### Truth and Consequences

**Summary**

On Sunday, Marinette discovered who her arch nemesis really was.

On Monday, she made Adrien’s father a deal.
Snow tumbled in the gaping hole in the side of the Agreste manor, landing on the smoking piles of shattered wood and mangled carpet. The smell of charred ozone mingled in the air with hundreds of aimless akuma, flitting here and there without their master to guide them. Somewhere in the distance, the sound of sirens made their way to the shattered remnants of Adrien’s house, but Marinette was numb to everything save for the look of utter bewilderment, betrayal, and contempt on Adrien’s face.

“...why?” Adrien mouthed, tears spilling out of the corners of his eyes and tracing trails down his soot covered cheeks. With torn clothing, mussed hair, and an ugly gash bleeding through his turtleneck, he looked only a tiny bit as bad as Marinette felt.

“I...I didn’t know,” Marinette croaked, dragging herself across the floor and towards her partner. “I didn’t know, I promise, I swear, I was only trying to-”

Adrien’s arm jerked away from her touch as she reached out for him, hauling himself to his feet and leaning on the wall for support.

“Trying to what ?” Adrien murmured, shaking his head. “Trying to help?! My father...he was my father and you didn’t tell me?!”

“I didn’t know it was you!” Marinette insisted, rising with a wince to stand level with him. “If I had known, I-”

“What difference would it have made?!” Adrien spat, face crinkling as he stared at the blackened crater where Hawkmoth had stood only a few moments before. “I told you this would happen...I told you and you didn’t trust me!”

Marinette’s head swam as the sum of her nightmares seemed to rise around her with the smoke. Her ears dripped droplets of red in the snow, naked for the first time since she was fourteen years old. Adrien cradled his hand to his chest, an angry red welt the only sign a ring had ever been on his finger.

“I’m sorry,” Marinette said feebly. “I know that doesn’t even begin to help, but I swear, I’m so, so...”
Marinette trailed off, staring at the floor where Hawkmoth disappeared.

“We can still fix this!” Marinette said, a manic edge creeping into her voice. “I-I can get my team—our team—and we can figure out what h-happened, right? We can still find them...w-we can get them back, right Adrien?”

She took a hesitant step towards him, ignoring the dull, throbbing pain in her ears as she watched his back, silently pleading for him to turn around and just look at her.

When he did, Marinette suddenly wished he hadn't.

“We?” Adrien echoed, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand before finally meeting her gaze with a look of anger and disappointment cold as the snow that piled around her ankles. “What makes you think there’s a we anymore?”

Three months earlier, on a cold Sunday in September, Marinette had learned the identity of her greatest enemy.

The next evening, she made Hawkmoth a deal.

Chapter End Notes

AR YA READY KIDS?!

So this is the start of my Big Damn Long Miraculous Civil War AU. I've seen quite a few "Chat Joins Hawkmoth" AU’s but no "Ladybug joins Hawkmoth" AU’s which I think is a ripe opportunity for drama. And since S2 is failing to live up to Thomas' ominous "Miraculous Civil War" tweet, I figured I'd take a crack at it.

This AU is divergent post Syren and will likely be contradicted multiple times by upcoming episodes. That's fine; at this point I want to do my own thing with these characters regardless of where canon ends up. Hopefully I can present this AU in a way that makes sense.

As always, feedback is the fuel that keeps me going! Please leave a review/comment/death threat in the comments below
What You Are In The Dark

Three Months Earlier

“Vengeance is mine sayeth... PRAYING MAN-TIS!” The large, bug-headed akuma in a priest’s vestment shrieked, slicing a car in half with his long, hooked forelegs. “MOCK MY EDUCATIONAL BIBLE-THEMED BUG CARTOONS, WILL YOU?!”

“You just had to make fun of Horace the Easter Beetle, didn’t you Michel?” A girl in a Catholic high-school uniform shrieked, dodging a trash can Praying Man-Tis threw at her head.

“I said it before and I’ll say it again; it was a stupid cartoon!” Her schoolmate shouted, defending himself with a backpack that their disgruntled youth pastor easily sliced in half with his mandible claw.

“Not helping!”

“You know I have no verbal filter! What am I supposed to do; not mock him?!” Michel said, holding a trash can lid up feebly to defend himself. The razor-sharp edge of the akuma’s claw glinted in the mid-day sun as it came arcing down, ready to cleave the pair in two.

Clink!

“Far be it for me to tell you how to practice your religion, padre, but I don’t think the Bible condones eating people.” Michel glanced over the rim of his shield to see a tall, black-clad young man blocking Praying Man-Tis’ claw strike with a long silver staff.

“Oh thank God, we’re saved!” Michel sighed as Chat Noir kicked the disgruntled pastor in the chest.

“OH NOW YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT GOD?!” Praying Man-Tis hissed, slicing a nearby car in half as Chat Noir vaulted over the hood. He whirled around, striking the insect in the back of its spindly legs as he tried to lure the akuma away from the teenagers. A flash of red swooped down from a nearby rooftop, the head of a yo-yo making a quick loop around the akuma’s claws. Snarling, Praying Man-Tis’ arms were hoisted above his head as Ladybug landed beside her partner, looping the end of her yo-yo over a nearby lamppost.
“You two might wanna take a page out of Exodus before your friend gets loose,” Ladybug grunted, tugging against the akuma’s strength as the younger teenagers turned and ran down a side-street.

“Hey look; w-we were saved by an insect after all!” Michel’s voice called as he ran out of sight.

“Shut up Michel!”

“COME BACK; YOU STILL HAVEN’T FINISHED THE GOSPEL COLORING BOOK!” Praying Man-Tis screeched, pulling against Ladybug’s yo-yo and snapping after the retreating teenagers.

“Dude, they’re like fourteen,” Chat said, jamming his baton in his mouth. “Nobody over fourteen colors.”

“I color,” Ladybug mumbled, tugging the Akuma back over the lamp post with a flick of her wrist. “Not cheesy photocopied drawings of the Last Supper, but I find it therapeutic.”

“Huh,” Chat Noir said, blocking another claw strike with a raise of his baton. “Guess I know what to get you for Christmas then.”

“I could use some more colored pencils, come to think of it,” Ladybug said, kicking the akuma back into the Seine. “Though there are a few books I haven’t been able to find yet-”

“ENOUGH!” Praying Man-Tis bellowed, rising from the water like an angry kaiju. “FOR TOO LONG HAVE I BEEN SCORNED BY THE YOUTH OF THIS CITY! ONCE I TAKE YOUR MIRACULOUS, HAWKMOTH WILL ENSURE THAT NO ONE CALLS MY EDUCATIONAL BIBLE CARTOONS LAME ANY LONGER!”

“Dude, we’re right here!” Chat said, wiggling a finger in his ear. “Ow...my ears are ringing now.”

“RINGING WITH THE PURE AND GOOD WORD OF THE-” Praying Man-Tis glanced down to see his ornate gold crucifix resting securely in the palm of Ladybug’s hand. “...when did you-”

“While you were rupturing Chat’s eardrums,” Ladybug said, spinning the necklace around on her
“...oh,” Praying Man-Tis said, scratching the back of his head with his claw. “...can I have it back? It’s kinda the source of my dread powers, you know...”

“Oh, so if I were to break it that would be-”

“Really bad for me, yes,” Praying Man-Tis nodded.

“Oh...well, in that case.” Ladybug held out her hand. “All yours.”

“....r-really?”

“Sure!” Ladybug nodded. “Let’s go another couple rounds! Not like I’m late for an afternoon shift or anything! I got aaaaaaaaall the time in the world!”

“...o-okay,” Praying Man-Tis said, tentatively reaching out for his crucifix. “I-If you’re sure, then-”

Ladybug spiked the cross against the ground with all her super strength, shattering it into a thousand pieces as Praying Man-Tis screech, shrinking back down into an unassuming twenty-something man in a priest’s collar.

“Wha...what happened?” The priest looked up as a sea of bright, sparkling ladybugs washed over the destruction, wiping it clean and leaving the sparkling streets of Paris good as new.

“You know the drill,” Chat said, waving his hands over the priest’s head. “Say ten Hail Mary’s, four Our Father’s, one Dead Parrot Sketch, and all will be forgiven.”

“And maybe update your Bible study class,” Ladybug said, latching on to the edge of a building and swinging up off the street.

“Think that was a record,” Chat said, landing on the roof and holding his fist out. “What was that, like five minutes or...Ladybug?”
“Sorrygottagotalklaterbye!” Ladybug called out as she leapt off the roof, swinging off towards the other side of the city, already well out of earshot.

“Huh...guess she really was late for something,” Chat murmured, glancing down at his fist before bumping it with his other. “Good job, Chat!” Why thank you Chat!”

“I'mhereI'mhereI'mhere!” Marinette cried, dashing through the cafe doors and worming her way past customers as she elbowed her way to the cash register. “Sorry I'm late!”

“I love you, but if you stick me with cashier duty again, I will have to kill you,” Alya said, tossing Marinette an apron from the coat hook by the bar. “You know how I get when I have to talk to customers.”

“Crabby?”

“Righteously crabby,” Alya hissed, turning around with a broad, artificial smile. “Yes, sir, have you made your decision?”

“I...had a thing to do,” Marinette chuckled nervously, scanning the coffee order Alya had scribbled on the torn sheet of paper.

“When don’t you have things to do?” Alya snorted. “What was it this time; album art commission? Art school audition? Dough explosion at the folks’ place?”

“One time that happened,” Marinette said, spraying some whipped cream on the hastily cobbled together latte and passing it across the counter. Contrary to her fondest hopes, being a superhero didn’t get easier as she got older. In fact, as Marinette was presented with more interesting and lucrative opportunities, being Ladybug became more and more of a chore. She was now more likely to get called away in the middle of work, class, or an invigorating design project than she was when she was fourteen and while akuma battles were no less harrowing, they were more intrusive and annoying than life threatening.

It didn’t help that Hawkmoth was running thin on akuma ideas.
“Once is enough,” Alya said, grabbing a croissant from the display case and tucking it in a brown paper bag. “Did you...hear back from Central Saint Martins?”

“...oh,” Marinette wiped her hands on her apron, shooting Alya what she hoped was an easygoing smile. “Not yet...”

“Matter of time,” Alya said with a wave over her shoulder. “You’re a shoe-in; how many other applicants have won a *Gabriel* sponsored design contest when they were fourteen.”

“That was four years ago,” Marinette pointed out. “It was a long shot anyway; I-I’m not holding my breath.”

“Well, not like you’re hurting for options,” Alya shrugged, pulling her apron off and heading into the back. “New York, Tokyo, San Francisco; who knows where you’re gonna be next year.”

Marinette bit her lip, watching the cream dissolve into the coffee with a blank, unfocused stare. Part of her wondered why she was working so hard to save for a future that seemed further and further away with each akuma attack.

“...y-yeah, the world is my oyster!” Marinette chuckled, wiping her hands on her apron as she slid up to the register. “Thank you for waiting, sir, can I take your...”

One would think that after four years of being casual friends with him, Marinette would have been immune to Adrien Agreste’s unique brand of boyish charm.

“Sir?” Adrien asked with a crooked smile. “I thought we were at least on first name terms by this point.”

The problem was that Adrien’s boyish charm had grown up along with the rest of him; faster, it seemed, than Marinette could develop an immunity.

“O-Oh that’s just what all the cool kids are calling their friends these days,” Marinette laughed, leaning on the cash register and accidentally charging Adrien for fifteen scones. “Sir...madame...your excellency. Ironic formality is all the hype these days.”
“Shows how behind on the times I am,” Adrien snorted. “Can I get a-”

“Tall black iced tea with no sweetener?” Marinette said, already pulling a pitcher of tea from the fridge behind the counter.

“With-”

“Half a lemon?”

“And a-”

“Raspberry scone,” Marinette supplied, fishing one out from behind the counter and tucking it in a brown paper bag.

“And while you’re at it-”

“A medium latte with two pumps of caramel?” Marinette asked, glancing at the fencing bag over his shoulder. “When are you going to stop buying Kagami’s coffee for her?”

“When I stop losing duels where coffee is on the line,” Adrien sighed. “I swear, the first time I beat her was some kinda fluke…”

“The fact that I have it memorized at this point means you should probably stop stepping to your senpai like that,” Marinette chuckled.

“Speaking of memorization,” Adrien said, leaning on the counter. “We still on for tomorrow?”

“Four-thirty, your place,” Marinette nodded. As though she would forget.

“I’ll let Nathalie know you’re swinging by,” Adrien said, grabbing a drink in each hand and snatching the bag with the scone in it between his teeth. “Thanks!”
Marinette watched him waddle out of the shop with an armful of drinks, wondering if he was capable of going thirty minutes without doing something that made her squishy.

“What was that about?” Marinette turned around to see Alya leaning against the doorframe with a raised eyebrow.

“Nothing,” Marinette said quickly, fiddling with her braid.

“Adrien leaves you red-faced over nothing?” Alya asked, draping an arm over Marinette’s shoulder. “You really expect me to buy that?”

“...it’s just a study date at his house,” Marinette said, worming out of Alya’s grasp.

“So it’s a date?” Alya said, lips curling into a grin.

“A date with books and no funny business,” Marinette said quickly, busying herself with cleaning the counter.

“Not with that attitude,” Alya said, bumping her hip against Marinette. “Come ooooooon; he basically invited you over while his parents aren’t home~”

“His father is a workaholic and his mother may be dead,” Marinette pointed out. “They’re never home.”

“Point still stands,” Alya said, pouring a cup of coffee for herself. “We’re gonna be out of school in a handful of months; this could be the last chance you get to do what every girl and at least half the guys in Paris dream of!”

“...Adrien?”

“Precisely,” Alya nodded.
“When you say every girl in Paris, do you mean that you-”

“What can I say; kid looks good in jeans,” Alya shrugged.

“...does Nino know that you-”

“What part of half of the guys in Paris was unclear?” Alya asked. “Look, Luka didn’t pan out the way you wanted, but that was like a year and a half ago, right? Get back up on that horse already...and by horse I do mean-”

“Got it!” Marinette said, straightening the disposable cups to give herself something to do other than turn red. With everything going on in her life, the last thing she needed was a fling with someone who was probably leaving for some posh foreign college in the following fall. She had tried (mostly unsuccessfully) to move past her feelings for Adrien and the last thing she needed was to go deeper down the rabbit hole she had spent four years crawling out of.

...on the other hand, next autumn was a long way away. Maybe the quickest way to get over Adrien was to get under-

“O-Oh, thank god, a customer,” Marinette muttered, stepping up to the counter with a beaming smile. “Can I help you?”

“Hooooooooooome!”

Marinette caught the door with her foot so it didn’t slam, strolling through the back of the bakery with a yawn. The smell of long-eaten dinner still lingered in the kitchen, and a plate of chicken, vegetables, and rice sat in the microwave with Marinette’s name on it. A note on the fridge read “Trouble with delivery driver; back tonight <3” in her mother’s neat pink calligraphy next to a crisp, cream colored envelope that Marinette had been anticipating...and dreading all week.

“Are you going to read it?” Tikki asked, fluttering out of her clutch bag as Marinette reheated the meal her father had made.

“I’ll get to it,” Marinette said, tucking the letter in her bag and hauling her dinner upstairs. By the time she had reached the ladder leading up to her loft, she had cleared through the chicken and vegetables and was just finishing her rice when she scooted through her trap door.
Not much had changed in Marinette’s room since she moved to the loft; only her computer and drawing table were relatively recent additions. A half-finished jacket pinned to a mannequin sat near her workstation, and a blinking light on her dashboard alerted her to a chat notification.

Luka: sooooooooo not to be a pest or anything buuuuuuuuuuuuuuuut

Luka: did you get a chance to finish the back-cover art yet?

Rolling her eyes, Marinette scarfed down the last of her dinner, firing Illustrator up as she replied to Luka.

Marinette: some of us are still in lycee :P

Marinette: and have two jobs

Luka: two whole jobs???

Luka: i dream of the days when i only had two jobs

Luka: working two jobs would be a vacation for me

Marinette: cut me some slack; i’m not used to the whole starving artist grind

Luka: you will be, young skywalker

Luka: you will be

Luka: b t dubs, did you hear from Saint Martins yet?
Marinette: why is everyone asking me that?

Luka: because it’s cool

Luka: and you’re totes going

Marinette: might be going

Luka: did anyone else have a letter of reference from jagged fucking stone?

Luka: i think not

Marinette: we’ll see

Marinette: i have a french paper to write but i’ll try and get you another draft tonight

Luka: you’re a peach <3

Luka: i would kiss you just for old time’s sake if i were there

Marinette: with that tongue stud???

Marinette: hard pass; you used too much tongue as it was

Marinette: whatever girl you’re with is going to get her teeth broken by a little metal wrecking ball

Luka: >:P
Marinette: what did I say about too much tongue

Luka: just for that; no more kisses for you

Marinette: my dentist thanks you

By the time ten o’clock rolled around, half an essay on *Les Misérables* and half an album cover for a budding punk group were finished, and the cream colored envelope perched on Marinette’s desk had remained unopened. Every time her eyes drifted over towards it, she came up with something else to do. She started on her math homework that wasn’t due for a week, organized her desktop folders, and even wiped her desk down before curiosity started to get the better of her.

It was heavy in her hands as she stared down at it; she didn’t know if that was a good thing or not. Slowly she peeled the back of the envelope open, fishing the letter out and starting to read.

> Dear Ms. Dupain-Cheng,

> We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to-

Marinette felt her stomach churn, heart pounding in her ears as she read line after line of glowing praise. “Great potential...imaginative designs...scholarship opportunities.” Every word said in her favor sent another cold, icy pang of disappointment washing through her as she just stared down at it, fingers running over the parchment almost longingly.

“What does it say?” Tikki asked, swooping over to read the letter as Marinette dropped it on the desk. “...you got in?!”

“Yeah...looks like it,” Marinette said softly, standing up and running a hand through her hair.

“B-But that’s amazing!” Tikki said, fluttering up to look her partner in the eye. “I-It’s what you wanted, isn’t it? One of the best schools in the world accepted your application!”
Marinette bit her lip, staring out at the Eiffel Tower. “It’s in London.”

Tikki’s antennae drooped, fluttering down to the desk with a small sigh. “...oh.”

It was what she wanted; an education from Central Saint Martins would have kickstarted her design career and made enough valuable connections to get her first investors interested. It was the beginning of her life as she wanted to lead it...and she simply couldn’t do it.

“Maybe you could...” Tikki trailed off, searching for an answer.

“What?” Marinette laughed. “Take the Chunnel every time an akuma popped up in Paris? Unless you’ve been holding out on teleportation powers, I can’t go to school in England and still be a superhero in Paris.”

“But...” Marinette swept the letter into her top desk drawer, opening Illustrator again and trying to lose herself in the swirling patterns of her design. She managed to ignore the weight in her chest up to and until Tikki laid a hand on her finger, looking up at her with wide, wobbling blue eyes.

“...it would have been nice,” Marinette said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand and turning back to her computer.

“Chat?”

“Hm?” Chat glanced across the rooftop at his unusually taciturn partner as she stared out over the city.

“Do you...” Ladybug started, trailing off as she seemed to struggle to find the words. “Did you ever read the story of Sisyphus when you were a kid?”

“...sounds familiar,” Chat said, leaning on his staff. “Yeah, didn’t he betray the gods or something? And in true Greco-Roman dickweasel deity fashion, they made him roll a boulder up a hill for all eternity.”
Ladybug’s expression melted into a small smile. “Every time he almost got to the top, it would just roll back on down again. And he’d have to start over.”

“Makes you wonder why he didn’t just sit down; give up and spend the rest of eternity taking a cat nap,” Chat snickered.

“...maybe he thought it was important,” Ladybug said. “Maybe he...knew if he didn’t haul the boulder up to the top of the hill, someone else would have to. Maybe there was enough of the good king left in him to not back down from his duty...or maybe he’s just been doing it so long that he needs to see it through.”

“Even if it’s impossible?” Chat asked.

“Maybe he doesn’t know that,” Ladybug said, hugging her knees to her chest. “Maybe he thinks...okay, just one more try. Maybe this time I’ll get it; maybe this time I’ll win.”

Ladybug bit her lower lip. “...I mean, would you give up if you were him? Just accept that your task was impossible and that you’d never be free of this...this life you were living?”

“Do you really need to ask?” Chat snorted. “You know me; someone tells me I can’t do something, I’ll do it just to spite them.”

Ladybug snorted, standing up with a lazy stretch. “Well, if nothing else, spite is a hell of a motivator...same time tomorrow?”

“Unless our Sunday gets interrupted by Monsieur Butterfly,” Chat chuckled, holding out his fist. “You owe me two for skipping out on me today.”

“Fair enough,” Ladybug said, tapping Chat’s fist with a quick one-two punch. “Sorry about that, I just-”

“Don’t worry about it,” Chat said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Let me know if you want me to cover a shift for you or something.”
“I wouldn’t even subject Hawkmoth to one of my swing shifts,” Ladybug chuckled, stepping backwards towards the edge of the roof. “…well-”

“I think Hawkmoth owes you one or two shifts at this point.”

“Owes me more than that,” Ladybug mumbled, shaking her hair. “Text me when you get home, kay?”

“Safe swinging,” Chat said with a two fingered salute as he dropped off the roof, kicking off a balcony and somersaulting over the lip of another building. She watched his dark figure retreat for a moment, admiring the deft way he landed and moved with an almost liquid flow before turning, latching her yo-yo on a lamppost and swinging off the roof. It was moments like this, when her life wasn't in peril and she could enjoy the simple freedom of swinging through the city with the wind blowing through her hair, that she truly appreciated the freedom being Ladybug offered.

Her unexpected side job came with fewer perks than one might think so she was sure to take advantage of them whenever she could. Gliding past her balcony window, she latched on to another lamp post, slingshotting herself up into the night air. She reveled in the feeling of freefalling for a few seconds before swinging up and over the rooftops, closing her eyes as the chilly night air whipped past her cheeks.

The light in Ayla’s bedroom caught her attention as she landed on the roof across from her family’s townhouse. It was something of a guilty pleasure to catch small, stolen moments where her friends had their hair down and looked completely unguarded. Alya sat with her back to the headboard of her bed, phone cradled on her shoulder as she typed on her laptop. She couldn’t make out what Alya was saying but judging by the way she rolled her eyes with beaming laugh, it wasn’t hard to tell who she was talking to.

Envy wasn’t an emotion that Marinette liked to dwell on; she had been blessed and fortunate in so many ways that it felt petty begrudging the lives that her friends had built for themselves. But there were moments when she found herself craving the freedom to chart her own course, unfettered by responsibility she had shouldered since she was a fourteen year old girl. Alya didn’t have to plan her life within walking distance of the Eiffel Tower; she didn’t have to worry about putting her boyfriend’s life in danger on the off chance that Hawkmoth discovered her secret identity. The course of her life was entirely hers to chart and despite having nigh-limitless powers of creation of her fingertips, there were fleeting moments where Marinette would have traded her earrings and her nighttime runs through the city for just a taste of the freedom Alya had.

Shaking her head, Ladybug swung off the edge of the roof, hoping to lose the burgeoning feelings of
resentment somewhere over the rooftops. She found herself sailing past Nino’s apartment, winding her way through the city until she found herself perched on one of the buildings across the street from Adrien’s family estate.

There were lines that Marinette never crossed as a superheroine; spying unseen on Adrien was one of them. She knew it would have been too easy to go down that slippery slope if she started and so she consciously steered clear of the Agreste manor whenever she felt like going on her little nightly strolls. Adrien lived his entire life under a camera lens; he deserved to have just a little bit of privacy in his personal life.

His father, on the other hand, wasn’t subject to the same courtesy.

The light on at the end of the compound drew Ladybug’s attention towards Gabriel Agreste’s office. While she had never indulged the creeping urge to spy on Adrien, the opportunity to be a fly on Gabriel Agreste’s wall was a little too much to resist. She could see him leaning over a drafting table as she had done so many times before, mumbling something to himself as a dark look of concentration crossed his face. While she had nothing but personal disdain for Adrien’s icicle of a father, the fashion designer in her couldn’t help but bear some begrudging respect for someone who built his fashion company out of nothing. He was living her dream; posted up in an expansive manor his own brand had bought. She could see herself in a similar position in a few years, drafting late into the night and in her personal office, talking with Tikki as her pen slid across the-

Ladybug frowned as Gabriel’s head turned to one side sharply, teeth baring as he snapped at someone just out of line of sight. The hair on the back of her neck stood up as she maneuvered herself up towards the window, keeping to the shadows as she tried to get a look at whoever Gabriel was snapping at. Adrien’s complaints about his father had petered off over the years, but something warm, fierce, and protective inside her bared its fangs at the thought of Gabriel looking at his son like that. She tilted her head to one side, peering around the corner as she tried take in whoever he was talking to…

And at first, she saw nothing.

Her initial instinct was that Gabriel was muttering darkly to herself as she sometimes did when faced with a difficult design decision. In the months and years that followed that moment, Marinette often found herself thinking back on the chance she had to follow her gut and turn away.

Six seconds was all it took to notice the small, floating purple figure that seemed to be the subject of Gabriel’s ire.
At first, Ladybug mistook it for a stress doll or an elaborate pincushion like the one that sat on her drafting table. During trying creative periods, she would often find herself ranting at the little duck shaped pincushion in the hopes that merely vocalizing her problems would be enough to solve them. So for a brief moment, Ladybug didn’t think anything of the fact that Gabriel was feverishly speaking to what appeared to be a doll; creative minds needed a safe outlet for stress, after all.

Then, the doll moved.

It was slight at first; just a flutter of wings that made Ladybug wonder if she hadn’t been up too late. She blinked, rubbing her eyes with the backs of her fists in the hopes that it was just hallucination brought on by lack of sleep. But when she opened her eyes, the floating purple figure had moved, hovering in front of Gabriel’s face as he spoke with it.

Ladybug froze, not trusting the flimsy shadows to hide her as she watched one of Paris’ most prominent fashion designers argued with a small purple bug creature. She tensed up as he turned to face the window, ducking out of sight as the small figure seemed to be going on at length about something. Gabriel closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and spoke two words she couldn’t quite hear.

A dark, purple light overtook him, causing Ladybug to avert her eyes with a pained wince. When she looked again, a tall, masked figure had replaced Gabriel and the small floating creature was no longer anywhere in the room. Ladybug’s stomach clenched, eyes widening as she saw a figure she had only seen in illusions or projections turn, walk towards a bookcase that swung open, and disappear down a dimly lit tunnel.

It wasn’t until the bookcase door shut behind him that Ladybug realized her hands were trembling.
Ladybug crouched on the ledge for what seemed like an eternity, shaking fingers clutching the windowsil. Cars passed on the street below, occasionally spilling light on her hiding spot, but Ladybug dared not move for fear that her legs would give out the moment she tried. Moving would mean that she needed to act; needed to do something about what she had just seen.

What was she supposed to do?

Could she take Hawkmoth by herself? She didn’t know where he was going or what kind of security measures Gabriel could have installed to thwart intruders. A better question; did she even know what he was capable of? She had spent almost five years fighting his proxies and servants, but his own skills were still largely unknown.

Taking him alone was out; she needed to call Chat, wait for Gabriel to transform back and then-

Her communicator beeping drew her out of her stupor. Fumbling for her yo-yo, Ladybug took a deep, steadying breath before answering.

“Chat, I...I need you-” Ladybug said.

“Always nice to hear,” Chat’s shaky chuckle came from the other end. “But maybe we should wait until after we handle this akuma, hm?”

“Akuma?” The sound of distance screaming drew Ladybug’s attention to a giant pink cupcake that threatened to swallow the Arc de Triomphe. “Of course there's an akuma; why wouldn't there be an akuma?!”

“You wanna split dessert?”

“I’ll be there in a second,” Ladybug sighed, closing her communicator and sparing one last look at Gabriel’s office before latching on to a nearby lamp-post and grappling towards the frosted nightmare that threatened to engulf her city.
“That was a piece of cake,” Chat said, watching the purified akuma flutter up over the city. Ladybug watched it flutter back in the direction of the Agreste estate, wondering why it never occurred to her that the butterflies might return home to their master when all was said and done.

“Okay, that was a low-hanging pun,” Chat admitted, frowning as Ladybug’s gaze drifted off over the skyline. “That one needed more time to rise...rise like a cake...cakes rise, right?...Ladybug?...you okay?”

“Chat…” Ladybug said, turning to face her partner. “There’s something I need to-”

Beep! Beep! Beep!

Ladybug growled, bunching her hands in her hair as her earrings started beeping. “Look, I...let’s meet up in the usual spot tomorrow; we need to talk.”

“I...have a study date in the afternoon but-”

“Chat,” Ladybug said, blue eyes hard as she held his gaze. “We need to talk.”

Another series of beeps silenced Chat’s line of questioning as Ladybug hopped off the roof, springing off a dumpster lid and landing behind a restaurant delivery truck as her transformation ran out.

“Okay,” Marinette murmured to herself, trembling fingers opening a packet of store bought cookies and passing one to Tikki as she fluttered up into her hood. “Okay, okay, okay...let me think...let me think…”

“What’s there to think about?!” Tikki squeaked, crumbs falling down the front of Marinette’s shirt as she frantically crammed the cookie in her mouth. “Adrien’s father is Hawkmoth!”

“Hey, say that louder next time!” Marinette said, pulling out her phone to make it look like she was
talking to someone. “I don’t think Gabriel Agreste heard it that time!”

“B-But this is what we’ve been working for!” Tikki squeaked in her ear as Marinette wound her way through the evening crowds. “We have him! We have his address! We just need to sneak in while he’s sleeping and-”

“I know!” Marinette snapped, pausing under a tree as she took a deep breath. “Look, after getting drenched in magically generated buttercream, nothing would make me happier than going over there and snatching that Miraculous away from Adrien’s skeevier than advertised father…”

“But?”

“But, I can’t just break in, guns blazing,” Marinette countered. "This whole situation just got a lot more complicated than I thought it would be..."

“You could sneak in?” Tikki suggested, scarfing another cookie down in a hail of crumbs and chocolate chips. “Steal it from him when he’s sleeping?”

“And what if he doesn’t keep it on him when he sleeps?” Marinette countered. “What if he locks it away in a safe or something and I’m left fumbling around in the dark until the alarm system trips? And how am I supposed to explain to Adrien why I’m rooting around his father’s office at night?”

“I don’t know!” Tikki said, an edge of desperation creeping into her voice. “But we can’t just do nothing! We...we can’t just leave him there!”

Marinette closed her eyes, ducking into a grocery store with a small sigh. “...what’s his name?”

“...Nooroo,” Tikki muttered into Marinette’s ear. “I know we have to be careful but it’s...he was just so sweet. And kind. His power is supposed to help people realize their potential; to make heroes out of anyone...and to have him be in the hands of that vile man-”

“I know,” Marinette said, reaching into her hoodie and rubbing Tikki’s head with the tip of her finger. “And we’re going to get him out...we just need a plan. We need to figure out how to get to him without him transforming, or running, or causing a scene, or-”
Marinette trailed off, eyes narrowing as Gabriel’s cold, refined features glowered up at her from the front page of a fashion magazine.

“...Tikki,” Marinette asked, eyes drifting over to the rows of packaged cookies. “Does Hawkmoth need time to recharge after an akuma?”

Tikki frowned. “I...we all need to recharge after a fight. Unless we find some way to recharge our magical power like eating cook-”

Tikki froze, looking up at the rows of cookies before turning slowly to look at Marinette.

“How fast can you eat?”

The sliding bookcase locked with a *thunk* behind him as the last of Gabriel’s transformation disappeared in a flash of dark purple light. He pinched the bridge of his nose, taking a deep breath as he fought to calm the rising tide of frustration that welled up after every failed attempt. Closing his eyes, he slowly started counting down from ten, willing himself to resist the urge to upend his desk with every passing second until he felt calm again.

“Frosting?” Gabriel said, shooting Nooroo a cool glare. “That was the best you could manage, hm?”

“I-I didn’t think-” Nooroo wilted as Gabriel held his hand up.

“You can spare me the sob story,” Gabriel sighed, rubbing his temples as he reached for the light switch. “I know better than to expect any degree of effort on your part at this point since you’ve made no secret how little you care for my family. I just thought that after four years, you might at least be tired of this miserable run around.”

“Aren’t we all?”

Gabriel’s heart seized in his chest as a voice echoed off the walls of his empty office. The lights came up on a young woman perched on the edge of his desk, blue eyes hard and arms cross as she glowered down at him beneath a red and black mask.
“How…who let you…” Gabriel glanced between Ladybug and Nooroo, faced with the enormity of his greatest hindrance catching him redhanded talking to a purple butterfly kwami. “I...I know how this looks, but I can explain-”

“Can you?” Ladybug asked, hopping off the desk, advancing on the fashion mogul as he backed towards the door, looking for a way out. “Go ahead then; explain. It’ll be good practice for your criminal hearing !”

“Nooroo, transform me!” Gabriel hissed, tilting a chair over to try and slow Ladybug down.

“Much as I’d like this to be a fair fight, I’m running on three hours of sleep and eighteen cups of coffee,” Ladybug said, kicking the chair clean across the room with an shattering crash. “Yeah, never had to deal with cooldown in the middle of a fight, huh? Fortunately for you, the care and feeding of your kwami isn’t going to be your problem for too much longer!”

“I-I understand how you feel-” Gabriel grunted as Ladybug lifted him off his feet by his lapels and pressed him up against the door to his office.

“You can’t even begin to comprehend how I feel,” Ladybug hissed, fingers bunching in the fabric of his shirt as his glasses slid off his nose. “I have spent four years putting my life on hold because of you and your magical temper tantrums-”

“Tantrums?” Gabriel’s lip curled into a snarl as he feebly tried to pull Ladybug’s hands off his shirt. “You think I’ve spent four years doing nothing but throw tantrums?! Like a child?!”

“Right, because covering Paris in pink buttercream frosting is just the peak of maturity.”

“If you’re going to arrest me, arrest me,” Gabriel spat. “But I will not be judged by a child who has no understanding of my life beyond what she has no doubt read in supermarket magazines.”

“Ooh, now who’s being judgemental?” Ladybug laughed, blood pounding in her ears as her fingers twisted in the expensive fabric of his shirt, lifting him higher over her head. Nooroo seemed frozen in mid air, paralyzed between his master and his best chance at freedom. “Okay, Gabe, why don’t you fill me in then? What do you need my Miraculous for anyway? You want money? Power? Always wanted a pair of silver studs with spots?”
“You think that all this has been in service of some shallow vanity?” Gabriel panted, legs kicking against the door as he struggled to get out of Ladybug’s grip. "You think that little of me?"

“I think much, much less of you,” Ladybug spat, bumping Gabriel hard against the door. She could feel Tikki’s anger bleeding through her suit, amplifying the hurt she already felt. It wasn’t enough that Gabriel be dragged in; he had to pay, had to explain himself, had to give some reason as to why she had spent so long fighting. “Come on, tell me; get it off your chest. You owe me an-”

“I...owe...you... nothing!” Gabriel hissed, teeth grinding as he glared down at his captor. “You cannot even begin to understand what I’ve gone through; what I’ve lost!”

“We’ve all lost plenty thanks to you,” Ladybug snarled, bringing Gabriel back down to eye level. “Tell me something; was it worth it? Was it worth all the heartache and destruction you caused?!”

“Emilie is worth anything!”

Ladybug blinked, fingers slackening ever so slightly as a soft series of knocks broke the tense silence that followed Gabriel’s outburst.

“Father?” Adrien’s voice came from behind the door. “Father, are you alright?”

Gabriel glared at Ladybug for a moment before she dropped him, sliding behind the door as Gabriel quickly straightened out his appearance. He ran his hands through his hair, took a deep breath, and unlocked the door wide enough to stick his head through.

“Yes, Adrien, I’m perfectly fine,” Gabriel said, sparing Ladybug a brief glance before forcing a somewhat uncomfortable smile. “I-I’m afraid my new chair was somewhat shoddily put together.”

Through the crack in the door, Ladybug saw Adrien’s eyes glance at the broken chair across the room, prying he didn’t look right to see her hiding behind the door. She didn’t know how she was going to explain to him what she was doing in his father’s office after hours or how to even begin to explain his father’s extracurricular activities. She didn’t know if she had the heart to look him in the eye as she made him effectively an orphan by hauling his father off to prison.
“Do you need some ice?” Adrien asked, stepping forward as Gabriel held the door closed to prevent him from coming into the room. “Or water, or-”

“No,” Gabriel said a little curtly. “...thank you, but it was just a careless accident. No need to worry.”

“If you say so,” Adrien said, a little uncertainly as he backed into the hall. “I’ll let you get back to work then…”

“Wait…” Gabriel spared Ladybug a quick glance as Adrien turned around. “I...have business in the morning. Early flight to Belgium.”

“Oh,” Adrien nodded, shoulders slumping ever so slightly. “Sure; I’ll get Nathalie to drive me to the fencing meet.”

“I apologize for cancelling at the last minute, but I may be detained for quite some time,” Gabriel said. “If...the worst should happen, Nathalie has all my affairs in order.”

“What?” From her hiding spot, Ladybug could see Adrien frown in confusion. “Why are you-”

“The controlling interest in the Gabriel House of Fashion will be held in trust until your eighteenth birthday next month and the deeds to this property, the townhouse in London, and the cottage in Vienna will be transferred to your control as well,” Gabriel continued. “The contents of my bank accounts, as well as my personal retirement-”

“Father, where is this coming from?” Adrien laughed, brow knitting in concern. “You’ve made this flight more times than I can remember; why are you suddenly talking like you might not come back?”

Gabriel glanced at Ladybug for a moment, eyes betraying something other than contempt before turning back to his son. “Because...you are a man in all but age. Should...anything happen to me, you need to be able to provide for yourself. Nathalie will, of course, help in whatever capacity she is able, but...she is not family. And when...if something were to happen to me, you would be the only member of our family left.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to you,” Adrien said, resting a hand on his father’s shoulder. “You’re going to go on this trip like you’ve done so many times before, and you’re going to come back in
one piece just like you always have.”

Ladybug’s stomach churned as Adrien leaned in, wrapping his arms around his father in a hug that he tentatively returned after a moment. In her haste to ensure that Gabriel was punished for his crimes, she neglected to consider that one of her oldest friends would be made fatherless in the transaction. As much as Hawkmoth needed to be stopped, it would come at the cost of Adrien’s last living family member, effectively orphaning him and exposing the company his livelihood was based on to ruin and ridicule. She had never considered that Hawkmoth might have family; he had been a faceless spectre that haunted her since she was fourteen. Seeing him as something human was unsettling; not even Tikki’s bristling anger managed to quell the sick feeling that bubbled up in her stomach.

“I am...not the most expressive person,” Gabriel said. “And I realize there have been times when you may have felt like I haven’t lived up to my responsibilities as a parent—”

“Father—”

“-but you must understand,” Gabriel said, pulling back with his hands on Adrien’s shoulders. “Everything I have done has been for your benefit...please, remember that.”

Adrien frowned in confusion. “I...will?”

“Thank you,” Gabriel said, awkwardly patting his son on the shoulders. “Now, you should be in bed. I fear Ms. Tsurugi will skewer me if she learns I kept you up.”

“I’d say that I’d fight her off but...well, we both know she’d beat me,” Adrien said with a shaky laugh, waving at his father as he backed out of the room. “Goodnight; safe travels.”

Gabriel opened his mouth as though he wanted to say something, but apparently decided against it, waving him off and closing his door with a lock that echoed in the silent office.

“I will ask you to kindly remember that this is my home,” Gabriel said, voice quietly restraining the anger that shook each syllable. “And to please refrain from tossing me about in a pique of anger while my son is home.”

Ladybug pursed her lips, folding her arms as Gabriel walked behind his desk, pressing a small button
that opened the bookcase that led to his lair.

“I don’t know how you discovered my identity, but I’ll just assume it was carelessness on my part,” Gabriel said smoothly. “That’s hardly important now; all that matters at this stage in the game is deciding what you are going to do with this knowledge.”

“You know what I have to do,” Ladybug said.

“What you have to do is ensure that no more akuma appear,” Gabriel said, looking over the rims of his glasses. “It seems to me that there are a number of ways to accomplish that.”

Ladybug felt her skin prickle at the insinuation. “What are you suggesting?”

“I’m suggesting that there may be a way for us to both get what we want,” Gabriel proposed, gesturing to the tunnel. “Though I would prefer to discuss this somewhere more secure.”

“What makes you think that I’m going to follow you into your creepy secret lair?” Ladybug asked, crossing her arms.

“If you weren’t, you would have arrested me by now,” Gabriel shrugged, turning around and walking into his hallway. “You still could, I suppose…”

Do it, a voice in the back of her mind that sounded strangely like Tikki demanded.

...and then what? Another voice countered. Orphan her friend? Doom a company full of designers like her to death by collateral damage?

Hawkmoth just had to be someone important, didn’t he? He couldn’t have been a nobody who nobody would have missed if he went to prison. He had to be a lynchpin in Parisian culture, her second favorite designer, and the father of one of her favorite people, didn’t he? It would have been easy to bag a nameless, faceless baker or shopkeeper or tailor without everything falling down around her ears…but Gabriel Agreste made things all the more difficult.

Tentatively, Ladybug stepped forward, following Gabriel into the dark hallway and towards a dimly
lit beacon of dark purple energy.

Chapter End Notes

Remember kids: don't go into supervillain's lairs unsupervised!

Thanks for all the feedback so far! Next chapter is the end of this prologue section so I'm eager to see if I can make a case that people will accept going forward. As always, read and review!
“Do you prefer red or white?”

Ladybug raised an impassive eyebrow at Gabriel as he uncorked a bottle of surprisingly cheap liquor, tilting the pale liquid into a stemless wine glass which he offered to Ladybug. When she made no move to take it, he shrugged and took a long pull from the chardonnay.

“Forgive me; I shouldn’t have assumed you were old enough,” Gabriel said.

“I’m-” Ladybug stopped herself with a small scowl. “Trying to fish personal information out of me?”

“Trying to be hospitable,” Gabriel said, corking the wine bottle and pacing over to the intricate glass window overlooking the city. Pale moonlight streamed in, casting shadows that made Gabriel’s face look thin, pale, and haunted. “I feel we may have gotten off on the wrong foot.”

“Kinda blew your chance to make a good first impression four years ago,” Ladybug said coolly. Small, pale purple butterflies danced in the air, fluttering close to Ladybug long enough to check her out before losing interest and dancing away.

“Never hurts to try again,” Gabriel said, setting his wine glass down on the windowsill and turning to face Ladybug. “Very well; let’s talk business. What is it that you want?”

“Are you trying to bribe me?” Ladybug asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Would you accept a bribe?” Gabriel asked, reaching into his jacket for a checkbook. “Funny; I hadn’t considered whether or not you might be open to selling your Miraculous…”

Gabriel took one look at the withering glare Ladybug leveled at him and quietly put his checkbook away.
“Very well,” Gabriel said. “Hard to put a price on something that is quite literally priceless, after all...so what is it that you want?”

“What I want is for you to stop using your butterflies to ruin my life,” Ladybug said, crossing her arms. “I want you to give up your Miraculous and stop chasing after mine.”

“And in return?”

“Return?” Ladybug asked. “How about your freedom; is that good enough?”

“No,” Gabriel said simply. “It’s not.”

“I’m sorry, Gabriel, but you’re not really in a position to make demands,” Ladybug said. “One word to the chief of police, and—”

“What, exactly?” Gabriel asked, taking a sip of his wine. “He’s going to take the word of an adolescent vigilante over mine?”

“Your word is better than Ladybug’s?” Ladybug snorted. “Which one of us has a statue of them in the middle of a park?”

“Which one of us has their name on half the park benches in this city, along with the words “Generously donated by the estate of…” Gabriel countered. “If celebrity is the only arrow in your quiver, I’ll remind you that I’ve been gracing magazine covers since you were in diapers.”

“Well, that’s just more reason for me to take your Miraculous right now then, isn’t it?” Ladybug countered.

“You can certainly try, though I imagine any fight between us might be a bit destructive,” Gabriel said, glancing down at the house below them. “The problem with akumitizing workers to build a secret lair for you is that they tend to skip over building codes; I shudder to think what would happen if our fight carried out into the main house…”

“Figures,” Ladybug sneered. “Given your complete and total disregard for your son’s safety in the
“past, I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“Do not assume that you know what is beneficial for my son more than I do,” Gabriel said, voice cold and steely. “Let it be clear that I would not be the one putting my son in danger in this situation.”

“So it would be my fault for wanting to drag in his criminal father,” Ladybug said.

“I am not going to apologize for the things that I have done in service of my family,” Gabriel said, hands clasped behind his back. “I doubt a simple ‘sorry’ is sufficient at this point in any case. But I am giving you a chance to end this peacefully with minimal destruction to all parties involved. I am offering you a trade.”

“Let me guess; you want my Miraculous,” Ladybug said.

“My interest in your Miraculous extends only so far as to what it can do for me,” Gabriel said. “Your guardian...has he never told you what kind of power you wield?”

Ladybug was silent, so Gabriel pressed on. “One who wields both the power of creation and the power of destruction has the potential to rewrite the world to suit their whims. That degree of power can overcome any obstacle, achieve any goal...heal any wound.”

“You expect me to believe that?” Ladybug asked, fingering her earrings absentmindedly.

“Think of the things you’ve already done with your power,” Gabriel said. “Think of all the devastation you’ve healed with a wave of your hand. Does it really stretch credibility to believe that the Ladybug Miraculous—with the Black Cat to provide support—could bring someone back?”

“Adrien’s mother,” Ladybug said. “So...this was all for her?”

“Everything I’ve ever done since I was fourteen years old has all been for her,” Gabriel said, folding his arms behind his back. “There is nothing that I would not do to make my family whole again; I cannot expect you to understand that, but if the power of your Miraculouses can bring Adrien’s mother back from...”
Gabriel trailed off, taking a deep breath as he fixed Ladybug with a resolute stare. “I promised that I would bring Emilie back...and I will not break that promise. To do that, however...I require the use of your Miraculous.”

“So you just want me to hand it over?” Ladybug asked, shaking her head. “After all we’ve been through?”

“I don’t need to actually possess them,” Gabriel continued. “I just...I need their power to be used once...for one solitary wish. I would not even need to be the one to make it, as long as it is made.”

“...so…” Ladybug shifted her weight. “One of us could…”

“You could use them both,” Gabriel said, snapping his fingers with a sharp echo that reverberated across the walls. “A snap of the fingers is all it would take; one second of effort and we could both go our separate ways. Paris need never be bothered by our little turf war ever again.”

Gabriel took a step forward, staying slightly out of reach. “Four years we’ve been at this. Four years of pointless back and forth like something out of a cheap comic book...aren’t you sick of this? A young person like yourself should be looking to the future rather than fighting a long, bitter, pointless war.”

“Yes,” Gabriel continued before Ladybug could interrupt. “This was all pointless; you were involved in a fight you had no business getting involved in and for four years, you’ve done nothing but delay my family’s reunion. That is what you’re fighting for; not for peace or for justice, but to torment one family who has been through enough heartbreak for-.”

“Stop it!” Ladybug blurted out, taking a step back. “You think that makes any difference?! Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?!?”

“I am not asking you to feel sorry for me,” Gabriel said softly. “I am offering you a way to end this without further harm to anybody.”

Ladybug stood stock still, jaw clenched and hands shaking in balled fists, not trusting herself to move as she scanned Gabriel’s face for any hint of deceit that would justify his elimination.

“I...I need to go,” Ladybug said, backing slowly towards the tunnel. “This was a mistake, I...I need
“Of course,” Gabriel said, running a hand through his hair. “I did not expect an answer right away. Take all the time you need; we have nothing but time, don’t we?”

Rather than give him an answer, Ladybug simply turned, running down the hallway as though she were waiting for it to swallow her whole. She didn’t look back until she was at the window that led to his office; didn’t realize that she had been holding her breath until the first gulp of night air seared her lungs as she dove off the balcony.

Nooroo watched Gabriel down the last of his wine with a thoughtful smack of his lips as he looked out the window.

“That went better than I thought it would,” he mused, watching Ladybug’s figure retreat over the rooftops.

Tikki started yelling the minute the suit disappeared.

“You had him!” Tikki shrieked as Marinette paced the length of the balcony, hands running through her hair as she fought to regain control her breathing. “He was standing in front of you and you walked away! You could have snatched that pin away from him at any time but—”

“I know!” Marinette snapped, rounding on Tikki. “I... know.”

“What,” Tikki said, zipping up and cupping Marinette’s nose. “Were you thinking?!”

“I don’t know, okay?” Marinette said, batting Tikki away with a wave of her hand. “I panicked; forgive me for having some trouble digesting the fact that my friend’s father is a crazy person in a moth suit!”
“W-Well...digest it!” Tikki squeaked. “Call up Chat! We need to go back!”

“And do what?” Marinette laughed, running her hand through her hair. “Hey, M. Agreste! I took a powder and decided, actually, fuck you and your deal; let’s throw down! Oh, shoot, try not to drop rubble on your sleeping son’s head while I’m kicking your ass, kay?”

“Then we can lure him away!” Tikki said, fluttering up to Marinette’s shoulder. “Call Chat; we can come up with a plan! We can fight him and-”

“What have I been doing?!” Marinette snapped, rounding on her kwami with a wild, frantic look in her eyes. “What have I been doing for the last four years, Tikki?! I’ve been fighting! I’ve been fighting since I was fourteen years old and it isn’t working!”

“All I do is fight,” Marinette rambled, pacing the length of her roof. “And when I’m not fighting, I’m waiting to fight! I’m hanging on the edge of my seat just waiting to get the call that something is attacking my city! I’m on standby twenty-four seven! I can’t even go to the beach or go on vacation or go to the movies without worrying that something bad is going to happen!”

Tikki floated back as Marinette blinked rapidly, shaking her head and scrubbing her eyes with the back of her hands. “I’m sick of it...I’m sick of my life being completely ruled by a fight I thought would be over by now! It’s the same thing, over and over and over again! Even now; now that we know who Hawkmoth is, I still can’t just run in there and bag him without Adrien’s life falling down around his ears.”

“Seriously?!” Tikki scoffed. “You know who Hawkmoth is, you have him at your mercy, and you’re not going to take him down because it’s going to inconvenience your extravagantly wealthy crush?!”

“What am I supposed to do; Adrien is my friend!”

“And Nooroo is mine!” Tikki snapped. “How calm do you expect me to be when he’s being held hostage by that... hideous man?”

“I know...” Marinette said, reaching out a hand and stroking her agitated kwami’s head. “I know exactly how you feel. Hawkmoth has two of our closest friends hostage...so what do we do in a hostage situation?”
Tikki’s eyes drooped for a moment, before widening in horrified realization. “...you don’t mean-”

“We...negotiate,” Marinette said, kneeling down to get on eye level with her kwami. “Tikki...is he lying?”

“Marinette-”

“Tell me he’s lying, and we’ll take him down,” Marinette pleaded. “Please, just look me in the eye and tell me there’s no way that we can bring Adrien’s mother back and I’ll call Chat right now…”

Tikki glanced away, scowling deeply at the street below them. “That...that shouldn’t matter.”

“Is it possible?”

“Only one person in the history of the world has ever held the Ladybug and Black Cat Miraculouses!” Tikki said, fluttering around anxiously.

“Is it possible ?”

“Anyone who did would have to wrestle with the two most powerful forces in the universe! I-It’s not like rubbing a magic lamp and making a wish; we’re talking about reshaping reality itself!”

“Tikki!” Marinette said, catching the fluttering kwami in her palms and bending over to look her in the eye. “Is...it...possible?”

Tikki glanced away for a moment, mentally chewing on her answer before turning back to Marinette. “Technically... technically anything is possible, but-”

“But what ?” Marinette asked. “Tikki, we have a chance to end this without anybody else getting hurt; w-we can’t just dismiss this out of hand!”

“So that’s your plan; after everything we’ve been through we’re just going to give the homicidal maniac what he wants?!”
“It’s not like he wants to rule the world or anything; he’s *trying* to bring his wife back,” Marinette countered.

“According to *him*,” Tikki sniffed. “Personally I wouldn’t trust him as far Ladybug could throw him...which, I might add, is not a bad idea!”

“Yeah, sure, let’s just whip people around the city like a superhero movie!” Marinette said, throwing her hands up. “Let’s just get in there and kick ass! I mean, why don’t I just *kill him* and dump his body in the river?! I mean it’s not like my actions have any consequence, right?! Who cares what happens after, right?! I’m sure Miraculous Ladybug can fix the fallout that’s gonna come after the head of a major fashion label gets outed as a supervillain! But hey, as long as we bag the bad guy it’s all hunky dory, right?!”

Marinette pinched the bridge of her nose. “We...we have to think about this. If there’s a chance that we can bring Adrien’s mother back and ensure that Hawkmoth never akumitizes another person again-”

“And you expect him to just *hand* over Nooroo when all is said and done?” Tikki asked.

“He doesn’t have any reason to keep fighting and if he *does* I can just take him down even *easier* ,” Marinette said. “No...no, if we do this, everybody gets what they want. We could do it *tomorrow* and everybody’s life could just go on.”

“You’re talking like you have both Miraculouses already,” Tikki said, shaking her head. “What about Chat? Is he supposed to just give you his ring when you tell him Hawkmoth made you a deal?”

Marinette bit her lip, frowning at the ground below her for a second. “…we can cross that bridge when we get to it.”

Tikki shook her head, floating a few yards away from Marinette as silence washed over the roof.

“Kwamis are beholden to their chosen,” Tikki said after a moment. “So if this is your choice...I have no real way to stop you.”
Marinette turned to see Tikki looking at her with a tired, sad look that made Marinette realize for the first time just how old she was.

“But this is not going to go the way you think it will,” Tikki said softly.

Tikki fluttered through the skylight as Marinette turned back towards the city, taking a deep breath as she watched the lights glimmer until the sun slowly started to peek over the rooftops behind her.

“You need a break?”

Marinette shook her head mid yawn, slapping the sides of her cheeks as she forced a small smile. “Sorry...late night.”

“I couldn’t tell,” Adrien said, watching her finish the third cup of coffee he brought from the kitchen. “I would top you off, but at this point I think you’ve had enough.”

“I’m probably just eating into tonight’s sleep at this point,” Marinette said, slurping the coffee-flavored sugar slurry at the bottom of her cup with a thoughtful smack of her lips.

“I think we’ve done all we can for today anyway,” Adrien said, closing his textbook and stretching with a small grunt. “We can always hook up at some point this week if you want to refresh.”

“You know I’m always down to hook up with you,” Marinette said, blinking as her sleep-deprived brain caught up to what she had just said. “...that came out wrong.”

“You do need some sleep,” Adrien chuckled, mopping up a streak of raspberry jam with the corner of his pastry before popping it in his mouth. “Just as well; father said his business trip to Belgium was cut short so he should be home for dinner.”

“O-Oh,” Marinette coughed. “Well...yeah, you should probably spend time with him then, huh?”

“I take what I can get where he’s concerned,” Adrien shrugged. “He has gotten better; we’re not
gonna be playing football in the park anytime soon, but at least he’s home for dinner most nights.”

“That’s…” Sad, Marinette thought. “Good?”

“Not as good as these pastries,” Adrien said, biting into the last orange scone with a small moan. “Seriously, when can I get the recipe?”

“Family secret; sorry.”

“If I marry you, do I get it?” Adrien asked as Marinette covered her squeak of surprise with a small cough.

“I-I’ll see if I can get it in my dowry,” Marinette chuckled, scratching the back of her neck as she stood up. “See you tomorrow?”

“Unless I bang at your door at three in the morning asking for more scones,” Adrien said, standing up and walking her out of his room.

“I may or may not throw them at your head if you wake me up at-” Marinette froze at the top of the stairs as the front door opened and a somewhat tired looking Gabriel Agreste stepped through.

“Oh, Father!” Adrien said brightly as Marinette’s stomach plummeted to the soles of her feet. In the light of day, it was easy to forget that Gabriel Agreste was a full fledged supervillain. He didn’t look like what she expected a supervillain to look like; he looked like an overworked old man, tired from a day of pretending to travel. “You remember Marinette, don’t you?”

Gabriel looked up at her with a small nod and a perfunctory smile. “Ah, Mlle. Dupain. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

_Not as long as you think_, Marinette thought as she returned the smile. “M. Agreste. I hope your trip was successful.”

Gabriel’s brow knit in confusion for a moment before he nodded in recognition. “Yes, my latest trip was quite successful, thank you for asking.”
“Marinette was just mentioning that she’s been accepted to Central St. Martins,” Adrien mentioned, nudging Marinette lightly in the ribs.

“Really?” Gabriel said, perking up ever so slightly. “I’ve worked with half the admissions board at some point or another and they’re not the type to be easily impressed.”

“N-Nothing’s for certain yet,” Marinette said, waving her hand. “There are still a few French schools I’m waiting to hear back from…”

“Don’t let Parisian snobbery hold your career back,” Gabriel said seriously. “French education is not automatically superior; it may do you some good to get out of the country for a while...broaden your horizons.”

Gabriel’s eyes turned to Adrien at the last line and Marinette felt him stiffen beside her.

“HEC is as good as Oxford,” Adrien said somewhat stiffly.

“There’s something to be said for travelling while you’re still young enough to enjoy it,” Gabriel said cryptically, brushing past them and heading up the stairs. “Congratulations on your admission, Mlle. Dupain; I trust you’ll exceed the expectations placed upon you.”

Adrien waited until the door to his father’s office closed upstairs before rolling his eyes.

“Oxford?” Marinette asked.

“Father wants me to do my undergraduate there,” Adrien shrugged, sticking his hands in his pockets. “Mom’s old alma mater so...he’s got a soft spot for it.”

“Oh,” Marinette said softly, rocking back and forth on her heels. “Well...it’s Oxford. Can’t beat that for a pedigree.”

“I guess,” Adrien sighed, forcing a small smile. “Sorry; you must be tired. I won’t keep you.”
“You make it sound like it’s a chore talking to you,” Marinette tsked. “But I’m sure you’d like to catch up with your father.”

Marinette paused as she stepped out into the cool autumn evening, turning around with a smile. “I’ll...see you tomorrow?”

“You want to do our chemistry homework together?” Adrien asked, leaning in the doorway. “After class?”

“S-Sure!” Marinette said brightly. “We can cheat off Alya and Nino’s notes at a cafe or something.”

Marinette didn’t miss the way Adrien’s expression fell ever so slightly. “Oh...yeah, sure we can all go together. Four heads are better than two, right?”

“I’ll let Alya know when I get back,” Marinette said with a small wave of her fingers. “Night Adrien.”

Adrien watched her walk down the steps, watched her round the corner past his gate, and watched her until she disappeared around the side of his house.

“Night Marinette,” Adrien muttered with a small smile.

“No...no we’re not going in that direction this season,” Gabriel said, scowling at the sketches Nathalie had dropped off earlier. “Well if that’s his opinion, he can sit this fashion week out; he either loses the hat or we go with a different designer...yes...yes that will do nicely.”

He registered the sound of the window unlatching behind him, but didn’t look up from the sketches or drop the call. “Have him deliver the revisions to my office tomorrow morning...thank you...goodnight.”

“Forgive the mess; I’m just getting my ducks in a row for Fashion Week,” Gabriel said, hanging up
the phone and carefully tucking the designs in a manilla folder. “One of my designers insists on trying to bring back comically large hate as if this was the Kentucky Derby or some garish gala.”

Gabriel turned around to see Ladybug pacing around the edge of his office, stopping to lock his office door before turning to face him.

“Have you considered my proposal?”

“Let’s get one thing out of the way,” Ladybug said, crossing the room and placing her palms on Gabriel’s desk. “I don’t like you, M. Agreste. I don’t like you and I could throw you much farther than I trust you.”

“You need not like someone to do business with them,” Gabriel said, regarding her over the rims of his glasses. “You need not even trust me, even if I have no plans to betray your confidence.”

“Good, because I don’t,” Ladybug said, eyes narrowing at Gabriel. “We’re not friends, we’re not partners. If I even think you’re going to go back on your word I will dropkick you into the Seine and fish you out by your heels for the whole city to see. Understand?”

“Completely,” Gabriel said, folding his hands on his desk. “Now...terms?”

“You will hand over your Miraculous-”

“No,” Gabriel said curtly, ignoring the scowl that darkened Ladybug’s face. “My Miraculous is the only collateral I have to ensure that you’ll keep your end of the bargain. You will receive it only when my wife is restored to me and not a moment before.”

Ladybug’s lips curled into a snarl. “Fine...but no more akumas.”

"Akuma," Gabriel interjected. "It's a singular plural, like-"  

"Do you want to get slapped?"
“I suppose a ceasefire is in both of our interests,” Gabriel sighed. “What else?”

“At no point will you ever possess our Miraculouses,” Ladybug said. “I will use both of them to make your wish.”

“Very well, but you will do it here where I can be assured that you are doing what you say you are,” Gabriel said. “While we’re on the subject, if we need to meet, we will do so here. You will not approach me in public, at work, or in the presence of my son. For that matter, Adrien is not to know any details of our arrangement, understood?”

“Understood,” Ladybug said.

“And on the subject of your...partner,” Gabriel said. “He is not to know my identity; I will deal with you and only you in this matter.”

“So what am I supposed to tell him?” Ladybug asked.

“Tell him what you like,” Gabriel shrugged. “Just keep my name out of it. How you get his ring is immaterial to me only so long as you get it.”

“I can reason with him,” Ladybug said, eyes narrowing as a small scoff slipped out of Gabriel’s lips.

“If you say so,” Gabriel said, holding his hands up placatingly. “When do you anticipate that you’ll acquire it?”

“Tomorrow,” Ladybug said. “It....may take a while for me to get him to agree.”

“I’m willing to agree to a ceasefire until this time next week then,” Gabriel said, raising an eyebrow at her indignant glare. “One week should be enough time to state your case; after that-”

“I’ll get it,” Ladybug said, crossing her arms. “I’ll bring it here, make your wish, get Nooroo back, and we’ll be done. That the sum of it?”
“Seems to me you’ve summed it up,” Gabriel said, slowly standing up. “If that’s all-”

Gabriel held his hand out.

“Then we can do business.”

Ladybug glanced at the outstretched hand for a moment, sparing Gabriel a cold look before she reached out and gave it a brief shake, releasing his grip after one pump.

“You had better thank your son,” Ladybug said after a moment. “He’s the only reason you aren’t in prison right now.”

Gabriel surprised her with a genuine, human laugh that made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Something about the sight of Gabriel Agreste smiling was eerily unnatural.

“And here I thought Mlle. Dupain was the only impressive friend Adrien had.”

"I think you'll find that Adrien runs in more impressive company than you think," Ladybug said coolly, brushing past him on her way to the window.

"...I'm glad it was you," Gabriel said as her boot perched on the ledge of the windowsill. She turned to see Gabriel looking at her with his hands clasped behind his back. "Something tells me that your partner would not have seen things so clearly."

"For your sake?" Ladybug said, latching on to a streetlight outside. "I hope he does."

Chapter End Notes

I'm actually proud that I made it to the plot of my story in under 20,000 words this time...

Thanks to everyone who's reacted to this so far; this idea has been living in my head for so long that it's been really interesting to see how other people have responded to this relatively unexplored concept.
Hopefully I've laid out this scenario in a way that makes sense (thanks @DarkReyna16 for vetting this) but I'd like to hear what y'all think. Do you think I laid this out in a way that seems reasonable? Is Marinette entering into a hostile partnership reasonable given the circumstances I've set up?

Next chapter! Ladybug gets the Black Cat Miraculous and makes the wish! Everyone goes home happy!

...yeah, nah, it's only gonna get better(worse) from here lads

Also, despite this getting posted in a month (apparently) dedicated to Gabrinette and despite the two main characters of this fic being Ladybug and Gabriel, this fic will not have any Gabriel/Hawkmoth/Ladybug/Marinette romance because...ew.
Communication Breakdown

It was five past six and Chat Noir already knew there was something amiss.

The setting sun spilled on the roof of the old, rarely visited apartment building that had served as their unofficial meeting spot for more than four years. It was earlier than they typically met, and despite setting the meeting, Ladybug was nowhere in sight.

**Ladybug: Patrol tonight; six o’clock. Meet at the usual spot.**

Chat Noir frowned at his communicator, making sure he was in the right spot at the right time. It took him less than ten minutes to make it from fencing practice to their meet-up spot, but when he arrived, Ladybug was nowhere to be seen. After missing patrol the night before and refusing to go into detail over the phone, something was troubling him and with each passing second that Ladybug was late, his uneasiness only worsened.

The sight of a familiar red figure swinging over the rooftops five minutes later did little to quell the nervous flutter of his heart in his throat. For once, he wished his swishing tail didn’t give away the anxious butterflies in his stomach as Ladybug landed, cradling a bag of warm, baked sweets under her arm.

“Sorry I’m late,” Ladybug said, cracking open the bag of pastries and offering him a warm lemon scone. “You would not believe the line at the Dupain’s bakery.”

“With these scones?” Chat asked, cracking it open and inhaling the warm, rich scent with a sigh. “I’m surprised the line doesn’t wrap around the city. How did you even get in?”

“Special City Savior privileges,” Ladybug said, closing the bag and rocking back and forth on her heels. “Owners let me practically come in the skylight.”

“Wait, how come I don’t get to do that?!” Chat asked, blinking after a moment. “…well, I’ve actually never asked.”

“I’ll put in a good word for you,” Ladybug said, scratching her arm a little anxiously. “Sorry about bailing last night; had a lot on my plate.”
“I’m sure it was a good reason,” Chat said, popping the corner of his scone in his mouth. “Everything alright? You were acting a little...off the other day after the Great Frosting Disaster that threatened our city.”

Ladybug opened her mouth to respond, but seemed to think better of it, biting her lip as Chat tore pieces off his scone. “...how long have we been doing this, Chat?”

“...you mean raiding the Dupain’s bakery before patrol or-”

“I mean…” Ladybug gestured between them. “This. How long have we been doing the whole teenagers with attitude thing?”

Chat frowned. “Four years in...twenty four days. October 19th, right?”

“Hard to believe, isn’t it?” Ladybug chuckled, shaking her head somewhat wistfully. “It feels like forever ago.”

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” Chat said, eyeing Ladybug’s expression out of the corner of his eye.

“Fun…” Ladybug echoed, fidgeting with her yo-yo. “Not the word I’d use...I mean this is fun; moments when we’re not fighting off possessed schoolchildren or slighted lovers with superpowers can be fun…”

“You don’t think eating your way out of a cupcake the size of Notre Dame is fun?”

“Wasn’t fun on my stomach the next day,” Ladybug chuckled. “Seriously though; you can’t tell me that you’d be disappointed if Hawkmoth disappeared tomorrow without any warning.”

“I’d be disappointed that I didn’t get to deck him in the schnozz at least once,” Chat said, jabbing his fist in mid-air. “You can’t tell me you’d be disappointed if you never got to toss Hawkmoth around a little for all the grief he’s given us.”
“What good would that do?” Ladybug asked.

“It would make me feel better,” Chat shrugged.

“But are we really in this to make ourselves feel better at this point?” Ladybug asked, fidgeting with the cord of her yo-yo absentmindedly. “Or are we in this to stop akuma from terrorizing our city?”

“Something tells me a fist in Hawkmoth’s face would accomplish both for me,” Chat said, punching his palm with a satisfying thwack.

“But what if you had to choose?” Ladybug asked, turning to face her partner. “Is it more important to make sure one man is punished or is it more important to make sure nobody ever gets akumitized again?”

“Someone’s philosophical tonight,” Chat chuckled, scratching his chin. “I mean...I guess it’s more important that people stop living in fear of one bad day turning them into a monster...but at the same time, we can’t really guarantee that without bringing Hawkmoth to justice. One way or another, it’s gonna come down to some face punching in the end...”

Ladybug nodded, chewing her bottom lip as she slowly walked over to her partner, placing her hands on Chat’s shoulders. “…what if it didn’t have to?”

“What do you mean?” Chat frowned.

“What if we could put a stop to Hawkmoth without fighting another battle?” Ladybug asked, fingers squeezing his shoulders through his suit. “Without putting any more people in danger? What if...what if we could end this all tonight?”

“Tonight?” Chat echoed, blinking in disbelief as his half-eaten scone dangled from his fingertips. “What are you talking about?”

“Chat,” Ladybug said, licking her lips. “Do you trust me?”

“Ladybug, do you know something?” Chat asked, gripping her shoulders. “Is that why you bailed on
“I had to be sure of something before we talked, but I need to know if you trust me or not,” Ladybug asked.

“Okay, I could honestly do without the cryptic back and forth here-”

“Chat!”

“Do I need to say it?!” Chat laughed, scratching the back of his head. “I mean...don’t you know that by now?”

Ladybug took a deep steadying breath. “I...have discovered a way to completely end this feud with Hawkmoth. I can get his Miraculous back and make sure he never has the power to harm anyone ever again...but to do that...to do that, I need your Miraculous.”

“How?” Chat asked. “What do you need my ring for?”

“I…it’s a long story,” Ladybug sighed. “And I can’t go into too much detail but...this is a sure bet. If I do this...if we do this, then Saturday’s frosting disaster will be the last akuma we’ll ever have to deal with.”

“But you can’t say…” Chat said, closing his eyes with a small sigh. “I thought...I thought we were past this.”

“Past what?”

“Past you not telling me things that I need to know,” Chat said, pulling out of her grip and pacing the length of the roof.

“This isn’t the same thing!” Ladybug protested chasing Chat down. “You don’t need to know how this shakes out, you just-”
“Need to hand over my Miraculous,” Chat sighed, crossing his arms. “And trust you.”

“I thought you did,” Ladybug murmured.

“That’s not fair,” Chat said, shaking his head. “You’re asking me to give up the one thing I’m supposed to protect with my life and giving me nothing in return.”

“I’m trying to give you your life back!” Ladybug said, grabbing Chat by the shoulder and turning him around. “Don’t you want this to all be over? Don’t you want to be able to leave town without worrying about whether or not it’s going to crumble around your ears?!”

“Yeah, but-” Chat ran his hands through his hair. “How do you even know this plan is going to work? How is this supposed to stop Hawkmoth without a big confrontation? Last I checked, he seemed kinda attached to his Miraculous and the whole ‘take over the world’ scheme he’s got going on.”

“He doesn’t…” Ladybug stopped herself before she could say anything else, closing her eyes as she weighed her options.

“I’m your partner,” Chat said, crossing his arms. “If you want my Miraculous, I deserve to know why.”

“…okay.”

“Okay?”

“You want to know why I need your Miraculous?” Ladybug asked, licking her lips as her fingers twisted together anxiously. “I...I know who Hawkmoth is.”

“You...you wha-”

“How or why isn’t important,” Ladybug barreled on.
“Are you sure?” Chat asked.

“I saw him transform in front of my eyes,” Ladybug said, watching her partner’s face split into a toothy looking grin.

“Wait...does he know you’re-”

“No,” Ladybug said, shaking her head. “He doesn’t know anything about me...just that I know that he knows he’s Hawkmoth.”

“Did he see you?”

“Would have been pretty hard to miss me when I was picking him up by the scruff of his neck and tossing him around his house,” Ladybug chuckled, infected by some of Chat’s bouncy enthusiasm.

“You...wait, you fought him?!” Chat stammered. “Wh-when?! Why didn’t you call me?”

“I didn’t fight him,” Ladybug said, biting her lips. “I rouged him up a little and then...we talked-”

“You... talked ?” Chat asked, head tilting to one side. “About what; when he plans to turn himself into the police?”

“Not exactly,” Ladybug said, holding a hand up. “Before...before I tell you what happened, I need you to promise me you’ll stay calm.”

“...what are you going to say that you needed to preface it with that?” Chat asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I met with Hawkmoth on Saturday,” Ladybug said. “I...I wanted to know why. Why he had spent four years terrorizing his own city.”

“So you, what, pumped him for information?” Chat frowned. “Kinda wish I had been there for that...”
“He told me that our Miraculouses are special; did you know that?” Ladybug asked. “When you put them together...when they’re used by one person, they can accomplish anything. Creation and destruction working in harmony to suit one person’s purpose...”

Chat idly glanced down at his ring, turning it over as Ladybug enclosed her hands around his.

“...even bring someone who’s gone back,” Ladybug said softly, looking up into Chat’s eyes.

There were moments in their partnership where Ladybug was truly impressed with Chat’s quickness; the speed with which he put the rest of the story together and twisted out of her grip was something to behold.

Chat looked at her with wide, disbelieving eyes. “...tell me you’re not doing what I think you’re doing.”

“Chat,” Ladybug said, taking a step forward only for Chat to retreat from her, cradling his hand close to his chest. “Chat, what if we were wrong this whole time?”

“I can’t...I literally can’t believe this,” Chat said.

“All those hours we spent just guessing about what Hawkmoth wanted,” Ladybug said, a frantic edge creeping into her voice. “Money, power, world domination; he just wanted to bring his wife back!”

“Says him!” Chat spat. “Tell me you’re not seriously thinking of just giving up your Miraculous to the purple psychopath we’ve been fighting since collège !”

“He is never going to lay hands on either of our Miraculouses,” Ladybug said seriously. “I will be the only one to ever touch both of them; that was our deal!”

“You... deal ,” Chat echoed, straightening up and staring at her incredulously. “You... you made a deal with Hawkmoth-”
“Chat, if you will just let me explain-”

“-for my Miraculous,” Chat said. “Without even thinking of talking to me?”

“This all happened so fast, I-I didn’t have the time to stay on top of Hawkmoth and bring you in!” Ladybug said. “I came straight to you after I talked to Hawkmoth again-”

“Again?!” Chat hissed. “How many secret meetings have you two had without me?!”

“If I thought you could have helped-” Ladybug started, irritation mounting with each interruption.

“Oh I would have helped,” Chat laughed, teeth flashing in the setting sun. “I would have helped my foot up his-”

“Chat!” Ladybug shouted, startling a small murder of crows off the ledge of a nearby roof. Her voice echoed throughout the city streets, reverberating off townhouses and offices as Chat straightened up, eyes narrowing in a way that prickled Ladybug’s irritation even more.

“I am sorry that the situation moved too quickly to involve you,” Ladybug said, taking a deep breath through her nose. “And I am sorry that I didn’t consult you before cutting this deal, but I assumed-”

“You assumed I would just hand over my ring, no questions asked,” Chat said, shaking his head.

“I assumed you would see the benefit of a peaceful solution to four years of pointless back and forth fighting that’s put Paris in the crosshairs!”

“Hey, I didn’t start this fight!” Chat said, pointing his finger at Ladybug. “You didn’t start this fight! We’ve been doing nothing but defending each other and this city from a lunatic in a bug costume; why is it our job to sue for peace?!”

“Because fighting isn’t working!” Ladybug groaned, grabbing her hair with both hands. “Fighting...isn’t...working, Chat! We have been rolling a rock uphill since we were kids and we’re getting no closer to the top!”
“Only because we didn’t know who we were fighting,” Chat said. “Who is it?”

“Chat-”

“No, I just want to talk!” Chat said, holding his hands up. “Hey, he convinced you that rewarding him for terrorizing Paris was a good idea; let’s give him a chance to sell me on it!”

Ladybug sighed, glancing to one side and muttering something that got lost on the wind.

“Seriously; if this is as good a reason as you say it is, maybe we can all just shake hands and go out for ice cream later,” Chat said. “Let’s go, c’mon.”

“I…” Ladybug shook her head. “Hawkmoth agreed to stop creating akumas and I...I agreed that I wouldn’t tell anyone else what I knew...he only wanted to deal with me.”

“And you told him no, right?” Chat asked, eyes narrowing. “You told him that there was no way you were going to make a deal concerning your partner without your partner, right? You fought Hawkmoth until he agreed, right?”

Ladybug’s lips pursed in a thin, tight line that told Chat everything he needed to know.

“...I see how it is,” Chat laughed bitterly, gesturing at Ladybug. “Batman gets to make a deal with the Joker, but we gotta leave the sidekicks out of it, don’t we?”

“Oh my god, are we really doing this right now?!” Ladybug laughed, clutching the sides of her head. “Is this really happening?! Am I hallucinating?! The fate of Paris is hanging in the balance and you’re holding it up because you feel slighted?!”

“Hey, don’t make this about my hurt feelings-”

“*You’re* making this about your hurt feelings!” Ladybug snapped. “*You’re* mad because *you* didn’t get to play superhero!”
“... play ?” Chat said, green eyes narrowing.

“I...I didn’t mean it like that,” Ladybug said, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“No, no, tell me how you really feel,” Chat said, spreading his arms wide. “Let’s get it all out there! Ladybug clearly thinks that I’ve been playing at being a superhero!”

“That is not fair ,” Ladybug said in a soft, dangerously quiet voice. “Do not put words in my mouth.”

“Your words are not the problem here!” Chat snapped. “You found out who Hawkmoth was—and didn’t tell me—you met with him twice —and didn’t tell me—you made a deal with him for my Miraculous without consulting me and now you won’t tell me the identity of our arch nemesis because he wants it that way! What you’ve done and what you’re doing is more worrying to me than the words coming out of your mouth!”

“What I’ve done and what I am doing is trying to make sure Paris never has to wake up to another akuma attack,” Ladybug said, hands balled into fists at her side. “So sorry if I haven’t taken the time to loop you in to this deal, but there are people’s lives at stake here...including yours!”

“Aren’t you tired of this?!” Ladybug asked, pacing around the edge of the rooftop. “Aren’t you sick of having your life dictated by our responsibilities? Don’t you wish you could just snap your fingers and put a stop to this pointless back and forth struggle? I know I am! I have things I want to do with my life that don’t involve running around rooftops in embarrassingly tight spandex; don’t you?”

“Of course I do, but-”

“But what?"

“It can’t just end like this!” Chat said. “Is this how it’s really supposed to end? Hawkmoth just walks away scot free with the thing he wanted in the first place?”

“If it means it ends, what’s the big deal?”
“Because someone has to answer for all the heartache this city has endured!” Chat shouted, tail swishing back and forth as he paced the roof.

“Even if he’s not the only one who has to answer for it!” Ladybug asked. “It’s not that simple, Chat; Hawkmoth has a business. He has a family!”

“Who cares about his stupid family?!” Chat blurted out, startling Ladybug into taking a step back. “So... what?! This was never going to end without collateral damage; someone was always going to be out a father or a brother or business partner!”

“Not like this!” Ladybug said. “We have a real chance to put a stop to all this madness without anyone else getting hurt! Isn’t that worth more than making sure Hawkmoth gets punished?!”

“Why are you asking me?! You already made the deal!” Chat said, throwing up his hands. “Maybe we should poll Paris! Hey, citizens! Does the bug themed psychopath deserve to get his wish? Text #HAWK to 43123 to cast your vote!”

“Can you please this seriously?” Ladybug said, foot tapping against the rooftop. “You’re not thinking clearly-”

“No, you’re not thinking clearly,” Chat said, shaking his head. “Never ever thought I would say that about you...”

“Chat-”

“Call me when you’re ready to do this right,” Chat said, stepping off the edge of the roof.

“Chat, wait!” Ladybug called, but he vanished into the encroaching night faster than Ladybug could catch up with him. She watched him go for a moment, watched his black silhouette disappear over the rooftops until it blended into the shadows that lingered between buildings.

On the streets below, a passing couple heard a frustrated snarl before a crumpled bag of pastries sailed over the edge of the roof and landed in front of them in a shower of crumbs.
Ladybug: Chat?

Ladybug: Chat, please answer me

Ladybug: I know you think I’m out of my mind but please

Ladybug: Please take a moment and think about what I’m proposing

Ladybug: Think about what really matters to you

Ladybug: We can accomplish our mission to this city with one move

Ladybug: We can end this today

Chat Noir: i agree

Ladybug: You do???

Chat Noir: yep

Chat Noir: this has gone on long enough

Ladybug: Yes!

Ladybug: We don’t need to fight any more akuma to keep this city safe!

Chat Noir: nope

Chat Noir: just one bad butterfly left to swat
Chat Noir: tell me who he is and i’ll end it now
Chat Noir: how am i the one holding this up????

Chat Noir: you have a royal flush and you’re folding!!!

Ladybug: I’m not having this conversation again

Chat Noir: i can’t believe you’re not even considering it!!

Chat Noir: you’re the one who wants a quick end to this, right?

Ladybug: Yeah, I want to beat the newest Mech Quest game too

Ladybug: Does that mean I have to rip the disk out and throw it at the wall?

Ladybug: BECAUSE IT ISN’T JUST ABOUT HAWKMOTH

Ladybug: OUR ACTIONS AFFECT MORE THAN JUST THE MAN WE PUT IN JAIL

Ladybug: Hawkmoth’s family are victims in all this too!

Chat Noir: victims because of their loony relative!!

Chat Noir: why is it suddenly our responsibility to make up for the things that Hawkmoth did?!
Ladybug: Because if WE don’t, NO ONE WILL

Ladybug: This isn’t as simple as putting one man in prison anymore.

Ladybug: If Hawkmoth is outed and publicly punished, there is a very real chance that hundreds of people will be out of work and his family will be left to bear the brunt of public scorn.

Ladybug: Are you ready to do that?

Ladybug: Are you ready to look his family in the eye and explain to him that you had a chance to not only keep him out of prison but bring his wife back and didn’t take it?

Ladybug: Are you ready to explain that the need to make someone pay outweighs their happiness and well-being?

Chat Noir: i think if i found out my father had traumatized half the population of paris for four years i would understand it if he needed to do some time in the clink

Chat Noir: why don’t you ask his family what they’d rather do?

Ladybug: His family doesn’t need to know

Chat Noir: so you’re fine just making a decision that affects people you don’t know without consulting them first?

Ladybug: No matter what we do, our decisions affect people we don’t know!

Ladybug: Don’t you get that?

Ladybug: If I tell them, they have to wrestle with the fact that they were living with a monster for four years.
Ladybug: They have to suddenly second guess every late night meeting or missed birthday and wonder if their family member was out terrorizing the city.

Ladybug: Am I crazy for sparing them that pain?

Chat Noir: just admit you don’t trust me

Ladybug: How many times to I need to say this??

Ladybug: This

Ladybug: Isn’t

Ladybug: About

Ladybug: You!!!!

Chat Noir: yeah you made that really clear already, thanks

Ladybug: Oh my god

Chat Noir: no

Chat Noir: you are asking me to wager my miraculous on a gamble without giving me anything to go on other than you plan on giving this ring to hawkmoth

Chat Noir: and after four years of putting my life on the line, i don’t get a seat at the table to decide the fate of paris
Chat Noir: because you don’t trust me to not put my foot up his ass

Ladybug: Maybe because you’ve done nothing but talk about how much you want to put your foot up his ass since I’ve told you!!!!

Ladybug: How many times do I need to tell you that I trust you?!

Chat Noir: trust me to do what exactly?

Chat Noir: be a good sidekick?

Chat Noir: take hits intended for you?

Chat Noir: did you trust that i would keep my mouth shut and fork over my ring when you asked?

Chat Noir: or do i only have your trust when it’s convenient for you?

Ladybug: You know what?

Ladybug: You’re being so incredibly immature right now it’s not even funny.

Ladybug: You have done nothing but make this about yourself since I told you!

Ladybug: You act like holding the fate of this country in my hands is some kind of cool privilege that I’m robbing you of!

Ladybug: This isn’t fun and games Chat!

Ladybug: I’m not holding out on you because I get off on being secretive and withholding!
Ladybug: I am trying to come up with a win-win solution

Ladybug: The most gain for the most people

Chat Noir: even if one of those people is a psychopath?

Chat Noir: does hawkmoth deserve to get his wish more than paris deserves vengeance?

Ladybug: Does satisfying the need for revenge mean more than coming to a peaceful solution?

Bzz!

Adrien let out a frustrated snarl as the edge of the sabre slid across his padded stomach, triggering a buzzer that added another point to his opponent’s steadily increasing lead.

“Again,” his opponent said, prompting a return to their starting positions. A bell chimed and Adrien lunged again, leaving his chest open for another point heralded by the sound of the buzzer’s metallic ring.

“Again,” his opponent said, flourishing a silvery sabre and returning to an almost perfect guard position. Adrien raised his sword as the bell chimed again, counting on his speed to slip past the guard and-

Bzz!

“Agh!” Adrien pulled his face protector off with his free hand, resisting the urge to toss it across the empty practice hall.

“That’s two you owe me,” Kagami said, removing her own face protection. “And to spare your wallet, I think we’ll end it here for today.”
“I can go a few more rounds,” Adrien protested, feebly poking at Kagami who absentmindedly batted his weapon away.

“You’re in your head too much; you’re going to lose an eye if you keep ‘fencing’ like you’ve been ‘fencing’ all afternoon,” Kagami clucked, resting a hand on her hip as she narrowed her eyes at Adrien.

“Sorry…just a little out of whack today,” Adrien muttered, running a hand through his hair with a sigh.

“Clearly,” Kagami said, uncorking a bottle of water and squirting a jet in her mouth before tossing it to Adrien. “Anything you’d like to share with the class?”

“I…” Adrien but his lip, choosing his words carefully. “I got into it with a friend a few days ago. Kinda had a shouting match if I’m being honest.”

“A shouting match?” Kagami asked, raising an eyebrow. “You?”

“I shout!”

“At other people?” Kagami said, narrowing her eyes. “About?”

“Something stupid,” Adrien said dismissively. “We’ve been working on this project for a long time and let’s just say we’re having differences of opinion in the home stretch.”

