”

“I have fur! How many times do I have to tell you?!”

The kwami chased each other, Pollen laughing and Plagg snarling. Adrien led Chloe through the graveyard, ignoring them and smiling to himself.

“What’re you so happy about?” Chloe said.

“Nothing.” He glanced at her and tightened his grip on her arm. “Just enjoying being with my family.”

Chloe looked up at him, her blue eyes swimming with emotion. She blinked and wiped her eye to keep any tears from falling. “Yeah, well, I guess I’m sort of enjoying you, too.”

They walked along, arm in arm through the silent graves and forgotten memories, content to take their time together.

Luka arrived at the lobby of Le Grand Paris with his bass strapped to his shoulder. The movers were already there unloading the few boxes of his clothing and personal effects from the moving truck to be transported to Chloe’s suite—their suite, starting today. To his surprise, Audrey was there directing the movers herself.

“Be careful with that!” she snapped when one of the burly movers bumped the keyboard set he was transporting on a wall corner by mistake. She spotted Luka across the room and approached him.

“Good, you’re here. I don’t know who you hired for this, but these movers need a sharp eye or they’ll destroy everything. I’m just glad I was here to step in while Chloe’s dealing with a work issue,” Audrey said.
“Oh, well, thanks Audrey. It’s fine, none of my stuff’s all that fragile.”

She flipped her perfectly quaffed brunette hair. “The point is they’re your things. You can’t let people take advantage of you, Luka. If they can’t do their job right, then they shouldn’t be doing it at all.”

He smiled at her awkward way of doing him a favor. “I guess that makes sense.”

“So, moving in with my daughter. It’s a serious step.”

“Yeah, I guess so. But we spend most nights here, anyway, so it’s more of a practical change than anything else.”

She made an incredulous sound. “And here I thought you were a true romantic at heart. I hope you have better material than that in your arsenal when the time comes. Chloe deserves to be treated like a queen, you know.”

Luka stared at her. Did she just give him her blessing? “I wouldn’t treat her any other way.”

Audrey crossed her arms and tried her best to appear aloof and nonchalant, but Luka did not miss the ghost of a smile on her handsome face. “Good. I trust you won’t disappoint.”

Slowly, he relaxed and smiled.

Chloe approached them. “Ugh, sorry. I’m close to closing on a contractor for the boutique B&B, so it’s a fucking circus.” She kissed Luka’s cheek. “Got all your stuff?”

“Thanks to Audrey, yeah.”

Chloe looked at her mother, who was suddenly very interested in her manicure. She hesitated a split second, but her expression softened. “Okay. Thanks for handling the movers, Mom.”

Audrey waved her off. “Please, you know I was born to order men around.”

Chloe smirked. “No truer words.”

“Audrey!” Emilie spotted them as she entered the hotel and waved.

“You’re late,” Audrey chided her old friend. “We said lunch.”

Emilie checked her wristwatch. “Shoot, I’m sorry. I must have lost track of the time.”

“Clearly.”

“Luka, Chloe—oh! Today’s the big day, isn’t it? Moving in together?”

“That’s the plan,” Luka said.

“Well, I’m really happy for you both.” Emilie glanced at Chloe and smiled softly. “I know how much you’ve been looking forward to this.”

Chloe said nothing, but Luka knew her well enough by now to read her emotions like an open book. He slipped his hand in hers and tugged on her fingers, a silent encouragement.

“Yeah,” Chloe said at length. “Thanks, we have. What about you?”
“I’ve finished moving back in to Agreste Mansion, yes. Adrien’s been very accommodating, maybe a little too much. But then, he always did have an open heart.” She smiled. “I like being there with him. It feels a little strange after all this time, but… I think I’ll enjoy getting used to it.”

“Home is people, not places,” Luka said.

“Yes,” Emilie said. She clapped a hand over her heart. “I couldn’t agree more.”

He felt Chloe squeeze his hand discreetly.

“Well, be that as it may, it doesn’t hurt to have nine bedrooms and rising property values in your favor,” Audrey said. “No reason you can’t have both, Emilie.”

Chloe rolled her eyes. “Way to read the moment.”

“What? If you can be just as happy living under a bridge as in a five-star hotel, choose the hotel, Darling. You already have what’s truly important, anyway.”

Emilie linked her arm in Audrey’s. “What a delightfully high-maintenance thing to say. I’ve really missed you.”

“Of course you did. Now come on, let’s leave them to unpack and settle in. I’m starving.”

“Oh, just one more thing.” Emilie fished out a small box from her coat and handed it to Luka. It was wrapped up in colorful paper with a cute bow. “A little housewarming present. I think you’ll both like it.”

“Thank you,” Luka said, accepting the package. “You didn’t have to do that.”


“Come on,” Chloe said once they were alone. “Let’s go unpack all your shit.”

They headed to the suite where Pollen was waiting for them, and she immediately accosted Luka and began asking about the contents of every single box the movers had deposited in the foyer.

“Here, almost forgot.” Luka retrieved a long, white box wrapped up in a yellow ribbon and presented it to Pollen. “I got your favorite.”

Pollen squealed in delight at the dozen yellow roses. “Honey Bee, look! Look what Hot Luka got me!”

Chloe carefully lifted the roses from their delivery box to put in water. “Like candy to a baby, every time.”

“Consider them a housewarming gift,” Luka said. And they had the added bonus of distracting Pollen for a while so that he and Chloe could finish unpacking with minimal distractions.

“Speaking of housewarming gifts,” Chloe said as she began pulling Luka’s clothes out of one of the boxes to transfer to the bedroom’s walk-in closet. “What’d Emilie give you?”

“Huh? Oh, right.” He’d already forgotten about the little present in his pocket and pulled it out. It was small, and when he shook it, he could hear something rattle inside. Maybe a kitchen magnet? A paper weight?

He unwrapped the ribbon and carefully peeled back the wrapping paper. A lacquered, wooden box
sat in his palm. It looked hand-painted, maybe even antique. Intrigued and a little confused as to why Emilie would give him something that looked valuable, he opened up the box.

“Okay seriously, you have, like, 900 hoodies,” Chloe said when she emerged from the bedroom. “Nobody needs that many hoodies, it’s utterly ridiculous. We’re getting rid of at least half of them, so I suggest you go through them yourself first, unless you want me to Thanos that shit at random. Hey, are you even listening to me?”

Luka barely heard her as he reached for the delicate, amethyst pin nestled in the box. The moment he plucked it from its velvet cushion, it burst with indigo light, blinding.

“What the hell?” Chloe said.

Luka stared at the tiny creature that had appeared before him. He hovered on delicate butterfly wings and looked up at Luka shyly.

“Oh,” the creature said. “Where am I…?”

All of a sudden, Pollen came buzzing in at top speed and collided with the little creature. “Nooroo!”

“Nooroo?” Luka said.

“Nooroo?!” Chloe said, incredulous. She snatched the box out of Luka’s hand. “Oh my god, she didn’t.”

“Uh, what’s going on?”

Pollen swung Nooroo around like a pair of dancers. “Did you miss me, Butterscotch? I bet you missed me sooooo much! I haven’t seen you in a hundred years! Oh! Wait, did you wake up for Hot Luka?!”

Nooroo, overwhelmed, was grateful when Pollen released him. “I don’t know, only, I felt so warm all of a sudden, and I wanted…” He looked up at Luka.

Nooroo, who Luka was pretty sure was a kwami like Pollen, floated to his eye level and peered deeply into his eyes. There was something sad and soft about those eyes, compound and dark like Pollen’s, but somehow fuller, as if they had seen much and more and could never unsee it. Nooroo came closer and touched his little arm to Luka’s forehead, and Luka instantly felt warmth swell down to his toes. It was a feeling of joy so intense that it was almost terrifying. He gasped, surprised to find tears in his eyes. Unbidden, he thought of Jessika in her final moments, reaching for him, smiling, relieved.

“I see,” Nooroo said softly. “You have a kind heart…”

“How did you do that? I saw…” Luka wiped his tears. “It was so vivid.”

“My essence is Empathy. I can reach even the most distant hearts. But your heart… There’s no resistance at all.”

Chloe cleared her throat. “Nooroo, are you…okay? You just lost your last two Chosen. You’ve been through a lot.”

Nooroo smiled sadly. “I mourn them, yes. But I don’t judge them. The heart is as mysterious as it is powerful.”
“Hmpf! They made you do awful things,” Pollen said. “I’m judging them.”

“That’s your power, Courage, not mine. I don’t Choose as you do. Every heart is unique, and each has value in its own way. However…” He looked up at Luka and touched his little chest, as if he, too, had a heart. “You are honest and true. I haven’t felt a heart quite like yours in so long.”

Nooroo shrank in on himself, and Luka realized he was embarrassed and a little afraid. It was so absurd—what could a god have to be self-conscious about? He scooped Nooroo into his palm gently. “Hey, little guy. I don’t know what exactly happened to you before, but you’re safe here. It’ll be okay.”

Luka wasn’t sure if he was doing this right. All he knew about the Miraculous was what Chloe shared with him, what he’d seen second-hand watching her and the others use their powers to defend those who could not defend themselves. He knew Chloe shared a bond with Pollen that he would never really understand, something deeper than mere friendship or kinship, something words could not convey. But when Nooroo had touched him and drawn out that memory of Jessika in her final moments, a moment born of sorrow but from which Nooroo pulled the pieces of joy and love for the woman Luka wanted to remember her as, he could feel something deeper, too.

Nooroo swelled with a relief so intense that Luka felt its cool tingle on his skin. “I think… I believe you.”

Hours later, when he was running across the rooftops of Paris, the wind in his hair and his many coattails fluttering like true butterfly wings behind him, he experienced a joy quite unlike any other. Queen Bee laughed when he tucked his long staff under his arm, removed his feathered fedora, and flourished in a low bow before her.

“My queen,” he said. “You fly so fast, I can barely keep up with you.”

She sidled close, those blue eyes sparkling behind her two-tone mask, and traced the winged Miraculous Pin at his collar. “Then we’ll have to wish for wings for you, too.”

He closed his eyes, and she came alive at his fingertips. He could see the life in her veins, brilliant with every beat of her heart. The heartstrings stretched all over the city at their feet, following couples on a romantic walk, a young family playing together in a nearby park, an old man feeding pigeons as he read a well-worn copy of his favorite book. And he could see Nooroo, too, the part of him that was deepest and most tranquil, thrumming with joy simply to be alive and real and here. He drew that feeling out like a long-held note, swelling and growing to bursting.