“And you got your blood pressure raised over that?” Kagami chuckled.

“It was an important project,” Adrien said, chewing the inside of his lip.

After the meeting with Ladybug the day before, Adrien had tried to put as much distance between himself and Ladybug as possible, running past the limits of his kwami-enhanced stamina until he found himself on the edge of town. He always thought better when he was in motion, but even the
lap around the city’s edge didn’t offer any solutions to a problem he never thought he would face.

“Still nothing to get your whiskers twisted over,” Kagami clucked, rapping his padded chest lightly with the flat of her sabre. “Pretending your opponent is the subject of your woes isn’t going to do you any favors as a fencer.”

“Like I’m going to the Olympics anyway,” Adrien snorted, batting Kagami’s sabre aside.

“You could if you put the work in.”

“One rookie prodigy fencer from France is plenty, don’t you think?” Adrien said, poking Kagami in the side. “Any more and the old guard will get humiliated.”

“I can’t be expected to humiliate the international fencing community by myself, can I?” Kagami chuckled, batting his fingertip away with the flat of her sword lightly.

“You’re gonna have to find some way to manage,” Adrien said, tucking his foil in its case. “Same time next week?”

“Only if you leave your troubles at the door like I do,” Kagami said with a small smirk. “I’m getting tired of always beating you.”

“I’m pretty sure I scored on you a few times since we’ve started practicing together,” Adrien said, crossing his arms.

“Times where you didn’t lean into my guard and kiss me to distract me?” Kagami asked.

“You’re just mad because we don’t kiss anymore,” Adrien said.

“Yes, truly I am bereft and despondent that the great Adrien Agreste no longer sees fit to grace my lips with the company of his,” Kagami said in a flat deadpan, back of her hand pressed against her forehead. “Surely a wealthy, eligible bachelorette with her own townhouse can do no better than a collège student who still sleeps in a bedroom with a skate ramp in it.”
“Hey, you liked the skate ramp!” Adrien spluttered.

“Not my favorite piece of furniture in your bedroom, if I’m being perfectly honest,” Kagami said, lips curling as Adrien’s face flushed a darker shade of red. “You’re still too easy to fluster; you know that, right?”

“You just know all my weak spots,” Adrien said, stiffening as Kagami lightly pecked him on the cheek.

“Better than you think,” Kagami murmured, ruffling his sweaty hair as she brushed past him. “Good luck with your project; try not to hurt your voice this time.”

Adrien grumbled out a half-hearted retort, stuffing his fencing gear back in his pack as the door slammed behind Kagami.

“...you wanna explain why you stopped seeing that girl?” Plagg asked, floating out of his bag and landing on Adrien’s shoulder.

“She’s allergic to stinky cheese goblins,” Adrien chuckled, flicking Plagg lightly on the head. “You drove her away.”

“Glad she didn’t go too far away,” Plagg sniffed. “Keeping your head on straight is a two person job and Ladybug’s currently not up to the task.”

Adrien frowned, idly changing back into his street clothes as he glared holes in the floor in front of him. Kagami was right; he had been off balance and in a bad mood since his spat with Ladybug and their ensuing week-long text message argument. They seemed to wind around each other in circles, neither giving any ground as they struggled to pull the other over the line.

“Hey Plagg…” Adrien said. “Could...could the Ladybug and Black Cat Miraculouses really-”

“Eh,” Plagg shrugged. “Who can say? Not like anyone’s been able to hold us both at the same time for...hm...must’ve been a couple hundred years now. I kinda black out whenever Tikki and I are too close together for too long anyway.”
“...so if Hawkmoth were to get both...or if we let Ladybug use both-”

“You’re acting like it’s as simple as snapping your fingers,” Plagg said, nibbling on the corner of his cheese. “Phenomenal cosmic power doesn’t come easy, kid. I mean, Ladybug’s got a stronger will than most, but-”

Adrien’s phone chirped in the bottom of his bag, a familiar three note chime that he had programmed to ring when exactly one app updated. Heart plummeting, he dove into his bag, scrambling for his phone as the Ladyblog app flashed across his screen.

AKUMA ATTACK: BELLEVILLE
ALL CITIZENS PLEASE REMAIN INDOORS
MORE NEWS TO FOLLOW

“So much for a ceasefire,” Adrien murmured. “Plagg...transform me!”

The scene that greeted Chat Noir as he touched down in the courtyard of a park next to a series of apartment buildings was baffling to say the least.

“-had no right to interfere like this!” Ladybug shouted, hands beating against the chest of an akuma dressed in the uniform of a Napoleonic artillery man. He could have been mistaken for a historical reenactor were it not for the glowing purple mask that hovered over his face.

“Our deal was for one week,” the akuma spoke in a voice that reverberated and echoed with someone else’s. “You have not held up your end of the bargain; why should I?”

“I am this close to convincing him,” Ladybug said, holding her fingers up to the akuma’s mask. “You have to-”

“I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” Chat asked, unable to keep the sneer out of his voice as he casually approached from behind. Ladybug whipped around, interspersing herself between the
akuma and Chat.

“Chat, please give me a minute,” Ladybug asked, holding her hand up. “This is all a misunderstanding!”

“There is nothing to misunderstand,” Hawkmoth said through the akuma’s mouth. “Ladybug has failed to satisfy the terms of our deal; Warning Shot here is...well, a warning shot.”

“ You stay out of this!” Ladybug hissed at the akuma before turning back to her partner. “L-Look, you wanted a meeting with Hawkmoth, right? Well...meet! Here he is; you can talk to him as long as you-”

“I think not,” Hawkmoth said through Warning Shot’s mouth. “ We had a deal, Ladybug; our understanding was that I would deal with you and only you in this matter.”

“Not really your call anymore, Hawky,” Chat snarled, resting the baton against the akuma’s shoulder. “You’re dealing with me whether you want to or not.”

“Chat, please; just hear him out,” Ladybug begged, hands clasped in front of her. “I promise you, this all makes sense; Hawkmoth, tell him-”

“You expect me to debase myself in front of every adolescent in a costume?” Hawkmoth sniffed. “No; I owe you no explanation.”

“You are not helping your cause right now!” Ladybug insisted.

“I thought that’s what you were supposed to be doing,” Hawkmoth retorted. “But, if you’d like to go back to the way things were before-”

“Hey, I prefer things better that way,” Chat said, giving the akuma a quick once over. “Now let’s see here...what’s small and easily breakable?”

“Chat please just let me handle this!” Ladybug said, trying to pull Chat back from his nose-to-nose staredown with Hawkmoth.
“I can handle this just fine!” Chat said, digging his heels in and glaring through the mask at Hawkmoth.

“Listen to your…’partner’. boy.” Hawkmoth said, refusing to retaliate even as Chat shoved the akuma back a few steps. “She has your best interests at heart…”

“I do,” Ladybug insisted, sparing a glare for Hawkmoth. “Chat...Chat, please look at me.”

Ladybug grabbed the sides of Chat’s face, twisting his head until he was staring down at her. There was a time when being this close to Ladybug would have turned him into a lovestruck mess; where the feeling of her gloves on his cheeks would have been the highlight of his week.

He thought he was past the point of Ladybug’s big, blue eyes holding any power over him...clearly, he was wrong.

“I know you’re mad or slighted or upset with me,” Ladybug said in a slow, calm voice. “That’s fine...we haven’t ever really fought like that, have we?”

Chat was silent, eyeing Warning Shot out of the corner of his eye as Ladybug continued to speak. “I- I guess we were pretty overdue,” Ladybug chuckled, rubbing her thumbs on his cheeks. “And we can fight more when this is done but please, Chat; please just hear us out…”

Chat let out a small growl, but Ladybug’s expression took some fire out of his anger. “I need you to be calm right now,” Ladybug pleaded. “Please…”

Chat sighed, sparing Hawkmoth one last glare before turning away.

“Fine…” Chat said. “I’ll hear you out…”

“Thank you,” Ladybug said, feeling a weight lift off her shoulders. “I-”

“And they say you can’t train a cat.”
Hawkmoth’s words echoed throughout the empty courtyard, followed by a snarl as Chat whipped around, hurling his staff at the brooch on the akuma’s uniform. It shattered, and a small purple butterfly floated out of it as Ladybug watched on in horror.

“Chat!” Ladybug hissed, watching the akuma float up over head. “What are you-”

“Catch it,” Chat said, fists balled as the confused local historian wobbled to his feet behind him. “Do it!”

Ladybug let out an annoyed sigh, flicking her yo-yo open and snapping up the akuma in a flash of light. She watched it go, purified and floating back towards the center of the city before turning around and facing her partner.

“What...the hell ?!” Ladybug spat, spinning Chat around to face her. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

“My job !” Chat fired back. “Or did you forget that we’re not supposed to be having chit-chats with akuma?!”

“That akuma was not here to hurt anyone,” Ladybug seethed, jabbing her finger at the historian who seemed to be taking his cue to slowly slither away. “He fired three shots in the air to get my attention and then led me here . He wanted to talk !”

“He wanted to shake you down and make fun of me while he was at it,” Chat scowled. “Some talk…”

“Un believable!” Ladybug groaned, jabbing her finger into her partner’s chest. “One minute of calm, reasonable discussion was all I asked for-”

“Hey, what are you getting mad at me for?!” Chat asked, batting Ladybug’s finger away. “Your buddy showed up and started talking down to me the minute I showed up!”

“It was just talk !” Ladybug snapped. “I needed you to just do nothing and you couldn’t even do that because your fucking ego got bruised! That was our one chance to sit down and discuss this deal
“Oh no, what a bummer,” Chat deadpanned. “Truly unfortunate; oh well, guess we have to kick his ass now, huh?”

“You are being such an ass right now!” Ladybug growled. “You’re looking for any reason to kill any chance this deal has at working.”

“Yeah, because it was such a stellar plan to begin with!” Chat spat. “Look, I know you think you figured out a way to twist this so nobody gets hurt, but people have already been hurt! There’s a trail of hurt that goes all the way back to my fourteenth birthday!”

“And there’s nothing we can do about that!” Ladybug snapped. “Nothing! We couldn’t help all those people when we were kids, but we can help now! We can help people who would be hurt if we keep fighting!”

“You know what,” Chat said, taking a step back. “You do what you want to do; I’m gonna keep doing what I’m supposed to do and hopefully you’ll wake up and realize that there’s only one real way to end this.”

“Chat, wait-” Ladybug said, reaching out to grab his wrist as he turned away from her. He stepped farther than she thought he would, and instead of her fingers closing around his wrist as she intended, her fingers brushed across his fingers, tugging his ring ever so slightly off his finger.

They froze, eyes trailing from Ladybug’s fingers on his ring up until they held each other’s gaze. In one swift motion, they stepped back from each other, Ladybug holding her hands up and Chat cradling his hand to his chest, a look of anger, confusion, and fear clouding his features.

“I...I didn’t…” Ladybug stammered, throat suddenly tight as she searched for the right words that seemed to slide further and further out of reach. “Chat, I-I didn’t- Chat!”

Chat sprang up into the encroaching night, leaping over the ledge of the roof as Ladybug latched onto a nearby lamp post, grappling herself up onto the roof after him. She touched down in a low crouch, scanning wildly for any sign of her partner.

“Chat?!” Ladybug called, frantically scanning the shadowy alleys beneath her feet. “Chat, come
Across the city, Gabriel Agreste calmly walked over to the window overlooking the city and unlatched it, pushing it open and taking a deep breath. The cold night air lapped against his face, and as he watched a red figure swing closer and closer to his home, he allowed himself a small, self-satisfied smile.

As Ladybug approached, Gabriel calmly removed his glasses and tucked them into his breast pocket, protecting them from harm as Ladybug swung through the window and immediately punched him in the face.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t
Stop
Me
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And so the plot thickens. Hopefully this Ladynoir fight isn't coming off as one-sided one way or another. I know people tend to stan either Marinette or Adrien but I want to be fair to both of their points of view here. I don't want it to come across that Ladybug has just gone off the deep end and I don't want Chat to come off as completely childish and stubborn for refusing her. Hopefully I'm pulling this off but if I'm not, you know where to tell me.

Thanks as always to DarkReyna16 for looking this over! Please let me know if you're still on board for this ride; I promise the end will be worth it.
Ladybug had a *fantastic* right cross.

Even as he was sailing over his desk, crashing into his new chair and landing in a broken heap on his office floor, Gabriel had to admire the way she stepped into the blow, threw her whole weight into her arm, and twisted her fist so the first two of her knuckles collided with his face.

Her technique, Gabriel mused as Ladybug hauled him off his feet and dangled him over the floor, was flawless.

“What the *hell* is your damage?!” Ladybug snarled, slamming him on his desk with a splintering thud that suggested that it was finally time to replace his workstation. “I had this all under control until you just *had* to get your snippy little quips in!”

“Clearly,” Gabriel coughed, wheezing as Ladybug hauled him up off his desk and back on to his feet. The slowly darkening bruise on his right cheek throbbed painfully as Gabriel touched it with a small wince. “I sense that you’re unhappy with me.”

“No, I’m fucking *ecstatic* that our plans to bring this to a peaceful solution have fallen down around my ears and now my own *partner* thinks I’m trying to steal his Miraculous,” Ladybug spat. “So *thanks* for that!”

“I won’t apologize for refusing to spill my life story to anyone who asks,” Gabriel said, straightening his tie and wiping the corner of his split lip with a handkerchief. “You must see now why I chose to deal with you over your partner…”

“Because *you* provoked him!”

“I provoked *you* as well,” Gabriel said, removing his glasses from his jacket pocket and replacing them on his nose. “You, however, appear to possess more of a practical sentiment than he does since you seemed to see the merit in my proposal…and the sense not to fly off the handle and squander a deal because your feelings are hurt.”
“Don’t talk like you know us,” Ladybug said, poking Gabriel in the chest.

“You forget that I’ve spent the last four years watching you,” Gabriel said, regarding Ladybug over the rims of his glasses. “I’ve watched countless battles between my akuma and you, and do you know what I see? Someone who does what they want to do and someone who does what they must do.”

“We both do what we have to do.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that your partner can be effective in battle,” Gabriel said, wiping the corner of his mouth. “When properly managed. But I do business with CEO’s; not their support staff.”

“Hey, none of this would have happened if you hadn’t created that akuma!” Ladybug snapped.

“I wouldn’t have created an akuma were it not for you reneging on the terms of our arrangement,” Gabriel said, leaning back on his desk. “You have not done what you said you were going to do, so where does that leave me? What recourse do I have?”

“Have you tried not being a total asshole when you don’t get your way?” Ladybug asked. “Wouldn’t kill you.”

“No, but why risk it?” Gabriel said, taking his glasses off and cleaning them with the corner of his pocket square. “But, the past is the past. All that remains is to determine where we go from here.”

“There is no we,” Ladybug growled. “I am not your friend, I am not your partner; don’t let the fact that your end lines up with my means fool you into thinking there’s any we here.”

“How you feel about me is completely immaterial,” Gabriel sniffed, catching a trickle of blood running down his nose with his handkerchief. “All that matters is if you’re still willing to work with me to come to an equitable solution.”

“Jury’s still out,” Ladybug said, flexing her fingers. “Chat’s solution to this is looking more and more tempting the longer I listen to you talk.”
“Please don’t waste my time with idle bluffs and empty threats,” Gabriel said, ignoring the look of irritation that darkened Ladybug’s features. “If you wanted to take me down, you wouldn’t have come alone and you wouldn’t be wasting time threatening me. Since I’m currently not being dragged to the police station by my ankles, I’m going to assume you’re still open to a win-win scenario.”

“I think there’s an English saying about assumptions and asses that you should probably be familiar with,” Ladybug grumbled, crossing her arms as she paced around the perimeter of the office. A dull, throbbing headache pulsed with each step she took, worsened by the harsh white light that reflected off Gabriel’s sterile office walls.

She had looked for Chat for almost an hour, but her partner’s talent for blending into the shadows was remarkable. When calling him didn’t work, she sent a string of almost illegible text messages as she walked the streets, grabbing every passerby she saw and asking them if they had seen her partner. Desperation gave way to frustration gave way to anger which led to Ladybug decking her friend’s father with all the strength she could muster.

...well, small portion of the strength she could muster. Her full strength would have likely popped Gabriel’s head clean off and sent it bouncing off the walls like a grisly pinball.

“I take it your partner was less than amicable to the idea of surrendering his ring to you?” Gabriel said.

“I have spent the last \textit{week} trying day and night to convince him, but he won’t even entertain the idea,” Ladybug sighed, massaging her temples with the tips of her fingers. “I laid out your case as best I could—”

“Leaving pertinent details out, I would hope.”

“-yeah, he didn’t like that,” Ladybug said. “Secrecy has always been something of a sore spot with him.”

“Why?” Gabriel asked. “He must understand that parts of your personal life need remain secret.”

“You would \textit{think},” Ladybug laughed. “No...he gave up even talking about our personal identities years ago.”
“You...don’t know who he is?” Gabriel seemed genuinely surprised. “Are you telling me that you’ve spent the last four years entrusting yourself to a complete stranger?”

“It’s safer that way,” Ladybug said, narrowing her eyes at Gabriel. “In case...in case one of us was compromised by you.”

“...prudent,” Gabriel admitted.

“You get a little paranoid when fighting someone whose M.O. involves brainwashing,” Ladybug replied coolly.

“If you say so...” Gabriel said, smoothing his hair out. “So...what are the next steps?”

“I don’t know,” Ladybug said, trying not to let her agitation show. “He’s...I don’t think I can get a hold of him anymore.”

“Explain,” Gabriel said, brow creasing.

“...we had a fight,” Ladybug said, rubbing her arm. “I tried to grab for his wrist...and I accidentally grabbed his ring.”

“You...you got your hands on his ring?” Gabriel asked, sitting up and leaning forward.

“I didn’t rip it off his finger if that’s what you’re asking!” Ladybug snapped.

“But you got your hands on it,” Gabriel said, stepping off his desk as he rubbed his bruising jaw. “You...you were able to get close enough to grab it.”

“Yeah, and now he thinks I’m trying to steal his Miraculous!” Ladybug groaned, throwing up her hands.

“...is that such a bad idea?”
Ladybug turned slowly to face Gabriel as he started to slowly pace back and forth.

“Granted, the element of surprise is no longer on our side, but with your skills-”

“You better not complete that thought old man,” Ladybug growled.

“Why not?” Gabriel asked, head snapping around to look at her. “You are the only reason I wasn’t able to get both of your Miraculouses-”

“Stop,” Ladybug said, holding a hand up and taking a step back.

“How many times have I managed to possess your partner?” Gabriel pressed on. “And how many times have you managed to get the better of him? We have proven again and again that when it comes down to a contest between the two of you-”

“This wasn’t our deal!”

“-that you consistently come out on top,” Gabriel continued, eyes widening as an idea slowly washed over him. “If he isn’t going to cooperate with us...yes, you could quite easily defeat him and when he was incapacitated-”

“That’s enough!” Ladybug shouted.

“-you...you could simply take his ring!”

Smack!

Gabriel staggered back as the back of Ladybug’s hand collided with the side of his face, sending him reeling and his glasses tumbling to the ground with a shattering crash. Ladybug took a step back from him, breathing heavily as she slowly backed towards the window.
“You *are* crazy,” Ladybug whispered, falling back out of the window and latching on to a lamp post as she swung away into the night.

Gabriel watched her go as he slowly pulled himself to his feet, readjusting his glasses as he wiped a trickle of blood from his mouth. Calmly, he walked over to his bookcase, opened a compartment with a click of a hidden switch, and opened the small safe that contained his Miraculous and a dejected looking kwami.

“...what now?” Nooroo asked in a small, quiet voice.

“Now,” Gabriel said, reaffixing his pin to his tie. “If I’ve played my hand correctly, we shouldn’t have to do a thing…”

Chat Noir ran until the lights of Paris faded behind him.

He ran until the familiar city streets gave way to more winding, wooded roads that carried him further and further away from his city.

He ran with all the superhuman stamina his Miraculous afforded him, passing through town after town without slowing down or diverting his course.

He dropped his transformation, and he kept running until his legs ached and lungs burned and he was forced to duck into a rail station, leaning heavily on the cold walls as he tried to catch his breath.

“Easy, kid,” Plagg murmured in his ear. “Take a deep breath...hey, *breathe!*”

“I can’t...I can’t…” Adrien put his hand against the wall, sucking great lungfuls of air through his nose as he tried to get control of his breath.

“This is gonna sound really weird coming from me, but you *really* need to calm down right now,” Plagg said as Adrien pulled his hoodie over his face so no one could see him talking to Plagg.
“How,” Adrien panted. “Am I supposed to be calm right now?!”

“You have to try,” Plagg said, pinching Adrien’s ear. “Flipping out is not gonna help us right now?!”

“Then tell me what I’m supposed to do!” Adrien hissed, crouching down to avoid suspicion of the evening crowds. “Ladybug-”

“If she wanted to take it, she wouldn’t have let it go,” Plagg said.

“She still wants it though,” Adrien murmured, head resting against the cool tile wall of the train station. “She wants to use our powers for-”

Adrien trailed off, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes.

“I never... never in a thousand years thought I would be worried about my partner trying to steal my Miraculous sitting in a train station in-” Adrien lifted his head to read the sign above him. “Oh god, I’m in Creil?!”

“Listen,” Plagg said, squeezing Adrien’s earlobe with his paws. “We don’t know for sure if Ladybug’s gone off the deep end.”

“Don’t we?!” Adrien said. “She’s spent the whole week hitting me up for my ring and trying to convince me to buy into this hairbrained scheme of hers! If she hasn’t gone off the deep end, she’s certainly climbing the diving board!”

“Okay,” Plagg admitted. “It’s a pretty sad state of affairs when you’re the levelheaded one-”

“Hey!”

“-and I sure as Swiss don’t want to wind up on Hawkmoth’s finger,” Plagg said. “But before we jump to red alert, we need to really think about our options.”
“Okay,” Adrien said, pulling out his phone. “I think we can get a train as far as Normandy. From there we can probably book passage across the Channel and—”

“Let’s call going on the lam Plan Z,” Plagg sighed. “Best case scenario…”

“Best case scenario is…Ladybug’s been listening to bad advice and didn’t really mean to grab at my ring,” Adrien said, tilting his head back as he thought. “Worst case scenario…”

“Worst case scenario is that Ladybug has either been akumitized or is genuinely on board with fulfilling Hawky’s plan,” Plagg said, landing on Adrien’s shoulder. “Which, for all intents and purposes, is the same thing.”

“No…Ladybug willingly siding with Hawkmoth is worse,” Adrien said. “I can deal with an akuma easier than I can deal with trying to change Ladybug’s mind…”

Willpower had always been one of Ladybug’s stronger values; one did not fight against all manner of silly enemies for so long without developing a hard-nosed drive to win at all costs. Ladybug’s strength wasn’t in her supernatural abilities; it was in her cunning, quick thinking, and motivation.

If all that was turned on him...

“Worst case scenario is that Hawkmoth has one of the Miraculouses and Ladybug is going to be gunning for me,” Adrien sighed, leaning forward and resting his head on his forearms. “…I don’t think I could beat her if it came to that.”

“Doesn’t matter if you think you can or not,” Plagg sighed. “You cannot let Hawkmoth get both me and Tikki or that’s the ballgame. Even Ladybug holding both of us is bad news since we tend to get a little…tweaky when we’re used by the same person.”

“So even if Ladybug never gives Hawkmoth our Miraculouses…”

“There’s a pretty good chance that she’ll try and use both of us at the same time and…well, does the term psychofraculated mean anything to you?”
“No.”

“Well, it ain’t pretty,” Plagg chuckled. “One person’s successfully used us both at the same time...the rest-”

“Got fraculated?”

“Psycho fraculated,” Plagg corrected. “See, Tikki’s ability to create anything and my ability to destroy anything aren’t easy to use. There’s a reason Chat Noir can only use it once before we need to recharge. It’s technically possible to use us both at the same time but...well, you need to be pretty strong willed and totally balanced, like, spiritually to pull it off...otherwise-”

“Fraculated,” Adrien nodded.

“Psycho fraculated.”

“Still fraculated,” Adrien murmured. “So...wait, why don’t we just give them to Hawkmoth and watch him blow himself up?”

“Because he could blow up the city while he did it,” Plagg said. “And that’s the best case scenario. You ever hear of the Empire of ________?”

“...what?” Adrien frowned, wiggling his pinkie in his ear. “Sorry, I missed that last bit; mind running that by me again?”

“About, oh, sixty-five hundred years ago the sovereign Emperor of_________ got his hands on both the Ladybug and the Black Cat Miraculouses,” Plagg said. “The________ believed that reality was an illusion, so the emperor wanted to use our powers to reject reality and create a new world for him and his followers to live in. Time came to use our powers and...well, things didn’t go the way he thought they would. Instead of rejecting reality, our powers rejected him. The emperor, the empire, all one hundred and fifty million citizens, and the land they lived on just disappeared. Erased from the world, from time, and from everybody’s memory in the blink of an eye. I can’t even say the word_________ anymore because even that got wiped out...in fact, as soon as I’m done talking about this, you’re going to totally forget we even had this conversation.”

“So you’re saying that whatever happened to the...the, uh...” Adrien’s eyes glazed over. “Sorry, I
missed that last bit; mind running that by me again?”

“All you need to know is that neither Ladybug nor her new chum in the purple suit should get their hands on me,” Plagg said, patting Adrien’s confused looking face. “And hey, so far so good, right? Four years and Hawkmoth hasn’t got his grubby little paws on me yet, has he?”

“That was before Ladybug decided to help him out,” Adrien pointed out. “And let’s face it; my track record vs. Ladybug isn’t the best.”

“Let’s face it, Adrien,” Plagg said. “Have you ever really tried?”

“How many times has someone turned me against Ladybug?” Adrien laughed bitterly. “And how many times has Ladybug knocked me on my butt?”

“She’s got a steller track record against kooky akuma who like to use you as a puppet,” Plagg corrected, nudging Adrien in the cheek. “There’s more to Chat Noir than just the suit, kid. Ladybug’s never gone up against you when you wanted to fight her.”

“Yeah, but…” Adrien sighed. “I don’t even really want to now…”

When Plagg could think of nothing to say to that, Adrien slowly rose, wobbling over to the ticket booth to purchase a train ticket back home.

The after-dinner crowds pressed in around Marinette as she aimlessly walked the streets that led away from Adrien’s house. She needed to not be Ladybug for a moment; long enough to calm the pounding in her head caused by the neverending cavalcade of thoughts that threatened to drive her mad.

You could simply take his ring.

She had touched it; reached out and grabbed at it with barely any effort at all. Even if Chat were to put up a fight, she could easily overcome him; she’d done it in the past. It would be easy to just reach out, take it, and put an end to this-
Marinette let out a small sigh, pressing her fingertips against her forehead. She was not a common hoodlum, no matter what Adrien’s overpaid tailor of a father thought. She couldn’t (she could) just take the ring off Chat’s hand without getting into a big fight (that she would win) and alerting all of Paris to the fact that Ladybug and Chat Noir were on the outs.

And even if she wanted to (she didn’t, she didn’t, she didn’t) there was no way of locating him. Marinette wasn’t just going to be walking along and bump into Chat in the middle of the—

“Oof!” Marinette stumbled back a few steps as she bumped into someone in a black hoodie. “Sorry, I didn’t see you ther....Adrien?”

Adrien pulled his hood down, expression flickering from confusion, to recognition, to brief panic as he jammed a small piece of paper into the pocket of his running pants. “Oh, h-hey Marinette! Fancy running into you running into me here!”

“Sorry; I had my head in the clouds,” Marinette chuckled, rubbing her arm. “Out for a night jog?”

“Hm?” Adrien glanced down at his clothes. “Oh...yeah I...I had to get out of the house for a little bit.”

Marinette didn’t fail to notice the way his face fell as he spoke, eyes dimming ever so slightly as he averted his gaze.

“Trouble with your father?” Marinette asked.

“...you could say that.”

“Sorry, I don’t mean to pry,” Marinette said, twirling the drawstrings on her hoodie.

“You’re not prying,” Adrien said, a small smile returning to his face. “We...we’re having something of a disagreement.”
“Join the club,” Marinette muttered.

“Hm?”

“Oh...I...just having some problems with my dad,” Marinette said, scratching the back of her arm.

“Really?” Adrien said, raising an eyebrow. “Wow...sorry, I just can’t remember you ever mentioning having problems at home before. I thought your dad was cool.”

“Me too,” Marinette sighed. “Sorry; you have your own problems to worry about. I shouldn’t-”

“You want to get some coffee?” Adrien asked, jerking his head towards a cafe across the street. “I could do with some caffeine right now; I’m buying.”

“I…” Marinette blinked. “…you know what, I’m not even going to pretend that doesn’t sound good right now.”

Chapter End Notes

Welcome back to Cafe Exposition folks!

Kind of a low action chapter but the next two are the last setup chapters before things get (imo) really really juicy. I'm introducing some homebrew worldbuilding here so please let me know how that's coming across.

Thank you for all the feedback! I know this concept is kind of a hard sell but I'm glad it's coming across well so far. Shit's about to get fairly real very soon so please put your seatback trays in the upright position, make sure your seatbelts are fastened, and keep in mind this will end well.

...mostly.
“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“It’s fine,” Marinette said, taking a sip of her latte as she watched Adrien stir sugar into his tea. “I’m just...reeling a little bit.”

“Would a cookie help?” Adrien said, pushing a biscotti across the table.

“What about a drink?” Marinette said, pushing a glass of water across the table. “I think you might need something stronger.”

“He left?”

“Uh...just left the bakery,” Marinette said hastily. “Not my family or anything...I may have done something I didn’t mean to do and I think he took it the wrong way.”

“Ouch,” Adrien said. “No wonder you’re so blue.”

“...weird question,” Marinette said, taking a sip of her coffee. “If you...had an opportunity to do something, something you were so sure was the right thing to do, but...but if you did it, it would...”
mean losing the confidence of someone for the rest of your life. Could you...do you think you could do it?"

“Marinette, I don’t think your dad is gonna hate you,” Adrien laughed. “You had an argument; that’s all. I don’t think anyone could really hate you for very long, no matter what you did.”

“Always nice to hear,” Marinette chuckled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “But still...if you had to choose between doing something you felt was right and doing something your family wanted you to do, what would you do?”

“Have you met my family?” Adrien said, raising an eyebrow. “My *raison d’etre* is doing things that my father doesn’t want me to do.”

“...what if it was your mother?” Marinette asked quietly, carefully studying Adrien’s face as he stared into his tea. “If she was here-”

“If Mom was here, I wouldn’t need to fly in my father’s face all the time,” Adrien chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck with a semi-wistful smile. “She would bat her eyelashes and he would melt and I could do whatever I wanted; she had him completely wrapped around her little finger.”

“Hard to imagine,” Marinette murmured. “I-I mean, it’s just hard to imagine your father as...well, anything other than *your father*.”

“He didn’t used to be as thorny as he is,” Adrien said, chewing on his bottom lip. “We both took Mom disappearing hard but...she took a big, big chunk of him when she disappeared.”

Marinette’s fingers twitched, acting on impulse as she reached across the table and lightly squeezed Adrien’s hand. “How do you even get over that?”

Adrien surprised her by flipping his palm over and squeezing her hand back. “You don’t,” Adrien said simply.

Their palms touched for a few moments before Adrien withdrew with a sheepish chuckle. “Sorry; didn’t mean to make it about me.”
“I shouldn’t have brought it up,” Marinette said, scratching her cheek.

“It’s fine,” Adrien shrugged. “Dad doesn’t talk about her much, so I take whatever opportunities I can.”

“...do you ever wonder if she’s still out there?” Marinette asked. “If...I don’t know...if she showed up one day out of the blue?”

“All the time,” Adrien said, taking a sip of his tea. “Not as much as I used to back when she first disappeared but usually around Christmas or her birthday I find myself wondering what would happen if she were to burst through the door like nothing had ever happened. I know dad would be happy; probably would get off me about going to Oxford and let me take a gap year with Nino. Wouldn’t have to worry about him working himself to death if Mom was there to threaten him to go out to dinner with her.”

Adrien trailed off, fingers steepling and green eyes gazing unfocused into the middle distance for a long moment.

“But,” Adrien said with a small laugh, shaking his head. “Nothing anyone can do about it, right? Can’t snap my fingers and make everything better, right?”

“You would if you could though,” Marinette said, chewing on her bottom lip. “If...you had a genie or something that could bring her back…”

“I mean, probably after I wished for world peace and your mother’s scone recipe,” Adrien chuckled. “I get three wishes in this scenario, right?”

“Sure,” Marinette chuckled. “Anything you want...except the scone recipe.”

“Not even a magic lamp can get me your family recipes, huh?” Adrien laughed, leaning in on his palms. “Will that still be included in your dowry if I marry you?”

“I-I would have to clear that with Mama first,” Marinette said, fidgeting with her belt loop. “No promises.”
“We can sort that out after the honeymoon then,” Adrien said, lightly prodding her shin with the tip of his shoe in a move that sent a small shiver running through her.

“Depends on how big the ring is,” Marinette said, emboldened enough to brush the back of his calf with the top of her foot.

“I’ll get you the crown jewels if it means getting to eat your…parent’s scones every morning,” Adrien said, smile widening as Marinette choked on a sip of her coffee, leaning over and patting her on the back. “You okay?”

“Fine,” Marinette spluttered. “Something went down the wrong pipe.”

“Inhaling cookies is only good when you don’t actually inhale cookies,” Adrien said, hand lingering on her back for a moment before pulling away. “…you gonna be okay?”

“Are you?” Marinette asked. “You said your father was getting better?”

“Ups and downs,” Adrien said, scratching the back of his neck. “…pretty down today, though. He…tried to do something today that I didn’t think he was capable of…”

Adrien took sight of Marinette’s rapidly horrifying expression and quickly backpedaled. “H-He totally tried to forge my signature on an application acceptance! I…I managed to stop him before he actually sent it in, but…well, I think I know what he was trying to do.”

“Dick,” Marinette said before she could stop herself. “I-I just mean-”

“It’s fine,” Adrien laughed. “It was…kind of a dick thing to do, huh?”

“Majorly!” Marinette said, suddenly sitting up. “Wh-where does he get off trying to make a decision like that for you?!”

“Always been like that, I guess,” Adrien shrugged, idly scratching the worn wooden cafe table. “Just…seems like a big thing to do without even asking me. Maybe I let him get away with too much in the past; maybe I should have drawn a line somewhere when I was younger.”
“It’s not your fault that your father has no respect for your boundaries,” Marinette growled, shaking her head.

“He says he’s just trying to do what’s best for me…”

“Shouldn’t you get to decide that?” Marinette said. “Nobody knows what’s best for you better than you do, right?”

“I would hope so,” Adrien mumbled.

“You’re not wrong for taking charge of your future,” Marinette said softly. “And if he really wanted to do what was best for you, he’d respect that.”

“He won’t,” Adrien sighed. “Sh... he is the single most driven person I’ve ever met. When he wants something, he gets it and until now I’ve really never stood in his way. We’ve...fought in the past, but we usually go with what he wants to do.”

“And you don’t want to do that anymore?”

“...I can’t do that anymore,” Adrien said, clenching his fingers around his cooling tea cup. “It’s not that I want to; there’s just too much at stake now to not fight him on this. If he gets his way…”

Adrien trailed off, shaking his head as Marinette’s fingers lightly brushed against the back of his, wrapping his hands in a small embrace.

“Then he can’t get his way,” Marinette said with a small smile. “I know you don’t pick hills to die on as much as I do, but if there ever was one, I think this might be it.”

“And what if I’m wrong?” Adrien asked. “What if...what I really don’t know what’s best for myself?”

“Then you have the right to be wrong,” Marinette laughed. “You have the right to make mistakes,
Adrien; especially when it comes to your own life. Your father may think he has you all figured out, but when all’s said and done, you have to chart your own course. You can’t just let yourself be dragged around by someone who thinks they’re doing the right thing. It’s not right; you deserve to have the chance to live your own life without someone constantly taking decision making power away from you!”

It was moments like this, when her eyes shone with barely restrained passion as she spoke at length about what she loved, that Adrien found it hard to think about anything else. The miserable week he endured to get to this table was worth it to feel Marinette’s soft hands pressing into the back of his. It was worth being close to her warm, resolute optimism, even if only for a few moments.

“Sorry,” Marinette said a little sheepishly as someone craned their necks from a table over to see what the ruckus was about. “Got a little carried away.”

“Don’t be,” Adrien said, suppressing a disappointed cluck as Marinette pulled away. “I needed some clarity...glad I bumped into you.”

“I think we both got what we needed out of that,” Marinette said, rising to her feet. “You know what you’re going to do?”

Adrien nodded, jaw tight as he rose to stand with Marinette.

“I think so,” Adrien said. “I think I owe you something for the pep talk.”

“If you’re gonna try and tip me, I’m gonna be a little offended,” Marinette said, eyes narrowing ever so slightly.

“Would you be offended if I offered to buy you dinner?” Adrien asked, holding the door for her as they stepped out into the chilly evening. “Say...Friday?”

Marinette blinked, praying the encroaching darkness hid her warming cheeks. “I...y-yeah, I’m probably gonna need to eat on Friday.”

“Not gonna get photosynthesis down by then?” Adrien chuckled, rubbing the back of his arm. “So...it’s a date then?”
“Uh...s-sure?” Marinette said, unable to keep the smile from her face. “It’s a date...a date for us...this Friday...dinner…”

“You okay?” Adrien asked, lips curling into a small smile.

“Date!” Marinette said, shaking her head as she slowly started backing away from Adrien. “I mean late! I mean...w-wow I should be getting home! Thanks for the coffee; have a date night!”

Marinette took three steps down the sidewalk before turning back. “Great night! Date night is Friday! And late night is...today! Tonight!”

Marinette laughed a little too loudly, inexplicably shooting Adrien a pair of fingerguns as she backed up and around the corner.

“...she’s adorable,” Adrien sighed, leaning against the lamp post as Plagg burrowed out from his hoodie.

“Wasn’t a total wash of a week, was it?”

“Like a date date?!”

“That’s what he said,” Marinette said, spinning around on her chair as she looked up at her ceiling. “I could be misreading it, but-”

“Nah, it only figures that after four years of coming up with plans to get Adrien to like you, he’d just up and ask you out of the blue,” Alya snickered.

“My luck was bound to improve sooner or later,” Marinette chuckled, eyes drifting over to her computer blinking an unread email message up at her. “I’ll give you that scoop tomorrow.”
“Speaking of scoop,” Alya said in a conspiratorial whisper. “I got a tip about that weird akuma attack this afternoon; check your email.”

Marinette’s good mood deflated like a week old birthday balloon as she opened an email from Alya, blood running cold as she saw a video attachment.

“Sound quality is garbage,” Alya said as Marinette hit the play button and a shaky camera showed Ladybug and Chat Noir in mid argument. “But looks like Paris’ it-couple is having a little lovers’ spat.”

“I-It’s probably nothing important,” Marinette laughed, watching her costumed self reach out for Chat’s wrist as he turned away. She paused the video, half of her not wanting to see what came next and half of her wanting to confirm a nagging suspicion that fluttered around her mind like an errant butterfly. There, in the middle of the frame, she could clearly see her fingers close around the cool metal ring around Chat’s finger and tug on it just a little.

“Yeah, I’m not in the business of outing Ladybug’s dirty laundry,” Alya sighed. “Just thought I’d share some juicy gossip in return for the dish about Adrien~”

“Th-Thanks,” Marinette coughed, leaning back in her chair. “I, uh...I gotta hang up. D-Dad needs me for something.”

“Keep me posted,” Alya said, hanging up and leaving Marinette in total silence as she stared at the scene before her.

Could was no longer the question; she grabbed his ring once and she could do it again. She wouldn’t even need to (physically) hurt him. It would be as simple as-

Marinette pushed herself back from her computer, standing up as she slowly started to pace the room.

“Tikki,” Marinette called out. “What do I do?”

Silence greeted Marinette as she paced over to the little cabinet Tikki now called home. She opened the door to see her kwami perched on a little doll-chair she had found for her, nibbling on the corner of a store-bought cookie she fished out of Marinette’s dresser. Since Marinette had agreed to talk to Chat on Hawkmoth’s behalf, there was an unspoken tension between them that had never been there
before. It was clear that there was quite a bit Tikki wanted to say, but for whatever reason she kept it to herself.

“Do you really want my advice?” Tikki asked, looking up at Marinette with a tired, vaguely disappointed look. “Or do you want me to tell you to just follow your heart and that everything will be alright in the end?”

“Tikki, please,” Marinette said, kneeling down to face kwami at eye-level. “Try and see things from my point of view! I am trying to do what is best everyone involved—”

“Including yourself,” Tikki said, rolling a chocolate chip around on her paw idly.

“That’s not—”

“You think you have a way to beat Hawkmoth in such a way that you get to go to the school of your dreams, get the guy of your dreams, and make it so you never have to fight another Ladybug battle ever again,” Tikki surmised, popping the chocolate chip around in her mouth and chewing it thoughtfully. “When you say win-win, you’re talking about yourself and Hawkmoth—”

“—and Adrien!” Marinette added.

“—whose happiness is something you want,” Tikki said. “So when you say you want to do what’s best for everyone, you really just mean yourself and the Agrestes.”

Marinette bristled, sitting up on her heels and looking down at Tikki. “I’m sorry, but isn’t ending this fight the goal?! Do you want to subject Paris to a costly battle?!”

“A battle our power would fix,” Tikki countered.

“Not everything can be healed with a Miraculous Ladybug!” Marinette groaned, grabbing at her hair. “Why isn’t anyone seeing that?! Why am I the only one worried about the human cost of this?!”

“By human, you mean—”
“Yes, I mean Adrien!” Marinette snapped. “Sue me for wanting to help my friend out!”

“So Adrien’s happiness and well being matter more to you than Paris’?” Tikki asked.

“We don’t have to pick!” Marinette shouted, glancing down at the trapdoor before lowering her voice. “It doesn’t need to be either-or; we can come up with a solution where everybody gets exactly what they want!”

“…including yourself,” Tikki said, folding her legs and looking up at Marinette.

“…including myself,” Marinette said. “Yes, alright, fine; I’m favoring the solution that gives me exactly what I want as well…is that wrong?”

“You have a responsibility to more than just yourself!” Tikki snapped, fluttering out of her house and looking Marinette in the eye. “Ladybug has a responsibility to more than just what Marinette Dupain-Cheng wants!”

“Don’t you think I know that?!” Marinette said. “Don’t you think I’m intimately aware of the needs-of-the-many crap?! My life has been ruled by responsibility since I was fourteen! I have always gone above and beyond to put the needs of total and complete strangers above my own for four years!”

“So this is, what, some kind of reward for all your hard work?” Tikki asked. “You think you’re owed a happy ending for all the work you’ve put in?!”

“Why not?!” Marinette asked. “Why does everybody get a happy ending except Ladybug?! Why am I the only one who had to struggle and fight and sacrifice?!”

“…you’re not the only one,” Tikki said quietly, narrowing her eyes at Marinette. “You said that this deal with Hawkmoth is the best way to make sure everyone gets what they want, right? Seems to me you’re failing to take someone into account here.”

Marinette glanced back at the computer screen, eyes lingering on the look of confusion and fear on Chat’s face.
“Oh...yeah, forgot about that, didn’t you?” Tikki said, floating up onto Marinette’s shoulder. “What, exactly, does your partner get out of this?”

“His life back,” Marinette muttered.

“This is his life,” Tikki said.

“He can still be Chat if he wants to be,” Marinette argued. “Once I make the wish-”

“You think it’s that easy?” Tikki said, floating around to stand between Marinette and Ladybug on the screen. “You think you’re just going to give him the ring back when it’s all said and done? You think he’s even going to want to speak to you after this?”

Marinette’s lips pressed together into a silent scowl, blinking as she turned away from the screen.

“...okay,” Marinette admitted, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “So this isn’t a totally happy ending...but nothing’s perfect, right? And even if...even if he never wants to speak to me again, he’ll understand. Someday, I’m sure...I’m just...I’m trying to do what’s best for him.”

Tikki closed her eyes with a sad sigh, lightly laying a paw on Marinette’s shoulder.

“Then...you should follow your heart, Marinette,” Tikki said flatly, floating back into her cabinet. “I’m sure it will all work out in the end…”

The door shut behind Tikki, leaving Marinette alone with the image of Ladybug’s fingers on Chat’s ring.

“Alright,” Marinette sniffed, grabbing her jacket and kicking the latch open. “Plan B…”

Knock-knock-knock.
“Master?” Marinette called out softly, rubbing her arms as she craned her neck in to look Master Fu’s shop. “Master Fu?”

The lights were on as the creaking of footsteps on floorboards preluded a symphony of unlatching locks as the door opened, revealing her old friend and mentor.

“I was beginning to think you weren’t coming.” Master Fu’s smile fell for a moment as he caught sight of Marinette. “Oh...Marinette, how lovely to see you.”

"Sorry," Marinette mumbled. "I would have called, but-

"You never need to apologize for visiting," Master Fu said, surriptitously craning his neck to look behind Marinette. "Are you...alone?"

"Tikki isn't here, if that's what you're asking," Marinette said, rubbing her red, puffy eyes as she lingered on the threshold. “Is this a bad time?”

“I sense it is a bad time for you ,” Master Fu said, stepping aside with a shaky little hop and sweeping her into the kitchen. “Would you like to tell me what is on your mind?”

“It’s...been kind of a bad day,” Marinette said with a small chuckle. “Well...ups and downs, really…”

Marinette took a seat at the table as Master Fu noting the pair of steaming teacups that sat on the table.

“Are you expecting someone?” Marinette asked.

“I was but...well, they seem to have gotten held up,” Master Fu chuckled, nudging the teacup towards her. “It happens from time to time; my friend makes appointments that frequently get derailed by family matters. Good thing that you came when you did; shincha green tea is not something one should throw out.”
“Feel free to kick me out if you have a date or something,” Marinette chuckled, taking a sip of the bitter green brew.

“I think the time for romance in my life is long past,” Master Fu chuckled, wincing suddenly and rubbing his temples.

“Are you doing okay?” Marinette asked.

“Oh...ups and downs...” Fu chuckled, wiping his sweaty brow with the corner of a tea rag. “Perils of getting old is that one tends to have more than a few aches and pains that tend to crop up at unexpected times...and I have been going without some very important medicine for far too long...”

Fu tried a shaky smile that didn’t quite look right for some reason.

“Is there anything I can do?” Marinette asked, only to be waved off by Fu.

“My physician shall be with me in due time,” Fu said, folding his hands in front of him. “But perhaps there is something I can do for you. I think this is the latest you’ve ever sought my company...what is the matter?”

“...very long story,” Marinette said, fidgeting in her seat. “Chat and I are...having a disagreement.”

“Ah,” Fu said simply. “Well...I’m afraid I won’t be able to offer much in the way of relationship advice, if that is what you need.”

“It’s a...professional disagreement,” Marinette murmured, glancing up at her master. “We...we may have a way to stop Hawkmoth. After all this time, we have a chance to make sure no one ever gets akumitized ever again.”

Fu leaned forward, narrowing his eyes at Marinette. “Is that so?”

“Yes, but...Chat doesn’t agree that it’s the right thing to do,” Marinette sighed, chewing on the inside of her lip. “He has a solution of his own, but it involves hurting people who don’t need to be hurt...”
“I cannot imagine Chat Noir would be the kind of person to endorse a course of action that leads to needless suffering,” Fu mused, stroking his chin. “What exactly is this plan of his?”

Marinette took a deep breath, looking the old man in the eye. “Master Fu...what happens if someone uses both the Ladybug and the Black Cat Miraculous?”

Fu seemed to stiffen in his seat, gaze focusing more intently on Ladybug. “...what has made you think of that?”

“Is it true that the Ladybug and Black Cat can accomplish anything if used together?” Marinette rambled on.

“Marinette, there is a reason I did not just give you both Miraculous when you were fourteen,” Fu said, leaning forward in his chair. “That kind of power is not one that can be used lightly and if you are thinking of using it to just banish Hawkmoth from existence or some such-”

“So it is possible?”

“Who have you been talking to?” Master Fu asked, leaning forward and sharing a curious look with Wayzz who floated out of his pocket. “Why the sudden interest?”

Marinette’s fingers twisted together under the table. Master Fu had the uncanny ability to make anyone feel like a schoolkid who lied about doing their homework without so much as raising his voice.

“I have an idea,” Marinette said. “An idea that I think will work...but I need both Miraculous-”

“Marinette, whatever you think you’re going to do-”

“I just need to know if it’s possible,” Marinette asked.

“Possible is not the thing you should be concerning yourself with,” Fu said, sweat glistening on his
brow as he rose to his diminutive height with a half stern, half fearful look. “I did not name you my successor to use the Miraculous however you saw fit; a Guardian only seeks to protect the kwami entrusted to them...and to use these...these powers in conjunction with one another…”

Master Fu was breathing hard, one side of his face twisted in a concerned scowl and one unnaturally drooping despite his best efforts.

“Master?” Marinette said, slowly rising to her feet. Master Fu blinked, reaching up with a shaking arm to pat the side of his face as he looked at Marinette with a strange, fearful expression.

“To...to hangre....” Master Fu fell back, splintering his ancient chair as Marinette scrambled to catch him before he hit the ground.

“Master?!” Marinette said, holding the old man’s softly convulsing body. “Master Fu?!”

“What’s wrong with him?” Wayzz asked as Marinette fished her phone out with one hand while cradling Master Fu’s head with the other.

“I-I think he’s having a stroke,” Marinette said, frantically dialing emergency services. “Yes, hello? I need an ambulance at 72 Rue de Merre, now! My friend is having a stroke!”

The phone slipped out of Marinette’s fingers as Fu’s hand reached up for hers, his eyes pleading even as his mouth struggled to form the words he wanted to say.

“Hang in there, Master Fu…” Marinette muttered, smoothing his hair. “Help is coming...help is coming…”

She pulled the smaller man towards the living room, careful not to jostle him too much as she laid him on the futon, covering him with a quilted afghan as he started to shiver. As the sound of ambulance sirens drew closer, her eyes landed on the bracelet around Fu’s wrist that dangled uselessly on the floor. Thinking quickly, she snapped his Miraculous off his wrist, tucking it in her pocket as Wayzz disappeared with a confused protest and a flash of light.

“I’ll keep this safe,” Marinette muttered, eyes now falling on the familiar octagonal box resting on the table. She glanced back at Fu for a moment, heart pounding as she cracked the box open, frantically grabbing the Fox, the Bee, the-
“Hello?” Marinette shut the box as she stood up, staggering over towards the door as the paramedics knocked. “Anyone home?”

“It would be unwise for me to speculate at this point,” Doctor Fandor said. “The fact that we were able to treat him as early as we were is promising but…”

Marinette nodded, watching the heart rate monitor blip in a slow, steady beat through the glass. She had never thought of Master Fu as “old” until now; not until he was hooked up to a dozen different machines keeping his unconscious body alive. He seemed to be shrinking into himself somehow, the lines on his face deepening with each passing breath.

“We’re still waiting on the results of his blood tests before we start any serious treatment,” Doctor Fandor continued. “We don’t want to inadvertently aggravate anything that might have caused his stroke.”

“He...said his personal physician was coming,” Marinette said, clutching on to the jewels in her pocket for a small source of comfort. “I’ll, uh...I’ll send her your way. Maybe she can tell you a little more about his condition.”

“Visiting hours are normally over by now, but…” Doctor Fandor coughed. “If you learn anything—”

“I’ll send him your way,” Marinette said with a weak smile. “I’ll be back with some blankets for him...thanks doctor.”

Doctor Fandor nodded, stepping away as Marinette lingered in the doorway for a brief moment, watching her master sleep for a few moments before stepping away, walking down the cold, sterile hospital hallways in a daze, letting her feet robotically carry her out into the night and onto the midnight streets of Paris.

Until Fu got better, she was, effectively, the last guardian of the Miraculous. Somehow in her quest to untangle herself from the chains of destiny, Marinette had found herself all the more entrenched in a fight that seemed to have no end. The Bee, Fox, and Turtle Miraculous clanked in her pocket with every step, inert, yet a constant reminder of her new responsibility.
What happened if he died?

Was she supposed to be a mentor to more teenagers barely younger than she was? Was she supposed to decide who was worthy enough to hold cosmic power in the palm of their hand? In all her training with Master Fu, he never prepared her for the possibility that she might need to take up the mantle before she was ready. Her head pounded with every step as an inescapable thought rose to the top of her beleaguered mind.

She had to get the others.

Even in her exhausted, emotionally battered state, her feet carried her towards Master Fu’s house, moving faster and faster through the darkening night until she stood at the back door to Master Fu’s house, wiggling the lock until she stood in the cold, dark kitchen she had been in only a few hours before.

The tea kettle sat alone and untended, steaming faintly as Marinette picked up her upturned kitchen chair. Her hands gripped the back of the chair for support, biting her lip to stem the wave of helplessness that threatened to overwhelm her. She took a few, shaking breaths, rubbing the backs of her eyes as she staggered into the living room.

The first thing she noticed was that the polished wooden box was open. The second thing she noticed was that each drawer was pulled out and each Miraculous slot was completely empty. Finally, she noticed a torn piece of paper folded on top of the box, neat black handwriting barely visible in the dim light of the apartment...

Across the city, Adrien sat motionless on his bedroom floor, dried tear tracks glistening in the florescent light as he looked down on the twelve new Miraculous he had rescued from Master Fu's empty house...

Two floors above him, Gabriel unlocked a hidden book safe, withdrawing a glittering blue peacock pin that had sat unused for almost ten years. He glanced up at the picture of Emilie cradling a newborn Adrien, took a deep breath and calmly returned the empty book safe to its place on the shelf...

A few miles away, Alya Cesaire sat staring at a Ladyblog post, finger hovering over the post button for a moment, before saving the article titled "Ladybug and Chat Noir on the outs?" as a draft. Reaching over to grab her coffee, her fingers accidentally nudged the cup off the desk, sending it to the floor with a wet, shattering crash...

"You lost little guy?"
Down the road, Nino Lahiffe leaned down, reaching out a hand to a black cat that hissed as he approached, quickly running off into the night before Nino could catch him.

"Fine," Nino said, tossing the kitchen garbage in the can and heading back inside. "No belly scratches for you then..."

"Night dude!"

Two streets over, Luka Couffaine raised a lazy hand over his shoulder as he stepped out of the back of the warehouse, under a ladder and onto the cold Parisian streets, humming a tune under his breath as he made his way home...

Above him, in the penthouse suite on the fourteenth floor of Le Grand Paris, Chloe Bourgeois woke suddenly, slowly sitting up and casting her eyes around her room. She got the strangest sensation that she was supposed to be doing something but quickly chalked it up to the product of too many sweets before bed and tried to settle down again...

"Crack!"

As she stepped out of the shower, Kagami Tsurugi's foot split a carelessly cast aside comb in half. She frowned, bending over to pick up the pieces and carefully toss them into the trash can...

"I will handle things from here...thank you doctor."

Doctor Fandor opened his mouth to protest but the look the tall, severe looking woman gave him told him they were done speaking. A pair of neatly dressed attendants in the room behind her unpacked their suitcases, attaching silvery looking monitors to Master Fu's fingers and unpacking vacuum sealed bags of powdered medicinal supplies. The woman slowly approached Master Fu's bedside, picking up his chart with a small laugh.

"Chan Fu?" She mused, shaking her head. "Is that what you've been calling yourself, you old tortoise?"

"Master He?" Master He turned to see her assistant holding up a small flask with clear pink liquid swirling around.

"Give him three drops, but he's too far gone for that to be enough," Master He said, taking off her white jacket and rolling her sleeves up. "We need to work fast if we're going to save this old fool's life."

Reaching down to take his pulse, Master He frowned as she noticed his bare wrist.

"Lost another one, have you?" She clucked, turning to one of her assistants. "Go to his home and retrieve the box; we can't afford to have any more Miraculous escape our clutches..."

And back in Master Fu's house, Marinette's fingers clenched around the note, trembling in fear, frustration, and anger as she read it.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Squabbler for reminding me I should probably deal with Master Fu :)

WHO'S READY FOR A GOOD OLD FASHIONED DONNYBROOK????

As always, feedback is much appreciated. This series is only going to be following canon through Anansi so anything that comes after it is not gonna be taken into account.

Just a note: I did change Chloe's ship plan because I couldn't naturally think of a good way to ingratiate her into DJWiFi much as I'm a fan of that triad. So I'm gonna pilot some Lukchlogami to see how that plays out because of a kinda cool idea I have for them.

NEXT TIME: Y'all ever seen that Naruto episode where Obito and Kakashi fight? It's gonna be kinda like that.
The distant droning of the mass carrying on below his feet provided a dull, grim soundtrack to Chat Noir’s train of thought. He had given up pacing a tread on the rooftop of Notre Dame’s cathedral, standing with his back against the wall as he waited for Ladybug to arrive. Arms crossed and jaw set, he tried to wrest control of the storm of conflicting emotions that bubbled unpleasantly in his stomach.

The large clock struck nine, an echoing gong rattling Chat’s teeth as a familiar red figure swung into view. He passed his sheathed baton between his hands, stepping out from the shadows and into the moonlight as Ladybug landed in a low crouch on the edge of the roof.

“...hey,” Ladybug said a little warily, eyes drifting down towards the baton in Chat Noir’s grip.

“Hey there,” Chat echoed, noticing that she hadn’t respooled her yo-yo after landing. “Rough night?"

“You could say that,” Ladybug replied, glancing around at the shadows that loomed over her like the cathedral architecture. “Not exactly our usual haunt.”

“Felt like a change of scenery,” Chat shrugged, leaning on his baton. “Haven’t been up here in quite a long time, have we?”

“Not since we found a better local to spar,” Ladybug said with a weary chuckle that trailed off into a few moments of tense silence that hung like the bitter October chill in the air between them.

Ladybug was the first to break the silence. “...where are the other Miraculous, Chat?”
“Master Fu?”

Trust another longwinded “future of the company” speech from his father to derail Adrien’s plans of getting some better advice on the whole Ladybug situation. By the time Gabriel was done, Adrien was half an hour late, running down backstreets and staying detransformed in case Ladybug or Ladybug’s new friend were looking for him.

Adrien knocked on the back door, arching up on the balls of his feet as he peered into the dimly lit kitchen. “Plagg, can you see anything?”

Plagg floated out of Adrien’s hood, peering in the window over the door. “Other than the ugly rugs he hasn’t changed in a hundred years? Not much…”

Adrien reached out, trying the doorknob out of frustration more than anything else. He half expected it to be locked and Master Fu in his turtle-patterned jammies for the evening. He didn’t expect the door to swing open, revealing a dimly lit kitchen that looked like it had seen better days. A broken chair lay strewn on the floor next to a shattered mug of tea. A faintly steaming teapot sat unnoticed on the stove and perhaps most worrying of all, a mug of shincha green tea that Adrien had gave him last Christmas sat undrunk across the table.

Adrien opened his mouth to call out before Plagg quickly held his paw up to his mouth. Grabbing the leg of the broken chair, Adrien slowly crept through the house, wary of every creaking step he took in case whoever had shattered Master Fu’s chair was still lurking in the shadows. He stepped into the living room, brandishing the splintered piece of furniture like a knife as his eyes swept the mildly disheveled room.

The bitterness about being the last person to find out about Master Fu didn’t linger long as the kindly old guardian took a unique interest in Adrien. No longer was Adrien completely alone as a civilian; he had someone to talk to outside of Ladybug and Plagg about the challenges a Miraculous holder faced. When thoughts of his fight with Ladybug wouldn’t leave him alone, Adrien reached out...only to arrive too late to be of any help.

“Check upstairs,” Adrien said, nodding towards Fu’s bedroom as Adrien slowly made his way around the perimeter of the room, opening cabinets slowly and scanning for any clue as to Master Fu’s whereabouts. His eyes landed on a familiar wooden box that Adrien had never had the chance to look inside before. He had asked about it a few times only for it to be brushed off as an urn for a departed friend. Now it lay almost open, multicolored velvet tempting Adrien to look inside.

“Not upstairs,” Plagg said, floating down as Adrien knelt in front of the table, slowly raising the lid
“Did you know this was here?” Adrien asked quietly, fingers running over the empty grooves in the velvet where he could imagine a hair comb, a bracelet, and a necklace laying.

“We…” Plagg trailed off as Adrien tossed the broken chair leg to one side, lips trembling as he stared down in horror at the empty box in front of him.

“They’re…they’re gone,” Adrien murmured. “This is where they were supposed to be, right?”

Plagg hovered down to the open box, lifting the velvet up to look for any sign of his friends. “This can’t be happening…who could have taken them?! Nobody knew they were here except…”

Plagg trailed off, but it was clear by the look on Adrien’s face that he didn’t need to say it.

“…she was here,” Adrien said, voice trembling with barely constrained fear and anger. “She…she took them!”

“We don’t know if-”

“She was the only one Master Fu trusted with their location!” Adrien snapped. “Who else would have taken them?! She had to have known where they were! If I had just been here when I was supposed to have been here then-”

Adrien’s fingers clenched around the box, unknowingly springing a mechanism that caused twelve smaller drawers to shoot out the sides. Adrien fell backwards on his hands, head arching up and staring at twelve pristine jewels embedded into a variety of accessories and artifacts.

“…there’s more?” Adrien murmured, leaning forward and slowly picking up a black and red brooch.

“She must not have had time,” Plagg said, glancing around. “We must have just missed them…”
Adrien spun the box around, rifling through the open drawers to see if any more had gone missing.

“She just took three,” Adrien said, heart pounding as he stared into the open box. “The three she knows...the three who know and trust her more than they trust me.”

“Now you’re just-hey!” Plagg watched as Adrien started emptying the box, hastily jamming his pockets full of Miraculous. “What are you-”

“I don’t know where Fu is but something tells me he wouldn’t have given Ladybug carte blanche to make off with as many Miraculous as she wanted,” Adrien said, stuffing the Dog bracelet and the Snake charm into his pockets. “And it isn’t going to be long before she’s back to pick up another dozen Miraculous to either give to Hawkmoth or use to get you! Does that sound fun to you?”

“...you don’t think-”

“I don’t know what I think right now,” Adrien babbled, tucking the Ox and the Dragon into his coat pocket. “Right now, Ladybug is talking crazy and there’s a box full of Miraculous unguarded on Master Fu’s table; what do you want me to do?”

Plagg opened his mouth to argue but found his excuses coming up short in light of almost overwhelming evidence.

“If you have a better idea, I’d love to hear it,” Adrien said, ferreting the last of his Miraculous away in his back pocket. “Until we find out what happened to Master Fu...”

The thought of the small, kindly old man that had been a good friend and mentor to Adrien suddenly hurt or dead made Adrien’s stomach churn as he snatched a piece of notebook paper from the coffee table, hastily scribbling down a message and leaving it neatly folded on top of the now completely empty box.

“...we need to get these somewhere-”

“-safe,” Chat Noir said flatly, green eyes narrowing at his partner. “All but three anyway; wouldn’t
“I don’t know where I went wrong, really…” Tikki sighed, morosely nibbling on the corner of her cookie. “I always thought she had a good head on her shoulders. Not prone to jumping off rooftops like that Florentine Ladybug I had in the fifteenth century. Maybe that was the problem...maybe she’s too smart to know when she’s making a mistake…”

Marinette’s gigantic striped cat plushy stared unblinkingly back at Tikki.

“You always know just what to say,” Tikki said, patting the toy on the nose as the trapdoor banged open, startling her into peering over the edge of the bed as a tired, haggard looking Marinette stumbled into her loft. “And where have you been, missy?”

“He took them…” Marinette murmured, staring up at the ceiling as she rolled on to her fainting couch. “He...I was at Master Fu’s and then...stroke...hospital...Miraculous…”

“Did you hit your head on the trapdoor again?” Tikki asked, floating down from the bed. “Do you want me to fetch the-”

“Hey do we have to stay in your pocket all night or can we come out while you’re having another existential breakdown?” Tikki frowned as a small orange fox wriggled its way out of Marinette’s coat pocket.

“Trìxx?” Tikki asked.

“What’s shakin’ Rikki Tikki Tavi?” Trixx said, floating up and lightly bumping Tikki’s head with their own. “Wayzz, Pollen, come say hi!”

“We hope it’s not a bad time to beg your hospitality,” Pollen said, floating up and lightly kissing Tikki on her cheeks. “We know it’s very late but…”

Tikki’s eyes trailed over to Wayzz’ downcast expression. “...Master Fu is hurt.”
“Hurt?” Tikki’s eyes drifted between Wayzz and Marinette who was staggering to her feet, rifling through her dresser as the sky on the horizon slowly started to pinken.

“He had a stroke…” Marinette grumbled, pulling a fresh blouse and jeans out of the dresser drawer as she shucked her coat off. “In the hospital...I had to take them in…”

“...please, go make yourselves at home,” Tikki said with a small, uncertain smile. “Beds and cookies are in the dollhouse.”

“Ever the gracious host,” Pollen said with a small curtsey as she and Trixx tugged a morose looking Wayzz towards the dollhouse. When she was sure they were out of earshot, Tikki floated down to Marinette, peeking over the divider as she changed.

“Explain.” Tikki hissed. “All of it. **Now** .”

“Master Fu. Stroke. Hospital. Had to rescue the kwami,” Marinette muttered, reapplying her deodorant.

“Is he going to be okay!” Tikki asked.

“Don’t know,” Marinette shrugged. “Not a doctor.”

“Well what did the doctor say-”

“I don’t **know**!” Marinette snapped. “I wasn’t there for long! I had to get back to Master Fu’s place and pick up the Miraculous!”

Tikki’s jaw set as her eyes narrowed at Marinette. “So where are the rest?”

Marinette glared at her blouse as she picked little fuzzies off of it. “...Chat took them.”
“Chat...took them?” Tikki echoed.

“He was going to meet with Master Fu but something held him up,” Marinette said, pinching the bridge of her nose as she fought off a pounding headache. “He came back while we were gone...he took the rest of them out of the box when he saw Trixx, Wayzz, and Pollen missing from the box on the table.”

Tikki blinked, floating back a little as though struck. “...so...he must have thought-”

“I don’t...care what Chat thinks,” Marinette grumbled. “With Master Fu out of commission, I am the last Guardian. I am the one he trusted to take care of the Miraculous; not Chat.”

“Then this is just a misunderstanding,” Tikki said in an almost pleading tone. “Just talk to him! Tell him why you took the Miraculous!”

“I have done nothing but talk to him,” Marinette said in an eerily quiet voice. “I have talked and talked and talked and talked but he just doesn’t want to listen! He has it in his head that a stupid superhero fight is the best way to solve this! He isn’t even open to my solution; he talks a big game about trust, but when it comes down to it, he doesn’t trust me enough to realize that I’m right!”

“I know you’re not on my side,” Marinette muttered as Tikki opened her mouth to protest. “I know you think I’m wrong or crazy or too craaaaaaaaaaaaazy for Adrien to realize his father is a monster but I know who I’m dealing with. Hawkmoth is not in control of this deal; I am. Hawkmoth doesn’t get to use any Miraculous; I do. I’m the one in control of this runaway freight train and if Chat has a problem handing over the reigns, tough. I’m the Guardian until Master Fu gets better, and if he doesn’t want to use his ring to finish his mission, then I will.”

Marinette’s shoulders rose and fell as her breathing slowly returned to a normal pace. The sun crested over the city, spilling light into her room as Tikki watched her chosen grab her backpack and trudge down the stairs.

“Where are you going?” Tikki asked.

“It’s six on a Tuesday; I have to help Papa proof the bread before class,” Marinette mumbled, ignoring her kwami’s feeble tugs on her backpack straps.
“You need to sleep,” Tikki said. “You haven’t been sleeping well since-”

“**You** need to sleep,” Marinette said, kicking the hatch to the ladder open. “We have a long night ahead of us…”

Ladybug’s jaw tightened. “They’re safe with me.”

“Are they safe or are they with you?” Chat asked. “Because that sounds like two pretty contradictory things.”

“I took them to keep them safe,” Ladybug said, eyes narrowing. “As their acting Guardian.”

“Speaking of which, I couldn’t help but notice their current caretaker is a little AWOL,” Chat said, noting the way Ladybug’s steely expression seemed to fall at Master Fu’s mention. “I was supposed to meet him last night, but wouldn’t you know it? He wasn’t home. Now…you wouldn’t happen to know where he ran off to, would you?”

Ladybug bit her lip, breaking Chat’s gaze with a sigh. “He’s…in the hospital.”

“Care to explain why?” Chat asked in a low, eerily calm voice barely audible over the noise of the city below.

“You think I hurt him?!” Ladybug laughed bitterly.

“I think it’s very convenient that Master Fu ends up in the hospital and you just happen to come across three Miraculous whose wielders you know personally,” Chat said, glancing over her shoulder. “I’m actually surprised I’m not getting ambushed right now…or are you waiting for me to have my back turned before you stick a knife in it?”

“You think I took them to…use against you?!” Ladybug spat.
“Hey, that would get you what you wanted that much faster, right?” Chat asked. “Four heads are better than one after all...oh, sorry two. It would be remiss of me to exclude your new partner.”

“If I wanted to take your Miraculous, I would have done it already!” Ladybug snapped, eyes wild and lower lip trembling with barely concealed anger. “I am so, so not in the mood to argue with you right now, Chat! Where...are...the Miraculous?!”

“You know, I would have brought them, but I thought I’d gift wrap them first so you can give Hawkmoth a nice early Christmas present!” Chat snapped. “Master Fu was gone; I made a call to keep the Miraculous you didn’t make off with safe!”

“That wasn’t your call to make!” Ladybug shot back. “I am the acting Guardian! I am the one Master Fu trusted to keep these Miraculous safe; not you!”

“Did he make that call before or after you told him that you wanted to use our powers to give Hawkmoth everything he wanted?” Chat spat, hair raising and tail-belt swishing back and forth irritably. “Hey, why don’t we wait for him to get out of the hospital to ask him? Let’s table this Hawkmoth Mercy Run debate until Master Fu adds his two cents?”

“Because he may never get out of the hospital!” Ladybug shouted, hoarse, trembling voice echoing off the cathedral walls. “H-He had a stroke and h-he’s sick and he could very well die leaving me in charge of a bunch of jewelry I never wanted to deal with in the first place!”

Ladybug’s voice echoed off the tall stone walls as she stared him down, jaw set and eyes brimming with unshed emotion.

“And as much as I would rather not spend the rest of my life babysitting kwami,” Ladybug said, blinking and shaking her head. “I am going to do my job as best I can...and for that...for that I need the Miraculous back... all of them.”

“...including mine?” Chat asked.

“...including yours.”

A chilly breeze rustled their hair as Ladybug felt a weight slide off her shoulders. She had spoken the terrible and unavoidable truth she had been avoiding all week and the world didn’t immediately end. Chat Noir didn’t even react like he thought he would.
“Until Master Fu gets better, I decide how to use the Miraculous and who to give them to,” Ladybug said, jaw tight as Chat just watched her with an unwaveringly sad gaze. “I gave you a chance to work with me. I gave you so many chances to work with me, but you’ve made it very clear that you don’t care to anymore...so until Master Fu recovers, I’m...taking back the ring.”

There was no impassioned plea to see his side of things, no stubborn refusal to part with his Miraculous. As the silence between them stretched on, Ladybug found herself wishing he would just yell like she expected him to. She could deal with Chat’s outbursts of anger when they were up front and grandiose like most of his emotional displays. The quiet, resigned look of sad, tired disappointment in Chat’s eyes was the only thing she got...and she didn’t quite know how to react to that.

Chat let out a deep sigh that seemed to deflate him a little as he looked down at his ring, turning it around his finger with the pad of his thumb. For a moment, she thought he was considering it. She could see the wheels in his head turn as he bit his lip, tossing the idea back and forth in his mind as she waited, fingers gripping the string of her yo-yo tightly.

“...just give it up,” Ladybug said, dropping her voice into a low, soothing tone. “We don’t have to fight...but I will if it comes to that.”

She could see his resolve start to crumble as he chewed the inside of his lip, avoiding her gaze. “I...don’t want to fight you,” Chat said in a small, soft voice. “It’s not right, you know? We...we were supposed to do things together...up to the end.”

Chat raised his hand, eyes turning up to meet Ladybug’s with a small, shaky smile. “You know...this week has really sucked.”

Ladybug found herself laughing in spite of herself, wiping her eyes with the back of her gloved hand. “Tell me about it...I think I maybe slept an hour total since last Friday...”

“Wow, a whole hour,” Chat chuckled, rubbing his nose with a small sniffle. “I’m actually jealous...”

Chat hesitantly reached his ring-hand out, palm up in an inviting gesture as he tossed his baton to one side.

“I don’t want to fight you,” Chat said, voice firm and resolute. “But I promised Master Fu to never
give this to anyone...so to keep with the letter of that promise, you’re going to need to take it off yourself.”

Ladybug’s eyes drifted between Chat’s hand and his face, cautiously taking a step forward as her brows knit in confusion.

“I’ll go with you on this if you want it,” Chat said seriously, tossing his baton to one side and extending his hand. “But if you want it...you’re going to have to come get it.”

Ladybug took a deep breath, fastening her yo-yo to her hip as she slowly approached Chat. “I know this doesn’t seem fair...but I promise you, it’s for the best.”

“...you really believe that, don’t you?” Chat asked, head tilting to one side as Ladybug got closer.

“I do,” Ladybug said, tentatively reaching her fingers out towards his ring finger. “After all this is said and done...we’ll be able to go about our lives like normal...we’ll be able to just be friends...”

Ladybug’s fingers brushed the green face of Chat Noir’s ring, gently tugging it forward and slowly down his finger.

“You know…” Chat chuckled. “I really don’t see that happening anymore.”

Before she could register what was happening, Chat’s hand flipped over, snaking around her wrist and pulling her in while his free hand shot for her face. Out of instinct more than anything else, she threw her arm out, catching his elbow as his fingers hovered a hair’s breath over her left earring.

Ladybug’s breath caught in her chest as she looked up to see any trace of softness or sentimentality gone from Chat Noir’s eyes. Even the malicious glint they took when possessed by an akuma didn’t scare her as much as the look of tranquil focus that he fixed her with as his fingers reached for her Miraculous.

“Well...darn…” Chat chuckled, fingers wiggling as he struggled against Ladybug’s strength. “Worth a shot...”

Ladybug raised a leg, planting her foot against Chat Noir’s chest and kicking him backwards,
breaking his grip as she just stared at him for a moment, watching him crouch to pick up his baton.

“You...you were going to-” Ladybug’s fingers reached up to touch her earrings, heart skipping a beat when she found they were ever so slightly out of their socket.

“I didn’t lie about not wanting to fight you,” Chat said almost sadly. “I didn’t...I don’t, really. Hell, if you had come to me with any other plan that involved my ring, I might have agreed to it by now. If you needed my ring to help quite literally anybody else in the world, I would have given it to you by now.”

Chat slid his Miraculous back down his finger as Ladybug unspooled her yo-yo, holding the impossibly strong string taunt in front of her like a shield.

“But you were right when you said this was about more than what I want,” Chat conceded, extending his baton with a flick of his wrist. “This isn’t even about what you want. This is about the men, women, and children who have spent the last four years living in total fear of every brush of anger; in fear that one bad day is all it would take to turn them into a monster. This is about all the people who were forced to hurt their friends and family because one lunatic with a God complex wanted to make a wish! This is about the uncountable amount of suffering Hawkmoth has caused to his kwami, this city, and everyone living in it!”

Chat’s shoulders rose and fell as a familiar fire crept into his eyes.

“He...has...to pay!” Chat hissed, tears brimming in his eyes. “If we don’t make this right, then nobody will! He will just go on, free as a bird, with a pat on the back and a nice shiny prize for being a superpowered asshole! Everything we’ve done, everything we’ve fought for, all the times we got hurt will have been for nothing! And this has to all have been for something!”

Chat Noir raised his baton, pointing it across the rooftop at Ladybug. “If you won’t make him pay...then I will.”

“You really don’t want to pick a fight with me right now, Chat Noir,” Ladybug said, yo-yo spinning as she slowly paced around him.

“Not particularly,” Chat said. “So why don’t make things easy and just give me your Miraculous?”
 ?',>

IT BEGINS

Hold on to your butts because this is gonna get wet and wild pretty quick. As always reactions/responses/politely worded death threats are always welcome and much appreciated.
If You're Ready For A Battle...

Chapter Notes

Author Note: This chapter switches back and forth between Ladybug/Chat Noir's first sparring match and their current battle. All past scenes are written in all italics while present scenes follow normal text.

“So you want me to just come at you?”

Chat Noir twirled his baton back and forth between his hands as Ladybug stretched out on the rooftop across from him. Full contact sparring was not Chat’s idea of a nice first date with his newly minted partner, but he supposed there would be time enough to ask Ladybug out for coffee later if he played his cards right.

“Obviously don’t use that black glowing hand thingie,” Ladybug chuckled, whipping her yo-yo out and twirling it around experimentally. “But otherwise, yeah, just come at me like you’re trying to steal my Miraculous.”

“You think Hawkmoth is gonna show up in person now that we put Stoneheart away?” Chat Noir asked.

“No...but I don’t think that’s the last time our butterfly friend is gonna gun for us,” Ladybug said, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Besides...if one of us gets turned all evil by Hawkmoth-”

“You think he can do that?” Chat asked.

“I don’t know what he can do,” Ladybug shrugged. “I’d like to be ready for anything though.”

“Even if someone makes us fight?” Chat shuddered. “I don’t like the idea of hurting you...”

Ladybug gave her newly minted partner a challenging smirk. “Who says you’re the one who’s gonna hurt me?”
Chat straightened up, raising his baton as his eyes narrowed. “You really think you’re gonna beat me that easily?”

“Let’s just say I think you’re gonna need to give it your all,” Ladybug said, sticking her tongue out at him. “Ready?”

“Want me to count it down?” Chat said, lowering himself into a fighting stance. “Three...two...one...”

Ladybug’s fingers tightened on her yo-yo string as it swung around her head, cautiously waiting for Chat to make the first move. He seemed waiting for her to make a move; either to surrender her earrings or launch an attack. Baton raised like the blade of a sword, his eyes never left hers as she maneuvered herself around the edge of the rooftop.

“Fine...we’ll do things your way,” Ladybug said, glancing over Chat’s shoulder. “Rena! Now!”

Chat whipped his head around, expecting an orange and black blur to come hurtling at him only to be greeted by the sight of an empty city behind him. By the time he realized what happened, Ladybug’s yo-yo had shot out, wrapping around his wrist and jerking him forward across the roof.

“You’re not the only one with dirty tricks up their sleeve!” Ladybug grunted, as Chat regained his footing. Instead of fighting her, he kicked off the roof, both of their strengths to catapult himself towards Ladybug’s face at full speed. At the last second she leaned back as Chat sailed over, tucking into a ball and bringing her feet up to kick hard against Chat’s chest.

He shot across the roof, bouncing off a stone column before rocketing back towards Ladybug as she yanked him by the cord still wrapped around his wrist. He spun like a top, leg shooting out as he approached and catching Ladybug in the back of the head with a kick that brought her to one knee. Ladybug rose with a snarl, pushing him back across the rooftop as she rubbed the back of her neck.

“Sorry,” Chat chuckled. “Did that-”
“-hurt?”

“Not really,” Ladybug muttered, rubbing the spot where Chat had bonked her with his baton a moment ago. She had barely felt the pressure through her suit despite the fact that Chat had given her a whack hard enough to send her back a few feet. “Huh...I guess that’s good to know.”

“Need a break?” Chat asked, a tense, hurt expression on his face. Ladybug simply snorted, shooting him a cocky smirk he was quickly falling in love with.

“You-”

“-wish,” Ladybug spat, bringing her leg around in an arc that swept Chat’s legs out from under his feet. With catlike grace, he deftly landed on his hand, springing back and landing on a gargoyle as Ladybug recovered.

“I’ve never wished you harm,” Chat said, unfurling himself and batting Ladybug’s yo-yo away with the haft of his staff.

“You have a funny way of showing it!” Ladybug snapped, yo-yo ricocheting off the stonework and wrapping around the haft of Chat Noir’s baton. He leapt back, using an archway as a simple pulley to yank Ladybug off her feet and into the air above the cathedral’s roof. A grasping claw shot past her ear as she let her yo-yo go, arms wrapping around Chat’s waist as she threw her weight backwards, tossing Chat Noir over her head and on to the roof below.

Pivoting at the last moment, Chat tucked into a ball, rolling along the hard stonework and-

- coming to a stop just before he teetered over the ledge.

“D-Don’t you think you’re taking this a little too seriously?” Chat chuckled, ducking a wide, arcing yo-yo shot.
“Akuma aren’t going to go easy on you, kitty,” Ladybug laughed, shooting her yo-yo at his ankles. “You better step your game up or you’re not going to last long.”

Chat danced out of the way of the yo-yo, stepping on the disk to prevent Ladybug from taking it back.

“Well, wouldn’t want this to end too soon,” Chat chuckled, lunging at Ladybug with a staff attack that—sailed inches above Ladybug’s head. Her arms came up to trap the staff, wrenching it from Chat Noir’s grip as she drove her foot into his midsection with a grunt that echoed off the ancient masonwork. He flew backwards, bouncing off the wall as Ladybug swung his baton in a wide arc towards his stomach. Chat ducked in time to miss the stone-shattering swing of his baton, vaulting over Ladybug’s head and diving for the small, barely recognizable red earrings as he passed.

“No!” Ladybug roared, batting Chat Noir up and over the roof as his claw snagged her yo-yo latched to her hip. He soared high over the city for a moment before yanking at her with a sharp snap of his wrist, tugging her along, off, and into the mostly deserted streets below. In mid flight, his legs locked around her waist, hands frantically diving for the earrings as she struggled to keep him away.

“Let...me... go!” Ladybug hissed as his fingertips brushes the smooth, polished metal of her Miraculous just as they collided with the street below. They tumbled over and over in a tangle of limbs, rolling a quarter of a mile down the road and separating, each landing in a low crouch as they glared at each other warily.

Ladybug slowly rose as Chat Noir recovered his baton, extending it to the length of a broadsword and letting it dangle loosely from his hands.

“How do you think this is going to end, Chat?” Ladybug asked, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “How long do you think you can keep this up before I beat you?”

“You know, that confidence is gonna take you places,” Chat said, twirling his baton experimentally. “Unfortunately, it’s not enough to take my Miraculous.”

“How do you figure?” Ladybug laughed, shaking her head. “Chat, when have you ever been good
enough to beat me? How many times have you been made to fight me now? And how many times did you actually win?”

“Well, you never know,” Chat shrugged with a dangerously lopsided grin. “My luck might be turning around.”

“Really?” Ladybug asked, yo-yo whipping around her head. “What exactly has changed since the last time you lost to me?”

Chat raised his baton like a sword ready to thrust, eyes narrowing as he tensed, ready to strike. “I’m actually going to try this time.”

His hand twisted a split second before his baton extended, shooting past her face and embedding into the wall behind her as she twisted out of the way.

“Is this what you call trying?” Ladybug asked, turning back to see Chat Noir retracting his baton with him on the end of it, rocketing towards her face feet-first and ready to-

-knock her off her feet.

“Not bad!” Ladybug said, tumbling back on to the roof, kipping up, and leaping over the haft of Chat Noir’s staff as he swept it along the ground.

“You sure you’re not a gymnast?” Chat chuckled, lunging with the tip of his staff that Ladybug effortlessly batted to one side with a kick.

“I’m sure I would break my neck if I tried that without this suit on,” Ladybug giggled, backflipping away from a low claw strike and responding with a yo-yo shot that-

-wrapped around a nearby lamp post and allowed Ladybug to shoot herself towards Chat at full
speed. He ducked, rising as she passed over him to flip her mid air and sent her tumbling down the street, knocking over a parked car as she skidded to a halt.

Heart pounding in her ears, Ladybug scrambled behind a parked van, looking for a moment to recollect her thoughts. Every time she seemed to gain the upper hand, Chat did something that put her on the back foot again. Getting to his ring finger proved harder than she thought as he wove a web of steel around himself with a constantly twirling baton, knocking away all her attempts to end the fight quickly.

“Alright, Plan B,” Ladybug said, opening her hand. “Lucky Charm!”

A small black and red ball appeared in her hands, heavy and hard enough to knock anything she threw it at for a loop. She bounced it experimentally off the ground once as she caught Chat’s reflection in the glass of the store.

“You know I can see you, right?” Chat asked, waving at Ladybug’s reflection as she eyeballed the wall next to the shop, the lamp post, and the side of Chat’s head. If she could ricochet the ball off both surfaces, she could strike him in his blind spot, incapacitating him long enough for her to take his ring.

“Bet you won’t see this,” Ladybug muttered, whipping the ball as hard as she could against the wall-

“Ooph!” Ladybug jerked backwards as the ball ricocheted off the wall and smacked her directly in the face, spinning her around and banging her head on the van as she heard Chat audibly wince behind her.

“That had to have stung,” Chat chuckled as Ladybug bent down to pick the ball up again. “Was that supposed to do something? I know you’re the one with all the brilliant plans, so you’re gonna have to explain it to the dumb cats in the audience.”

“You said it, not me,” Ladybug growled, stepping out from behind the van and whipping the ball at Chat Noir again...only for her foot to land on a patch of slick sidewalk and jerk out from underneath her as she released it, sending it flying into the night and out of reach.