Queen Bee gasped happily, and when he opened his eyes, he saw delicate butterfly wings, hundreds of them dreamed into life, flickering pink with happiness all around them. He held her gaze behind his own harlequin mask and touched a gloved hand to her cheek. The wings simmered crimson as they surrounded the pair, drawn to their love like moths to a flame.

“Monarch,” she said, their noses touching.

“Interesting,” he said. “It doesn’t go with my color scheme, though.”

“It goes with my theme.” She dragged her fingers through his hair. “I’m the queen; my partner should be the king.”

He laughed. “Well, in that case, how can I say no?” She parted for his kiss, and the butterflies surrounding them burned golden with desire.

Queen Bee soon pulled away, but she had a wicked grin on her pretty face. “Not so fast, Your
Highness. You want me? You’ll have to catch me first. Let’s see what you can really do.”

“As my queen commands.” Monarch tapped his staff on the ground, and the many butterflies rushed to lift him into the air like he weighed nothing at all. “I’ll even give you a head start!”

Queen Bee took off, a yellow bullet against the darkling sky, laughing as he followed.

“Hold still,” Chloe commanded. “Marinette, I swear to god, if you blink one more time, I’m going to gouge out your eye.”

Marinette accomplished the supremely enviable feat of rolling her eyes as Chloe touched up her eyeliner without smudging it. “I’m drying out over here,” she complained.

“Deal with it.”

“I think you look really pretty, Marinette,” Tikki said.

“Of course she does. You’re welcome,” Chloe said as she finished up. “There, a masterpiece.”

Marinette checked her reflection in the powder room mirror. “Ugh, I can’t believe this.”

Chloe’s smug expression fell. “Excuse you?”

“I just don’t get it. Every time I try wings, I always mess it up. I’ll never make them look this perfect without you.” She whirled and took Chloe’s hands in hers. “That’s it, you’ll just have to quit your job, move in with me, and become my personal makeup artist.”

Chloe smirked. “I know you have a thing for blondes, but try to keep it in your pants. Today’s about Alya and Nino.”

“You make me sound so desperate.”

“Hey, believe me, I see the appeal of me.” Chloe admired her own reflection and grinned. “I don’t blame you.”

Marinette laughed. “Get a room.”

“You mean the one you literally just offered?”

Marinette bumped her so they could both stand in front of the mirror. “Just for that one, you get a penalty selfie.”

“A selfie?! Me too, me too!” Pollen said. She yanked Tikki into the frame of Marinette’s cell phone and squished them in a tiny hug between Chloe and Marinette.

“Say bugs rule!” Marinette snapped the selfie.

“God you’re ridiculous,” Chloe grumbled even as she scrutinized their selfie.

“Ridiculously cute thanks to your amazing eyeliner skills. Thanks, Chloe!” Marinette fired the selfie off to all their Miraculous friends along with a #BuggingOut comment.

“You’re welcome. I accept chocolate and groveling as valid forms of payment,” Chloe said.
They laughed together, and Pollen snickered at Tikki.

“Hey, shouldn’t you be, like, lining up by now or something?” Chloe asked as they gathered their things. “The ceremony’s supposed to start soon. You’re going to be late.”

“What?” Marinette checked her phone. “No, we have plenty of—shit! I’m late!”

“Uh, yeah, I literally just said that—”

“I have to go! Tikki, hurry up! Ahh!”

She ran to the door, realized she’d forgotten her purse, and turned back. She almost ran into Chloe, who was holding out the purse for her with an annoyingly smug look on her face.

“Don’t trip and fall over the altar, Mari-gnat,” Chloe said.

Even Tikki burst out laughing at that one.

“Honeycomb, I am so proud of you right now,” Pollen said, about to cry.

“If I wasn’t late for my super important bridesmaid job I would come up with a really good comeback to that!”

Chloe shoved her out the door, and Marinette all but ran through the hall to meet up with the bridal party. She gathered her pink dress skirt in her arms, afraid she actually would trip now that Chloe had to go and open her big mouth about it.

Alya was a vision in white lace as she waited with her father in the dressing room. She spotted Marinette practically sprinting.

“There you are! Seriously, cutting it kinda close.”

“Nah, she’s right on time!” said Nora, Alya’s older sister and maid of honor. She wore a suit and pink tie that matched the bridesmaids’ dresses. “Breathe, girl.”

Marinette leaned on her knees and panted, amazed that she hadn’t tripped on her mad dash here. “Ah, thanks Nora. Sorry to keep everybody waiting. Just a makeup emergency!”

Alya’s younger sisters, Etta and Ella, giggled.

“Well, now that you ladies are all here, maybe we can get started,” said Otis, the father of the bride. “The sooner I marry you off, the sooner we can eat.”

“Ha ha, Dad, real classy,” Alya said.

He laughed and gave her a hug. “I’m just kidding, Alya. You know I’ve been snacking all day!”

“Oh, Dad, let’s get lined up already,” Nora intervened, winking at Alya. “Remember where you’re gonna stand? Just like we rehearsed?”

Nora distracted the others, giving Marinette and Alya a private moment. Trixx poked her head out of Alya’s hair, where she’d wrapped herself in the veil.

“Psst! Marinette!” Trixx said. “Look, I’m adorable.”

Marinette laughed. “You sure are. But you better stay hidden, or poor Otis will have a heart attack.”
Alya gently nudged Trixx back into her hair. “Just take a nap, Trixx. It’ll be over soon.”

“And miss out on Wayzz trying to keep a straight face for this silly human ritual? Not on your life, hon.”

Tikki phased out of Marinette’s purse and settled on her shoulder in the folds of her long, wavy hair. “Please behave, Trixx. You know how nervous Wayzz can get.”

Trixx grinned toothily. “Me? I’m the paragon of virtue. You know that.”

“Don’t worry, Trixx. We’ll have time for fun on the honeymoon, I promise,” Alya said.

Alya and Nino were headed to Japan for their honeymoon starting tomorrow. Fu had suggested the destination so Nino could return the Coral Miraculous to its proper Guardian, and Alya had agreed on the condition that they get to meet some of the other Miraculous Chosen living there. The traditions of the past needed some twenty-first century updates, and Alya could not think of a better way to start than to begin building an international network of Miraculous Chosen. With a freer flow of information, perhaps they could prevent another incident like the war with Pride from happening again anywhere else in the world.

Trixx giggled. “Then consider me behaved…for now.”

Marinette took Alya’s hands in hers. “I’m so happy for you, Alya. I can’t believe it’s finally happening! I mean, I can believe it, you know, but I can’t believe it.”

“Chill, girl! You’re more nervous than I am.” Alya grinned mischievously in a way that reminded Marinette disturbingly of Trixx. “Or maybe you’re just thinking of a certain groomsman waiting at the end of the aisle for you?”

Marinette flushed. “W-What? Of course not! Adrien and I are way far away from anything like that.”

“Uh-huh.”

“He’s still, you know, figuring things out with Emilie, and there’s his therapy, the new VC fund he’s starting, and then I’ve got, like, a million things on my plate with the spring line coming up, and the Shanghai expansion, and—”

“—and you’re so stupidly in love with him that none of that really matters in the end,” Alya interrupted. “Look, all I’m saying is I’m happy for you, too. And this is my wedding, so you better goddamn enjoy yourself. No thinking about work or anything else, got it?”

Marinette pulled Alya into a fierce hug. “I love you, Alya.”

“I know, I’m fabulous.”

Marinette laughed. “You sound like Chloe.”

“What can I say? You have amazing taste in friends.”

They shared a laugh, and soon it was time to start the ceremony. Marinette took her place in line behind Nora, who led the procession as a string quartet played at the front of the room. Nino was grinning from ear to ear in between Fu, who was officiating the ceremony, and his little brother and best man, Chris. Marinette smile when they briefly locked eyes, and she shot him a discreet thumbs up under her bouquet.
But Marinette’s attention was drawn inevitably to Adrien, who couldn’t take his eyes off her as she made her way down the aisle ahead of Etta and Ella. Her heart swelled at the sight of him, and he flashed her a winning smile that made his eyes dance.

“Marinette!” Tikki whispered in her ear. “Watch your step!”

Marinette bit her lip, embarrassed, and stepped carefully onto the dais to take her place next to Nora. Everyone she loved had turned out to the ceremony, friends and family alike, and she smiled seeing them all gathered in the audience. Old friends from Dupont had all turned out to support Alya and Nino. Manon and Alphonse and a gaggle of Alya’s work colleagues looked on eagerly, fawning and swooning at how pretty Alya was in her wedding dress. Chloe and Luka sat together with Juleka, Rose, and Chloe’s parents. Marinette’s own parents were in the front row, where Sabine was taking a thousand pictures of the bridal party and Tom waved to Marinette, in case she somehow missed his barrel-chested frame taking up two seats.

The music changed for Alya and Otis, and everyone rose. Alya was radiant as she approached the altar on her father’s arm. Marinette cast a furtive glance at Nino, who was slack-jawed and staring at the woman who had somehow chosen him above all others. Everyone took their places, and Fu began the ceremony.

“I had the pleasure of meeting Alya and Nino a few months ago at a difficult point in my life,” Fu addressed the room. “It was…a bit of a dark time, in all honesty. Some days, I was not sure how things might turn out. If I would make it through in one piece.” He took each of Alya’s and Nino’s hands in his and smiled. “But then I met the two of you, and you were every bit as worthy as I had heard. You have something special, something that inspires the people around you and earns their love and loyalty. Something truly miraculous.”

Marinette found Adrien watching her, and he smiled when she looked at him. She bit her lip.

“I think I can speak for everyone gathered here today when I say I am truly honored to know you both,” Fu went on. “And I am delighted to be in your presence today as you join your hearts and souls together, now and forever.”

Alya and Nino exchanged their vows and their rings, and Marinette felt like she might jump out of her skin as she waited for Fu to finish up.

“Then, it is my sincere pleasure to pronounce you husband and wife,” Fu said. “Nino, please kiss your lovely bride while I’m still young.”

Nino laughed and pulled Alya into a dramatic dip to kiss her in front of everyone, and the whole room erupted in cheers and clapping. Everyone rose to their feet as the bride and groom headed back down the aisle, and Marinette fell in line behind them. Adrien took her arm.