"Am I supposed to fetch that?" Chat asked. "Because that's kind of a dog thing."
Something’s wrong... Ladybug thought as Chat approached, baton extended and ready to strike.

“Looks like someone’s having an unlucky night,” Chat said, leaping into the air and diving straight for-

- Ladybug’s midsection, wrapping her in a bearhug and pulling her off her feet.

“Caught you!” Chat crowed, waving Ladybug back and forth as she struggled to wriggle out of his grip.

“This isn’t a game, Chat!” Ladybug squealed, kicking at her partner futilely as she tried to wriggle out of his super-hug.

“Not one you’re winning, anyway,” Chat sniggered, ignoring the way Ladybug-

-rained elbow after elbow on top of Chat Noir’s head as he drove her hard against the side of the shop wall, dislodging a few decorative bricks from the facade.

“Didn’t your father ever teach you not to hit a lady?” Ladybug grunted, smashing her elbow into the side of his head as Chat picked her up, spun her around, and slammed her back first into the hood of a nearby car.

“Didn’t yours ever teach you not to hit a cat?” Chat hissed as Ladybug struck him hard in the face with her palm, locking his arm in an armbar as she tried to reach for his ring. In response, he rammed her into the car again, knocking it over and sending them both-

- tumbling to the ground, laughing as Ladybug’s fingers mercilessly attacked his sides.
“L-Ladybug, stop!” Chat laughed, trying to wriggle away from the onslaught of tickles she rained down on him. “Not fair!”

“I don’t play fair, kitty,” Ladybug cackled, digging her fingers into his sides without mercy. “Should have never told me you were ticklish!”

“I can’t believe you’re using truth or dare questions against me!” Chat panted, grabbing onto a railing and sliding out from underneath her before she could tickle him again.

“All’s fair in love and war,” Ladybug said, readying another fighting stance.

“So is this love or war?” Chat asked, arching an eyebrow with a suggestive wink.

“Pretending to flirt with me isn’t going to make me go easy on you,” Ladybug snorted.

“Who’s pretending?” Chat asked, leaning back as Ladybug—

—shot her yo-yo at his legs, yanking him off his feet and dragging him down the street towards her as she reeled him in.

“You...just had ...to be stubborn ,” Ladybug growled as Chat grabbed at a lamp post, trying to catch himself before she pulled him in. “If you had just done what I said, we wouldn’t have to do it like this! But you just had to make this even harder, didn’t you?!”

“Yeah, because I totally put us on this batcrap crazy path to destruction!” Chat said, kicking at Ladybug with both feet as he wriggled his ankles out of her yo-yo. “At least I’m not giving up without a fight!”

“That’s just how you think, isn’t it?!” Ladybug snapped, ducking a staff thrust and countering with a series of elbows to Chat’s midsection. “Everything has to end in a big punchup, doesn’t it?!”

Ladybug grabbed Chat by the wrist, pulling him in as her forearm cut him across the throat and sent
him tumbling to the ground at her feet.

“Well...you wanted a fight?! You got one!” Ladybug spat, leaping in the air and bringing her knee down-

- hard enough to crack the cement.

Ladybug’s jaw dropped as she shared a mortified look with Chat. “Did...did you just-”

“I didn’t know I was punching that hard!” Ladybug said, shooting him a horrified look. “Why didn’t you tell me I was punching that hard?!”

“I didn’t know!” Chat shrugged. “I thought you were going easy on me!”

“I...was,” Ladybug said, glancing at the hole her super strength had left in Notre Dame’s roof.

“...fix it later?” Chat said.

“I’ll do the ladybug thing before we-EEP!” Ladybug squeaked as Chat pounced at her, landing in a low crouch at her feet with a smirk. “Hey, I wasn’t ready!”

“I think a wise bug once said that all was fair in love and war,” Chat said, examining his nails. “So if you’re not going to play by the rules, neither will I.”

“If that’s how you want to play it,” Ladybug shrugged, twirling her yo-yo a little faster. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you…”

The yo-yo sailed in an arc over Ladybug’s head, tip of it swinging around and-
catching the side of Chat’s baton as he raised it in a block. He countered with a thrust that backed her up a few feet, parrying another yo-yo attack and-

- bringing his staff down in a wide slash that Ladybug avoided by nimbly leaning out the way at the last second. He shifted, bringing his staff across in a sweeping slash that-

-Ladybug leapt over, shooting a kick at Chat’s head that he barely got out of the way of. Ladybug landed, pivoted, and drove her elbow towards Chat’s midsection only for his-

- open hand to reach out and catch it, tugging her off balance and dipping her as he lunged for her-

- ears, barely missing them as Ladybug drove her forehead into his face, backing him up towards the bridge with a series of-

- punches and kicks that nearly overwhelmed him. While he was too busy defending his face, Ladybug made her move, sweeping his legs out from underneath his feet and-

-quickly pouncing on top of him, hands pinning his wrists to the bridge as he struggled to get out of her grasp.

“End of the road, kitty,” Ladybug said, inching her fingers up his wrists towards his ring. “Not a bad fight, but you really should have learned when to-
“-give up!”

“What?” Ladybug said, glancing down at her partner as she held his wrist between her fingers. “Are you kidding?”

“I give up,” Chat said again, glancing up at Ladybug who was currently sitting on his chest. “You win; I lose.”

“Come on, Chat, you can’t give up that easily,” Ladybug clucked. “What if this was a real fight? Would you just give up and let Hawkmoth take your ring?”

“What else am I supposed to do?” Chat asked, trying to wriggle his way out from under Ladybug. “I’m out of options!”

“Come on, kitty; think,” Ladybug prompted. “What’s the one thing you can still do?”

Chat’s brow furrowed for a moment before a flash of insight went off behind his eyes.

“-Cataclysm.”

He said it so softly that Ladybug almost didn’t catch it before his hand erupted in a writhing mass of dark energy. His hand lashed out, but instead of lunging at her, he clawed at the bridge beneath them, sending tendrils of black energy arcing out through the stone. The ancient footbridge creaked, groaned, and then with a mighty crack buckled and splintered into a hundred shards of stone and metal that cascaded down towards the inky black waters of the Seine below.

As she fell, Chat kicked off against her chest, falling with the splinters of ruined road and disappearing as icy black water engulfed her in one, freezing moment. She gasped, tried to keep her eyes open, but in the darkness Chat may as well have been invisible. Kicking hard against the broken stone, she struggled against the undertow, trying not to get swallowed as the bridge pieces nearly
“Phew...okay time out.”

Chat Noir sprawled back against the rooftop with a sigh of relief, anchoring himself between two buttresses as Ladybug perched on the railing beside him.

“Not bad for a first workout,” Ladybug panted, flexing her fingers experimentally. “I think that was more exercise than I got all year.”

“At least now we know what we can do,” Chat said, punching his hand with a satisfied smirk. “And this is a lot more fun when the bad guys aren’t breathing down your neck.”

“I’ll say,” Ladybug said, drawing her knees up against her chest. “...still, next time we fight, it isn’t going to be so easy, will it?”

“Doubt he’s going to go easier on us now that we publicly humiliated him,” Chat conceded, glancing up at his partner’s pensive expression. “Still, not like Hawkmoth’s hitting the gym like we are; a couple more workout sessions like this and you’ll probably be able to bench-press any akuma that swings at you.”

Ladybug’s tense expression melted as she let out a chuckle that made Chat’s heart skip a beat. “...thanks, by the way.”

“Hm?” Chat’s head cocked to one side as Ladybug turned and nearly ended his fourteen year old life with a beaming smile.

“It’s just...this is going to be really hard, you know?” Ladybug said, tucking a strand of dark hair behind her ear. “And...well...I’m just really happy that I don’t have to do this alone...”
Coughing, Ladybug hauled herself out of the river, retching freezing water onto the sidewalk as she turned around, scanning for any sign of Chat Noir. In the flickering street light on the far side of the river, she could see a pair of green eyes staring at her for a long moment, his face hidden by the shadows, his expression unreadable.

Chat blinked, hoping his burning cheeks weren’t totally obvious as he coughed, trying to look cool as he offered a fist for Ladybug to bump.

“I think as long as we have each other’s backs, Hawkmoth doesn’t stand a chance.”

Chat Noir held Ladybug’s gaze for a long moment. There was a time when he would have been the one to fish Ladybug out of the water himself; a time when even inconveniencing his Lady would have been unthinkable. But then again, there was a time when Ladybug looked at him with something other than hurt, betrayal, and cold, defiant anger.

He did his best not to flinch, refusing to be the first to look away.

Ladybug slowly rose to her feet as the sound of sirens approached, brushing wet hair out of her eyes as she watched Chat Noir’s green eyes blink...and then disappear as he was swallowed by shadows.

A wave of tremors wiggled their way up from her stomach, building strength in her chest, and barrelling out of her mouth in a long, frustrated, angry, anguish scream that rattled the windows of the houses and shops as Ladybug sank to her knees, fist driving into the concrete again and again and again until a small cloud of powdered stone hung in the air around her. She screamed until she couldn’t scream anymore; until the street in front of her had borne the brunt of her frustration as much as it could. Her head fell forward, hair hanging around her face as the water lapped uselessly against the banks below.

“...fine,” Ladybug sniffed, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hands. “That’s fine...I don’t need you...I can do this by myself...I don’t...I don’t...”

Ladybug curled in on herself, cradling her hand to her chest as she tried to stifle the sobs that fought their way out of her body.
“I don’t need you… I don’t need you...” Ladybug whispered again and again as thought the act of saying it would make it true.

Ladybug returned his smile, carefully brushing her knuckles across his for the first time, standing up with a stretch. “Alright... you up for a quick lap around the city?”

“Sure,” Chat said, springing to his feet as he cracked his neck. “I know this great bakery downtown where we could maybe get a bite to eat?”

“I think I know a better one,” Ladybug said, latching on to a lamp post and leaping into the setting sun. Chat kept pace with her, bouncing from rooftop to rooftop, doing stupid stunts that made her laugh and almost lose her grip as they chased the setting sun over Paris’ shadowed streets.

Gabriel’s pencil paused it’s scratching on the paper as the creaking of a window opening drew his attention behind him. Ladybug leaned against the window frame, dried tear tracks betraying the quiet, resolute expression on her face.

“Chat Noir is not cooperating,” Ladybug said in a soft, distant voice. “I am going to have to take his Miraculous from him by force... but I am not going to do your dirty work for you while you sit back and do nothing.”

Gabriel turned around as Ladybug made no effort to come in out of the biting October air.

“You are going to help me get it from him,” Ladybug said quietly. “You are going to use whatever powers you have to help me recover the Black Cat Miraculous… and then I never... ever want to see you again.”

Before he could reply, Ladybug fell back into the night, swinging off as a breeze ruffled Gabriel’s latest drawing. He caught it before it flew away, admiring the blue and green peacock themed coat with a small, self-satisfied smile.
Two floors beneath him, Adrien stared at his tired, beleaguered expression in the bathroom mirror, watching the last of his tears run down cheeks as he leaned against the wall of the shower, fully clothed and letting the water soak through thousands of euros worth of fabric and design.

“...okay,” Adrien said with a heavy sigh, slowly standing up and peeling the wet fabric off his back. “...okay.”

Wrapping himself in a warm, freshly laundered towel, Adrien padded into his room, the sounds of hushed kwami whispers coming from the cabinet by his bed. He stopped in front of his desk, eyes lingering on a picture of Ladybug and Chat Noir that had hung over his desk since their very first akuma battle together. He stared at it for a long moment, until black and red blurred together as his vision blurred. With a soft tug the little picture came loose, revealing a perfectly square patch of fabric in the bulletin board where it had sat as he tucked the little picture in the top of his desk drawer and padded aimlessly towards his bed.

“You did good today, kid,” Plagg said, floating down from the Zodiac kwami party and lightly nuzzling into Adrien’s cheek. “Held your own against Ladybug going after you full tilt...you should be proud of yourself.”

“I’m not…” Adrien sighed, rolling over and clutching his pillow. “I’m really not.”

A soft weight pressed against his pillow as Plagg landed on it, curling up next to him.

“I’m proud of you,” Plagg muttered. “And I’ll be proud of you for you until you wake up and realize you should be proud of yourself too.”

Adrien let out a weak laugh, scratching the top of Plagg’s head with his fingertip. “Least I still have you…”

"Damn skippy, son," Plagg purred.

Across town, Marinette sat at the foot of her bed, tired red eyes bouncing back and forth between the Bee, the Turtle, and the Fox as the gears in her mind turned and the beginnings of a plan started to
“What are we going to do?” Marinette muttered, glancing at Tikki who was staring out the window. “Why didn’t my Lucky Charm work?”

A sharp, almost mocking laugh came from Tikki’s throat as she refused to look at Marinette. “You went up against someone whose superpower is misfortune and you wonder why your Lucky Charm isn’t working like it used to?”

Marinette looked over as Tikki slowly turned to face her chosen. “For the last four years, you’ve had Plagg’s powers of bad luck affecting your enemies...now they’re going to affect you. And there’s really only so much I can do to stop it; I was never made to go against Plagg or him against me. To call this...unprecedented is putting it mildly.”

“So...what’s going to happen?” Marinette asked, a creeping sensation of dread crawling up her spine.

“I don’t know,” Tikki laughed, leaning back against the windowsill. “But I think it’s safe to say that your luck has finally run out.”

“Tikki-”

“I am bound to do what you command,” Tikki barreled on, refusing to meet Marinette’s gaze. “I am literally incapable of opposing you in this...but you should know that as long as you insist on helping Hawkmoth, I will do exactly what is required of me and nothing more.”

Marinette watched as Tikki floated into the cabinet by her dresser without another word, leaving Marinette completely alone in her bedroom loft with her thoughts and the weight of the Miraculous pressing down on her.

As the heart rate monitor steadily blip-blip-blipped into the night, Master He carefully opened her old friend’s mouth, tipping a cup of thick, softly glowing green liquid into his mouth.

"See what you get for being too proud to take your medicine?" Master He clucked, wiping the corner of his mouth as he stirred restlessly in his sleep. "Insufferable old goat..."
Her phone on the table beside her buzzed, Jun's number blinking on the screen as she answered. 
"Did you find them?"

"We've combed every inch of Master Fu's house," her apprentice said as the sound of opening drawers echoed in the background. "Lan is going once more around the house looking for hidden compartments but...the box is here. And it's empty. No sign of the Zodiac or any of the other Miraculous..."

Master He sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Alright...come back to the hospital at your earliest convenience. I need you two to help with the next part of Qingfu's treatment."

Master He closed the phone, fingering a white beaded bracelet that hung around her wrist. "Not again..." she muttered quietly to herself.
You look like total crap."

Adrien sighed, shooting Chloe a sidelong glance as she fell into step beside him.

“Good morning to you too, Chloe,” Adrien said flatly. “How lovely it is to see you, my dear friend. That’s how normal people say good morning.”

“Don’t get mad at me for being honest,” Chloe sniffed. “Gabriel may be making handbags now but that’s no excuse for having bags under your eyes...unless this is some kind of really stupid viral marketing campaign.”

“Can you not see this boy has had a late night?” Nino sighed, tweaking Chloe’s ponytail as he walked alongside her. “Provide the coffee or keep your opinions to yourself, mkay?”

“Why would I start doing that?” Chloe asked, straightening her ponytail with a small pout sent Nino’s way. “I’ve got an eighteen year streak of never keeping my opinions to myself.”

“Keep it up and you’re bound to break some kind of record,” Nino said, lightly nudging Adrien in the shoulder. “...seriously though, are you okay dude?”

“Fine,” Adrien mumbled, tugging his jacket tighter around himself. “Just...late night is all.”

“I haven’t seen you this tired since your fencing club went out to Nice for that tournament,” Nino said, placing a hand on Adrien’s shoulder. “Kagami make you do late night fencing drills again.”

“I hate to be the one to break it to you, but fencing was not what they were drilling when they went
to Nice,” Chloe chuckled, bumping Adrien’s hip with her own. “Don’t tell me you’ve replaced a Kagami shaped hole in your life without telling us.”

“For once, I have not enjoyed staying up until the crack of dawn,” Adrien sighed, rubbing his pounding temples. “Just a bad night’s sleep.”

Adrien could feel Nino and Chloe sharing a look over his head. “Everything okay at home?”

“As much as it ever is,” Adrien sighed, jabbing the stopwalk light as he spied Alya and Marinette in deep conversation across the street. From across traffic, Alya seemed to be insistently drilling at some point that Marinette seemed to be evading with one-word answers, mutely nibbling the end of a croissant as she and Alya crossed the street towards them.

“Morning,” Alya said, leaning up to peck Nino lightly on the cheek as Marinette gave a small wave with her croissant. A pink knit beanie covered messy dark curls, and her tired, red eyes could have given Adrien’s a run for their money.

“Hello friends…” Marinette said. “...and Chloe.”

“God, you look even worse than Adrien does,” Chloe sniffed, looking Marinette up and down. “Did you lose a fight with the sandman?”

“Bite me,” Marinette muttered without any real feeling.

“Just spreading the love around today, aren’t you Chlo?” Adrien chimed in.

“I’m just being honest!” Chloe huffed, stomping ahead in line with Nino and Alya. “Don’t bite my head off!”

“I don’t think anyone’s mouth is big enough to fit your head in it,” Adrien muttered, teasing a weak snort out of Marinette. “...you okay?”

Marinette nodded, fingers clenched the heavy metal brooch in her pocket.
“No?” Gabriel raised an eyebrow. “I beg your pardon?”

“There will be no more akuma in this city,” Ladybug said, folding her arms across her chest. “You’ve brainwashed enough people, don’t you think?”

“I’m curious to know how exactly you think I’ll be able to help you apprehend Chat Noir then,” Gabriel said. “Since creating akuma is my Miraculous’ sole capability.”

“Have you tried fighting for yourself?” Ladybug asked, rubbing her tired, red eyes. “Wouldn’t kill you, you know.”

“It very well might if Chat Noir has his druthers,” Gabriel said. “And I pay people to do my fighting for me.”

“You brainwash people to do that for you,” Ladybug pointed out.

“You act like the people you fought had no choice in the matter,” Gabriel said. “I offered them a deal they agreed to; not my fault there was fine print they weren’t aware of.”

“Spoken like a true businessman,” Ladybug muttered.

“Thank you,” Gabriel replied, leaning against the windowsill as he rubbed his chin. “I can’t very well go out there and fight him with you...I wouldn’t stand much of a chance, unfortunately.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Other than his skillset revolves around being able to take and deal massive amounts of damage?” Gabriel sniffed. “Your Miraculous are on an entirely different level than mine. You managed to fight him to a standstill, but I fear your erstwhile partner would flatten me like a crepe if it came to a fight between the pair of us.”
“You can’t seriously mean that,” Ladybug said. “You both have Miraculous; you should be on an even playing field.”

“It would take at least four other Miraculous to equal the Ladybug or the Black Cat,” Gabriel said, head jerking over to where the book that Marinette had returned to him so long ago sat on a shelf. “You’re talking about one-half of absolute power; the power to create champions is nothing compared to the power the pair of you wield.”

Ladybug touched her earrings absentmindedly.

“You think it’s coincidence that you’re incapable of being harmed while wearing your suit?” Gabriel continued. “Or that you have the power to fix and destroy almost anything? You think illusions or a simple shield or even the ability to create temporary champions is anything compared to that?”

“Make no mistake about it,” Gabriel said. “Chat Noir wields more destructive capabilities than even he realizes. And if he were to ever unlock his full potential, I doubt I would survive a single well-placed punch without shattering into a thousand pieces. Like it or not, we are going to need more support. If we had more Miraculous on our side maybe…”

Gabriel trailed off, raising an eyebrow in Ladybug’s direction.

“…I know where we can get three,” Ladybug said carefully.

“…you mean the others you deputize on occasion?” Gabriel asked. “I had hoped you were the one responsible for creating new heroes.”

“Heroes that I have to convince that Chat Noir, the literal spokesperson for Parisian homeless cat shelters, is now somehow evil and needs to be stopped,” Ladybug sighed, scowling at the floor. “They’re not just going to take me at face value when I say Chat needs to go down.”

“You sell yourself too short,” Gabriel clucked. “It’s your word against his, and you don’t seriously think this city would believe Chat Noir over Ladybug, do you?”
“That’s not something I really want to find out,” Ladybug said tersely. “I’d like to keep the fact that our city’s superheroes are on the outs under wraps as long as possible; you’re not the only supervillain in the world, you know.”

“If you’re talking about the bank robbers and pickpockets those charlatans in New York stop, I hardly think you need to worry about them.” Gabriel said nothing for a moment, fidgeting with something in his pocket. “But I can respect the need for discretion...very well,” he murmured. “In that case…"

Gabriel withdrew his hand, tipping it open to reveal a blue and green brooch in the shape of a peacock tail.

“Is that-”

“Consider this a gesture of good will,” Gabriel said, laying the brooch on the table. “After all, the Miraculous should be in the custody of their new Guardian.”

Ladybug reached out for the brooch carefully, picking up and inspecting it. “Where did you get this?”

“It belonged to Adrien’s mother,” Gabriel said, meeting Ladybug’s stunned expression with a chuckle. “What? You didn’t seriously believe you were the only Miraculous users in the world, did you?”

“I didn’t know that my Master’s missing Miraculous was in your pocket this whole time,” Ladybug said, eyes narrowing. “Any more Miraculous you’d like to cough up?”

“Let’s start with this one and we can go from there,” Gabriel said, taking a seat behind his desk. “I would recommend that you use that to find someone who isn’t a fan of your previous partner and start a cat-catching task force. The Peacock’s unique ability to create, shall we say, disposable cannon fodder should come in handy.”

“Cannon fodder?” Ladybug asked.

“The kind you don’t need to fret over if Chat Noir kills a few...which he most assuredly will,” Gabriel said.
“You make it sound like I’m just going to run into Chat on the street,” Ladybug said. “If he was smart, he would never transform again.”

“You forget that he wants your Miraculous as much as you want his,” Gabriel said, steepling his fingers. “Besides...I think you know the best way to get the cat to come out and play, don’t you?”

“...Marinette?”

Marinette shook her head, shooting Adrien a weak smile. “Sorry...it’s nothing, really.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing,” Adrien prodded. “You know you can talk to me, right?”

Marinette’s fingers brushed the Peacock in her pocket, turning it over this way and that in her palm as she walked alongside Adrien. It belonged to his mother...so why shouldn’t he have a chance to use it? He was admittedly a pretty big Chat Noir fan but if she put her case to him...if she explained why she was fighting his father, then-

“Hey, Marinette!”

Marinette turned around to see Luka jogging up behind her, worn wool-lined denim jacket wrapped around his shoulders as he shot them a small wave. “And Adrien...long time no see.”


“Oh you know; living the glamorous life of a starving artist,” Luka chuckled. “Not exactly gonna sell out the Velodrome anytime soon, but we’re hanging in there.”

“Even The Beatles played strip-clubs at first,” Marinette chuckled. “I’m sure you’ll look back on this when you’re a millionaire and laugh.”
“If I can find a band to stick together long enough to sell out that is,” Luka chuckled, falling into step on Marinette’s other side. “You guys see the Ladyblog this morning?”

Marinette nodded. “I guess...there was some kind of fight last night?”

“Rumor has it that it was Ladybug and Chat Noir, but there wasn’t any akuma spotted nearby,” Luka said, glancing at Marinette out of the corner of his eye. “I know they’re fond of sparring every now and then, but there was apparently a bridge destroyed.”

“Well, I’m sure superhero spars get rough every now and then,” Adrien said tightly.

“ Heard someone say that it got pretty rough,” Luka continued as Marinette just nodded mutely. “Cars flipped, street destroyed, the whole nine yards. One or two commenters suggested that-”

“Can’t always believe what you read on the internet,” Adrien interrupted, pulling ahead as he checked his phone. “I gotta talk with Nino about a project; catch up with you later, Marinette.”

Marinette watched his black jacketed back fall into step with Nino who glanced back at her and then leaned in to talk to Adrien.

“What do you think?” Luka asked quietly. “Do you think...I don’t know...that Ladybug and Chat Noir are on the outs or something?”

Marinette swallowed, gripping the peacock tighter in her fingers.

“If they were,” Marinette said. “That would be pretty bad news for Paris, wouldn’t it?”

“Be pretty bad news for Ladybug too,” Luka replied, tugging Marinette’s elbow to turn her around to face her. “I mean, she’s pretty incredible but...I get the impression that fighting her own partner wouldn’t be easy, would it?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Marinette shrugged, avoiding Luka’s questioning gaze.
“You sure about that?” Luka asked, snaking his head around to look her in the eye. “Because you know...you can talk to me about anything, right?”

Marinette bit her lip, clutching the brooch in her pocket for support as a distant school bell rang.

“I...I gotta go,” Marinette said, backing up towards the school gate.

“Okay,” Luka nodded. “But...if you need to talk to me about something... anything ...I mean, we’re still friends, right?”

Marinette nodded, shooting Luka a shaky smile as she darted after her friends, leaving Luka watching her go with a thoughtful frown.

“Dude, what was that about?”

“I don’t know,” Adrien grumbled, shoving his hands into his pockets as they approached their lockers.

“Yeah you do,” Nino said, leaning against his locker.

“...yeah I do,” Adrien sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “...god, he was just talking to her about the Ladyblog; he wasn’t kissing her or anything.”

“He used to,” Nino pointed out.

“Don’t remind me,” Adrien grumbled.

“A lot,” Nino continued.

“Don’t remind me!” Adrien squawked.
“I’m pretty sure Alya saw him sneaking out of the bakery at like four in the morning once or twice,” Nino said, tapping his finger against his chin. “And I’m pretty sure she found his-”

“Oh my god stop talking!” Adrien hissed, rounding on Nino only to get lightly smacked on his cheek for his troubles.

“Jealousy is a disease, my friend,” Nino said, cupping Adrien's face and lightly slapping his other cheek. “If you want to make this thing with Mari work, you are going to have to deal with the fact that you are not her first man. And deal with the fact that Luka is still tight with her. She is not gonna fall into your arms if you throw a fit whenever she chats up her ex.”

Adrien sighed, rubbing his cheek with a small pout. “I know…”

“I mean, it’s not like you’re pure as the driven snow, right?” Nino chuckled, elbowing Adrien in the ribs. “You’d be an Olympic fencer if you actually practiced with Kagami as much as you claimed you were practicing with Kagami.”

“We practiced,” Adrien insisted, following Nino up the stairs towards their classroom. “…just not fencing, most of the time.”

“Yeah, something tells me those Japanese classes you’ve been taking are a lot easier once you’re familiar with the native tongue,” Nino chuckled, ignoring Adrien’s burning cheeks.

As much as she tried to focus on the lecture, Marinette’s attention was drawn to the brooch she kept turning over in her pocket, rubbing the smooth metal compulsively as her eyes scanned the familiar faces of classmates she had been in school with since she was a child. As they drifted from Ivan to Mylene, to Kim, to Max, she wondered if any of them would accept the opportunity to help her stop Chat Noir.

She wondered if any of them would even believe her if she told them Chat Noir needed to be stopped.

Marinette glanced over at Chloe, texting conspicuously on her phone, and Nino and Alya, passing
small notes to each other behind their textbooks. All three of them were the most reliable choices, but they had all worked with Chat in the past. They knew him on a personal level; maybe not as intimately as she knew him, but enough to cast doubt on any lies she might throw their way. No, involving them would be a last resort; it was too risky to involve people that might side with Chat instead of her.

A quiet grumbling came from her stomach as the sickening sensation of anxiety flooded back into her stomach. In times like these, Tikki usually had the right answer. But her kwami was being uncharacteristically quiet; sullen even. She would answer Marinette’s questions in snippy, one word responses, making herself as scarce as possible whenever Marinette didn’t need her. It was amazing how fast her support system had completely crumbled around her; first Master Fu, then Chat Noir, then finally her own kwami. She was left with the enormity of dealing with Chat completely on her own...except for Gabriel, but she would rather eat her own beanie than open up to Hawkmoth.

Much as Marinette hated to admit it, she was completely and totally on her own.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, breaking her out of her brooding and drawing her attention down as she opened her chat client.

**Luka:** hey got a late shift tonight but text me if you need a friendly ear

**Luka:** gives me something to do besides unload trucks all night lol

...well, maybe she didn’t have to be totally alone.

Careful to close the door without making a sound, Luka quietly locked the back door, hanging up his coat on the coat rack as the sound of a muted television caught his attention from the living room. He carefully stooped down to pick up the mail, singling out the letters with *PAST DUE* stamped on them for immediate attention in the morning once his paycheck cleared.

Making his way into the living room, he stopped to pull a blanket over his sleeping mother, carefully turning off the television and quietly making his way upstairs. He could hear Juleka quietly talking to someone on the phone, occasionally giggling quietly as he passed her bedroom towards the small, corner room he had slept in since his family moved to the small townhouse on the edge of the city when he was six.
Carefully sliding the door open, Luka stifled a yawn, dropping his keys in a bowl on a cluttered nightstand as he closed the door behind him. He paused as he tugged his shirt over his head, distantly aware of the sensation of being watched as he unbuckled his jeans. Then he smelled it; a warm, strawberry scented shampoo he had come to know very well.

“...hey there, Marinette,” Luka said, quietly turning around as he turned on the light, revealing Ladybug sitting in a worn leather armchair in the corner of his room.

“Actually, it’s me,” Ladybug said quietly, shooting him a shaky wave.

“Yeah...hi Marinette,” Luka said, leaning against his dresser, holding up a hand to forestall any questioning. “You want to skip the part where you deny it and get to the real reason you’re here?”

“You want to put your shirt on?” Ladybug asked.

“Not like it’s anything you haven’t already seen but, sure,” Luka chuckled, tugging a worn concert t-shirt out of his top drawer. “So, I’m guessing you’re not here to reignite our whirlwind romance.”

“If I was, I wouldn’t be telling you to put the shirt on,” Ladybug chuckled anxiously. “How did you-”

“You bailed on a lot of dates,” Luka chuckled, earning an indignant huff from Ladybug. “Like every week, you had to run off to take care of some imaginary problem... conveniently when a giant monster was tearing through the city.”

“...oh,” Ladybug sighed.

“Also, let’s be real, that suit leaves very little to the imagination,” Luka said with a small smirk. “You think I wouldn’t recognize my girlfriend’s butt on national television?”

“Why didn’t you say anything then?” Ladybug asked.
“Figured you’d say something first,” Luka shrugged, crossing his arms. “Then...you didn’t. Then...we broke up.”

“I wanted to tell you,” Ladybug said softly. “I...really did, but you know the kind of crazy situations I get involved in.”

“The kind where your partner powerbombs you onto the roof of a car and breaks a bridge over your head?” Luka asked, raising an eyebrow. “Were you two really sparring last night?”

“...not exactly,” Ladybug sighed. “I...have a way to end this fight against Hawkmoth. Chat Noir disagreed with my methods and it got to the point where he almost Cataclysm’d me.”

Luka’s frown deepened as Ladybug stood up, cupping something in her hand as she approached him.

“I need to get his Miraculous,” Ladybug said. “And I wish I didn’t have to ask you to do this, but all the other heroes I’ve recruited before have worked with Chat. They have reasons to trust over me but I was hoping…”

Ladybug pulled a small black leather box out from behind her back.

“I was hoping you’d see things my way,” Ladybug said, cracking the case open and revealing a blue, peacock shaped brooch.

“Is this…” Luka reached out for the brooch, only for Ladybug to pull it back.

“This is a one way ticket to total disaster,” Ladybug explained. “If you accept this...you accept being my new partner. And that means that Chat is going to come gunning for you too sooner or later. I’m not going to pretend like this even begins to equip you for the dangers ahead but...I’m out of options. And I need someone to fight with me.”

One look at Ladybug’s large, pleading blue eyes was all it took for Luka to reach out and pluck the brooch from the case.
“So…” Luka asked. “How does this work?”

“I’m just saying this series has jumped the shark at this point.” Kagami muttered, tugging her jacket around her shoulders as she followed Adrien out of the movie theater and into the chilly evening air.

“When was Star Wars not jumping the shark?” Nino snorted, falling into step on the other side of Adrien.

“The new series had so much promise,” Kagami sighed. “But that final lightsaber fight between Rey and Kylo Ren’s giant fighting robot was just asinine.”

“I’m sure a hundred other nerds on the internet would agree with you,” Adrien chuckled, earning an elbow in his ribs as they passed a small crowd gathered outside an electronics store. “Wonder what that’s all about?”

“My guess is that Mayor Andre finally did something so stupid the news paid attention,” Nino chuckled, arching over the crowd to get a better look at the TV screens. “...hey, check this out.”

Adrien and Kagami elbowed their way through the crowd as Nadja Chamack finished addressing the camera.

“That’s right,” Nadja said with a beaming smile. “Paris has yet another hero to defend her! Joining me now is Ladybug with her new sidekick!”

The camera panned over, and Adrien’s stomach clenched at the sight of Ladybug standing next to a tall, dark haired young man in a form fitting blue, green, and purple suit. A feathered cloak fastened with a blue peacock brooch hung down to his calves, ending in the frills of a peacock, and in one hand, he could see a fan folded and tucked behind his back.

“And now, Nadja,” Ladybug laughed, patting the new superhero on the shoulder. “Paon here isn’t my sidekick; he’s my partner.”

“A partner you say?” Nadja said as Adrien let out a derisive snort, jaw clenched as he felt his heart
pounding in his ears. “And how does Chat Noir feel about this new man in your life?”

“Well, when it comes down to it, I think Chat understands his place in our little team,” Ladybug laughed. “And while he’s pretty good at taking hits, sometimes you need a subtler approach, you know?”

Kagami glanced up at Adrien, noting the way his hands seemed to be shaking at his sides as his eyes bored holes into the television.

“Well, it looks like Team Ladybug has a new leading man,” Nadja chuckled, sticking a microphone in the blue stranger’s face. “And what can Paris call you?”

The blue costumed hero looked into the camera with a smile. “Call me...Mayura.”

“And with that, we’ll send it back to you!” Nadja said, smiling at the camera. “But you can expect more from this new mystery hero in the days to come!”

“Cut!” The camera man shouted as Nadja turned back to Ladybug. “Thank you again for this exclusive opportunity, Ladybug. I’m sure my viewers would love to know more about your new partner.”

“You’ll have plenty of chances to get to know him,” Ladybug said, resting a hand on Mayura’s shoulder. “I don’t think he’s going anywhere anytime soon.”

Mayura gave a small thumbs up as Nadja turned to go. “You think that worked?” Mayura asked once Nadja was out of earshot.

“It should,” Ladybug sighed, crossing arms. “Chat’s feelings get hurt at the drop of a hat and he’s always been insecure about our partnership. Calling it out like that is bound to get him seeing red.”

“Damn, remind me never to piss you off,” Mayura chuckled. “Or if I do, promise not to use my daddy issues and fears of abandonment as weapons against me.”
Ladybug gave a noncommittal grunt, staring after Nadja’s van as she drove off. The hurt, angry part of her that relished finally being able to vent her frustrations with Chat didn’t last long and a quiet, nagging, Tikki-esque voice of shame in the back of her mind soon took over.

“This is war,” Ladybug said, with a firm nod. “If the worst thing I end up hurting is his feelings, I’m fine with that...besides-”

Ladybug turned, offering her closed fist out to Mayura.

“-Chat and I are through,” Ladybug said with a small smile. “You and I are partners now.”

Mayura returned the smile, lightly brushing his knuckles against hers. “Partners.”

“Dude,” Nino breathed, as the television cut back to the news desk. “What was that about? I’ve never heard Ladybug diss Chat like that before...”

“I wouldn’t know,” Adrien said stiffly, turning and heading down the street.

“Adrien,” Kagami said, turning to stop him.

“I should really get home; catch up with you guys tomorrow.” Adrien made it a few steps before Kagami caught his wrist, forcing him to turn around and look at her.

“It would seem that Ladybug and Chat Noir are having some relationship troubles,” Kagami said, falling into Japanese and looking Adrien dead in the eye as she spoke. “And if I were Chat Noir, I would be careful not to let any obvious attempts to antagonize me get under my skin.”

Adrien blinked frowning in confusion as Kagami squeezed his wrist. “Understand?”

“..yes,” Adrien replied, stepping back with a confused look on his face as Kagami turned,
walking back towards Nino and tugging him in the direction of their houses.

“She’s right, you know,” Plagg hissed in his ear. “Ladybug knows you’re too easily ruffled; that’s why she’s trying to ruffle you.”

“Well mission bloody accomplished,” Adrien snapped as he stomped off down the street. “I’m ruffled, I’m miffed, I’m downright nettled at this point! How could she-”

“Okay, be as nettled as you want to be,” Plagg whispered. “Just don’t fly off the handle and play right into Hawkmoth’s hands. Ladybug expects you to come at her swinging without any thought for your personal safety...mostly because that’s what you always do.”

“I do not!” Adrien insisted.

“You do too,” Plagg shot back. “You did pretty good last time against Ladybug, but you can not start playing her game. She’s good at her game; she always wins her game.”

“Then how are we supposed to win?” Adrien asked.

“We change the game,” Plagg said. “Rewrite rules, put her Duusuu’s new partner on the back foot, and fight as dirty as she is until we get Tikki and Nooroo back! Come on; use that big brain of yours and come up with a plan for once!”

“I come up with plans,” Adrien protested.

“Good ones this time,” Plagg chuckled, smile falling as he caught the look on Adrien’s face. “...you okay?”

“Yeah...I just...I know we’re supposed to be enemies, but hearing her say all that...” Adrien said with a hollow chuckle. “Guess I finally know how she felt about me, huh?”

Plagg nuzzled into the crook of Adrien’s neck as he walked on in silence towards his house, lost in thought as his feet wore the familiar path towards his mansion. A flutter of movement above him drew his attention to a red and black blur, swinging off a nearby lamp post with a blue feathery blur
hot on her heels. The distant sound of laughter echoed over the streets as he watched Ladybug bounce off the rooftops, landing at the edge of a building as Mayura stepped beside her. He said something that made her laugh, open mouthed as she lightly punched his shoulder, free as a bird and apparently without a care in the world.

He turned away before she could spot him, melting into the crowd of gushing onlookers as he walked home.

“Cheer up, kid,” Plagg chirped. “When we get home, Uncle Plaggy is gonna let you in on a couple of secrets that should make plucking old bird brain over there a cakewalk.”

“Please never call yourself ‘Uncle Plaggy’ again,” Adrien said with a small shudder. “It’s creepy and makes it sound like you’re going to- ah!”

Adrien stepped onto what he felt was a shadow only to fall through empty space, tumbling down into a dark hole that seemingly opened up beneath his feet. He hardly had time to cry out before he fell out the other side of the hole, tumbling on to the sidewalk a few yards away from where Plagg was floating, a smug little grin on his face.

“What...what was that?” Adrien asked, patting the concrete where the hole had been a few seconds earlier. "Did you do that?"

“A better question is,” Plagg said with a toothy grin. "Do you want to do that?"

Down the street, out of Adrien’s sight, Kagami Tsurugi glanced up at Ladybug and her new partner with a derisive sneer before turning and heading towards her townhouse a few blocks over.

“Kinda expected him to show up by now,” Mayura said, perched on the edge of the rooftop as Ladybug scanned the skyline for any sign of a black figure heading towards them. After three laps around the city, conspicuously posing wherever she was sure that cameras would pick them up, Chat Noir was still nowhere to be found.
“Yeah...me too,” Ladybug said, turning to face her new partner. “How’s the supersuit treating you?”

Mayura cracked his knuckles, flexing his fingers experimentally. “I feel...great. Like I could run a marathon and still not even be tired! I see why you guys spend your nights just running around the city.”

“No better view of Paris, that’s for sure,” Ladybug sighed, biting her lip as she sought out any sign of Chat Noir. Her plan to draw him out of hiding had been, so far, unsuccessful. He either hadn’t seen the broadcast, didn’t care that she had replaced him...or had and was being uncharacteristically reserved. She waited for the rush of anger and emotion; waited for him to get pissy and make a mistake out of spite.

But nothing came. And the thought of Chat Noir actually planning something unnerved her more than it should.

Mayura laid a hand on Ladybug’s shoulder, offering her a small smile. “Hey...we’ll get him.”

“Not tonight though,” Ladybug sighed, looking back up at Mayura. “Want to go once more around the city?”

“Want to go once more around the city?”

Across the city, Hawkmoth watched through Mayura’s eyes as Ladybug smiled up at him.

“Not a bad idea,” Mayura’s voice said, watching Ladybug leap after him into the night. Mayura glanced down at the brooch attached to the cape around his shoulders, running his fingers over it almost reverently. He didn’t know that the Peacock brooch was darker than it should have been; didn’t know that there was far more purple in his attire than the Peacock usually had.

As far as Ladybug and her new partner knew, there was absolutely nothing wrong with the Peacock Miraculous.

Chapter End Notes
NOTHING WRONG WITH THE PEACOCK MIRACULOUS!

I blame this fic for getting me finally liking Luka as a character. I'm also taking this opportunity to address Adrien's jealousy issues (whichtheshowisntdoing) so hopefully I can do that in a way that isn't too love-triangly.

Yeah that's a word.

Also, just to note, I am fully and 100% disregarding any canon I don't particularly care for because, hey, what is fanfic for if not creating intricate canon non-compliant AU's? I know Mayura is coming up so I may come back and integrate some of that into Mayluka but we'll see.

Either way, our little civil war is finally ramping up! Ladybug has a new partner! Chat Noir is getting special training! Kagami is still best girl! Nothing is wrong with the Peacock Miraculous! How will Chat Noir react? And will Kylo Ren's giant robot actually defeat the Resistance?

P.S. Thanks for the amazing Kudos/Comments ratio this fic has gotten. To see so much engagement is a continuous source of encouragement and keeps me amped and motivated to continue to break your hearts >:D
Chat Noir extended his claws, grasping at nothing as he focused on an apple in the middle of the table in his bedroom. He closed his eyes, grunting in frustration as he retraced the steps Plagg showed him over and over in his mind. When nothing happened, he let out a frustrated snarl, slumping over onto his couch with a deep sigh.

“Okay...Claws In,” Adrien said, taking a sip of his water as Plagg rematerialized. “What am I doing wrong?”

“You’re treating it like a Cataclysm,” Plagg clucked, crossing his arms. “This is a lot more...subtle. Not as destructive, but since you can use it without me needing a cheese break, I’d say it’s pretty useful.”

Adrien leaned forward on the couch, glaring at the apple as though he could make it disappear through spite alone. “Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner?”

“Hey, giving a hormonal teenage boy the power to destroy everything he touches was bad enough,” Plagg said, crossing his arms. “Master Fu didn’t want us giving you everything because it takes a while to master even one of my powers. I didn’t want your head to explode from all the wicked knowledge I dropped on you...but seeing as how Ladybug is making new heroes to fight against you, I figured you would need all the help you could get.”

“Tell me about it,” Adrien muttered.

“You know...you have twelve unused Miraculous just hanging out upstairs,” Plagg pointed out. “I’m sure if you explained things to them, they’d be down to help you out.”

“And put them in Ladybug’s grasp?” Adrien shook his head. “I’m not getting anyone else involved, Plagg. The last thing we need is for Ladybug and her new bird friend to recover the few Miraculous we do have and turn them over to Hawkmoth...no, I have to do this myself.”

“That’s pretty objectively not true, dude,” Plagg sighed as Adrien sat up suddenly, head cocked to one side as he regarded the apple.
“Where does the portal go?”

“Wherever you put the second portal,” Plagg said, head tilting to one side as Adrien stood up.

“You’re telling me I have a ASHPD in my ring?!” Adrien said, a slow grin spreading on his face. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?!”

“A what now?”

“Claws out!” Adrien said, cracking his neck as he felt Chat Noir’s suit settle over him. He took a deep breath, reaching his hand out. “Black Hole!”

A swirling portal of dark energy materialized under the apple, sucking it in as Chat Noir’s other hand reached over his head, materializing another portal on the ceiling. The apple tumbled out of the portal above him, landing in his open palm as Chat Noir disappeared both portals with a snap of his fingers.

“This was a triumph~” Chat hummed to himself, taking a bite of his apple. “I’m making a note here, huge...oh...oh God, why does it taste like Camembert?!“

Mayura turned this way and that, examining his reflection in the mirror that hung over the back of his door. His fingers glided down the smooth, scaled fabric with a toothy grin, unfurling his fan and plucking a quill out to toss at the dart board pinned to the far wall. It sailed clean through the drywall, out the other side of the wall and on to the street below as Mayura winced, quickly vanishing his transformation as Luka ran to the window to look out.

“Guess I’m still getting used to my own strength,” Luka chuckled, looking down at his bare hands with a small frown. Turning back to his civilian self after being able to leap and glide between buildings in single bounds was disorienting to say the least. Compared to the power and agility Mayura had, Luka felt like a sluggish, flat footed drunk stumbling around the street without any real power.

“You up for a tour around the city, little guy?” Luka asked, turning around and facing Duusu as they calmly floated just over his shoulder. The little peacock kwami’s peaceful, serene smile and
unblinking lavender eyes unnerved Luka ever so slightly, but he supposed that magical animal spirits didn’t have the best grasp on what was and wasn’t creepy for humans.

“If that is what my master wishes,” Duusu said with a small, slightly vacant smile. “It would be wise to familiarize yourself with your new abilities before you encounter our enemies.”

“Might not be a bad idea to take Mayura out for a test drive; see what he can really do,” Luka said, crossing his arms thoughtfully. “...hey, Duusu?”

“Yes, my master?” Duusu replied.

“...you know you don’t need to call me like that,” Luka chuckled a little nervously.

“Would you...prefer it if I called you something else?” Duusu said, cocking their head to one side.

“Just Luka would be fine,” Luka said.

“Very well...Luka,” Duusu said. “Was there something you required of me?”

“Just wanted to see if you knew what we were up against,” Luka said. “I know a little about Chat Noir from the Ladyblog and the scraps of what Ladybug has said, but I don’t really know what I’m getting myself into yet.”

“You needn’t worry yourself,” Duusu said in what they probably thought was a soothing tone of voice. “With my power, you will be able to overcome that treacherous alley cat without any problem.”

“You’re saying that like he doesn’t have an instakill attack that will pulverize me if he so much as touches me with it,” Luka pointed out.

Duusu chuckled. “All the more reason for you to get...comfortable with your pawns.”

“My what now?” Luka asked as Duusu gave another unnerving smile.
“You didn’t think a fan, some sharp quills, and short range flight were the sum of my abilities, did you?”

A soft knock on the cabinet door and the smell of freshly baked cookies drew Tikki out of her nap as Marinette slowly opened the door.

“Hey,” Marinette said with a small smile, placing a small plate of cookies on the table in front of the cabinet. “Papa made some of his caramel cookies if you want a few?”

Tikki glanced down at the plate with a small, noncommittal nod. “Thank you.”

“I...was thinking later we could go train with Mayura a little,” Marinette said, sitting on a stool by Tikki’s cabinet. “He still needs a little fine tuning to get control over his powers, but I think Luka is really taking to it! Your friend Duusu seems to like him too; couldn’t stop fawning over her new partner.”

Tikki rolled over with a small frown. “Duusu...fawned?”

“...yes?” Marinette said.

“Duusu...doesn’t fawn,” Tikki said. “Unless it’s over their own reflection in the mirror.”

“I...I know it’s been a while since you two spoke,” Marinette said, scratching her arm nervously. “And...I probably should have brought you back to say hi before I gave her to Luka, but-”

“You don’t need to explain yourself to me, Marinette,” Tikki said flatly. “As my chosen wielder, I am obligated to obey your wishes in all things; you don’t need to explain your decisions to me after all.”

A frustrated sigh escaped Marinette’s nose. “You know, this would all go a lot quicker if you stopped dragging your feet.”
“I’m sure it would,” Tikki said airily, taking a nibble out of the offered cookie. “Things usually go much quicker when partners work together. I’m sure if you and Chat Noir were still on the same side, you could have accomplished anything...like, say-”

“Oh, right,” Marinette said, leaning in with a small scowl. “Let’s say we defeat Hawkmoth. Let’s say Chat is still willing to work with me after throwing him around the city and essentially calling him useless on national television. How does that make anyone’s life better?”

“Your job isn’t to make one family’s suffering go away,” Tikki said, floating out of her cabinet. “You’re not responsible for healing every broken heart that comes in your path.”

“Even if I had the power to?”

“Marinette, what do you think this is?!” Tikki laughed. “Do you think there’s no risk involved to this little plan?!”

“Hey, I understand the risk!” Marinette hissed, careful not to wake the other sleeping kwami. “I know doing this isn’t going to be easy-”

“It’s not just not going to be easy; it’s going to be the single most difficult thing you’ve ever had to do in your entire life,” Tikki said, eyes narrowing. “I wasn’t lying when I said it is possible, but the last person to successfully use us not only had an ironclad will, but understood creation and destruction enough to balance us evenly! It’s like walking a tightrope; one slip and-”

“And what?” Marinette said.

“And I don’t know what’s going to happen,” Tikki shrugged. “I honestly don’t know because no one has failed to use us the same way twice. One person got ripped apart the moment he mantled both of us, one person disappeared for seven months and then reappeared in a foreign country as a completely different person, one person turned into a flower pot, one person instantly transformed into a garden of roses, one person was flat out rejected by the pair of us and spent the rest of her life with shockingly orange hair-”

“Okay, point made,” Marinette sighed. “What happened to the one person who did use you properly?”
Tikki sighed. “...if I told you...it would only encourage you.”

“It’s encouraging then,” Marinette said. “We wouldn’t be working so hard to stop Hawkmoth if there wasn’t a chance he could use it, right? And if Gabriel Agreste is a serious threat, then why not me?”

“What makes you think you’re even going to get the chance to use us?” Tikki said. “You think your friend in the tacky red pants is going to honor his side of the arrangement and not immediately screw you over the first chance he gets?”

“How?!” Marinette laughed. “Tikki, I have a small army of Miraculous on my side. I know who he is, I know his weaknesses, and the best part is that he knows it too! He knows I have him under my thumb and that if he so much as blinks at me the wrong way, I can take him out with Mayura’s help! What does he have other than the ability to make underpowered minions?!”

Tikki looked thoughtfully at Marinette for a second. “...you’re a fairly big fan of Gabriel’s, aren’t you?”

“I was ,” Marinette snorted. “The shine has come off that apple lately.”

“So...was he always a fashion mogul?” Tikki asked. “Did he come from a powerful family who afforded him every privilege in the world?”

“...no, he was actually born to a single parent who died when he was a boy,” Marinette said slowly. “He...put himself through school and started as a janitor for a men’s clothing company that let him work in the drafting rooms when he was done with work.”

“And from that, he built a fashion company that is known the world over,” Tikki said. “Is that the kind of man who has nothing?”

“So he has a lot of money.”

“He has drive ,” Tikki hissed. “Ambition, and the will to carry his plans out. Yes, he has a lot of money, and there is no way to get that much money without stepping on a lot of people in the process.”
“Maybe,” Marinette admitted, standing up and plucking a cookie off the plate. “But I’m not going to be one of them.”

Tikki watched Marinette as she disappeared down the ladder, trap door closing with a bang that startled Pollen awake.

“I hope you’re right,” Tikki said softly.

Mayura’s grin was almost infectious and after test-driving his new powers, even Ladybug’s dour mood seemed to lift.

“So that’s what Duusu meant by ‘pawns’,” Mayura said, eyes roaming the rooftop where he and Ladybug had sparred only a few moments earlier. “Good to know I can always call on back-up.”

“Gotta admit, having more numbers on our side isn’t gonna hurt,” Ladybug chuckled, stretching her shoulder out as she watched Mayura throw a few experimental jabs. She remembered what it was like feeling the rush of otherworldly power for the first time, elevated from human to superhuman with only a few words. As much as the weight of being Ladybug had begun to wear on her over the years, there was no doubt that being a superhero was just cool.

“I doubt Chat Noir is gonna even know what hit him,” Mayura chuckled, pounding his fist into his palm with a toothy smirk. “We may even have his Miraculous before the week’s out.”

“...I wouldn’t get overconfident just yet,” Ladybug said, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

“What do you mean?” Mayura laughed, gesturing to the roof behind him. “Did you...not see what I just did? That was awesome, right? We’ve got our own little army now; what does Chat Noir have other than a catnip addiction and a skewed sense of priorities?”

“Experience,” Ladybug said simply. “He’s had four years now to bond with his kwami and really start to get the full breadth of his powers. Not to mention he knows how I fight forwards and backwards by now; we learned how to fight together when we were kids and now...”
Ladybug shook her head, trailing off as she looked over the city. She thought that Chat would have surfaced by now, but he was being uncharacteristically quiet. He could be subtle when he wanted to be, but more often than not he was prone to more in-your-face displays of heroism. And yet, despite conspicuously flaunting her new partner at every turn, he seemed to be nowhere in sight.

...maybe she had gotten to him.

In the deafening silence, her own traitorous thoughts seemed louder than ever. Despite telling herself that hurting his feelings in the short term would save her from having to hurt him in the long term, and despite the fact that Chat had tried to take her Miraculous barely a week earlier, it still felt cheap publicly humiliating him on national television.

There was a difference between doing what you had to do to win and actually enjoying it.

“Hey, we got this,” Mayura chirped. “I know my suit isn’t the only thing that’s green about me, but with you backing me up I’m sure I can take him down sooner than you think!”

“I’m all for putting an end to this as soon as possible, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Ladybug said, patting Mayura on the shoulder. “You did good tonight; your friends did good too. But I think we need to run a few more practice sessions before we start hunting for Chat in earnest.”

Mayura nodded, biting his lip thoughtfully as Ladybug ambled towards the edge of the roof. “Taking off so soon?”

“I have a French paper to write,” Ladybug explained.

“Write it tomorrow,” Mayura suggested. “I could use a little more practice.”

“Can’t,” Ladybug said. “I...have a date.”

“...oh,” Mayura blinked. “Well, great! Awesome! Uh...yeah, no, by all means, go do your homework! Sorry for keeping you. I’ll just do another pass around town and let you know if I find anything.”
“Thanks,” Ladybug said, shooting a small smile over her shoulder. “And, uh...thanks. Again, I know this is a tall order, but-”

“It’s no problem,” Mayura said, waving Ladybug off. “We’ll catch up later, okay?”

“Sure,” Ladybug said, raising her fist for him to bump but transitioning into an awkward, half-hearted wave at the last second. “And um...if you run into Chat-”

"Go for the groin?” Mayura said, lips quirking as a genuine smile floated out of her lips.

"Seriously though...if you run into Chat, don't fight him by yourself," Ladybug said. "I know you think you're doing well...and you are. But I don't think you're at his level quite yet."

Mayura ignored the warm, prickling sensation of indignation as Ladybug latched onto the edge of the roof, swinging away into the city. It was strange that every time Ladybug even mentioned Chat a swell of sudden anger and aggression welled up inside him, stronger than he was used to feeling. Shaking his head, Mayura watched her go for a moment until her red dot disappeared into the city.

“Come on, man,” Mayura sighed, slapping his face lightly. “Get it together…”

Chat Noir sat with his legs crossed on the couch, a pad of paper in his lap as he tossed various objects through one Black Hole and out another.

“Looks like even kwami magic bows to Isaac Newton,” Chat muttered, making a note on the pad as he tossed a soda can through a portal on the floor and caught it as it came through a portal that opened up by his head. “No loss of velocity so I should be able to…”

Chat scratched his head with the back of the pen as the webcam positioned outside his window pinged on, drawing his attention to the monitor screen of his laptop. He was happy that Nino accepted “girl problems” as a reason for installing a few secret security systems around his window; in truth, the floor-to-ceiling windows that were currently drawn shut offered any passing superheroes a good look into his bedroom physics laboratory. Now that Ladybug and her new sidekick were out looking for him, it probably wasn’t a good idea to walk around his own bedroom in full costume
A flash of blue flitted across the screen as Chat Noir’s lip curled into an instinctive snarl, watching Mayura leap high into the air and glide, the edges of his cape fanning out as he floated lazily over the city. Of all the (many) things that Chat Noir envied about Mayura’s new position, the freedom to run around the rooftops without looking over his shoulder was one of them. Ladybug’s little press tour had made his usual nighttime stress relief runs impossible when he needed them the most.

Speaking of Ladybug…

Chat Noir frowned at the monitor, watching Mayura land on a rooftop nearby. When Ladybug didn’t join him, Chat Noir slowly stood up, pocketed the pen and reached his hand out towards the screen.

“Hm...wonder how far I can use this thing…”

Mayura touched down on the rooftop, hands lacing behind his head as he stopped his frenetic running long enough to catch his breath. He had been twice around the city already and still felt like he could run all night without getting seriously tired.

But it seemed that no matter how far he ran, he kept coming back to the same spot.

“Come on, it’s been a year,” Mayura muttered under his breath, pacing back and forth on the rooftop to try and release some of his anxious energy. “Of course she has a date; why wouldn’t she? Why shouldn’t she…”

Mayura sighed, leaning on the edge of the rooftop.

“Get over it…” Mayura muttered to himself. “You need to get over it…last thing you need is to over-complicate this with...ugh…”

“Let me guess; lady troubles?”
Mayura snapped around, fan unfurling as he scanned the rooftop for the low, purring voice that had just spoken.

“Who’s there?” Mayura called, cautiously backing up to the edge of the roof in case he needed to run. “Show yourself!”

“Alright, alright, no need to get your tailfeathers twisted,” a voice said from behind him. Mayura whipped around to come nose to nose with a pair of large, glowing green eyes.

“Hey there,” Chat Noir said, chuckling as Mayura let out a startled squawk, backpedaling and nearly tripping over his feet as Chat Noir climbed over the ledge of the roof. “You must be...sorry, I’m drawing a blank here. What was your name again? May...uvula? Feel like it started with an M…”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Mayura asked, drawing a quil from his fan and holding it tensed between his fingers.

“I would actually!” Chat Noir said, casually walking along the rim of the rooftop as Mayura watched, heart thumping loudly in his ears. “I like to greet all the new heroes of Paris...after, of course, Ladybug has known everything about them for a few weeks at least. Don’t worry; as Ladybug’s partner, you’ll get used to finding out things secondhand.”

“Jealous?” Mayura asked. “I seem to be a lot chummier with Ladybug than you were.”

“Well of course you are; you’re her partner,” Chat Noir said, leaping up onto the roof of the stairwell. “You’re ‘Team Ladybug’s new leading man!’ You woulda thought that Carapace would have beaten you out by seniority alone but you must’ve aced the interview.”

“Or maybe she just trusts me more than she trusted you?” Mayura said as Chat Noir hopped off the stairwell.

“Ladybug trusts you not to get in her way and to do your job without questioning her,” Chat Noir said coolly. “And that trust dries up the second you have a dissenting opinion. Don’t let her little publicity stunt fool you; you’re more puppet than partner, pal.”

“Are we on the roof of a winery?” Mayura laughed. “Because I smell a lot of sour grapes in the air tonight. What, are you sad she didn’t take time out of her day to kiss your head and make you feel
“Joke all you want; I’m just offering some friendly advice,” Chat Noir said, examining his nails. “Ladybug is keeping things from you; including the underlying reason for this little spat between us.”

“Oh, I’m sure you have a very well thought out sob story to accompany the reason you tried to take her Miraculous,” Maura said, crossing his arms.

“It’s actually pretty short; wanna hear it?”

“Sure; why don’t you tell it to me while I’m bouncing your head off the pavement,” Mayura said, eyes narrowing as Chat Noir let out a bark of laughter.

“Oh, wait...are you serious?” Chat Noir chuckled. “You...actually think you can beat me, don’t you?”

“Why don’t we find out?” Mayura said, gesturing around the rooftop as that surge of anger swelled inside him again. “Fitting that a mangy alley cat should die on a roof, isn’t it?”

“You don’t want to wait for your partner?” Chat Noir asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh don’t worry; I’m sure I can handle you all by myself,” Mayura chuckled, unfurling his fan.

Chat Noir let out a small, derisive snort, leaning back with his arms lazily draped over the ends of his baton. “Alright then, bluebird... handle me.”

Mayura tensed, waiting for Chat Noir to pounce on him, but he just stood there, casually stretching his back out by turning this way and that. Mayura spun his fan around with a flourish, hoping to provoke some kind of reaction from Chat Noir, only to be disappointed by the unphased look of half-bored amusement on his face.

Alright then, Mayura thought, springing into action as he spun in a wide arc, shooting a kick at Chat Noir’s head that he effortlessly ducked, lazily stepping out of the way as Mayura landed where he had just been standing. A flurry of blue feathers sailed out from the fan as he whipped around,
bringing of the hard edge of the fan around in a slash at Chat’s head that he avoided by simply stepping back. The next three blows were similarly completely ineffective as Chat danced just out of reach of the fan’s range, teasing him with a pearly white grin that only served to irk Mayura as none of his attacks seemed to connect.

“Sorry, am I supposed to be feeling handled right now?” Chat laughed, parrying a thrown quill with his baton and sending it sailing into the streets below. Another flurry of quills sailed past his head as he leapt forwards, handspringing off Mayura’s head and landing in a crouch on the roof behind him.

“So, partner, I’m curious as to what Ladybug’s been telling you about me,” Chat said conversationally, catching a punch from Mayura and holding his fist fast in his palm as he tried to pull it back. “I’m guessing by the way you’re trying to spear me with those quills, it probably wasn’t great, was it?”

“Nothing but the truth,” Mayura grunted, planting his foot on Chat’s chest and kicking off, fluttering up in the air and coming down with a flipping kick that Chat caught. With a jerk of his hips, Chat sent Mayura flying over his shoulder, landing in a heap on the floor of the roof with a frustrated snarl.

“And what exactly is her version of the truth?” Chat asked, turning around in time to pluck a thrown quill out of the air. “That I’m some kind of evil mastermind conspiring to steal the Miraculous?”

“You tried to take hers!” Mayura spat. “You stole twelve already!”

“Twelve that she would have likely just forked over to her new mystery partner,” Chat said, letting out a sharp bark of laughter as a confused expression crossed Mayura’s face. “Oh, she didn’t tell you about that, did she?”

“Can we skip the banter and meaningless chit-chat and get to the part where you stop running away from every attack I throw?” Mayura panted, rolling his shoulder.

“Man you are new at this,” Chat sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Banter and meaningless chit-chat are like the biggest part of being Ladybug’s partner.”

“I thought being Ladybug’s partner meant getting brainwashed or taken out of the fight,” Mayura said, lips curling into a smirk. “Or was that just you?”
“Hey, there you go!” Chat laughed. “Though, a little constructive criticism, a bit lacking in puns for my taste. You might want to go with a bird theme or-”

Mayura’s blue leathered boot silenced Chat’s train of thought by driving heel first into his face.

“Tweet tweet, fuck you,” Mayura said in a flat, emotionless voice. “How’s that?”

“Mediocre,” Chat said, spitting as he rubbed his jaw. “But I’ll give you a pass because I guess you were just *winging it* .”

“Please start punching me; it’s bound to be less painful than these puns,” Mayura growled, driving his elbow into the side of Chat’s head as he rolled with it, flipping into a cross-legged sitting position.

“Now why would I want to do something like that?” Chat asked, tapping his chin thoughtfully, falling back out of the way of another kick, and handspringing up back on to his feet. “I don’t particularly have any reason to dislike you, do I?”

“My little coming out party not get your fur ruffled?” Mayura panted, whipping a quill at Chat Noir’s head. “Come on; this is barely any fun without you fighting back!”

“Am I *boring* you, bluebird?” Chat asked with a small pout.

“I have new respect for Ladybug for having done so much with an anchor like you holding her back!” Mayura spat as another kick missed Chat by a scant few inches. “Face it; you’re not exactly on her level, are you?”

A rush of black, knocked the fan out of Mayura’s hands as a hand picked him up by the scruff of his cape and dangled him effortlessly in the air above his head. Mayura clawed at Chat’s hands, trying to pry them open or kick him away, but Chat held fast, not even flinching as Mayura tried to wriggle out of his grasp.

“Neither, it seems, are you,” Chat said, tossing Mayura across the roof with a flick of his wrist, sending him crashing into some patio furniture as he fell.
“I’m not the one you should be fighting,” Chat Noir said, bending down to pick up Mayura’s fan as he crawled out from under a broken lounge chair. “We should be working together!”

“Is this your *join me and together we can rule Paris* speech?” Mayura said, wiping his lip as he wobbled to his feet, reeling from the force with which Chat had *flicked* him. “Because it *sucks* .”

“You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into,” Chat said, tossing the fan back across the roof. “Ladybug doesn’t want my Miraculous because I tried to take hers; she wants it so she can use it for Hawkmoth!”

Mayura blinked, catching his fan out of mid air. “Are you...are you serious?”

“Yes!” Chat Noir said. “She wants to use our Miraculous to make his wish so he stops supervillaining it up! She knows who he is and she just wants to *give him* what he wants.”

Mayura frowned, crossing his arms. “So...this whole time... *Ladybug* has been working for Hawkmoth...wow...”

“I know! That’s why we need to-” Chat trailed off as Mayura’s shoulders started shaking, his mask of shock and concern dissolving as he burst out laughing.

“That is...without a doubt...the *stupidest* lie I have *ever* heard,” Mayura chuckled, wiping the corner of his eye with his finger.

“I...I’m not lying!” Chat said. “I’m telling the truth! She really wants to use our powers to give Hawkmoth what he wants! She’s trying to sue for peace with the lunatic that’s held this city hostage for years!”

“Oh, *please* ,” Mayura snorted. “Ladybug working with Hawkmoth? What kind of dumb shit is that? Who would be *stupid* enough to believe that?”

“I don’t know; maybe the asshole who’s stupid enough to buy Ladybug’s lie!” Chat spat. “Who is, by the way, *you* ”
“Nice comeback,” Mayura said, waving his hand over his brooch that started to glow a faint, blue and green light. “I’ve got a better one... **Quill Guard!**”

Plucking four feathers from his fan, Mayura whipped them at the rooftop around Chat’s feet as they started to faintly glow. Four black and blue circles slowly materialized around his feet, growing and glowing brighter as four armored figures slowly emerged. Each wore intricately crafted blue and green plate armor and each had an elegant peacock plume coming out of their helm. Two held shields; one with a broadsword and one with a long, feather tipped spear. One unsheathed two shimmering scimitars as it unfolded as the largest figure slammed a heavy, two-handed warhammer down on the roof at Chat Noir’s feet.

“Since we’re all about introductions tonight, let me introduce you to my band,” Mayura said as the four armored figures bore down on Chat Noir. “Hammet, Hetfield, Hendrix, and Van Halen. Boys? Say hi to Chat.”

The four knights turned their glowing purple eyes towards Chat, raising their weapons as they started closing in around him.

“Alright which one of you is Hendrix because I gotta say I'm a big fan of your-,” Chat Noir dove out of the way as they charged with four echoing metallic roars that echoed throughout the city.

Chapter End Notes

I was {} close to naming Luka's Quill Guard after the Midnight Crew

{} close.

I added another Tikki/ Marinette scene that I cut from the last chapter because some of you pointed out (fairly) that Marinette hadn't been explained the potential repercussions of using both. That said, if it wasn't at least a possibility, then Hawkmoth getting a hold of them wouldn't be such a big threat. Hopefully that clears some things up; I'm writing at a breakneck pace so thanks for letting me know if I need to circle back and make myself clearer. Also starting to play around with some of Chat's cut powers so interested to see how this plays out.

Next Time! Strife! Dates! More classic rock references than you can shake a guitar pick at!
“Papa?”

Gabriel looked up over the rim of his laptop, lightly whacking the side of the case to try and get the spotty internet connection to work. Adrien was holding up the pair of fishing rods while struggling to balance a tackle-box in his other hand.

“You didn’t think the fish were going to catch themselves, did you?” Emilie chuckled, lowering her sunglasses and raising herself up on the beach chair to look at her husband. “And you did promise earlier today, Gabriel.”

“That was before Marcel bungled the Milanese order,” Gabriel sighed, trying to avoid his five year old son’s beaming expression.

“There’s no one else who can handle it?” Emilie clucked, sitting up with a small frown. “Gabriel, you can’t spend all weekend working.”

“I know; I know...I just need a little bit more time,” Gabriel said, shooting his son an apologetic smile. “Raincheck?”

Adrien looked up at the mention of rain as his mother sighed, rising from her seat and leaving her book page-down on the chair. “Come on, sweetie. Papa needs to work.”

“I’ll...catch up with you later,” Gabriel said, not missing the look of disappointment that crossed his wife’s face as she took their son by the hand and led him down towards the water.

Gabriel sighed, taking off his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose as a calm breeze blew in over the water, taunting him with the promise of relaxation as he turned back to his laptop, quietly
promising to murder his business partner at the first available opportunity.

“Sir?”

Gabriel opened his eyes, sitting up in his chair as Nathalie gently rocked his shoulder.

“What time is it?” Gabriel muttered, feeling around for his glasses.

“A little after nine,” Nathalie said, placing a cup of warm tea down on his desk.

“Must’ve drifted off,” Gabriel said, closing his eyes as the memory of the beach slowly slipped back out of his consciousness. “Anything to report?”

“Marcel wants your opinion on which brand of nylon we should use for our men’s underwear,” Nathalie said, placing the report on Gabriel’s desk. “Because he is pathologically incapable of having an independent thought, no matter how minor.”

“This is urgent I suppose,” Gabriel snorted, circling a choice at random and passing it back across the table to Nathalie.

“His lack of foresight is always your emergency, isn’t it?” Nathalie chuckled.

“Why break tradition now?” Gabriel said, leaning back in his chair. “Anything else?”

Nathalie tapped a few buttons on her tablet as the widescreen TV Gabriel used for conferencing lit up with a grainy picture of Chat Noir battling four peacock plumed knights. Frowning, Gabriel turned around, threw the curtains to his office open, and looked out the window at the battle taking place on the roof across the street.

“...Nathalie?”
“Yes, sir?”

“In the future, I would appreciate it if you informed me about superhero battles taking place outside my house before you asked me about my underwear.”

"I will take that to heart, sir."

Chat Noir ducked as the tip of the knight’s sword sailed over his head, barely missing him as the glittering point of a spear stabbed itself into the roof at his feet. He recovered just in time to leap over a lumbering hammer smash, parrying a flurry of scimitar slices with the haft of his staff before backflipping out of the way of Mayura’s feather darts.

“Alright, I’m starting to feel handled,” Chat panted, leaping on to the roof of the stairwell as he looked down on Mayura and his Quill Guard. “Or at least I’m not bored anymore.”

“Come down here then; I’m sure Hammet could bore you plenty,” Mayura said as the spear wielding knight gripped their spear tighter.

“Nice pun...so Hammet’s the one with the spear and shield….that makes the sword and boarder over there Hetfield,” Chat Noir said aiming his finger at each knight in turn. “I’m guessing you named the flippy scimitar one Van Halen which would make the big guy Hendrix, right?”

“Good guess” Mayura said, patting the large, hammer wielding knight on the side of the shoulder.

“I also guess that your phone is full of nothing but British dad-rock,” Chat Noir snickered.

“Nothing wrong with appreciating the classics!” Mayura said, whipping another handful of feathers at Chat as he leapt into the air.

“You know they kept making music, right?” Chat laughed, blocking Hendrix’s hammer strike with his staff and kicking off the larger knight’s chest before Van Halen could come in with a sword strike. “Rock didn’t just die when the 80’s ended.”
“Might as well have!” Mayura snapped, watching Chat match Hetfield blow for blow before kicking his helmet off. It sailed through the air as the headless suit of armor staggered around, dropping his sword and shield and fumbling around on the ground for any sign of his head.

“Personally, I always found all that wailing and wanking to be kinda grating,” Chat sighed, kicking Hetfield’s head at Hammet and watching the spear wielding knight fumble, trying to grab it before it tumbled off the edge of the building. “Like, we get it; you’re an attention whore who needs the spotlight on them. Do we really need a guitar solo in every song?”

“If you’re trying to piss me off, you’re gonna have to try a lot harder than that,” Mayura scoffed.

“Jagged...Stone... suck’s ,” Chat Noir said with a large, toothy white smile that widened with every word he said.

“...you son of a bitch! ” Mayura charged, unfortunately at the same moment that Hendrix, eyes glowing with purple fury, also charged, hammer swinging in a wild arc towards Chat Noir’s side. At the last second, Chat stepped back, barely missing the hammer blow that spun around and caught Mayura full in the chest, knocking the wind out of him and sending him tumbling back into Hetfield and Hammet who had just righted their helmets. They fell into a pile with a sound like a cart full of pots falling down the stairs amid Mayura’s muffled curses.

By the time he righted himself, Chat Noir was nowhere in sight.

“Where’d he go?” Mayura muttered to himself. “Come on o-”

Mayura’s vision suddenly went dark as a Quill Knight’s helmet was jammed over his head backwards.

“Gotta protect that fragile brain of yours,” Chat Noir snickered, dancing out of the reach of Mayura’s flailing arm swipes. “Can’t exactly afford to lose too many more cells, can you?”

Mayura wrenched the head off with a growl, chucking the helmet at Chat who ducked, picked up a second helmet, and promptly jammed it on Mayura’s head again.
Across the street, Gabriel watched Mayura struggle to pick himself up, fumbling and swinging wildly as Chat Noir held his palm against his forehead.

“...not the most impressive Mayura, is he?” Nathalie coughed as Gabriel sighed, taking his glasses off and squeezing the bridge of his nose.

“Nooroo,” Gabriel said, drawing the quivering little kwami out from his hiding spot in the desk. “Contact-.”

“-Marinette?”

Marinette’s head jerked up as her mother’s hand laid on her shoulder, startling her out of a murky train of thought.

“Sorry,” Marinette said, placing the roll of dough in a banneton and covering it with a clean towel. “This one’s ready to proof…”

Sabine watched her daughter as she grabbed another lump of dough from the machine, weighed it out on the small scale in front of her, then started kneading with the same distant look in her eyes as before.

“...I think we can handle it from here, dear,” Sabine said gently.

“We have twenty more loaves to proof before we meet the order,” Marinette sighed, wiping her forehead with the back of her arm. “You and papa-”

“We’re kneading bread before you were even a bun in the oven,” Sabine said, taking the dough from her daughter. “We can manage without you...you look tired.”

Marinette caught her reflection in the window over the counter, tucking a strand of floury hair behind her ear. “...been a long week.”
“I can tell,” Sabine said, slowly kneading the dough as Marinette pulled her apron off. “...anything you’d like to talk about?”

Yes, Marinette thought. “Not really,” she said, hanging her apron up on the back of the door. “I should get some designing done anyway.”

“You should take a break,” Sabine clucked, turning to face her daughter. “Don’t think I don’t know how hard you’ve been working lately.”

“I’ll break when my schedule breaks,” Marinette grumbled.

“You’ll break much sooner than that if you don’t take time for yourself,” Sabine said, dropping the dough on the counter and making her way over to a stack of fresh raspberry pastries. “There will always be work to do, Marinette; you need to make sure you’re strong enough to do it.”

Sabine dropped two pastries on a plate, pushed the plate into Marinette’s hands, and gently pushed her out of the kitchen.

“Go get some rest,” Sabine said. “And by rest, I do not mean any portfolio work.”

Marinette was too tired to even consider arguing with her mother, and knew better than to linger in Sabine Cheng’s kitchen when her mother didn’t want her there. She wasn’t strict by any definition of the term; she simply demanded the same respect she extended to her daughter and Marinette never had reason to rebel.

Even as she padded upstairs, nibbling on the corner of her favorite pastry, Marinette didn’t feel any less tense or unhappy than she had been in the kitchen; the only difference was that now she had no dough to take her frustrations out on. And despite the swirling medley of emotions making her hair turn prematurely grey, frustration was the one that made every minor setback seem like an insurmountable obstacle.

The worst part was that she had almost nobody to talk to.

She liked Luka; trusted him to keep her secrets and stand by her side. But the truth of the matter was
that he wasn’t Chat Noir. And as much as she was angry with him, a small corner of her still held out the smallest bit of hope that he would come to his senses; that he would see things her way and agree to let her mitigate the damage that Hawkmoth had already done. For all Gabriel Agreste had done to Paris, he had inflicted the same kind of suffering on his family, and while she doubted he would turn over a new leaf, at least Adrien would have one parent he could rely on instead of no parents at all. And despite the growing revulsion she felt towards Adrien’s father, she wasn’t going to cause harm to someone who had been harmed enough already.

Not if she had the power to do something different.

Marinette was barely through the door to her room when her earrings started vibrating a faint, pulsing beat that made her heart drop into her stomach. Her earrings only buzzed like that when someone was trying to call her Miraculous communicator, and the only person who ever called her communicator was-

“Tikki! Tikki transform me!” Marinette said quickly, pulling her yo-yo out the moment Ladybug’s suit settled over her. Her fingers trembled as she popped the lid to the communicator open, fumbling with the lid until a dark video screen came into view. “...Chat?”

“Afraid not,” Hawkmoth said as his picture filled the screen. “You don’t look happy to see me.”

“No, I’m thrilled to have random old men calling me at odd hours of the night,” Ladybug said, feeling her lip curl into a snarl. “Tell me you have a good reason for interrupting my evening.”

“Oh I just called to see how you were doing,” Hawkmoth said airily. “Catch up and dish the goss as the kids say....since I clearly have nothing better to do with my life than talk to an adolescent girl in a ladybug costume.”

“For someone who doesn’t like to chit-chat, you sure are wasting a lot of oxygen with your words,” Ladybug sighed. “Is there a point to this call?”

“I just thought you should know that there’s a cat fighting with a bird on the roof outside my home,” Hawkmoth said, angling his communicator towards a large screen television. A grainy image showed Chat Noir wrenching the hammer out of the hands of one of Mayura’s knights and smacking it across the roof with it. She watched in horror as Mayura lunged, swinging a peacock-patterned sword that Chat caught in an open palm as his free hand grabbed Mayura by the scruff of his collar, tossing him aside as he kicked the helmet off another knight.
“Oh, and to the surprise of no one...the cat is winning,” Hawkmoth said. “Thought you might want to do something about th-”

Ladybug snapped her communicator closed with a growl, kicking her window open and leaping out into the night.

Hawkmoth blinked as his communicator went dim.

“Well...that was rude,” Hawkmoth said, turning his attention back to the fight outside.

“You think he would be doing better with a five to one numbers advantage,” Nathalie sighed, leaning on the windowsill as she watched two of Mayura’s knights run headlong into each other as Chat leapt out of the way.

“I think he’s doing quite well for someone with literally a thousandth of the experience as Chat Noir,” Hawkmoth mused, watching as Chat hurled another knight off the roof and on to the street below. “He should have drilled with his knights more so they weren’t tripping over each other in battle.”

“Shouldn’t have goaded Chat Noir into a fight,” Nathalie sighed.

“Yes, well, you know how young men are,” Hawkmoth said, folding his hands on his cane. “If anything is going to provoke Chat Noir into an act of foolhardy bravado, it’s going to be another young gun trying to take his spot.”

“But what happens if Mayura slips out of our reach?” Nathalie asked.

“We shall just have to hope Ladybug gets here in time to save her new sidekick,” Hawkmoth shrugged.

“...I know I’ve brought this up before-”
“I sense you’re about to bring it up again,” Hawkmoth sighed.

“Can we really trust Ladybug to see this through to the end?” Nathalie asked, wincing as Mayura tripped over Chat Noir’s baton and crashed into one of the two remaining knights.

“We can trust that she’ll deliver what we want,” Hawkmoth said evasively. “Beyond that...well, that’s what our little insurance policy is for, isn’t it?”

“Still...a bit much to expect from a teenager, isn’t it?” Nathalie said, watching Chat lift Mayura off the ground and press him back against the wall of the stairwell.

“Any other teenager and I would agree,” Hawkmoth said, eyes trailing to a security camera that showed a familiar red spot swinging across the city. “But if there’s one thing we can count on, it’s that Ladybug will always find a way to come out on top...”

Mayura grunted, kicking feebly against Chat’s stomach as he held him fast against the brick wall of the stairwell. The Quill Guard was in a pile of armored pieces on the rooftop, feebly trying to piece themselves back together and frequently attaching the wrong limbs to wrong torsos. His fan lay on the ground at Chat’s feet, just out of reach of Mayura’s grasping fingers.

“You had enough?” Chat asked, head rolling with a punch that Mayura managed to land on the side of his head. “...ow.”

“Just getting warmed up,” Mayura grunted, despite the fact that his blow didn’t even seem to phase Chat or slacken his grip enough for him to wiggle out.

“You can cut the bravado; you have nobody here to impress but me,” Chat said, fingers brushing over the Miraculous that held his cape up. “This is a new one, isn’t it?”

Mayura’s heart fell into his stomach as Chat began to unclasp it...before seemingly thinking better of it and simply straightening it as he let Mayura fall back to his feet.

“I don’t know where you got it or what Ladybug has been telling you, but you’re not helping who
you think you’re helping,” Chat said as Mayura straightened up.

“I think I know Ladybug better than you do,” Mayura said, reaching for the fan only for Chat to carelessly pin him against the wall with one hand.

“After two days?” Chat snorted. “Unlikely.”

“Oh, so you’ve also seen her without her mask on?” Mayura said, lips curling into a smirk.

“You…” Chat blinked. “She told you who she was?”

“I guess I’m just the trustworthy kind of guy,” Mayura sighed, watching Chat’s eyes narrow ever so slightly. “Aw, what’s wrong? Feeling left out?”

“She told you who she was…”

“That’s right, though the mask wasn’t the only thing she took off when she was with-”

“…and you just told me ?!” Chat snarled.

“Yeah, that’s...wait, I feel like you’re mad at me for different reasons than I want you to be mad at me,” Mayura said as Chat released him from the wall.

“What kind of dumbass are you?!” Chat groaned. “You don’t just go telling people stuff like that!”

“I...okay, this is definitely not the reason I wanted you to be mad at me,” Mayura said, watching Chat Noir, squeeze his temples with his fingers.

“Didn’t Ladybug tell you to keep this stuff close to your chest?!?” Chat sighed. “God, this is superhero 101! No secret identity talk ever and especially not to someone you’re fighting against! Because guess what? Now I know that you know who Ladybug really is!”
“You w hat!?” Mayura and Chat turned to see Ladybug land on the roof a few meters away, glaring at both of them, but saving a special kind of ire for Mayura.

“...I feel like I may have fucked up,” Mayura said.

“No shit,” Chat snorted.

“I…” Mayura glanced back and forth between Ladybug’s indignant glare and Chat Noir’s smug, shit-eating grin. “H-He started it!”

“Go pick up your toys, junior; the grown ups need to talk,” Chat said with a dismissive hand wave as his eyes settled on Ladybug. “You know that’s the one downside of owning a bird; they always find a way to sing when you don’t want them to.”

“Look, I-” Mayura stopped as Ladybug held up a hand and sent him a look that said *I’ll deal with you later* before turning her attention back to Chat Noir.

“I see you two are getting acquainted,” Ladybug said, placing her hands on her hips.

“Why wouldn’t I take the time to get to know my replacement? ” Chat Noir sniffed. “Didn’t take long for you to replace me and let the whole city know about it, did you?”

“Didn’t leave me much of a choice, did you?” Ladybug replied. “Thought that little publicity stunt would grab your attention.”

“Well, you got it,” Chat said, folding his hands on top of his baton. “Didn’t need to go and hurt my feelings to do it.”

“I’ve done nothing in the past, and your feelings got hurt,” Ladybug said, feeling her irritation at Chat prickle. “At least this time I seem to have gotten what I wanted out of it.”

“Sorry, were you expecting a temper tantrum?”
“Given your history of throwing a fit when you don’t get what you want?”

“You mean like you did when I didn’t fork over my Miraculous on demand?”

Mayura’s eyes ping-ponged between Ladybug and Chat Noir as he tried to piece his knights back together, his initial indignation at being forgotten giving way to relief that he wasn’t being used as a prop in this superpowered marital spat.

“My god, are we in a time warp?” Ladybug laughed bitterly. “I swear we just had this conversation a few days ago!”

“Before, during, or after you pitched The Dumbest Idea Ever?!”

“Uh...are we still fighting?” Mayura asked, screwing Hammet’s head back on and helping the suit of armor back on its feet.

“We’re fighting; you’ve had enough for one night, M. Loose Lips,” Chat Noir sneered.

“Hey, don’t get him involved in this!” Ladybug countered.

“You got him involved in this!” Chat Noir cried, jabbing his finger at Laybug. “He was probably writing Gorillaz fanfiction in his underwear before you had to pull him into our fight!”

“Hey, who told you about that?!” Mayura cried as Ladybug and Chat Noir both turned to look at him incredulously. “...I mean...I...I don’t… ”

“Dude, I was kidding ,” Chat Noir sighed

“Shut up!”

“Can we all focus on why we’re here?!” Ladybug groaned, rounding on Chat. “Look...I’m willing to be the bigger person here-”
“You haven’t been bigger than me since I hit puberty, short-stack.”

“- and give you another chance to end this peacefully,” Ladybug continued, breathing hard through her nose.

“Wait, what?!” Mayura interjected. “He tossed me across the roof for half an hour and he gets a second chance?!”

“Mayura, please-”

“No, by all means; your partner should have an equal say in decisions you make regarding the pair of you,” Chat shot back.

“Wait, are you on my side now?!” Mayura asked.