“Save me a dance?” he said.

She squeezed his arm. “All the dances.”

The reception was loud and joyous as people danced and drank the night away. Adrien pulled Marinette against him and spun her around on the dance floor, and she laughed and threw her arms around him.

“Marinette, I love seeing you so happy!” Tikki said when they took a break to sip champagne.

Adrien petted Tikki’s head. “It’s a happy day.”
“Yeah, yeah, as far as I can tell, weddings are just an excuse for you people to get drunk and cry in a way that’s socially acceptable,” Plagg said. “Humans, always so worried about what everybody thinks about you.”

“Oh, and you don’t care what anybody thinks, Plagg?” Marinette teased.

He crossed his little paws and turned up his nose. “No way. And by the way, it’s Your Royal Putrescence from now on.”

Adrien shot her a look that said ‘Don’t ask’, so Marinette let it go. Tikki sighed and took Plagg’s paw in hers.

“Be nice, Plagg. The humans deserve a celebration after everything they’ve been through, and so do we.”

Plagg rolled his eyes and draped himself over Tikki like he could not muster the strength to stay upright alone. “Only if you carry me.”

“Oh, Plagg, you’re impossible.”

He pressed his nose to her cheek and held on tighter. “You promised.”

Marinette couldn’t hide her amusement. Was Plagg whining at Tikki? It was kind of cute…

“Yes, all right,” Tikki relented. “Come on, then. We’ll stay together.”

“Wait, cheese first.”

“I’ve already taken care of the cheese,” said Emilie, joining them at their corner table. Duusu poked his head out around her long braid.

Plagg hissed at him, but Duusu hid his face away. Tikki sighed like the whole exchange was too exhausting to deal with.

“H-Hello Tikki, Plagg,” Duusu said shyly.

“Ready to go?” Emilie said. “The room is all set up for you. The others are already there waiting.”

Emilie had made the rounds gathering up the kwamis soon after the party started so that they could enjoy themselves in a private room without having to worry about all the people who were not supposed to know they existed.

“You know, Sugar Cube, you ’n me could just disappear,” Plagg said. “Just for a little while!”

Tikki smiled. “But everyone will want to see us.”

“They wanna see you.”

“Aw, come on, Plagg,” Marinette said. “Duusu’s happy to see you, right?”

Duusu looked like he would rather be anywhere but here. “Y-Yes! Very happy… Oh! Um, Trixx was asking about you…”

Plagg’s ears flattened. “Guile just wants to drag me into some shady scheme.”

Tikki giggled. “Probably because you’re always willing to go along with them.”
“Am not.”

“You are. You’ve never been able to resist a good scheme.”

Plagg looked extremely put off, but he didn’t argue. “Whatever. You said there’s cheese?”

“Oh yes.” Emilie leaned in conspiratorially. “There’s even some Beaufort D’Ete I smuggled in especially for you.”

Plagg’s ears twitched. “…And where would a cat find this elusive cheese? You know, if he was interested.”

“Right this way.” Emilie opened her purse, and Plagg and Tikki phased inside.

“Thanks, Emilie,” Marinette said.

“You’re welcome.” She glanced at Adrien. “Have fun, you two.”

“Mom,” Adrien said. “Save me a dance?”

Emilie smiled. “I’d like nothing better.” She touched his cheek, and soon she was off to deposit the kwami.

“How about some champagne before we tear up the dance floor again?” Marinette said once they were alone.

Adrien slipped his arm around her waist. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

Marinette leaned against him and breathed him in. “Not at all. Maybe I’m just trying to ply you with liquor so I can have my way with you later.”

He chuckled, and it sent shivers down her spin. His hand wandered dangerously low over her backside. “Be careful what you wish for, Princess.”

He gave her a long, slow kiss that curled her toes, and promised to return with fresh libations. Marinette was not alone for long, though.

“So, when’s your big day?” Manon said, joining her at the corner table.

“Huh?”

“You know. You and DTF Guy have been like barnacles all night. I’m surprised you haven’t eloped yet at the rate you’re going.”

Marinette flushed and stole Manon’s last crostini out of spite.

“Hey! I was gonna eat that!”

Marinette swallowed the food and stuck her tongue out. “Too bad.”

Manon sighed. “Well, hey, I’m happy for you. It’s obvious you and Adrien are good for each other. All joking aside.”

“Thanks, Manon.”

They watched as Luka and Chloe were interrupted on the dance floor by Audrey and Andre
Bourgeois. Audrey was insisting on taking some glamour shots of them, while Andre was trying to get her to leave them alone to enjoy themselves. Luka was happy to indulge her, however, and even danced with Audrey so that Chloe could dance with her father. Marinette smiled watching them.

*I guess there’s nothing like your daughter’s boyfriend sacrificing his life for yours to make you see him in a different light.*

Manon seemed to read her mind. “It’s hard to believe how much things have been changing for the better lately. I mean, I turn around and it’s like everyone and their mom is living their best life. Even Ladybug and Chat Noir were caught practically eating each other’s faces the other day!”

Marinette flushed. She’d have to tell Adrien they needed to tone down the PDA while transformed. In this city, there was always someone watching, even high up on the Eiffel Tower.

“Anyway, it’s kind of nice, you know? After everything that happened with the coral murders, and Hawk Moth, and you know…” Manon smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “It’s just really nice to see people bouncing back.”

Marinette put a hand on her shoulder. “How are you doing?”

Manon looked up at her. “Me? I’m super!”

“Manon… It’s okay, you know. Just because a lot of people around you seem like they’ve moved on, doesn’t mean you have to. Only you can know when you’re ready.”

Manon clasped her drink with both hands and averted her gaze. “Am I that obvious? I don’t mean to rain on Alya’s parade or anything. Just forget it.”

Marinette pulled her into a hug before she could do anything about it. “There’s no forgetting it. It happened, and it was horrible. But it wasn’t your fault any more than it was any of the other victims’ faults.”

Manon’s dark eyes were wide and glassy with unshed tears. “I keep thinking about him. About Aramis—I mean, Felix.” She averted her gaze. “That akuma… He wanted me to give it to you.”

“You couldn’t have known. No one knew.”

Manon shook her head. “Why can’t that be good enough? Why can’t I accept that?”

“I don’t have all the answers, but I can tell you this. Your feelings are valid, and it’s okay to still be upset. It’s okay if you’re still upset a year from now, or even ten years from now. But I hope you know that I’m not upset with you. No one is. I’m here for you, Manon.”

Manon wiped her eyes. “Well, shit. Now I’m about to ruin my makeup. Thanks a lot, Boss.”

Marinette grinned. “Anything for my favorite intern.”

“Hey, Marinette? I know he’s in jail for, like, five lifetimes or whatever, but do you think Felix could ever, you know…”

After Ladybug’s magic had restored Paris and healed the surviving coralized and akumatized victims, Felix was arrested. Jessika was dead, having overcome Pride’s insidious curse and sacrificed her life to save those of the surviving coralized victims. With her gone, Felix went down for everything. And while Marinette couldn’t tell Manon the whole truth, she knew there was no chance of Felix ever escaping to commit further atrocities now that the Butterfly Miraculous was no longer
under his control.

“No,” Marinette said. “He’s an old man who used up all his magic. He’s never going to see the light of day again, count on it.”

Manon nodded, though she didn’t look entirely convinced. Adrien returned with two fresh champagne flutes and handed one to Marinette.

“Hey, Manon. Pretty dress,” Adrien said with a smile.

Manon smoothed the skirt of her purple bubble dress. “Thanks. I actually designed it myself. With some help.”

“No really,” Marinette said. “That one’s a Manon Original.”

“Very nice. Marinette, watch out. You may have some competition in a few years.”

“I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

Manon flushed self-consciously. “Well, uh, I guess I better leave you to it.”

“No, stay if you like. Here, we’re going to dance, anyway.” Marinette handed Manon her champagne glass. “Ready, Kitty?”

Adrien looked at her, intrigued. “My lady, I’m at your dis-paw-sal.” He took her hand and kissed her knuckles.

Marinette looked back at Manon over her shoulder and raised a finger to her lips, winking. Manon gaped at her, stunned speechless, but Adrien twirled her around as they wandered onto the dance floor.

“That was a little on the nose,” he said as he wrapped his arm around her waist and led her in a dance.

Marinette leaned in and kissed his nose. “I think it’s nice sometimes to know your heroes are real and watching out for you. Besides, maybe I want to show you off a little.”

“Oh, really?” He pressed a kiss to her temple. “Because I’d prefer to have you all to myself.”

Marinette smiled. “That could be arranged…”

Adrien let Marinette lead him down the hall, his eyes drawn to her satin skirt whispering around her ankles as she managed the supernatural feat of walking briskly in high heels. They ended up in Alya’s empty dressing room, and she closed the door behind them.

“We don’t have much time,” Marinette said, her fingers curling around his jade tie.

“Nonsense,” Adrien said, backing her up against the wall. “We have all the time in the world.”

Marinette laughed as he kissed her neck and ran his hands over her hips. “The speeches will be starting soon.”

“Maybe you should have thought about that before you dragged me in here.”
Her fingers in his hair made his skin hum as every cell in his body came to life. “I have a hard time thinking when I’m around you.”

Adrien traced her jawline and forced her to look up at him. “And because I love you, I’ll ignore the extremely appropriate pun you just walked right in to.”

Marinette’s gaze darkened, and she dragged her hand down over his pants. Her fingers closed around him, and he pressed harder against her palm. He felt her smile into their kiss as she teased him.

“Turn around,” he said, not waiting for an answer as he pushed her up against the wall by the door. He slipped the strap of her dress off her shoulder and cupped her bare breast.

“That’s not fair,” Marinette said, flattening her palms against the wall.

Adrien kissed her neck and wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her closer. “Fair?”

He was rewarded with a breathy gasp when he pinched her nipple and she pushed back against him.

“F-Fuck,” she said, trembling.

“Princess, such vulgarity.” He smiled against the shell of her ear and slipped his hand under the long slit in her skirt. “Be patient.”

But Marinette was anything but patient when he squeezed her again. She threaded her fingers in his hair and tugged him close enough to kiss desperately. His hand traced along her thigh and ghosted over her panties, tempting.

“Adrien,” Marinette whispered as she pressed herself flush against him.