“This does not need to be any more complicated than it needs to be!” Ladybug snapped. “You cannot seriously think that this little rebellion of yours is going to turn out the way you think it will! You’re outnumbered, Chat! You got away last time, but I have backup this time; there’s two of us and only one of you! And what exactly has changed since the last time we fought that makes you think you can handle the both of us?”

Chat was silent for a moment, green eyes trailing back and forth between Ladybug and Mayura. “...you guys ever see that cartoon based on that MMO that came out a while ago?”

Mayura and Ladybug shared a confused glance. “Oh, wait, I think my sister watched that when it was on TV,” Mayura said, snapping his fingers. “Yeah, wasn’t it called Wak- FUCK!”

Mayura’s shadow expanded into a large, swirling black hole that sucked him into the roof. Before Ladybug could react to her partner suddenly disappearing, Mayura tumbled out of another hole several meters above her head. Ladybug skirted out of the way just as Mayura crashed into the roof at her feet.

Ladybug glanced between her discombobulated partner and an infuriatingly smug looking Chat Noir. “What was that?!” She squeaked, voice cracking up a whole octave in pure confusion. “What
“ACME Portable Black hole,” Chat said, fingers twisting and sending Mayura tumbling through another portal that deposited him across the street, depositing him into a hot tub and startling a trio of elderly bathers. Ladybug watched dark energy crackle around his hands, opening a portal beneath Mayura’s feet as he stepped out of the hot tub that sent him tumbling back into the frothy jacuzzi.

“You think this is funny?!” Mayura called from across the road, climbing out of the hot tub. “Is this all some kind of joke to you?!”

“A little bit!” Chat called back, meeting Ladybug’s baffled expression with a hapless shrug. “My kwami is very interested in not getting himself captured, so we’ve been, shall we say, expanding my moveset a little bit...hasn’t Tikki done the same for you?”

The sound of her kwami’s name coming from Chat’s mouth momentarily stunned Ladybug, long enough for her not to notice the shadow that opened up beside her. As Chat’s hand reached through another shadowy portal, she barely leaned back and out of the way of a claw that brushed the smooth, metal surface of her earrings. She jumped backwards, as the first portal disappeared and another opened beneath her feet where she landed, sending her tumbling back into inky blackness and depositing her at Chat’s feet. Before he could grab a hold of her, she aimed a kick at his shins, creating enough space for her to slide back across the roof, one eye behind her to watch out for any more surprise portals.

“Don’t pretend like you’re doing this because you’re concerned about my kwami!” Ladybug snapped, shooting her yo-yo at Chat’s head as he opened another portal, redirecting it so it shot out of a portal and bonked Ladybug in the head.

“I’m not; I’m concerned for mine,” Chat Noir replied, jumping into another shadow and appearing behind Ladybug. She ducked, rising with an uppercut that sent Chat staggering a few steps backwards as she rounded on him. Her yo-yo snapped out again as two teal armored figures rushed past her, lunging for Chat Noir with a pair of scimitars and a spear. The yo-yo wrapped around the haft of the spear as Hammett thrust at Chat Noir, yanking it back out of the knight’s grasp and embedding it in the rooftop a few meters away.

“Just how many kwami are you gonna press-gang into this little crusade of yours?” Chat spat, ducking as Van Halen’s scimitars ripped into Hammett, scattering the armor pieces across the rooftop.

“That’s something for their Guardian to worry about; not you!” Ladybug fired back, untangling her
yo-yo and sending another strike at Chat Noir. Again, a staggering, uncoordinated knight stumbled into Ladybug’s attack path as Chat Noir moved out of the way, getting tangled in the yo-yo string.

“What do you think is gonna happen when Master Fu wakes up and realizes you’ve been working to undo everything he’s been working towards for the last four years!” Chat Noir demanded, lunging with a staff strike that Ladybug sidestepped as she drove the heel of her palm into Chat’s nose.

“He’s going to wake up to all the kwami back where they belong and Hawkmoth defeated forever!” Ladybug growled, wrapping her yo-yo around Chat’s staff. “The only difference between our plans is that mine sees a family reunited and yours is just revenge for revenge sake!”

“You’re honestly okay with giving this prick what he wants?!” Chat Noir hissed, grabbing on to either end of his staff and holding fast as Ladybug tried to rip it from his hands. “Vichy Ladybug, just handing over the keys to the city and collaborating with the psychopath who’s been using Paris as his playground?!”

“This isn’t about Hawkmoth!” Ladybug grunted, fingers twisting tightly in the string of her yo-yo. “And it isn’t just him who gets what he wants!”

Chat’s brow furrowed. “What do you-”

“I got him!”

“Mayura, no!” Ladybug cried out as Mayura dove at Chat feet-first, descending from a high-dive behind Chat. Chat turned as Mayura cried out, dropping his staff and stretching his hands out beneath him. As she watched Chat form a portal to disappear, Ladybug was suddenly struck with the realization that, for whatever reason, Chat couldn’t use his new power without the use of both hands.

She was then struck by Mayura’s boots as Chat vanished, leaving her face the only thing stopping Mayura’s descent.

Mayura collided headlong into his partner, sending them both tumbling along the rooftop and rolling to a stop just before spilling over the edge. They righted with Mayura on top of her, shaking his head in confusion as he looked down.

“Got... you?” Mayura chuckled as Ladybug closed her eyes with a deep sigh. “Uh...hi?”
Wordlessly, Ladybug turned Mayura’s head towards Chat Noir who was currently miming taking a picture.

“You two make a cute couple,” Chat said, kicking his staff up off the ground as Ladybug and Mayura rose to their feet, brushing off the dust and untangling themselves from each other. “Is it...MayLady? Ladyura? Doesn’t have quite the ring as Ladynoir, does it?”

“What’s the plan?” Mayura whispered.


“...featherstitch?” Mayura said, unfortunately loud enough for Chat to hear him.

“Oh, wait, I know that one!” Chat called out. “Yeah, that’s where you trade off attacking from the left to the right to throw your opponent off balance...of course, if that doesn’t work you can always try backstitching—you told him about that, right?”

“I feel like i’m missing some context here,” Mayura mumbled as Ladybug’s jaw tensed, fingers balling into fists out of pure frustration.

“Man...you haven’t even shown him the playbook yet, have you?” Chat Noir sighed, shaking his head. “It’s almost not even fair fighting you like this…”

“Try tying one hand behind your back then; I’m sure you could take us,” Mayura said as the Quill Guard slowly rose, retrieved their weapons, and began completing a circle around Chat. Ladybug could see the gears in Chat’s head turning as his eyes bounced between the knights, Mayura, and finally back to hers.

*Rush me,* she silently begged. *Come on; I'm right here. Just come swinging at me.*

For a moment, she thought he was going to strike. She could see him tense, hands gripping on his staff as he seemed to be weighing his options.
“Alright...time to bring in some backup,” Chat said, lips curling into a smirk as Ladybug’s eyes widened. “Now!”

Ladybug’s instincts caused her to whip around at the same second that her brain quietly reminded her that she had used the same gag on Chat only a few nights earlier. By the time she turned back around, Chat had disappeared over the edge of the rooftop, leaping through the city with a wave and a toothy grin over his shoulder.

“Where are they coming from?!?” Mayura asked, glancing around as Ladybug followed Chat, leaping off the building and latching on to a nearby rooftop. She was dimly aware of Mayura yelling at her to wait as he leapt after her, but she could focus on nothing but the blood pulsing in her ears and the sight of Chat Noir running just a few hundred feet out of her reach.

He glanced over his shoulder, waiting to see if Ladybug was following him before diving off the edge of a rooftop, plunging into the murky alleyways below. Ladybug followed from the ledge above him as far as she could before leaping down into the alleyway after him. The distant echoing of Mayura’s Quill Guard as she followed Chat, ducking delivery drivers and vaulting over parked cars as she pursued him straight towards a brick wall.

“End of the road!” Ladybug cried as Chat looked left, looked right, then disappeared into a portal he created in the ground at his feet. Ladybug skidded to a halt as the portal closed, glancing down two distinct side-paths as Mayura caught up with her.

“Which way did he go?” Mayura asked, stopping to adjust the helmet of a Quill Guard who had reassembled himself too quickly.

“I don’t know,” Ladybug said, glancing around.

“Split up?”

“That’s what he wants,” Ladybug groaned, tugging at her hair.

“Don’t got much of a choice, do we?” Mayura said, nodding at two of his henchmen. “Hammett, Hetfield, go with Ladybug and-”

“No, he’ll hear them coming a mile off,” Ladybug said, pointing down the left path. “Go that way;
try and flush him towards me and we’ll try and grab him in the middle.

“Sure this is a good idea?” Mayura asked.

“Don’t got much of a choice, do we?” Ladybug echoed, tearing off down the left path as Mayura headed right.

Chat Noir heard the sound of clanging bootsteps as he ran, leaping up, over the rim of a rooftop as he spied an open window on the far side of a row of stately, expensive looking townhouses that felt vaguely familiar, even in the dim light of the streetlamps. As much as he enjoyed nettling Ladybug’s new sidekick, he didn’t fancy taking on the pair of them so early in the game. Mayura was a wildcard that he didn’t have a full grip on yet. He knew that his knights were strong, but still uncoordinated. They could gang up on him, but they couldn’t move like he could.

They were only going to get better, and his fight wasn’t with Mayura.

“I found him!”

Chat swore as Mayura called out behind him, chasing him down a sidestreet as he ran without thought or plan as to where he was going. He needed to get away long enough to get back home; get somewhere where they wouldn’t see him portal back into his room. But with Mayura breathing down his neck, he couldn’t see an easy path of escape.

Rounding the corner and breaking Mayura’s line of sight, Chat spied an open window on a balcony two stories off the ground. Without thinking, he leapt up onto the balcony, stealing into the dimly lit master bedroom and slamming the window shut as a flash of blue came around the corner behind him.

As he landed on the plush, Persian rug, debating his next move, he noticed that the swirling blue patterns on the carpet.

*That looks familiar,* he mused, glancing up at the elegantly forged Persian saber hanging off a rack on the wall.
...that looks familiar too, Chat thought, frowning as the door at the far side of the room opened as Kagami Tsurugi stepped out of the bathroom, humming a small tune under her breath and dropping her towel at the exact moment Chat turned to look at her.

...okay, now that definitely looks familiar, Chat thought.

“Uh...h-hi?” Chat Noir said, waving and averting his gaze as Kagami’s eyes slowly widened as she glanced between Chat and the open window. “I-I’m sorry to disturb you, miss, but I-”

BANG BANG BANG

Before Kagami could process the fact that she was currently standing naked in front of one of Paris’ oldest heroes, the sound of an insistent pounding on the door downstairs drew her attention. Grabbing her towel back to her chest, Kagami headed to the window, peeking behind the curtain as she saw four large, blue, heavily armored knights running down the street.

“Friends of yours?” Kagami asked, brushing a wet strand of hair out of her face as Chat mentally cursed at himself for being careless enough to get tracked back to his ex-girlfriend’s house. Mayura had either got lucky or saw the tip of his tail disappear into Kagami’s room.

“He must’ve seen me...,” Chat said, eyes still buried in his hands as Kagami grabbed a fluffy pink bathrobe off the corner of the vanity. “I’ll be out the skylight...a-assuming you have one, that is! I-I wouldn’t know; I’ve never been here in my life!”

“I boarded the skylight up when mother passed,” Kagami said, sliding into a pair of fluffy bunny slippers. “Putting in a home theater. Only way out is that window or the front door...neither of which sounds like a good option for you at the moment.”

“I’Il-” Chat Noir made to head for the window only to have Kagami press hard on his chest back towards the bathroom.

“Stay,” Kagami commanded, cinching the bathrobe around her waist as the knocking at the door became more insistent.

“But-”
“You can explain to me why you’re galavanting through my window at eleven o’clock at night when I’ve seen our guests off,” Kagami said, glancing over her shoulder as Chat Noir grabbed her by the elbow. “…is Ladybug looking for you too?”

The way Chat’s eyes averted in an all too familiar way told Kagami all she needed to know.

“Get comfortable,” she commanded, pushing him back into her bedroom as another thundering series of knocks came.

“Hello?! Hey, whoever’s in there, open up! We need to talk!”

“What are you going to do?” Chat asked.

“…act like my mother,” Kagami said, smirking at the visible chill that ran down Chat’s spine. “Cruel, I know, but they interrupted my evening relaxation routine so I’ll be raising the specter of Tsurugi Umeko for one last fright.”

BANG BANG BANG

“Coming!” Kagami called, taking a deep, steadying breath as she plucked a Polish saber off the wall, weighing it in her hands as she descended the stairs. The steel in her hand would be useless against a superhero, but just holding it made Kagami feel a little surer of herself. Contrary to popular belief, Kagami was not made from ice and the idea of facing down Ladybug and her garishly dressed new partner in nothing but a bathrobe and slippers was enough to put the smallest wobble her step as she quietly placed the sword in the umbrella stand by the door.

But like in all trying times, Kagami quelled her anxiety by focusing on the facts of the situation. Chat Noir was Adrien, Adrien was her friend, and Ladybug needed to get into her house to get to Chat Noir.

To do so, she would have to go through Kagami.
Hendrix stepped up to the door, hefting his hammer as he prepared to break it down

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, cool it!” Mayura hissed, pushing Hendrix back. “We can’t just go caving in people’s doors left and right—”

Behind him, the front door opened to an irritated pair of amber brown eyes as the owner of the house, a young woman about his age, stepped out in a fluffy pink bathrobe.

“Yes?” Kagami said, pulling her bathrobe tighter around herself as she closed the door behind her. “May I help you?”

“Sorry for, uh...disturbing you ma’am...miss...pal...,,” Mayura said, offering a sheepish wave, eyes bouncing up and down and lingering just a little too long on the cute, button-nosed slippers on her feet. “But I need to get into your house. Official superhero business.”

“.I see,” Kagami said, eyes drifting to the small cadre of armored knights that clustered behind Mayura. “And you would be?”

“Sorry, hi, I’m Ladybug’s partner-”

“I thought that was Chat Noir,” Kagami said, looking the blue-feathered stranger up and down with an appraising raise of her eyebrow. “Mmm...yes, I’m fairly certain that you’re not her usual better half, unless you traded the catsuit for...whatever this is.”

“I...we’ve been all over the news all week,” Mayura said, deflating a little as Kagami seemed to be unphased by the superhero standing in front of her. “...Mayura? The peacock? Ring a bell?”

“I find the news to be depressing, so I try not to watch it too much,” Kagami said, crossing her arms and narrowing her eyes. “And you’ll excuse me if I don’t let random costumed strangers into my home.”

“Okay, look, I know this is weird, but you need to trust me,” Mayura said, stepping up onto Kagami’s step. “Someone just ran into your house; someone Ladybug and I have been fighting with all night—”
“So you’d like to fight with them in my living room?” Kagami sniffed, looking up as Ladybug came tearing down the street. “I don’t think so; that brute with the hammer looks a little too smash-happy to be let near my furniture, thank you very much.”

“What’s going on?” Ladybug asked. “Did you find him?”

“Ch... he’s in there,” Mayura said, jabbing his head towards Kagami’s house. “Saw him go in the open window.”

“So you claim,” Kagami said, turning her attention to Ladybug. “Is this renaissance faire reject here with you?”

Ladybug’s lips pursed, a familiar and uncanny jealousy kindling as Adrien’s ex-girlfriend looked impassively at her. There was no real reason to dislike the woman other than the fact that she made good on her promise of wooing Adrien before she could come up with a perfect way to ask him out. Still, it wasn’t easy watching Adrien walk around with his arm wrapped around her waist or watch Kagami lean in and whisper something that made Adrien blush while they were on double dates.

It didn’t help that Kagami was the only person in the world that could manage to look intimidating while wearing a pink fluffy bathrobe and bunny slippers.

“Sorry to disturb you, miss,” Ladybug said, falling behind her shield of professionalism. “But my partner and I need to search your home...for your own safety.”

“For my own safety?” Kagami echoed with a small laugh, jerking her head up at the cameras stationed at the corners of her home. “My personal security system would have tipped me off to anyone breaking and entering without my knowledge. Since I received no such alert and since my retainers are currently not pouring out of their home right now, I assume your...partner, was mistaken.”

“He went in through the window!” Mayura protested. “I saw him go-”

“Please keep your voice down; people are sleeping,” Kagami said, earning an icy glare from Mayura.

“We won’t be long,” Ladybug said, stepping in front of Mayura with a small smile. “Just a quick
look around and we’ll be out of your hair.”

“...just a quick look around?” Kagami asked.

“Ten minutes or less,” Ladybug promised.

“Oh, well in that case...no,” Kagami said, watching Ladybug’s smile crack and brow crease.

“...no?” Ladybug echoed. “But-”

“My home is not a museum for people to wander in and out of as they please,” Kagami said coolly. “Even if the finest security system euros could by were to fail me, I am a silver-medalist fencer in a house full of swords. I daresay anyone who did break in would find me more than capable of tossing them out into the gutter.”

“We just need to-”

“I’m sorry, but it’s very late and I have university classes in the morning,” Kagami sighed, looking down on Ladybug with a tired, dismissive look in her eye. “So if there’s nothing else, I’d like to get back to bed.”

Ladybug gaped incredulously at Kagami, genuinely at a loss for words. “I’m...I’m trying to protect you here!”

“So you claim ,” Kagami repeated, eyes narrowing. “But it is well within my rights to decline any offer of protection from a vigilante .”

“V-Vigilante?” Mayura squeaked, gesturing to Ladybug as her fingers balled into fists at her side. “Th-this is Ladybug we’re talking about here!”

“And what branch of the police does Ladybug work for?” Kagami asked. “Does she have any official power to compel me to follow her orders? Or am I expected to comply with every girl in patterned spandex who wants entry into my home simply because she saved the city once or twice?”
“I saved you once or twice!” Ladybug snapped.

“And so I am to surrender my right to privacy to you because you saved me, what was it, four years ago?” Kagami asked, refusing to melt under the volcanic glare Ladybug leveled at her. "Does every person you assist owe you their unquestioning obedience?"

"If you would just-

“I thought as much,” Kagami said, watching Mayura tense up as she cut Ladybug off with a small wave of her hand. “Now, if there’s nothing else, I’d like you and your friends to clear off my doorstep. Thank you for your service, but I do not require your assistance tonight.”

“Look, we’re being nice here, but you know we can just walk past you, right?” Mayura said, crossing his arms. “There's not a hell of a lot to do to stop us, is there?”

“By all means; let my security system catch Ladybug and her new sidekick strong arming a woman in her bathrobe when she refused to let them in her home,” Kagami said, lips curling into an infuriatingly smug smile that made Ladybug’s blood boil. “I’m sure the press would be very interested in footage of Paris’ greatest heroine breaking and entering like a common hoodlum. The social backlash from that should be enough to keep you busy while my attorneys are suing those ridiculous costumes off your backsides.”

“Now, unless there’s anything important to discuss,” Kagami said, opening the door without breaking Ladybug’s gaze. “Have a pleasant evening.”

“You’re making a mis-” Ladybug blinked as the door slammed in her face and the sound of latching locks echoed in the small entranceway. For a moment, Ladybug just stood there, breathing hard, glaring at the peephole, and fighting the urge to rip the door off its hinges and barrel into the house after Chat.

“You sure he went in there?” Ladybug asked.

“Definitely,” Mayura said, glaring up at the windows above their heads. “So either she doesn’t know he’s in there and just being difficult…”
“...or she absolutely does and doesn’t want us to find him,” Ladybug said, glancing up at the security camera before turning away with a small sigh.

Kagami watched through the peephole, heart pounding in her ears as she gripped the hilt of the sword she had carried downstairs. For a moment, it looked like Ladybug was going to break her door down and come after her...but the moment passed and Ladybug slunk away, yo-yo carrying her up into the night as her partner followed.

Kagami let out a breath as the sword clattered to the ground at her feet, head pressed against the door as she fought to regain control of her breathing. She closed her eyes, slowly counting backwards from ten until the terror of talking down Ladybug in a bathrobe dissipated a little and she could stand unassisted. She carefully placed the sword to the umbrella rack, smoothed her bathrobe, and headed up the stairs.

“They’re gone,” Kagami called into the empty house, kicking off her slippers as she entered her bedroom. “You can come out now, Adrien.”

Silence greeted her as she looked around the shadowy room. Rolling her eyes, she shucked the bathrobe off her body as she heard an embarrassed cough coming from the shadows in the corner of the room.

“Thought you were still there,” Kagami said, shooting a small glance in Chat Noir’s direction.

“I should probably-”

“Stay,” Kagami said, tossing a pair of running shorts and a tank-top on her dresser. “Not like there’s anything you haven’t already seen, is there?”

“...the butterfly tattoo is new,” Chat Noir chuckled, averting his gaze as his ex-girlfriend got dressed as though he weren’t even there.

“I went out with some cousins one night and a tattoo parlor in Roppongi was having a sale,” Kagami chuckled, tugging her shirt over her head as she flicked the light on. The sight of Chat Noir, savior of Paris, conspicuously averting his eyes left her little doubt as to his identity; nobody else had looking bashful down to an art form like Adrien Agreste. “Glad you aren’t insulting my intelligence by
denying it at least.”

“How long have you known?”

“A year or so,” Kagami shrugged. “It would have been hard not to notice that the only time you ever cancelled plans with me coincided with magical mayhem...that and you were always uncannily good at sneaking out of my room. Goto-san never even realized you were in the house, and he’s ex JSDF.”

“Had a couple close calls; really miss that skylight I used to sneak in through,” Chat Noir chuckled, scratching the back of his head. “Sorry I never told you…”

“It was smart not to confide in someone Hawkmoth had compromised at least twice,” Kagami said, holding up her hand to forestall a protest. “I don’t blame you for anything...I assumed you had your reasons and decided not to pry.”

“Ladybug’s idea, ironically enough,” Chat Noir chuckled.

“And a good one; if you had shared your identity with her, I’m guessing you would be in her clutches instead of hiding out in my house,” Kagami said, looking him over. “Are you going to tell me what this is all about? I take it you didn’t jump through my window to have another post-breakup sleepover.”

“Not exactly,” Chat Noir coughed, biting his lip. “I’m not sure if you should even be involved.”

“I just spent ten minutes staring down a superhero in my bathrobe with only the threat of legal action protecting me,” Kagami said, eyes narrowing. “I’m involved; the least you can do is let me know what I’m involved in.”

“...long story,” Chat Noir sighed.

“I’ll put the kettle on then,” Kagami sighed, heading down the stairs. “But if you’re on the run from the police as well, I’d like some notice in case the constable comes battering my door down.”
Mayura had barely landed behind Ladybug on the roof overlooking her parents’ bakery when a red and black fist socked him hard in the shoulder.

“Ow!” Mayura squawked, rubbing his arm. “What the-”

“What was the one thing I told you not to do?!” Ladybug hissed, brandishing her finger in Mayura's face.

“Look, I didn’t go looking for a fight—”

“Well you found one!” Ladybug snapped. “What were you gonna do if I didn’t show up?!”

“I...I would have thought of something…’’ Mayura mumbled sheepishly, wincing as Ladybug socked him in the shoulder again. “Okay, that doesn’t actually hurt, but—”

“And you told him you knew who I was?!” Ladybug rambled. “At what point did you think that was a good idea?!”

“I thought we were trying to get under his skin!” Mayura protested. “Get him to make a mistake or something; I thought if I told him how close we were—”

“Tell me you didn’t tell him we used to date,” Ladybug said, grabbing either side of Mayura’s face and tilting his head down. “Look me in the eye and tell me—”

“I didn’t!” Mayura said, cupping the backs of Ladybug’s hands. “Look Mar—”

“Ladybug,” Ladybug cut across. “I am Ladybug. And while I am Ladybug, I need you to forget the fact that you know my name or anything about me! Do you understand?!”

“What’s the big deal?!” Mayura laughed. “So I told him I knew who you were! I could be anybody! You could be anybody! He was your partner for four years and he never figured out who you were, right?!”
“He never figured out who I was because I gave him nothing that would lead him back to me,” Ladybug said vehemently. “Not a side of town I lived on, not a favorite restaurant, not the route I walked to school; nothing. And in the span of two days, he knows that you know my secret identity!”

“So what?” Mayura asked. “He doesn’t know a thing about me!”

“He knows you’re the kind of person who names their minions after classic rock guitarists,” Ladybug said, ticking her fingers off as she went. “He knows you have a sister who likes to watch cartoons. He only met you tonight and somehow managed to figure out a way to use his new Aperture Science skills to pit us against each other! I mean, we were tripping over each other out there because you wanted to finish your little cock fight!”

“Alright, not my finest hour, I admit,” Mayura said, holding his hands up. “I was just trying to help...I swear…”

Ladybug shook her head, turning away from him and walking to the edge of the roof as Mayura waited for her to say something. Seconds dripped into minutes before Mayura spoke again.

“Are you okay?” He asked, walking across the rooftop as Ladybug sat on the edge of the roof. He had known Marinette for almost four years; dated her for almost two. He had seen her at her happiest and at her most devastated, but he had never seen her look so tired in all the years he knew her.

“I’m just...I’m scared,” Ladybug said quietly, wrapping her arms around herself as she leaned off the edge of the building. “I’ve had to do this for four years, you know? I’ve had to fight poor brainwashed civilians almost every week of my life...I haven’t even been out of the city since I was fifteen. But...as rough as it’s been...as hard as it is to fight, I’ve always had Chat with me...since day one…”

Ladybug stared down at the people milling about on the street below with glassy, unfocused eyes.

“I know I said he was useless...and that he just gets himself brainwashed…” Ladybug muttered. “But the truth is...all those times he got himself in trouble...all the times an akuma took control of him...that could have been me. It was going to be me, but Chat...stepped in the way.”

Mayura said nothing, simply settling down by Ladybug’s side and watching her out of the corner of
“...that’s the kind of person he is,” Ladybug said slowly. “That’s the kind of person we’re up against...someone who will die to protect something he cares about...”

“I’m sure you’d do the same for the people you loved,” Mayura said, lightly nudging her shoulder.

“That’s the thing though...I wouldn’t,” Ladybug said, shaking her head. “I would try and find a better solution...one where no one had to get hurt. One where everyone could get what they wanted and we didn’t have to choose between what we needed to do and what we wanted to do...Chat will just throw himself into a fight no matter what the cost is...and now that fight is with me.”

“Well...I think I prefer your solution,” Mayura said. “And maybe Chat will still wake up and realize he doesn’t want to fight you anymore.”

Ladybug sighed, leaning against Mayura’s shoulder as he tentatively wrapped an arm around her. “...just because he doesn’t want to, doesn’t mean he won’t.”

They lapsed into a comfortable silence, broken only by the sound of cars and chattering civilians below as Mayura idly wondered what kind of person would willingly fight someone like Marinette; someone he had fought alongside since he was a kid. He didn’t even know the half of the argument, didn’t even know why Chat was upset with his partner, except-

“Hey...you’re not really working with Hawkmoth, are you?” Ladybug stiffened as Mayura looked down at her with a dark, serious expression.

“...who told you that?” Ladybug asked.

“Chat...before you showed up...he said you wanted to use his ring to help Hawkmoth,” Mayura said softly. “...just level with me...is it true?”

Ladybug blinked, brain scrambling for an answer. Part of her wanted nothing more than to let Luka know exactly what he was getting himself into; screamed that it was the right thing to do while another part of her coolly reminded her that telling her partner the truth had led to this situation in the first place. But before she could lie or come up with an answer to satisfy Luka’s curiosity, Mayura burst out laughing.
“Oh man, like anyone would buy that,” Mayura said, lightly rustling Ladybug’s hair. “You working for Hawkmoth…”

“Y-Yeah,” Ladybug laughed, smoothing her hair with trembling fingers. “Crazy, huh...not Gorillaz fanfiction crazy, but-”

“Hey, when they release Murdoc from prison, I can stop filling in the holes,” Mayura said, steadying Ladybug as she slowly rose to her feet. “You gonna be okay?”

“...eventually,” Ladybug sighed, trying a shaky smile. “Just gotta keep...looking on the bright side.”

“Every cloud has one, or so I’m told,” Mayura said, holding out his fist for Ladybug to bump. She raised her fist for a moment before thinking better of it, slipping inside his guard and wrapping her arms tightly around his neck.

“Thank you,” she murmured, breath tickling his ear as she spoke. “I know this is a lot to handle, but...I’m really glad I don’t have to handle it alone.”

Tentatively, his arms wrapped around her waist as he resisted the urge to inhale the warm, strawberry scented hair that tickled his nose. After an all-too-short moment, she pulled back, wiping the corners of her eyes with her palms and shot him a somewhat surer smile.

“Of course,” Mayura said. “Anything you need, I got you.”

“I need a nap,” Ladybug chuckled, turning and heading towards the bakery. “...sorry for losing my temper earlier, I-”

“You’re under a lot of stress; I get it,” Mayura said, holding his hand up. “We’ll do better next time...or I will at least.”

“You usually do,” Ladybug giggled, shooting him a wave over her shoulder. “Night, partner.”

Mayura watched as she hopped across the roof, through the skylight, and transformed back into Marinette. His eyes lingered on her for a long moment as she laced her fingers behind her head,
taking a deep breath as her eyes closed. He watched her sit on the edge of her fainting couch, head buried in her hands as her shoulders started to hitch and shake, wanting desperately to break through the skylight and throw his cloak over her shoulders and pull her close like he used to.

Instead, he turned away, quietly stoking the angry voice inside his head that demanded that he thrash the daylights out of Chat Noir for upsetting Marinette so much.

Across town, Gabriel Agreste leaned back in his chair, swirling a tumbler of old, oily scotch in one hand and regarding a picture of a much younger, much happier family with the other.

"I'm going to fix this..." Gabriel murmured to himself, like a prayer, as he had so many times in the past four years. "I'm going to fix this..."

Chapter End Notes

So ends Mayura's first battle.

If anyone thought I jobbed Mayura out here...I did, but I had my reasons. 1) He's been a superhero for only a handful of days while Chat has had literal years to master his abilities 2) Ladybug hasn't trained enough with him yet and 3) I've always seen LB/CN on a different tier than the rest of the Miraculous, something I'll expand on in the future. To use an Exalted reference no one will get, Ladybug and Chat are Solars, Mayura/Hawkmoth/Rena/Carapace/Queen Bee are Celestials, the Zodiac are Terrestrials.

Confused? I hope so!

As always, feedback keeps the writer engine going. I'd especially like to know how I'm writing Marinette since I feel like I need to keep some sympathy with her since 1) she's the main character and 2) I need to try and piece this back together after shattering it with an Angst Hammer. So reviews are greatly appreciated!

NEXT TIME: Finally getting to that Adrinette Date as Mayura does a little sleuthing of his own and Kagami screws Adrien

'...s head on straight.

Tune into my writing blog (siderealscribblings on tumblr) for outtakes/WIPS! Thanks for reading!
Kagami slowly stirred a generous dollop of honey into her tea as she glanced between Adrien and the small floating cat-shaped spirit currently gnawing on a wheel of cheese she fished out from the crisper.

“So, let me see if I have this right,” Kagami said, taking a sip of her tea. “The source of your unfathomable powers of destruction is a cat that is powered by cheese, you and Ladybug working together could grant any wish, Ladybug knows who Hawkmoth is and instead of immediately binning him like she should, she has decided that the maniac in a butterfly costume deserves to have his fondest wish granted and promised to give Hawkmoth your ring. When you refused to surrender your Miraculous, you went to your mentor only to find him hospitalized and three Miraculous, which only Ladybug knew about, gone. You then seized the rest of the Miraculous, Ladybug took issue with that and your erstwhile lady friend demanded your Miraculous at swordpoint...or yo-yo point as the case may be. You fought once to a standstill before she enlisted the help of some sap who apparently knows her secret identity. So...not only does she have Hawkmoth and Birdboy on her side, but she has the ability to create three more heroes and potentially oppose you with a full half-dozen, experienced superheroes.”

“There’s also the chance that Ladybug could be too weak to use both of us and accidentally break reality when trying to make her wish,” Plagg added before attempting to jam the rest of the cheese wheel into his mouth.

“...I see,” Kagami said, taking a bite of her tea biscuit. “We're a bit fucked, aren’t we?”

“Royally,” Adrien sighed. “Or rather, I am. You’ve already done enough for me by stonewalling Ladybug like that.”

“I did learn how to be arrogant and condescending from a grandmaster, after all,” Kagami said with a weak chuckle. “If I did it like mother did, they should be feeling impotent and insecure for at least a few days.”

“I can’t see Ladybug wallowing in powerlessness for long,” Adrien said, patting Plagg on the back as he started to gag on his cheese wheel. “She’s a take-action kind of person.”

“You should take a page from her book then,” Kagami said, leaning in with her chin on her palms.
“I’m interested to know why you didn’t disarm...what was his name? Meduka?”

“Mayura.”

“Yes...why didn’t you take his Miraculous when you had the chance?” Kagami asked.

“Because Ladybug has me painted as some kind of Miraculous thief,” Adrien said, running his fingers through his hair. “I didn’t want to prove her right. Besides, she could just replace whatever I take off him with another Miraculous and I’d be back to square one.”

“You took twelve other Miraculous already; what’s one more?”

“I took those to keep them safe,” Adrien insisted.

“I doubt that’s how Ladybug sees it,” Kagami said. “Much as your intentions were good, I’m afraid encroaching on her Guardianship pushed her into a corner.”

“Wait, so this is my fault now?” Adrien spluttered.

“I’m not blaming you Adrien,” Kagami sighed, rubbing her temples with her fingertips. “Just assessing the facts; you had good reason to keep the Miraculous out of Ladybug’s hands, but in doing so you may have escalated it to the point of conflict between the two of you...in any case, you two seem to be at war now. Do you think there’s any chance Ladybug will see reason and come over to your side of things?”

“...maybe, but-” Adrien sighed, taking a sip of his tea. “I’ve known her for four years; when she sets her mind to something, she sees it through. And she really believes this is the right thing to do which...I mean, for all I know, it might be.”

“Having second thoughts?” Kagami asked.

“I’ve been having second thoughts since I tried to take her Miraculous for the first time,” Adrien admitted, watching the steam rise off his mug. “This all happened so fast, I’ve barely had time to process it. Two weeks ago we were still friends, still fighting goofy looking monsters together...then
Ladybug springs this plan on me and I don’t even have time to get two words in before she’s asking for my ring and saying that making peace with Hawkmoth is the best way to end this. I don’t even know if that’s such a crazy idea at this point—"

“It is,” Plagg chimed in.

“Is it?” Adrien said. “Ladybug isn’t the type of person who makes decisions without thinking them through first.”

“Well, first time for everything, huh?” Plagg sniffed. “The only way this is going to end without tears is if we bag Hawkmoth before Ladybug gets her hands on me!”

“...there’s a chance though, right?” Adrien said. “A chance that Ladybug could use both Miraculous and this all comes to a peaceful end before Christmas?”

“A chance, sure, but-"

“Let’s say there’s a chance,” Kagami interrupted, drawing Plagg and Adrien’s attention. “Let’s say Ladybug is the kind of uniquely gifted individual she’s proven herself to be and she resurrects Hawkmoth’s wife. Let’s remove the question of can from this discussion for a second and pretend that Ladybug will have no problem granting Hawkmoth’s wish without any complications.”

Kagami dunked the corner of a biscuit in her tea, letting the dark liquid soak the cookie as she contemplated what she wanted to say. “...how many?”

“How many what?” Adrien asked.

“How many people has Hawkmoth possessed over the years?”

“I...I don’t know,” Adrien shrugged, avoiding Kagami’s probing eyes. “Let’s say...once a week for four years...two hundred and eight? Not counting the people who got affected by something the akuma did.”

“So it’s safe to say that if you’ve lived in Paris in the past four years, you’ve been affected by an
akuma in one way or another,” Kagami said, chewing on the corner of her lip. “I forget...you’ve never been akumatized, have you?”

“No...guess you know why now, huh?” Adrien chuckled, trying to diffuse some of the tension in the room as Kagami continued to stir her tea with her cookie.

“It’s not an experience you forget,” Kagami said quietly. “I mean...you do, but it sticks around in the corners of your subconscious...the thought that you could be made to hurt someone you cared about without your knowledge or approval...and that it could happen more than once...well, you start to really dread your own bad moods. People in your life look at you differently...mother was always demanding of me, but after Riposte-”

Kagami blinked as she glanced down into a cup full of floating chunks of cookie crumbs, quietly pushing it aside as she looked back at Adrien. He reached across the table, gently taking Kagami’s hand with a reassuring squeeze.

“The thought of him out there, free after what he did to me...I almost killed you, Adrien,” Kagami whispered. “He can’t get away with this...I don’t care who gets hurt. I’m sorry if that makes me sound heartless, but too many of us have suffered because of that lunatic for him to just walk away after this is all said and done….makes me sick to even think about it.”

“He needs to pay,” Kagami nodded, locking eyes with Adrien as she squeezed his hand. “Ladybug may be doing right by Hawkmoth’s family, but Hawkmoth’s family aren’t the only ones who deserve justice... we deserve to have closure. This city deserves to have closure. And if you don’t, I’m going to find out who he is, hunt him down, and drag him back to Paris by his ankles myself.”

“I don’t doubt that you would,” Adrien laughed, smile dropping as Kagami locked eyes with him. He had known her a long time; gotten to know her better than most people could claim. Which is why the look of desperation floating behind her burning gaze made him sit up a little straighter in his chair.

“Promise me that you’ll make him pay, Adrien,” Kagami said. “Promise me.”

Adrien nodded, lightly squeezing Kagami’s hand a little harder. “I promise. Hawkmoth is going to answer for what he’s done to this city...no matter what the cost.”

“Good,” Kagami nodded with a small smile, wiping the corners of her eyes as she got up to dump
“If you’re sure, then I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

Adrien shared a brief glance with Plagg. “I mean...I do have about a dozen Miraculous you could probably pick from.”

“Even if the Zodiac doesn’t exactly stack up in terms of power compared to the Inner Circle,” Plagg said.

“Inner Circle?”

“Peacock, Butterfly, Turtle, Fox, Bee,” Plagg said, ticking his paws off.

“Still an upgrade from bathrobes though,” Adrien countered as Kagami leaned against the counter, brows knit in concentration.

“Much as I’d like to beat the wings off Hawkmoth myself, I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Kagami sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Why not?” Plagg said, floating up to Kagami’s eye level. “Come on! You’re like the coolest friend Adrien has!”

“Thank you,” Kagami chuckled.

“And you’re a world class swordfighter to boot!” Plagg said, making thrusting motions with his empty paw. “You’d be perfect!”

“I appreciate your confidence in me,” Kagami said, lightly rubbing the top of Plagg’s head with her fingertip. “There’s just one problem.”

“What’s Ladybug going to think when a dark haired, brown eyed woman shows up fighting by Chat’s side?” Adrien sighed, leaning back in his chair.

“Ladybug has good reasons to distrust me already,” Kagami said. “I fully expect that either she or
her new pet are going to have their eyes on my house in the near future, so it’s best if you don’t come here in costume anymore. And if I show up on the battlefield—"

“Someone’s going to put it together sooner or later,” Adrien said, chewing on his lower lip. “Would have been nice to have someone watching my back though…”

“It’s not a bad idea, but I don’t think it can be me,” Kagami said, rubbing her chin. “You need to find someone else; twelve, if you can.”

“I don’t even know where to begin,” Adrien sighed. “Who’s going to believe that Ladybug is actually working with Hawkmoth? Mayura literally laughed in my face when I told him.”

“Only because he’s already been poisoned by Ladybug’s idea already,” Kagami said. “You wouldn’t have any proof, would you? Something that confirms Ladybug is actually working with Hawkmoth?”

“Nothing but my word,” Adrien muttered. “However much that’s worth against Ladybug’s.”

“Getting down on yourself helps no one but Hawkmoth,” Kagami clucked, pulling her chair around the side of the table and sitting in front of Adrien, lifting his chin up with her hand. “You’ve fought tooth and nail for this city since you were a skinny little fourteen year old; that has to be worth something.”

“I would hope so,” Adrien said, patting the back of Kagami’s hand as he slowly stood up. “...you know, I’m glad I accidentally jumped through your bedroom window tonight.”

“Accidentally,” Kagami chuckled. “A likely story; just admit you’re still madly in love with me and couldn’t resist being away from me for another moment.”

“If that were true, I wouldn’t be leaving,” Adrien laughed, meandering through the empty house with Kagami as they headed towards the front door. “I should probably get going.”

“Late for a date?” Kagami teased.
“Tomorrow, but not tonight,” Adrien said, avoiding the curious glint in Kagami’s eyes.

“Is that so?” Kagami asked, a teasing lilt creeping into her voice. “Anyone I know?”

“Mayyyyyyybe,” Adrien said.

“Plagg?”

“It’s that Marinette girl who lives in the bakery,” Plagg said simply, spinning in mid air as Adrien flicked him in the back of the head.

“Traitor,” Adrien hissed.

“No need to be so cagey; I’m not going to give her the shovel talk or anything,” Kagami chuckled. “Though it seems you have something of a type.”

“Brunettes?”

“Ambition, artistry, and a magnetic personality seem to be prerequisites, don’t they?” Kagami said, tapping her chin. “In any case, I’m sure you’ll enjoy yourself...as long as you don’t come on too strongly.”

“When have I ever done that?” Adrien snorted, opening the front door and letting a chilly midnight breeze blow into the foyer.

“Our second date was a horsedrawn carriage ride through the park accompanied by a string quartet,” Kagami said flatly. “This was after the rooftop dinner and tickets to the opera.”

“...I see your point,” Adrien chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Just...try not to go over the top too quickly; maybe save the marriage talk for date five or so, hm?” Kagami said.
“I may have already proposed marriage twice,” Adrien said.

“Of course you have.”

“Jokingly, of course.”

“Of course it was,” Kagami said, pulling Adrien into a tight hug as he turned to walk away. “Be safe.”

“No promises,” Adrien said, kissing her briefly on the cheek. “Thank you...for all of this.”

“Oh please; if Ladybug captures you, my social circle dries up faster than the punchbowl at a Bourgeois Christmas party,” Kagami chuckled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Let me know how I can help.”

“I’m sure I’ll think of something,” Adrien said, shooting a wave over his shoulder as Plagg burrowed into Adrien’s jacket collar. Kagami watched from her doorstep until Adrien rounded the corner and disappeared down a side street before stealing back into her house, locking the door and leaning against it with a sigh.

“Why couldn’t I have normal, boring friends like Mother wanted?” Kagami sighed, turning the lights off as she trudged upstairs.

“You’re getting in rather late.”

Adrien resisted the urge to sigh, privately rolling his eyes as he hung up his coat. His father didn’t look up from his sketchbook, pencil scribble-scribble-scratching non stop as Adrien stuck his head in his study.

“Sorry,” Adrien said. “I was out; lost track of time.”
“I can see that,” Gabriel murmured. “Take care you don’t sacrifice your sleep schedule for a few hours with your friends.”

“Yes, father,” Adrien sighed, running his hand through his hair. “I’ll be back before midnight tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“I...have a date, actually,” Adrien said, studying his father’s facial expressions for any sign of disapproval.

“...is that so?” Gabriel asked, frowning at his sheet of paper. “Is it Mme. Tsurugi again or have you finally caved to Chloe’s advances?”

“Neither,” Adrien chuckled, biting his lip. “It’s...it’s Marinette, actually.”

Gabriel’s pencil stopped moving as his eyes snapped away from the page to look at his son. “...Mme. Dupain?”

“Mme. Dupain-Cheng,” Adrien said, jaw tightening. “Yes...is there a problem with that?”

Gabriel opened his mouth, but to Adrien’s surprise, he seemed to be at a loss for words. Adrien braced himself for a wave of fatherly disapproval, already mentally running through the list of comebacks he had been working on all week.

But to Adrien’s surprise, Gabriel just nodded. “None at all,” Gabriel said, clearing his throat. “Do you need reservations?”

“...I-I’ve made them already, thank you,” Adrien said, a little bewildered at the lack of parental overbearance.

“Of course you have,” Gabriel said, offering his son a small smile. “Thoughtful, as always. Enjoy your evening; let me know if you require anything.”
“...thank you,” Adrien said, frowning in confusion as he backed out of the study and started heading up the stairs. “...that was weird.”

“What was weird; he didn’t seem to have a problem with you and Marinette, did he?” Plagg whispered into Adrien’s ear.

“That’s what was weird,” Adrien said, closing and locking the door to his room as he stepped through it. “When has my father ever passed up an opportunity to micromanage my social life?”

“Maybe he’s finally warming up to the idea that you’re not a kid anymore?” Plagg suggested.

“That’s even weirder,” Adrien laughed, running a hand through his hair. “Maybe he just likes me dating someone ‘in the industry’ as it were…”

“I wouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth on this one,” Plagg said, lightly punching Adrien in the shoulder. “You deserve to have a nice night out after the crazy week you had. Kick back, have a nice dinner, play your cards right and get invited back to Marinette’s room after-”

“First date, Plagg,” Adrien said, flopping down on his couch. “First date.”

“That means less than nothing to me,” Plagg said, landing on Adrien’s shoulder with a sigh. “Long night…”

“Feels longer than it was,” Adrien yawned, checking his watch. “Not a total wash though.”

“Even if Kagami can’t fight with you, she’s a good source of good ideas,” Plagg pointed out. “And her best one is that we need more backup than we currently have.”

“Maybe we can put an ad out on the Ladyblog,” Adrien chuckled, paging through his phone. “Help wanted; Chat Noir needs YOUR help to defeat Hawkmoth since his partner is being a total butt…”

A bright picture of Ladybug and Mayura greeted him when he opened the Ladyblog, eliciting a
small growl of disgust from Adrien who quickly paged away, thumbing back a few weeks to where stories of Ladybug and Chat Noir’s latest akuma battles were still front page news. He paused as he came to a picture of Ladybug and Chat Noir standing with a formerly akumitized eight year old, holding him up on their shoulders while his mother took a picture with her phone.

They had gone out for ice cream after that; spent the afternoon talking and joking with the kid until he felt a little bit better. Ladybug had laughed when the kid innocently asked if Chat Noir was scared of vacuum cleaners like his cat was, almost running into a lamp post as they took him on a quick rooftop tour of Paris. It was moments like that, divorced from the superpowered battle they found themselves in, that Adrien cherished more than anything else.

Letting out a small sigh, Adrien wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, scrolling until he hit the bottom of the Ladyblog. As he was about to turn his phone off for the night, three words in scrawling red font caught his attention at the bottom of the page.

**GOT A TIP?**

Adrien’s thumb hovered over the button, wondering if an anonymous tip that Ladybug had sided with Hawkmoth would be taken seriously. If only he had some kind of tangible evidence; some kind of proof that would tie Ladybug back to-

Adrien sat up, staring at his phone for a long minute. “Plagg...transform me.”

Plagg vanished into his ring before he could say anything and Chat Noir fumbled for his communicator at his belt, flicking it open as a wide, disbelieving smile stretched across his face.

"Jackpot."

“Hey...sorry I haven’t been by to check on you lately.”

Master Fu’s only response was the slow rise and fall of his chest as the heart-rate monitor blipped faintly in the background. Even unconscious, Master Fu still had a way of making Marinette feel uneasy; as though he would wake up at any moment and start berating her for colluding with their enemy. A bag of pastries sat cooling in her lap as she tore strips off the crumpled white paper, rolling them up as she spoke to him.
“I’ve, uh...been busy,” Marinette laughed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I wish I could say it was doing something that made you proud but...well, who knows? Maybe you would be...maybe you’d understand.”

Part of Marinette wondered if Master Fu might be persuaded to come over to her side; that he’d see sense in saving Hawkmoth’s family, if only for his wife and son’s sakes. A word or two from Master Fu might convince Chat to stop his one-man war and help her put an end to years of pointless suffering.

“I don’t know how to make him listen to me,” Marinette muttered, shaking her head. “I’m still trying to get through to him and make him see that we have a chance to make this all...mean something without creating more heartache in the process...why doesn’t he get that? Why is he being so...”

Marinette trailed off with a deep, weary sigh, head dropping as she tossed another shred of pastry bag on the floor.

“I hope you’ll understand why I have to do this,” Marinette said, placing the bag of pastries on the nightstand. “If not...I hope you’ll forgive me someday.”

Marinette stood up, tucking the blankets up around Master Fu’s chest as a tall, slender woman with shockingly white hair stepped into the room, looking over the rim of a medical chart as she noticed Marinette there. “Can I help you?”

Marinette started a bit, dropping the blanket as the woman looked down on her with a hard, suspicious glint in her eye. “I-I was just tucking him in! He looked...well, it’s kinda chilly in here and-”

“You must be Mme. Cheng,” the woman said, looking Marinette over briefly. “You brought him in a few days ago, yes?”

“I...did everything I could for him,” Marinette said, hesitantly offering her hand to shake. “You must be his personal physician.”

The doctor let out a dry laugh through her nose, gripping Marinette’s outstretched hand with a soft, almost regal shake as two assistants in pale blue lab coats craned their necks around the corner of the door. “I am, despite the old tortoises best efforts to refuse to take his medicine. Dr. He, at your
service. These are Jun and Lan, my associates and proteges.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Jun said in English with a small nod her companion mirrored.

“You as well,” Marinette said with a shaky smile as she turned back to the only other French speaker in the room. “...how is he?”

“You may have saved his life by acting as quickly as you did, but it’s frankly too early to tell,” Dr. He said as her assistants followed her into the room, Lan quietly noting Master Fu’s vital signs as Jun started opening vacuum sealed bags of what appeared to be freshly shorn leaves. “Our friend has a...very rare condition that requires special medication to combat. Medication that he has neglected to stock up on for some time.”

“Is that what you’re making there?” Marinette said, watching Jun mince the plant leaves and add them to a stainless steel mortar.

“He’s not yet strong enough to handle the...side effects of the medicine quite yet,” Dr. He said. “We need to build him up a bit first before administering the dose to minimize the risk of complications.”

Marinette’s brow furrowed, opening her mouth to say something as Jun poured a vial of strange green liquid into the mortar and began to grind it with the chopped leaf.

“It’s perfectly safe, I assure you,” Dr. He said, cutting Marinette’s protest off before she could vocalize it. “Something he’s been taking for quite some time, actually. Not exactly something one stores in a pharmacy, so my associates and I need to brew it in small batches.”

“I’ll...leave you to it then,” Marinette said with a slightly nervous chuckle as she turned to leave.

“Before you go,” Dr. He said, glancing up from Master Fu’s medical chart. “Do you happen to know where that silly bracelet of his is?”

Marinette stopped cold, as a chill washed over her, turning back to look at Dr. He looking at her curiously.
“Bracelet?” Marinette echoed, taking note of the way Jun had slowed the grinding of herbs and the way Lan’s eyes seemed to be trained on the monitor that dimly reflected Marinette standing in the doorway. “O-Oh, the one he used to wear, right?”

“A trinket he can’t seem to let go of,” Dr. He chuckled, folding her hands in front of her. “Still, I’ve never seen him without it; it didn’t fall off his wrist when you moved him, did it?”

“Must have,” Marinette shrugged, heart thumping insistently in her ears. “I-I can go look for it back at his house, if you want?”

“I sent Jun and Lan there already; they couldn’t seem to find it,” Dr. He sighed. “Couldn’t seem to find the rest of his collection either.”

“A collection?” Marinette echoed, praying that Dr. He didn’t notice her hands fidgeting with the buttons of her coat.

“A box of accessories; not very valuable, but they have some sentimental meaning to him.” Dr. He said, chewing on a pencil as she stared blankly into space. “I hate to think someone who didn’t realize their worth might have stolen them…”

“I...can’t imagine…” Marinette said, chewing her lower lip. “I mean, he never showed it to me but-”

Frowning, Dr. He crossed the room to Marinette in two fluid steps, gently raising the back of her hand to press against Marinette’s forehead before she could get away. “My dear...you look very pale.”

Marinette dared not to breathe, worried that the slightest hitch in her breath would be enough to give her away. Dr. He’s hand lingered for only a handful of seconds that seemed to stretch on for eternity, before saying something to Jun in Chinese. Jun nodded, reaching into an open leather carrying case and producing a small dark glass bottle with a white cap.

“Take this,” Dr. He said, offering the bottle to Marinette. “A concoction of my own design to boost energy and fortify against sickness. Two drops in any warm beverage should ward off the common cold and perk you up a little bit.”

Marinette glanced between the bottle, Jun, and Dr. He for a split second before hesitantly reaching
out a hand to take it. “Thank you,” Marinette said. “I should probably...I mean, I don’t want to get in your way or.”

“Yes, by all means,” Dr. He said with a small nod. “Don’t want to interrupt the rest of your day. Please feel free to visit our friend anytime you’d like...I’m sure he’d appreciate your company.”

Marinette nodded, turned and accidentally knocked into a rolling metal cart on her way out of the room. She tried not to look like she was rushing away and didn’t even dare to look over her shoulder at the eyes she felt on her back as she made her way down the clean, sterilized hospital hallways.

She didn’t start breathing again until she reached elevator, taking shaky, unsteady gasps of air as she leaned against the wall for support.

“Who is that?” Marinette whispered to Tikki who poked her head out of Marinette’s coin purse.

“I...I don’t know,” Tikki said.

“Tikki I swear if you’re holding out on me-”

“I didn’t see who you were talking to!” Tikki hissed. “And I wasn’t exactly invited to every single social gathering Master Fu went to!”

“She knew about his Miraculous,” Marinette muttered, fidgeting with the buttons on her coat. “She knew about all of them.”

“She knew he had a collection -”

“-that he never showed to anyone but me ,” Marinette said, holding her deactivated phone up to her ear so she could talk to Tikki without looking like an idiot. “How does she know that? I thought Master Fu was the last Guardian of the Miraculous!”

Tikki was silent for a long moment. “...I can’t say anything else about that.”
“Tikki-”

“I wouldn’t if I could but I literally can’t,” Tikki snapped. “Does the word geas mean anything to you?”

“Should it?”

“To make a long story very short, there are certain things I can and cannot talk about,” Tikki said. “It’s part of being a kwami; I am literally incapable of revealing certain information to you. I can’t even hint at it any more than you could breathe fire.”

“You told me who Master Fu was,” Marinette said, turning the bottle of mystery liquid over and over in her pocket as she walked out of the hospital.

“I was given permission to do so under very specific circumstances,” Tikki explained. “You had learned enough about the Miraculous on your own to break the geas and allow me to talk about him again. But there are some things I can’t actually help you with; the Miraculous, the forces that protect them-”

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?” Marinette asked, stepping out of the hospital and glancing up at the windows looking out on the street.

“You can compel me to do certain things,” Tikki said, a sneer creeping into her voice. “I’m compelled to help you transform; compelled to let you access my powers of creation. This is one thing you can’t compel me to do.”

Marinette stopped as she caught sight of Lan and Jun glancing out the window a few stories above her. They watched her for a few seconds, held her gaze as they offered a small wave before turning and disappearing back into Master Fu’s room.

“Fine,” Marinette said, turning and heading down the street into a dark alleyway. “Didn’t want to have to do this, but I guess I have no choice, do I?”
The sight of Gabriel Agreste in an apron, chopping onions as he tried to read a recipe over the rim of his glasses would have been comical if there wasn’t something so deeply unsettling about it. It was easy to forget that he was responsible for so much pain and suffering when he looked so ordinary; just an average Parisian father preparing lunch for himself as though he had never enslaved people to do his dirty work against their will. It had only been a handful of days since she had gone to war with her partner, and Ladybug hadn’t slept a full night since. She would rise in the middle of the night, pace her room, write a hundred messages to Chat and delete them all before flopping fruitlessly back onto bed, avoiding the judgmental stare of her giant cat plushie.

Gabriel didn’t seem to have lost a wink of sleep over what he had done, humming under his breath as he added the onions to a pan on the stove.

“Name sounds vaguely familiar, but I can’t place it,” Gabriel said, wiping his hands on a dish towel and turning to face Ladybug. “Why do you ask?”

“She…” Ladybug bit her lip as she set the glass bottle of medicine down on the counter. “I...encountered her today. In civilian form. She started asking questions about Master...my Master. About the Miraculous.”

Gabriel paused in the middle of slicing a chicken breast, glancing up with a look of cold, wary fear that reminded Ladybug exactly who she was dealing with. “Did she mention them by name?”

“No,” Ladybug said, crossing her arms. “Just that she was looking for the box of ‘trinkets’ my Master had with him...I swear she knew something. I felt like she was...interrogating me.”

“I’ll see what I can find out,” Gabriel said, sprinkling some salt over his chicken as he reached for a bell pepper. “In any case, you need to stay away from her.”

“No kidding.” Ladybug snorted. “Just thought you should know we might have more than one Guardian...even though my Master told me that they were the last one.”

“He probably lied to you,” Gabriel said casually. “Don’t take it personally; we all lie to people we care about every now and then.”
“Speak for yourself,” Ladybug muttered.

“You lied to your partner for four years about who you were and who the other heroes he fought beside were,” Gabriel pointed out.

“To keep us safe!” Ladybug snapped.

“Then it was a very good reason to lie,” Gabriel said, holding his hands up defensively. “Honesty isn’t always better than a little deception every now and then.”

“Is that how you sleep at night?” Ladybug scoffed.

“It’s how my son sleeps at night,” Gabriel said, adding the bell pepper to the onions and stirring them around. “Surprised he slept at all last night given the ruckus your former partner caused on the roofs across the street.”

“He just wanted to flex his muscles and toss Mayura around for a bit,” Ladybug muttered. “Nothing you need to worry about.”

“Unlike his new skill set,” Gabriel said, flipping the sizzling vegetables in the pan. “That little disappearing act he pulled seems to have caught you off guard.”

“We just need to iron out some kinks; he won’t get away from us next time,” Ladybug said, leaning on the counter. “…does the name Tsurugi mean anything to you?”

In response, Gabriel flicked the tip of his knife into the cutting board with a loud thunk, tapping the emblem laser etched into the blade of the knife.

“Nearly every professional kitchen in the world uses Tsurugi cutlery, cookware, or kitchen appliances,” Gabriel said. “But I’m guessing you’re not in the market for a new skillet.”

“Chat...got away from us last night,” Ladybug said, staring at the kanji on the knife blade. “Mayura thinks he ran into the house of Kagami Tsurugi, but when we asked to search for him, she wouldn’t let us in.”
“Can’t imagine she would,” Gabriel said, brow furrowing. “I know the girl; Adrien was involved with her for a few years and we ran in similar circles as her late mother. You don’t suppose that she’s in league with our friend in black, do you?”

“Certainly didn’t have a high opinion of me or Mayura,” Ladybug said. “Didn’t make any secret of letting us know it either...if we could have just gone into her house-”

“Be glad you didn’t force the matter,” Gabriel said, adding the chicken to the pan. “The Tsurugi family isn’t one to make an enemy of. They’re rich, influential, powerful-”

“And you aren’t?” Ladybug said, earning a sharp bark of laughter from Gabriel that made her skin crawl.

“Let’s just say there’s wealthy and then there’s wealthy,” Gabriel chuckled. “I’m nouveau riche; self-made people like myself aren’t always highly regarded by more ‘established’ families like the Tsurugis. My ancestors were pig farmers; theirs were nobility. They’ve had wealth and power longer than a great many nations and I would not advise you to start rooting around in that girl’s personal business without good cause.”

“She’s one woman; I think I can handle her.”

“A woman who’s won Olympic gold and survived a childhood with a crucible of a mother breathing down her neck,” Gabriel pointed out, stirring his lunch around the skillet. “By all means, do whatever you need to in order to get Chat Noir’s ring; just be careful you don’t get your spots sued off in the process.”

“Thank you for the sage advice,” Ladybug said, tensing as the front door opened.

“Relax, it’s not Adrien; he’s preparing for a date with some friends of his,” Gabriel said.

“Is that so?” Ladybug said, trying to sound casual.

“Yes, seems an ambitious young designer caught his eye,” Gabriel mused, turning his lunch around in the pan as he regarded Ladybug’s reflection in the polished chrome backsplash behind the stove.
“Interesting girl; reminds me a lot of myself at that age.”

Three weeks ago, Marinette would have been on cloud nine if someone had compared her to a young Gabriel Agreste; now the comparison made her suppress a shudder of revulsion.

“Sounds like quite a girl,” Ladybug said, crossing her arms.

“Disappointed that someone beat you to Adrien’s affections?” Gabriel said, popping a piece of chicken in his mouth and chewing thoughtfully as he tipped the contents of the skillet onto a plate. “You wouldn’t be the first young lady taken with my son.”

“My...interest in your son is completely professional,” Ladybug said with a small cough. “Hope he and this lady friend enjoy their evening.”

“I’m sure they will,” Gabriel said, picking up the bottle of medicine and turning it over in his hands. “I’ll see what I can find out about this; I have some contacts in the forensics department who owe me a few favors.”

“Thanks,” Ladybug said, turning to head out the kitchen window.

“You should try and get some rest,” Gabriel called after her. “Forgive me for saying so, but you look like an absolute wreck.”

“You just ooze charm, don’t you?” Ladybug grumbled, latching on to a nearby roof and swinging away. Gabriel watched her go for a moment, thoughtfully chewing a piece of chicken as Nathalie quietly entered from the side door.

“...for future reference, sir, young women don’t particularly like it when you comment on how tired they look,” Nathalie said, adjusting her glasses.

“Duly noted,” Gabriel said, rolling the medicine bottle across the counter towards Nathalie. “See what you can find out about this Dr. He person. Last thing we need is another self-important old fool making a mess of things when we’re so close to the finish line...”
Alya crossed her arms, staring at the blank Ladyblog queue with a small frown on her face.

For the first time in four years, there was no akuma attacks to report. No Ladybug and Chat Noir sightings outside the little press tour Ladybug had done with her new partner. It was as though Chat Noir had disappeared after their little sparring match the week before, melting into the shadows and vanishing without a trace.

Which was odd, given the fact that Chat rarely missed the chance to pose for pictures with tourists or mug for cameras while on a midnight stroll.

With nothing to post, Alya closed her laptop with a small sigh, turning around in her chair to close the window as a sudden breeze blew in-

“Hey there!”

Alya screamed, tumbling backwards and falling out of her chair as she caught sight of a pair of pretty green eyes staring at her from the windowsil.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you,” Chat Noir said, twirling his communicator anxiously between his fingers as Alya righted herself. “Is this a bad time?”

“Depends,” Alya chuckled, brushing her pajama pants off. “Bad time for what?”

“ Noticed that the Ladyblog was drying up with content and I thought I’d let you in on a little scoop,” Chat said, flicking open his communicator and turning it to show a log of text messages between him and Ladybug. “I was thinking ’Ladybug Betrays Paris; Sides with Hawkmoth’ would a snappy headline, don't you?”

Chapter End Notes

Am I going to name all my chapters after lines from the Midnight Crew?

A better question is who is going to stop me?

So I was going to get to the date in this chapter but I figured Chat's chat (ha) with Alya
was a good place to leave it (the fact that it's also 6500 words meant that it was a good place to stop as well. Kinda feel like a decompression chapter or two where nobody is fighting would be helpful to bring the pace back down a little bit. Next time we'll have the date and the fallout from Chat Noir going to Ms. Ladyblog with the receipts.

Thanks as always for the reviews/feedback! Pointing out questions you have with the story is helpful when writing the next chapter to see if there's anything I need to go back and explain better.

Prompt for this week; how are you feeling about our protagonists? Anything bugging (ha) you or anything you'd like addressed in future chapters?
Alya thought her Friday evening was going to be a boring one. She fully expected to spend it cleaning out the Ladyblog’s inbox and making a half-hearted attempt to organize her workspace before working on her essay for Monday morning.

She didn’t expect to be pulled into a national conspiracy with Ladybug at the center of it all.

“I...I don’t understand,” Alya said, paging through log of texts as Chat perched on the edge of her bed. “This doesn’t make any sense; why would Ladybug side with Hawkmoth?!"

“She’s not so much siding with him as she is working to achieve the same goal,” Chat Noir said. “Though, for all intents and purposes, that seems to be the same thing.”

"And what goal is that?" Alya asked, eyes gliding over page after page of heated text conversations she was never meant to see.

"Apparently he's been giving this city grief for the last four years because he wants to bring his family back," Chat Noir sniffed. "Ladybug seems to have taken his side and got a little put-out when I didn't instantly agree to help her.

“Is that why…” Alya closed his communicator, passing it back to Chat with a curious frown. “Is that why you two were fighting last week? Is that why Ladybug’s been looking to replace you?"

“She more or less demanded my Miraculous and I had to destroy that bridge to just keep her from taking it,” Chat continued, running a hand through his hair. “She...Hawkmoth must have given her that peacock brooch to help her steal the ring off my finger.”
“...I see,” Alya said, jotting something down on her notepad as Chat talked. “So...why tell me this? Why not go to the police or the mayor or-”

“I need your help,” Chat said as he stood up. “Paris needs to know what’s really going on; they need to know that Ladybug and Hawkmoth are working together and I need to use the Ladyblog to get the message out before she lies to anyone else.”

“Local news shut you out, huh?” Alya chuckled, mostly as a way to break the tension a little bit.

“Local news doesn’t have your cred when it comes to Ladybug,” Chat said. “If it came from the Ladyblog, people might be more inclined to believe it. I mean, let’s face it; nobody else in this town has as much credibility when it comes to Ladybug other than...well, Ladybug.”

Alya nodded, still too stunned to do anything but frantically scribble notes on her pad. “...alright, I...something like this, I need time to work on it.”

“I took pictures of my communicator’s text log,” Chat said, rifling through his pockets and pulling out a thick manilla envelope. “This is everything starting from the conversation after our first argument. I don’t know if you need a statement or anything-”

“I’m going to start with this,” Alya said, weighing the packet of photos in her hand. “I’ll let you know if I have any questions...I mean, I probably will...God, I’m still trying to even wrap my head around this.”

“You and me both, sister,” Chat Noir chuckled. “It’s, uh...it’s been a tough week.”

“Well...enjoy your evening,” Alya said. “If what you’re saying is true-”

“It is,” Chat insisted.

“-then you should probably take the night off,” Alya said, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “I’ll message your Ladyblog profile if I need anything.”

“Alright...and, uh...thanks,” Chat said, offering her a small smile. “Glad to have Paris’ number one...
superhero reporter on my side.”

Chat offered her a short two-fingered salute as he climbed out her window, leaving Alya staring at the packet of evidence and two pages of clumsily handwritten notes on her desk.

“So much for working on that essay,” Alya sighed, burying her face in her hands. "What have you gotten yourself into, girl..."

He was watching her.

The camera’s grainy blue image caught sight of the garishly dressed peacock pacing back and forth on the roof across from Kagami’s townhouse, glancing around as though he were waiting for someone to arrive. Kagami kept an eye on the screen out of the corner of one eye while she quietly worked on a history essay in her favorite armchair.

“And I thought my Friday evening plans were dull,” Kagami clucked, putting the finishing touches on a paragraph as she watched Mayura keep his vigil silently. His arms were folded in around himself and every step he took seemed to brim with impatience and annoyance. Twice, he disappeared from the camera’s eye only to reappear a few seconds later, sighing and resuming his watch on her home.

His fingers fidgeted against his forearm, dancing up and down the blue material of his suit as though he were playing a piano scale...or fretting a guitar chord. Kagami distinctly remembered watching Adrien fidget in a similar way when he was bored, mentally running through finger exercises to keep his mind occupied.

Kagami quietly opened a moleskin notebook next to her laptop and scribbled “Musician?” under Mayura’s name before returning to her essay, humming under her breath as she typed.

There was something almost surreal about getting dressed for a date.

It was so painfully ordinary, Marinette could scarcely believe that it was actually happening still. A
week before, when Adrien invited her out, she was still holding on to hope that she could make peace with Chat and bring their war against Hawkmoth to a close without any more hurt caused.

Now, she was just praying this would end sooner rather than later.

With Central St. Martin’s breathing down her neck to accept their offer, Chat’s insurrection couldn’t have come at a worse time. They had been fighting Hawkmoth for four years and now, she had less than nine months to put an end to it before she lost the chance to go to her dream school.

If she couldn’t figure out a way to draw Chat into the open, then…

Marinette shook her head, cinching the belt around the waist of her dress and stepping into her open toed heels. She could worry herself into a hole in the ground tomorrow morning; Mayura was keeping an eye on Kagami’s house and she doubted Chat would surface again so soon. Tonight, all she needed to worry about was what to order for dinner. Tonight, she could just pretend to be a normal person with normal problems that didn’t involve superpowered drama.

*I’m going to need the practice,* Marinette thought, nodding at her reflection in the mirror. *Because someday I will be.*

The promise of an ordinary life where she could pursue her ambitions unhindered by duty dangled just out of reach. In the quiet moments of doubt when she wondered if she was really doing the right thing, Marinette closed her eyes and pictured London. She pictured herself making friends with up and coming fashionistas and building the foundation of what would one day be her brand. She envisioned taking weekend trips to the mainland, coming and going from Paris without worrying whether or not the city would fall down without her holding it up.

It was that promise of a simple life of her own choosing that steeled Marinette against uncertainty.

“I’ll be back in a little bit,” Marinette said, shooting a small smile at Tikki which the bug kwami didn’t return. “Buzz me if you need anything.”

“I’m sure I won’t,” Tikki said, waving over her shoulder as Marinette disappeared through the trap door with a small sigh. She was going to need to do something about Tikki sooner or later; something to at least make peace with her increasingly surly kwami. Maybe she could steal into the kitchen before Adrien arrived and grab a plate of peace offering cookies…
The sound of shattering glass and her mother’s minced oath floated through the door as she nudged the door to the kitchen open. A plate of filled macarons lay scattered on the kitchen floor, shattered beyond any hope of salvation. The counters were lined to the ceiling with folded white boxes, half of them filled while her father frantically tried to mold the delicate pastries as quickly as he could.

“I’m...stepping out,” Marinette said, sticking her head in the kitchen. “Are you two alright?”

Tom and Sabine shared a brief glance. “Perfectly fine!” Tom said, waving at his daughter.

“Right on track!” Sabine added, sweeping up the macaron disaster with a slightly forced smile. “Have fun on your date, dear!”

“Are you sure you don’t need any-”

“No!” Tom and Sabine said forcefully, making Marinette jump a little.

“We have everything taken care of, honey,” Tom insisted.

“Take the night off,” Sabine added. “We’ll take care of this by the time you get back.”

Marinette lingered in the doorway, glancing between the pile of unfilled pastries and the boxes that still needed to be filled just as the front doorbell rang, drawing her attention away from the minor meltdown in the kitchen.

“I’ll be right back,” Marinette said, ignoring her parents’ cries of protest as she clacked down the hallway, throwing open the door and letting the cool autumn breeze.

“Hey, I-” Marinette paused as Adrien turned around, taking in the sight of Adrien in a tailored black blazer, his hair tousled by the wind. There was a limit to how cute a guy could be and Adrien seemed to find new ways to completely disregard that with just a look and a smile.

“Hey,” Adrien said, leaning on the door frame, eyes wandering over the lines of her dress in a way that made her stomach flip. “This a Dupain-Cheng original?”
“Modification, actually,” Marinette chuckled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ears. “Look, I—"

“Adrien!” Tom cried, filling the door behind her as Sabine slid alongside her. “How nice to see you!”

“Nice to see you…too…” Adrien trailed off, tapping his left cheek as he noticed a glob of raspberry jam on Tom’s cheek. “Did you get into a fight with a fruit merchant or something?”

“Just a little overzealous with the pastry bag,” Tom chuckled, wiping the jam off his cheek and hastily wiping it on his apron. “Big order to fill-”

“A very big order,” Marinette said, shooting her father a glance. “Called in at the last minute too-”

“But nothing we can’t handle,” Sabine added, nudging Marinette forward.

“Five hundred jelly pastries are hard to fill with two people,” Marinette said, nudging her mother back.

“Hard, but not impossible,” Tom added, patting Marinette on the shoulder as Adrien’s eyes bounced from Dupain to Dupain. “Which means-”

“Which means-” Marinette interjected.

“Which means…you want to stay here and help your family fill their order,” Adrien surmised, tapping his chin thoughtfully.

“No!” Tom and Sabine insisted.

“Yes!” Marinette replied at the same time.

“Absolutely not, young lady,” Sabine said, crossing her arms. “You are not going to waste another
“Friday night slaving over a cookie sheet!”

“But-”

“In fact, you’re reverse-grounded,” Tom said, lightly nudging his daughter forward. “No house chores or family business until you hang out with your friends, miss.”

“I’m sure Adrien will understand that I can’t just walk out on my parents when they’re up to their eyeballs in berry jam with a deadline creeping up on them,” Marinette insisted, glancing back at Adrien who frowned, deep in thought. “Three sets of hands are just a lot faster than two-”

“And four would be a lot faster than three, right?” Adrien interjected before Tom or Sabine could respond. Adrien was treated to the sight of the combined Dupain-Cheng family blinking in unison before they all started talking at once.

“Oh, we couldn’t ask you to-”

“I’m sure you have better places to be than-”

“It’s Friday night, dear-”

“Marinette wants to stay and help, right?” Adrien asked, turning to his date who nodded with a small, apologetic smile. “And the more people help, the faster it would get done, right?”

“Well...of course, but-”

“Adrien, it’s fine,” Marinette assured him. “You don’t have to stick around, really.”

“Yeah, but…” Adrien scratched the back of his head, offering a smile that never failed to make her pulse spike. “I wanted to spend time with you...and if this is where you’re going to be…”

Tom and Sabine shared a glance over Marinette’s head as a chilly breeze washed over her pinkening cheeks.
“...I think we have a spare apron in the cabinet?”

The door swung open before Nino could ring the doorbell again, and Alya’s tired, slightly nervous looking smile greeting him.

“Come in,” Alya said, taking Nino by the hand and tugging him through the darkened kitchen.

“I got your text, but I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” Nino said, letting Alya drag him upstairs towards her bedroom. “Usually your booty call texts are a lot flirtier...”

“Wish I could say I was in the mood, but I’m really not, babe,” Alya sighed, closing and locking the bedroom door behind them.

“Is everything...okay?” Nino asked, frowning as his eyes roamed over the pile of papers spread out on the comforter of Alya’s bed.

“Hard to say,” Alya laughed, running a hand through her hair. “I’ve...I’ve been looking at this for hours now and I’m going crazy; I think I need your help something.”

“Is this normal something or super something?” Nino asked, scowling at what appeared to be a picture of printed out text messages. “Are these-”

“Chat Noir came to my room a few hours ago,” Alya rambled on, flopping into her office chair with a sigh. “You know that Ladynoir sparring match that totaled the bridge?”

“Sure,” Nino shrugged. “Figured they were just playing rough with each other.”

“Yeah, well…Chat says that wasn’t a sparring match,” Alya said. “He says that...they were fighting. For real this time...because Ladybug is apparently working with Hawkmoth.”
Nino’s first response was an involuntary laugh that echoed in the empty house. “…you’re joking, right?”

“_He_ wasn’t,” Alya said, rubbing her arm anxiously. “He was stone serious...he said that they’re working together to try and bring someone back to life and that they need the Ladybug and Black Cat to do it. Ladybug asked him to help her and when he refused...he said she stole the our Miraculous.”

“Stole them? Weren’t they hers to begin with?”

“I guess there’s a master nobody told us about?” Alya shrugged. “And that she was borrowing them from him but...something happened to him and Ladybug made off with the Miraculous, presumably to give to Hawkmoth.”

Nino shook his head, eyes scanning the sheafs of printed out text messages with a deepening frown. “This doesn’t make any sense…”

“He wants me to run an article on the Ladyblog,” Alya laughed, burying her face in her hands. “He wants me to go public with this information. I’ve somehow gone from being a part-time superhero and fanblogger to being at the center of a superpowered marital spat...what am I supposed to do?”

“You’re the journalist here; not me,” Nino said, walking around the side of Alya’s chair and sliding his hands along her shoulders. “I mean...this is wild; we can agree on that much, right?”

“Right…”

“So...when you have a lead on the story, what do you do?” Nino asked.

“I don’t know...follow up...fact check...make sure I’m printing the right information before I post anything,” Alya said, gesturing to the text logs spread out on her bed. “I mean, isn’t this proof enough?”

“I’m looking at cell-phone pictures of a Miraculous text chain,” Nino shrugged. “It doesn’t look good for Ladybug, but...hell, who’s to say these are even legit?”
“You think Chat Noir is lying?”

“Well either he’s lying or…” Nino sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Man, I don’t even want to think about or…”

“Either way, it’s bad news,” Alya muttered, chewing on her lower lip. Her eyes drifted between the pile of text messages on her bed and the open laptop on her desk. “But...I think I know what we need to do...or what I need to do anyway. You probably don’t need to be involved in this.”

“Yeah I do,” Nino said, kissing the top of her head. “Like I’m gonna let you walk into this without backup.”

“Have I told you lately you’re the best?” Alya chuckled, punching a number into her phone as she held it up to her ear. “Chloe? Hey, it’s Alya...listen, we gotta talk…”

Mayura’s foot tapped an uneasy rhythm as he sat on the edge of the roof across from Kagami Tsurugi’s house, eyes scanning the darkened horizon for any sign of Chat Noir. Much as he hated bailing on band practice, Marinette would be out of commission for most of the night and somebody needed to keep watch on the off chance that Chat Noir returned to his hiding spot.

Unlikely as it was, Mayura almost wanted Chat to show himself.

He was almost reluctant to detransform the night before, fighting the urge to go back and wait for Chat Noir to show himself so he ambush him properly. But despite his grand fantasies of kicking Chat Noir’s ass, the fact of the matter was that Mayura was punching far above his weight class when it came to Ladybug’s former partner. The ease with which Chat Noir tossed him around was frankly frightening, and a quiet part of Mayura’s mind wondered if there was even any hope of fighting him by himself.

Still, if he could get a picture of him coming out of Kagami’s house, then-

“Are you going to be there all night?”
Mayura’s train of thought slid off the rails as a voice called up to him from across the street. Kagami had come out onto the balcony outside her bedroom, setting down a tray of tea as she settled into a chair looking out over the street. Out of instinct more than anything else, Mayura ducked behind an air conditioning unit.

“I know you’re up there,” Kagami called. “My cameras have been on you since you arrived; I’ve been watching you watch me all night now.”

“How many cameras does this girl have?” Mayura muttered to himself, straightening up and stepping out from his hiding spot and hopping up onto the ledge of the roof.

“I’m just enjoying a night out on the town,” Mayura said with a small shrug. “It’s a free country; not like you own this building too.”

“I do, actually,” Kagami said as a window below Mayura slid open and a tall, burly Japanese man in a floral apron stuck his head out, craning his neck up to see what the commotion was. “Ojama shite sumimasen, Goto-san!”

Mayura shot the man a shaky wave as he stuck his head back in, closing the window behind him with a lingering glare in Mayura’s direction. “Goto-san used to work for my mother before he retired, and naturally I didn’t kick him out of his home when he stopped working for me,” Kagami explained as Mayura skipped off the roof he had lurked on, landing on the neighboring house with a flutter of blue feathers and a triumphant smirk.

“Okay, well...you don’t own this building do-”

“I’m going to save you a lot of time and trouble; my mother bought every house on this street when we moved here as an investment opportunity, so technically -”

“You gotta be kidding me,” Mayura muttered, hopping off the roof and landing on the street below Kagami’s balcony. “Look, I swear I’m not trying to spy on you or anything.”

“Exactly what someone who was trying to spy on me would say,” Kagami pointed out.

“It’s just...we ran into a scary guy last night and I wanted to make sure you were safe,” Mayura explained.
“Is this part of the standard superhero service?” Kagami chuckled, leaning over the railing. “Do you check in on everyone who has a brush with danger?”

“Well, I’m one for one so far,” Mayura chuckled, scratching the back of his neck. “Second night on the real job, so thought I’d get off to a good start.”

“I’m sure this will reflect well on your performance review,” Kagami said, carefully regarding Mayura over the rim of her balcony. “I’m sorry if I was a touch curt with you and your lady friend last night; you had interrupted some much needed personal time and I feel I may have taken that out on you more than I should have.”

“Oh, uh...no need to apologize, madam,” Mayura said, coughing awkwardly into his hand, suddenly wishing he had Marinette’s knack for acting so effortlessly heroic. “All in a day’s work...or night’s work...you know what I mean.”

“I’m not sure if I should be flattered that I’m worth the attention or offended that you decided to call me madam,” Kagami said, eyes narrowing. “Just how old do you think I am?”

“...I would answer that if I thought there was a right way to do so,” Mayura chuckled nervously. “Look...Ladybug wanted me to keep an eye on the place for the next few days in case anyone came by. I swear, we just wanted to make sure the...person we’re chasing isn’t going to come back and hurt you.”

“Must be quite the scary person if one of Paris’ heroes is permanently stationed outside my bedroom window,” Kagami said, head tilting back and forth as she thoughtfully regarded him.

“You could say that,” Mayura replied. Something about the way she looked at him made Mayura feel on edge; like she was deciding whether or not to pounce on him from the balcony above.

“Hard to be on the watch for someone when I don’t know what they look like,” Kagami said. “Who exactly is this person you’re worried about?”

“Someone you don’t want to get on the bad side of,” Mayura said. “Can’t exactly say anymore than that; sorry, for your own-”
“-protection, yes,” Kagami sighed, turning her attention back to her laptop. “Well, do whatever you feel is necessary, but I imagine you’re in for a rather dull evening.”

“Tell me about it,” Mayura muttered, backing up towards the middle of the avenue. “So I’ll just-”

“You can resume your perch across the street,” Kagami said. “Just try not to make too much noise; Goto-san gets peevish when you interrupt his evening soaps.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Mayura said, casting a glance across the street and nearly falling over when he saw Goto glaring out the window of his living room, the frilly apron stretched across his massive frame doing little to diminish the cold, wary suspicion in his eyes.

“Of course I get stuck watching the girl with an attack bear in an apron,” Mayura muttered, fluttering up off the street as Kagami watched him over the rim of her laptop.

“Well that was...something,” Adrien laughed, brushing the flour off his pants as Marinette passed him a warm washcloth to take some of the jam off his cheeks. “Got a little I Love Lucy there towards the end, but I think we made it.”

Marinette didn’t quite know why she found the image of Adrien covered in pastry residue so attractive; maybe it was the fact his shirt sleeves were rolled up and his collar was popped down to his collarbone. Maybe being attracted to bakers was one of those things she picked up from her mother.

“Thank you again for all this,” Marinette said, shooting her parents a wave as they loaded their delivery van with the last of the pastries. “I doubt this was the evening you had planned.”

“Hey, some people would pay a lot of money to have a date at a French bakery,” Adrien said, scrubbing his cheeks down as Marinette hung their aprons up. “Your folks could probably run a side business teaching Americans how to make bread.”

“The fact that my mother even let you in her kitchen is a small miracle,” Marinette chuckled. “I doubt she’d open the doors to her bakery to any tourist who wanted to play baker for a day.”
“I’ll take that as a compliment then,” Adrien said, rubbing his forearms with a small wince. “Man, baking really takes it out of you, doesn’t it?”

“In more ways than one,” Marinette said, fetching Adrien a bottle of water from the fridge. “I don’t know if I could handle the kind of dawn to dusk schedule my parents operate under.”

“Early bird gene must’ve skipped a generation then,” Adrien chuckled, leaning on the counter as he checked his watch. “Shoot...I think our restaurant just shut its doors.”

“Sorry,” Marinette said.

“For what?”

“You...went and planned this night out and my parents’ pastry predicament put a pin in it,” Marinette sighed. “I was...really looking forward to hanging out with you tonight.”

“We hung out,” Adrien said. “Just did it over a pile of pastries instead of a table at *Le Grand Paris.*”

“Ugh, I missed out on Marlena’s cooking too?!” Marinette moaned, morosely taking a bite out of a pastry. “It’s seriously been weeks since I’ve eaten anything that wasn’t baked and stuffed with some kind of filling...”

“Remind me to bring you a salad or something on Monday,” Adrien said. “Seriously though...I had fun tonight.”

“Glad one of us did,” Marinette muttered a little louder than intended. “N-Not that I didn’t like spending time with you, because I did! It’s just...”

Marinette shrugged, stuffing her mouth with another bite of pastry as Adrien frowned thoughtfully at her.

“You work...three jobs?” Adrien said, cocking his head.
“Feels like four,” Marinette chuckled. *Feels like a lot more lately.*

“On top of applying to design schools and graduating lycee?” Adrien snorted, shaking his head. “And I thought I was the one with the crazy schedule.”

“Certainly surpassed you there,” Marinette said, avoiding Adrien’s almost paternal look of concern. “I’m not biting off more than I can chew, I promise.”

“You’re not doing a hell of a lot for yourself either,” Adrien pointed out.

“Life of a young designer is not the most glamorous,” Marinette sighed. “Look at your father; how many jobs did he work to get Gabriel off the ground?”

“My father isn’t the kind of person I would recommend looking up to,” Adrien countered. “I mean, I love him in a ‘he’s my father so I have to’ kind of way, but look at where all that hustle got him; three different hypertension medications and a fractured home life.”

“Okay, bad example,” Marinette admitted. “I just...no one else is going to fight for the kind of life I want except me. A much help as I get from my friends and family, it’s...it’s just always going to come down to me doing what I need to do...I don’t want to be stuck making pastries for the rest of my life. I don’t want to be stuck in this city for the rest of my life...”

“I didn’t realize you felt so trapped,” Adrien muttered.