He hissed at the pressure of her butt against his cock, but in their passion he leaned into her harder. At this rate, he was going to lose control completely. He grabbed her wrist and pinned it to the wall over their heads. Marinette looked back at him, and he was treated to the sight of her beautiful face slackening in bliss as he slipped a finger inside her.

Adrien smiled and pressed his lips to her neck as he pleasured her. Every gasp, every tremble, the sensation of her fingers in his hair—she was electricity upon his skin, and he was sure he would lose his mind watching her slow, sensuous destruction.

“Mm,” she moaned.

“Marinette,” he said, hardly recognizing his own voice so thick with desire.

“Yes…”

Adrien closed his eyes and nearly lost what little was left of his composure at the sound of that word in that sensual lilt.

“Tell me,” he whispered. He ground his hips against her, and they both saw stars.

“Adrien, I’m—ah!” She tightened her grip on his hair, almost painful, and looked directly at him. “I want you.”

His mouth went dry at the look of unfettered longing in her eyes. No one had ever looked at him
with such intensity of feeling before, like she meant every word in every dimension, every lifetime, every version of them there had ever been.

“I want you so much.” She let her fingers slide down his jaw, over his lips, parting them.

He could never say no to her. Hastily, he let her go to unzip his pants. She tried to turn around, and as much as the thought of Marinette’s pretty lips around him would have been fucking fantastic right now, the threat of getting caught was slightly more pressing. He caught her hips and pinned her to the wall.

“Why?” she complained.

He gathered her satin skirt up and pushed it aside, spreading her legs. “I want you, too,” he said against the shell of her ear.

Marinette bit her thumb to keep from crying out when he entered her from behind. Lust and adrenaline got him moving as she writhed in his arms, trapped between the wall and him. The mighty Ladybug, powerful and beautiful and the strongest person he knew, now a shaking mess clinging to him as he fucked her against the wall where anybody might walk by and hear them. That thought went straight to his cock, and he moaned against her neck.

“God, I can’t…” He lost all coherent thought as he drove into her.

“Don’t stop,” she said, gasping. “Chaton…”

Hearing her pet name for him at the peak of wanton desire was his undoing. He pressed a finger to her clit as he came and didn’t let up even as she almost collapsed beneath him.

Adrien squeezed his eyes closed and rested his damp forehead against the cool wall to catch his breath. Marinette’s fingers found his and pulled his arm around her. For a few blissful minutes, they held each other there and slowly came up for air.

“♫

“I love it when you call me that,” he confessed, pressing a soft kiss to her neck.

She laughed and turned in his arms. This time, he let her. “I’m aware.” She kissed him, long and slow as if to savor every last drop of him.

“Tell me,” he said, almost pleading, his forehead touching hers. “Please…”

She smiled and dragged her fingers over his neck to his hair. “I love you, Adrien.”

Adrien smiled. No matter how many times she said it, he never got tired of hearing it. He was sure he never would. “Thank you.”

She laughed and nuzzled him affectionately. “You’re welcome.”

He felt her pulling away, but he tightened his hold on her and looked her in the eye. “Marinette, I love you so much.”

She laid her hand on his chest, and he felt his heart thundering beneath her fingertips. “I’m right here for you.”

And she was, always. Ever since she had brought him back from the darkest depths of his own self-destruction, she had been there for him. Every day getting to see the people he cared about, getting to
live, was a gift she had given him. And he cherished it as much as he cherished her. Adrien wondered if she truly understood what she had done for him, what it really meant, how close he had been to shattering completely.

“That’s a serious face,” she said, watching him. “Are you okay?”

He smiled. “Yeah. I think... I know it’s all going to be okay.”

“It will be. You’re my partner. We’re in this together.” She kissed him again, fiercely this time, as if to share a piece of her heart and passion with him.

For a guy who played host to the avatar of bad luck himself, Adrien had never felt luckier.

When Marinette and Adrien made their way back to the reception, it was to find Luka and Nino huddled around the DJ station. Before Marinette could ask, Adrien kissed her cheek and excused himself.

“I have to talk to Nino about something. Be right back.”

Marinette, still flushed from their intimacy, decided to help herself to a drink at the bar, but Alya was, as usual, one step ahead of her.

“I got you, girl.” Alya winked.

“Alya, have I told you today that I love and accept you as my lord and savior?”

Alya laughed. “Get in line.”

“There you are,” Chloe said, making her way around the dancing guests to them. “Please tell me you know what’s going on.”

Marinette frowned. “What do you mean? What’s going on?”

“Testing, testing,” Nino spoke into a microphone as the music cut. “Hey, party fiends! Can you all hear me in the back? Cool, cool, cool. Yeah, right, so uh, I don’t know if you heard, but I just married my smokin’ hot fiancé. Kind of a big deal, right?”

Everyone whooped and clapped, and Nino curtseyed.

“Why do I have the feeling something super dumb is about to happen?” Chloe said.

“Oh yeah! So, I know this day is about me ‘n Alya and all that, but I just wanted to give a shoutout to some special friends here today, especially one in particular. Marinette? Where are you?” He shielded his eyes and peered around the room for her.

Alya grabbed Marinette’s hand and raised it up high. “Over here, stud!”