“Selfish of me, I know-”

“Who says being selfish is always bad?” Adrien countered, leaning against the counter next to Marinette. “Who says you have to always drop everything you’re doing and take care of someone else’s needs?”

“That’s the ‘right’ thing to do, isn’t it?” Marinette chuckled.

“It’s not right that you feel like no one else cares about your dreams except you,” Adrien said, lightly bumping her hip with his. “You don’t have to sacrifice the things you want just because you think
you have some responsibility to the people around you. With all you do for your friends and family, I’d say...maybe it’s high time you acted a little selfish.”

“I’ll...try to remember that,” Marinette said.

“It’s that or I start kidnapping you before you work yourself to death,” Adrien chuckled, shooting her a small wink. “Still owe you that dinner you know.”

“Still bummed I had to miss out on it tonight,” Marinette said, offering him a small smile. “I think I’m free next week...barring another pastry disaster.”

“Tell your parents if they want my help again, they’re gonna need to start paying me,” Adrien chuckled, plucking his jacket off a coathook on the back door. “Cash, check, or croissant delivery only.”

“I’ll let them know,” Marinette said, plucking a few pastries off the counter and stuffing them into a bag as she followed Adrien out the back door. “Thanks again, by the way. For the help and...well, for the advice.”

“Thanks for the crash course in pastry making,” Adrien said, immediately cracking the bag open and stuffing an apricot pastry in his mouth. “Next time I’ll pack a change of clothes in case something comes up and we have to avert another baked goods catastrophe.”

“I’ll let you know if there are any massive croissant orders coming down the pipeline,” Marinette said, offering him a small wave as he backed down the street. “Careful walking home; holler for Ladybug if you need any help.”

Adrien passed through a streetlight only long enough to catch the tail end of a sad, sour expression before shooting her a small smile. “Yeah...I’ll keep that in mind.”

Adrien headed down the sidewalk, humming under his breath as Marinette watched him chew on the pastry. “Well...not exactly how I thought my first date with Adrien would go,” Marinette chuckled to herself, locking the door behind her and turning off the lights in the kitchen. Still, covered in flour, pastry crumbs, and no small amount of fruit filling, she allowed herself to relish the small moment of peace that had come at the end of such a chaotic week.
Breaking through the trapdoor with a sigh, Marinette walked over to her laptop, idly browsing her social media accounts and checking her email. Amid a follow-up email from Central Saint Martins and a few emails from Alya about the project she was working on, a blinking notification in the Social tab of her email client caught her attention.

Ladyblog Admin: [1] Unread Message!

Marinette let out a fond sigh, shaking her head as she clicked on the email. Having an official presence on the Ladyblog as Ladybug was awkward at first, but in the more trying times of her career as a superhero, letters from grateful citizens always managed to lift her spirits.

Only this time, the message was a little less encouraging.

A chill washed through Marinette as she opened the email, a sickening, gnawing pit of fear growing in her stomach as she read the message. Her fingers shook as she scanned the contents of the message, breath hitching and catching in her chest as her head swam.

“No…” Marinette muttered, fingers pressed against her lips. “No, no, no...oh, God, Chat, what did you do?!”

“What?!”

Kagami glanced over the rim of her laptop at Mayura’s outburst echoed down the street. He seemed to be talking into a communicator, clearly agitated as he started pacing the roof.

“How did he...no...no, just stay there...I’m on my way.”

Closing the communicator with a dark oath, Mayura took off, building up speed on the rooftops before leaping off and gliding across the city.

Frowning, Kagami fished her phone out of her pocket and punched Adrien’s number in, wrapping her jacket around her shoulders as a chill set in.
“Hello?” Adrien answered after a moment, a cheery lilt in his voice.

“That bird I saw the other night was back again,” Kagami said, slipping into Japanese in case anyone was still listening. “Something must have startled him.”

“I wonder what it could have been,” Adrien replied, a smug smirk evident even in his voice.

“Did you get into any mischief while I wasn’t looking?” Kagami asked.

“Wait and see; I’m sure it will all be clear tomorrow morning,” Adrien said.

“If you say so…” Kagami sighed. “Just...wanted to make sure you were safe.”

“Apart from covered in flour, I think I’m okay,” Adrien chuckled.

“What exactly did you two get up to?” Kagami said.

“I’ll tell you tomorrow,” Adrien said. “Let’s just say I think things are looking up for us.”

“Don’t jinx it,” Kagami clucked. “I’ll talk to you in the morning.”

“We can get a celebratory breakfast,” Adrien said. “If I played my hand correctly, I think I found a way to handle our bug problem.”

Kagami set her phone down with a small sigh, leg shaking as she tried to shake the sneaking sensation that something was amiss.

Adrien woke the next morning to the sound of his phone buzzing next to his ear, shaking off the
cobwebs of sleep as he rolled over, flicking the television on as he rose with an exceptionally feline stretch.

Glancing at his screen, he noticed the red light on top flashing and a message that informed him that he had missed thirteen calls in the past half hour, all from Kagami. Frowning, Adrien started calling her number, dimly aware of a special news bulletin going on in the background on his television.

“Couldn’t wait to talk to me, could you?” Adrien chuckled as he picked up the phone.

“Where are you?!” Kagami panted, panic creeping into her voice. “I-I’ve been trying you all morning, I’ve been-”

“Hey, slow down, I just woke up,” Adrien said, frowning as he sat back down on his bed. “Is everything okay?”

Kagami’s end was silent for a long moment. “You haven’t seen the Ladyblog, have you?”

“Just woke up,” Adrien said, rubbing Plagg’s head as he burrowed out of the covers next to him. “Anything interesting posted?”

“Adrien,” Kagami said, voice quavering as she tried to keep it level. “I need you to be calm right now...no matter what happens, I need you to be calm right now.”

“You’re scaring me, Kagami,” Adrien said, switching his phone to speaker mode as he opened his browser. “What’s going on, what’s-”

The front page of the Ladyblog opened to a brand new headline. Adrien frowned in confusion for a moment, reading it once, twice, three times as a slow wave of dread washed over him.

“I...I don’t understand…” Adrien panted, heart throbbing in his ears. “This isn’t...this isn’t…”

“Was this part of your plan?” Kagami asked. “Because if it was-”
"No, this...this isn't what I wanted," Adrien said, teeth gritting together. "This isn't what I wanted at all..."

“Adrien, please,” Kagami begged through the phone. “I know you’re upset, I know you’re scared, but you have to be smart right now! This is clearly some kind of trap! You can’t.”

The rest of Kagami’s warning was swallowed by an angry scream as Adrien transformed, leapt out the window, and started barreling towards Mayor Andre’s residence across the rooftops as fast as he could.

Chat Noir Betrays Paris; Sides with Hawkmoth

In an exclusive interview with the Ladyblog, Ladybug confirmed that last week’s battle between her and Chat Noir was far more serious than an ordinary sparring match.

“It pains me to say this,” Ladybug told Ladyblog reporter Alya Cesaire late last night in an exclusive interview. “But Chat Noir tried to steal my Miraculous a little more than a week ago with the intent of supporting Hawkmoth. When I refused to surrender my earrings, he attacked me and we fought throughout the streets of Paris. I managed to drive him off, but he’s made it clear that he and I are enemies now.”

“I know this may be shocking to hear,” Ladybug continued. “But Chat Noir made his choice. And I’m asking Paris to help me bring him to justice before anyone gets hurt.”

A special press conference with more information will be held Saturday at 9:00 a.m. in front of the Mayor’s residence. This story is still breaking, so please stay tuned to the Ladyblog for more details.

When asked if she had any words for her former partner, Ladybug had only this to say. "You brought this on yourself."

Chapter End Notes

I mean, did you really expect Adrien to have good luck?

Happy Thanksgiving American readers ᴮᵉᵉⁿᵉᵉ
Don't Want to Die In Here

Chapter Summary

Chapter title once again comes from Heel Turn 2 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MtnwN32ioo) by the Mountain Goats which is now required listening for the press conference scene in this fic.

I expect a full 250 word essay on how this song about bad guy wrestlers relates to Marinette's feelings of helplessness in the face of the crushing responsibility she's lived with since she was a child.

Extra Credit: Explain how Unmasked! from the same album relates to Chat Noir's perspective.

Chapter Notes

HEY GANG, I realize you have strong feelings about characters in this fic and I appreciate that, but if you could please tone down the vitriol in the comment section I would appreciate it greatly. Without naming names, some of the comments have gotten a little more heated than I'm comfortable with and they're honestly a little upsetting to read.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You ready?”

Ladybug nodded, taking a deep breath to quell the rising tide of nerves that threatened to drown her where she stood. Mayura laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder, giving her a small squeeze as they headed up the wooden stairs and onto the podium Mayor Andre erected in front of his house. Carapace, Queen Bee, and Rena Rouge stood off to one side as she passed, eyes not leaving her as she stepped out of the curtain and into a sea of flashing lights.

“Ladybug, are the rumors true?!”

“Did Chat Noir really betray you?”

“Why is he working with Hawkmoth?”
“How long has he been working against the city?”

“How does this betrayal affect your secret love-child?”

“Are he and Hawkmoth romantically involved?”

“One at a time, people,” Mayura said, holding up a hand to quell the stream of questioning. “Ladybug has something she needs to say, and then we’ll do a quick Q&A session after she’s done.”

Silence fell over the crowd of reporters and onlookers. Mayor Andre stood off to one side, his secretary whispering frantically in his ear. Two kids in black and green cat-print shirts caught her eye as she swept the crowd, looking up at her as though they were waiting for her to deny the allegations she put out the night before.

No turning back now...

“Good morning,” Ladybug said, clearing her throat. “I’ve called this press conference to confirm the rumors that Chat Noir has turned on Paris and sided with Hawkmoth in order to steal our Miraculous.”

Silence lingered for another moment before the crowd erupted in a wave of panicked, angry cries.

Twelve Hours Earlier...

From: Ladyblog Admin

To: Ladybug

Message:


“No…” Marinette muttered, fingers pressed against her lips. “No, no, no...oh, God, Chat, what did you do?!”
A picture of a pile of screenshotted text messages was attached to the message from the Ladyblog, each showing page after page of Ladybug begging her partner to help Hawkmoth and give up his ring. Alya Cesaire—her best friend, Rena Rouge, and most importantly, editor of the Ladyblog—had been hand delivered piles of evidence that tied Ladybug to Paris’ greatest terrorist.

It was a full minute and a half before Marinette composed herself long enough to look at the screen again which only brought a fresh wave of panic coursing through her.

“Oh God, what do I do?” Marinette moaned, grateful her parents weren’t around to hear what she imagined was a very loud, protracted nervous breakdown. “What do I do...what do I do...what do I do…”

Her head swam as her mind cycled through a myriad of increasingly catastrophic scenarios, scrambling for some kind of foothold she could grasp onto as Tikki poked her head out of the cabinet, scanning the screen as Marinette paced the floor of her bedroom.

“Marinette,” Tikki said in a soft, gentle tone she hadn’t used with Marinette in a while. “Marinette, please, just breathe...breathe…”

Marinette sank to her fainting couch, head dipping between her knees as she forced each breath to be slower than the one that came before it. Tikki landed on her shoulder, nuzzling into the corner of her neck with a small sigh. “It’s over.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Marinette said, fingers bunching in the fabric of her flour-stained dress.

“You know what you’re supposed to do,” Tikki said gently. “This doesn’t have to break badly for you...this can all still be over tonight. You can call Chat; you can take Hawkmoth down together.”

And then Adrien loses his father.

“And then Adrien loses his father,” Marinette laughed, wiping a tear from her eye. “Great; back to square flipping one.”

“Adrien’s father is a horrible person-”

“And the last family Adrien has,” Marinette sighed, fingers running through her hair. “I’m supposed to just orphan him then? And then look him in the eye tomorrow? I can’t be responsible for that, Tikki, I can’t-”
“You are *Ladybug,* ” Tikki said sternly. “You are responsible for the safety of an entire city. I am *sorry* that Adrien is going to be the one suffering for something he has *no* role in, but there is no other way to end this. You *cannot* be blinded by the well-being of one person.”

Marinette stared blankly at the floor for a long moment. “…so, this has nothing to do with Nooroo then?”

Tikki blinked, floating back to look at the angry, bitter look of defeat on Marinette’s face. “That *isn’t* the same thing.”

“You want me to defeat Hawkmoth because you want me to rescue your friend,” Marinette said, chewing the inside of her lip. “Doesn’t matter who gets hurt as long as Nooroo is safe, right?”

“This is about *more* than just Nooroo, this is about-”

“The fate of the city, I know,” Marinette said. “A fate I have *not* stopped fighting for, by the way. Just because I’m trying to mitigate the fallout a little doesn’t mean I’ve stopped caring.”

“You’ve just stopped fighting the enemy you’re *supposed* to be fighting!” Tikki snapped.

“How many akuma attacks have there been *besides* Warning Shot who was only akumatized because Chat was being a brat?” Marinette asked. “I thought I was supposed to put a stop to akuma attacks; seems to me like I’ve done that. After four years of pointless fighting, *I* did that.”

“You’re really counting on Hawkmoth to hold up his end of the bargain?” Tikki sniffed.

“Hey, so far so good,” Marinette said, slowly standing up. “I am under *no* delusion that Gabriel is a good person, or even an honorable one. But the fact of the matter is that as long as this deal keeps going, we have no more akuma attacks. We move this war out of the streets of Paris and only involve people who *know* what they’re doing!”

“And how long do you expect this little ceasefire of yours to last!”
“Long as I can help it,” Marinette said, slowly rising to her feet as she pushed panic aside and began formulating a plan. “Transform me.”

“Where the hell have you been?!”

Gabriel opened the door to his study to find his window open and an irate Ladybug wearing a track in his carpet.

“Making toast,” Gabriel said, setting his dinner down on a table and closing and locking a door behind him. “Adrien is coming home from his date soon, so whatever this is about—”

“We have a problem,” Ladybug said, tapping her foot against the floor.

“Clearly; we don’t communicate unless there is one,” Gabriel sighed, rubbing his eyes. “What is it this time? Is Kagami causing more problems than we thought she would?”

“Worse,” Ladybug said, flipping a phone around and showing Gabriel the image of the chat logs on Alya’s bed. “Chat went to the press with the text logs showing us arguing about whether to help you or not. Tomorrow, all of Paris is gonna know that we’re in cahoots.”

“I see,” Gabriel said, taking a small bite of his toast. “Bit fucked then, aren’t we?”

“Unless I figure out some way to stop this before it leaks,” Ladybug sighed, running a hand through her hair. “I have two hours to come up with a plan before I have to meet the Ladyblog’s editor. Ideas; now.”

“She called a meeting?” Gabriel said, raising an eyebrow. “She wants to meet with you before she posts the story?”

“Yeah, I guess she wants to get the facts of the case before she goes ahead with publishing it,” Ladybug said, folding her arms. “And I’m kinda blanking on what I’m supposed to tell her to stop the story from running.”

“Really?” Gabriel chuckled. “I thought the answer was obvious.”
“Enlighten me then,” Ladybug said, watching Gabriel pace over to the window, rubbing his chin.

“If Ms. Cesaire wants to meet, I say you meet with her,” Gabriel continued. “I say you take Mayura with you and try and group the rest of your allies together in once place at one time. Sit them down, buy them coffee, and confirm their suspicions.”

“That’s exactly what we’re trying to stop from happening,” Ladybug sighed.

“Let me finish,” Gabriel said, turning back to face Ladybug. “You tell them that you and Chat have been fighting, which is true. You tell them that he tried to steal your Miraculous, which is true. You tell them that he stole a box of Miraculous out from under your nose, which is true.”

“Where are you going with this?” Ladybug said, brow knitting.

“Then...you tell Ms. Cesaire that it is Chat Noir, not you, that has thrown his lot in with Hawkmoth,” Gabriel concluded.

Ladybug blinked, shaking her head as she turned away. “That’s insane…”

“Is it?” Gabriel asked. “History has shown that Paris is more inclined to believe you over Chat. That incident with Copycat a while ago sticks out, but-”

“You want me to publicly slander Chat Noir?” Ladybug scoffed. “That’s your solution?”

“...technically, since it’s in print, it’s considered libel, but-”

“I take it back. Your plan isn’t insane; you are.”

“I don’t understand what the problem is here,” Gabriel laughed somewhat incredulously. “You are being gifted an opportunity to decisively tip the scales in your favor-”
“By spreading lies about my partner...ex-partner,” Ladybug muttered.

“By allowing the Ladyblog to spread one,” Gabriel said, holding his finger up. “Chat Noir tried to steal your Miraculous, right or wrong?”

“Right, but-”

“Chat Noir made off with twelve other Miraculous, correct?”

“Again, true, but-”

“He is holding up a deal that will secure peace for Paris because his feelings got hurt, true?”

“But he still doesn’t deserve to...to...” Ladybug trailed off. “This isn’t right.”

“I must say, you are being remarkably considerate about someone who is behaving so inconsiderately towards you,” Gabriel said, folding his arms. “Noble, to be sure, but it appears your erstwhile partner lacks your sense of fair play...do you really think he’d extend you the same courtesy?”

Ladybug opened her mouth, brow knitting as she crossed her arms, lips pursing as Gabriel stepped off his perch on the wall.

“You have done nothing but give him chances to cooperate with you,” Gabriel continued. “You’re still trying to get him to cooperate with you. And how does he respond? He steals what’s rightfully yours and tries to undo the years of good work you’ve done with a blog post. He continues to harass and attack your allies and tries to undermine you and still you give him the chance to work with you. How many chances does Chat Noir get? What does he have to do to convince you that he isn’t interested in cooperating? That he’s intent on taking your Miraculous and using it in a misguided crusade for revenge?”

Ladybug was silent as Gabriel stood in front of her, hands tucked in his pockets as he looked her over. “The alternative is that you are cast out of Parisian society; that you are hounded by police and government officials and a score of other Miraculous users. It means that our goal becomes infinitely harder to achieve and every good work you’ve done over the last four years gets immediately and irrevocably erased from the memory of this city.”
“So Chat Noir deserves to be totally smeared then?” Ladybug asked, cold blue eyes glaring up at Gabriel.

“You didn’t make the choice to bring your spat public,” Gabriel pointed out. “He did. He chose to involve the press; he chose to drag your name through the mud. He seems to have no qualms about ruining your reputation; why should you have qualms about flipping his little tactic back on him?”

“Because it’s...cheap,” Ladybug said, somewhat lamely.

“It was cheap to involve the press in the first place,” Gabriel countered. “Cheap and desperate; he must be so short of allies that he feels the need to discredit you to even have a fighting chance.”

“Do we really want to push him if he’s that desperate?” Ladybug asked, massaging her temples with her fingertips.

“Desperate people make mistakes,” Gabriel said, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Tarnishing his reputation is the quickest way to get him out in the open and making stupid mistakes and with the rest of your team on your side, you could set a trap for him that he would run gladly into. This could be over tomorrow if you play your cards right tonight.”

“You’re not hurting him,” Gabriel said as the silence between them stretched on longer than he felt comfortable. “You’re not torturing him, you’re not putting his life in danger. You are cutting him off from his cherished celebrity and giving him yet another chance to surrender himself. Do you really think he’ll fight so fiercely when people are no longer chanting his name?”

“There has to be an alternative…” Ladybug muttered.

“The alternative is that you find the entire city aligned against you,” Gabriel said, voice taking on a steely quality. “And let me remind you that it’s taken me four years to make any progress because I’ve been unable to act openly due to pending charges of domestic terrorism. I don’t know about you, but I don’t particularly want to waste the rest of my life fighting for my family’s future; do you?”

Ladybug said nothing as Gabriel sat down at his desk, organizing his sketches as Ladybug stared aimlessly into space. “The choice, of course, is yours...but I insist you think about pursuing this course of action and ask yourself just how much longer you want to do this.
Ladybug said nothing, lips pursed as she stared at the smooth marble tile for a long moment as Gabriel wordlessly went about his work. He didn’t look up as she walked towards the window, only turning around when she was gone to watch her swing away over the darkening streets until she was long out of sight.

Ladybug touched down on a blank and seemingly empty rooftop a few blocks from Le Grand Paris, coming to a stop as she feared the weight of her decision would eventually snap the fragile yo-yo string that kept her aloft. Silence pressed in around her as she paced the roof, head swimming as she searched for some answer, some alternative that would give her the results she wanted without crossing a line she never believed she would even reach.

As she paced, she became increasingly aware of the chill in the air and the dark corners of the city that hadn’t seemed so frightening before. At times when Chat Noir was being exceptionally flippant or childish, she had felt like the fate of the city rested solely on her shoulders. A small part of her took pride in being the one with the plan; the one who always came up with a strategy to solve whatever stood in their way.

Now Ladybug found herself wishing it wasn’t all up to her.

*Just how much longer do you want to do this?*

She had a choice; lie and tell the whole city that Chat Noir was working for Hawkmoth or allow him to completely destroy her reputation and make ending the fight in her favor all but impossible. The first choice rankled the steely sense of justice her parents had instilled in her since she was a child; the second choice made Marinette Dupain-Cheng blanch, though not because she was worried about her action figure line.

If Chat’s story ran unedited, her escape from the endless akuma cycle only got further and further away. He would drag the city into a civil war rather than allow one terrible person to live in quiet anonymity with his family. As much as she wanted to see Gabriel punished for what he had subjected her to, it was almost worth letting him go if it meant a normal Christmas and a chance at a normal life after school.

*Just how much longer do you want to do this?*

But to do that, she needed to-

Her anxious spiral was interrupted by a set of boots landing on the far side of the roof. Ladybug whipped around, yo-yo snapping out in pure instinct and smashing into the brickwork next to Mayura’s head.
“Whoa, whoa, easy!” Mayura said, holding his hands up. “It’s me, it’s me!”

Ladybug let her yo-yo fall to the roof as she leaned on a nearby air conditioning unit, taking weak, shaky breaths as Mayura tentatively approached.

“I got your call...” Mayura said, reaching a hand out gently as Ladybug pressed the heels of her palms into her eyes. “Are you okay?”

“No…” Ladybug sighed, fighting the almost uncontrollable wave of sobs that bubbled up in her chest. “No...I’m...I can’t…”

“Hey, breathe,” Mayura said, cape wrapping around Ladybug’s shaking shoulders. “Breathe...deep breaths now, come on…”

It was such a familiar motion; one that Luka had done to Marinette so often in the past when the stress of her own brilliance threatened to collapse around her. His arms wrapped around her shoulders (just tight enough to make her feel secure), his cape hid her from view (to protect her from any possibility of embarrassment) and his voice hummed a low, shushing sound that seemed to stem the oncoming panic before it could take hold of her.

“You okay?” Mayura repeated.

“...I’m tired,” Ladybug said in a small, quiet voice that Mayura almost didn’t capture. “Four years of this...four years of this and now I…”

Ladybug pressed her forehead into the feathered shoulder of Mayura’s cloak. “Alya wants to meet...she wants my side of the story before she runs the story Chat told her.”

“Smart woman,” Mayura said, trying not to indulge too heavily in the strawberry scented locks of hair just under his nose.

“...I have the chance to totally flip this around on Chat,” Ladybug said. “To...to out him in front of the whole city as the one working with Hawkmoth…”
“That’s...that’s great, isn’t it?” Mayura asked, a strange surge of savage thrill rushing through him. “We could have the whole city looking for him! Who’s gonna team up with him once we show the city his true colors?”

Ladybug stared aimlessly into the rows of woven blue and purple feathers on Mayura’s chest. “They’re going to hate him...”

“So?”

“He...we used to be friends,” Ladybug sighed, disentangling from the hug and ambling aimlessly towards the edge of the roof. “We were more than that, really...”

A sudden and altogether unwarranted sense of jealousy bubbled up inside Mayura. “Were you two...close?”

“Yes...and no,” Ladybug laughed, shaking her head. “We probably spent a grand total of a few months’ worth of hours together in the last four years...but you can’t help being attached to someone who you go through so much weird stuff with.”

A sad, almost wistful smile crossed Ladybug’s face. “You ever...did you ever see that movie about the guy who gets trapped between two rocks?”

“Is that the one where he has to cut off his arm to get away?” Mayura asked with a small shudder.

“Yeah...gross, right?” Ladybug said, staring into the city below. “I remember watching that and thinking to myself...I couldn’t do that. I need my arms to draw and sew and do all sorts of things; how could I cut it off? Would it even be worth surviving with just one arm?”

Ladybug’s smile slowly slipped off her face. “But then...you’re stuck. You’re trapped...there’s no way out except to just...hack off your arm. And even if it’s messy and even if it hurts and even if there’s no way to get that arm back...at least a one-armed life is still a life, right? You look up at your arm and think...I’m going to miss you, but I don’t want to die in here.”

“Especially if that arm tries to stab you in the back when you aren’t looking,” Mayura added, brow
“Something like that,” Ladybug said, turning to Mayura with a small, sad smile that just about broke his heart. “You know...I think I’ve done a good job for this city for a long time...haven’t always been perfect, but I’ve given it my all…”

“I’d say more than that,” Mayura said, leaning on the edge of the roof next to her. “Don’t think I didn’t notice how tired you always were.”

“Still am,” Ladybug said with a deep, almost resolute sigh. “Tired of being tired...tired of being tired of being tired... but I guess I’m just tired of being Ladybug. I think I just want to be...Marinette for a while. Just an ordinary person with an ordinary life...”

Ladybug shook her head, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “Can you do something for me?”

“Anything,” Mayura said, almost as soon as she had spoken. “Absolutely anything.”

“This is still such bullshit.”

Alya sighed through her nose, watching her breath condense in front of her as Chloe stood shivering and pouting between her and Nino.

“Unbelievable,” Chloe huffed. “I’m nice enough to be honest about my cool secret identity and you dweebs don’t tell me for four years! And then it’s not even to do anything cool! It’s just ‘oh hey Chloe, I’m a furry, my boyfriend is a Ninja Turtle, Ladybug might be evil, and we need to use your rooftop to confront her in case she is crazy! No buildup; no courtesy! Just a superhero booty call out of nowhere-”

“Nino, could you do the thing?”

“-and now here I am, freezing my cute little butt off on top of my own roof so that you can- ow!” Chloe yelped as Nino reached up and lightly yanked on her ponytail, slapping him in the arm.
“She’s like a lamp; just tug on her and she turns off,” Nino snickered, ignoring the glare and stuck out tongue from Chloe as he huddled closer to Alya. “...you okay?”

“Peachy,” Alya said, stuffing her hands in her pockets. “My childhood heroine might be insane and I’m meeting her on a rooftop thirteen stories over the streets of Paris...babe, if Ladybug kills me, please delete my internet history.”

“Ladybug isn’t going to kill you unless she’s already killed me,” Nino said, wrapping a protective arm around Alya’s waist. “Chloe is going to have to delete both of our internet histories.”

“Not after going through them first,” Chloe said, eyeing Nino and Alya. “I’m a little curious now…”

Things were truly looking dire when Chloe’s incessant whining proved to be a calming influence for Alya who still felt like she was making a mistake. Perhaps it was four solid years of barely restrained Ladybug worship screaming at her to trust Ladybug and forget about whatever nonsense Chat was on about. But something about the way Chat had come to her coupled with the piles of evidence he produced gave her enough pause to orchestrate this little meeting.

Something wasn’t quite adding up for Alya…

A flash of red appeared on the horizon just after the clock started chiming midnight, and for the first time in her life, Alya wasn’t looking forward to Ladybug’s arrival.

“Allright,” Alya said, taking a deep breath and disentangling herself from Nino’s grasp. “We clear on the plan?”

Nino and Chloe shared an uneasy look before nodding.

“Good,” Alya said, straightening her jacket. “Follow my lead…”

Ladybug touched down on the far side of Le Grand Paris’ roof taking note of Nino and Chloe with a small look of surprise. “Wow, gang’s all here, aren’t the-”
“That’s close enough for now,” Alya said, one hand clutching her phone as Ladybug stopped in her tracks, looking a little wounded. “We can talk fine like this, for now…”

“Okay,” Ladybug said in a smooth, even voice like she was trying to calm a startled horse. “Alright… I’m not going to hurt you, Alya.”

“Good,” Alya said, quavering voice barely noticeable over the hum of the air conditioning units. “Because we have about twenty security cameras—”

“Twenty-seven,” Chloe chimed in.

“- twenty-seven cameras ready to record you if you try anything funny,” Alya said, fishing Chat Noir’s packet of photographs out from her coat and tossing them across the roof at Ladybug’s feet. “You got my email?”

“Wouldn’t be here otherwise,” Ladybug said, picking up the parcel and turning it over in her hands. “I’m just wondering what it is Chat Noir told you.”

“Pretty juicy scoop,” Alya said, crossing her arms. “He said you betrayed Paris and are working with Hawkmoth. He said you’re trying to bring Hawkmoth’s wife back to life and that there’s no plans on you bringing Hawkmoth in when everything’s said and done.”

Alya studied Ladybug’s guarded expression carefully. “He said you took our Miraculous.”

Ladybug fingered the envelope in her hands for a moment, turning it over as she seemed to be avoiding Alya’s gaze.

“Well… that part is true,” Ladybug said, looking back up at Alya. “Our Master fell ill and I took them for safekeeping.”

“That’s what Chat said about the Miraculous he took,” Alya countered.

“I’m sure he did,” Ladybug said, putting two fingers in her mouth and whistling loudly. Before Alya could look around to see what Ladybug was whistling for, something floated overhead, dropping
three things on the ground in front of her before landing behind Ladybug in a low crouch.

“Hey, what the hell is he doing here?” Nino said, tugging his jacket up his face in a feeble attempt to hide his identity.

“What happened to nobody knowing who we are?!” Chloe said, eyes narrowing at Mayura as he unfolded behind Ladybug. “And what runway nightmare did you walk off?”

“M. Mayura, I presume?” Alya said, bending down and picking up a familiar looking brown wooden box that landed at her feet.

“Nice to meet you,” Mayura said with a small wave, ignoring the withering looks that Nino and Chloe leveled at him. “Sorry I’m late; Ladybug wanted me to grab something before I showed up…”

Alya cracked open the box, Trixx’s glittering orange pendant laying flush against the plush red velvet inside.

“I took your Miraculous because I knew I was going to need your help,” Ladybug said, watching Nino and Chloe secure their Miraculous with a curious frown. “I didn’t want to have to involve you; I know you’ve worked with Chat in the past and I…”

Ladybug trailed off under Alya’s curious glare, jaw setting as she resisted the urge to break her gaze. There was still a chance to end this; a chance to confess that she was in over her head and desperately needed some kind of help. Maybe she hadn’t thought of every possible solution; maybe there was some clever strategy that she could come up with if she took the time to…

Time.

That’s what it came down to; time. Time she didn’t have; time that was slowly dripping away. She didn’t have enough time to end the fight the way she wanted to, she didn’t have enough time to do all the things she always wanted, she didn’t have enough time to figure out a way to save herself and Chat…

Just how much longer do you want to do this?

“...I’m not the one working with Hawkmoth; Chat is.”
Ladybug was surprised at how quickly the words tumbled out of her mouth; how easy it was to
damn her partner without even tripping over her tongue. It was out of her mouth before she even had
time to process it; an ugly secret bare for the whole world to see.

She waited for the indignant gasps of shock and disbelief; waited for the barrage of questions she
wasn’t entirely prepared to answer. But something had shifted between the three of them when she
wasn’t looking, and instead of looking at her for answers, Nino and Chloe simply turned to Alya.

*She would have made a good Ladybug,* Ladybug mused as Alya closed her eyes with a sigh.

“You’re sure?” Alya asked, gesturing to the photos. “Those pictures…”

“Never seen them before in my life,” Ladybug said. “I don’t think this kind of thing is hard to fake;
I’m no artist, but I’d wager that’s a pretty easy thing to photoshop, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Alya said unevenly, turning the box over in her hands as she regarded Ladybug. “You don’t
happen to have any proof of that, do you?”

“Proof?” Mayura echoed incredulously, gesturing to Ladybug. “This is Ladybug; what proof do
you-”

“It’s fine,” Ladybug said, holding her hand up to silence any further protest from Mayura. “And as it
turns out...I don’t...but why would I lie to you?”

“You’d lie if you were working with Hawkmoth like Chat said you were,” Alya pointed out,
absentmindedly fastening Trixx’s necklace around her neck.

“If Ladybug was working with Hawkmoth, why would she give you your Miraculous back?”
Mayura butted in. “Why wouldn’t she just ask him to akumitize you or something?”

“He’s got a point,” Nino chimed in. “Brainwashed lackeys are always more reliable, aren’t they?”

“Too true,” Alya said, narrowing her eyes at Ladybug. “...and what do you want us to do?”
“I don’t want this to blow up into a full scale war,” Ladybug said, chewing on her lower lip. “Chat and I are...well, whatever we are, we were friends once. And if we can end this fight without hurting him, I would like that.”

“But that’s not totally necessary,” Mayura chuckled, earning a sharp glare from Ladybug. “...sorry.”

“We just need his ring,” Ladybug continued, looking at each of her allies in turn. “If we draw him out into the open, we can team up and capture him before he can cause any more destruction...I mean, you saw what he did to that bridge a few weeks ago...”

Alya seemed to chew this over for a moment, rubbing her chin. “And how are we supposed to draw him out?”

“He expects that you’re just going to take his word at face value,” Ladybug said. “But, if you tell the city that Chat Noir is working with Hawkmoth instead of me, he’ll come running; probably be too angry to think straight. If he comes at us hot, we have the chance to catch him making a mistake. We set up a press conference, lure him somewhere enclosed, and bring him down tomorrow if we play our cards right.”

“So, you want me to use the Ladyblog as bait?” Alya asked, raising an eyebrow. “And then lay a trap for Chat Noir at some kind of press stunt?”

“That’s the cleanest way I can think to stop this madness,” Ladybug said.

“And how are we supposed to know that Chat Noir isn’t the one telling the truth here?” Alya asked.  
*She wants to believe you; just give her the chance.*

Ladybug bit her lip. “Why would I lie to you, Alya? After everything, why would I lie to you?”

For a moment, she wondered if Alya sensed her treachery; wondered if she had prematurely handed over the few Miraculous as an empty gesture of good will. Silence lingered between the two for only a handful of moments, but under Alya’s piercing brown eyes, it felt like an eternity.

“...I know,” Alya sighed, rubbing her temples. “I know you wouldn’t lie to me like that, it’s just...hard for me to believe, you know?”
“Not any easier for me, believe me,” Ladybug chuckled, somehow elated and dismayed that Alya didn’t see through her ruse. All the arguments and contingencies her frazzled brain had concocted in the last hour evaporated, and all Ladybug was left with was the aftermath of having looked her best friend in the eye and completely lied to her.

You can make it up to her when this is over.

“After all the times we fought with him...doesn’t make sense that Chat would just turn his back on the city like that,” Nino said, crossing his arms with a thoughtful frown down at his bracelet.

“...maybe he’s just tired of fighting,” Ladybug sighed, glancing at Chloe. “And you?”

“As if you even need to ask,” Chloe scoffed, flashing Ladybug a small wink. “You know I’m your biggest fan, right?”

“I don’t need fans right now,” Ladybug said, affording Chloe a small smile. “I need teammates; people I can trust to help me bring Chat Noir in and end this stupid superhero fight once and for all.”

“What we do tomorrow secures peace in Paris,” Ladybug said, setting her jaw as she took a hesitant step forward. “No matter how much it hurts or how much we don’t want to do it, we have a responsibility to ensure that no one is akumatized ever again. We have a responsibility to the people of this city, our neighbors, and...I think we have a responsibility to ourselves. Because, I don’t know about you, but fighting an endless war is not what I wanted to do with my life.”

“I hear that,” Chloe chipped in.

“So...can I count on you?” Ladybug asked, eyes landing on Alya.

“Wouldn’t be much of a Ladyblogger if I ditched you now, would I?” Alya chuckled, smiling at Ladybug for the first time. “You’ve always had our backs; always managed to put this city back together after Hawkmoth gets on his nonsense. Doesn’t really make sense that you’d totally turn your backs on us now, right?”

You haven’t. You’re still fighting for Paris’ best interests.

“Thank you,” Ladybug said. “Alya and I should probably work on the article...if we could get this started tonight, we could probably work on a plan to trap Chat and still have time for lunch tomorrow.”
“Let’s meet at my place in about thirty,” Alya said, jerking her head in Nino’s direction. “Gonna make sure Nino gets home safe.”

“I get scared of the dark,” Nino chuckled.

“I’ll have the security footage of tonight deleted too,” Chloe said with a sharp, toothy smile. “Oooh, can’t wait to see the look on Chat Noir’s face.”

“I can,” Ladybug muttered to herself as she shot them a small wave. “Alright; Mayura and I will work on the battle plan and let Alya know what the score is.”

“And I’ll let these two know when we’re ready to catch a stray,” Alya said, waving back. “See you in thirty.”

“Sure...and thanks again, everyone,” Ladybug said, latching on to a nearby rooftop and swinging off the roof into the city below.

“Nice to meet you guys,” Mayura said, shooting them a sharp, two-fingered salute before leaping after Ladybug, soaring behind her as they disappeared into the night.

"...noice tuh meet u gais!" Chloe sneered, shooting off three salutes in rapid succession towards Mayura’s retreating rear. "What a tool..."

“Hard to believe that Chat Noir just suddenly started to work with Hawkmoth,” Nino mused.

“Harder to believe that Ladybug suddenly decided to join the Mothsquad,” Chloe countered.

“You’re right,” Alya muttered, palming her Miraculous. “That is pretty hard to believe.”

“I’ve called this press conference to confirm the rumors that Chat Noir has turned on Paris and sided with Hawkmoth in order to steal our Miraculous.”
Ladybug allowed the crowd’s cries of horror and betrayal to carry on a few moments, staring blankly into the sea of shocked and terrified faces that could have just as easily been turned towards her. A child in the front row let the Chat Noir action figure slip from his fingers, the cheap plastic toy shattering on the flagstones in front of the Mayor’s residence and snapping Ladybug back to reality.

*No going back now. Just get it over with.*

“I know this is shocking,” Ladybug continued. “And no one is shocked more than I am. To call this a betrayal would put it too lightly; I counted on Chat Noir more than anyone else to stand by my side. I trusted that he would always have my back; that we would do everything in our power to do what was best for everyone in Paris. But when it came to it...when it came to it, Chat Noir chose a path that would leave a trail of destruction running through this city.”

The eyes of Paris on her, Ladybug steeled herself, looking straight into the camera.

“I am calling on all citizens, public agencies, and law enforcement officers to help us bring Chat Noir to justice,” Ladybug continued, eyes scanning the rooftops for any flicker of black. “Every minute that Chat Noir walks free is another minute this city is in jeopardy. So, with heavy heart, I ask Paris to-”

A flicker of movement caught her attention seconds before something slammed into the ground between the crowd and the podium, scattering flagstones and kicking up dust as onlookers leapt backwards, falling over each other to get out of the way. Mayura instinctively flung an arm out in front of Ladybug as the dust slowly cleared, and a tall, black clad figure slowly stepped out of the haze.

Some small, optimistic part of Ladybug held on to the hope that she could one day make things right with her partner; she didn’t know how much she relied on that hope until one icy glare from Chat Noir killed it dead.

“Hey there, *partner*,” Chat Noir growled.

Chapter End Notes

So now you have Ladybug's side of the story leading up to the press conference.

I was a little unprepared for how, ah, passionate some of you were regarding this pivotal moment in the story. I hope you always feel free to express your thoughts and feelings in the comments section; they let me know how people are receiving these characters and how I need to course correct to get the reaction I want.
Next time! Will Chat Noir survive his ill-conceived confrontation with Ladybug? What is Alya's plan? Will Kagami save her ex-bf before he gets his furry ass kicked? Will someone FINALLY put Chat Noir over clean???

All these questions and more will be answered in Chapter Sixteen: Aristeia!

In the mean time, go listen to Beat the Champ and be sad with me
Nadja Chamack slowly wobbled to her feet, hacking up the lungful of dust that had erupted only moments before. Through the ringing in her ears, she could hear people screaming in terror and police rushing past her towards the tall, black clad figure stepping out of the small crater he had landed in.

“Theo...Theo, are you alright?!” Nadja stammered, hauling her cameraman to her feet and angling him towards the clearing dust. Ladybug stepped out from behind Mayura’s protective arm despite the latter’s protest, walking down the steps of Mayor Andre’s house with Queen Bee, Rena Rouge, Carapace, and Mayura in tow.

“Just keep rolling,” Nadja said, taking a deep breath as she straightened her hair out. Something Albert Londres worthy was coming and Nadja was going to survive long enough to record it.

“Nadja, we lost you for a second,” her anchor chirped in her ear. “Are you alright?”

“Y-Yes, Arthur,” Nadja said, clearing her throat as the camera panned over Ladybug and Chat Noir. “Moments...after Ladybug announced Chat Noir’s betrayal, the former hero arrived on the scene, apparently to confront his former partner-”

“And the crowd of onlookers.”

Master He sighed through her nose as the television showed Ladybug approach Chat Noir, smacking the unconscious Master Fu on top of his head.

“Wake up, you old goat,” Master He hissed. “Or your pupils are going to tear each other apart!”

“Should we do something, Master?” Jun asked, chewing on her lower lip.
“Yes; prep Quingfu’s latest infusion,” Master He sighed, fingering her bracelet absentmindedly. “I will step in if this gets out of hand…”

“Mayura is now saying something to Ladybug, but her attention appears to be on Hawkmoth’s newest pawn!”

Gabriel took a small sip out of his mimosa with a satisfied sigh, kicking his feet up on his desk as the TV’s in his office showed Ladybug advancing on Chat Noir as her allies formed a semi-circle between Chat and the Mayor’s residence.

“Good girl,” Gabriel said, fingers running over his pin. “Now close the deal.”

“Police are evacuating Mayor Andre away from his residence and we are being told that we have to move back out of the-”

“Idiot!” Kagami hissed, turning off the television as she pulled her other boot on. “Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid boy!”

Bounding down the stairs two at a time, Kagami snagged a pair of keys off the foyer table and flung the door open to reveal Goto, a plate of cookies balanced in one hand and the other raised to knock on her door.

“Everything alright, miss?” Goto asked in his deep, quiet voice. “You seemed out of sorts, so I brought some-”

“I need to borrow the Maserati!” Kagami panted. “Please, my friend, Adrien, he’s…”

“Slow down, miss,” Goto said, laying a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “What is wrong?”

“No time! Please, Goto, just-”
“Miss, I may no longer enjoy the pleasure of serving your family, but do not think I do not care about you anymore,” Goto said softly, laying the cooke on the table just inside the front door. “If there is something I can do to help you, I will…but I can’t protect you from what I don’t know about.”

Kagami took a deep breath, eyeing her longtime friend for a moment as she debated what to tell him. “Ladybug is in league with Hawkmoth and intends to sell out the city, Chat Noir is the last hero opposing him, and I need to rescue him before his damned pride gets him captured or killed by Ladybug or her lackeys!”

“...I will drive,” Goto said, wrapping an arm around Kagami and ushering her towards the garage under his home.

Nobody said anything until the last of the civilians had evacuated the area.

Chat Noir just stood with his hands folded on top of his baton, glowering green eyes silently locked on Ladybug while people scrambled out of the square in front of Mayor Andre’s house. Ladybug kept her eyes on him, studying the relaxed, reserved way he just stood there. He looked almost calm, only a burning glare and dried tear stains on his cheeks betraying his anger.

“Quite the party, isn’t it?” Chat Noir said when he was sure they were alone, voice barely quavering above a dull monotone. “Gang’s... all here, aren’t they...well, almost. Guess your new chum didn’t make the invite list, did he?”

Ladybug set her jaw, stepping forward a few steps out of rank as she refused resolutely to break Chat’s stare. “It’s over, Chat. Alya didn’t buy that story you sold her for a second; she came to me last night and told me what you told her...really, those photographs were such low quality.”

“You don’t say?” Chat Noir said, eyes drifting over Carapace, Queen Bee, and Rena Rouge. “I suppose if I told you three that Ladybug was working with Hawkmoth and planned to deliver the city to him on a silver platter, you wouldn’t believe me, would you?”

Queen Bee and Carapace glanced at Rena as she straightened up a bit under Chat’s gaze. “Is there a reason we should?”
“...why would you?” Chat Noir sighed, eyes returning to Ladybug’s. “I’m just a shmuck in a catsuit; not like I’ve saved half the city’s lives a hundred times over, right?”

“You want a fucking medal for that?” Mayura scoffed. “You’re just mad that your little smear campaign blew up in your face.”

“Oh, I’m mad,” Chat Noir said in a soft, quiet voice that made the hair on the back of Ladybug’s neck stand up. “Positively... furious, actually...but not because of that...”

Chat Noir trailed off, eyes boring a hole in Ladybug’s as the silence between them stretched torturously on. Carapace glanced between Ladybug and Rena Rouge, Queen Bee spun her top anxiously on the tip of her finger, and Mayura fingered a handful of quills, ready to toss them at Chat given the slightest twitch of movement.

“...so?” Chat Noir asked Ladybug. “Anything you’d like to say to me?”

Ladybug took a deep breath through her nostrils, chin definitely lifting as she fought an onrush of engineered guilt. “I am very sorry that it came to this, Chat. I am sorry that we couldn’t solve our differences without dragging the whole city into our fight, but since you insisted—”

“This is all...my fault then,” Chat Noir said, nodding as though considering Ladybug’s words.

“...I didn’t go to the press,” Ladybug said quietly. “You wanted this public? It’s public now...and you really should have brought more than a handful of crummy photographs if you wanted to turn the city against me.”

“Thought I had more credit than I did,” Chat Noir chuckled weakly. “Guess I shouldn’t have tried to turn the Ladyblog against Ladybug without a videotaped confession from you, huh?”

“I don’t plan on confessing to anything,” Ladybug said, fingers tightening around her yo-yo string. “You are out of options, Chat. You have no one to turn to, no one to rely on, and no hope of defeating all five of us...I don’t want to fight you, Chat, but if you continue to resist, I will do whatever it takes to protect my Miraculous.”
Chat Noir said nothing, lip quivering as his eyes continued to roam between Mayura, Queen Bee, Rena, Carapace, and Ladybug.

Ladybug sighed. “I am giving you a chance to-”

“No!” Chat snapped, jabbing his finger at Ladybug as his eyes brimmed with angry tears. “I...I am giving you a chance now! I am giving you a chance to come clean; I am giving you a chance to tell me where our enemy lives! I am giving you a chance to put this stupid truce of yours aside; I am giving you one...last...chance to help me put a stop to all this!”

Ladybug took a step back, mouth falling open as Chat Noir’s outburst nearly knocked her off her feet. She had always been dimly aware of the kind of person that bubbled behind his usually flippant exterior but to see Chat Noir in such a raw, emotionally vulnerable state was something entirely new and unsettling. In the four years of chaos they had endured together, she had never seen him shed so much as a single tear. But any restraint, any pride he had was gone, washed away by the almost palpable tide of anger that radiated off him.

“You can tell the whole world that I brought this on myself, but you and I both know that you have a choice!” Chat Noir spat. “You chose this; not me! I didn’t make a deal with a lunatic for our Miraculous; I didn’t cut you out of a decision that affects the rest of your life. I didn’t decide to start working with-”

“Hey, that’s enough!” Mayura snapped, stepping in front of Ladybug as he pulled a fresh handful of quills from his fan. “You know, I’ve just about had it with temper tantrums, pal!”

“Oh, please keep talking,” Chat Noir snarled, green eyes narrowing at Mayura. “Please give me an excuse to use your head like a football again; I’m begging you.”

“Good; get used to begging,” Mayura snapped, tossing his quills down in on the broken flagstones as his knights materialized out of the ground. “You’re gonna be doing a lot of it in a minute.”

“Dude, chill out!” Carapace interjected, holding his hands up. “Ladybug’s trying to stop this from getting crazier than it needs to be! She doesn’t need your hotheaded ass making things worse!”

“She can try all she wants; her sidekick over here is done listening,” Mayura spat, glancing at Queen Bee and Rena Rouge. “Are you just gonna stand there and let him talk to her like that??!”
“Mayura, wait!”

“Come on; he’s right here!” Mayura spat, gesturing to Chat Noir who made no attempt to escape despite Mayura’s knights closing in on him. “We outnumber him nine to one! Let’s go! Let’s get him!”

“Mayura, stick to the plan!” Ladybug demanded as Mayura’s knight slowly closed the circle around Chat Noir. Rena watched as Ladybug turned Mayura around to face her, noting the way the knight with the spear maneuvered itself behind Chat Noir who only seemed to have eyes for Ladybug’s earrings.

Before Rena could say anything, the knight with the spear lunged, driving the glittering silver tip towards the center of Chat’s back. Chat turned a second too late, tip of the spear grazing his throat and unhooking the bell that dangled around his neck. Ladybug watched in horror as the bell dropped to the ground, bouncing once with an echoing ring that seemed all the louder given the fact that everyone seemed to be holding their breath. The bell rolled along the flagstones, coming to a rest at Ladybug’s feet as Chat stumbled backwards, grasping at the place where the bell used to be.

Silence.

“Dude, what the fuck!” Carapace shouted.

“I...I didn’t…” Mayura stammered, glancing between the knight with the spear and Ladybug who covered her mouth in shock. “Hammet...he moved on his own, I don’t know what—”

Mayura’s head jerked back as Chat lunged faster than anyone could track him; faster than Ladybug had ever seen him move in her life. His fist collided with Mayura’s face and a sickening smack echoed throughout the empty plaza. Flagstones underneath Mayura’s feet shattered as the blow connected, glass in the windows behind him splintered as Chat Noir threw his whole weight into the blow.

Nathalie bounded up the stairs two-by-two, flinging the door to Gabriel’s office open to find Hawkmoth sprawled out on the floor, clutching his shocked face in pain.

“Are you alright?!?” Nathalie asked, bending down and helping Hawkmoth back to his feet and
kicking aside the pieces of a chair he had crashed through. “I heard a crash downstairs, what-”

Nathalie trailed off as Hawkmoth rubbed the dark, purplish bruise that started forming under his mask.

Mayura flew backwards like he had been struck by a car, bouncing off an ornate marble column and tumbling down the steps in front of Mayor Andre’s house.

Mayura slowly staggered to his feet, clutching his face in shock as real, definite pain pulsed in his cheek. His eyes were wide and fearful as his hand came away, revealing a darkening purple bruise blossoming on his right cheek.

“...that hurt,” Mayura said quietly, looking helplessly at Ladybug who seemed rooted to the spot in fear. “I thought...I thought you said our suits protected us…”

Ladybug could come up with no explanation and surprisingly, Chat looked as shocked as the rest of them. His eyes bounced between Mayura’s bruise, his trembling hand, the shattered flagstones at his feet, the broken windows in Mayor Andre’s house, and finally, Ladybug herself. Silence hung in the air for a long, painful moment before Queen Bee eloquently summarized what everyone seemed to be thinking.

“...oh shit.”

“We are now receiving reports that a scuffle has broken out among the gathered superheroes! We are unable to get a better view due to police presence, but it looks like...yes, it sounds like there’s a fight going on just inside the plaza! I hear shattering glass...someone just-”

The crackling sound of a small explosion followed by panicked screaming echoed through the car radio as Kagami sat drumming her fingers against the back seat, peering through the tinted windows as onlookers rushed past on the sidewalk. News helicopters whirled overhead, jockeying to get a good view of the battle going on just on the other side of the wall.
“Police blockade up ahead,” Goto muttered as the car approached the Mayoral residence. “Shall I find another way around?”

“If you can,” Kagami sighed, chewing on her lower lip as the distant sound of a pitched battle echoed over the rooftops. “Keep your distance; we don’t want to get too close to the-”

A large, heavily armored figure fell from the sky a few feet in front of the car, impaled by a feathery spear that jutted out of its chest. A few seconds later, two more crumpled balls of metal only vaguely recognizable as suits of armor crashed through the walls of the mayoral mansion, splintering the street in front of the car as they landed.

“...this is too close,” Goto mused, flinching as the fourth knight landed on an empty police car, neatly bending it in half.

“Far too close,” Kagami agreed, buckling her seatbelt as Goto threw the car in reverse.

Carapace was no stranger to pitched battles.

A year before, a Nutcracker akuma had raised an army of giant rats and tried to kill Mayor Andre. Carapace had spent his Christmas bludgeoning monster rats with the blunt end of his shield, deflecting canon balls and doing battle with toy soldiers.

The year before that, the dreaded Sharkhands nearly bit his head off with the massive Great Whites that hung from each shoulder. And just the summer before, he and Chat Noir had saved the city from the baffling Chai-mera that shot scalding hot tea from its mouth.

Those fights were crazy; this was fucking bedlam.

In all the years Carapace had fought alongside Chat Noir, he had never seen him like this. Shoulders hunched, claws outstretched, and green eyes wild with fury, Chat was a jet black force of nature that fought like a wild animal caged. Staff forgotten on the sidewalk, he lashed out with punches, kicks, and wild, flailing limb strikes that shattered stone with every failed hit.
Worse than any of that was the pained, terrified look in Ladybug’s eyes as she scrambled to get some
distance between herself and a wild, raving monster that nobody could seem to stop.

Carapace barely raised his shield in time to deflect a stray piece of concrete that Chat Noir flung at
Mayura. Queen Bee’s top lashed out, wrapping around Chat Noir’s wrist before he could drive it
forward into Ladybug’s face. With an almost feral snarl, Chat Noir yanked Queen Bee off her feet,
tossing her across the courtyard in Carapace’s direction.

“Coming in hot!” Queen Bee squealed as Carapace tossed his shield at Chat Noir, freeing up both
hands to pluck Queen Bee out of the air. “Oof...kitty’s mad. Kitty’s really mad.”

“No kidding,” Carapace said, dropping Queen Bee back on the ground as he charged into the action.
Chat’s claw lashed out, seemingly driving through Ladybug’s stomach until the illusion shattered,
disappearing into a cloud of orange smoke as Ladybug and Mayura lunged at Chat Noir from
behind.

“Grab his legs!” Mayura shouted as Carapace picked up his shield from the ground mid stride. Chat
whipped around, claw crackling with some kind of dark energy as he lunged for Ladybug’s earrings.
Mayura threw himself in front of Ladybug, but Carapace was quicker, catching the claw attack on
his shield. He braced, shield rattling as the force of Chat’s blow drove him backwards into Mayura’s
chest.

“You’re making a mistake!” Chat hissed, driving claw strike after claw strike against the flat of
Carapace’s shield. “She’s working with Hawkmoth! She’s trying to steal my Miraculous! Why
won’t you listen to me?!”

“Come on,” Carapace grunted, weathering blow after blow from Chat Noir. “You gotta give me
more than that, dude!”

Chat’s fist smashed against the center of Carapace’s shield with an echoing ring, driving him back as
Chat Noir disengaged, refocusing his attention on Ladybug. The warm, beating heart of Adrien
Agreste broke just a little when he saw the fear in Ladybug’s eyes; the last remnants of his feelings
towards her bemoaning the fact that his friend and partner now looked at him like he was some kind
of monster.

But the rest of Adrien only reveled in each bruise and stone broken under his feet.
“You wanted me?!” Chat Noir hissed, hauling a hunk of broken cement off the ground and whipping it like a frisbee at Ladybug’s head. “Here I am!”

Ladybug flattened herself as three hundred pounds of stone sailed through the wall above her head, scrambling out of the way as Chat Noir pounced, clearing the courtyard and smashing into the ground where she lay with reckless abandon.

“You wanted an end to this?!!” Chat Noir snarled, swiping at her ears with wild, reckless abandon as she backed into the mansion foyer. “Let’s end it!”

His claw tore a chunk out of a stone column as Ladybug ducked his blow, hammering into his side with her elbow as she tried to create space. She needed time to back off; if she could just come up with some kind of plan, she could-

Chat’s palm collided with her cheek, derailing her train of thought as another dull, throbbing shock of pain spread throughout her cheek. It didn’t hurt any more than accidentally running into a door or column, but the fact that she had felt anything—the fact that she was no longer completely invulnerable—was cause for concern.

And by concern, she meant mind-blanking terror that turned her guts to jelly.

Mayura crashed through a window from the courtyard as they fought, tackling Chat against a column. Before Ladybug could capitalize, Chat slammed both fists into Mayura’s back, knocking him flat to the the floor as the wind left his chest with a sudden gasp.

“What’s wrong?” Chat Noir snarled, stomping on Mayura’s wrist as he scrambled for his fan. “Come on; you’re Ladybug’s partner! That means getting your ass kicked while Ladybug watches!”

Chat Noir kicked Mayura in the stomach with all the force he could muster, sending him rolling down the hallway with a series of grunts and barely muffled curses as he scrambled to stop himself. Chat turned to pursue him, stopping as Ladybug’s yo-yo snaked around his wrist.

“Leave him out of this!” Ladybug demanded, yanking Chat Noir towards her with a grunt.

“Hey, good news, rookie!” Chat Noir laughed as Ladybug’s fist slammed into the side of his head. “Ladybug likes you better than me! I can’t remember the last time she got so nettled when something
happened to me.”

Ladybug drove blow after blow into the side of Chat’s face, but his smooth, pale skin remained unblemished as her attacks seemed to have no effect on him. His hand snatched hers out of the air mid blow, yanking her in with a wide, almost manic smile.

“Don’t get used to it, though,” Chat Noir called over his shoulder as Mayura. “Soon as she’s done with you, you’ll find yourself Public Enemy Number One! Kicked to the curb and traded in for a good little stooge who won’t question her!”

“Don’t say that!” Ladybug hissed, kicking Chat Noir away. “How dare...how dare you act like I just used you?! We were friends! We were partners!”

“Oh don’t make me laugh!” Chat Noir snarled, backing Ladybug down the hall as she threw anything she could get her hands on at him. “If I was your partner then why did you wait a whole year before telling me about Master Fu! If I was your partner, why did I never get a say in who joined our team?! If I was your partner, why did you pull rank on me when I questioned this stupid plan of yours!”

Chat Noir’s plucked a chair out of the air as Ladybug threw it, turning around and breaking it over Mayura’s head as he tried to lunge at him from behind. He caught Mayura by the throat, hoisted him off his feet, and punted him down the hallway like a football.”

“I was only your partner as long as I shut up and took hits for you,” Chat Noir said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “Least I’m taking hits better than Junior over there...how you holding up, bluebird?”

“Peachy,” Mayura spat, staggering to his feet as he held his side with a small wince.

“Hey, he makes for a good punching bag,” Chat Noir said, eyes narrowing at Ladybug. “You might want to keep this one around for a while; maybe he can die for you a few times before you ditch him...”

Ladybug swallowed, jaw setting as she refused to give into the impulse to look away from Chat Noir; refused to be cowardly on top of treacherous.
“Forgot about that, didn’t you?” Chat Noir murmured.

“I didn’t...I didn’t forget,” Ladybug said, shaking her head. “If you thought I did...or if you thought I just used you...I’m sorry.”

“...then it just didn’t mean anything to you,” Chat Noir said, shaking his head.

“It can still—” Ladybug trailed off with a frustrated growl. “It can still mean something! You can still help me, Chat! I can undo this whole mess if you just helped me!”

“Oh, so Miraculous Ladybug is gonna erase a whole press conference then?!” Chat Noir spat. “This city and everyone in it is gonna be calling for my head on a plate by nightfall! You think you can just snap your fingers and make it all go away?!”

“I can tell them Hawkmoth brainwashed you or something,” Ladybug said, running her hands through her hair.

“Ooh I can see the headlines now; Chat Noir Gets His Stupid Ass Brainwashed Again; Ladybug Has to Save Incompetent Doofus From Himself,” Chat Noir sneered.

“Or...or that you were acting as a double agent!” Ladybug suggested “Th-that this whole mess was just a publicity stunt to get Hawkmoth to trust you! That we—Ladybug and Chat Noir—worked together to bring Hawkmoth down!”

“I never wanted to fight you!” Ladybug continued. “You threw the first punch! You attacked me, first! You suckered me in and tried to steal my Miraculous! But I will still do everything in my power to help you and restore your reputation after Hawkmoth is dealt with!”

“But only if I’m a good boy and give you my Miraculous first,” Chat Noir sneered. “Only if I endorse this stupid plan of yours and help that costumed creep get away!”

“...would that be so bad?” Ladybug asked quietly. “It’s one person...you can’t let one person go if it meant the whole rest of the world could finally be at peace?”
“...not this one,” Chat said, pacing out of the front door of the mansion as Ladybug followed through a hole in the wall. He was dimly aware of Queen Bee, Rena Rouge, and Carapace forming a small circle as Mayura stumbled through the wall behind him. “Not him. Your commitment to this little ‘win-win’ situation is admirable, but I’m not playing that game. It’s him or me...and you’ve made it clear which one you want.”

“I wanted both!” Ladybug said, snapping her yo-yo out at Chat Noir’s face. He raised a hand just in time, plucking her yo-yo out of the air before it struck and holding it tight in his ring hand. A snap of black energy sizzled from the ring, flowed down his fingers, and zig-zagged over the case of the red and black yo-yo as he clenched his fist.

Ladybug felt the weight at the end of the string suddenly go slack as the yo-yo shattered, crumbling between Chat Noir’s fingers and scattering on the ground at his feet.

“We don’t always get what we want,” Chat Noir snarled, wrapping the string around his hand and yanking Ladybug off her feet. Ladybug lurched forward, allowing Chat’s strength to pull her in feet first. Her kick connected with his face, sending him reeling backwards and tumbling on the pavement in a heap. Mayura was on him before he could get up, driving his knee into the middle of Chat’s back and pinning him to the flagstones as he reached for his ring.

“How you holding up there, alley cat,” Mayura said, grabbing for Chat Noir’s ring.

“Peachy,” Chat Noir hissed, hand crackling with black energy. “Positively Cataclysmic.”

Ladybug stopped dead in her tracks as tendrils of black energy coursed from Chat’s hand through the courtyard, arcing out and snaking up the columns of the mayor’s house. A symphony of splintering cracks filled the courtyard as the ground beneath them and the house behind them shifted...then shattered.

“Get some cover!” Carapace cried, throwing his shield over Ladybug’s head as he, Rena, and Queen Bee ducked under it. Mayura scrambled out of the crumbling hole in the ground, barely grabbing onto Ladybug’s yo-yo before the flagstones beneath their feet shattered. Stone, steel, and glass fell in a shower as they all sank into the ground, born down by the weight of Chat’s destructive power. Snapping power lines snaked back and forth above them as they fell, broken sewer pipes spilled water into the deepening hole, and under twenty seconds, a pristine, marble hole was all that remained of Mayor Andre’s house.

As the world fell around her, Ladybug wondered whether or not even Chat knew exactly what he was capable of. A thick cloud of dust and debris settled over the wreckage of the mayoral residence
as Ladybug slowly wobbled to her feet, careful not to step on any crumbling patches of ground.

“Everyone okay?” Ladybug called.

“Define okay ,” Queen Bee huffed, crawling out from under Carapace as Rena hauled him to his feet. “My childhood home just fell down around my ears!”

“At least no one was in it,” Mayura coughed, scanning the haze with his back to Ladybug.

“And at least my hair’s not on fire!” Queen Bee sneered. “Just because it’s not worse, doesn’t mean it’s-”

“Quiet!” Ladybug snapped, fingers wrapping around the remnants yo-yo string as she scanned the wreckage around her. “Chat?! Are you alright?!”

Nothing answered her, save for the sound of crumbing stone and the distant screech of emergency sirens.

“We have five minutes until his ring wears off; somebody find him!” Ladybug whispered, gesturing for her team to spread out and pick through the crater. As the smoke cleared, Rena Rouge climbed over the broken suite of luxury cars that Mayor Andre kept in the garage under his house, scanning for any sign of movement in the wreckage.

Total devastation would have been an understatement. Rena couldn’t even compare it to a bomb blast because even bomb blasts spared the toughest of materials. Cataclysm ripped, rendered, and ruined steel, stone, and support structures without any prejudice. Everything he touched was destroyed in one form or another.

Rena dropped down off a crumbling ledge into a large sewer drain, readying her flute and holding her nose as she followed the metal pipe that ran under Mayor Andre’s house. In the distance, she could hear what sounded like footsteps on metal growing further and further away. Glancing over her shoulder, Rena delved further and further into the sewers.

Her vulpine eyes adjusted to the darkness relatively quickly as she walked, carefully following the sounds of splashing, muffled curses, and footsteps down one access pipe after another. Deeper and deeper she went into the sewers, until the sound of Ladybug crying for Chat could no longer be
heard...and for that matter, neither could Chat Noir’s footsteps.

Rena was about to turn around when she felt him behind her, his low, frenetic breath registering on her ears and the back of her neck. Before she could turn around, she felt his hands on her wrists, twisting and pinning them against the wall before she could raise her flute.

“You know this is why people prefer cats with bells on,” Rena muttered, heart beating as Chat Noir’s wide, glowing green eyes looked down at her from the darkness.

“Seem to have lost mine,” Chat Noir croaked, glancing over his shoulder nervously as though he expected the rest of Ladybug’s team to follow. “Where’s your boyfriend?”

“Looking for you,” Rena said, glancing down the access pipe. “You better get gone before he finds us like this...then again, he’s always been a big fan of yours, so this is probably one of his top ten fantas-”

“What are you doing?” Chat Noir hissed.

“What are you doing?” Rena countered. “You need to get out of here before Ladybug finds you.”

Chat released her wrists, head tilting in an almost feline expression of confusion. “You...wait...”

“Whatever is going on between you and Ladybug, all I’m getting is a lot of hearsay,” Rena explained, crossing her arms. “I don’t necessarily believe you...but I sure as hell don’t believe Ladybug either. And if you get binned today, I get the feeling that the truth behind this clusterfuck gets locked up with you.”

“I told you the truth,” Chat Noir said as Rena grabbed his wrist, leading him down a side tunnel away from the main canal. “If you have doubts about Ladybug, then why not help me?!”

“Because Ladybug knows who I am, where I live, and how to get to me,” Rena said, scanning the sides of the tunnel for any kind of door. “She knows how to get to all of us and as of last night, Mayura does too.”
“What?” Chat Noir hissed. “Ladybug told *Mayura* who you guys are and she didn’t tell me?!”

“You don’t *know*?” Rena Rouge asked. “She never told you who we were?”

“Why would she; I’m just the shmuck who fought for her until Mayura showed up,” Chat Noir spat bitterly. Being kept in the dark on the identities of his partners was a bitter pill Chat had learned to swallow because he believed it to be necessary; believed it was just a way to keep everyone safe.

“Guess it was never about safety,” Chat laughed. “Just another way for Ladybug to lord herself over me…”

“Save it for couples counseling; you need to get to the surface before you detransform,” Rena Rouge said, kicking the lock off a ladder that led to a manhole above their heads. “Look, even if I wanted to help you fight Ladybug, I can’t risk my civilian self getting exposed; not while Ladybug has her foot on my neck. If you get me proof-”

“I *got* proof!” Chat Noir said. “Ask Alya Cesaire of the Ladyblog; I *showed* her my text logs and-”

“Alright,” Rena Rouge shushed. “I will follow up with this...Alya person and see what I can figure out. In the meantime...if you can get me *undeniable* proof that Ladybug sold this city out, we’ll help you out. In the meantime-”

“*Hey Rena!*” Chat Noir froze as Mayura’s voice called down into the sewer. “*Any luck?*”

For a hair of a moment, Chat thought Rena might betray him before she turned and shouted. “*Nothing! I’ll be up in a second!*”

“Alright, well, hurry it up; *Ladybug wants to take to the rooftops,*” Mayura called, footsteps disappearing back up the access tunnel.

“...jackass,” Rena Rouge muttered as soon as she was sure Mayura was gone.

“You know, this may be the adrenaline talking, but I could just about kiss you right now,” Chat Noir breathed.
“Please don’t; you’re kinda snotty,” Rena chuckled, wiping the corner of Chat’s sooty, tearstained cheek. “Ladybug may or may not have gone off the deep end, but some of us remember that you saved our bacon and hers enough times to get a little credit. But I’m gonna need something a hell of a lot more solid than text messages if you want me to fight Ladybug for you.”

“So what are you going to do?” Chat asked.

“Help Ladybug look for Chat Noir,” Rena said, backing down the tunnel. “Shame I always sucked at hide-and-seek.”

Before Chat could ask anything else, Rena was gone, melting into the shadows and leaving him slightly dumbstruck in her absence.

“Come on…” Kagami muttered, eyes scanning the rooftops and the sidestreets from the backseat of her car. “Where are you…”

“We should go home, miss,” Goto said, turning into a sidestreet as the crowds became too thick to move in. “He isn’t going to just spring out of the ground in front of-”

Goto slammed on the brakes, causing Kagami to lurch forward enough to see Chat Noir crawling out of the manhole in front of them, almost running him over as he whipped around and looked at them with wide, fearful eyes.

“…then again, I’ve been wrong before,” Goto muttered as Kagami kicked the passenger door open.

“Get in,” Kagami commanded.

“I...Kagami?” Chat asked, tilting his head to one side. “What are you-”

“Get in,” Kagami repeated coolly.
“Kagami, I don’t have time for this right now,” Chat hissed, crouching down as a shadow passed overhead. “Get out of here before Ladybug.”

“Get in the car,” Kagami repeated, eyes narrowing at Chat Noir. “Or you’re on your own.”

Before he even had the chance to respond, Kagami’s hard, steely glare informed him that she was, in fact, completely serious. Casting a quick glance around the alley, Chat let out a deep sigh, crawling into the back of Kagami’s car as the door closed behind him.

“Take us home, please,” Kagami called up to Goto who wordlessly took them out of the alley and down a side street. From behind tinted glass, Chat could see Rena Rouge and Queen Bee scouring the streets from the rooftops above him. Carapace jogged past the car, talking into a communicator as two of Mayura’s knights ducked into a shop on the street. The giant television above the street replayed the press conference, blowing up the moment when all Paris turned on Chat Noir and replaying it over and over again with the words Chat Noir Betrays Paris, Destroys Mayor’s House, Sides with Hawkmoth repeating on a tickertape at the bottom of the screen.

“How could she do this to me?!” Chat growled, punching the leather backed seat in front of him. “After all the time we fought together, after everything I’ve done for this city, she just smears me like none of it meant anything! And let’s face it, it might as well not have! I saved her life over and over and over again and now she just…”

The words caught in Chat Noir’s throat as Kagami simply watched him impassively, letting the anger and frustration billow off him like great clouds of steam. “…are you finished?”

“I just might be,” Chat Noir sighed, head jerking to one side as the back of Kagami’s hand collided with his cheek. “Hey, what the hell?!”

“What part of that little stunt out there helped your cause?” Kagami asked, crossing her arms and glaring at Chat who just sat there, rubbing his cheek. “What part of causing a scene and attacking Ladybug in broad daylight was a good decision? What part of destroying the mayor’s house was supposed to disprove Ladybug’s lies?! What, pray tell, the fuck were you thinking?!”

“I don’t know…” Chat Noir mumbled. “…I was just…I hoped…”

“Wrong… answer ,” Kagami seethed. “I understand that you’re feeling slighted and betrayed and hurt—“
“You don’t,” Chat Noir snapped.

“Oh cut the woe-is-me shit, Adrien,” Kagami spat. “It doesn’t help anyone; least of all yourself.”

“What was I supposed to do then?!” Chat Noir countered. “Just let her lie to the whole city and stir them up against me?!”

“Well you did a fine job of helping her drive your reputation into the bloody catacombs,” Kagami said, flipping her phone out and bringing up the news footage of Chat Noir confronting Ladybug. “Does this look like the behavior of a person who’s been wrongfully accused? Or does this look like a crazed, unhinged maniac who wants to steal poor innocent Ladybug’s Miraculous?”

Watching Mayor Andre’s house crumble under a wave of black energy, Chat’s defensiveness slowly melted away. From the helicopter, he could see himself tossing Carapace and Queen Bee around, lunging and slashing at Ladybug like some kind of wild animal as she fearfully retreated from every swipe of his claws.

He looked positively terrifying.

“You have always helped Ladybug and your outbursts are still helping Ladybug,” Kagami said. “You want to throw a fit? Go rent a room where you can pay to break plates. Don’t do it when fate of the city is in jeopardy; more importantly, when your fate is in jeopardy.”

The car pulled into the garage under Kagami’s house, plunging the cabin into darkness as Chat Noir stared blankly out the window.

“You are the last hero in Paris,” Kagami said, lightly squeezing his shoulder as Goto got out of the car. “You need to start acting like it. I promised I would help you, but I can’t help someone who isn’t going to help themselves. I can’t help someone who will run headlong into danger without a thought for their own safety.”

“Ladybug-”

“Ladybug isn’t coming to save you this time,” Kagami said emphatically. “No one is going to save
you if you get kidnapped or brainwashed or killed again. The people of Paris aren’t going to rise up and help you take out Ladybug.”

“I hoped they would,” Chat said, voice heavy and thick with emotion as he leaned forward, resting his forehead on his knees. “…no one believed me, Kagami. Even with a whole pile of evidence…I thought after all these years…”

Chat trailed off as Kagami wrapped her arms around his chest, squeezing him gently as his green, glowing eyes lit up the darkness.

“…it didn’t mean anything,” Chat Noir said quietly. “Nothing I did mattered…”

The weight of being a hero never really registered for Kagami until that moment; all the long, tiresome, dangerous work that went into keeping the city safe. Chat Noir had spent four years keeping the city from falling down and at the end of the day, all it took was one blog post to turn the entire city against him. It was enough to make Kagami want to chuck her gold medal in the river; enough to make her wish she had never fenced for France in the first place.

“I know…you frog-eaters are a faithless bunch, aren’t you?” Kagami muttered, satisfied with the traitorous laugh that bubbled out of Chat Noir’s chest. “And that Ladyblog fangirl just lost herself a premium subscriber.”

“Two,” Chat chuckled, wiping his eyes with the backs of his hands. “…I kinda screwed up, didn’t I?”

“Let this be your last screw up then,” Kagami said, kissing the top of Chat Noir’s head. “You are more than enough to beat her; you just need to stop being reckless and start being smart.”

“I’m really not sure I can though,” Chat Noir sighed. “She’s…I mean, for some reason I can hurt them now but…Ladybug…she’s-“

“She’s a person,” Kagami said. “Flesh and blood; just like you. She’s not smarter than you, she’s not stronger than you. She isn’t some glowing golden goddess without any weaknesses or vulnerabilities. The fact that you bruised her pretty little face is evidence enough of that. You just need to find her weaknesses and dig at them until she begs for mercy.”
“She’s tired of fighting? Show her the real meaning of tired,” Kagami continued, running her hands through Chat Noir’s unruly hair. “Exhaust her; run her into the ground. Drag this out as long as you possibly can and create friction between Ladybug and her new partners. If she wants to fight dirty, fight dirtier. Fight positively filthy until she wishes she never picked a fight with you in the first place.

“You know, you’re scary sometimes,” Chat Noir laughed.

“I didn’t destroy a city block~” Kagami chuckled. “Between the two of us, I think Ladybug’s in for a scare of her life. So why don’t we put the kettle on and figure out a way we can win this?”

“Yeah...” Chat Noir said, frowning down at his ring. “You can...go ahead..I’ll be in in a second...”

Kagami simply nodded, retreating out of the back of the car and closing the door behind her. Chat leaned back in the seat, staring at his ring for a long moment as he listened to the clock on the garage wall tick.

“I suppose you’re wondering why you haven’t transformed back, hm?”

Chat Noir yelped, sat bolt upright, and grabbed at his staff as the woman in the front passenger seat of the car turned around to look at him. He hadn’t seen anyone come in; the door hadn’t opened since he had crawled into the back seat. But judging by the way the tall, white haired woman sat in the front seat, hands folded across the coat in her lap, she hadn’t snuck in when he wasn’t looking.

“Rather curious...though it ties into my theory of spontaneous emotional development,” the woman mused, stroking her chin. “Tell me, is this your first instance of retaining your Mantle after using Cataclysm?”

“How...who...why...” Chat Noir stammered uselessly, pointing between the woman and the door.

“Oh, forgive me,” the woman said, adjusting her glasses. “I so rarely have an opportunity to see the Black Cat in all its brutality, I seem to have taken leave of my courtesy. My name is He Qiong; Dr. He to my peers and Master He to my apprentices.”

“I am sorry for barging in uninvited,” Master He continued, taking Chat Noir’s flabbergasted silence as an invitation to keep talking. “I’m sure you have quite a few questions; I might be able to answer
them if you’re willing to answer just one of mine...where are the other Miraculous Master Fu was protecting?”

The cold night air whipped against Ladybug’s cheeks as she watched Mayura, Queen Bee, Carapace, and Rena Rouge converge on her location.

“Anything?” Ladybug asked as they touched down on the rooftop

“Nothing on my end,” Carapace shrugged.

“Ran the edge of town; no sign of him,” Mayura said.

“I think he split,” Queen Bee said, earning a tired, defeated sigh from Ladybug.

“Come on; we can do another pass around the city,” Mayura said.

“How is looking for a black cat at night going to be easier?” Rena Rouge countered.

“Nobody said this was going to be easy,” Mayura sniffed. “If you’re not up for a double patrol, then-“

“Hey, she never said she wasn’t up to it, pal,” Carapace butted in.

“If memory serves, she’s been up to it longer than you have,” Queen Bee said, examining her nails. “We all have, actually. Doesn’t change the fact that Kitty Noir probably went to ground after destroying that building.”

“So we’re just gonna quit because it got dark out?” Mayura said. “We should-“

“No…” Ladybug sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “No…it’s too late; we’re not going to catch him today.”
Shaking her head, Ladybug turned back over the city, head swimming as she tried to imagine the myriad of places Chat Noir could have been hiding.

*This was supposed to be the end of it.*

“Alright, well…we’ll try again another day,” Ladybug said, turning back to the team of assembled superheroes with a small smile. “Thanks…all of you. You did really well today-“

“Not well enough,” Mayura muttered, so quietly only Rena heard him.

“I’ll get in touch with you when it’s time to search for Chat again,” Ladybug said.

“Actually, I was thinking…maybe we could hang on to the Miraculous and do a little solo patrolling?” Rena suggested, gesturing to Queen Bee and Carapace. “I mean…are you really going to have time to track us down one by one and distribute our Miraculous when Chat sticks his head up again?”

Ladybug glanced between Mayura and Rena, a detail that wasn’t lost on Queen Bee whose eyes narrowed as Ladybug looked to Mayura for support.

“I don’t know…” Ladybug said, scratching the back of her neck.

“I mean, you don’t take mine back,” Mayura said, earning a small, curious scowl from Carapace behind his cowl. “Would make responding to Chat a lot easier if they were able to get in the action quicker, wouldn’t it?”

“I guess…” Ladybug sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “It’s not…I mean, I trust you; all of you. It’s just-“

“Not how we’ve done things in the past,” Rena conceded. “But…I think it’s safe to say the way we’ve done things isn’t gonna cut it anymore.”
“No, you’re right,” Ladybug nodded. “Okay…until Chat Noir is captured, you can each hang on to your Miraculous. I don’t think I need to stress how important it is to keep them secure; we’ve worked together long enough that you should know the score by now, right?”

“Like I’d ever let anyone lay hands on my sweet little honey bee,” Queen Bee cooed, petting the pin with Pollen in it.

“We’ll take good care of them,” Carapace nodded, fingering his bracelet.

“I just…want you all to know how much I appreciate the support,” Ladybug said, smiling a small, shaky smile. “Last few weeks haven’t been easy for me but…”

Ladybug took a deep, steadying breath. “I’m just glad you trust me on this…I wish Chat could have done the same, but-“

Ladybug trailed off as Carapace and Queen Bee shared a look behind Rena’s back.

“We got your back, girl,” Rena said, shooting Ladybug a warm, beaming smile. “Always and forever.”

Rena extended a fist for Ladybug to bump, and for a moment, Ladybug looked like she was going to reciprocate. But as her hand raised, she just offered Rena, Queen Bee, and Carapace a small wave as she backed towards the edge of the building.

“Get home safe,” Ladybug said, yo-yo latching on to a nearby rooftop and swinging away, followed closely by Mayura who shot them a crisp two-fingered salute before flying after Ladybug.

Rena’s smile slowly dropped as she watched Ladybug and Mayura fly away until she could no longer make out their colored silhouettes against the skyline. “Twenty minutes,” she said to Carapace and Queen Bee as soon as she was sure Ladybug and Mayura were out of earshot. “Take the long way. Make sure you’re not followed.”

Rena leapt off the roof without looking backwards, flipping once and landing in a low crouch behind a dumpster as she detransformed. Casting a quick look around, she turned the collar of her jacket up, sticking her hands in her pocket and lightly stroking the top of Trixx’s head as she walked.
“Gonna have to let me know what to feed you,” Alya mused, turning down a sidestreet with a quick glance over her shoulder.

“I may have picked up a coffee addiction in Morocco I never managed to shake,” Trixx yipped, slithering up Alya’s coat and nestling in her hair.

“Girl after my own heart...or are you a boy kwami?” Alya asked, turning into an alleyway.

“It would take at least a month to explain why that question doesn’t even make sense,” Trixx chuckled.

“Fair enough...serves me right for assigning a gender to a floating fox spirit,” Alya chuckled. “You know, I think this is the most we’ve ever talked. Ladybug tends to just chuck my necklace at my head and take it back when we’re done.”

“Does that mean we get that sleepover you’ve been promising since you were a kid?” Trixx asked.

"Probably less of a pajama party than I hoped, but I’m sure we can have some girl time in,” Alya said. “Or...girl/boy time in...or-”

“Fox Talks?”

“Yeah, we’ll have a lot of Fox Talks,” Alya said, stepping through a door as it swung open, ducking out of the way of a man in a white apron carrying a bag full of lobster shells.

“Evening Marc,” Alya said, patting the chef on the shoulder as she pushed into the kitchen, picking up a completed plate of food and depositing on the serving counter as she passed. “Hey Mama.”

“Hey honey,” Marlena said, burning the alcohol off a pan of flambe with a fireball that sent Trixx scurrying back into her pocket. “Hanging out here tonight?”

“Just meeting some friends,” Alya said, eyeballing a towering stack of chocolate and caramel the
pastry chef was drizzling with white chocolate. “Is that even on the menu?”

“It is for *Her Highness*,” Marlena sighed, rolling her eyes. “Honey, could you take that over to the Peach Garden Room? It’s for—”

“Yeah, I think I know who it’s for,” Alya said, plucking the wobbling dessert and a fresh pot of coffee off the counter and elbowing her way through the swinging doors. A low hubbub of chatter, mostly concerning Ladybug and Chat Noir’s most recent battle, floated through the air of *Le Grand Paris*’ restaurant as Alya passed, weaving her way through tables of patrons towards the doors at the far end of the main restaurant.

Stepping through the doors, the artificial smell of peaches wafted through the air as she stepped under the boughs of silver and gold artificial peach trees. The television over the bar showed the same footage that had been rolling all day, but Alya’s attention was drawn to a table at the center of the room that looked ready to snap under the weight of every dessert the restaurant served.

“What the hell is this?” Alya asked, sitting down at the table as Chloe shoveled a spoonful of chocolate cake into her mouth.

“What does it look like?!?” Chloe hissed, washing the bite of cake down with a sip from a root beer float. “I’m *eating my feelings*! Join me, won’t you?!”

“Those are some *ugly* looking feelings,” Alya said, picking up a spoon and tearing into the marshmallow cream on top of a tart with a small moan. “But they taste sooooooo pretty…”

“I didn’t *sign up* for this shit!” Chloe babbled, chocolate crumbs flying from her mouth. “I thought we were in for a fun superhero romp against one of Hawkmoth’s stupidly dressed cronies! I did not sign up to fight *Chat Noir* in full *psycho* mode!”

“Hey, this wasn’t on anybody’s job description,” Alya said, gingerly touching Chloe’s root beer float against a darkening bruise on her collarbone. “But it’s part of the job now.”

“Should I have brought insulin to this little party?” Nino asked as he walked up to the table, struggling to find a place to set his jacket down that wasn’t covered in pastries. “Or something *not* covered in chocolate?”
“Why would you want something not covered in chocolate?” Chloe asked, pushing a wobbling croquembouche towards Nino. “Why would I?”

“Weren’t you on a diet though?” Nino asked, prodding a cream puff monstrosity with a fork.

“Fuck my diet!” Chloe whimpered through a mouthful of jelly doughnut. “We got bigger things to fry right now and the only way I’m gonna make it through this is if some of them are covered in sugar and filled with jam!”

“Okay, can we take a step back from the diabetic ledge we’re poised on for a second?” Alya said, pouring herself a cup of coffee as she surreptitiously scooted her chair closer to the table. “Kinda have a lot to unpack here…”

“Fuck unpacking; let’s just chuck it in the river,” Nino sighed, popping a cream puff in his mouth, rubbing his shoulder with a small groan. “What a total shitshow…”

“Absolute clusterfuck,” Chloe added.

“As much as I agree with you, we gotta keep our heads on straight,” Alya said, taking a sip of her coffee. “So…what do you guys think?”

Chloe and Nino shared a look. “Can’t believe I’m saying this,” Chloe sighed, dunking a raspberry in whipped cream and popping it in her mouth. “Really, really, really wish I didn’t have to say it, but… ugh…I don’t trust Ladybug.”

“Ditto,” Nino said, scratching the back of his neck. “I mean…whole thing seems really shifty for some reason; unnecessarily shifty too.”

“Like she’s keeping us at arms length while getting all cuddly-cuddly with Mayura,” Chloe said, rolling her eyes.

“Yeah, I don’t like that guy either,” Nino said, leaning back and crossing his arms. “He is like... super intense and never shuts up about Ladybug.”
“Like he’s her lapdog or something,” Chloe chimed in. “And he totally thinks he’s number two in this outfit, doesn’t he?”

“Right?” Nino huffed. “Fucking barking out orders like his feathered ass isn’t greener than goose shit.”

“You’re just mad because the press called him ‘Team Ladybug’s New Leading Man’,” Chloe snickered.

“I mean that’s the thing, isn’t it?” Nino asked, turning to Alya. “Are we Team Ladybug?”

Alya steepled her fingers in front of her as she thoughtfully gazed into the sea of sugary excess in front of her. “I’m not,” she said after a long moment.

“So we’re for Chat then?” Chloe asked, sharing an uneasy look with Nino.

“I mean he tore through that building like it was made of styrofoam,” Nino said. “He was a fucking maniac out there. I’ve got bruises on my bruises and I’m pretty sure I sprained my shoulder trying to stop just one of those palm strikes. I have never seen him that pissed...and Ladybug looked really scared of him.”

“Im a little scared of him,” Chloe said, poking a piece of cake with her fork. “I mean...we got hurt. He hurt us.”

“Doesn’t mean he’s lying though,” Alya said, chewing on her thumbnail. “Of course that doesn’t mean he’s telling the truth either. Much as I don’t trust Ladybug, I don’t know if Chat’s evidence can be completely believed either...”

“So either Ladybug’s lying about Chat or Chat’s lying about Ladybug?” Nino asked.

“Or they’re both lying about something,” Chloe chimed in. “Maybe Hawkmoth doesn’t even factor into whatever’s going on between them?”

“Yeah, but...we don’t know for sure, do we?” Nino said. “I mean, that’s the rub, right? I’m not down
to support either of them at this point until we get more information.”

“I agree,” Alya nodded, taking a sip of her coffee. “We played along with Ladybug and got our kwamis out of her hands; if Chat’s telling the truth, we rescued three Miraculous from Hawkmoth’s grip.”

Alya’s eyes drifted up to a television hanging over the bar as the image flashed to a scene from the Ladybug and Chat Noir statue in the park. A small crowd had gathered to watch as a construction worker started taking a powersaw to Chat Noir’s neck, cutting through the brass until it toppled off his shoulders and landed on the grass in front of a cheering mob.

“If Chat’s telling the truth…we just helped Hawkmoth smear the last hero left in this city,” Nino said with a small shiver.

“Hey, what about us?” Chloe huffed. “We’re heroes!”

“She’s right,” Alya said, tearing her gaze away from the television. “No matter what’s going on with Ladybug and Chat Noir, we’re three independent heroes now. Teaming up with Ladybug today got us our kwami back, but I say this is the last time we really help her until we’re sure she’s telling the truth.”

“She’s gonna get suspicious if we don’t turn up to Chat hunting parties,” Chloe pointed out.

“Not to mention she knows everything about us already,” Nino added. “Where we live, who we talk to; if we go against her, she’s gonna...well, shit, I don’t know what she’s gonna do, but-”

“So we pretend to be good little soldiers for her,” Alya continued, twirling a lock of hair anxiously. “Show up, make a show of looking for Chat Noir, pretend to be one hundred percent invested in her cause to get close to her. We just...slow things down a little. Look for Chat but don’t look too hard. And none of this ‘attack on sight’ bullshit Mayura’s on about. The fact that he’s Team Ladybug without even questioning it makes me a little leery of him.”

“Birdo knows too much already,” Nino agreed, scooping a pile of whipped cream off one of Chloe’s desserts and dropping it in his coffee.

“Yeah, where does Ladybug get off letting him know who we are?” Chloe huffed.
“Everyone knows who you are,” Nino said dryly.

“It’s the principle!” Chloe said, slamming her fist on the table so hard it toppled the croquembouche, sending cream puffs rolling across the table.

“So, we’re agreed then?” Alya asked. “We don’t move until we know more. Whatever Ladybug and Chat Noir are up to, we stay out of the thick of it, get more information, and only throw our lot in with the one we’re sure is in the right.”

“If Chat’s right, is he really going to accept our help after the Ladyblog served his metaphorical head to the Parisian populace?” Nino asked, gesturing at the crowd dumping the dismembered Chat Noir statue in the river.

“The Ladyblog is my responsibility,” Alya said, with a nod to reassure herself. “Let me worry about rectifying this situation if Chat Noir is telling the truth. I hate to think I slandered an innocent person, but-”

“It’s libel if it’s in print,” Chloe said. “And it’s not like you did it to dump on Neko Noir because you hate him or anything; we had to get Ladybug to trust us enough to let us accessorize whenever we wanted to. Strictly business.”

“Hope he sees it that way,” Alya said, chewing her bottom lip.

“After the treatment this city has given him, I’m sure he’ll accept whatever help he can get,” Chloe chuckled, earning a sharp glare from Nino. “...not helping; got it.”

“We did what we had to for the power to protect this city,” Nino said, laying a hand on Alya’s shoulder with a small squeeze. “And we will until Hawkmoth rips our Miraculous off of us.”

“Long as he doesn’t touch my hair that is,” Chloe said, wiping the corner of her mouth with a napkin. “So on the topic of team names, how does the Miraculous Bee Team sound?”

“Hey, if it’s Team Anyone, it’s Team Rena,” Nino said. “Alya’s been handling all the legwork so far and pretty much secured our Miraculous out from under Ladybug’s nose.”
“So that means the whole team gets to be named after her?” Chloe pouted. “I’m putting us up here in a safehouse! If Ladybug and her blueberry boy-toy show up, it’s my black and yellow ass they’re going to kick!”

“Well why don’t we put it to a vote?” Nino asked, raising a hand. “Alya, what team are we?”

“Cheater,” Chloe said, sticking her tongue out.

“Not Team Rena,” Alya said with a fond chuckle, fishing a piece of chocolate cake off the table and feeding it to Trixx in her pocket. “We’re not electing a leader here or appointing one of us as the mascot of this little splinter cell. In fact, officially, this team doesn’t exist. We’re not a team, and somehow...somehow we’re the only team left with Paris’ best interests at heart.”

As Alya spoke, she noticed how Nino and Chloe seemed to sit up a little straighter, all playful bickering immediately put on hold as they both turned to give her their undivided attention.

“Ladybug and Chat Noir are obsessed with each other,” Alya continued. “Even when they’re battering each other through buildings. But while they’re focused on whatever lover’s spat they’re having, Hawkmoth is still out there somewhere. And sooner or later, he’s gonna take advantage of this split between Team Ladynoir and make his play for the Miraculous. That’s what he’s always wanted, and until he has them or he gets captured, we can’t count him out of the fight just yet.”

“Through all this superpowered nonsense, we have to keep our heads cool,” Alya said, insistently poking her finger on the tabletop. “We have to get to the bottom of this, we have to do our own research, we have to see through this Miraculous shell game and find out which cup Hawkmoth is hiding under so we can put him on the shelf for good.”

Chloe nodded as Alya spoke, sharing a glance with Nino as the television screen behind the bar showed a city gripped by fear, mistrust, and betrayal. Mayor Andre and Chief Raincomprix were making a joint statement, no doubt calling for Chat Noir’s arrest, but Alya was oblivious to the opinions of anyone not currently seated at the table.

“We’re not Team Ladybug and we’re not Team Chat,” Alya said. “We are first, foremost, and forever Team Paris. We are for this city and the people in it; right or wrong, good or bad, and regardless of whatever Miraculous bullshit gets thrown their way...or at least I am.”
Alya leaned back, glancing between her two unlikely partners as a pregnant silence lingered between them. A kind of static electricity hung in the air; years later, Alya would look back on that moment with a kind of clarity that only came from hindsight.

Nino was the first to act, plucking a dessert fork off the table and holding out like a sword towards the middle of the table. “Alright...guess I'm Team Paris.”

“Team Paris,” Chloe said, lips curling into a small, slightly savage smirk as she crossed her spoon with Nino’s fork.

“Team Paris,” Alya said, folding her fork over her new partners’ cutlery, forming a small silver triangle of cutlery in the middle of the table.

Chapter End Notes

So why am I being so mean to Adrien?

Part of what I want to do with this fic (other than rip the still-beating hearts out of Ladynoir shippers) is “fix” some of the things that irk me about Miraculous Ladybug’s canon (what else is fanfiction for if not venting your grievances with canon in story format?)

One of the biggest gripes I have is that Adrien/Chat is a very static/helpless character.

He doesn’t ask questions, he doesn’t follow up on leads (like the BOOK OF MIRACULOUS IN HIS FATHER’S OFFICE) and he spends a lot of the show pining after Ladybug and just waiting to be saved. He relies on Ladybug to save him if his reckless fighting style gets him hurt, he wants Ladybug to save him from his loneliness, he wants his father to save him from his lousy family situation. Ladynoir, in show, is a pretty unequal partnership, mostly because Ladybug more often than not has to do all the work. She has to plan, she has to fight Chat or fight alone or worry about recruiting someone in the thick of battle, and at the end of the day, Ladybug has to carry the day in a way that Chat Noir just doesn’t need to do.

Chat doesn’t need to rely on himself in the same ways Ladybug does.

I like Adrien more than I’ve liked a cartoon character in a long time, but I realized that I like his potential more than I like the way he’s presented in the show. So if (by my subjective interpretation you’re encouraged to disagree with) Adrien is a character that relies on Ladybug for practically everything, the best way to get him to develop would be to put him at odds with his former idol and force him to save himself. He has support from Kagami, but that support isn’t going to come in the form of placating his wounded ego or excusing his mistakes. No one is going to bring him back if he gets killed again; no one is going to Miraculous Ladybug his problems away. If he gets kidnapped, caught, or brainwashed just once, that’s the ballgame. He needs to either rise to
Ladybug’s exceedingly competent level, or get his Miraculous snatched. No more hiding, no more waiting for his knight in spotted armor to rescue him; it’s sink or swim from here on out.

Whether he does or not is something you’ll have to wait and see~

Thank you again for making this the second-most commented on story I have (behind SB1B’s thousands of comments). It really means a lot to me that people take time out of their day to respond/yell at me. Next part is in the works and then we can get into the bulk of the cold war proper~

Until next time!
“You have a lovely home.”

Kagami said nothing, arms crossed across her chest as Master He sat across the table from her, cup of tea growing cold in front of her.

“Interesting decoration,” Master He remarked, looking over the rim of her glasses at a polished silver scimitar that hung on the wall. “Is that a Persian shamshir?”

“...a tulwar, actually,” Kagami said tersely, glancing at the clock on the wall that taunted her with every tick.

“Are they not similar though?”

“...at a glance, perhaps.”

“I see,” Master He said, non committedly. “...forgive me for prying, but are you and Chat Noir-”

“We don’t need to talk,” Kagami sighed.

“Just trying to make conversation,” Master He shrugged.
“Though I am curious as to how you entered my car without my knowledge,” Kagami said, eyes narrowing at her unexpected guest.

“I used the door,” Master He said simply.

“...you expect me to believe that?”

“How else does one enter a car?” Master He asked, raising an eyebrow as Kagami suppressed the urge to roll her eyes.

“I would have noticed if you came in through the bloody door,” Kagami muttered.

“Not, unless, I didn’t want you to,” Master He said with a thin smile as the garage door swung open again.

“Were you followed?” Kagami asked as Chat Noir sat down at the table, placing a long, slender wooden box in front of him.

“ Took the extra-extra long way around to make sure I wasn’t,” Chat Noir said, unlatching the box and opening it in front of Master He. Twelve polished, metallic pieces of jewelry sat glittering in the dim light of the kitchen, pressed into plush red velvet. Master He couldn’t suppress the small gasp of surprise that slipped through her lips, leaning forward as she scrutinized each Miraculous in turn.

“...you were telling the truth then,” Master He said, leaning back in her chair. “Thank you for being so...forthcoming.”

“I have nothing to hide,” Chat Noir said, folding his arms across his chest. “If you are a friend of Master Fu, that is.”

“I have nothing to hide either,” Master He said, producing a faded, yellowing photograph with a flick of a wrist and holding it up for Chat Noir to see. A group of eight, elderly Chinese people sat posed around a table in what appeared to be early 1900’s fashion. The small, hunched figure of Master Fu sat off to one side, no different than when Adrien had seen him only a few weeks before. Next to him, Master He sat, arms folded and glaring at the camera with a kind of judgemental suspicion.
“I am a woman who values honesty above all else,” Master He said, leaning in and steepling her fingers as the photo disappeared back up her sleeve with another flick of her wrist. “Secrets and subterfuge are Master Fu’s purview; mine is the spread and dissemination of knowledge, so I will be perfectly candid with you. I am here because I believe that Ladybug and the Ladybug Miraculous are in grave danger.”

“So he got away?”

“We spent all day looking for him; couldn’t find him,” Ladybug sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose as she stared at Hawkmoth’s back across the room. “He must have scurried off in the wreckage after that Cataclysm destroyed the Mayor’s house.”

“Were you planning on fixing that?” Hawkmoth asked, staring out the window at the pile of smoking rubble in the near distance. “I don’t mean to be a bother, but that was the home of one of our family friends-”

“Haven’t had time; looking for Chat has kinda been at the forefront of my priority list,” Ladybug said, waving a hand dismissively.

“Yes, and leaving a smoking hole that Chat Noir created only gives credence to our version of events,” Hawkmoth said, nodding thoughtfully. “Still, I would see to that before too long. Maybe get a nice press shot of Ladybug saving the day once again.”

“I don’t need to jockey in front of the cameras for attention,” Ladybug said coolly. “I don’t need public acclaim in order to do the right thing.”

“Of course you don’t,” Hawkmoth said, turning around and frowning at the bruise Chat Noir left on Ladybug’s cheek. “Seems our friend is finally realizing his destructive potential.”

Ladybug scowled, touching her bruised skin unconsciously with the tips of her fingers. “Any theories as to why that might be?”

“You picked a fight with a physical avatar of destruction and you’re surprised that he can destroy
things?” Hawkmoth said, raising an eyebrow. “No offense, but-”

“Choose your next words carefully,” Ladybug said. “I have had a very rough day.”

“You and Chat Noir have been relatively stagnant over the past couple of years,” Hawkmoth said, holding his hands up defensively. “You have each only scratched the surface of what you’re individually capable of.”

“Not like you ever gave us a reason to step up our game,” Ladybug scoffed.

“Perhaps, but what happened today was a result of Chat Noir evolving,” Hawkmoth explained, rubbing his chin. “He is rising in power in opposition to you, and he’s made it clear that he has no qualms about hurting you to get what he wants...I understand you two were friends, but...I’m afraid you’ve been too lenient with him.”

“Too...lenient?” Ladybug echoed, gesturing out the window. “Mayor Andre just declared Chat Noir Public Enemy Number One! They are dismembering the Chat Noir statue in the park and calling for his head on a stick! He is being hunted like an animal and you think I’m being too lenient?!”

“You are still giving him opportunities to join you when he’s made it clear that he has no intention of ever coming around to our side of things,” Hawkmoth said, hands folding on top of his cane. “You are still hanging on to the hope that Chat Noir will not be harmed in any of this when he seems to bear no such feelings towards you. This is not going to end well for Chat Noir, and if you don’t realize that-”

“Hey, I realize that,” Ladybug shot back. “Nobody realizes how bad this is going to be for Chat Noir more than I do, okay? Just because I’m not out for his blood yet doesn’t mean I don’t know that he…”

Ladybug swallowed heavily, biting her bottom lip as she forced herself to remain calm in Hawkmoth’s presence. The place for tears was not standing in front of Paris’ greatest exploiter of emotional vulnerability.

“I know he’s not going to get that happy ending your family will,” Ladybug said. “I know he...I know we’re effectively enemies now…”
“Then you need to start treating him like the enemy he \textit{is},” Hawkmoth said. “Because that is how he will be treating you the next time you meet.”

“If we can just pin him down after a Cataclysm-”

“Cataclysm may be the least of your worries,” Hawkmoth said walking over to a table and picking up a manilla folder. “You’ve done well to isolate him from most sources of support and get the remaining Miraculous holders on your side, but-”

Hawkmoth tossed the folder to Ladybug who plucked it out of the air with one hand. Inside, a picture of a white bracelet on Dr. He’s wrist sat superimposed next to a copy of a page from the Miraculous book, detailing a figure clad in white and standing next to an elegant crane.

“It seems you missed a spot.”

“Wait...you mean working with a deranged brainwashing lunatic is putting Ladybug in \textit{danger}?!?” Chat Noir gasped facetiously. “You don’t say!”

“This must be the kind of \textit{genius} insight that awards you the title of \textit{master},” Kagami said dryly.

“Scoff all you’d like,” Master He sniffed. “But do not underestimate the fact that Hawkmoth has his talons wrapped around one of the most powerful forces in the universe.”

“You seem awfully sure of that,” Chat Noir said evasively. “Who’s to say Ladybug’s not telling the truth and I’m the one who’s \textit{really} working for Hawkmoth?”

“I had my suspicions,” Master He said, stirring her tea slowly. “But the fact that we’re sitting here talking to each other means that you’re not the one that Hawkmoth is manipulating.”

“I thought you would have sought out Ladybug at first,” Kagami said, tapping her finger to her cheek thoughtfully.
“I did,” Master He said, taking a sip of her tea. “But there is something...or some one preventing me from finding her...”

“Dr. He...is a Miraculous user?”

“Yes, it would see that your master’s doctor runs in the same circles as he does,” Hawkmoth said as Ladybug studied the image of Dr. He’s bracelet. “I wish I could say that was the worst of it, but I had my personal assistant do some digging and...well...I have reason to believe that the old bat is much older than she appears.”

Ladybug turned the page, scowling at the identical image of Dr. He posing for an early photograph, the same cold, analytical look turned on the camera.

“I suspect she’s a sorceress of some kind,” Hawkmoth said, frowning as Ladybug let out a derisive snort. “Something funny?”

“A sorceress?” Ladybug sniggered. “You have to be kidding me.”

“Do I look like the kind of man who indulges in kidding ?”

“Being a Miraculous user wasn’t enough?”

“As I’m sure you’re well aware, each Miraculous has a very limited purview of abilities,” Hawkmoth sniffed. “You could no more destroy a city block than Chat Noir could heal a broken bone. To stray outside one’s purview of expertise requires study of forces beyond the scope of human abilities. I hesitate to call them ‘supernatural’ since they seem to be baked into the very fabric of the world we live in, but-”

“You’re talking like you’re...familiar with these forces,” Ladybug said, narrowing her eyes at Hawkmoth.

“Like I said, Miraculous have limitations ,” Hawkmoth said, running his fingers over his brooch. “The Butterfly allows me to make a gift of power to someone, but tragically does not allow me to
compel them to do my bidding. To do that, I needed to...broaden my horizons.”

“Gabriel Agreste; fashionista, C.E.O. and amateur warlock,” Ladybug said, crossing her arms. “You’re a regular triple threat, aren’t you?”

“Quadruple if you count my gardening skills,” Hawkmoth said, regarding Ladybug with a strange, appraising look for a moment.

“You garden?”

“You haven’t seen my flowers, have you?”

“Must’ve missed it on the way in,” Ladybug said, turning to leave. “I really should be getting going…”

“Please...I insist,” Hawkmoth said, pressing a button on the wall that opened what appeared to be an elevator door on the far side of the room. “I feel as though we need to...understand each other.”

“...if that is some kind of euphemism, I swear to God-”

“Don’t be perverse ,” Hawkmoth groaned as he headed into the elevator. “You must half my age...what kind of monster do you take me for?”

“What kind of monster are you?” Ladybug asked, narrowing her eyes at Hawkmoth.

“I’d like to show you,” Hawkmoth said, rubbing the back of his masked head. “I feel it’s...important that you understand just what kind of monster I am.”

“...a warlock is shielding Ladybug from your sight?” Kagami asked, deadpan incredulity dripping from every syllable.
“What you call them is irrelevant,” Master He said, folding her hands in her lap. “Hawkmoth or someone working for him is versed in magic that—”

Kagami’s giggle interrupted Master He’s monologue.

“I’m sorry, but seriously,” Kagami said, looking between Chat Noir and Master He. “Magic? Warlocks? You really believe this woman?”

“A thumb-sized talking cat powered by stinky cheese lives in my ring and gives me unfathomable powers of destruction,” Chat Noir said blankly. “And you’re having trouble buying the fact that Hawkmoth might have gone to Beauxbatons?”

“...forgive the interruption,” Kagami said, sitting back in her chair with a thoughtful nod.

“As I was saying,” Master He said, eyes narrowing at Kagami. “There is a haze of dark power surrounding Ladybug that prevents me from getting an accurate idea of her location. I was able to find you largely because my divination abilities weren’t hampered, and even then it was only because you hadn’t detransformed yet.”

“Could Hawkmoth do the same?” Chat Noir asked, unconsciously fingering his ring.

“If he could, he would have already,” Kagami countered.

“I doubt he has the same...experience as I do,” Master He said with a small smile.

“Though enough experience to thwart your efforts to locate him and Ladybug,” Chat Noir said.

“Master Fu long suspected that there was something more to Hawkmoth than just the Butterfly Miraculous,” Master He said. “The fact of the matter is that Nooroo does not confer upon his user the ability to influence people’s minds. Whatever he’s done to create these akuma lies outside of Nooroo’s purview...and given their insidious nature, it’s not a stretch to assume that Hawkmoth is employing some heinous sorcery to coerce his victims into complying with his goals.”

Kagami nodded, brow knit and mouth pursed in concentration as she stared into the swirling
“Make no mistake; Hawkmoth has not showed the full breadth of his abilities,” Master He continued. “It takes a special kind of person to learn sorcery...one willing to sacrifice and endure a great deal of hardship. And any person like that is not one you’d like to make an enemy of.”

“...too cheap to spring for music, huh?”

Of all the strange things Ladybug had done in her tenure as a superhero, riding in a cramped elevator with Hawkmoth ranked among the strangest.

“Wings in,” Hawkmoth said as elevator descended, taking a deep breath as Hawkmoth’s suit disappeared and revealed a very tired looking Gabriel Agreste. For a moment, Ladybug eyed the brooch around his neck only a scant yard or so in front of her. She mused at how easy it would be to take it from him; how simple disarming Hawkmoth once and for all would be...but at this point, would Chat really be satisfied with that? After demolishing an entire block, how much more would he be willing to destroy until his thirst for revenge was satisfied?

The elevator landed on the bottom floor before Ladybug could follow that train of thought any further as Gabriel fished a ring of keys out of his pocket.

“I don’t like to come down here as Hawkmoth,” Gabriel muttered, producing a silver key that fit into a lock on the side of the elevator door. “Seems...indecent somehow.”

“Because being Hawkmoth is so decent above ground?” Ladybug asked, stepping away from the doors in case they opened into the eighth circle of hell. Instead of fire and brimstone, she was struck with a sickeningly sweet floral aroma as the elevator doors opened into an eerily serene setting. At the end of a long, empty cathedral looking setting was a lush, extravagant floral setting at odds with the rest of the stark environment.

“What...what is this?” Ladybug asked as Gabriel started walking down the cold steel gangplank, each step echoing as he headed towards the far side of the room.

“Emilie...Adrien’s mother loved flowers,” Gabriel said somewhat haltingly, running a hand through his hair and smoothing his suit jacket out. “Had a knack for bringing the most hopelessly lost plants
back from the brink of death. I...I tried to keep some of her plants alive after we declared her missing, but...well, this is all that remains.”

Ladybug’s confusion only worsened as she approached the little garden on the far side of the room and took notice of the smooth, glassy cylinder under the towering butterfly shaped glass window overlooking the room. Inside lay a woman with smooth, fair skin, soft blond hair, and delicate, refined features that reminded her all too much of Adrien.

“What...what the hell is happening?” Ladybug asked, head swimming as Gabriel plucked a handkerchief out of his breast pocket, methodically wiping a corner of the glass window that accumulated dust in his absence. “Is that...you said she…”

“I...am grateful that you have come this far to help my family,” Gabriel said, eyes never leaving his wife’s face even as he spoke to Ladybug. “But if we are to go further...I need you to understand what it is you are fighting for.”

“Sorry if I’m not feeling too concerned about my former partner’s well-being at the moment.”

“I understand that you’re upset with her right now-”

“Upset doesn’t even begin to scratch the surface,” Chat Noir hissed, standing up from the table and pacing around the edge of the kitchen. “Upset is the understatement of the whole goddamned year! For four years I risked my life to protect this city and Ladybug and she just throws it all away because I wasn’t a good little boy who did what he was told! I told her working with Hawkmoth was a bad idea, so why should I care if Mme. Know-It-All gets her spotted butt in trouble?!”

“Ladybug is not going to get away with this,” Master He said sternly. “If she has promised the services of her kwami to a deranged lunatic, there will be consequences for the girl under the mask; make no mistake about that. I am not asking you to help me save Ladybug; I am asking you to help me recover the Ladybug Miraculous before she or Hawkmoth use it for some nefarious purpose.”

“Forgive what might be an ignorant question,” Kagami interjected. “But how can the power of creation be used nefariously?”

“It is when it’s used to create nefarious things,” Master He said simply. “And whatever Hawkmoth’s
plans for it are, I doubt they factor in the best interests of Paris. Wrestling control of the Ladybug Miraculous away from Hawkmoth is our number one priority.”

“That’s all well and good, but our situation just got a lot dicier,” Chat Noir said, flicking the television mounted on the wall on with a button.

“Emilie and I were...well, I can’t say childhood sweethearts because I spent most of college pining after her from afar,” Gabriel chuckled, running a hand through his hair. “I spent so much time thinking she was just...unattainable, that I didn’t work up the courage to ask her out until graduation threatened to separate us forever.”

“Why would she be unattainable?” Ladybug asked, leaning against the railing that separated the small garden from the rest of the room. “She’s a person; not an object.”

“She was... is the daughter of a Austrian banker and a child actress to boot,” Gabriel chuckled, shaking his head. “Never mind the fact that she was as beautiful then as she is now and I was a skinny fourteen year old nobody who could barely say two words to her without making a total fool of myself...still honestly a bit surprised that she gave me the time of day.”

“Punching above your weight class, huh?” Ladybug said.

“Emilie is above everyone’s weight class,” Gabriel said, fingertips lingering over the glass lid of the casket. “The fact that she chose me... picked me is nothing short of miraculous.”

Ladybug said nothing as Gabriel trailed off, eyes going slightly unfocused as he stared up at his wife’s face.

“I knew I was never going to be worthy of her,” Gabriel continued. “Her family made it clear what they thought of their daughter marrying below her station...but I tried. I fought and I struggled and I worked around the clock to build my business into something not even her father could look down on. I made Gabriel into the company it is today so that my wife would want for nothing....that she would never have cause to regret the choice she made.”

“Something tells me your wife wouldn’t be thrilled with your behavior since her disappearance,” Ladybug said, studying Emilie’s serene expression. “...but she didn’t disappear, did she?”
“No...she didn’t,” Gabriel muttered, almost under her breath. “She went to the doctor for help with a phantom pain in her stomach...they handed her a death sentence. A disease so rare the impossible \textit{fraud} who diagnosed her named it after himself...called it Licter’s Syndrome. As if he had invented the damned thing…”

Gabriel’s mouth twisted into a bitter snarl as he turned away, taking off his glasses with a shaky sigh.

“She was thirty six years old,” Gabriel said. “Thirty six and already preparing herself for death...can you imagine that? Watching someone you love fill out her will while nursing your infant son? Watching the...only source of light and happiness in your life dim as it prepared go out forever?”

Gabriel turned to face her for the first time, a quiet anger brimming behind his eyes.

“Could you accept that?” Gabriel asked. “Would you just...lie down and let death come for the person you loved more than anything in the entire world? Or would you do something about it? Do anything to save the life of the person you loved?”

“That’s what you did then?” Ladybug asked, raising an eyebrow. “You didn’t try...conventional medicine first?”

“I tried \textit{everything},” Gabriel laughed, shaking his head. “Poured \textit{millions} into medical research, flew in experts in rare diseases from around the world, paid for expensive herbal compounds that \textit{swore} they would ease her pain...every time, I was disappointed. Every...single...time, they let me down. Conventional medicine \textit{failed} my wife...so I turned to more unconventional medicine.”

“\textit{-shocked more than anyone else at this tragic and unfortunate turn of events,}” Mayor Andre said as photographers snapped pictures of him in front of the rubble of his house. “\textit{To have someone this city nurtured as a hero betray us is truly saddening, but the renegade Chat Noir has made his lack of care for this city apparent today. It is fortunate that no one was harmed in today’s battle, but I fear next time we may not be so lucky. Therefore, the City of Paris stands with Ladybug and formally issues a warrant for the capture of Chat Noir on grounds of property destruction, terrorism, and attempted murder!”}

“Hear that? I’m a \textit{terrorist} now,” Chat Noir spat, turning the television off.
“People who blow up buildings tend to garner that label,” Master He sniffed.

“Okay, master, what would you have done in that situation?” Chat Noir asked, crossing his arms across his chest.

“Would have made myself scarce; stayed out of the public eye until the chaos Ladybug was trying to create died down,” Master He said simply. “Attacking Ladybug erased any doubt there might have been in the minds of Parisians or your fellow heroes. Now I don’t see any way forward that doesn’t involve a great deal of chaos and destruction.”

“Destruction Ladybug is responsible for,” Chat Noir countered.

“Does Ladybug hold the Black Cat?” Master He said. “Does she control you like a puppet? Does she decide what is and isn’t destroyed with a cataclysm?”

Chat Noir opened his mouth to respond but found himself coming up short, averting his gaze from Master He’s firm, unwavering stare.

“No one is responsible for your actions except you, Chat Noir,” Master He said. “The course you chart going forward is entirely your own; it is up to you to determine how to use the power Master Fu trained you how to use.”

“Master Fu didn’t train me in anything,” Chat Noir said, fingering his ring as he stared off into space. “He was... is my friend, but he was never my mentor. All that sage wisdom and Miraculous hero training was saved for Ladybug who seems to be putting it to great use.”

Master He frowned, sitting up in her chair. “He...at least trained you how to fight, correct?”

“I took karate until I was sixteen and have fenced since I was eight,” Chat Noir said. “I learned more from fighting Kagami here than I did from Master Fu.”

“He told you about Sanctuary though, right?” Master He said, glancing between Kagami and Chat Noir who looked equally nonplussed. “You’ve...you’ve used environmental transformations in the past, so he must have taught you how to brew different elixirs, right?”
“He would give me a wheel of cheese with the different powers I needed,” Chat Noir shrugged, ancient indignation bubbling up inside him. “Once I ran out of underwater cheese so Ladybug just recruited Carapace while I sat on the rooftop and watched the water battle from a distance.”

Master He blinked, shook her head and stared off into space for a few moments.

“Well...that’s...,” she said. “I...it’s not unusual for Master Fu to play favorites, but to... completely neglect the training of the most dangerous Miraculous of all is just...gods...what was he thinking?”

“You received no training from this supposed mentor of yours?” Kagami asked, turning back to Master He. “Tell me; will he be well enough once he recovers to weather a slap to the face?”

“He will have to weather more than that,” Master He sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Overcautious old fool!”

“Ladybug said he was training her to be the next Guardian,” Chat Noir said, watching Master He’s normally composed expression crumble into a hodgepodge of confusion, disbelief, and anger. “And again; doing a great job with that!”

“Guardians are the most secretive of our orders, to be sure, but this...gods, he’s making you pay for his mistakes!” Master He hissed, shaking her head.

“I sense we’re missing some context here,” Kagami said, sharing a look with Chat Noir.

“Welcome to Team Chat,” Chat Noir snorted. “You get used to missing context after a while.”

Okay...okay,” Master He sighed, shaking her head. “Never send a Guardian to do a Vizier’s job...okay, here’s what’s going to happen. You are going to keep your head down for a few weeks at the least. You are not going to make any public appearances or antagonize Ladybug in any way. If Ladybug is as desperate to end things as you say she is, she will try and provoke you; try and fill the silence you leave in your wake. The longer we can prolong this, the more we can force tension between her and her new partner.”

“So, what, just take a vacation?” Chat Noir asked. “I thought you said we needed to move on
“Ladybug?”

“We do, but you need to catch up on the training Master Fu should have been giving you,” Master He said, slowly standing up. “When you’re ready to have some real instruction, you know where to find me. Until then—”

Chat Noir blinked as the image of Master He evaporated, leaving Kagami and him staring at a blank patch in the kitchen where she used to be.

“...am I going mad,” Kagami asked, head slowly tilting to one side. “Or did a strange Chinese woman just break into my house, lecture you, and disappear into thin air?”

“That or I hit my head harder than I thought I did,” Chat Noir sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “This is a weird question, but—”

A pop split the silence as Kagami tore the cork out of a bottle of white wine with her teeth as she fished another out of a cupboard by the sink.

“Read my mind,” Chat Noir said, clinking the necks of the wine bottles together as he tipped the moscato straight down his throat.

Master He’s eyes opened to the sight of her apprentices looking at her curiously over the rim of Master Fu’s bed.

“Everything alright?” Jun asked as Master He slowly stood up from her chair, shaking her head as she came back to her senses.

“Lovely,” Master He said, straightening her tie. “Jun, please prepare the Sanctuary for Chat Noir’s use. Lan, please prevent me from strangling Quingfu before he has recovered.”

Master He stared at her unconscious friend’s sleeping face with a small sigh. “We have a lot of ground to make up...”
“...magic?”

“It sounds silly when you refer to it as such-”

“So what would be a better term for it?” Ladybug asked.

“...I prefer the study of supernatural forces,” Gabriel muttered, adjusting his glasses.

“Sure you do,” Ladybug said. “So...you started researching the occult for a way to cure your wife?”

“Some men might have prayed for a miracle; I’m more of a do-it-yourself sort of person,” Gabriel said, leaning on the railing a few yards away from Ladybug. “I admit, I got a little desperate; Emilie’s health only worsened as Adrien grew older. I spent the better part of two years indulging every charlatan and witch doctor I could find...I was disappointed by most of them.”

“Not all?” Ladybug asked.

Gabriel scratched the back of his neck somewhat uneasily. “...let’s just say I finally found someone with more power than money; someone who was willing to sell a secret or two for a few hundred euros.”

“Didn’t realize Hogwarts tuition was that cheap,” Ladybug chuckled, more of out nervousness than anything else. “Is that how you learned of the Miraculous?”

“Every road I went down mentioned them in some capacity,” Gabriel shrugged. “Or hinted at them. Four thousand years of secret history is shaped by a set of strange objects; two that are rumored to guarantee their wielders absolute power. So...naturally I sought them out; paid people to make inquiries and go places I couldn’t. I spent another two years looking for any sign of them and then...”

Gabriel trailed off eyes losing focus as he stared into the inky black glass that stretched out over the
back wall of the cathedral.

“I got an offer,” Gabriel said. “From a...curiosities dealer. Two Miraculous and a whole book detailing their secret history...sounded too good to be true…”

Gabriel closed the car door behind him, wrapping his jacket tightly around his shoulders as Gorilla eyed the dilapidated warehouse with a curious frown.

“This seems...unsafe,” Gorilla said as Gabriel forged ahead, boots crunching on the gravel road leading up to the entrance of the building. “Sir, we should-”

“Wait outside, Gorilla,” Gabriel said, lightly patting his assistant on the shoulder. “They wanted me to come alone.”

“I’m aware of that, but-”

“If I’m not back in half an hour, take the car, and go home,” Gabriel said, pulling the front door open with a wrenching creak of rusted iron hinges. “And take care of Emilie for me.”

Gorilla nodded somewhat uneasily, watching Gabriel disappear into the old warehouse with a worried frown. A lone glimmer of light shone down from the ceiling, illuminating half of a long wooden table that sat in the direct center of the facility. Glancing around the abandoned maze of metal shelves and forgotten forklifts, Gabriel walked towards the chair table as the email had instructed, pulled it out and took a seat. His breath came out in great clouds of steam, but a cold sweat still ran down the back of Gabriel’s neck as he waited, eyes scanning the shadows for any sign of movement.

“Mr. Agreste.”

Gabriel nearly fell out of his chair as a disembodied voice came across the table. Through the darkness, he could vaguely make out the figure sitting in the chair opposite him; a tall, featureless figure that seemed to have been waiting for him since he entered the building.
“Good of you to come,” the voice said in perfect French.

“Good of you to meet me,” Gabriel said, sitting up a little straighter in his chair. “I confess, I thought I was coming out here on another wild goose chase.”

“Chase enough geese, and you’re bound to catch one eventually,” the voice said, laying something heavy on the table just out of the circle of light. “I understand that you’ve been asking around about the Miraculous...I hope it’s not for some garish runway display.”

“I have an accessory department for that kind of thing,” Gabriel said, leaning in with his fingers pressed together. “...my wife is sick; incurably so. I need something, well, miraculous in order to save her life...and I’m willing to pay the rest of my fortune in order to get the miracle I need.”

The purple eyes regarded him unblinkingly from the darkness, fingers tapping rhythmically on the table in consideration.

“You’re no ordinary warlock,” the voice murmured. “Here I thought we were dealing with just another power hungry little charlatan.”

“We?” Gabriel asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with,” the voice said, sliding a metal briefcase across the table as Gabriel fumbled to catch it before it fell. Fingers trembling, he cracked the briefcase open as the flickering fluorescent light bulb shone down on a purple butterfly shaped pin and a blue Peacock shaped pin. Between them was an old, dusty book with an intricately carved gold symbol pressed into the leather.

“Two Miraculous and the grimoire,” the voice said as Gabriel lifted the butterfly out of the box almost reverently. “As promised.”

“And these...will help my wife?” Gabriel asked.

“Possibly,” the voice said. “The Butterfly is capable of bestowing...unique capabilities on its Champions. You might be able to create a Champion capable of healing your ailing wife but...well....it’s not exactly the Ladybug.”
“The Ladybug?” Gabriel asked, opening the book and landing on a page featuring a red and black clad figure.

“The Power of absolute creation,” the voice mused. “Paired with the Black Cat, the power of absolute destruction...well, you could even bring someone back from the grave with that kind of power.”

“My wife isn’t dead yet,” Gabriel snapped, closing the case with a thoughtful frown. “Who has the Ladybug and Black Cat?”

“Really wish I knew,” the voice said. “Whoever has them isn’t going to reveal them without good cause...but as you said, you don’t need to bring your wife back from the dead yet.”

Gabriel nodded. “I see...I don’t believe we discussed terms, did we?”

“We have not,” the voice said.

“What is this going to cost me?” Gabriel asked. “I have money put away, if that’s what you’re looking for-”

“Nothing.”

“I...beg your pardon?” Gabriel asked.

“That’s what this is going to cost you,” the voice said. “Nothing.”

“You would part with two artifacts of immense power for...nothing?”

“There is nothing you have that I want...yet,” the voice said. “And as I said, my partner and I aren’t getting much use out of these at the moment. Better to...pass them on to someone who might do some good with them. See if you can’t heal your wife.”
“I don’t accept charity,” Gabriel said, stiffening as the voice let out a low, throaty chuckle.

“A man in your position doesn’t need it,” the voice said. “So consider this a...gift. Friends give each other gifts now and then, don’t they?”

“We’re friends?” Gabriel asked.

“I’d like to be,” the voice said. “And if there comes a day when you have something that I need—”

“I see,” Gabriel said, adjusting his glasses thoughtfully. “…as long as it has nothing to do with my son or my wife, I suppose I owe you and your partner a favor down the road...to repay the friendship you showed me today.”

“I’m glad we understand each other,” the voice said, slowly rising from their seat. “There is...just one more thing I’d like to request.”

“And that is?” Gabriel asked, stiffening as the figure stepped into the light for the first time. A smooth, solid, featureless black helmet covered their head. A long, black, military coat swept the ground a scant few inches above the polished black boots that clacked audibly on the floor with every step. Gabriel’s breath seized in his throat as the figure stopped by his chair, leaning down until he could see his terrified reflection in the polished metal of the helmet.

“...take good care of your son,” the figure said in an oddly cheerful voice that made Gabriel’s blood freeze in his veins. “You only get one chance to be a father...would be a shame if you squandered it, hm?

A heavy, gloved hand patted Gabriel on the shoulder as the figure padded away, leaving Gabriel sitting alone in the warehouse, trembling hands clutching the briefcase to his chest.

Ladybug’s heart thrummed in her ears as Gabriel finished, slowly taking a handkerchief out and wiping his sweating brow.

“...who were they?” Ladybug asked.
“I was hoping you knew,” Gabriel chuckled weakly. “I never saw them again after that...and I suppose you know the rest of the story, don’t you?”

Gabriel walked back towards Emilie’s pod, laying a hand almost yearningly on the glass as he looked up at her.

“The Peacock didn’t help her,” Gabriel said. “And none of my akuma helped her either. She was running out of time and I was running out of options...so I took a gamble and drew out the Ladybug and Black Cat.”

“Is that what she would have wanted?” Ladybug asked, looking up at Emilie. “Would she have wanted you to tear your way across the city trying to save her life?”

“No,” Gabriel said, shaking his head. “She would have rather died than allow anyone else to suffer on her behalf...but if she survives long enough to hate me, then I’ll have done my job.”

Gabriel pulled his hand away, meticulously wiping his palm print from the glass until it was clean again.

“I managed to put her in an engineered sleep,” Gabriel said, glancing back over the empty room. “I froze her in time along with her beloved garden and built my mansion on top of it to hide her from the rest of the world. This...whole room used to be filled with flowers, but I’m not strong enough to keep time from running its course...it seems again that I am in danger of failing my wife.”

He seemed diminished in a way; tired, haggard, and at the end of his rope as he looked at her with an almost pleading expression.

“You asked me what kind of monster I was,” Gabriel said. “I am the kind of monster who loves his family. I am the kind of monster who would burn the world down if my loved ones could thrive in the ashes. And for four years, I’ve done just that; left nothing but bitterness and destruction in my wake until you showed up. Until you gave me another path forward.”

Ladybug said nothing, eyes quietly drifting between Gabriel and Adrien’s sleeping mother.
“I don’t expect you to like me or forgive me,” Gabriel said quietly. “When this is done, I will gladly subject myself to whatever punishment you feel I’ve earned...as long as Emilie and Adrien can live together in peace and happiness, I’ll be content.”

“I appreciate the great personal toll this war with Chat Noir must be exacting from you,” Gabriel continued, bending down and retrieving . “And I am more than capable of compensating you for your time and hardship-”

“Keep your money,” Ladybug sighed, shaking her head as she turned around, heading back towards the elevator. “I’m not doing this for a reward; I’m doing this because…”

Ladybug paused at the elevator door, glancing back at the woman who reminded her so much of Adrien.

“It’s just the right thing to do,” Ladybug said, stepping back into the elevator and leaving Gabriel alone with his wife.

Marinette kicked the hatch to her room open, staggering in with a sigh as she fished her phone out of her pocket. A series of missed calls flashed on screen that confused Marinette for a split second until she recognized the number.

“Shit,” Marinette swore, frantically mashing redial. “Shitshitshitshitshit... hello, Victor?! Y-Yes, I got your calls...yes, I know I was supposed to work this afternoon but I….no, it was just a family emergency! Yes my...my aunt Stefanie tripped and fell down some stairs and I had to...really?...I...I-I know I’ve missed a few shifts lately, but if you could just...is there anything I can do to...no...no, I understand...I’ll drop my apron off tomorrow...sorry…”

“...so much for my career as a barista,” Marinette sighed hanging up her phone with a sigh as her face fell into her hands. She pressed her palms into her eyes as warm, wet tears leaked down her cheeks, struggling to maintain composure as she flicked on the television.

“-scene in the park where a mob of concerned citizens have taken to the streets, dismantling Chat Noir’s statue in the park,” the reporter explained as a small mob tore into Chat Noir’s statue, dismembering it with chisels and saws and shattering his limbs with sledgehammers on the sidewalk. “Only hours after Ladybug was brazenly attacked by her former partner, Paris has moved quickly to erase the legacy of the once stalwart protector of this city, turned diabolical-”
Marinette’s finger pressed the mute button, watching the silent scene of posters, billboards, and any image of Chat Noir being torn down and burned in makeshift bonfires in the street. She watched in silence as grinning, winking images of her former partner were consumed by fire, crowds of her friends and neighbors coming out in unanimous support of Ladybug.

Marinette never knew having the whole city on her side could feel so rotten.

“What’s wrong?” Tikki asked softly from her perch on the couch next to her. “Why are you crying? The whole city is on your side. No one is going to believe that you’re working with Hawkmoth now...isn’t this is what you wanted, isn’t it?”

“This is what he wanted,” Marinette sniffed, wiping her eyes with the back of her hands. “I never wanted to make this city pick between us because I knew this was going to be the outcome...not my fault he was so eager to enlist the press.”

“Of course...you were just doing the right thing,” Tikki said, glaring up at Marinette with hard blue eyes.

“...the right...thing,” Marinette said, aimlessly staring at the mayhem taking place on the television screen. “You know...I’ve done the right thing. I think I’m pretty good at knowing what the right thing is and doing it. For four years, I’ve done nothing but the right thing; nothing but put the needs of everyone in this city over my own...and maybe that’s why I’ve been so hellbent on convincing myself that I’m doing the right thing. Because...maybe that’s all I’ve been told I can do. Maybe that’s...just what I’m good at.”

“When akuma attack during my job or my classes or my free time? I do the right thing and drop everything in order to stop them,” Marinette chuckled, shaking her head. “My...handmade birthday gift to Adrien is hijacked by his father? I do the right thing and let Adrien’s dipstick dad take the credit for it. When my classmates have a problem, I do the right thing and drop what I’m doing to help them. When mean Italian girls try and turn my friends against me with lies, I do the right thing and just let her go. When the guy I am actually in love with wants me to plan a double date for me and his new girlfriend, I do the right thing and help him out!”

“When my partner acts like being a superhero is some kind of game and shows up to every fight flirting and cracking jokes, I gently remind him that people’s lives are on the line,” Marinette rambled, shoulders shaking and tears streaming down her face. “Because that’s the right thing to do, right?! Constantly babying someone and cajoling them into doing their job no matter how frustrated you are because that’s the right thing to do! Being solely responsible for the safety of this city is the right thing! Managing a team of superheroes all by myself is the right thing! I have lived and
Marinette was all but incandescent as four years of pent up anger, frustration, and bitterness wafted off her like great waves of heat.

“I have done so much for everyone around me,” Marinette spat. “And when I ask for one thing for myself; just one simple wish that would make the life of the person I care about better, you act like I’m some kind of monster! Like nothing I’ve done up until now has earned me a little credit! Like I haven’t bled and fought and suffered for this city over and over and over again, day after day, week after week, every single month for four years!”

“So, no, Tikki,” Marinette said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hands. “No, I don’t think I’m doing the ‘right’ thing. I don’t think I’m being just or righteous or pure or selfless; I’m not going to lie and say this is objectively the right thing to do because it isn’t! But you know what? It’s the right thing for me...just once...this one time, we’re doing the right thing for me...even if I’m the only one who will...”

There were times when Tikki forgot that her charge was just scraping eighteen years old, and Marinette never looked younger than she did standing there, cheeks bruised, and shawl dropping off her shoulders like a cape. Ladybug had been stripped away, and all that remained was Marinette; tired, angry, frustrated Marinette screaming at the top of her lungs for some small bit of solace.

Sighing, Tikki floated over to Marinette, placing her little paws on the back of Marinette’s hand and gently guiding them up to her face. “Close your eyes and think about...grass growing.”

“What?” Marinette asked.

“Think about...spring,” Tikki continued. “Renewal...rebirth. Think about the warm sun and flowers blooming and baby birds hatching. Focus on creation...on life. Imagine...life flowing through your fingertips.”

Marinette did as she was told, closing her eyes and imagining the countrysides outside of Paris in full bloom. She imagined picking flowers with her mother; back when she could safely leave the city without worrying about an akuma invasion. She thought about baby birds poking out of their nests; of little baby sea turtles fighting to reach the sea. And as she thought of this, her bruised cheek started tingling; like a thousand little ants were walking across the surface.
Marinette opened her eyes, looking in the mirror to find that her formerly bruised skin had faded back to soft, pink skin and the remnants of a warm, pink light disappeared from her fingertips.

“What...did I...did you?” Marinette, pressing her fingertips into her cheek and feeling no pain. She looked down at Tikki who fixed her with a warm, almost maternal look that nearly made her heart break.

“I don’t say this to all my Ladybugs,” Tikki said, lifting a lock of black hair away from Marinette’s face. “But I think you’re my favorite. No one has partnered with me longer or more faithfully. Even now; despite all of this, you have been a good friend to Paris. You have given so much...and while I still don’t agree with you...I am with you.”

“Really?” Marinette whispered, almost afraid to believe it.

“If your plan to use Plagg and I is to succeed, you are going to need all the help you can get,” Tikki said, shaking her head. “And even if that toad of a man doesn’t deserve any happiness...Adrien does. You do. And if Plagg is going to help his chosen as much as possible...I can at least do the same for you. But...I hope you know what you’re getting into.”

“If this is about Hawkmoth, then-”

“I’m talking about Chat Noir,” Tikki said seriously. “What he did today—the fact that he could hurt you in a way that your suit couldn’t protect you from—means that he’s learning how to use his Miraculous powers more and more efficiently. Plagg is opening the doors to a whole armory of destructive power...and there is a very real danger that you might be seriously harmed unless I do something to help you.”

“I hate Hawkmoth,” Tikki said. “I hate this plan, I hate that you’re pitting me against my other half...but I love you more than I hate any of that. Now I won’t...I won’t approve of the things you do or encourage you to do them. I will never stop trying to convince you to mend things with Chat Noir...but I will heal you. And I will protect you. I don’t have grave, reality bending powers that Plagg has; I can’t make you punch harder or fight better or destroy a building...all I can do is heal. Protect...and heal.”

Tikki guided Marinette’s hand down to the bruise on her waist.

“Think of spring,” Tikki said. “Just...think of spring.”
Marinette closed her eyes as warm, pink light flowed from her fingertips, propelled by thoughts of flower fields in spring, grass shooting up out of the ground, and Adrien’s warm, gentle smile.

Chapter End Notes

I know a lot of this chapter was a full mess of expository dumping, but we gotta move this plot forward because I don't really want to get sucked into padding to meet that three month timeframe I so foolishly bragged about in the opening chapter.

I wanted to end on an emotional beat for Marinette who turns heel in the middle of a heated motive rant. I hesitate to call her a villain since I still feel like she’s acting out of a desire to do good for Adrien but she’s 100% turned heel. Full bore AJ Styles at the top of Bullet Club’s popularity. She’s not quite at the point where she’s raking eyes and hitting people with chairs, but she is definitely going to hold the tights and pull her opponents off the apron before they can tag in. I'd say on the scale of heels with one side being full chickenshit Kevin Owens and the other being diabolical sadist Minoru Suzuki, she's probably Becky Lynch back when WWE was trying to sell Becky Lynch as a hell; just kinda rude and kinda dirty fighter, but she's not putting Young Lions in chokeholds just yet.

Have I alienated my readerbase yet?

Shoutout to @ladybeug on Tumblr for the chapter name. Song link in the header is definitely reflective of both Gabriel and Marinette and the idea that things like creation, healing, and love might not be inherently good things. I’m also fully aware that I’m taking a jigsaw to canon at this point and the things I say may/may not be in line with Thomas Astruc’s story. At this point if I deviate from the canon backstory of Fu and Gabriel, I just ask that you go with it. It’s not so much that I don’t know how Fu lost the Butterfly or how Gabriel gained it...I just don’t really care for the purposes of this story.

Follow @siderealscribblings on Tumblr for updates (or if my blogs are purged in the Great Tumblr Fire, @siderealsandman on Twitter/Pillowfort)
Smoke and blood clogged Adrien’s nostrils as his spear plunged through the shield of the man in front of him.

His horses bore him forward, faster and faster as his chariot cut a bloody swathe through the crowds, black flames bellowing from his shield as he rode.

The lucky were trampled under the silvery hooves of his mares; the unlucky were pierced and burned as he turned his baleful gaze on them.

There was a flash of light, and a beautiful naked woman appeared before him, red hair wrapped around her like a robe as she held a hand up to shield a cowering archer from his wrath. His spear drove into her side as a pained, ear-splitting wail ripped through the chaos of battle all around him.

Another flash of light, and a tall, armored figure bore down on him, spear ready to cleave him in half.

To Adrien’s savage glee, he screamed louder than the woman did.

Adrien jerked awake, kicking the blanket off as he sat bolt upright. His t-shirt clung to his chest, pillow drenched with sweat as the nightmare faded from his mind.

What the hell was that? Adrien thought, looking down at his shaking hands. No stranger to nightmares, he had never woken up remembering the sensation of a spear punching through the armor with such clear distinction; as though he could still feel the weight of metal in his hands.

Sunlight streamed through his open blinds as he looked down at his ring that seemed to faintly pulse against his skin with each panicked beat of his heart.
“What the *fuck* happened to you?”

“Nice to see you too, Jules,” Luka mumbled, grabbing a packet of peas from the fridge.

“No, seriously, what the literal, actual *fuck* happened to you?” Juleka said, cereal spoon dropping back into her bowl as Luka tugged his jacket on. “You were out all weekend, you didn’t come back until, like, three last night and you come downstairs looking like a truck hit you...wait, did a truck hit you?! Is that why-”

“Hey, say that louder, I don’t think Mom heard you,” Luka hissed, tucking his ice pack against his side as he headed out the back door. “Off to work; text me what you want for dinner.”

“I’m going to group tonight so-”

The door closing behind him cut Juleka off as Luka stepped down the back steps of their townhouse, trudging down the street with his hands stuffed into his pockets. His head still throbbed from the thrashing Chat Noir had given him only a few days before and the cold November sun was just a little too bright to bear.

Luka’s fingertips, brushed over the cool metal of Duusuu’s pin as it currently sat holding his belt together around his waist. Even the simple act of walking to his job at the warehouse with a hundred other Parisians all gossiping about events they had no hand in was almost painfully mundane. He wondered if it came with the territory; the yearning to take off in flight to cover even the shortest of distances. Maybe Marinette could relate to the almost crushing sense of loss that came every time he took off Mayura’s suit; the sensation of being reduced back to the plain, ordinary person he was without all encompassing power propelling every beat of his heart.

Then again, Marinette had never been plain or ordinary.

The only satisfaction he got came from walking past newspaper stands with Chat Noir’s stupid face framed by a wanted poster and watching talking heads on televisions cry for his head on a plate. As much as Saturday’s battle had been a shitshow on par with a Van Halen reunion show, the world finally saw Chat Noir for the two-timing traitor that he was. It was only a matter of time before his luck ran out; Luka just hoped to be there when it was.

*Keep running*, Luka thought, lip unconsciously curling as a smiling, winking image of Chat Noir flashed across a nearby television screen. *That’s about all you can do, isn’t it?*
“Luka!”

Luka glanced up as a bright, uncharacteristically beaming Marinette came running down the sidewalk, weaving through crowds of Monday commuters.

“Hey, don’t you have- ow!” Luka winced as Marinette tugged him into a nearby alley. “Hey, still sore from Saturday, what are you-”

Luka trailed off as Marinette shoved her hand under his shirt, closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Okay...flowers, flowers...grass, grass...baby turtles, baby turtles…”

“Okay, starting to freak me out a little, Mari.” Luka chuckled, biting his lip as her fingertips traced the bruise on his side. After a few seconds, a warm, pink light flowed from the tips of her fingers, shining through his shirt as the pain from Chat Noir’s kick slowly started to fade under her touch. After a few seconds, Marinette pulled Luka’s shirt up so he could see the perfectly healed patch of skin where his bruise used to be.

“...could you always do that?” Luka asked as Marinette puffed up under Luka’s look of awestruck confusion.

“My kwami and I worked on it the other night,” Marinette said with a sharp smile. “Seems like anything Chat Noir can break, I can put back together again, including my partners.”

“You need to seriously reel back on the cool-factor before someone else realizes you’re Ladybug,” Luka chuckled, biting his lip as Marinette withdrew her touch from his side. “We still on for tonight?”

“Rena, Carapace, and Queen Bee all signed on so I think we’re good to go,” Marinette nodded, adjusting her backpack. “I think between the five of us, we can cover the whole city; do at least a couple sweeps before the night is over...unless you have plans.”

“I can move stuff around,” Luka shrugged. “Just need to swing by Jules’ support group to make sure she’s getting home safe.”
“Always the concerned older brother,” Marinette chuckled. “If there’s somewhere you need to be, then-”

“I’ll be there,” Luka said, lightly bumping Marinette’s shoulder with his fist. “Come on; I’m Team Ladybug’s leading man, remember?”

Marinette rolled her eyes, but the small smile that tugged at the corners of her mouth was worth mentioning it. “I owe you one,” Marinette said.

“Keep healing my bruises and I think we’ll be square,” Luka said with a small frown. “Is school out today or something?”

“Hm?” Marinette said, glancing down at her watch with a mortified look. “Shit!”

Marinette dashed out of the alleyway, pivoting around to shoot Luka an apologetic look. “I-I’ll call you later!”

“If you can,” Luka replied, fingers, touching the spot where the bruise had been only a few moments earlier. The faint touch of her skin on his had been enough to make his head swim as he stumbled out of the alley.

“Of course Marinette has a magical healing touch now,” Luka sighed, shaking his head with an almost wistful smile.

“Cutting it a little close there, aren’t you?”

The last bell tolled as Marinette slid into the seat next to Alya, sitting up straight as Mme. Mercer walked in, trying to act like she had been there the whole time.

“Overslept,” Marinette lied, pulling her calculus notebook out as Mme. Mercer started writing on the board. Her eyes drifted over to the row across from her that was empty except Nino at the far end of the bench.

“Are M. Agreste and Mme. Bourgeois not joining us today?” Mme. Mercer asked.
“Adrien has a family thing he’s gotta take care of,” Nino said, clearing his throat. “And Chloe is, uh-”

The door on the far side of the classroom opened as Chloe stepped through the door with a tired, sad smile.

“I am very sorry that I’m late, Mme. Mercer,” Chloe said, tugging a black and yellow scarf tighter around her shoulders. “I had...well...something of a rough weekend.”

“Of course, Mme. Bourgeois,” Mme. Mercer nodded with a small, sympathetic smile. “I’m sure we’re all aware of the difficulties you’ve had this weekend and we thank you for the lengths you went to to protect this city.”

“You have to be fucking kidding me,” Marinette grumbled as Alya just shook her head.

“Oh...thank you,” Chloe said, pressing a hand against her chest. “It means...so much to me that my family home wasn’t destroyed in vain.”

“Ladybug fixed it,” Marinette muttered.

“Ten hours later,” Alya shrugged.

“Still got fixed ,” Marinette said as Chloe floated down the aisle, offering their classmates a soft, serene smile as she slid into her seat next to Nino who looked on the verge of cracking up. Her eyes landed on the seat next to Chloe with a small frown as Mme. Mercer began lecturing.

Master He glanced over the rim of her clipboard as she sensed someone enter the room. “May I help you?”

A tall, blond young man lingered at the doorway, a bouquet of flowers dangling from one hand as he stared at the prone, slumbering figure of Master Fu.
“I hope so,” the young man said in accented but otherwise perfect Mandarin, placing his flowers in a vase on a nearby table. “I’m looking for my teacher.”

Master He put her clipboard down, frowning at the young man. “Was he your teacher?”

“My friend,” the young man said, meeting Master He’s eyes. “But never my teacher.”

Master He nodded slowly, glancing at the silvery ring on the young man’s finger. “So you’re still in need of a teacher?”

“I hope I’ve found one,” the young man said, holding his hand out. “Adrien Agreste.”

“Good to formally meet you,” Master He said, shaking his hand. “I think I saw your face on a bus advertisement the other day.”

“Gotta build that Gabriel brand,” Adrien chuckled, eyes drifting down to Master Fu’s sleeping face. “Is he...do you think he’s going to be-”

“He’s weathered worse than this,” Master He sighed, rubbing her eyes as she tapped an IV tube that was feeding Master Fu a thick, viscous pink liquid that seemed to be faintly glowing. “After a...certain age, it becomes more important to take one’s medicine.”

“And what age would that be?” Adrien asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Old enough to require some very unique medicine,” Master He said, looking over the rim of her glasses. “But, I take it you didn’t come here looking for a pharmaceutical lesson.”

“I was hoping you could help out with something else,” Adrien said with a sharp look. “Something more practical.”

“Nothing in this world is more practical than the study of medicine,” Master He sniffed, motioning Adrien to follow her as she crossed the room towards a narrow closet stuffed with overcoats and lumpy pillows. “The preservation of human life is the single most valuable vocation one can pursue.”
“My vocation is a little more...destructive,” Adrien said, frowning in confusion as Master He withdrew what appeared to be a smooth, black key from her coat pocket.

“Of course it is.” Master He sighed, rolling her eyes as she shut the closet door and pressed the tip of the key against the lockless doorknob. “But if you came here expecting a clear-cut path to power, I’m afraid you’re going to be disappointed.”

Adrien watched as the doorknob shimmered, bending around the key as it slid in with the sound of metal scraping on metal and locks disengaging in an almost musical way. Master He waited for a moment before turning the key, a shuddering thunk of a final deadbolt unlatching echoing from beyond the door.

“I will be with you momentarily; mind the stairs, won’t you?” Master He said as Adrien opened the door, wincing as a blinding flash of multicolored light spilled into the room. Shielding his eyes, Adrien stepped forward, heedless of Master He’s warning as his foot fell through empty space. With a yelp, he started tumbling down a set of smooth, translucent stairs, flipping end over end until he came to a stop in a pile at the bottom of an excessively long staircase.

“She did warn you about the stairs, bro,” Plagg snickered as Adrien hauled himself to his feet brushing himself off as he looked around the cavernous room he saw before him.

A field of endless, shimmering stars swirled high above his head as he stumbled further into the room. Each footstep on the featureless stone floor echoed off the smooth, black marble walls. As he walked closer, Adrien could make out intricate carvings of armored figures doing battle etched in silver. He could see Greek soldiers, Roman legionaries, and modern day army grunts all battled in an intricate tableau of destruction and chaos. Above the scene were large, towering figures, some wielding spears, others carrying swords, all staring down at Adrien with cold silver eyes that glimmered like stars.

“Plagg...where are-” Adrien stopped in his tracks as he stared up at a towering, thirty foot tall engraving of Chat Noir, baton balanced over his shoulders.

“This is the Sanctuary,” Master He’s voice called from behind him. “Or rather...it’s your sanctuary.”

Adrien turned to see Master He clad in an elegant white suit, hair held in a bun fastened with a pair of white feathers, and face concealed by a pale porcelain mask that jutted out from her nose to give her the appearance of a beak.
“Master He I presume?” Adrien asked.

“It’s Master Crane now; I thought it would be best if we were perfectly transparent with one another,” Master Crane said, offering a small nod of her head to Plagg. “Saa’aathanek, Suul’Kumath. Kar’Rothe che’theo kara u’’ana keliik.”

Without missing a beat Plagg replied, “Kel’tha aa’ranaka, Kreto tethyeas. Llemastro uu’thiinik qua keo methras.”

“Am I having a stroke?” Adrien asked, eyes glancing back and forth between Master Crane and Plagg.

“Forgive me; I get so few opportunities to practice my Primordial, I couldn’t resist greeting your friend in the Old Tongue,” Master Crane chuckled.

“You should keep practicing, Master,” Plagg snickered. “Unless you meant to say that my humble serpent welcomes me to my Sanctuary.”

“Yes...well, Duolingo doesn’t exactly have a master class on the language of spirits,” Master Crane sniffed, turning back to Adrien. “I’m sure you have questions.”

“Only a few thousand,” Adrien chuckled, glancing up at Chat Noir’s towering effigy. “Namely who I should talk to about updating my portrait...”

“Ow!” Chloe slapped Nino’s shoulder as he shepherded her out of the hallway and into an empty classroom. “Do I need to start wearing my hair up around you?!"

“What part of ‘let’s not make things worse’ was hard for you to understand?” Alya sighed, hopping off the teacher’s desk as Nino locked the door behind him.

“How am I making things worse?!” Chloe huffed.
“Oh, I’m sorry I didn’t do my homework, M. LaChance, but you see, my favorite teddy bear was so cruelly buried by Chat Noir’s thoughtless destruction of my childhood home,” Alya crooned. “How long are you gonna milk this?”

“Long as I can,” Chloe snorted. “People are being nice to me for the first time in my school life.”

“God, wonder why that could be,” Nino snorted, earning another slap from Chloe.

“Just cool it on the Chat Noir hate; we don’t need this city getting more up in arms than it needs to be,” Alya sighed.

“Says the girl who penned an article accusing him of terrorism,” Chloe said, sticking her tongue out.

“Speaking of which,” Nino said, stepping between Chloe and Alya before the situation could bubble over. “You guys got the text, right?”

“Nine tonight; Ladybug wants us to do a sweep of the city,” Alya said with a small shrug. “I don’t think Chat is gonna stick his head up though.”

“Cops all over the city are looking for him; I don’t think we’re gonna see one hair on his furry head until the New Year,” Chloe agreed.

“Might be a good chance to do some digging on Ladybug though,” Nino said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully as he looked at Alya. “She’d probably open up to you more, right?”

“She’s not being super open with us, but I guess I’ll take a shot at it,” Alya shrugged. “You want to handle Birdo? We still know nothing about this guy other than the fact that he’s got a classic rock fetish and a serious hate-boner for Chat Noir.”

“I’m sure we can get to know each other a little better,” Nino said, glancing over his shoulder. “We good on the plan?”

“Guess we got dinner plans,” Chloe nodded. “Much as I’d rather spend the evening with anyone besides Mayura.”
“I think by the time we’re done with him, the feeling will be mutual,” Nino chuckled, cracking his knuckles.

Kagami stole into the back of the room as quietly as she could, softly closing the door behind her as she entered the almost unearthly calm auditorium. A small circle of chairs was arranged in the center of the room, and plump, bearded man in his mid-50’s waved Kagami in with a warm, beaming smile.

“How Kagami,” Dr. Berger said, nodding to a seat between Ivan Bruel and Alix Kubdel. “Nice to see you again.”

“Forgive me for being late,” Kagami apologized, offering Ivan and Alix a small smile as she slipped into the cheap plastic folding chair. “Not interrupting anything, am I?”

“Not at all; Marc was just about to share something with the group,” Dr. Berger said, turning his soft, accepting smile to the nervous looking black haired boy opposite Kagami in the circle.

“Oh...no, that’s fine,” Marc chuckled, fidgeting with a loose strand of his multicolored gloves. “I was just gonna….I mean I...I don’t want to bother anyone...”

“Nothing you say here is a bother to anyone, Marc,” Dr. Berger said, accompanied by small murmurs of encouragement from the assembled group. “If you have something you’d like to share, we are more than happy to hear it.”

Marc trailed off as Nathaniel slipped a hand into his, squeezing it gently as Marc took a moment to steady himself.

“It’s just...all this Chat Noir stuff is putting me on edge again,” Marc said, chewing on his lip. “I know there hasn’t been any akuma attacks in a month now but...it’s almost scarier that Chat Noir is working for him now.”

“I know I’m certainly taking Chat Noir’s betrayal very personally,” Dr. Berger said with a small nod. “I think it’s very natural to be afraid now that one of Paris’ greatest heroes has seemingly abandoned the city.”

“Seems strange that Chat Noir would turn on this city after years of faithfully defending it, doesn’t
Kagami said, crossing her arms over her chest as all eyes turned to look at her. “The boy fights tooth and nail for every akuma victim for four years and then throws his lot in with the monster who creates them?”

Kagami watched the assembly share uneasy glances with one another. “I’m just having a hard time understanding why Chat Noir would do such a thing.”

“Yeah, well, I mean,” Kim coughed into his hand. “He was always kinda...you know...dark?”

“Yes, those homeless kitten PSA’s he did for the animal shelter were positively terrifying,” Kagami said as a smattering of nervous chuckles filtered through the auditorium. “I’m just saying I’m having trouble coming up with a reason as to why Chat Noir would turn on Paris overnight.”

“Denial is a very natural part of grief,” Dr. Berger said. “It’s hard to accept the fact that someone you trust and admire is capable of hurting you; it’s...natural to try and deny that truth for as long as possible.”

Kagami glanced around the circle. “So...all of you believe Ladybug at face value then? Despite the fact that she’s presented no evidence that Chat Noir is working with Hawkmoth?”

An uncomfortable silence filled the room as everyone shared uneasy glances with their neighbors.

“I mean, come on,” Mylene chuckled. “It’s Ladybug.”

“Yeah, Ladybug wouldn’t lie to us,” Rose said, glancing up at Juleka who said nothing, staring across the room at Kagami with a thoughtful expression. “That’s just...crazy, right?”

“We are not trying to invalidate your grief, Kagami,” Dr. Berger said diplomatically. “It’s important to remember that everyone has different reactions to trying situations.”

Kagami fought the urge to roll her eyes, just nodding as she studied the faces of the assembled support group as the session wound on. A large chunk of Adrien’s class was present along with one or two random akuma victims who drifted in and out depending on the week. She felt a little cheap coming back here after so long; like she was just using this group to work through her own trauma and offering little in return. That guilt had driven her to leave a few months back, but her curiosity demanded that she find out how Hawkmoth’s most affected victims reacted to the news.
“Thank you all for joining us today,” Dr. Berger said, snapping Kagami out of her meditative musing. “In these...trying times, it’s important to remember the value of community. Our next meeting will be next Sunday at two o’clock, but you all have my number; please don’t hesitate to call about anything.”

Dr. Berger aimed that last line at Kagami who pretended not to notice as the congregation rose with a shuffle of chairs scraping on linoleum.

A light nudge against Kagami’s shoulder drew her attention as she stood to leave. “Haven’t seen you in a bit,” Juleka said.

“Lot on my plate at the moment,” Kagami said, quietly wondering if that was the biggest understatement of the year. “School’s...keeping me busy, but I needed to come back after what happened on Saturday.”

“I hear you,” Juleka muttered, glancing at Rose who was deep in conversation with Mylene before turning back to Kagami. “Does seem...kinda odd that Chat Noir would just up and turn on Ladybug without any provocation, doesn’t it?”

“I’d be more convinced if Ladybug offered any kind of evidence to support her claim,” Kagami said.

“Right?” Juleka said, voice dropping a little as she glanced over her shoulder. “I mean...I know the whole city is ready to pull Chat Noir limb from limb but...I don’t know...it’s hard to think that that goofy guy just suddenly-”

“You good, Jules?”

Kagami turned in time to see Juleka’s older brother slide through the back doors, hair tousled from the wind.

“I gotta run somewhere, so you’re on your own for-” Luka trailed off as he spotted Kagami, face losing color and mouth falling open slightly.

“You okay?” Juleka said, glancing between Kagami and her brother. “You remember Kagami,
“Been a little while, hasn’t it?” Kagami asked with a polite smile.

“Has it?” Luka shook his head. “I-I just mean that it doesn’t seem that long since you stopped coming to these things?”

“Time certainly has a way of getting away from us,” Kagami chuckled. “Your mother, is she-”

“She’s doing better,” Luka said, nodding a little too much. “Doctors are pretty optimistic, actually.”

“That’s a relief,” Kagami sighed, offering a sympathetic smile to Juleka. “I understand things were fairly rocky for a bit.”

“Apparently everything’s in remission, so just a matter of building her strength back up,” Juleka nodded, glancing at Luka for confirmation.

“Not out of the woods by any means, but we’re pretty-”

“Luka? Everything o-” The door opened again and Kagami turned to see Marinette Dupain-Cheng take two steps into the auditorium before freezing in her tracks, staring at Kagami with the same stunned look of silence that Luka wore a few moments earlier.

“Goodness, quite a reunion, isn’t it?” Kagami said, shooting a small smile in Marinette’s direction. “How have you been, Marinette?”

Marinette shared a quick, uneasy glance with Luka before returning Kagami’s smile somewhat warily. “G-Good. Just, uh...busy with school, you know?”

“University doesn’t get any easier, I’m afraid,” Kagami said, eyes drifting between Marinette and Luka. “Adrien says that you’ve been accepted into Central Saint Martins?”

“Accepted, but I-I’m still weighing my options,” Marinette laughed, scratching the back of her neck.
“Lots of good schools out there, you know?”

“Tons,” Luka chimed in. “Not that Marinette needs much schooling, right?”

“Always something to learn,” Marinette said, teetering on her heels as though she were waiting to bolt at the first available opportunity.

“Quite,” Kagami said, glancing between Luka and Marinette. “Am I keeping you from something?”

“No!” Luka blurted out

“Yes!” Marinette blurted out at the exact same time.

“W-We were just gonna get some coffee!” Luka said

“Luka got off a long shift and we’re gonna catch up!” Marinette added.

“I’m always game for some coffee,” Juleka said, wrapping her arm around Rose’s waist as her girlfriend saddled up next to her. “Mind if we-”

“I-It’s a school night,” Luka said. “I’m sure you two have a lot of homework.”

“Marinette’s got a lot of homework,” Rose chirped. “She’s in more advanced classes than we are so-”

“Y-You’d actually be surprised,” Marinette laughed. “It’s less homework but more...uh...schoolwork.”

“Uh-huh,” Juleka said. “Look, if you two don’t want us cutting in on your date-”

“Not a date!” Marinette said, turning to Kagami with an intense look in her eyes. “Not a date; Luka
and I are not dating. Do not tell Adrien we are dating because this is definitely-”

“I think she’s got it,” Luka said somewhat tersely as Kagami’s eyes roamed over their shifty, uncomfortable looking faces. “Just...old friends catching up.”

“Of course,” Kagami said, eyes locking with Marinette’s. “Well, don’t let us keep you; have fun with your...not-date.”

“We will,” Marinette nodded, backing towards the door and towing Luka along with her by the elbow. “N-Nice to see you again!”

“Be-” Kagami blinked as they disappeared through the door. “...safe?”

“Smooth.”

“Thank you, Mme. Not-A-Date,” Luka muttered. “I didn’t expect her to be there; she threw me off.”

“She’s really good at that,” Marinette sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Come on; I’d like to get some searching in so I can get to my homework.”

“Thought you said it was more classwork than homework?”

“Seems I’m getting better at lying then,” Marinette muttered to herself as they ducked into an alley to transform.

“Okay, so...pretend for a second my former Master told me about nothing even remotely related to Miraculous secrets...and then stop pretending because that’s exactly what happened.”

Master Crane sighed through her nose as she paced around the perimeter of the enormous chamber. “When humans and kwamis first formed partnerships, we realized that we needed a place to train without causing catastrophic destruction. The best minds of the time, human and spirit, pooled their collective intelligence and came up with...this. This Sanctuary, for lack of a better term, is a place to grow and train in power; a place where the Black Cat can harness their full destructive potential without needlessly risking life to do so.”
“So it’s like some kind of...Hyperbolic Time Chamber?” Adrien asked, eyeing the carved effigies of ancient warriors with a curious frown.

“Do I look like I have any idea what that means?”

“Sorry; continue,” Adrien coughed, scratching the back of his neck.

“Each Miraculous has a designated space where time ceases to have meaning,” Master Crane continued as Adrien mouthed *Hyperbolic Time Chamber* to Plagg behind her back. “Past and present collide in this space with the goal of creating a crucible to temper the steel of the Black Cat. Discovering Ladybug or Hawkmoth’s identities will do no good if you are not strong enough to stop them.”

“Not exactly like there’s anyone we can talk to about Ladybug,” Plagg shrugged. “Besides me of course, but-”

Adrien and Master Crane turned to Plagg with identical looks of confusion.

“Plagg?” Adrien said. “Is there something you’re not telling us?”

“Yep,” Plagg nodded.

“Is it about Ladybug?” Master Crane asked.

“Mmhmm,” Plagg responded.

“Do you...know who Ladybug is?” Adrien asked.


“Why didn’t you say something sooner!!” Adrien spluttered.
“Can’t,” Plagg said simply.

“...you can’t?” Adrien said, squinting in disbelief.

“I... really wish I could help you out, but I can’t,” Plagg shrugged. “Sorry.”

Adrien stared at his kwami for a long moments, hoping that he would spontaneously develop eye laser powers and roast his kwami where he floated.

“Plagg,” Adrien said quietly. “Ladybug is hell bent on using your power to fuel her misguided Christmas gift for Hawkmoth, remember?”

“Mmhmm,” Plagg nodded.

“And we need to stop her,” Adrien said slowly.

“Yeah, we really need to get on that,” Plagg nodded.

“And it would be easier to stop her if I could bushwack her civilian persona while she was getting coffee,” Adrien said, eyebrow twitching.

“Yeah, probably-”

“So why in God’s name aren’t you telling me who she is?!” Adrien fumed.

Plagg sighed, shaking his head. “Ladybug’s true identity is-”

Plagg mouth opened, but all that came out was a deep, pained retching noise from the pits of his throat.

“Ladybug’s name is-” Plagg started gagging again, a dry, rattling cough slipping out of his mouth.
“You go to—” Plagg started retching before he could get any words out. “She lives—”

“Oh you must be kidding me,” Master Crane sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose through her mask.

“What’s happening to him?” Adrien asked, glancing between his choking kwami and Master Crane.

“Master Fu,” Plagg coughed. “Made me promise to not reveal Ladybug’s identity to you or anyone else. And I don’t think you understand how much I can’t break that promise.”

“Spirits live and die by treaties, contracts, and promises,” Master Crane said. “If Plagg swore to never reveal Ladybug’s identity, then Plagg literally can’t tell you who Ladybug is; anymore than you could turn into a chipmunk or photosynthesize at will.”

“Is there any way you can like...hint at it?” Adrien said, digging into his pocket and pulling out a crumpled up sheet of paper and pen. “Could you write it?”

“I wouldn’t waste your time,” Master Crane sighed, watching Plagg start to write out Ladybug’s name only to snap the pen and eat the wad of paper in one bite. “Master Fu has had quite a long time to figure out how to make an airtight contract that would prevent Plagg from revealing anything even if pressed. As inconvenient as it is for us, these kinds of oaths are what prevent Hawkmoth from pumping Nooroo for information.”

“Once again, Master Fu helps Ladybug more than he helps me,” Adrien muttered.

“Pouting is not part of your training regimen,” Master Crane said, eyes narrowing at Adrien through her mask. “Regrettable as it is that Master Fu has neglected your training, sulking over it will not help you now. You need to take responsibility for your own development as a Black Cat if you are to succeed in rescuing the Ladybug Miraculous.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” Adrien asked, glancing up at the stars that turned overhead. “Practice katas in outer space until I reach Super Chat Noir Level Two?”

“You certainly could, but for our purposes, I think you need a little more martial and a little less art,”
Master Crane said, producing the black key that she used to unlock the Sanctuary. “I’ll let you get acquainted with your new...training program for a while. See what you make of what the Sanctuary has to offer you.”

Adrien accepted the key with a frown as Master Crane turned, walking up the staircase and back towards the shimmering door at the top.

“Any advice?” Adrien called up after her.

“I would transform, if I were you,” Master Crane called back as she disappeared through the door.

Before Adrien could ask what she meant, a rustle of motion behind him drew his attention. The carvings of fighters on the wall started rustling as smooth, inky black shadows pulled themselves out of the obsidian surface. Four tall, lightly armored Greecian warriors stepped out of the wall, each brandishing a long silvery spear and a broad silvery shield that glowed faintly with crackling green runes.

“...hi, my name’s Adrien,” Adrien said, causing the figures’ heads to snap in his direction, their pale silver eyes glaring at him from beneath their helmets. “You guys must be part of the training program Master He talked about.”

The figures silently regarded him with curiosity as Adrien shucked his jacket and started stretching.

“Four on one is hardly a fair fight, isn't it?” Adrien said, cracking his neck. "You do know who you're dealing with, right?"

"Oh...I think I have some idea," a low, haughty voice called from the other side of the room. The phantom hoplites parted revealing a tall, lean, athletic figure striding out of the darkness and into the light of the shining stars. Unlike the other phantoms, this one appeared to be mostly human, clad in smooth black leather armor and wielding a long, silver spear that reminded Adrien a little too much of his own staff. A heavy black shield in the shape of a roaring lion's head dangled from one arm and the man's cold, glittering green eyes glared at him from the mouth of a black lion shaped helmet.

Most striking of all was the glimmering silver ring on the man's right hand; one that was identical to the trembling, pulsing ring around Adrien's own finger.
"I'm dealing with housecat that likes to play at being a predator," the figure chuckled, hand resting lazily on the haft of his spear as the hoplites circled around Adrien. 

"Black cat aesthetic and an over inflated ego?" Adrien snorted. "You must be Chat Noir."

"What I call myself is none of your concern," the figure laughed. "A mouse needn't concern himself with the name of the cat that eats him."

"I can't tell if you're threatening me or flirting with me at this point," Adrien said, glancing at Plagg who seemed to be staring at the figure with a kind of aching recognition that made Adrien's heart hurt just a little. "You know this guy?"

"Adrien," Plagg said in a hard, serious tone Adrien had never heard him use before. "You need to transform...now."

"Calm down, Plagg; this is just a training exercise, right?" Adrien chuckled. "What's the worst thing that could happen to-"

Adrien staggered backwards as the blow struck him, ears ringing as he felt something sharp, hard, and cold jam into his chest. He blinked in surprise, glancing down to see the silvery haft of the figure's spear sticking out of chest as a faint blossom started soaking his shirt. He had thrown the weapon so quickly that Adrien only realized he had been stabbed when his vision started to blur.

"...Plagg?" Adrien croaked, blood leaking out of the corner of his mouth. "What is...what's..."

"You really should have transformed, boy," the figure chuckled as Adrien sank to his knees, feebly clawing at the spear sticking out of his chest. He looked to Plagg for help, but the kwami just sighed, shaking his head as Adrien's heart feebly beat its last. "Is this really the youth of today...no honor...no valor...no soul..."

"Let's just say we got our work cut out for us, Diomedes pal," Plagg said, voice strangely distant as Adrien's vision went black.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_nV2jcTFvA

And that's all we have for Adrien's story. A character that struggled and fought against forces out of his control only to perish in a meaningless way that GRRM would just gush over.

Merry Christmas!

...okay, at the risk of spoiling myself, Adrien is not actually dead. But did you really expect the Black Cat's training regimen to be pleasant? Especially given Adrien's mythological dacestor (Shitty Homestuck Reference Count: 2) at the helm?

This was going to be a downtime chapter but I couldn't risk ending 2018 without hitting you in the gut one last time!

RE: Why Can't Kwami's Just Tell Their Wielder Who The Other Is. I hope I cleared up some confusion that I addressed in the comments of last chapter. Dark Owl is a deathbell for Enemies!AU’s so I needed to come up with a reason that prevents Tikki and Plagg from spilling the beans. So from here on out, I'm just going to ask you to accept the fact that there is no way for Tikki or Plagg to directly reveal the identity of the other person any more than Nooroo could reveal Master Fu's identity.

That said, hope everyone has a good holiday/day!
“Alright...I know the last few days have been hectic, but I think it’s important that we keep things in perspective.”

“Even though Chat Noir got away from us, we were able to work together, as a team, to shut him down and force him to flee. If anything, this just proves that Hawkmoth’s latest lackey isn’t the unstoppable force of destruction he seems to think he is. He knows that he doesn’t stand a chance of beating all five of us, so all we need to do is pin him down one more time and force him to use his Cataclysm. Once he plays that card, all we need to do is trap him and this whole shitshow will be over.”

“I know we’re asking a lot of you, but we wouldn’t do it if we didn’t think you were capable of the challenges we face. And I know that, if we work together, we can stop Hawkmoth and Chat Noir once and for all!”

Silence resonated over the rooftops as Queen Bee, Carapace, and Rena Rouge just stared at Mayura for a long, painfully uncomfortable moment.

“Yeah, uh...Ladybug usually gives the rousing speeches around here, dude,” Carapace coughed into his hand.

“I was...pretty much going to say the same thing,” Ladybug said, patting a slightly deflated looking Mayura on the arm. “Okay, let’s spread out in groups of two or three; Mayura? You’re with Queen Bee and Carapace for the evening. Take everything north of the Seine and radio in if you run into anything suspicious. Rena and I will take everything south of the Seine; meetup at Square d’Alleray around midnight if you don’t find anything.”

“Do you really think he’s going to be out here?” Queen Bee asked, raising an eyebrow. “If I blew up someone’s house, I wouldn’t be crawling the streets in the middle of the night.”
“We have to at least try and look for him,” Ladybug sighed. “God only knows what he’s up to right now…”

“Wouldn’t it be better if, uh, we went together?” Mayura asked. “I mean no offense to you two, it’s just...I’m still a little green at this and I’ve never worked with anybody other than you-”

“Perfect night to start,” Ladybug shrugged. “You guys are gonna be working close together from here on in; might as well start learning each other’s rhythms.”

“We have an uneven number anyway and seeing as how Rena is the most experienced, it makes sense to group her and Ladybug together on the two-person squad,” Carapace interjected.

“Yeah...it’s just that-”

“Relax, rookie,” Queen Been said, draping an arm over Mayura’s shoulder. “We’ll get you a nice hot cocoa to celebrate your first ass-kicking and make a night out of it, hm?”

Mayura shot Ladybug an uneasy glance. “...if you think that’s what’s best.”

“You’ll be in good hands,” Ladybug said with a reassuring smile. “Carapace and Queen Bee will take care of you, right?”