The people closest to them parted, and Nino grinned. “There she is! Sorry, Mar, you’re a little short.”

“Oh, come on,” Marinette said, a little embarrassed now that everyone was looking at her.

“Anyway, what I wanted to say was, Marinette? You’re one of the most amazing people I know. And I know I speak for Alya, too, when I say we wouldn’t have made it here today if it wasn’t for
you.” He paused and smiled softly. “None of us would have.”

Alya’s hand in hers and the look of sincere love in her eyes was like a punch to the gut. She felt so many eyes on her—Chloe next to her, thoughtful; Fu across the room, smiling; Adrien, watching her with a quiet devotion that stole her breath away.

“You’re our hero, Mar,” Nino said.

Marinette was so taken aback at his sincerity, at all of them in agreement—her team—that she began to weep. She covered her mouth, unable to hide the surge of emotion.

Nino laughed. “So, without further adieu, I give you the most awesome not-a-boyband you’ll ever see, one night only, folks! This one’s for all the miraculous ladies out there!”

Luka had taken up an electric guitar while Adrien manned the keyboard. Nino took over the DJ’s stand mixing and dropping a heinously familiar beat that made Marinette burst out laughing. Luka took the microphone with the most self-satisfied grin she had ever seen.

“You’re so good to me, baby, baby,” Luka sang.

Chloe stared in horror. “You’re fucking kidding me.”

Alya threw her arms around both Marinette and Chloe. “Stop lying to yourself and just love this with me!”

With no choice—because no one argues with a bride on her wedding day—Chloe let herself get pulled into the rhythm as everyone danced and sang along to Avril Lavigne’s Hot. Marinette caught Adrien watching her and smiling like the enormous dork he was.

“You make me so hot, make me wanna drop.
It’s so ridiculous, I can barely stop!”

Luka’s energy was contagious as he and the others went above and beyond to make themselves as silly as possible. Alya sang along, deliriously happy and laughing, and Marinette couldn’t help but laugh with her. She grabbed Chloe’s arm and spun the three of them around, and soon even Chloe couldn’t help but give in.

“You’re so fabulous, you’re so good to me, baby, baby!” they sang as they laughed and danced together.

And it was over far too soon, but Adrien found Marinette again afterwards and scooped her into a bear hug.

“I did warn you,” Adrien said. “You sure you know what you’re getting yourself in to?”

Marinette grinned. “For you? I think I can make a little room for the punk pop princess we all deserved.”

“I’ll make you a believer yet,” Adrien said.

Alya herded all their friends together. “Come on, let’s take a picture! Where’s Emilie and Master Fu? We need everyone in here!”

“Here, I can take the picture,” Luka said, fishing for his phone.

Chloe pulled him to her side. “Not so fast, Sk8ter Boi. You’re part of the team now, so get your cute
“Here here,” Nino said. He bowed dramatically. “Your Majesties.”

“I heard something about a picture?” Emilie said, joining them.

“If we can find a cameraman,” Alya said. “Hey, you! Yeah, can you take our picture?”

Marinette’s face began to ache from smiling so much. Sandwiched in between Adrien and Alya, she and the others posed for the camera one of the other wedding guests aimed at them.

“Say cheese!” the cameraman said.

It was the first of many pictures to commemorate that night in between dancing, cake, and an encore performance by popular demand. Everywhere she turned, Marinette saw the people she loved most smiling, laughing, and enjoying the precious time they had together.

And despite everything they had been through, all the pain and loss and tragedy they had endured, she had never felt more like a hero than she did in this moment, surrounded by her team.

Chapter End Notes

I think my Chlonette is showing a little... Can't resist! And of course I was going to make Luka Miraculous, who do you think you’ve been dealing with?? I can think of no one better than him to wield Nooroo properly. No Viperion in this universe since that reveal came very recently as of the posting of this chapter, but there’s always future fic for that!

I started this fic about six months ago. Back then, it was little more than a whim I dreamed up as I was getting casually interested in Miraculous Ladybug. I can’t believe it turned into a full-fledged story completed in a matter of months. That feels like a huge accomplishment, considering this thing is over 200K words! I have the show material to thank for getting me here, of course, but I also have all the amazing readers among you who were invested and kind enough to drop kudos, write me comments, and connect on Tumblr. You made me feel like I wasn’t in this alone shouting my dumb excitement into the void, and it was your dedicated encouragement that kept me motivated to keep at this. Especially those of you who stuck with me and found the time to share your thoughts on most, if not every chapter have my deepest and sincerest gratitude. This fic is for you as much as it is for me. Thank you so much!!

I am very pleased to announce that this is not the last contribution I’ll be making to the ML fandom. I’ve been working on TWO new multi chapter fics. One will be a Mermaid AU called The Merling Queen, because obviously I could never consider myself a *real* ML author without the Obligatory Mermaid AU. The other is an AU similar to this fic (superheroes, Miraculous, etc.) called Look Me In The Stars. Both fics will feature more Adrinette and ChloLuka on fairly equal footing (compared to here, which was more Adrinette-centric). If you like my writing, those ships, and/or are interested in a darker/mature take on mermaids and pirate lore, I hope you’ll check out one or both of those two new fics! Until then, please feel free to drop me a line on
Tumblr @renaerys. I love hearing from you all!

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