“Of course,” Carapace said, draping his arm over Mayura’s shoulder. “We’re gonna have a lot of fun, aren’t we partner ?”

“Uh…” Mayura glanced back and forth between Queen Bee and Carapace, each smiling just a little too widely for his comfort. “Sure?”

"Whatever you three do, just make sure finding Chat is a priority,” Ladybug sighed, glancing over the shadowy rooftops. "Who knows what he's doing now..."
over onto his hands and knees. His hand plunged through something cracked and brittle and as his eyes adjusted to the dim, green light, he found himself kneeling on a mountain of smooth, dry, pearly white bones illuminated by a sickly green light hanging above him. Bird skulls bounced around inside of human skulls as Adrien jerked back, sending a small avalanche of assorted bones sliding down the hill as he sat up, looking around for any sign of life.

“Plagg?” Adrien called out, staring down into the shadowy valley beneath him. Piles upon piles of broken buildings, ruined architecture, and shattered piles of rubble stretched as far as the eye could see, all heaped together and piled on top of one another in an indecipherable mess.

“Told you you should have transformed, dude,” Plagg’s voice snickered from behind him.

“Next time a crazy Greek dude wants to stab me in the chest, warn me!” Adrien said, turning around and nearly falling over as he was confronted with the sight of a skinny, fourteen year old Chat Noir reclining on top of an elephant’s skull.

“Next time a crazy Greek dude wants to stab you in the chest, dodge,” Chat Noir said in Plagg’s voice, smiling a large, impossibly toothy grin.

“...do I want to know why you look like my fourteen year old self?” Adrien asked.

“Don’t you know better than to ask why I do anything at this point?” Plagg chuckled, looking himself over appraisingly. “I was feeling nostalgic for a time when you were just a squirt with more guts than brains...which technically only ended like a month ago, but-”

“Some part of me is still hoping that someone spiked my water at the gym and this is a strange, drug induced hallucination,” Adrien sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Was getting stabbed in the chest part of your brilliant training regime?”

“...in all fairness, you were supposed to-.”

“Transform,” Adrien sighed. “Yeah...got it.”
Master He glanced at her watch, tapping her foot against the linoleum floor of Master Fu’s hospital room as she stared at the closet door.

“It’s been several hours now,” Jun said softly, replacing the vial in Master Fu’s IV device. “Shouldn’t Chat Noir have come back by now?”

“He may be receiving some...intensive training,” Master He coughed. “He has quite a bit of ground to make up so I’m sure he’s just...training a little harder than usual this first time out.”

“...or?”

“Or he’s been totally destroyed—body, mind, and spirit—and consumed by the endless black hole of energy that is the Black Cat Miraculous,” Master He sighed. “In which case, we may need to interview new Black Cat candidates.”

“So where the hell am I?”

“Where do you think things that get Cataclysmed go?” Plagg chuckled, twirling Chat Noir’s baton between his fingertips as Adrien passed through a small glade of petrified trees, long dead leaves crunching under their feet as they walked. “Everybody’s got a garbage can; this just happens to be mine.”

“Explains the smell,” Adrien said, wrinkling his nose as a dry breeze intensified the general smell of decay that infested the air around them. “Lovely as your backyard is, I was kinda hoping to get out of here before Achilles stabs me in the chest again.”

“Ooh, do not say the A-word around Diomedes,” Plagg said with a wince. “Always rankled him that Achilles got most of the credit for winning the Trojan war. He spent the better part of ten years pouting in a tent when we were out killing men by the literal boatload, and who does everyone remember?”

“To be fair, he didn’t come up with the horse idea.”
“To be fair, Odysseus didn’t stab two gods in under half an hour,” Plagg countered. “Underworld has a whole city full of the people Diomedes killed and most people just draw blanks when you mention him.”

“You got a type, don’t you?” Adrien chuckled. “Are all Black Cats destructive rich kids with fragile egos?”

“They tend to take to the power of Destruction the easiest,” Plagg said with an almost wistful smile. “He was your age when we pulled down the walls of Thebes together; not much older when we started cutting through Princes of Troy like they were watermelons.”

“Arson, murder, and destruction of property?” Adrien muttered. “Sounds like a peach of a guy.”

“You get used to him,” Plagg said, draping an arm over Adrien’s shoulder as the glen gave way to a wide, barren field littered with broken chariots, bent spears, and shattered shields. “He was one of the better kittens I’ve had so naturally I thought he could give you some pointers.”

“Did one of those pointers need to be the point of a spear?” Adrien asked, touching the bare, unblemished patch of skin on his chest where the spear had pierced him.

“Oh don’t be such a party pooper,” Plagg huffed. “Death is a slap on the wrist over here; it’s not unusual for Black Cats to die a couple hundred times while training.”

“I knew I should have swapped with Ladybug a while ago,” Adrien muttered as they approached the high, ruined walls of an ancient looking city.

“You and I both know you’re not giving up the black ensemble for anything in the world,” Plagg chuckled, tugging at Adrien’s cheek as he stepped through a gaping hole in the wall. “Ahh, Troy. Been a long time since a city has been properly sacked like this one. Bombs and cannonfire just lack that personal touch, you know?”

“Is this little walk through Chat Noir’s Greatest Hits leading me back to the entrance?” Adrien asked, feeling around in his pockets. “Did you happen to see the key that Master He gave me?”

“Uh...ha...a-about that,” Plagg chuckled, scratching the back of his head. “You see-”
A pearly metallic clink drew Adrien and Plagg’s attention down a ruined street towards an open city square. A tall wooden horse stood forgotten at the far corner of the square, and at the foot of it, a tall, dark figure held the black metal key aloft on one hand, clinking it against his shield as it swung from a leather strap.

“Drop something?” Diomedes called, voice echoing down the empty streets.

“...okay,” Plagg said, holding his hands up. “But in my defense—”

“Claws out!” Adrien hissed, watching a rush of dark power flow out of his ring and surround him. He felt Chat Noir’s suit settle over him with a familiar rush of energy even as Plagg’s strange new body didn’t seem to dissipate. Chat Noir’s gloved hand rose to pluck the spear Diomedes threw at him out of the air, spinning it around and leveling it at him with an icy glare.

“Looks like someone’s learning their lesson,” Diomedes chuckled. “You may not be as thickheaded as I originally took you for.”

“Let me assure you, he is absolutely as thickheaded as you think he is,” Plagg said.

“So are you like Ladybug’s boyfriend or something?”

The jet of hot chocolate that spurted out of Mayura’s nose was the only confirmation that Queen Bee needed.

“B-Boyfriend?” Mayura spluttered, laughing weakly as he glanced between Queen Bee and Carapace. “Wh-What makes you think I’m her boyfriend?”

“Stab in the dark,” Carapace shrugged. “You two seem pretty close; close enough for her to trust you with Chat Noir’s job after they split up anyway.”
“She went to you before she went to any of us,” Queen Bee said, leaning against the railing of the rooftop. “So we figured you two were-”

“No,” Mayura said quickly, shaking his head. “No we’re...just friends. I mean...I don’t even think Ladybug would have time for a boyfriend, right?”

Carapace shared a look with Queen Bee behind Mayura’s back.

“She had one,” Carapace said. “For a while, right?”

“She told you about that?” Mayura asked. “I thought...she would be pretty tight lipped about that kind of thing.”

“She wasn’t specific, but she told Chat there was a guy in her life a while back,” Carapace said casually, leaning on Mayura’s other side. “Think it lasted, what, a year or so?”

“Little longer than it should have, according to her,” Queen Bee snorted.

“...I see,” Mayura said, feathers rustling as he stared down into the city lights below. “Can’t imagine anyone would breakup with Ladybug though.”

“She broke it off with him, according to Rena,” Carapace shrugged, glancing at Mayura’s expression. “Guess she liked the guy just fine...just never fully loved him like he loved her, I guess. Better off as friends, in her opinion.”

“Kind of a shumck, if you ask me,” Queen Bee snorted. “If Ladybug wanted to break up with me I wouldn’t have let her go without a fight.”

“Maybe he was trying to respect her feelings,” Mayura muttered. “Isn’t that important?”

“Sure, but-”
“We should probably keep going,” Mayura said a little too hastily, dumping out the rest of his cocoa and leaping up on the edge of the roof. “Lots of ground to cover, you know?”

With a flutter of feathers, Mayura took off, gliding across the street as Carapace and Queen Bee watched him for a moment.

“Came on a touch strong there, Queenie,” Carapace sighed.

“I thought we were trying to get answers out of him,” Queen Bee huffed, pulling out a black and yellow notebook and scribbling *Ladybug’s Boyfriend???”* on the front page. “At least we’re getting some answers out of him.”

A cold, dusty wind blew through the streets of the ruined city as Chat Noir stared across the courtyard at Diomedes and the skeletal, hollow-looking soldiers that seemed to melt out of the shadows that stretched out of every ruined building. They shambled forward with janky, uneven steps, hollow green eyes staring daggers at Chat Noir and Plagg as they converged.

“Friends of yours?” Chat Noir asked, twirling Diomedes’ spear between his hands.

“Seem to be the bodies of unfortunate wretches that ran afoul of a Cataclysm,” Diomedes said, twirling the black key by its lanyard as his eyes slowly swept the courtyard. “I’ve never seen them in such numbers before...the two of us here must’ve called them out of their holes; drawn to the power that slew them in the first place.”

“They’re not with you?” Chat Noir asked, glancing over his shoulder as shadowy archers stumbled out of a house behind him.

“I thought they were your revenge for that little knick I gave you earlier,” Diomedes chuckled, stepping away from the Trojan horse as the circle of soldiers closed around them. “Plagg must’ve risen them to give you some target practice but he seems to have overdone things, haven’t they?”

“You call a spear in the chest a knick?” Chat Noir snorted.
“You live, don’t you?” Diomedes sniffed, eyeing Plagg’s form with suspicion. “I would ask why you’ve taken to dressing like a feline fool, but I know better than to question your insanity by this point.”

“Oh like you didn’t pick that lion shaped helmet yourself,” Plagg said, sticking his tongue out as Chat Noir backed up against the encroaching hoard, dancing out of the way of a haphazardly fired arrow that shattered on the cobblestones at his feet.

“Okay, okay, we’re all weird furries here,” Chat Noir said, raising the spear in a defensive stance in front of his face. “You gonna give me my key back, Percy Jackson, or am I gonna have to take it from you?”

“That was my original plan, but these creatures seem to have other ideas for us,” Diomedes chuckled, raising his lion-head shield in front of him. “Up for a little sport?”

“My idea of sport has a lower body count.”

“You were right about this one, Plagg; all talk and no teeth.”

“You gossiped about me?!” Chat Noir snapped.

“Kids, kids, please, I love you both equally,” Plagg chuckled, raising his baton in front of his face as he backed into Chat Noir and Diomedes’ back. “Can we talk about this after you two re-kill these guys? Keeping Adrien from dying takes a lot out of me so if we could keep the kid alive-”

“Hey, I can handle myself!” Chat Noir insisted.

“The spear-wound in your chest begs to differ,” Diomedes sniffed as dozens of phantom Trojans poured out of neighboring alleys in a steady, consistent stream of wobbling wrecks all bearing down on them with single minded malice in their eyes. “Can’t talk your way out of this one, boy.”

“You’ve never heard me talk before,” Chat Noir said, batting another arrow aside with the haft of the spear. "Though these guys seem saltier than usual."

“They’re miffed that someone ripped their bodies apart with magic,” Plagg said, shooting Diomedes
a dirty look. “They’re pissed at you, not Adrien!”

“It was war; at least I granted them a painless death,” Diomedes muttered, head ducking behind his shield. “A courtesy I won’t extend a second time!”

The smell of spice and charcoal filled the air as a gout of black and green fire erupted from the mouth of Diomedes’ shield, arcing out and engulfing the encroaching wall of soldiers as they struggled to raise their shields in time. Faint, disembodied screams filled the air as the fire washed over them, leaving cinders and blackened weaponry in its wake. The blistering heat prickled Chat Noir’s exposed skin as he took a step backwards, getting behind Diomedes as he swept the flaming arc over the crowd.

“And here I thought I was the most needlessly dramatic Black Cat,” Chat Noir sighed as the wall of dead soldiers charged as one.

“Trust me, you’re not even in the top ten,” Plagg snickered, ducking out of the way of an arrow shot and braining a charging soldier in the face with the staff. “When you’ve burned down a city in a fit of anger you can talk.”

“One time that happened!” Diomedes snapped, catching a sword strike in his shield’s mouth and melting it in another wave of flame.

“Troy, Corinth, Olynthus, Sybaris, Thebes-”

“Thebes had it coming!” Diomedes roared, lion’s shield expelling another gout of flame into his attacker’s face.

“Next time Ladybug says I’m immature, I’m introducing her to you,” Chat Noir muttered, deflecting an arrow attack with the haft of the spear. “After I take her Miraculous!”

“Are you at odds with that black and red spotted witch?” Diomedes laughed, braining an oncoming soldier with the thin end of his shield and sending them crumbling to dust at his feet. “Marvelous; Plagg wouldn’t let me throttle that Amazon Ladybug in my day!”

“Suffice to say, you aren’t the first Cat to have Lady problems,” Plagg muttered as Chat Noir ducked under a spear strike, kicking his attacker hard in the chest and sending them tumbling away. “I
thought he'd be the most sympathetic?"

“Just to be clear, I’m not looking to throttle Ladybug!” Chat Noir grunted, hurling his spear through the chest of an archer that dissolved as though it were made of ash.

“Then you’ve already lost,” Diomedes grunted, loosing another blast of fire from his shield that engulfed another dozen soldiers. “Victory goes to the warrior who perfectly embodies killer instinct and you, dear boy, do not strike me as a killer.”

“You know, that’s the nicest thing you’ve said to me all day!” Chat Noir chuckled, ducking out of the way of a sword strike and uppercutting a phantom soldier’s head clean off its shoulders as another rose to take its place. “God, how many of these guys are there?”

“How many people did you end up killing again?” Plagg asked.

“Eight thousand, six hundred, and thirty two,” Diomedes said somewhat proudly, punching another soldier clean in half with his shield. “Not counting deer, horses, elephants, lions-”

A distant roar caught their attention from the far side of the mob.

“...and if we’re counting lions?!”

“Been awhile since we had just a girl’s night, hasn’t it?”

“Mm,” Ladybug grunted non-committedly, eyes scanning the horizon for any motion of black on the rooftops.

“Heh...who would have known that Chat Noir needed to turn evil for us to finally do a solo patrol, huh?” Rena chuckled.

“Yeah...weird how that worked out,” Ladybug said, voice distant and detached as she fruitlessly searched for any sign of her former partner. Silence lingered in the cold night air for several long,
painful moments as Rena studied the face of someone she had fought alongside since she was a girl; someone who toed the line between idol and comrade. Even though she was technically still under suspicion, Rena wasn’t blind to the way Ladybug’s posture seemed a little tighter than usual; as though she were a spring one wind away from splintering under the pressure.

She had never seen Ladybug looking anything less than perfectly polished and at the top of her game and even the smallest visual cracks in her armor made Rena’s stomach turn.

“Look…” Ladybug tensed a little as Rena laid a hand on her shoulder. “I know I’m just a part-time hero and I know I wasn’t as close to Chat as you were, but...I just want you to know that I know what you’re going through. We all trusted Chat and he let us all down. He was our partner and...well, I can understand if you’re feeling a little wonky about all of this still.”

Ladybug nodded, fingers running over the splintered cracks in the yo-yo Chat Noir had destroyed. The fact that Tikki’s power had been insufficient to completely erase the damage he had done worried her; a testament to the fact that there were some wounds that were still beyond her healing abilities.

“I…” Ladybug swallowed, laying a hand on Rena’s with a small squeeze. “...I’m glad you’re on my side, Alya. I don’t think I could do this if you weren’t on my side.”

Rena offered Ladybug the warmest smile she could, hoping some of it would melt the wall of silence that Ladybug had built up around her.

“You know you can talk to me about anything...right?” Rena said, squeezing Ladybug’s shoulder. “Anytime you need a friendly ear, I’m here for you, m’kay?”

“Thanks,” Ladybug muttered, returning Rena’s smile somewhat unsteadily as she cracked open her communicator to check on the time. “We should probably call Carapace and see how they’re getting on.”

Ladybug’s fingers scrolled through the scant list of heroes on her communicator’s roster, pausing as she noticed a bright green light next to Chat Noir’s name.

Glancing at Rena out of the corner of her eye, Ladybug bit her lip, typing out a quick message and hitting send before she could talk herself out of it.
Ladybug: Are you there?

Chat Noir’s communicator buzzed on his waist as he drove his foot through another shadowy soldier’s head, dispelling it with a grunt as another soldier took a swipe at his shoulder. He smashed his spear haft into another’s stomach, turned around and skewered another through the eye socket, dodging out of the way of an arrow attack, and narrowly avoided a javelin tossed at his head.

“Keep the pressure up!” Diomedes roared, green flames swirling around his hands as he clapped his palms around a phantom soldier’s head, immolating it and sending it to the ground with a pained scream. The body of the soldier disappeared, but the flames lingered, floating to the ground like leaves on the wind and burning even though there wasn’t anything to consume. The battlefield was awash in flickering green light as great patches of flame sent beads of sweat running down Chat Noir’s neck.

Chat Noir howled in pain as a sword strike glanced off his shoulder. Anger, fear, and frustration started to bubble up inside him, erupting from his mouth in a pained scream as the flames around him seemed to grow in intensity. He was deaf to the roaring of the flames as he lashed out with his claw, driving through the attacking soldier’s breastplate as green and black flames suddenly erupted from the wound. The soldier screamed in pain, flames spewing from his mouth in an emerald jet as he fell to the ground, disintegrating into cinders in front of him.

“That’s new…” Chat Noir muttered, gazing down at his claw still wreathed in green and black fire as a low snarl came from behind him. He ducked in time for the wispy, emaciated lion to sail over his head, taking out a small cadre of soldiers before turning and rounding on him. Its hollow, glowing green eyes glared daggers at Chat Noir as it charged, a distant roar echoing out of its mouth as it ran. Chat grit his teeth, hefting the spear and throwing it as hard as he could into the lion’s open mouth.

The silvery spear cleaved the lion in half as it passed through it, catching fire and sailing through the last remaining archer’s head and exploding in a small fireball that quickly ate through the last remaining soldiers. A brilliant, green light ended the battle and left the three Black Cats standing alone among the flaming wreckage.

“Not bad,” Diomedes chuckled. “Almost as fun as it was to kill them the first time...how many did you bag?”

“Didn’t count,” Chat Noir muttered, staring at the flames dancing around his fingers. “How do you turn this off?”
“You turned it on; figure it out,” Plagg shrugged.

“Helpful as ever, aren’t you?” Diomedes chuckled weakly as Chat Noir stared at the flames around him.

“Green Flame differs between Black Cats,” Plagg huffed. “Diomedes liked to shoot fireballs out of his shield and helmet. Adrien seems to have taken a more hands-on approach; whatever mnemonic device he thinks will work will-”

Chat Noir raised a flaming hand, concentrated on it for a moment, then extinguished it with a snap of his fingers.

“There you go,” Plagg said, golf-claps echoing off the walls of the city. “One flaming kitten, ready to go.”

“Couldn’t have just told me how to do it, could you?” Chat sighed, snapping his fingers and illuminating his hand in green flame again. “You had to have me murdered and dragged to the city of Troy to fight a legion of hellspawn with a psycho for backup, didn’t you?”

“Yes!” Plagg chirped cheerfully.

“Our power is not won without struggle,” Diomedes said, crossing his arms across his chest. “To know Destruction, one must destroy and be destroyed.”

“That was deep; did you get that from a fortune cookie?” Chat Noir sighed, wrenching the still flaming spear out of the wall and snapping his fingers to put it out. “Not exactly the Spartan type so you’ll forgive me if I’m not exactly jazzed about spending my night fighting all the unfortunate chumps you ended back in Greece.”

“For someone who isn’t the Spartan type, you took to my spear well enough,” Diomedes countered.

“It’s just a staff with a pointy end,” Plagg snickered, as Chat Noir offered the spear to Diomedes haft first. “Not that hard to use.”
“Minute to learn; lifetime to master,” Diomedes said, accepting the spear from Chat Noir and twirling it around in his hands. “And yet this staff with a pointy end spilled the blood of Ares. I doubt there’s anything in this world that it cannot pierce…”

Diomedes pressed a small emerald in the middle of his spear. With a faint click, the spear shrunk in on itself, collapsing until it was a little more than a foot and a half long. He looked at it almost fondly for a long moment before he snapped into action again, whipping it at Chat Noir faster than he could react. The glimmering silver tip sank into his chest, but to his surprise, there was no pain like there was last time. The short-spear simply passed through his body as a weight settled on his back.

“I don’t exactly have much use for it anymore, seeing as how the afterlife is so tediously pleasant, ” Diomedes sighed as Chat Noir reached back to feel the spear hanging from a holster across his costumed back. “And I’m glad to lend my support to anyone who opposes that witch of life, so I’m happy to hand it over to you. Cut her treacherous heart out and roast it on the flames of your own fury. Should make for a fine treat to celebrate your victory”

“Okay, listen pal,” Chat Noir sighed, closing his eyes to still the pounding headache in his skull. “There will be no heart cutting, no heart roasting, and certainly no heart-

Chat Noir opened his eyes to find Diomedes gone, the city gone, and himself standing in the Sanctuary where Diomedes had stabbed him.

“...eating?” Chat Noir said, eyes sweeping the empty Sanctuary, looking up at the tall, carved effigy of Diomedes staring down at him.

“...that was weird,” Chat Noir muttered, snapping his fingers and illuminating the dark room with crackling green flame. He reached back, retrieving two smooth metal staffs that were crossed across his back, duplicates of his original weapon/communicator that rested on his right hip. Frowning, Adrien pushed the buttons in the middle of each staff, flinching as a bright, glittering spearhead materialized on the end of either of them.

“Not that I’m not a sucker for medieval weaponry, but I don’t see how this is supposed to help me stop Ladybug without putting a hole in her chest,” Chat sighed.

“Nobody said this was gonna be easy,” Plagg said, floating out from behind his ear in his usual cat form with the black key dangling between his teeth. “My whole schtick is causing death, destruction, and decay on astronomical levels; you are trying to fight without too much collateral damage. As
much as Kagami and Master He poke at you for blowing up the mayor’s house, that’s what we do, Adrien. We destroy things.”

“So I should just shank Ladybug the next time I see her?” Chat Noir growled, flinging both of his spears across the room with a sigh. “Destroy her and pick the Ladybug Miraculous out of the ash pile?”

“Oh gods no,” Plagg said. “I’m not saying restraint is a bad thing: Diomedes was a great Black Cat but he was a pretty rotten person, if you couldn’t tell. Guy took a little too well to the power to destroy anything his heart desired. You have the power to destroy the city with a flick of your wrist, but that doesn’t mean you should. Things would be a lot easier for you if you stopped holding back and stopped caring about who you hurt.”

“That wouldn’t be right though,” Chat Noir countered.

“That wouldn’t,” Plagg agreed.

“For all Ladybug’s done, she doesn’t deserve to be destroyed by me,” Chat Noir sighed, looking down at his hands. “But destruction is all I got, huh?”

“Lucky you got a brain between those ears, huh?” Plagg snickered, rubbing the top of Adrien’s head. “If anyone can find a way to make wanton chaos and destruction non-lethal, it’s you.”

“Don’t suppose anyone else has some less destructive tricks, do they?” Chat asked, eyes passing over the rows and rows of Black Cats that came before him.

“See how you do with the new kit and we can talk about getting you a less intense mentor,” Plagg said, patting Chat Noir on the head.

“I’m beginning to think this whole place is crazy,” Chat Noir muttered. “Especially seeing as how you don’t seem to disappear when I transform.”

“Yeah, I can kinda do whatever I want in here and nobody can really stop me,” Plagg chuckled, smiling a wide, toothy grin at Chat Noir. “Want to fight ninjas riding a giant t-rex? I can make that happen for you. Want to use undead Nazis as target practice for your fireballs? Say the word and we can light em up! We’re here to make you a better, leaner, more capable Chat Noir, but that doesn’t
mean we can’t have some fun along the way.”

“Was that fun?” Chat Noir snorted.

“You didn’t think fighting undead elephants in the ruined city of Troy was fun?” Plagg said, tilting his head to one side. “Do I even know you anymore?”

“Did you ever?”

“Anything from your end?”

“Nothing but some rubbernecking tourists at the cafe,” Queen Bee sighed, slurping the last of her iced coffee in one long noisy slurp. “We got some cute selfies for the Instagram account, but other than that, no sign of Tall Dark and Furry.”

“Nothing on our end either,” Ladybug sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “I mean...it was a long shot anyway. We’ll just have to keep at it; maybe patrol once a week to keep our presence out there.”

“Might be a good idea to do smaller patrols too,” Rena added, glancing at Mayura. “If we expose our newest member without a full squad to protect him, Chat might pounce on him like he did last time.”

“He got lucky last time,” Mayura bristled. “He’s not gonna catch me flat-footed again.”

“Chat doesn’t get lucky,” Queen Bee snickered. “Unless you have shittier luck than he does, I think he’s just better than you, bluebird.”

“Hey, who’s side are you on?” Mayura snapped, rounding on Queen Bee with an unusually sharp glare.

“Don’t get your tailfeathers twisted, honey,” Queen Bee sniffed. “I’m just stating facts; Chat Noir’s got miles more experience than you do. Everytime you two go head to head, you get stomped on.”
“Well maybe I wouldn’t get stomped on if we spent more time training instead of posing for pictures!”

“Hey, I am building connections with the people we protect!” Queen Bee snapped, poking Mayura in the middle of his chest. “The people of this city need to be reassured that their heroes are still out there defending them!”

“Oh yeah, the people of Paris really need to see Queen Bee making duck-lips with her Starbucks order!” Mayura barked, swatting Queen Bee’s finger away. “Real morale boost that is!”

“Enough!” Ladybug and Rena snapped at the same time, glancing at each other as Ladybug put a hand on Mayura’s shoulder.

“Look...we’ve had a rough couple of days,” Ladybug said diplomatically as Rena pulled Queen Bee back a little. “Maybe we should take five and train a little; get Mayura caught up to the rest of us.”

“Gonna take more than five,” Queen Bee muttered under her breath, earning a sharp glare from Mayura.

“Only a matter of time before Chat makes his presence known again,” Rena said, glancing at Ladybug.

“If he survived a city block falling on his head, that is,” Mayura said, crossing his arms. “How do we know he’s even still alive.”

“He’s alive,” Ladybug said quickly, avoiding Mayura’s questioning gaze. “He’s just...lying low. Won’t be long before he sticks his head up again.”

Ladybug’s fingers brushed across her communicator subconsciously as she shot her team what she hoped was a confident smile. “Good first patrol, everyone. We’ll be in touch for some training exercises soon but for now, lay low and keep an eye out for our friend in black.”

“Sounds good,” Carapace said, backing towards the edge of the roof. “Man...iced coffee would hit the spot right now.”
“I could go for another,” Queen Bee said, glancing at Rena. “Anyone else want to come?”

“I’m good,” Mayura said quickly. “I got…family stuff I should be doing.”

“I’m gonna clear my head,” Ladybug said, jerking her thumb over her shoulder. “Swing around town for a bit. Thanks for the invite though.”

“I won’t say no to free coffee,” Rena said, bumping Queen Bee in the shoulder as the three of them headed towards the rooftop.

“Wait, I’m buying?!” Queen Bee squeaked.

“You can afford it,” Carapace chuckled as they dove off the rooftop, swinging over the rooftops and into the cold evening. Ladybug stood next to Mayura for a moment, watching them go before turning to leave.

“Hey,” Mayura said as she got ready to swing off the rooftop. She turned around to see him scratching the back of his head, feet shifting as he seemed to be searching for the right words to say.

“Something wrong?” Ladybug asked.

Mayura opened his mouth a few times before trailing off with a shaky laugh. “You know what, never mind.”

“You sure?” Ladybug asked, head tilting to one side. “You've been acting kind of…angry lately.”

"I get angry when people I care about get hurt," Mayura said, heading towards the edge of the roof. “I gotta go check up on Mom; let me know when you have some time to spar with me a little.”

Before Ladybug could follow up, Mayura leapt off the rooftop, gliding down through the streets and out of sight. She thought of following him for a moment, stepping to the edge of the roof as she palmed her communicator in one hand.
Chat Noir’s notification light shone green up at her, her message from before unanswered even if she was sure he had seen it. She sat down on the edge of the roof, biting her lip as she typed out another response.

Ladybug: I looked for you all night

Ladybug: I wondered if you were out and about like you usually were…

Ladybug: Didn’t seem to be in any of your favorite spots.

Ladybug: Almost wanted to see if leaving any croissants as bait would work.

Chat Noir sat with his back pressed up against the obsidian wall of the Sanctuary, watching Ladybug’s messages scroll past on his screen with little pings that echoed across the smooth, featureless black stone.

Ladybug: I patrolled with everyone for the first time today.

Ladybug: Everybody gave it their all but…just not the same, you know?

*Of course it’s not the same,* Chat Noir thought, chewing on his lower lip as Ladybug continued to type.

Ladybug: I don’t know what you’re doing.

Ladybug: Or if you’re even still alive.
Ladybug: Though I guess a building falling on your head wouldn’t be enough to do you in, huh?”

Silence. Nothing but the blinking red letters on her communicator screen looked back at her.

Ladybug: I just...I just need to know you're okay.

Ladybug: In spite of everything, I

Ladybug stared at the communicator, desperately trying to complete the sentence that hung unfinished on the screen.

Ladybug: In spite of everything, I still care about you.

Chat Noir: you got a real funny way of showing it

His reply nearly knocked her off the roof as she read it, scrambling to keep her footing as she stared down at the black text floating on the screen.

Ladybug: Police are still looking for you.

Ladybug: Mayor Andre is calling in a special task force to take you in.

Chat Noir: five superheroes, one super villain, and the whole damn country against me, huh?

Chat Noir: guess i should feel honored

Chat Noir: though your press conference probably helped my "popularity"

Ladybug: And the small fact that you destroyed a building
Chat Noir: you fixed it, didn’t you?

Chat Noir: you fix your boyfriend's broken nose too?

Ladybug: He's not my boyfriend, but any bruises you left behind, I healed.

Chat Noir: wow, you're talented

Chat Noir: seems to me the only one who lost something permanently is me, huh?

Ladybug sighed through her teeth, gazing down at the park where Ladybug’s statue stood alone next to a broken pedestal where her partner’s effigy once stood.

Ladybug: I can still fix this if you give me a chance.

Ladybug: We're not too far gone, Chat.

Chat Noir: the Parisian mob clearly disagrees

Ladybug: We can come up with a story to make them trust you again.

Ladybug: If we work together, we can still put this behind us.

Chat Noir snorted, shaking his head as he gazed up at the dozens of Black Cat carvings that surrounded him.

Chat Noir: you’d like that, wouldn’t you?
Chat Noir: quietly fix everything before people find out the truth?

Chat Noir: before rena and the others learn you're lying to them

Chat Noir: well

Chat Noir: i’m not interested in fixing anything anymore

Chat Noir: see

Chat Noir: i just spent my day getting fireballs shot at me and fighting the legions of hell that my kwami raised just for me to practice on

Ladybug: What????

Chat Noir: and if i’ve learned anything from my psychotic tutor it’s that

Chat Noir: sometimes, peace isn’t the answer

Chat Noir: sometimes, the only way to cure an infection is to burn it out at its source

Ladybug: Even if it means burning me too?

Ladybug watched the screen for a long, tense moment as the question hung in the air between them.

Across the city and in another dimension, Chat Noir did the same thing, scowling down at the keypad as he struggled to come up with a response.
Chat Noir: fire doesn't care about what it destroys

Chat Noir: anything that's too close to the blaze is likely to get burned up as well

Ladybug: Is that a threat?

Chat Noir: no; that's simple physics

Ladybug watched Chat's communicator blink off, leaving her alone with her thoughts as the first drop of a cold autumn storm landed on her head.

Chapter End Notes

Happy 2019!

I know I threw a lot of lore at your faces so feel free to speak up if things get confusing. I wanted to introduce the Sanctuary here so I could have Adrien passively working on his Chat Noir skills while more character driven stories are happening in the foreground. Still have to flesh out Luka's situation a little bit better so next chapter may focus on the side characters a little bit more.

As some of you correctly guessed, Diomedes is the Greecian hero Homer wrote about and incidentally the flamethrower shield was Homer's idea, not mine! Even ancient Greeks could appreciate the beauty of big fuck-off fireballs shot from badass shields.
“Someone’s been busy.”

Kagami stepped back from the corkboard, tying one last red string around a pin stuck in the center of Hawkmoth’s police sketch. The wall of Kagami’s office had transformed into a red web of connected images, each akuma victim staring down at Adrien as he set his coat down on a nearby chair.

“I was thinking about what you said the other day,” Kagami said, running a hand through her hair and taking a sip of her cold tea with a grimace. “Ladybug isn’t the enemy we need to be focusing on; defeating Ladybug doesn’t solve the Hawkmoth problem—”

“Only defeating Hawkmoth does,” Adrien said, folding his arms over his chest as his eyes roamed over the faces of friends, loved ones, and complete strangers Hawkmoth had ensnared in his web over the years. His best friend, his classmates, even his own father had fallen prey to Hawkmoth’s single minded pursuit of the ring around his finger. Seeing hundreds of victims, all laid out in a web of lies only stoked the glowing coals of anger that flickered almost constantly these days.

“Ladybug’s still the best lead we have, unfortunately,” Adrien sighed. “We have to count on her making a mistake and letting something slip to Rena or the others.”

“About that,” Kagami said, glancing at Adrien out of the corner of her eye. “Isn’t there an ally we haven’t reached out to yet?”

“You’re talking about Chloe,” Adrien said with a tight smile.

“I’m just wondering why you haven’t reached out to Queen Bee yet,” Kagami said. “It would seem that she’d be the most...enthusiastic supporter if she found out that you were Chat Noir.”

“She’s working very close to Hawkmoth’s lackeys right now; that’s not information I want to put in his reach,” Adrien said. “If Rena’s right and the others are working with her to expose the truth, she’s already doing as much as she can for me without risking her or my safety.”
“That’s...surprisingly well thought out,” Kagami said, raising an eyebrow.

“Believe me; if I could pull someone else in, I would,” Adrien said, leaning on the table as he stared up at the red, tangled web above him. “But for now, it looks like it’s you and me against the world.”

“A- hem.”

Plagg glared up at him from the table, hands on his hips and cheeks bulging with stuffed Camembert.

“You, me, and a cheese addicted cat against the world,” Kagami chuckled. “That might just be enough.”

"It's gonna have to be," Adrien said, leaning on the back of a chair as he looked up at the web of Hawkmoth's victims. "Okay...where do we start?"

“Hey, Marco?”

Luka hovered in the doorway of his manager’s office, hands wringing the corner of his apron as he rocked back and forth on the heels of his shoes.

“Can I ask about that checker position you put out today?” Luka asked.

“Think you just did,” Marco chuckled. “You know that would be kind of a step down from backroom, right?”

“Not for me,” Luka said, scratching the back of his head. “See...my friend needs a job and I was wondering if there was anything I could do to put a good word in for her.”

“Is this friend like the last friend you put a good word in for?” Marco asked, narrowing his eyes. “Because I just got the smell out of the employee lounge and-”
“No, no, no!” Luka said, holding his hands up. “No, she’s nothing like Leo; she’s super sharp, really dependable, no interest in magic cigarettes...also going off to college next year and really needs some cash.”

“I bet,” Marco said, rubbing his stubbled chin thoughtfully. “But after the last guy you recommended-”

“I’ll take the after-closing shift for the next month if you push her application to the front of the line,” Luka said quickly, smirking as he saw Marco’s eyebrows clear his glasses frames. "Me and Simon will handle everything."

“Well, if you feel that strongly about it, I suppose I can help you out,” Marco sighed. “But I’m gonna hold you to that promise.”

“You won’t regret this!” Luka promised, tapping twice on the doorframe as he headed towards the back with a little spring in his step.

“That was very gallant of you,” Duusuu whispered in his ear as he stepped into the cool, refrigerated section at the back of the store.

“Just helping out a friend,” Luka muttered, grunting as he lifted a cardboard box onto the table and started unloading it. The thought of handling closing shifts every day for the next month made his stomach turn a little, but it would be worth it if it meant helping Marinette achieve her dreams.

Dreams that no longer included him.

Rena Rouge: You good?

Chat Noir: just peachy, thanks for checking in

Chat Noir: thanks also for those patrol details you sent
Chat Noir: i was occupied at the time but good to know when people are looking for me

Rena Rouge: Whole city is looking for you.

Rena Rouge: I would limit my nightly excursions if I were you.

Chat Noir: duly noted

Chat Noir: anything else?

Rena Rouge: Queen Bee thinks that Mayura might have been Ladybug’s former fling.

Chat Noir: i guessed as much

Chat Noir: still carries the torch for her, doesn’t he?

Rena Rouge: I guess so.

Rena Rouge: Got all touchy with Bee after she brought it up.

Chat Noir: hm

Chat Noir: might be able to get something out of that

Rena Rouge: Like what?

Chat Noir: idk i’m still planning

Rena Rouge: Lol you plan now?
Chat Noir: i thought i’d give it a try since it works so well for lb

Chat Noir: did she hint at anything when you patrolled together?

Rena Rouge: No, she was pretty buttoned up.

Rena Rouge: Seemed kinda

Rena Rouge: Sad, I guess.

Rena Rouge: I think she misses you.

Chat Noir: misses hiding behind me while our enemies beat me to a pulp maybe

Rena Rouge: Is that really fair to say?

Rena Rouge: You weren’t just a human shield to her.

Chat Noir: she never seemed to have a problem using me as one

Rena Rouge: IIRC, you were the one who was always jumping in front of attacks meant for her.

Chat Noir: yeah and that makes me a shmuck, doesn’t it?

Rena Rouge: Your words not mine.

Chat Noir: >:P
Rena Rouge: Anything good on your end?

Chat Noir: i’m getting ready to possibly fight ladybug again

Chat Noir: i want you to know that i’m not looking for a fight

Chat Noir: but if she gets in my way, i have no problem fighting her to get to hawkmoth

Rena Rouge: Damn, you got frosty, didn’t you?

Chat Noir: november gets frosty

Rena Rouge: Alright, well, keep me in the loop.

Rena Rouge: And if you get your ass nabbed, we never talked.

Chat Noir: of course we didn’t

Rena snapped her communicator shut, de-transforming as she stepped back out of the bathroom and into Chloe’s garishly decorated living room. If she hadn’t outed herself as Queen Bee within hours of getting her Miraculous, the black and yellow patterned throw pillows, honeycomb artwork, and tiny golden bees hanging from each lamp string would have been enough to give her away.

“Did you fall in?” Chloe snorted, popping a piece of popcorn in her mouth as Alya took her seat at the table.

“You know if being an heiress gets old, you can always go into standup with material like that,” Alya said, pulling a soda out of a nearby ice chest and cracking it open.

“And miss my chance to become a hotel baroness like my father would have been if he didn’t get
into local government,” Chloe said, wrinkling her nose. “Pass. What’s the cat doing?”

“Preparing to take Ladybug on again if she gets in his way,” Alya said as Chloe let out a low whistle.

“Dang, the golden lovers really fell out hard, didn’t they?” Chloe clucked, shaking her head.

“Ladybug’s taking it pretty hard,” Alya muttered, chewing on her lower lip.

“If Chat’s right, then she’s got nobody to blame for her unhappiness but herself,” Chloe said.

“I know...but-”

“Don’t get soft on me now, Cesaire,” Chloe said sternly, eyes narrowing across the table. “We said we were gonna get to the truth behind this come hell, high-water, or teary-eyed bug girls. Did that stupid cutlery cross we did in the restaurant mean literally nothing to you?”

“I’m not saying I trust her,” Alya said, holding her hands up. “Just...I don’t think I’ve ever seen Ladybug look so down before. She’s always so...energetic and upbeat. But she just looked so tense last night; like she was one step away from snapping.”

“You wanna switch next time?” Chloe asked. “Maybe she’ll be more open with me.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Alya chuckled.

“Well, if that fails, I can always-”

“You are not seducing Ladybug,” Alya said, glancing over the rim of her glasses.

“You’re just saying that because you want to be the one to seduce her,” Chloe muttered, folding her arms across her chest.
“I’m in a relationship.”

“So? Nobody said you have to date her,” Chloe said as the door to her flat opened. “Just tell Nino you need the night off to throw yourself at Ladybug with reckless romantic abandon and get her to tell you her darkest secrets.”

“I miss out on the coolest conversations,” Nino sighed, pecking Alya on the cheek as he settled into the chair between her and Chloe. “You guys get started without me?”

“Chloe wants one of us to seduce Ladybug,” Alya said offhandedly.

“That’d be one way to see who’s under the mask,” Nino said, rubbing his chin. “Either that or Mayura but he seems to be too Ladybugsexual to bite.”

“After last night, I would really rather seduce Hawkmoth than Mayura,” Chloe said, mouth wrinkling in disgust. “Ew, ew, ew, why did I say that?!”

“Haha, you’re gross,” Nino sing-songed, catching a pretzel Chloe whipped at his head.

“Any ideas that don’t involve getting naked?” Alya asked, leaning in on her palm. “I don’t think the femme fatale routine is gonna be super successful.”

“Shouldn’t we be working just as hard to see what Chat Noir is up to?” Nino said. “We’re digging pretty deep into LB’s dirty laundry, but there’s still a chance she’s telling the truth.”

“Letting Chat Noir go went a long way towards getting him to trust me,” Alya said. “He’s not exactly telling me everything, but he’s at least saying more than ten words at a time to me.”

“With all the pressure Daddy is putting on him, he’s bound to reach out for some help sometime soon,” Chloe muttered, twirling her ponytail anxiously. “That security company he hired to help the cops out gives me the heebee jeebees.”

“Given Stigma International’s reputation, those jeebees are pretty justified,” Alya said, frowning down at the black-clad security personnel that flanked Mayor Andre on the cover of the newspaper.
“They’ve been roughing up people around the neighborhood for no good reason,” Nino huffed. “Is it true they can’t even run contracts in the States anymore?”

“When America kicks you out for being overzealous fascist dickheads, you know you’re a real piece of work,” Alya sniffed, shaking her head. “Somebody’s gonna get desperate sooner or later; we just gotta keep our eyes on both targets and see who tips their hand first.”

“It’s that or seduce Chat Noir,” Chloe muttered, straightening up as Alya and Nino both raised their eyebrows at her. “Oh so Paris’ it-couple breaks up and I can’t make out with the remnants?!”

“So come on, focus!”

Chat Noir bit his lower lip as his claw outstretched, green flickering flame dancing on the end of a candle. He focused on moving the flame down the wick, struggling to keep the ambient heat from melting the wax that surrounded it. He watched the flame slip down the wick, watched the smooth, featureless wax give way and start to bubble with a frustrated sigh, igniting the candle and immolating it in a flash of green flame.

“Take three hundred and thirty three,” Chat Noir muttered as Plagg conjured another inky black candle from the floor of the sanctuary. “Is there a point to all this?”

“The point is teaching you how to use your powers without destroying everything,” Plagg sighed, rubbing his forehead. “That fire is like Cataclysm; it destroys what you want it to destroy. You have to keep it in check to keep collateral damage to a minimum.”

“Couldn’t have started with an easier task?” Chat Noir panted, wiping his brow. “What was that about using phantom Nazis as target practice? Can we go back to doing that?”

“You got that part down,” Plagg said. “But unless you want to burn the city down every time you use it, you need to get a better hold on your abilities.”

“I’ll get a hold on my abilities after I eat,” Chat Noir sighed, turning around and heading back up the stairs that led to the door out of the Sanctuary. “I’m burned out.”
“Nice pun,” Plagg snickered as Adrien detransformed, stepping back through the door and into his bedroom. “First one I’ve heard from you in a long time.”

“Not feeling especially punny these days,” Adrien muttered, stepping out of his bedroom and into the hall in time to see his father step out of his office.

“-tell him I’ll handle it before tomorrow afternoon,” Gabriel sighed, deactivating his earpiece. “Idiot.”

“You would think you would have fired all the idiots that seem to work for you by now,” Adrien chuckled, patting his father on the shoulder as he passed him. “Unless one of the perks of the job is muttering darkly to yourself about how you’re surrounded by idiots.”

“It’s remarkably gratifying, even if it means dealing with Marcel’s latest breed of incompetence,” Gabriel sighed, following his son down the stairs. “Promise me that when I’m gone and you inherit the company that you’ll fire him at the first opportunity.”

“I don’t think he’s gonna outrive you, but sure,” Adrien chuckled, grabbing his scarf off the coatrack. “You gonna try cooking again or wait until the new smoke detectors are installed?”

“I was actually wondering if you wanted to get dinner somewhere,” Gabriel said, lingering on the bottom step somewhat awkwardly as Adrien slowly turned around, looking at his father like his head had turned into a talking pumpkin. “The two of us, I mean.”

Frowning, Adrien walked up to his father, pressing the back of his hand against his forehead. “Are you sick?”

“I’m perfectly well, thank you-”

“Are you in debt to the mob and this is the last night before they whack you?”

“Why would I be in debt to the mob?”
“Because I can count on one finger the number of times we’ve been out to dinner together,” Adrien said. “So you’re either dying or going to die or-”

“Can a man have dinner with his family without being interrogated about it?” Gabriel sniffed, straightening his tie uncomfortably. “If you have other plans-”

“No, no, no, we’re good,” Adrien said, cinching his scarf around his throat. “I take it takeout from the Thai place down the road is out of the question?”

“You’re talking to someone who survived on cheap noodles from the ages of eighteen to twenty nine,” Gabriel sniffed, pulling his coat off the rack. “If I never eat pasta again, it will be too soon.”

“What did Chat Noir mean when he said that he had “just spent his day getting fireballs shot at him and fighting the legions of hell that his kwami raised just for him to practice on?”

“What part of that sentence was unclear?”

“You’re saying that Plagg has some way of...what, raising the dead for him to beat up?” Marinette sighed, closing the help wanted section of the local newspaper to look at her kwami.

“It’s very likely that Chat Noir got in touch with another Master,” Tikki said, taking a bite of her cookie. “One that allowed him to access his Sanctuary.”

“No chance of accessing that for myself, is there?” Marinette asked.

“Not unless we somehow stumble on the Key that lets you go there,” Tikki said. “And if Hawkmoth’s research is to be believed-”

“Dr. He is the one that sent him there,” Marinette sighed, rubbing her temples. “...what’s the worst case scenario for me?”

“Worst case scenario is that Hawkmoth gets what he wants, but I assume you’re talking about the
“scenario involving Chat,” Tikki sniffed. “The longer he’s allowed to train, the stronger he is going to become. And with Plagg and another Master fully behind him, he’s going to be a better Chat Noir than he’s ever been.”

“Shame he didn’t show this much gusto for his responsibility when we were partners,” Marinette muttered, ignoring the sharp look Tikki shot her. “What? He jokes his way through four years of akuma attacks, lets me do all the heavy lifting, and now he suddenly wants to take things seriously? How am I supposed to feel about that?”

“Maybe he finally feels has a reason to give his all.”

“Shame he didn’t give his all sooner; we could have ended this years ago,” Marinette said.

“We can still end this-“

“I intend to,” Marinette said, flexing her fingers. “He can get as many power-ups as he wants; I’ve spent four years figuring out ways to beat akuma with all kinds of stupid power-ups.”

“There’s a pretty big gap between an akuma and a fully realized Black Cat,” Tikki said, tapping the cheek Chat Noir had bruised.

“Is there anything you can do to prepare me for that?” Marinette asked, cupping Tikki in her hands. “I know you only said you were going to help protect me, but-”

“I only awakened your healing abilities to heal you and your friends,” Tikki said, worming out of her grip. “I can’t in good conscience give you access to anything that could be used against Chat Noir.”

“So that’s a no on Ladybug eyebeams then?”

“I don’t even have eyebeams to teach you,” Tikki sighed.

“Anything to protect me at least?” Marinette asked. “Chat’s gonna be hurling fireballs at my head; can you give me anything to prevent me from being burned alive?”
Tikki almost flinched, tensing as she closed her eyes, taking a deep breath through her nose.

“...I’ll see what I can do,” Tikki said, grabbing a cookie and floating towards her dollhouse.

“...thanks?” Marinette said, watching Tikki slip into the dollhouse. “O...kay, we’ll unpack that later, I guess...be nice if she could Miraculous Ladybug me a new job while she was at it...”

“So...how are things at school?”

“Same as usual,” Adrien said, leaning back in his chair so the waitress could set the creaking plate of meat, potatoes, and roasted vegetables in front of him. His father raised an eyebrow as Adrien immediately tore into his porterhouse, rending the filet in half with his knife and taking an enormous bite out of it.

“Getting a little bored of it, to be honest,” Adrien said, juice running down his chin as Gabriel neatly tucked into his roast duck.

“I keep telling you you should test out already,” Gabriel said. “Take an early graduation and get a head-start on your life.”

“I’m starting to come around to it,” Adrien said, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “Would be nice to have some free time to focus on...other pursuits.”

“You certainly have your pick of them,” Gabriel said, taking a sip of his wine. “Your date with Mme. Dupain-Cheng went well, I take it?”

“As well as a date making pastries with her parents could have gone,” Adrien said with a somewhat wistful smile. “Better than I thought, actually.”

“Better at least than the first time I took your mother out,” Gabriel chuckled. “Baking pastries beats getting attacked by a rogue duck while walking in the park.”
“She married you, so it couldn’t have been that bad, right?” Adrien laughed.

“I still order the duck whenever I go out,” Gabriel said, teeth glinting as he popped another piece of duck meat in his mouth. “My symbolic revenge. Made your mother mad, but she could never convince me to give up meat.”

“It almost worked with me until we went to Spain and I had chorizo for the first time,” Adrien said, mopping up his steak juice with a potato.

“We never went to Spain,” Gabriel said, brow furrowing.

“We went to Spain,” Adrien clarified. “That was when you had to prepare for the-”

“-Vogue shoot,” Gabriel said, nodding. “I remember that...your mother didn’t speak to me for a week after I cancelled that trip.”

“I seem to remember her referring to you exclusively as your father and that man ,” Adrien laughed. “I also remember the floral display you bought for her at the airport.”

“Only because I killed her hydrangeas while she was away,” Gabriel chuckled. “She used to joke that I was her second most beloved living thing after her bonsai trees.”

“I don’t know how much of that was a joke,” Adrien snickered, taking a sip of water as a comfortable silence lapsed between them. “You know...I don’t ever remember you talking about Mom this much.”

“I suppose I’ve been thinking a lot about her lately,” Gabriel said, fingerling his wedding ring as he stared into his wine glass. “Just wondering what she would say if she were here with us...every time I’m with you there’s just this...space I’m waiting to be filled. Half of me still thinks that she’s going to walk in at any moment...”

Gabriel trailed off, swirling his wine glass absentmindedly.
“I haven’t… I know I haven’t always been the father you needed,” Gabriels said.

“You did the best you could,” Adrien said.

“No I didn’t,” Gabriel said, shaking his head. “I… did what I always do when confronted with hardship; I reacted out of fear. I wanted you close and under supervision in case… anything happened to you.”

“Well with Hawkmoth running around, it wasn’t like you didn’t have good reason,” Adrien chuckled.

“That maniac certainly didn’t make things easier, did he?” Gabriel clucked, shaking his head. “It’s just… you’re going to be out and on your own soon and I don’t… I don’t want to lose you because I was too harsh or too controlling when you were a boy.”

“Dad,” Adrien sighed, shaking his head with a smile. “I’m not going anywhere; you’re not gonna lose me. I’ll admit we’ve never been close but I still love you, you know.”

Gabriel managed a small smile, clearing his throat and taking a bite of his duck. “Thank you… I love you too.”

“Didn’t need to say that over a hundred euro dinner, did you?” Adrien chuckled, trying to break the tension a little.

“Everything is better over fine food,” Gabriel said, clinking his wine glass against Adrien’s. “I just… I want you to know that I’ll support you no matter what you do. If you don’t want to go to Cambridge, I can’t very well stop you. It’s just…”

Gabriel looked out the window as a few police officers accompanied by Stigma security personnel walked past the window on the sidewalk outside.

“This city is going to the dogs,” Gabriel muttered. “Might be a good idea to get away for a few months.”
“Are you planning on taking that vacation you always threaten you’re going to take?” Adrien chuckled.

“My home is where your mother is,” Gabriel said. “You on the other hand-”

“Have a life here,” Adrien said, taking another monstrous bite of his steak. “HEC is as good a school as Cambridge.”

“Even if Mme. Dupain-Cheng is also planning on heading across the pond?” Gabriel said, raising an eyebrow.

“Well...I mean, not like I can’t take the train to see her, right?” Adrien said, scratching the back of his head. “And she can train back whenever she wants so...and we’ll both be really busy, so not like we can hang out every day anyway.”

“You’ve really thought this through,” Gabriel said with a small smile. “Well, if there’s anything I can do to help with that-”

“Thanks,” Adrien said, thoughtfully chewing his steak with a frown. “Actually...I can think of one thing you could do for me.”

Anarka jerked awake in time to see Luka step back from her, a handknit blanket draped over her shoulders.

“Go back to sleep,” Luka murmured as she slowly stirred, sitting up against her pillows.

“How long have I been asleep?” Anarka muttered, tugging her beanie off and running her hand over her stubbled scalp.

“Not long enough,” Luka chided, pushing his mother gently back against the bed.

“I’m not an invalid yet, honey,” Anarka chuckled, pounding on her chest as a wet, phlegmy cough
rocked her chest. “Just a walking anti-smoking ad.”

“Not walking; sleeping,” Luka said, kissing her on the forehead. “I got a shift at the store; Juleka will bring some food in a bit.”

“At this hour?” Anarka muttered, flopping back against the bed as Luka stepped out of her room, heading down the hallway towards the kitchen where Juleka stirred a pot of soup.

“How’d the doctor’s appointment go?” Luka asked, grabbing a canteen of water from the fridge.

“Better than usual,” Juleka said, wincing as a fresh fit of coughing drew their attention from upstairs. “Apparently the coughing is a good sign and besides being cranky from the meds, she’s been in good spirits.”

“I’ll relieve you tomorrow,” Luka promised. “I gotta run something over to Marinette’s place before my shift.”

“Is that a euphemism for-”

“It’s a euphemism for a job application,” Luka said, narrowing his eyes at Juleka.

“Suuuuuuure,” Juleka said, rolling her eyes. “Would be nice if you could get me a job, but-”

“But you gotta worry about graduating so you don’t end up taking midnight shifts at grocery stores like your lunkhead older brother,” Luka said, scraping some of the soup off the back of the ladle and sampling it with an appreciative nod. “Do your homework; I’ll tell Rose if you don’t.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I won’t unless you make me,” Luka chuckled, ruffling Juleka’s hair and snatching the job application off the table. “See you in the morning.”

“Power bill’s due tomorrow,” Juleka said as Luka hovered in the doorway.
“I’ll...take care of it,” Luka said.

“You know...we could always see if Dad can-”

“I’ll take care of it,” Luka insisted, stepping out the back door and into the night before Juleka could reply, clutching the application to his chest to protect it from the wind as he walked down the street.

Ladybug stood in front of the mirror, looking down at the two identical yo-yo’s in her hands.

“Okay...so...Tikki said I just place one yo-yo here,” Ladybug said, placing one yo-yo over her left wrist. The string of the yo-yo snaked out from both sides, wrapping around her wrist and securely holding it in place. One spot on the face of the yo-yo started to glow and as Ladybug tapped it, a pink circle light sprang out of the sides. The circle expanded until it was a solid, shimmering circle of energy, lightly humming around the nucleus of the yo-yo. The light slowly started to cloud, solidifying into a round red metal shield that sank onto Ladybug’s arm with a noticeable weight.

“Past Ladybugs got the coolest stuff,” Ladybug said, swinging the shield around experimentally. “Would have been nice to get this instead of a yo-yo from the start, but we’ll just count this as a victory for good old Team LB.”

Glancing down, she noticed that the wire from the yo-yo remained attached around her wrist and to the back of the shield. Acting on a hunch informed by 18 years of superhero media, Ladybug tossed her shield onto the fainting couch, watching the yo-yo string unspool and hang in the air between her wrist and the shield. She jerked her hand back and the shield retracted along the string, cinching back onto her wrist as her reflection smiled back at her.

“Eat your heart out, Carapace,” Ladybug said, snapping her shield out a little harder than she intended and knocking over a mannequin next to her desk. “...Alright, so this is more of an outdoor toy-”

A sharp knock on her bedroom hatch made Ladybug’s heart stop.

“Marinette?” Her mother’s voice called through the hatch as Ladybug transformed back quickly,
stufiing Tikki back into her dollhouse. “Can I get some help at the register?”

“Coming!” Marinette called, straightening her hair as she slid down the ladder out of her room, snagging her apron off a coat rack as she headed from her flat down into the bakery shop proper.

“Sorry about the wait, how can I help—”

Marinette could feel the color drain out of her face as Gabriel Agreste looked up from the pastry case, his thin, polite smile catching her off guard even as Adrien beamed over his father’s shoulder.

“M. Agreste,” Marinette managed to stammer, keeping the waver out of her voice with all the willpower she could muster. “What a...surprise!”

“Adrien and I were coming home from dinner and he suggested that we stop by for some quick dessert,” Gabriel said, looking over the rims of his glasses at the case. “I confess, I’m not much for sweets, but Adrien says a few of your lemon bars might be right up my alley.”

“Papa makes them on the tart side,” Marinette chuckled, unconsciously tucking her hair over her earrings as she dove under the counter. “Did you, uh, have a good dinner?”

“Dad had the night off so we decided to take advantage of it,” Adrien chuckled, leaning on the counter as Marinette tucked some lemon bars into a paper bag. “He’s been pretty busy lately, haven’t you?”

“Nathalie is taking more of an executive role at the office, so she’s having some trouble staying on top of some of the day-to-day responsibilities she handled,” Gabriel said.

“Sounds like you need a new assistant,” Marinette said, wondering if there was a BAFTA category for Acting Normal While Talking To Your Arch-Enemy.

“Yes, well...Adrien said that you were currently looking for a job, so I thought I would—”

Thunk!

Marinette banged her head on the inside of the glass case, nearly falling backwards as she jerked
upright, looking between Gabriel, Adrien, and her parents not-so-secretly eavesdropping from the kitchen doorway.

“You...are you...” Marinette said, head tilting to one side as she tried to find the words to say.

“I know this is somewhat unorthodox,” Gabriel said. “Usually, this would be something we would address back at the main office, but-”

“You’re...offering me a job?” Marinette said, glancing between Adrien and Gabriel.

“Dad told me that Nathalie’s position was opening up,” Adrien chimed in. “I let slip that you were looking for some weekend and after school work.”

“I...well, I am, but...” Marinette trailed off with a laugh. “Sorry, this is just...I mean, isn’t this a little sudden? Aren’t there other people more qualified for the role than me?”

“With Nathalie managing more things at the office, her old role has been reorganized,” Gabriel said. “Just some clerical work, really; nothing an enterprising fashion designer shouldn’t be able to handle.”

“An enterprising designer that’s still a student,” Sabine said.

“It wouldn’t cut into class time either,” Adrien said. “Just a few nights a week and Saturdays. With an opportunity to work for our London office while she’s in school.”

Marinette’s heart throbbed in her ears as she looked between Adrien and his father for a long moment. Her hesitance must've been written on her face because Gabriel cleared his throat.

“Would you mind if we had a private word,” Gabriel said, gesturing between Marinette and himself. “One designer to another?”

Sabine shared a glance with Tom and Adrien for a moment. “It’s fine,” Marinette said, shooting her mother a reassuring smile. “We’ll just stay out here; I’ll holler if we have customers.”
“Well...we’ll be in the kitchen, then,” Sabine said, stepping through the swinging doors and shooting Gabriel a firm look before disappearing into the back with her husband and Adrien.

Marinette had never been alone in a room with Gabriel out of her Ladybug costume and his sudden presence in her parents’ bakery made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. It was unnerving how ordinary he managed to look; more a stodgy tax accountant than a brainwashing megalomaniac. Seeing him in her own home made her feel cornered, despite the fact that she was armed with her Miraculous and the Butterfly pin was nowhere to be found.

“You know I’ve heard good things about this place but...I’ve never actually been here,” Gabriel said, turning around a curious nod. “Your parents’ reputation precedes them.”

“They’ve certainly worked for it,” Marinette said, swallowing past the painfully dry lump in her throat.

“I can appreciate that,” Gabriel mused. “I can also appreciate an artist at the top of their field; it’s apparent where you get it from now.”

“I don’t know if I’m at the top of my field just yet.”

“I think you will be,” Gabriel said. “One day. You’re on the right track, Mme. Dupain-Cheng. Just need a little nudge to put you over the finish line.”

“And interning for you is the nudge you think I need?” Marinette asked.

“Something tells me that someone with your credentials is going to make it whether I nudge you or not,” Gabriel chuckled. “But Adrien mentioned that you were looking for work, so I thought I’d offer you the position first...and if I may be so bold, a reference from the head of a major fashion label would go a long way towards whatever career you had in mind.”

“I...appreciate it,” Marinette said slowly, trying to choose her words carefully. “And I appreciate Adrien sticking his neck out for me, but...”

“You...think I’m just offering you this position because of your relationship with my son?” Gabriel
asked, raising an eyebrow. “Do you think you’re not qualified to intern for a fashion company?”

“Well...I am, but-”

“Does the schedule I proposed not work for you?”

“It does, but-”

“Is there any particular reason you don’t want to intern for my label in particular?”

_You’re fucking Hawkmoth, that’s why_, Marinette thought.

“I just...I’d rather make it without my friends calling in favors,” Marinette said diplomatically. “If that makes sense.”

“I understand,” Gabriel said, nodding thoughtfully. “I was much the same way when I was your age. Wanted to build Gabriel with my own two hands and tips saved from waiting tables. I turned down quite a few investment opportunities early in my career because I wanted to make it under my own steam...but nobody makes it under their own steam. Even the smallest boutiques need investors and business connections to ensure their designs leave the mannequins they’re pinned on.”

“I’m not offering you this position because my son is taken with you,” Gabriel continued. “I’m offering it to you because, from what I’ve seen of your work, you’re going to be the kind of designer that’s worth paying attention to; the kind that’s going to put me out of business if I’m not careful.”

Marinette couldn’t keep the self-satisfied smirk off her face. “So by offering me this job, you’re hoping I’ll spare your multi-million euro fashion label my terrible wrath?”

“I would appreciate it,” Gabriel chuckled. “You don’t have to give me an answer tonight; I know this is all very sudden but Adrien is...well, Adrien.”

“He certainly is,” Marinette said, eyes drifting over to the kitchen door in time to see Adrien’s face in the crack of the door. He caught her eye, simply raising an eyebrow and tilting his head as if to say _Well?_
“At least give me a day to make my case,” Gabriel said, leaning on the counter. “Come by the offices on Saturday; I insist.”

“Well...I guess I can give it a shot,” Marinette said, chewing on her lower lip as Adrien let out a near silent yes in the kitchen behind her.

Already working with him, Marinette mused. Might as well get some money and career help out of it.

“Very good,” Gabriel said, nodding with a small smile as he checked his watch. “I will have Nathalie email you the details later this week. Feel free to reach out to her with any questions you may have.”

“I will,” Marinette nodded, passing the bag of lemon squares across the counter and accepting a note from her future employer. “And, uh...thanks.”

“I wouldn’t thank me just yet, Mme. Dupain,” Gabriel chuckled, taking his change and his bag as he turned to leave the shop. “But I look forward to working with you as well.”

The bell above the door jingled as Gabriel stepped back into the night, leaving Marinette alone with her thoughts for a split second before Adrien cleared his throat from the doorway to the kitchen.

“I...feel like I may have overstepped my bounds,” Adrien said, awkwardly waddling back into the shop.

“For eavesdropping?” Marinette asked, crossing her arms across her chest.

“No, I have no regrets about that,” Adrien chuckled, scratching the back of his head. “I mean, it’s a public shop open to anyone, so technically-”

“Adrien.”
“I...know you were looking to get a new job,” Adrien said, leaning against the counter. “It was a spur of the moment thing; I should have called before coming over but...I got excited.”

“I would have liked more time to prepare,” Marinette chuckled. “But I really appreciate it.”

“Hey, he had the job open; I just-”

“.introduced me formally to a world-famous fashion mogul who wants to take me under his wing,” Marinette said with a small smile. “It was that or intern for Style Queen and Audrey is-”

“-the actual worst person in the world,” Adrien nodded. “Is this...good?”

Marinette responded by throwing her arms around Adrien’s neck, pulling him into a tight hug as his arms slipped around her waist. She stayed like that for a moment, breathing in the smell of Adrien’s cologne.

“This is great,” Marinette said, pulling back without completely disengaging, eyes tracing the curve of Adrien’s lips as she leaned in a little closer. “This is-”

“Marinette!”

The front door to the shop opened as a windswept Luka stumbled through the door, clutching something close to his chest. He stopped when he saw them embracing behind the counter, hovering in the middle of the shop a little awkwardly.

“Am...I interrupting something?” Luka asked as they stepped apart.

“Just a little celebration hug,” Adrien said, coughing into his hand.

“Oh...cool, cool,” Luka said, nodding just a little too much. “What, uh...what are we celebrating?”

“Adrien hooked me up with a gig in the fashion industry,” Marinette said, shooting Adrien a beaming smile.
“...oh,” Luka said, fingers clutching at his jacket a little. “That’s uh-”

“Marinette’s portfolio hooked her up with a gig in the fashion industry,” Adrien said. “My father was really impressed with the stuff she put out so she’s interning for him.”

“I’m still not sure what the pay is, but it’s bound to be a hell of a lot better than working retail,” Marinette chuckled.

“Yeah, no kidding!” Luka said, laughing just a little too loudly. “Anything’s better than working retail, right? Well, yeah, congrats! Adrien...to the rescue, right?”

“I just floated the idea to my dad-”

“Yeah, bet you did,” Luka said, cheeks hurting a little from smiling too much. “Adrien’s dad, to the rescue, huh?!”

“Sorry, you wanted to say something?” Marinette prompted, eyes drifting down to the white piece of paper sticking out of Luka’s jacket.

“Oh, no, uh, just saying hi,” Luka chuckled, stepping back as he zipped his jacket up. “Should probably get going; got a late shift at the grocery store I need to get to so...uh...congrats on the new job! Thanks again, Adrien!”

Before Marinette could say anything else, Luka was back out into the cold night air, cold wind biting at his burning cheeks as he took the job application out of his jacket and crammed it in the nearest garbage can as he headed down the street.

Luka stormed through the swinging doors at the back of the shop, plucking his apron off the rack a little harder than necessary and cinching it around his waist with knot that cut into his stomach just a little too much.
Breathing through his nose, he grabbed a box off the floor, slamming it down on the table with clash that echoed throughout the otherwise empty backroom as he started to unpack the box, pen practically slicing through the inventory sheet as he took stock.

He emptied the box as quickly as he could before grabbing another, burning through it with the same singleminded drive to finish as his heart pulsed painfully in his ears. His face burned despite the chilly nature of the back of the warehouse, unloading box after box until he realized the stock wasn’t getting taken to the front of the warehouse.

“Simon!” Luka called out, sticking his head out into the dimly lit grocery store. “Simon?!”

After a moment of silence, Luka sighed through his nose, pulling out his phone and punching Simon’s number in.

“Pick up you lazy prick,” Luka muttered under his breath. “Hello? Hey, did you forget you were supposed to help me stock tonight...you have a thing? What thing? Okay so...so I’m just supposed to unload, take inventory, and stock by myself?! And you didn’t think of telling me until now ?! No...no, that’s fine . Have fun.”

Luka hung up with a frustrated snarl, shoving his phone back into his pocket as he headed back into the back of the store, grabbing the stack of magazines he had just unloaded and carrying them to the front of the store without stopping to look at the cover. Muttering under his breath, he jammed them into their proper spots, stepping back to make sure he had done a good job.

Luka’s lip curled as Adrien Agreste smiled up at him from the cover of the magazine, lip caught in the corner of his mouth as though he were teasing him.

“Well look who it is,” Luka muttered, grabbing a magazine off the rack and paging through to the vapid, meaningless interview towards the middle. “Paris’ Teen Heartthrob of the Year. Guess that’s an easy title to come by when your face is on every billboard in the city, huh?”

A picture of Adrien standing father sitting at a desk made Luka’s pulse spike; the smug, opulent looking Gabriel only aggravating him even more.

“You just got it so...easy, don’t you?” Luka muttered, glaring daggers down at the happy looking father-son pair that graced the center of the page. “Daddy just snaps his fingers and gives you whatever you want, huh? You want a job in the family business? Done. You want to be on the cover
of a magazine? Done. You want to show up your girl’s ex by offering her a cushy, high-paying job? Done, son! Can I get you a pony to go along with that?!”

Luka crammed the magazine back into the rack with a frustrated snarl, stomping into the backroom as he struggled to control his breathing. He glanced around at the pile of boxes that seemed to never get any smaller, breathing through his nose as his fingers brushed over his belt-buckle where Duusuu slept. Anger ebbed out of him, leaving him drained, frustrated, and defeated as he padded over to the worn, moth eaten break couch off to one side of the room.

“Not her fault...better gig, all things considered,” Luka muttered to himself as he sank down on the couch, leaning back and closing his eyes. He just needed a moment to rest; a moment to collect his thoughts and
Mayura’s eyes snapped open, jerking awake and knocking a pillow off the edge of the couch. He looked around wildly, feeling around at his costumed chest as he wobbled to his feet. The back room was empty, and for a moment Luka wondered if someone had come in and robbed their inventory as he slept or worse, seen him in his costume that he had no memory of donning.

The sound of clinking metal drew Mayura’s attention back to the front of the store. He stuck his head out, fan gripped in one hand only to see his knights delicately stacking canned beans, mopping the floors, and restocking the fridges.

“Did...when did you guys start doing this?” Mayura asked, waving to catch their attention. Four identical, silent shrugs greeted him as Mayura stepped back into the back room, staring at his reflection in the distorted metal of the walk-in freezer. His fingers reached up, brushing across the bottom of his mask as he tried—really, truly tried—to remember when he had transformed.

I just wanted to help you.

Mayura flinched, looking around as a soft, familiar voice spoke in his ear. “Duusuu?”

You had such a hard day. You do so much for the people in your life. You deserve to have someone take care of you for a change.

Mayura nodded, head tilting to one side as he watched his knights work. “...maybe I do.”

Of course you do...such a sweet, caring young man deserves to have all the things his heart desires.
Mayura let out a small chuckle, scratching the back of his head. “I don’t know about all the things…”

“Some things are just...out of my reach, I guess,” Mayura muttered.

*Who’s to say they have to be? Marinette just needs another chance to fall in love with you, doesn’t she?*

“I doubt that it’ll take this time if it didn’t last time,” Mayura sighed.

*I think when she sees the kind, generous person that you really are, she might have a change of heart.*

“Yeah she’s...she’s dating Adrien though,” Mayura protested.

*She isn’t married to him, is she?*

“I don’t know...I don’t want to ruin our friendship,” Mayura said, gesturing to the fridge as Hammett held up a crate of orange juice for him to see. “And Adrien’s...he’s a good guy, right?”

*As good as you are?*

“That’s a really weird question to ask,” Mayura said.

*All I’m saying is that you already know how to make Marinette happy.*

“Can we...change the subject?” Mayura said, a chill running down his neck.

*I just don’t understand why you’re so unwilling to seize the happiness in front of you.*
“Seriously, I’d like to talk about something else,” Mayura said. “Or, you know what, no talking is also good. I should—”

Tell me you don’t still think about her.

“Duusuu, that’s enough,” Mayura said sternly. “You’re really—”

You can’t even smell strawberries without thinking of her shampoo; can’t even unpack lipgloss without remembering the kind she likes. You can still feel her lips on yours if you close your eyes, can’t you?

“Wings in!” Mayura’s cry echoed throughout the store as his costume disappeared and his knights with it. The crate of juice Hammett held fell to the floor as he vanished, shattering in a tide of sticky orange syrup that pooled on the linoleum lit by the sickly fluorescent lights that flickered overhead.

Luka took short, shaky breaths, back pressed against the refrigerator case as he sank to the floor. His heart thundered in his ears as he closed his eyes, pressing his palms against his eyelids as he tried to forget Duusuu’s words and the sensations they brought to mind. His hand on Marinette’s. The smell of her shampoo as he buried his face in her hair. Her giggling into every kiss as his arms wound around her waist.

Luka wrapped his arms around himself. “Wings out…”

Mayura took a deep breath, blinking as he put his head between his legs and fought the sad, self-pitying surge that rose up around him. "I'm sorry I yelled at you..."

I just want what’s best for you, Luka. I want you to be happy.

Mayura curled into a tight ball as his knights surrounded him, wordlessly and clumsily offering their master comfort as the lights flickered dimly overhead.
Mostly de-powered episode but I think we need one after all the superhero bullshit we’ve endured so far (except Luka; he's due for some super(hero?) bullshit)

People have raised issue with Tikki helping Marinette and while I'm going into more detail later, I think it's very telling that she helped out Marinette in this chapter after the "burned alive" line.

Thanks again for all the great feedback you guys have been leaving! Really helpful in determining how my fic is coming across and keeping my motivation to write flowing.
Marinette straightened her blazer, heel tapping anxiously against the cool marble tile until Gabriel’s secretary glared at her over the rims of his glasses. Marinette shot him an apologetic smile, twiddling her thumbs as she hummed under her breath until another glare silenced her.

“Sorry,” she said, her voice echoing off the pristine black and white walls. Gabriel’s smooth, minimalist design aesthetic permeated every floor of Gabriel’s Parisian headquarters, surrounding Marinette in a fortress of polished stone, tinted glass, and pale overhead lighting. The amount of light reflecting off white surfaces made her feel like she was waiting in a hospital waiting room for surgery rather than waiting for Gabriel’s meeting to end.

She wondered if Gabriel had designed this place to be as intimidating as possible on purpose.

The heavy black doors opened with a creaking groan as Marinette all but snapped to her feet, smoothing her skirt out as a small crowd trickled out of Gabriel’s office.

“We’ll touch bases again on Monday; have the spread ready for my review by then,” Gabriel called to a general chorus of ‘yes M. Agreste’ as he stepped out of his office.

“I’ll schedule a meeting with Casper to go through the runway number one more time,” Nathalie said, peeling away from the crowd. She took notice of Marinette with a simple, unreadable nod as she passed, leaving Marinette alone with Gabriel.

“Mme. Dupain-Cheng,” Gabriel said with something approaching a warm smile. “Sorry for keeping you waiting.”

“Not at all, M. Agreste,” Marinette replied with a smile. “Just...getting to know your assistant.”

The man behind the desk didn’t look up at her as she mentioned his name, typing away with an almost inaudible clack of keys.

“If you did, you would be the first one,” Gabriel muttered gesturing into his office. “If you’re ready
to begin, I’ll introduce you to your fellow intern and we can get started on the day’s events.”

“Fellow...intern?” Marinette asked. “Another fashion designer?”

“Someone who’s more interested in the business side of fashion business,” a familiar voice came from behind her. A crisp white button down shirt slightly unbuttoned with the sleeves rolled up past his elbows might have looked sloppy on other men but Adrien managed to pull the casual end of business casual off remarkably well.

“I don’t believe we’ve met, mademoiselle,” Adrien said with a crooked smile that made her heart skip a beat. “Adrien Agreste.”

“You’re surprised I’m working for my father?”

“I just...didn’t think you were super interested in fashion,” Marinette admitted somewhat sheepishly.

“I’m not super interested in modelling ,” Adrien clarified. “I’m not the biggest fan of some of the people my Dad works with, but that doesn’t mean I’m not interested in taking over the business side of things someday.”

“Is that what you were doing today when you split off from your father and me?” Marinette asked, chewing her bottom lip.

“Had a meeting with the head of the accounting department,” Adrien said, miming falling asleep in his chair and making Marinette’s soda spurt out of her nose as she laughed. “Nice guy but he introduced me to the preferred brand of paper clip we use.”

“Maybe that’s a key element of Gabriel’s brand,” Marinette said with a challenging raise of her eyebrow.

“Tell me you had a more interesting day than I did,” Adrien sighed, leaning in on his palm as he watched a spark flicker in Marinette’s eye.
“I don’t even know where to start,” Marinette laughed, shaking her head. “I spent the morning pressing flesh with the senior designers, then we toured the fitting rooms, met some of the models, sat in on a brand strategy meeting and shadowed your father as he picked out items for the winter show! Did you know every designer on staff contributes one piece to the show?!”

“Some people spend all year working on their number,” Adrien nodded.

“It was like...everything I could have wanted to know about running my own fashion label,” Marinette sighed. “I cannot thank you enough for setting me up with this.”

“If it makes you feel better, I wasn’t entirely selfless when I put your name forward for the job,” Adrien said with a sharp, almost familiar smile. “I thought my internship would be a lot more entertaining if I got to take you out to lunch every day.”

“Do you usually take out your father’s assistants?” Marinette asked, head cocking to one side.

“Just the pretty ones,” Adrien said, teeth catching the light in a way that made Marinette’s stomach flutter.

“And here I thought I got this position with my design skill and love of the industry,” Marinette chuckled, crossing her legs under the table. “Am I going to have to tell your father his protegee is distracting me from my duties?”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Adrien said, tip of his shoe bumping into her shin under the table. “I’m almost disappointed we have to go to work after this; our dates seem to be pretty irregular, don’t they?”

“Circumstances seem to stack against us,” Marinette chuckled. “...this is a date then?”

“I thought I made it clear that I wanted to date you,” Adrien chuckled, fingers tangling with hers as he leaned in across the table.

“You did, just...life has been crazy for me lately,” Marinette said, shaking her head. “I’ve got school and this job and getting ready for design school and...I want to date you too, but are you ready to
date my crazy schedule?"

“I think some people are worth working with a crazy schedule for,” Adrien said, picking her hand up and lightly brushing his lips across her knuckles. A complex swirl of nostalgia, longing, and jubilation took hold of her all at once, leaving her sitting there dumbstruck at the simple gesture. Here she was, on a date the person she had wanted since she was fourteen, and the only thing she could think of was Chat Noir and the clumsy displays of affection he used to show her. Her hand hadn’t been kissed in almost two years and yet a small, traitorous part of her heart was disappointed that it wasn’t Chat that had kissed her like that again.

“I…” Marinette’s phone buzzed on the table, thankfully saving her from having to confront the emotional quagmire that snuck up on her. “That’s your father; I should probably-”

“Oh, yeah, sure!” Adrien said brightly as Marinette collected her bag. “I’ll grab the check.”

“Thanks,” Marinette said, turning to leave before leaning down, clumsily cupping Adrien’s cheek and kissing it briefly. “…maybe I can get lunch next time?”

“…looking forward to it,” Adrien said, turning in his chair as she bustled out of the restaurant with a warm, beaming smile. “Wow…she is really making that blazer ensemble work, isn’t she?”

What is wrong with you?

Marinette sat hunched over in the stalls of the ladies’ bathroom, fingers twisted in her hair as she stared blankly down at the polished tile floor in front of her.

You have the job you always wanted...on the career path you always wanted...you have the guy you always wanted...why are you thinking about him?

It seemed that now they were...adversaries (Not enemies, Marinette reminded herself.) Marinette thought of Chat more than ever; more than she even thought about Adrien or any of her other friends. She thought about where he was, what he was doing, and what he was thinking. She thought of new ways to sway him back to her side, new strategies to counteract his new abilities, and ways to salvage his reputation once this was all over with.
Does he even think of me? Marinette thought bitterly. Or am I just the Ladybug shaped hurdle he has to vault on the way to Hawkmoth?

Did he and Master He stay up all night like she did, coming up with plans to defeat her? Was he trying to save her like she was trying to save him? Did he even care about making things right after this spat between them was over? Or would he just step over her de-powered body without a look back?

Can you really blame him if he does?

Marinette shook her head. He threw the first punch; he escalated this war of words into something more. Everything she had done up to that point had been retaliating against a move Chat made against her. And every move he made seemed to be laser-focused on taking her support structure away, cutting her off from people who could help her, and getting ready to take her Miraculous from her.

So why can’t I stop thinking about him?

Marinette stood up with a sigh, fingers raking through her hair until she looked somewhat normal again.

Maybe it’s time to make a move of my own.

"Everything go alright today?"

Gabriel looked up from his notebook to see his son leaning against the door frame, an expectant smile on his face.

"I think maybe you were the one who did me the favor by getting Mme. Dupain-Cheng to accept this position," Gabriel chuckled, leaning back in his chair. "I could tell from her designs that she was talented but...I didn't expect her to show such insight. She's curious...eager to learn...I think your friend will fit in quite well."
"Of course she will," Adrien nodded.

"I know she has ambitions of starting her own label but is it too much to hope that she'll take over as Chief Creative Officer when I retire?" Gabriel said, idly scribbling in his notebook. "Your vision and her creativity would make for a formidable team, you know."

"I think you're right," Adrien said with a devious smirk. "Maybe we'll start our own company and start competing with yours."

"That would make Christmases awkward to say the least," Gabriel said, glancing at the coat in Adrien's hand. "Going out for the night?"

"Just gonna hang out with Nino for a bit," Adrien said, waving over his shoulder. "I'll be home before midnight."

"Check in with Nathalie before you turn in," Gabriel said, watching his son walk away with an almost wistful smile on his face.

Everything’s turning out just how I wanted...

“Keep your hands up!”

Mayura danced out of the way of another kick as Carapace bounced his shield off Hammett’s head, skirting away from a spear strike with a level of grace that was quite frankly depressing. Such a tall, sturdily built young man shouldn’t have moved like a trained ballerina; it honestly wasn’t fair that Carapace seemed to be as agile as he was and nearly twice as durable.

“Keep backing up like that and you’re gonna run out of roof!” Carapace cried, catching Hendrix’s hammer blow on the flat of his shield without so much as budging. Mayura tossed a trio of quills at Carapace, grunting in frustration as Carapace swung Hendrix around to absorb the strike. Pressing his advantage, Mayura leapt over his knight’s fallen body, gliding up into the air and-

“Sneak attack!”
“Wait, what?” Queen Bee’s boot collided with the side of his head, spiking him down to the rooftop. The four knights turned, glancing between Carapace and Queen Bee in confusion as Mayura pulled himself up with a groan. “What...the fuck ?!”

“Did you not hear me yell ‘sneak attack’ just now?” Queen Bee sighed, leaning on Carapace’s shoulder. “That was a sneak attack; an attack done sneakily.”

“You shouted,” Carapace said.

“He clearly needed the warning,” Queen Bee sniffed, ignoring the scowl Mayura shot her way.

“I didn’t know it was going to be two on one,” Mayura muttered.

“Two on five, but go off I guess,” Queen Bee sniffed.

“They’re a team,” Rena Rouge called down from the chimney she was perched on. “Why wouldn’t they fight you together?”

“I thought we were just sparring,” Mayura grumbled.

“Which is like fighting but non-lethal,” Queen Bee said slowly.

“You would do well to take a page out of Queen Bee’s book,” Rena Rouge said, hopping off the rooftop and landing in front of Mayura. “You have the numbers advantage, but you and your knights don’t work as a team. You guys fight like Power Rangers villains; all queuing up one at a time to take a swing at Carapace. All he really had to do was move and your guys wound up hitting each other more than they hit him.”

Mayura’s knights looked as sheepish as four seven foot tall suits of armor could look as Mayura just scowled, cheeks burning with embarrassment. “You couldn’t have said that without someone kicking me in the back of the head?”

“Kicks to the back of the head are among the greatest teaching tools known to man,” Queen Bee said, pirouetting and aiming a kick at Carapace’s head which he instinctively caught on his shield.
“And you’re not gonna take your eyes off me the next time we practice.”

“You wish,” Mayura muttered.

“Oh honey, don’t even act like I’d give you the chance to turn me down,” Queen Bee sniffed.

“Aaaaaand that’s our cue to call it a night!” Rena Rouge said brightly as Carapace got between Mayura and Queen Bee. “You did good tonight; I’ll catch up with Ladybug and let her know how training went.”

“I can update her myself, thanks,” Mayura said, turning to leave as Rena laid a hand on his arm.

“Look, Queen Bee can be prickly,” Rena said as Queen Bee stuck her tongue out behind her. “But you’ll get used to her. We’re all on the same team here, right?”

“...right,” Mayura said with a nod. “As long as that team is Ladybug’s team, that is…”

Mayura turned, foot braced on the edge of the roof and ready to take off-

“Sneak attack!”

Mayura whipped around, throwing a quill that ricocheted off Carapace’s shield as Queen Bee stood motionless behind him.

“Look at that; you’re learning,” Queen Bee said, waving from behind Carapace’s shoulder. “Bye bye birdie.”

Mayura quietly flipped her off, backflipping off the roof and gliding down over the city.

“We should train him wrong on purpose,” Queen Bee said, watching him fly away. “As a joke.”
“You know, it might not kill you two to go easy on him for a night,” Rena Rouge sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“It miiiight though,” Carapace said with a wince.

“I wouldn’t chance it,” Queen Bee said. “Might be allergic.”

“He’s not gonna let anything slip if he doesn’t trust us,” Rena Rouge said.

“I’m working a good cop, bad cop routine,” Queen Bee said, lightly smacking Rena Rouge on the shoulder. “I’m pushing him right into your persuasive little paws, so just keep pretending to be nice to him and we’re golden.”

“I am being nice to him.”

“Good; get into the role,” Queen Bee said.

“I’m serious!” Rena said. “If Chat’s lying, then he’s actually working to protect this city; if Chat’s not, then there’s a chance he could just be Ladybug’s tool.”

“Or he’s fully in on the scheme and knows he’s working for Hawkmoth,” Carapace pointed out. “Did you hear that bit about Ladybug’s team?”

"I think if he had any doubts about us, he would have jumped us foaming at the mouth by now," Queen Bee sniffed. "He doesn't suspect dick."

“Still don’t know for sure,” Rena Rouge said. “So please try and be nice to him; or at least try not to haze him like you are.”

“Who’s hazing him?” Queen Bee huffed.

“Oh please; Ladybug and I ran the sneak attack play on you during your first training session.”
“You bitches were hazing me ?!”

“Vital signs seem normal...blood pressure has stabilized...patient is still in medically induced coma pending further healing…”

Jun trailed off as she looked up to see Master He staring out the window, eyes focused on something on the rooftop across the way.

“Master?”

Master He took off her glasses, tucking them neatly into her breast pocket as she looked at her apprentices. “You've done very well today; you should go get something to eat.”

“We’ll stay as long as you stay, Master,” Jun said with a small smile.

“I'll be fine by myself for a little while,” Master He assured them. “Master Fu is through the worst of it...I can handle him for a little while. You should sample some of this supposedly fine French food while we're in the city.”

Jun and Lan shared a look and a shrug. “Anything you’d like us to get for you?”

“Nothing; just take the night off,” Master He said with a small smile. “I’ll see you first thing in the morning.”

Jun and Lan wasted little time getting their coats on, shooting Master He a few more thank yous before slipping out the door, chattering amongst themselves as they went down the hallway. Master He waited until she could no longer hear them before slipping out of the hospital room, making her way down the hallway towards the stairwell that led to the rooftop.

The first blast of night air hit her like a sledgehammer in the face as she wrapped her coat tighter around her chest, fumbling for a pack of cigarettes in her breast pocket. She lit one with trembling
fingers, allowing the cool rush of nicotine to wash over her tongue with a deep sigh as a pair of footsteps landed on the roof behind her.

“I know doctors really shouldn’t be smoking,” Master He chuckled, turning around to face Ladybug as she stood across the rooftop, warily keeping an eye on Master He. “I’ve tried to quit about a hundred times now...always seem to keep coming back to them. Then again, being effectively immortal mitigates any risk of cancer, so do as I say, not as I do.”

“Never really wanted to,” Ladybug said, taking an awkward step towards Master He. “I’m-”

“I know who you are,” Master He chuckled. “Everyone in the world knows who you are, Mme. Ladybug...and I assume you know who I am.”

“Do you prefer Master or Doctor He?” Ladybug asked.

“That depends; do you want to be my student?” Master He said, raising an eyebrow.

“I have a Master already,” Ladybug said, eyes drifting down to the rooftop beneath their feet. “I should have come earlier, but I was...well, I was busy.”

“I know,” Master He said. “You’ve had quite the hard time lately, haven’t you?”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Ladybug chuckled, rubbing her arm anxiously. “...I need your help.”

“You need my help a lot more than you think,” Master He said, taking a long drag out of her cigarette.

“I know you and Chat talked,” Ladybug said, taking another step forward. “Tikki mentioned that you helped him awaken some of his powers, but you should know that I’m not the one you should be fighting. He and Hawkmoth are working together, and if we don’t stop them, this city could go up in smoke like the Mayor’s house did. I know you’re trying to do what’s right, but I need you to believe me on this; Chat Noir is not to be trusted.”
Master He cocked her head to one side, regarding Ladybug through curiously squinted eyes. “You know...that was very convincing. You have a very natural kind of charisma that makes people want to trust you, you know. It's a rare talent; I'd almost be inclined to help you, if it weren’t for the fact that you're lying right to my face.”

Ladybug’s warm, pleading expression fell as she took a step back, licking her lips. “I don’t know what he told you, but-”

“I will not lie to you,” Master He said. “So please do not lie to me; not with that warlock’s foul stench polluting your aura.”

“Warlock?”

“Do you not know?” Master He chuckled. “That Butterfly’s influence surrounds you like a shroud; it’s what prompted me to believe Chat Noir in the first place. I tried to reach out to you, but that sorcerer’s power prevented me from even finding you. I knew who you were and who you were working for before I even set eyes on you so, please, spare me the lies you fed this city.”

Ladybug straightened up, taking a step closer to Master He. “...okay,” Ladybug said. “So you’re not going to help me, are you?”

“I will help you however I can,” Master He said. “As I am helping Chat; it’s my duty to assist those who are Chosen...all you need to do is forsake that wretched master of yours and join your partner in his quest to bring him down.”

“It’s not that simple,” Ladybug said, rubbing her temples. “Imprisoning Hawkmoth would cause more damage than you realize. People would be hurt.”

“People are always hurt.” Master He said. “You cannot go through life without hurting people and any pain that comes from Hawkmoth’s defeat is not your responsibility.”

“It is if I don’t stop it,” Ladybug said, crossing her arms over her chest. “Are we gonna have a problem?”

“I’m a doctor; I’m only here to heal our mutual friend, Master Fu,” Master He said, holding her hands up defensively. “And assist the forces arrayed against Hawkmoth, which you still have an
“Yeah, we’ve had that conversation before,” Ladybug muttered. “I don’t suppose I can convince you to stop helping Chat, can I?”

“Stronger people than you have all tried and failed to dissuade me from my duty,” Master He said with a sharp, mirthless smile. “You are welcome to try though.”

Ladybug looked the aging doctor up and down, eyes lingering on the bracelet around her wrist. “...are you teaching him?”

“Only what Master Fu ought to have taught him by now,” Master He said, taking another drag off her cigarette. “I’m actually quite surprised; Quingfu always spoke very highly of you but I never heard much about Chat Noir. Didn’t know what to expect but penchant for the impulsive notwithstanding, I’m quite impressed with his progress. He’s taking to his training with an unusual degree of gusto.”

“Funny; he never struck me as the kind to take his training very seriously,” Ladybug said.

“It helps when one has a master that’s actually willing to train them,” Master He said. “It’s no wonder you’ve surpassed Chat by such a wide margin; between your innate skill and Master Fu’s favoritism-”

“Favoritism?” Ladybug scoffed. “So it’s my fault that Chat Noir wasn’t included more?”

“Not at all,” Master He said soothingly. “Quingfu was always more comfortable focusing on one student at a time...to the detriment of his other pupils, unfortunately.”

“If Chat wanted to get better, he would have found a way to do it under his own steam,” Ladybug sniffed. “The fact of the matter is he was more than happy to let me shoulder most of the burden for our whole partnership.”

“If I remember correctly, he sacrificed himself quite a few times for your-”
“Yes, Chat Noir sacrificed himself plenty of times!” Ladybug snapped. “But who had to figure out a way to carry on without him?! Who had to come up with strategies to fight the akuma and her partner at the same time?! Whose responsibility was it to recruit new heroes when Chat Noir didn’t show up?! Me! Always me! I needed a partner that pulled his own weight; not a lovestruck sap that turned into a liability more often than not!”

Ladybug’s fingers trembled as her fists clenched at her side, her last word echoing off the rooftops that surrounded them.

“Do you think I liked being responsible for saving my partner every damn week?!” Ladybug spat. “Do you think that was fun for me?! Do you think I just loved having the whole city live or die based on my actions?! Don’t you think I would have loved it if Chat Noir had contributed his fair share instead of disappearing and leaving me to fight Hawkmoth’s flunkies all by myself?!”

Master He said nothing as Ladybug’s last cry echoed off the rooftops, looking the young woman up and down with a sad look in her eye.

“That must have been hard,” Master He said softly.

“Yeah,” Ladybug muttered, turning away and wiping the corner of her eye with the heel of her palm. “Yeah, that was hard.”

“Is this your revenge then? Payback for an unequal partnership?”

“This has nothing to do with Chat,” Ladybug said insistently, glaring at Master He across the rooftop. “Tell your student that it doesn’t matter how hard he trains, how much he tries, or how long he fights. Because I’ll beat him. I’ll beat him like I’ve beaten everything else that’s been thrown my way since I was fourteen; I’ll beat him like I’ve beaten him so many times before. Remind him that four weeks of training doesn’t make up for four years of slacking off and that given the first chance, I’ll be the one to take his Miraculous.”

Smoke billowed out of Master He’s nostrils as she exhaled, eyes narrowing at the younger woman across the roof.

“How many chances did you need to beat him before?” Master He asked, extinguishing her cigarette on the rooftop and crushing it under her heel. “Because you’ve had three already, including a five on one fight where you chose the battlefield. You lured him into a bloody trap and he outfought you.”
“He ran away,” Ladybug said.

“After he pounded you, your partners, and the city block into rubble,” Master He said. “I saw the footage; you got yourselves soundly thrashed by a—what did you call him? Lovestruck sap who turned into a liability more often than not?”

Ladybug said nothing, lips pressed together in a tight line as her brow knit in anger.

“It really is amazing what a person can accomplish in a handful of weeks,” Master He said, coolly walking past Ladybug on her way to the door. “Who knows how many more of his abilities he’ll master the next time you meet.”

Master He stopped as Ladybug’s hand reached out, clamping down on her shoulder as she reached for the door.

“Tell me how I can unlock more of my powers,” Ladybug pleaded. “Please...this will all be over sooner if you just let me catch him.”

Master He stared at Ladybug for a long moment, cool grey eyes regarding her with unblinking focus as the air between them hung silent and still.

“You really want to know?” Master He asked, holding Ladybug’s gaze for a long moment. Her free hand reached into her coat, producing a glittering red key that dangled at the end of a long, braided green string. “I gave Chat Noir a key much like this one; one that allowed him to access Plagg’s power more fully. I suspect that he’s using it as we speak to practice.”

“That’s it?” Ladybug asked, watching the key swing back and forth at the end of the cord.

“By all rights, I should give you your key as well...” Ladybug reached out, fingers hesitantly trying for the key. As Ladybug’s fingertips touched it, Master He stepped back, sank into a crouch and drove her fist into Ladybug’s stomach faster than Ladybug could react. Instead of pain, a warm, tingling sensation passed through her as an invisible force shot her across the roof as though she had been struck by a car. Ladybug landed in a crouch, watching the air around Master He’s palm shimmer as she cinched the key’s lanyard around her belt.
“I should give you your key, but seeing as how you’re not *acting* like Ladybug at the moment, I think I’m going to have to shirk my sacred duty for the first time in almost a hundred years,” Master He said, flexing her fingers. “Oh well...nobody's perfect.”

“That was cheap,” Ladybug said, slowly getting to her feet. The tall, slender woman didn’t strike Ladybug as particularly strong. But the dull, almost ticklish sensation where Master He had struck her was a testament to the fact that she clearly wasn’t the old doctor she took her for.

“You should have been watching my other hand,” Master He said. “Lesson one; never take your eyes of an opponent or get close to them without landing a telling blow.”

“We’re opponents now?” Ladybug chuckled weakly. “What happened to being sworn to help me?”

“Sometimes the most helpful thing you can do for someone is *give* them a swift slap to the head when they’re stepping out of line,” Master He mused. “I intend to help you quite a bit.”

“We should be working together! As the acting Guardian of the Miraculous-” Ladybug stopped as Master He let out an impressive snort of laughter.

“And that makes you Queen of all Kwami, does it?” Master He chuckled, shaking her head as a small, fluffy white kwami poke its head out of her jacket. “The acting Guardian is still very much alive downstairs and I don’t even answer to him. If you thought you could pull rank on me, I'm very sorry to disappoint you.”

“Do you need me, QiQi?” The kwami chirped as Master He shucked her doctor’s coat, rolling the sleeves of her dress shirt up to her elbows.

“I think you can sit this one out, Kiicci,” Master He said, watching as Ladybug unatched her yo-yo’s from her hips. “I’m more than capable of handling Ladybug myself.”

“Shall I notify Chat Noir at least?” Kiicci asked.

“...tell you what,” Master He said, meeting Ladybug’s wide, apprehensive eyes. “Wait fifteen minutes, and then reach out to him.”
“Have it your way,” Kiicii chirped, tucking her head under her wing. “Let me know if you need me.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” Master He said, fingers flexing and shimmering with power as Ladybug began twirling her yo-yo’s. “Fifteen minutes is more than enough time to teach Mme. Ladybug a lesson in underestimating her elders.”

“Don’t you think you’re the one who’s underestimating me?” Ladybug asked, eyeing the swinging red key hanging from Master He’s belt.

“Maybe I am,” Master He admitted, settling into a fighting stance. “Could be getting cocky in my old age. But I'll tell you what...if you can take this key from me in fifteen minutes, it’s all yours.”

“You know I’ve spent four years snatching akumatized objects off people who are trying to kill me, right?” Ladybug asked, lips curling into a challenging smirk. “I’m not even going to need five.”

“Funny...I was thinking the same thing,” Master He said, outstretched hand beckoning Ladybug forward.

Chapter End Notes

Shorter chapter this time but I thought it was better to keep the drama tight rather than try and pad it out with filler scenes. A neat 5k is better than an overlong 7k is what I always say...starting today.

Next time! Master He throws down with Ladybug! Mayura begins to suspect things! Gabriel draws a suit or some shit idk he’s not in the next one so much!
Ladybug’s yo-yo’s sat in her outstretched hands, coiled and ready to lash out. Across the rooftop, Master He stood stock-still, one hand held out in front of her as though frozen in mid-wave. The air around her palm shimmered with some kind of barely visible energy as her kwami watched from the edge of the roof.

“Now remember girls,” Kiiicii said airily. “No hair pulling, no eye gouging, and no hits below the belt.”

“Thank you, Kiiicii,” Master He chuckled, shaking her head. Ladybug’s yo-yo’s slipped from her hands, twirling in opposing spirals as Master He just watched, calmly anticipating the attack to come. She looked perfectly relaxed, eyes tracking Ladybug’s movements as she started to circle around her.

“Fifteen minutes and counting, Ladybug.” Master He said. “Unless you’re keen on fighting Chat Noir and myself, I would do something if I were-”

Master He leaned out of the way, letting Ladybug’s yo-yo sail past her head and ricochet off the wall behind her.

“...you,” Master He finished, parrying the second yo-yo shot and wrapping her fingers around the yo-yo’s string. With a flick of her wrist, Master He yanked Ladybug across the rooftop like a fish at the end of a line, foot surrounded by translucent energy as it collided with Ladybug’s head. Ladybug bounced off the rooftop with a yelp, grabbing at Master He’s belt as she passed. Spinning on her heel, Master He kicked Ladybug away, sending her bouncing off the roof tiles and tumbling towards the edge.

Ladybug’s stomach plummeted for a moment as she fell over the lip of the building, then shot back up into her throat as Master He yanked her back up onto the roof by the yo-yo string she still held in her hand.

“The only drawback of having such a long weapon is that there’s quite a lot of string for your opponent to grab on to,” Master He said idly, examining the cracks in one of Ladybug’s yo-yo’s as she hauled herself to her feet. “Interesting...seems that Chat Noir’s destruction isn’t as easy to heal as I-”
Master He sighed in disappointment as Ladybug yanked her yo-yo back, snapping it out into a shield and ripping it at Master He’s head.

“I wasn’t done studying that,” Master He muttered, deflecting the shield attack and bringing her free hand around to intercept a punch Ladybug threw at her head. “Feint with the yo-yo and follow up with a more up close and personal attack...clever.”

“Thank you,” Ladybug said, grabbing Master He’s arms and hip tossing her over her head. Master He landed with a thunk, rolling over and springing back to her feet as Ladybug lunged for the key. They eyed each other for a moment, panting and pushing their hair out of their eyes as they waited for the other to make a move.

“...you have no style,” Master He said after a moment.

“Oh, so we’re just name calling now?” Ladybug asked.

“That was a compliment,” Master He said, looking Ladybug over. “You have a natural fighting style that makes you highly unpredictable in combat and very hard to plan around…”

“Never took karate lessons as a kid,” Ladybug shrugged, shouldering her shield as she twirled her yo-yo behind her.

“Don’t start,” Master He said, raising her hands again. “Come on; show me what else you’ve learned.”

“How long did it take to find someone to print a map this big?”

“Three days and three hundred euro,” Kagami said, gazing up at the towering map of Paris that took up most of her office wall. “I had them note major akuma attacks over the last four years in purple.”

“I can see that,” Adrien said, looking up at the sea of purple dots that littered the map. “...why does
“anyone even live in this city anymore?”

“The locale is pretty,” Kagami chuckled. “Beats London by a country mile.”

“The British would disagree,” Adrien said, eyes drifting to a stack of envelopes sitting on the table in the middle of the room. “These the profiles on akuma victims?”

“I thought we could start paging through them to see if there’s any commonality or leads we could follow,” Kagami said, picking up Alix Kubdel’s folder and idly paging through it. “See if we can make some kind of connection.”

“Nice work,” Adrien said, picking up a folder and flopping down in an overstuffed armchair in the corner of the room. “How many of these do we have to pick through?”

“Two hundred and three,” Kagami said, plucking a folder off the table with a wrinkled frown. “Who was Count Killigard?”

“...that was a pro-gamer who got pissed his team lost the finals of their tournament,” Adrien said slowly as the memory came back to him. “Spawned waves of enemies down streets from these big glowing towers; think I got targeted from that one and Ladybug needed to call Queen Bee and Carapace in to help.”

“And Vice Ice?”

“Hockey team vice president who was kicked off the team for roughhousing,” Adrien said. “Froze me solid in a block of ice; Ladybug needed to take it on solo.”

“Rear Admiral Roccoco?”

“Old navy geek that press-ganged me into his crew,” Adrien said. “Rena Rouge and Ladybug picked him off in a battle on the high seas…”

Adrien got out of his chair, dropping the file in his seat as he started paging through files, dropping them in two piles on the table one at a time as Kagami looked on with a raised brow.
“What are you doing?”

“Just...counting something,” Adrien muttered, dropping files on top of one another with a rhythmic *thwap* of cardboard on cardboard.

Fighting a nigh immortal sorceress/kickboxer was difficult enough without Master He trying to *teach* her while she bounced her head off the pavement.

“Move your feet more!” Master He chirped, sweeping at Ladybug’s legs with a low kick that nearly bowled her over. The narrow rooftop that marked the boundaries of the battlefield presented a persistent threat to Ladybug who seemed to be doing nothing but back up out of reach of the old master’s blows.

“Look-” Ladybug grunted as Master He’s fist smashed into her shield, causing a pearly ringing sound to echo across the rooftops. “This is a waste of time! We should be working together!”

“Glad we agree,” Master He said, knocking Ladybug backwards with a well placed kick to the shield. “So when are we going to take Hawkmoth down?”

“I already took him down!” Ladybug grunted, yo-yo lashing out and snaring Master He by the foot. “This city is akuma free and will stay that way so long as we keep working together; what else do you want?”

“Justice,” Master He said, stepping on Ladybug’s yo-yo string.

“Sometimes justice *is* vengeance,” Master He said icily. “And there’s the small matter of a missing Miraculous he stole from us.”
“Nooroo isn’t being forced to akumatize people anymore!”

“What mercy your master has,” Master He sneered, slapping the end of a yo-yo strike out of the air as it whipped at her face. “Tell me, what exactly did he promise you in exchange for being his patsy? Fame? Fortune? Or did he skip the bribery and get straight to the part where he brainwashed you?”

“I am not his patsy!” Ladybug snapped, snaring Master He’s wrist and zipping towards her fist first. “And I’m not brainwashed!”

Master He raised her hand, catching Ladybug’s fist and holding her firm as the two locked eyes.

“You think you’d be able to tell if you were?” Master He grunted, struggling under Ladybug’s raw strength. “You think his victims knew that their thoughts weren’t their own?!”

“He is working with me!” Ladybug growled. “Is it so hard to believe that we found some common ground to work towards?!”

“From where I’m standing you’re working very hard towards his goal,” Master He said, planting her foot against Ladybug’s chest and kicking her away. “What exactly are you getting out of this?”

Safety. Security. A city that isn’t at war with itself.

“A clear way to end this fight once and for all,” Ladybug said, snapping her yo-yo’s around her wrists.

“And all you have to do is fight Chat Noir,” Master He laughed, shaking her head. “Funny that Hawkmoth’s two greatest adversaries are now fighting one another.”

“I gave Chat a chance to work with me; he chose not to,” Ladybug snapped.

“That’s how you deal with your teammates?” Master He said. “They either do what you say or you destroy them?”
“I’m not the one destroying things,” Ladybug said. “I’m trying to heal this city after years of pointless fighting; Chat doesn’t even want to entertain the idea of using our powers to actually do some permanent good!”

“You think it’s that easy?” Master He asked. “You think you are that one in a million person to unite the two most powerful forces in the universe without destroying the world in the process? The only two to successfully try needed years of training and the support of every other Miraculous on this plane of existence!”

“Then train me!” Ladybug cried. “Help me! Help me get everyone on my side and we can come to some kind of peaceful end to this nightmare!”

“Peace?” Master He spat. “That...animal turns your home into a warzone, and you want to sue for peace?! Your master pushed my friend past his breaking point for years and you want to sue for peace?! The amount of pain and suffering he’s caused to our organization is incalculable; the fact that he kidnapped a kwami is deplorable enough, but the fact that he’s ruined the reputation of the most selfless Miraculous with his greed is disgusting... and you talk of making peace?!”

Master He’s lip trembled with barely concealed anger, eyes alight with fury as she spat at Ladybug’s feet.

“Well, I spit on your peace,” Master He said, palms glowing with shimmering translucent energy. “I spit on your mercy and I spit on a world in which Hawkmoth gets to live after what he’s done!”

Well...you tried.

“...fine,” Ladybug muttered, whipping her shield out. “I tried. You and Chat can wallow in bitter self-righteousness all you want, but I’m taking what belongs to me!”

“Speaking of which,” Kiicci mused, sticking her head over the roof ledge. “Fifteen minutes are up, gals. Shall I let the cat in?”

“Might as well,” Master He shrugged. “I think we’ve both said all we need to say.”

Kiicci nodded, fluttering away as Ladybug’s yo-yo lashed out, desperately attempting to snare the kwami before she got too far. Her world spun as Master He’s foot lashed out, colliding with her
cheek and sending her tumbling into the side of the stairwell in a heap as Master He coldly looked down on her.

“You’ll take this key out of my cold, dead fingers,” Master He said, crossing her arms. “And judging by your performance thus far, I don’t think you’ll be taking it anywhere any time soon.”

Adrien dropped the final folder on top of a wobbling pile, stepping back and staring at the two piles before him.

“Alright...I’ll bite,” Kagami sighed, closing her file and handing it to Adrien. “What are the piles for, Adrien?”

“One for the akuma fights I helped with the entire time,” Adrien said, pointing to the smaller of the two piles. “And the other for instances when I’ve been brainwashed, taken out of the fight, or otherwise incapacitated...oh look, Puppeteer. Ladybug took on me and a whole slew of akuma by herself.”

Adrien tossed the final file on top of the larger pile with a sigh, running his hands through his hair as he scowled down at the table in front of him.

“One hundred and twenty-six akuma where I’ve spent the fight possessed, depowered, or taken out of the fight,” Chat Noir muttered. “More than half.”

Kagami said nothing, watching Adrien glare at the larger pile for a long moment.

“All those times I let myself get in harm’s way,” Adrien chuckled, patting the larger stack bitterly. “All those times Ladybug had to replace me or carry on without me...and now I have to somehow come up with a way to win all on my own.”

“Where’s the pile for the times Ladybug was out of commission?” Kagami asked.

“There are none,” Adrien muttered. “Ladybug never got captured, brainwashed, or in any kind of trouble...just me.”
“Have you ever considered why that is?” Kagami asked.

“Because she’s just better than me?” Adrien suggested, gesturing at the blank spot on the table where Ladybug’s pile might have gone. “Look at that; perfectly Miraculous track record.”

“Because you protected her,” Kagami said. “You got hurt trying to keep her out of danger, you got possessed so she wouldn’t get possessed, and you got incapacitated and she didn’t have to suffer the consequences.”

“You were her shield for four years,” Kagami continued, laying a hand on Adrien’s arm. “Shields get battered; shields get broken. She hid behind you and let you soak up all the misfortune thrown her way.”

“So?”

“So, look at what she’s done without you,” Kagami said. “Or rather, what she hasn't done. She's failed, three times to capture your Miraculous. Failed to capture you or keep you isolated. Failed to cut you off from your allies. Failed to secure all the Miraculous. The first thing she did when you broke with her was surround herself with more pawns to help her, and even then, she failed to convince your core teammates that she’s right. Her operation has been compromised and she has nothing to show for it.”

“As much as this city loves to kiss Ladybug’s spotted feet, she wouldn’t have accomplished any of this without help,” Kagami said. “So you’re frustrated that you didn’t have as many victories as Ladybug? Her victories are built on the sacrifices of others; built on the help of others. She is not a one person army and the fact that you fell in battle before is only a testament to how much she needs someone to be willing to sacrifice themselves for her. Her whole strategy relies on it.”

“She's got people to sacrifice themselves for her though,” Adrien countered.

"You think Mayura is going to be as instrumental to Ladybug's plan as you were?"

"Point," Adrien said, leaning on the table. "I guess...I don't know...it's unsettling to think that maybe I could have done more. Maybe I could have...helped more or fought better."
"You were fighting without any real training or mentorship for four years," Kagami said. "You just needed someone to take more than a passing interest in you; if your erstwhile master had done as much for you as he did for Ladybug, you might have been able to do more."

"Can I really put everything on Master Fu though?" Adrien asked. "I feel like I should have...I don't know...I feel like I should have been better..."

"You are better," Kagami said, squeezing Adrien's hand lightly. "If there was ever any question as to who was the better hero, that's been soundly put to bed."

"My, you're good at giving pep-talks aren't you?"

Adrien and Kagami jumped, looking at the source of the small, airy voice sitting on the stack of folders.

"Kiicii?" Adrien said, kneeling down to look the little crane kwami in the eye. "What are you doing here? Is Master He alright?"

"She's fine," Kiicii chirped. "Just fighting Ladybug but she wanted me to wait a few minutes before coming to get-"

"What?!" Adrien squeaked, leaping to his feet so quickly his knee banged on the table. "Wh-where are they?!!"

"On the rooftop of the hospital," Kiicii said. "But I wouldn't worry; she's doing-

Adrien was already out of the room, transforming as he leapt over the balcony and crash landing on Kagami's floor below.

"-fine." Kiicii cheeped to a mostly empty room as Kagami just sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose.
Something snapped in Master He.

The cool, collected demeanor melted into a brutal, vicious fighting style that left Ladybug gasping for breath as she battered blow after blow away with the flat of her shield. A cold flame burned in the old woman’s eyes as she drove Ladybug back with each advancing strike and the quiet ticking of a clock in the back of Ladybug’s mind only worsened the fear that crept over her.

How long did she have until Chat Noir arrived?

“You think you’re going to win?!” Master He squawked in between blows that shook Ladybug’s teeth as they rattled against her shield. “You think this is all going to end well for you?!”

“It would if people would just listen to me!” Ladybug grunted, watching the dangling, swaying of the key at Master He’s belt.

“I’ll listen to you when you have something useful to say!” Master He said, clashing with Ladybug’s shield as she tried to overpower her.

"You're not even going to be Ladybug when this is all said and done," Master He grunted, driving her knee into Ladybug's shield. "You think Master Fu is going to let you keep Tikki after this?! You think he's not going to just strip you of your Miraculous the first chance he gets?!"

"He can try," Ladybug growled, leaning out of the way of a frenzied attack.

"Oh, you're not the first mad dog we've had to put down," Master He chuckled and a devilishly sharp grin. "We've gotten very good at it over the years; we used to have a whole division dedicated to subduing rogue heroes. Who knows; Chat Noir might rebuild it just to come after you!"

Master He lashed out, sweeping her leg beneath Ladybug’s. In a moment of perfect clarity, she leapt in the air in time, knees tucking up against her stomach. She saw a flash of fear in Master He’s eyes as she realized the attack had left her all too open for a counter attack, but before she could react, Ladybug lashed out, kicking Master He as hard as she could in the chest. To Ladybug’s great surprise, Master He crumpled, flying backwards and landing in a heap at the doorway to the stairs. The first telling blow Ladybug had landed seemed to have taken the wind out of Master He as she struggled to push herself back up to her feet, panting and holding her chest with a pained whine.
A single blow was apparently all Master He could take.

“I...I didn’t want to have to do that,” Ladybug muttered, a cold chill of shame washing over her as she walked over to the old woman, untying the key from her belt as her hand feebly raised to tried to stop her. “You..if you had just...you started it! I-I was just talking to you and...you just...”

Master He said nothing, chest rising and falling with a slow, painful rhythm as her eyes stared up at Ladybug, burning with an untold amount of hatred as Ladybug stepped back, looking at the key in her hand.

“I'm sorry,” Ladybug said quietly. “I'll...I'll make this up to you...once I’m done, I'll...I'll...”

Ladybug felt the heat before she noticed the flash of green light that seemed to illuminate the night sky. She pivoted, shield raising in time to catch a spinning ball of green fire on her shield. The fireball exploded, sending a shower of individual flames raining down around her in a circle of fire that spread across the rooftop. Out of the shadows, Chat Noir prowled, landing in a crouch at the edge of the circle as he slowly looked between Ladybug and Master He. She couldn't tell if the venomous glow in his eyes came from the fire, but the dancing shadows that fell across his incensed snarl of rage made him look positively monstrous as he looked at her.

“What...did you... do?! ” Chat Noir snarled, claws crackling with green flame. The heat and stench of the fire that surrounded her was almost as acrid as the anger that wafted off of Chat Noir in waves. He seemed to rise with his rising anger, shadows swirling around him as the flames flickered on all sides. A palpable sense of terror seized Ladybug and as she faced the threat of immolation from two fronts, Ladybug made the only smart choice.

Her yo-yo shot out, latching on to a nearby building and zipping her away with the key before Chat could follow. Chat turned to chase her, flames building in intensity until a soft, almost inaudible cry caught his attention.

“Wait...”

Chat turned as Master He slowly pushed herself to a sitting position, beckoning him over as the flames disappeared in a flash of light.

“Master!” Chat Noir said, scampering over and supporting Master He’s head with his hand. “What happened?! Are you alright?! Why didn’t you call me sooner?!”
Master He said nothing, just smiling as her eyes watched Ladybug disappear into the night.

"Just wait," Master He said, pushing herself up into a sitting position, rubbing her chest with a small wince. "You'll see..."

Racing through the city, heart thundering in her ears, Ladybug tried to put as much distance between herself and Chat Noir as possible. The further she ran, the calmer she felt, but nothing could shake the sensation of flames licking at her cheeks. The heat still lingered on her skin and despite the frigid evening air, sweat ran down the back of her neck as she weaved a confusing escape route in the hopes of throwing off pursuers that didn’t seem to come.

When she was certain Chat Noir wasn’t behind her, Ladybug snaked towards Gabriel’s mansion, landing on the roof as she struggled to catch her breath. In the span of twenty minutes, she had picked a fight with Master Fu's doctor, kicked an old woman in the chest, and robbed her as Chat Noir tried to put a stop to her.

*She started it.*

“She started it,” Ladybug repeated to herself out loud, trying to convince herself more than anything. Ladybug shook her head, looking down at the ornately crafted red and black key in her palm. Was this it? Was this little key really worth it? Or had she just clobbered someone for a shallow attempt to get stronger?

*You need this; you need to be stronger than Chat.*

"That's right..." Ladybug muttered to herself. "I...just need to keep up..."

Ladybug paced the rooftop, slowly regaining control of her breathing. She didn't think it was possible for someone to be so single-focused on revenge, but Master He's wild fighting style told her all she needed to know about the old woman. Her former partner was now under the tutelage of someone who apparently prized revenge for herself and her organization over a safe, expedient solution to the problem. So what if Hawkmoth walked away? Wasn't that worth it if it meant Paris could finally be at peace? But of course she didn't see it that way; even suggesting it caused Master
He to accuse her of being-

No. You are in control of this situation. Gabriel is under your thumb; not the other way around.

Ladybug let out a shaky sigh, slapping her face lightly to try and steady herself before she entered Gabriel’s study.

You can still fix this.

“I can fix this,” Ladybug muttered to herself, twisting the cord tied around the string between her fingers. “I will fix this...if it takes me the rest of my life I’ll…”

Ladybug leaned against the rooftop railing, squeezing her eyes shut as she fought the wave of guilt and uncertainty that rose around her.

“I’m going to fix this...I’m going to fix this...I’m going to fix this…”

She repeated this over and over for a few moments, reassuring herself that she still had the capacity to salvage some kind of peace after this was all said and done. She would come up with a brilliant plan, as she always did, to put right this mess when everything was said and done. If it took ten or fifteen or twenty years, she would fix this; she would get partner back and make the whole city forget they were even at odds. She would; she had to.

Everything was going to be fine someday; it was that kernal of optimism that made stomaching what she had to do bearable.

Gabriel examined the key that sat before him, head tilting back and forth as he looked up at Ladybug.

“I can’t even begin to tell you how dangerous it was to engage that woman all on your own,” Gabriel began.
“Spare me the lecture; you’re not my father,” Ladybug muttered, even as a part of her knew Gabriel had a point. “I saw an opportunity to get the upper hand on Chat Noir and I took it; I didn’t know if it would come around again—”

“Fair point,” Gabriel said, fingers wandering over the key as he muttered something under his breath. A faint, musical chime echoed throughout the room as the key vibrated ever so slightly. “What did she say this was? Something to unlock your true potential?”

“I’ve been wondering how Chat’s been able to train without anyone finding him,” Ladybug said, rubbing her chin. “She said a key like this was what allowed Chat to develop his powers more.”

"Powers that include caustic flames he thought were a good idea to use on the rooftop of a hospital,” Gabriel said.

A small shiver ran up Ladybug's back as she nodded, remembering the way Chat Noir had looked at her. His blazing, twisted look of rage seemed to be burned into the back of her eyelids; an accusatory glare that awaited her every time she closed her eyes.

“Interesting,” Gabriel muttered, frowning down at the key as a small circle of purple light started to glow around it. “Yes...there’s definitely something supernatural about this...I don’t quite know what though.”

“Your book doesn’t say anything about it?” Ladybug asked, nodding at the Miraculous book that lay on his shelf.

“It mentions ‘keys to power’ but I assumed they were referring to metaphorical keys,” Gabriel said. “I don’t know how to use it, but even if I did...I don’t know...something isn’t right here...”

“What are you talking about?” Ladybug asked, watching as Gabriel sat up, spinning the key around as he squinted at it over the rim of his glasses.

“Let me get this straight...this old, powerful, intensely capable woman has these artifacts of unfathomable power...artifacts that could prove dangerous if in the wrong hands...and yet when you made off with this...she just let you go?”

“I...I beat her,” Ladybug said somewhat lamely. “I got the upper hand...I think I hurt her before Chat
showed up-”

“Did he follow you?”

“...well, no , but-”

“And that doesn’t strike you as odd?” Gabriel said, licking his lips. “Something so rare and so powerful falls into your possession, and you don’t question why they didn’t try and take it back before it slips through their fingers?”

Ladybug’s warm, jubilant sense of triumph started to deflate like a pricked balloon as Gabriel’s fingers began plucking at something around the key. Thin, shimmering strips of purple energy clung to the key as it slowly began to pulse a kind of clear purple energy. Ladybug and Gabriel leaned closer to the key, frowning as it slowly started to vibrate.

Then all at once, an ear-piercing scream rent the air; a loud, wailing bird's screech that seemed to be coming from the key itself.

“It’s a trap!” Gabriel hissed, dropping the key and clamping his hands over his ears as the wailing grew louder and a bright, flashing purple light illuminated the room

“Turn it off!” Ladybug screamed over the siren, shielding her eyes from the blinding light that spilled out of the windows of Gabriel's office.

“They’re going to see this across the city; get this thing out of my home!”

Ladybug swooped down, picking it by the lurching, screaming key and bolting for the window, deaf to whatever Gabriel was yelling at her as she fled.

*Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!*

Heart pounding in her ears, she carried the key over the rooftops, eyes scanning the horizon for a good place to dump it.
Why the hell didn’t you think this through first?!

A few blocks away, she could see a pair of figures making their way towards her location, darting over the rooftops as she fled trailed by a bright purple light and a desperate wailing sound.

You put this whole operation in jeopardy to flex your superhero muscles!

As she sailed over the Seine, Ladybug let the key fall from her grip. She landed on the far side, ducking into an alleyway and throwing herself into a dumpster as quietly as she could. Her hands clamped over her mouth, stifling her labored breathing and protecting her nose from the putrid smell as she waited for her pursuers to catch up with her, accompanied only by the sound of a watery wailing sound from the river.

"Down here!"

The dumpster lid trembled as someone landed on it, leaping off with a creaking crunch of steel. Through the thin crack between the lid and the edge of the dumpster, she saw Chat Noir and Master He walk to the edge of the river, staring into the water for a long moment as Chat Noir extended his baton into the dark waters below. Master He, snapped her fingers, ending the noise and extinguishing the light as Chat Noir fished the key out of the river.

“I think we may have been discovered,” Master He sighed.

“Unless the tabloids are right and Hawkmoth is a river monster,” Chat Noir said, shaking his head. “Gotta say, that was a nice idea.”

“I’m just glad she took the fake key as bait,” Master He said. “And glad we could hear and see her across town.”

Of course it was a fake.

“You sure it was Hawkmoth that set it off?”
“That, or Ladybug is acquainted with another scholar of the arcane arts that tripped the trap,” Master He shrugged. “Either way, they’re no friends of ours.”

“Too bad she moved before we could find out where she was holed up,” Chat Noir sighed.

“Good ideas rarely survive contact with the enemy,” Master He said, pocketing the key. “But I think a silver lining can be salvaged from all this. After all...I think I understand Ladybug a little better now.”

“Kicking her ass led you to that realization?” Chat Noir laughed.

“You don’t really know someone until you fight them,” Master He said.

“Is that a Vizier saying?”

“From *The Matrix Reloaded*, actually,” Master He said, glancing over her shoulder, looking into the alleyway where Ladybug hid. Her gaze lingered a little too long on the dumpster for Ladybug’s comfort.

“Seriously?”

“You think I spent the last eight hundred years sitting in a study and sipping tea?” Master He said, turning to head down the street. “I go to the movies, you know.”

“Good films or just cheap action movie sequels?”

“Rich coming from an addict to cheap Japanese animation.”

“Did Kagami tell you that?”

*Kagami.*
A passing car cut off Master He’s response and by the time it was gone, the street was once again quiet save for the cacophonous pounding of Ladybug’s heart in her ears. Ladybug lay on top of an overstuffed garbage bag for a few moments, waiting until the threat of being discovered paled in comparison to the stench that overwhelmed her.

She tumbled out of the dumpster, landing on all fours as a single name rang out in her mind like a clear, crystal bell.

*Kagami.*

“If we had known about your little plan beforehand, we might have been able to help more…”

“It wasn’t so much a plan as it was a contingency,” Master He said, taking a sip of her tea. “I created the decoy on the off chance that Ladybug would confront me and spying her across the street gave me the chance to put my plan into action.”

“I’m sure the fireball or two I threw at her head helped sell the act,” Adrien said, hands on his hips as he stared up at the map of Paris that hung on the wall of Kagami’s office.

“And you’re sure you don’t know where Ladybug stopped before throwing it in the river?” Kagami asked.

“She started moving before we could get a good read on her location, unfortunately,” Master He said, holding the tea-cup up for Kiicci to dip her beak in. “We know Ladybug headed to a secondary location, but by the time we were on her heels, she doubled back and threw the key into the river. I wrongfully assumed Hawkmoth would try and defuse my trap which would have given us enough time to find him…perhaps he doesn’t even know how to counteract enchantments.”

“So we’re back to square one,” Kagami muttered darkly. “Knowing nothing and fumbling around in the dark.”

“Not quite,” Adrien said, wandering over to a decorative wall rack and pulling a rapier out of its sheath. “We know she crossed the river.”
“And what does that do for us?” Master He said, watching Adrien stab the rapier into the map, slicing and sawing until the city below the Seine fell to the floor in a wide paper ribbon.

“It cuts our search area down,” Adrien said, frowning up at the map as he laid the flat of the sword between two points like a measuring stick. “We...we used to run sprints from the Arc du Triomphe to the Louvre for fun. Her record for crossing that stretch was just a hair over five minutes, last we tried…”

“And from the time she started moving again to the time the key landed in the river...that was definitely only two or three minutes,” Master He said, watching Adrien trim the top third of the map off. “So judging by her time-”

“That rules out the 17th...18th...19th...and the 20th arrondissements,” Adrien said, kicking the pieces of the map out of his way as they fell to the floor. “That just leaves the 8th...9th...10th...11th...and-”

The tip of the rapier landed on the first arrondissement, inches away from Adrien’s home.

“...my neighborhood,” Adrien muttered, staring at the pared down map of Paris. Somewhere in the shredded map was his enemy’s home base; spitting distance from where he lived and went to school. “That’s something.”

“This is more than something,” Kagami said with a toothy grin. “This is...well, forgive me for saying so, but-”

“This is more than Ladybug and I managed to do together,” Adrien chuckled, shooting Master He and Kagami a friendly smile. “Maybe we should have brought you two in years ago.”

“Tell that to Master Fu when he wakes up,” Master He chuckled. “I have an I told you so banner printed for such an occasion.”

“We have something to work with now,” Kagami said, gathering up the pieces of the map and chucking them into the fire. “I’ll start looking for anything out of the ordinary and we can start crossing off locations based on known akuma victims.”
Adrien nodded, plucking his father’s photograph from the nearby corkboard and pinning it to the square plot of land where his home was.

“One spot down,” Adrien said, running a hand through his hair. “I’m going to let our friends on the inside know what we found...be back in a minute.”

Master He waved him off as Kagami began organizing the list of akuma victims, moving with a kind of bright eyed frenetic energy that told Adrien that she wasn’t likely to even notice him slip out. He made his way through the empty halls of the house, stepping out onto the balcony as he punched a number into his phone.

“...Dad?” Adrien said. “Hey, it’s me...no, nothing...no, I’m good, I just...just checking to see if you got home okay...heh...yeah, I know Gorilla has you covered...I know...okay...I’ll see you in a bit…”

Adrien’s eyes caught a flash of blue on the rooftops across the street, spying a tall feathered figure perched on the ledge of the roof. Mayura silently watched him, unmoving and unblinking as Adrien pretended not to notice him.

“...I love you too, Dad,” Adrien said, quietly stuffing his phone in his pocket and backing back into the house.

Gabriel stared at his phone in bemused confusion, stowing it and turning back to Ladybug who appeared to be trying to wear a hole in the floor of his office.

“If they knew where we were, they would be here by now,” Gabriel sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “I think we’re in the clear.”

“And if they’re just waiting?”

“Waiting for what?” Gabriel said. “You chucked the key in the river, yes?”

“Yes, but-”
“And they didn’t see you when you spied on them?”

“I don’t think so—”

“If they were going to come back and attack us, they would have done it already,” Gabriel concluded, sighing as he slumped in his chair. “I think we’re safe for the moment... still, I insist that you have nothing more to do with that woman.

“Don’t need to tell me twice,” Ladybug sniffed, scratching the back of her head. “...Chat Noir mentioned the name Kagami to Master He before they left.”

“You think he’s referring to Mme. Tsurugi?”

“Do you know of any other Kagamis that have ties to Chat Noir?”

“No...but if you’re thinking of going after her, you need to be very careful,” Gabriel said. “That girl has more resources at her fingertips than anyone else in this city; even Andre doesn’t have as many lawyers on retainer as her mother did.”

“What is she going to do; sue me?” Ladybug snorted.

“She is going to use her hundreds of millions of dollars, euros, and yen to help Chat Noir and keep us from finding him,” Gabriel said.

“But we know where she is,” Ladybug said. “We could go there now with the police and—”

“And what? Arrest her under suspicion of harboring a terrorist?”

“Why not?”

“Because the world doesn’t spin based on Ladybug’s word!” Gabriel snapped. “If you swing at her
and miss she is going to armor up and make life very difficult for us. The last thing we need is a fleet
of Tsurugi attorneys, private investigators, and personal bodyguards buzzing around the city.”

“But the longer she helps him, the more Chat Noir can train!” Ladybug said. “He’s gone from
punching a little harder than usual to throwing fireballs at my head in the span of two weeks!”

“Which is why you need to be careful,” Gabriel said. “Or allow me to send an akuma in to-”

“I thought I was very clear about how I feel about akuma,” Ladybug said, narrowing her eyes at
Gabriel.

“Then do it the old fashioned way,” Gabriel said, waving his hand. “Just don’t let her know you
even suspect her until you’re ready to eliminate her from the equation.”

“I’ll take that under advisement,” Ladybug said. “...Master He said that she couldn’t reach out to me
because you had somehow shielded me from her sight.”

“I took precautions to make sure no one meddled in our affairs,” Gabriel said. "It was that or she
would have found you the minute she set foot in the city." "

“Any other precautions I need to know about?”

“If we’re lucky, none that will come up,” Gabriel said smoothly.

“And if we’re not?"

“You’re just going to have to trust that I’ve taken all proper precautions,” Gabriel said with a thin
smile.

"I thought trust wasn't necessary for business relationships," Ladybug said.

"Have I done anything to betray our deal?” Gabriel asked. "I've held up my end of the bargain and I
will continue to hold up my end of the bargain as long as you honor yours. Trust me or don't...you
Ladybug nodded somewhat uncertainly, turning to leave before a thought stopped her.

“When you akumitize someone,” Ladybug asked, choosing her words slowly. “Do they know what’s happening?”

Gabriel regarded her for a long moment, face impassive as he shook his head. “No...the people I enlisted had no recollection of what happened after the deal was struck; they are blameless...well, almost.”

"Almost?"

"The person's feelings, wants, and desires still fuel the akuma," Gabriel said. "They're just...amplified beyond a person's capacity to control them. Anger becomes rage; attraction becomes all-consuming love. They're the same person, you see...just-"

"Amplified," Ladybug said. "And beholden to your will."

"That's a very simplistic way to put it, but I suppose you could put it that way," Gabriel shrugged. "Why do you ask?"

“Master He...she...” Ladybug trailed off, shaking her head with a small laugh. "You know what; it's nothing. Just something a bitter old woman said. I’ll let you know if Mayura finds anything on Kagami."

Gabriel watched Ladybug swing out his window, eyes following her until she disappeared from sight.

Ladybug: You learned a new trick.

Chat Noir: I’m full of surprises these days
Chat Noir: all from that training Master He and my key gave me

Chat Noir: how’s your key working out for you btw?

Chat Noir: ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh wait

Ladybug: Your little ploy didn't work.

Chat Noir: neither did yours

Ladybug: That key wasn't my only plan.

Chat Noir: mnhmm

Chat Noir: and how's your plan working out?

Chat Noir: because from where i'm sitting, you and your #miracusquad are on a losing streak

Ladybug: Only a matter of time before you make a mistake we can take advantage of.

Ladybug: How much longer do you think you can stay hidden from us?

Chat Noir: long as i need to

Chat Noir: might just leave town for a little bit; take plagg with me on a riviera vacation

Chat Noir: give you a few years to cool off and come to your senses
Ladybug: You expect me to believe that you're just gonna give up and leave while your real enemy is still kicking around?

Ladybug: That's not like you.

Chat Noir: yeah, well, I thought working with a lunatic wasn't like you but i guess i was wrong

Chat Noir: how's hawky doing?

Ladybug: Chat

Chat Noir: give him my best and let him know that the bottom of my boot has his ass' name written on it

Ladybug: Is Master He alright?

Chat Noir: oh you care?

Ladybug: I never wanted to hurt anyone.

Ladybug: Especially not a friend of Master Fu...if she is a friend of Master Fu that is.

Chat Noir: master he is fine

Chat Noir: she's been keeping fu alive this whole time

Ladybug: You trust her?

Chat Noir: well there's the small fact that she's been nothing but totally honest with me
Chat Noir: which is a hell of a lot more than i can say for you and fu

Ladybug: You're still hung up on that, aren't you?

Chat Noir: you're not because you've been in the loop since day one

Chat Noir: i did my job totally blind for a whole year before master fu revealed himself to me

Chat Noir: inb4 "it was safer that way"

Ladybug: It was safer that way.

Chat Noir: HA

Chat Noir: called it

Ladybug: We had to keep information in as few hands as possible.

Chat Noir: yeah, and what was the plan for when one of those hands started working for hawkmoth?

Ladybug: With

Ladybug: Not for.

Ladybug: And truth be told, he's not even working right now.

Ladybug: He's been effectively benched; he isn't going to be a threat anymore.
Chat Noir: nah, you're all the threat he needs these days, aren't you?

Chat Noir: who needs an akuma when you have a trained attack ladybug, right?

Ladybug: I'm only a threat as long as you want me to be.

Ladybug: The sooner you start cooperating the sooner we can fix this mess.

Ladybug: Unless you like people burning Chat Noir dolls in public bonfires?

Chat Noir: please

Chat Noir: you haven't made it as a superhero until people start burning effigys of you in the street

Chat Noir: what would spiderman be without j. jonah jameson calling him a menace all day?

Ladybug: ...seriously?

Chat Noir: more of a DC girl?

Ladybug: What needs to happen for you to start taking this seriously?

Ladybug: At what point are you going to stop seeing this thing we're part of as some kind of cool adventure?!

Ladybug: The fate of this city and our futures is on the line and you can't stop dropping fucking comic book references!

Ladybug: You are a wanted criminal, Chat!
Ladybug: If the police or those Stigma goons get their hands on you you're going to prison!

Ladybug: Your life is at stake here!

Ladybug: Don't you get that?!!

Chat Noir: i get that just fine

Ladybug: Then why aren't you acting like it?!

Chat Noir: ...man

Chat Noir: you are really not used to people not doing what you tell them to do

Chat Noir: you don't even know how to act right now, do you?

Chat Noir: you got nothing left to threaten me with, ladybug

Chat Noir: nothing to hold over my head now that the city is against me

Chat Noir: hell, all i need to do is wait you out until hawkdaddy loses his patience with you

Chat Noir: how long do you think he'll be a good boy?

Chat Noir: how many times are you going to fail to take my miraculous before he gets fed up and turns on you?

Chat Noir: i mean...i'm not the one with the ticking clock here
Chat Noir: you and hawkaboo are really keen on ending this NOW so

Chat Noir: it's really just in my best interests to just wait you out seeing as you have nothing to scare me with anymore

Ladybug: Are you sure about that?

Chat Noir: oooh what's that supposed to mean?

Ladybug: It means you should be careful about the people you choose to bring into our fight.

Chat Noir: is that supposed to be a threat?

Ladybug: No, of course not.

Ladybug: After all; I have nothing to threaten you with.

Ladybug: Right?

Chapter End Notes

So He v Ladybug went as well as everyone thought it would, right?

If you haven't noticed, we're about 16 chapters away from the end, but words wise we're about halfway through. I'm getting to the stuff I've wanted to write since I came up with the idea for this story, so it's going to be a lot longer in some parts as we get closer to the end.

As always, reviews fuel my writer furnace and I appreciate all the reviews I've gotten so far! It's amazing to see a story with almost as many comments as kudos and it's part of the reason I've been so regular with this fic.

Next time we're gonna do some character building! Let me know in the comments who you think I need to develop more and I'll block some time off for them. I've got a Mayura/Kagami scene and a Team Paris bonding/ship tease scene in the works but if there's others you'd like to see let me know!
As always, follow me at siderealscribblings.tumblr.com for writing updates/memes.
Mayura: listen asshole

Mayura: i don’t know who the fuck you think you are but Ladybug doesn’t need you harassing her online

Mayura: so why don’t you just do everyone a favor and leave her alone

Mayura: or better yet, just turn yourself in so we don’t have to drag you through the streets after taking your ring

Chat Noir: new magical interdimensional communicator, who dis?

Mayura: haha

Mayura: funny

Chat Noir: no i’m serious, are you a new Miraculous holder?

Chat Noir: if you are, we need to talk about ladybug and her gaudy new sidekick

Chat Noir: meduka i think his name is?

Chat Noir: complete tool; does what he’s told without thinking for himself

Mayura: god you’re a regular chucklefuck, aren’t you?

Chat Noir: i’ve been known to chuckle a few fucks in my day, yes

Chat Noir: you been spying on ladybug’s texts?

Mayura: no

Chat Noir: then how did you know we’ve been texting?

Mayura: i

Chat Noir: >:3c

Mayura: the screen was open and i saw your name in the log!

Chat Noir: spied my name in the log more like it

Chat Noir: that why ladybug broke up with you?

Chat Noir: she catch you going through her phone?

Mayura: none of your fucking business

Mayura: just a friendly reminder; you’re chuckling days are going to come to an end pretty soon here
Chat Noir: *your

Mayura: wow you never turn the asshole spigot off, do you?

Chat Noir: could say the same for you tweety

Mayura: at least i didn't stab my partner in the back

Chat Noir: i tried to stab her in the front, tyvm

Chat Noir: and i didn’t want to but mme. bossyspots tried to pull rank and take my miraculous

Chat Noir: so i made an executive decision

Mayura: to help a monster

Chat Noir: i thought we had this conversation already, junior

Chat Noir: why would i help someone that’s made regular attempts on my life since i was a kid?

Chat Noir: does that make sense to you?

Mayura: makes more sense than your crock of shit about ladybug

Chat Noir: what makes you believe her more than me?

Chat Noir: other than the fact that you’re obviously still in love with her?

Mayura: lol, who said i’m still in love with her?

Chat Noir: nobody

Chat Noir: but you act like it

Chat Noir: you act like i used to act before i finally took the hint and decided to stop chasing love that didn’t want me back

Mayura: and who says she doesn’t want me back?

Chat Noir: ha

Chat Noir: buddy

Chat Noir: lemme let you in on a little secret

Chat Noir: the reason she broke up with you is because she’s been in love with one guy since she was fourteen

Chat Noir: that guy isn’t me

Chat Noir: and he sure as swiss isn’t you

Chat Noir: i’m sure she gave you a shot because her one-sided crush wasn’t working out for her but she left you when she realized that you weren’t the person she was in love with

Mayura: bull
Mayura: and i cannot stress this enough

Mayura: shit

Chat Noir: you broke up mid-july of last year, yes?

Chat Noir: day before bastille day

Chat Noir: i'll take your long silence as confirmation of what i already knew

Chat Noir: you forget lb and i used to be close

Chat Noir: i remember that day because we watched the fireworks while she cried on my shoulder

Chat Noir: you want to know what she said to me?

Mayura: why do i get the feeling you’re gonna tell me no matter what i say?

Chat Noir: ‘i didn’t love him, chat’

Mayura: shut up

Chat Noir: ‘i tried and i tried and i tried and i don’t know why i didn’t feel anything for him’

Chat Noir: ‘because on paper we should have worked out! he's so sweet and funny and cute and i really think we could have been happy together’

Mayura: you’re so full of shit it isn’t even funny

Chat Noir: ‘but i don’t love him like he loves me’

Chat Noir: ‘and i don’t think i ever will’

Chat Noir: ‘so i thought it was best that we just part as friends’

Chat Noir: and i’m guessing she kept you close, didn’t she?

Chat Noir: close enough so that she could get what she needed out of you without letting you too close?

Mayura: don’t fucking talk like you know me or what our relationship is like

Chat Noir: oh, but i do

Chat Noir: you know why i don’t like you, mayura?

Chat Noir: other than the fact that you’re a spineless piece of tofu in the service of a super-villain?

Chat Noir: it’s because when I look at you, i see me

Chat Noir: and not the sexy feline predator we know and love today

Chat Noir: no, when i look at you, i see a younger, sadder version of myself

Chat Noir: i see a sad, desperate, infatuated idiot who would throw himself in front of a speeding train if meant ladybug would love him back
Chat Noir: i see someone who thinks being with ladybug and being a superhero is the answer to the miserable shitshow that is his life

Chat Noir: and that if buggy just gave him the time of day, whatever personal shit he was going through would just disappear and he would be happy as a clam

Mayura: man you are crazier than i thought if you think you have the first idea about who i am or what i want

Chat Noir: tell me i’m wrong

Chat Noir: tell me there’s not a part of you that’s still holding out hope that ladybug is going to fall back into your arms if you’re just cool enough or fast enough or willing to take enough damage for her

Mayura: fuck you

Chat Noir: she won’t though

Chat Noir: there’s nothing you can do

Mayura: jesus do you ever stop talking?!?

Chat Noir: being mayura; being her sidekick? being her “partner”? that isn’t going to make her love you again

Mayura: go to hell

Chat Noir: you know what, i’m sorry, i shouldn't have said that

Chat Noir: because, uh, technically, she never actually loved you to begin with

Mayura: you know what???

Mayura: at this point, i hope you don’t turn yourself in!!

Mayura: because i really want a chance to get my hands on you after ladybug takes your ring off!!1!!

Mayura: see how much shit you talk when you’re not chat noir anymore!!

Chat Noir: mayura

Chat Noir: my guy

Chat Noir: even without my ring

Chat Noir: i will always talk shit

Chat Noir: and i will always be chat noir

Mayura glared at the blinking communicator he hurled across the room through angry tears that streamed his cheeks as his teeth ground together.

“I hate him...,” Mayura muttered. “I hate him...I *hate* him....”
“What a dickhead,” Chat Noir muttered, closing his communicator and picking up the apple Plagg had placed before him.

“You think you got it?” Plagg called from the far side of the Sanctuary.

“You wanna watch?” Chat Noir asked, frowning as he stared at the apple in his hands. “Cataclysm!”

Chat Noir held his breath as a crackle of black energy arced out from his fingers, slipping through the core of the apple. Plagg examined the apple critically, looking for any blemish in the skin for a long moment before slicing it open, letting a trickle of black, decaying apple pulp ooze out of the perfectly unblemished apple skin.

“Not bad,” Plagg murmured, poofing another apple into existence. “Now Cataclysm the seeds without damaging the rest of it.”

“You gotta be kidding me,” Chat Noir groaned. “Look, I did the stupid candle trick; I Cataclysmed the skin off of an apple. I Cataclysmed through the skin of an apple! What’s the point of all this?!”

“The point, junior, is for you to get to a point when you can destroy anything you want and nothing you don’t,” Plagg said. “You’re the lens through which my phenomenal cosmic power of destruction gets focused, and the more focused you are, the less collateral damage you do. The point is to turn you from a thermonuclear warhead into a razor sharp engine of destruction.”

“We can’t go back to target practice on skeletons in ancient Troy?”

“Maybe once you get your destructive impulses under control,” Plagg said, curling up on a pillow he conjured out of black smoke. “Now get cracking; Plaggy likes his apples without seeds.”

Every nerve in Alya’s body burned.

Her legs like jelly; her lungs protested every pained breath of air. Whatever parts of her mind that had not gone blank from agony were devoted to devising creative ways to kill the bouncy blonde on the treadmill next to her.

“Come on, Cesaire; two minutes to go!” Chloe chirped, clapping her hands as Alya tried to vaporize Chloe’s hair with her mind.

“You... suck...” Alya panted, holding on to the rails of her treadmill for support.

“You were the one who said we should start meeting somewhere inconspicuous,” Chloe said. “Somewhere in public; somewhere where people wouldn’t look twice at us hanging out together.”

“Shut... up!”

“And Nino and I have been hitting this gym for years, so-”

“One more word...and I’m going to kill you!”

The sound of the treadmill beeping was a blessed relief to Alya who immediately hopped off the treadmill, still holding on to the railings as her legs wobbled like a newborn faun.

“Hey we still have our cooldown jog!”

“I’m going to cool down by dunking my head in a bowl of ice water,” Alya panted, upending her
water bottle on her head with a sigh of relief. Thankfully, the fitness club Nino and Chloe had frequented for a while was deserted enough that nobody noticed Alya leaning on an exercise machine as she struggled to catch her breath again. She still felt a little out of place, especially next to Chloe in her matching black and yellow striped top and running shorts.

“Don’t be such a baby,” Chloe huffed, hopping off the treadmill.

“You know the point of this was to have somewhere to talk, right?” Alya said, wiping her brow with the corner of her shirt as they walked past rows of identical cardio machines towards the weight room.

“So talk,” Chloe said. “Not like we got a lot to talk about; other than the fact that apparently Hawkmoth lives in my neighborhood, if Chat’s to be believed.”

“Did you hear the trap Hawkmoth was supposed to have triggered?”

“Yeah, but so did half the city,” Chloe shrugged. “And that’s assuming Chat didn’t just fire an airhorn out the window and claim it was Hawkmoth that set it off.”

“Fair point,” Alya nodded.

“There is just one other thing you should probably see,” Chloe said nudging the door to the weight room open as a grunt and clang of weights on the rubberized floor caught their attention. Nino stood in a weight rack in the corner of the room, staring down at a creaking barbell loaded with heavy steel plates on each side.

“What is that, a hundred kilos?” Alya asked, admiring the way Nino’s tank top rode up on his stomach as he stretched, staring down at the barbell with a somewhat bewildered smile. “Didn’t know it was leg day for you.”

“It’s not…” Nino said, glancing around for a moment before bending down, grabbing the barbell in the center and tugging it up and over his head in one, fluid motion.

“Wow, someone set a new personal-” Chloe trailed off as Nino let his left hand drop from the barbell, holding it high over his head with only one arm for a long moment before returning it to the floor with a heavy clang.

“Is...that normal?” Alya asked, eyes lingering on Nino’s exposed arm as he just stepped back, shaking his head with a beaming smile on his face.

“It’s about twice what I usually do with both arms,” Nino said. “I was cranking away at it this morning but I felt like it was still too light so...I just kept adding weight.”

“More than last time, right?” Chloe said with a toothy grin, leaning against the weight cage as Alya glanced between the two of them.

“Have you guys been measuring this?” Alya said, crossing her arms across her chest.

“Not formally, but we’ve been noticing that our old workouts have been getting pretty easy lately,” Chloe said. “I went from a ten minute mile two weeks ago to a six minute mile yesterday. We thought there was something funny going on but we weren’t sure until...just now.”

“What do you mean?” Alya asked.

“How far do you think you ran on the treadmill today?” Nino asked.
“I dunno...we ran for like, thirty minutes so I figure it was something like a mile or two?” Alya chuckled. “I was never the sporty type, but I kept pace with Chloe-”

“The biggest cardio bunny in the world besides Kim,” Nino chuckled. “Chloe?”

“Wasn’t that long; just a quick six kilometers,” Chloe said, smile widening as Alya’s glasses slipped from the arch of her nose.

“I...you said we...wait... what?!” Alya stammered, glancing down at her watch and tapping furiously until the kilometer tracker blinked an eight up at her. “But I was heaving and dying the whole time!”

“Still ran six kilometers in under thirty minutes,” Chloe pointed out. “After being a total couch potato for years.”

“Hey!”

“Your shirt has a carton of fries sitting on a sofa.” Chloe said, nodding down at the anthropomorphic potato on Alya’s stomach. “Nino and I thought there was some metaphysical bullcrap afoot, so we wanted to be sure.”

Alya glanced around the empty weight room for a moment. “Trixx?”

“Yes ma’am?” Trixx chirped, sticking their head out of the corner of Alya’s workout bag. “Y’all talking metaphysical bullcrap without me?”

“You wanna explain why my boyfriend can pick me up with one hand and why I can run like I actually like it?” Alya asked.

“Oh, is that happening already?” Trixx asked, nodding slowly. “Should have just asked me; you’re Bleeding.”

“What, where?!"

“Capital B Bleeding, dear,” Trixx snorted, watching Alya flail around, looking for blood. “Actually, it’s more accurate to say we’re Bleeding together; we all are.”

“Okay, ominous choice of wording aside, what is that supposed to mean?” Nino asked, glancing at his gym bag as Wayzz floated out.

“It means that aspects of your alter egos are bleeding into your true selves,” Wayzz explained. “Increased durability, vitality, stamina, and potency, to name a few. You’re never going to reach superhuman, but it won’t be long before the three of you reach peak human potential outside of your costumes.”

“I’m guessing Ladybug and Chat Noir are the same?” Chloe asked, glancing at Pollen who floated out of her hairpin.

“It doesn’t quite work that way,” Pollen said, glancing at Alya and Nino. “Ladybug and Chat have one destined partner; each of you has two. The three of us together form a special triad within the Inner Circle; one that was designed to work together as a unit. This Bleeding effect is the product of your newfound partnership; coming together as friends and allies under the auspices of protecting this city has formed...well, not to over-romanticize it, but it’s a special bond that affords you certain privileges.”

“Up to and including a training regime that would make Charles Atlas blush,” Nino said.
“Would it be gauche if we just swept the Paris marathon this year?” Chloe asked, eyes glinting with devilish glee. “Like hung back for the first part and then zipped our way to the podium?”

"Fuck the marathon; I'm taking the Tour de France back," Nino grinned. "On foot."

“Make no mistake, chickadees; this is not a good sign,” Trixx said, wagging their finger in a display of uncharacteristic seriousness. “The fact that our powers are Bleeding together means that something is seriously wrong with the world right now; wrong enough that empowering three teenagers beyond their limits is somehow the best solution to the problem the universe faces right now.”

"Ladybug and Chat Noir are not supposed to be at odds with one another," Trixx continued, looking each of them in the eye as they spoke. "Their lil' lovers spat goes beyond whatever stupid shit they think is worth fighting over. This is bigger than Paris and it's bigger than Hawkmoth; they are tearing apart two cosmic forces that are supposed to be in perfect harmony. So whatever it takes to put a stop to this fight and get Tikki and Plagg under the same banner again, we need to do it. If not-

“The shit is gonna hit the fan?” Nino asked, sharing an uneasy glance with Chloe.

“The shit will hit the fan, blow up the fan, burn down the fan lives in, kill the fan’s extended family, and probably burn the city down in the process,” Trixx surmised, patting Alya on the shoulder. “No pressure, or anything, but you three might wanna start making gym dates part of your usual schedule.”

“How’d recon go?”

Luka shrugged, making his way down the street at Marinette’s side. “It went. Nothing really of note. She eats leftover Chinese takeout alone, she watches Downton Abbey in her pajamas, she reads until like two in the morning...honestly, it’s like she’s an old woman in a twenty year old Olympic fencer’s body.”

“You haven’t seen Chat or Master He at all?”

“No...not like she hasn’t had her share of nocturnal visitors though,” Luka said, scratching the back of his neck.

“Is that a tactful way of saying ‘booty calls’?” Marinette snorted.

“You tell me,” Luka shrugged. “The other night I saw...well, I saw Adrien step out of her bedroom to make a phone call.”

Marinette blinked, heart thumping uncomfortably in her chest. “...oh. Are you-”

“It was a full moon and I was maybe fifty yards from the guy,” Luka added. “He was talking on the phone with his dad...I don’t know what the deal is with you two, if it’s like a casual thing but-”

“I’m...sure they were just hanging out as friends,” Marinette chuckled, chewing on her lower lip as she clutched her binder to her chest.

“Exes don’t just hang out with friends, Mari,” Luka said.

“We do.”

“Yeah, but...” Luka trailed off with a shrug. “Different with us, isn’t it? We’re more than just exes,
we’re...partners.”

“Well unless you see him with his tongue down her throat, I think we’re gonna err on the side of giving him the benefit of the doubt,” Marinette said a little sharply. “It’s that or working with his father is going to get a lot more complicated.”

“Still can’t believe you turned into a suit on me,” Luka chuckled, flipping the collar of Marinette’s blazer. “I thought you hated that guy.”

“I do.”

“All those times you said he was such an asshole .”

“He is ...well, was. He’s mellowed out-”

“And you’re still working for him?”

“Okay, so Gabriel Agreste is a grade-A prick with a stick so far up his ass he can’t even bend over properly,” Marinette admitted, adjusting her collar. “He’s also one of the top designers in the world and offered me an internship; prick or not, I couldn’t turn that down.”

“Guess not,” Luka muttered, running a hand through his hair as they walked down the street, giving a pair of black-clad Stigma personnel a wide berth as they passed.

“Would you turn down a gig with Axl Rose if he offered?” Marinette asked, slowing as a small crowd blocked their path.

“If Axl Rose offered me a gig, then-”

“Touch me again, and I’ll have you fired!”

Chloe’s shrill, imperative voice cut above the chatter of the crowd as Marinette and Luka shared a quick look. Elbowing past a wall of rubbernecking citizens, they made their way to the front of the crowd to see Chloe standing between a terrified looking old couple, glaring at a tall, somewhat embarrassed looking police officer accompanied by two Stigma security personnel. Marinette spied a rather sickly looking Alya at the far side of the crowd, shuffling next to her as her shoes crunched on broken glass as she walked.

“What’s going on?” Marinette asked, glancing at the broken window behind the couple and recognizing the small enclosure full of pet cages she had visited with Chat Noir on a couple of occasions. “Alya?”

Alya blinked, shaking her head as she took sight of Marinette and Luka for the first time. “The, uh...the cops wanted to take the shelter owners in for questioning. Chat Noir was always fond of them in the past so-”

“So they think they know where he is?!” Marinette hissed, turning pale as Chloe stared the officer down.

“Mme. Bourgeois-”

“That’s Mme. Queen Bee to you!” Chloe snapped, transforming in a flash of yellow light that nearly blinded Marinette. The Stigma guards noticeably unclasped the latches that held collapsible batons as Queen Bee crossed her arms. “As I’ve said already, the Abels have been cleared of any suspicion already; Ladybug and I have already checked all the shelters, charities, and organizations Chat Noir
supported and none of them have been proven to have any knowledge of Chat Noir’s whereabouts!”

“You did?” Luka muttered as Marinette just shook her head. She hadn’t even considered the civilian contacts Chat Noir had made as potential threats.

“We are under strict orders from Captain van der Meer-”

“Who is here at the pleasure of the Mayor who happens to be my father,” Queen Bee said. “And I swear, if you lay a finger on these people, you and your little henchmen here won’t even be able to work mall security after I’m done with you!”

The police officer glanced at the Stigma guards who just scowled at Queen Bee, muttering something under their breaths as they backed away from the increasingly angry looking crowd.

“I’ll have to report this to the chief,” the police officer mumbled, running a hand through his hair.

“I’m having dinner with his family tomorrow; I’ll tell him myself,” Queen Bee said, making a dismissive little wave with her hand as the crowd started to break up. “Alright, show’s over people; back to work!”

“Chloe to the rescue...never thought I’d see the day,” Marinette chuckled weakly, fighting down a rising sense of nausea as her eyes roamed over the shattered glass window that once hosted cute pictures of playing kittens; one of which Ladybug had helped to paint during an adoption drive she and Chat Noir had done a year or two back. Of course he had decided to champion stray cats; he never managed to adopt any but mysteriously came up with money to cover adoption fees, vaccinations, and other essentials so people could have just walked away with any cat they liked.

If Alya heard Marinette, she didn’t respond, blankly staring at the broken window and the teary couple being consoled by Queen Bee of all people.

“Send the bill to the Mayor’s office; it’ll get taken care of,” Queen Bee said with a small smile, patting the older couple on the shoulder as she turned to face Marinette with a small frown. “Oi, bread-girl! You want to move it along? Uncle Gabriel isn’t going to accept rubbernecks as an excuse as to why you’re late for work.”

Marinette shot Queen Bee a scowl as she passed, collecting herself and marching past the animal shelter.

“Let it never be said Queen Bee is without her charm,” Luka snorted, shaking his head as he fell into step beside Marinette. “Girl goes from Mme. Congeniality to her old venomous self at the drop of a hat.”

Luka glanced at Marinette’s dour expression with a worried frown. “You okay?”

“...those people were targeted because-” Marinette let out a deep sigh, pinching the bridge of her nose. “They were targeted because-”

“Hey,” Luka said, laying a hand on her shoulder and turning her until she faced him. “Those people were targeted because Chat Noir made a bad series of choices; this is not your fault, Marinette.”

“But if I-”

“The only reason this stupid fight is still happening is because Chat Noir is too fucking proud to hand himself in,” Luka continued, tucking a strand of hair behind Marinette’s ear. “You didn’t start this; any collateral damage is on his head, not yours.”
Marinette shook her head, blinking quickly as she let out a shaky breath. “I wish I believed that...I really do...I just...I just-”

This was always going to have a cost...

“It’s just...not fair other people have to pay the price for this fight,” Marinette said, leaning into a hug as Luka wrapped his arms around her shoulders. “It’s not fair...none of this is-”

“It’s okay,” Luka murmured, resisting the urge to run his fingers through her hair. “It’s gonna be over soon...it’s gonna be-”

“Marinette?”

Marinette pulled away from Luka as though a jolt of electricity had suddenly coursed through him, turning around as Adrien stood in the middle of the sidewalk, glancing between them with a small frown of confusion.

“Everything okay?” Adrien asked, frown deepening as he noticed the smudges in Marinette’s mascara.

“F-Fine!” Marinette said, wiping her eyes and stepping into Adrien’s embrace as Luka hovered somewhat awkwardly next to her. “I just...the, uh, shelter up the street was being harassed by some of those security goons and-”

“I know the one,” Adrien said, wiping a tear off Marinette’s cheek with a warm, reassuring smile. “You wanna stop by the makeup room before your shift starts?”

“Your father-”

“Can wait a little bit,” Adrien said, slipping his hand into Marinette’s as he shot Luka a somewhat apologetic smile. “Sorry, we should-”

“Yeah, no, by all means,” Luka said. “I should probably be on the clock now anyway.”

“I’ll talk to you later,” Marinette said, waving as she turned, walking hand in hand with Adrien down the street. Luka’s lips twisted into an unhappy scowl as Adrien leaned in, saying something that made Marinette let out a snort of laughter audible even from where he was standing. Adrien’s arm disengaged from Marinette’s hand, slipping around her waist in a gesture that made Luka’s blood boil as Chat Noir’s words echoed in his mind.

She’s been in love with one person since she was fourteen...and it isn’t you.

Marinette ignored the exasperated glare Gabriel’s new assistant shot her as she snuck past him, quietly knocking on the door to Gabriel’s office.

“M. Agreste,” Marinette called, nudging the door open as she stepped into the office to see Gabriel standing at his drafting board, eyes scrutinizing every sweep of his pencil as his hand moved in a blur across the page.

“Sorry, I’m late,” Marinette muttered, making her way over to the small desk she occupied in the corner of the office. “I-”

“Adrien called up and explained,” Gabriel said almost distractedly. “Seems you’ve had quite the morning.”
“Won’t happen again,” Marinette promised, dropping her purse in the chair as she began rifling through the stack of mail addressed to Gabriel.

“I’m afraid it will,” Gabriel muttered, frowning at his sketch for a long moment. “As long as those jackbooted thugs Andre hired are skulking about the city.”

“Not the nicest of people, are they?” Marinette asked, earning a distracted *hm* from Gabriel in response. Marinette took this as a cue that the pleasantries were over for the moment as Marinette carefully weeded through the small pile of mail in front of her. A neatly folded piece of parchment stood out from the stack of fashion magazines and invoices, the bright gilded words on the front reading “You’re Invited”.

“Anything that requires my attention?” Gabriel asked.

“Expecting an invitation to something?” Marinette asked, holding the card up for Gabriel to see. One look at it and Gabriel groaned, rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

“Andre’s bloody soiree,” Gabriel muttered darkly. “That man gets less and less tolerable the closer he gets to election season…”

“Shall I decline?”

“Afraid I’m rather obligated to go,” Gabriel said. “Can’t exactly stand up Ladybug and her entourage, can I?”

Marinette’s heart skipped a beat as she was painfully reminded she was currently sorting Hawkmoth’s mail. “Ladybug?”

“Andre wants to throw a ‘thank you’ gala for the heroes of Paris,” Gabriel explained, tilting his head as he looked at his sketch through squinted eyes. “For all they’ve done to stop Hawkmoth and Chat Noir…old sport’s trying to glean a little of their credibility since his Stigma security personnel have been quietly lowering his ratings since he invited them here.”

“I see,” Marinette said, dropping the invitation on the keyboard on her laptop.

“It’s rather garish if you ask me,” Gabriel muttered. “He’s becoming more like a lamprey with every passing election cycle; clinging to whatever will keep him in office and feeding on their scraps.”

“And that’s Ladybug?”

“No…that’s Chat Noir,” Gabriel said, leaning back with a sigh. “It’s easier to unite the populace *against* something rather than *behind* something. Boogeymen keep voters scared and seeking stability.”

“I thought Hawkmoth would have been that boogeyman,” Marinette said, glancing at Gabriel out of the corner of her eye.

“Chat Noir’s proven to be a more effective cudgel to threaten the people of Paris with,” Gabriel said. “Given his penchant for theatrics. Andre’s going to bang his anti-Chat Noir drum as long as it keeps making noise…part of the reason this gala’s being thrown, really.”

“Fun,” Marinette said, prompting a dry snort from Gabriel.

“Andre wouldn’t know fun if it slapped him in the face,” Gabriel said, glancing up at Marinette for the first time since she entered. “Never mind the invitation; I need your opinion on something.”
Marinette blinked, slightly dazed by the fact that one of her former fashion role models had asked her for advice. “Me?”

“I can’t tell what’s wrong with this design,” Gabriel muttered, stepping back as Marinette walked around the side of his drafting table. Even with what she knew about him, Marinette couldn’t help but be mildly dumbstruck by the clean, precise sketch Gabriel had etched in graphite. The faceless, perfectly poised model wore a sweeping, ankle length dress, exquisitely sketched, but somehow…

“Any thoughts?” Gabriel prompted, leaning back and watching as Marinette squinted at the design.

“It’s gorgeous…but…” Marinette trailed off with a small chuckle. “I don’t know if I should-”

“I insist,” Gabriel said, folding his arms as Marinette squared up with the sketch.

“It hides too much,” Marinette said, tilting her head to one side. “Especially the legs…I’m not saying put a slit up the side, but-”

Gabriel held out his pencil for Marinette to take, prompting her with a nod as she took the chipped, worn old pencil like it was the hilt of Excalibur, turning back to the design as she bit her lip.

“If you just...take it in here,” Marinette said, making a few lines of her own. “Raise the hem line, slim the straps, and-”

Marinette stepped back, glancing at Gabriel’s expression out of the corner of her eye. His stony, impassible face betrayed nothing as he stared at the drawing for the longest moment of Marinette’s life…and then he nodded, picking up the sketch with an approving glance.

“Yes...just what it needed,” Gabriel sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Thank you, Mme. Dupain, I...seem to be falling out of touch.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Marinette chuckled, scratching the back of her neck. “Your design was-”

“Something I would have come up with ten years ago,” Gabriel chuckled, shaking his head. “I get worried that I’m running out of good ideas; just rehashing the same designs over and over with different spins on them.”

“Only so many variations on a piece of cloth hanging off the shoulders,” Marinette said.

“And yet you managed to take this design into the modern era with a few strokes of a pencil after I stared at it all morning,” Gabriel said, raising his eyebrow with the barest hint of a smile. “You shouldn’t discount that out of hand.”

Gabriel’s eyes wandered back to the sketch with a thoughtful tilt of his head.

“You know, I think I’m going to have Michel file the mail from now on...I think I have another project for you to work on.”

Chapter End Notes

Had to break this chapter up because it was getting toothy and I wanted each mini scene to have its day in the spotlight. Wanted to do a little character development and start to set up the next major story points (the fashion show and the party) while doing some
character work (namely Luka's life circling the drain). Next chapter will move into some more character building (namely Luka's life circling the drain) and some more setup before the big party.

We only have a few more character building chapters before this roller coaster peaks at the top of the first drop so please let me know if there's anything you want to see/character questions you want answered before I kick into MAXIMUM OVERDRIVE.
“He wants me...to design a dress...for the show...in London!”

“You can’t seriously be surprised,” Adrien said, watching Marinette practically bounce down the street beside him. “I knew it was only a matter of time before he moved you from note taking to doing actual design work.”

“It’s still a Gabriel show in London,” Marinette repeated as though she were trying to convince herself she wasn’t dreaming. “It’s going to be filmed; my designs are going to appear on television...oh my God, my designs are going to be on television...oh my God, what have I gotten myself into?!”

“The opportunity of a lifetime?” Adrien said, arm sliding around her waist as he tried to get out in front of a freak-out. “You’re gonna do fine; Dad wouldn’t put you on the London show if he didn’t think you had the chops for it.”

“Still, this is...” Marinette let out a shaky laugh. “I feel like it’s kinda my debut, right? This is my introduction to the world of fashion. I go through with this and I suddenly drop the ‘aspiring’ part of being an aspiring fashion designer....and I only have two weeks to go from sketch to full design!”

“I’m guessing that means you’re gonna be busy next Saturday?” Adrien chuckled.

“Oh...yeah, probably not gonna be able to accompany you to this Ladybug shindig the mayor is throwing,” Marinette said, quietly grateful that she had a built in excuse to explain why she couldn’t go to Mayor Andre’s ball as herself. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be; not like I’m super jazzed about having to go and rep the family name,” Adrien sighed.

“High society gigs not your thing?” Marinette chuckled.

“Especially not when they’re glorified political rallies for Chloe’s dad,” Adrien said, glancing at Marinette out of the corner of his eye. “I’m surprised that Ladybug’s team is so open to being used
“Well...Ladybug’s never been one to shy away from a good cause,” Marinette said diplomatically. “Though I don’t know if Mayor Andre’s reelection campaign qualifies…”

“Ladybug loves the spotlight,” Adrien muttered.

“What’s...that supposed to mean?” Marinette chuckled, smiling a little uncertainty.

“Just that Paris’ number one hero isn’t shy about posing for the camera,” Adrien said. “Gone on quite a press tour since splitting with Chat Noir.”

“I guess she thinks people need to be kept abreast of the situation,” Marinette said somewhat evasively.

“Guess so,” Adrien said. “What do you...what do you think of all this? This Ladybug and Chat Noir stuff I mean.”

A cold shudder washed over her as she fought to keep her expression neutral. “It’s...terrible, isn’t it? Sad that Chat Noir turned on Ladybug after all those years of partnership.”

“You believe her then?”

“You don’t?” Marinette asked, looking up at Adrien with a frown.

“I’m...just a little confused as to Chat Noir's motives,” Adrien shrugged. “A guy puts his life on the line for four years and he suddenly decides to side with Hawkmoth?”

“Maybe he got akumitized.”

“Would Ladybug really hold a press conference calling him out if he was?” Adrien said, carefully studying Marinette’s neutral expression. “I mean, if that was the case, wouldn’t she just say he was akumitized rather than making it out like he joined Hawkmoth voluntarily?”
“Don’t know,” Marinette shrugged.

"I mean, correct me if I'm wrong, but he saved your life a couple of times, right?"

"I mean, it was a while ago, but-"

“And then there’s this Mayura guy, I mean, he comes out of nowhere and Ladybug acts like she’s know him for years-”

“Well, maybe she has!” Marinette said a little sharply. “I’m sorry, I just...this whole situation is making me nervous and these thugs are roaming the streets and because of all this-”

“Okay, okay,” Adrien said soothingly. “I’m sorry; I won’t bring it up again.”

“Thanks…” Marinette said, forcing a small laugh to break the tension as they saddled up to the back door of her parent’s. “I just really want to fast forward to next spring, you know? We’ll be out of school, I'll be on my way to the career of my dreams, and we’ll be…”

Marinette trailed off as Adrien’s eyebrow raised. “Go on.”

“I...well, I-I haven’t really thought about it much,” Marinette lied, twirling the end of her hair as she avoided Adrien’s increasingly widening smirk. “I thought that if...well, if things were still going well between us, we could...I-I mean, Paris and London aren’t that far apart, so we could...keep in touch.”

“Keep in...touch?” Adrien prodded, fingers running over the back of her knuckles. He had a habit of playing with her hands when she wasn’t paying attention, drawing her focus back to the way his fingers laced through hers.

“Well...I mean if things are going the way they’re going now—and crazy schedules aside, I think they’re going great!—I was thinking...I don’t know, I know long distance is tough on the strongest relationships-”
Marinette had barely registered the fact that Adrien was leaning in before he kissed her, neatly derailing her train of thought with a press of his lips against hers. Her breath left her mouth in a small, shocked squeak as she instinctively gripped his forearms, pulling him closer as she backed up against the back wall of her parent’s bakery. It was sudden, sweet, and over much too soon for Marinette’s liking as Adrien pulled away, licking his lips with a smile plucked fresh out of her fondest First Kiss With Adrien fantasy collection.

“I think that no matter what happens, we should keep in very close touch,” Adrien murmured, tucking a strand of hair behind Marinette’s ear.

“Yeah...yeah, touching you sounds good,” Marinette said, blinking as Adrien’s smirk only widened. “Keeping in touch with you sounds good! Y-Yeah, that’s what I meant! I-I mean, not that I, uh...don’t want to touch you I just...uh...c-can you shut me up again?”

Adrien thankfully obliged, fingers lacing through her hair as his free hand snaked around the side of her waist. It was almost a relief to be held like this; to be touched and kissed and caressed in a way that made the chaos and confusion of her superpowered existence seem to melt away. There was no war with Chat; no city on the verge of splitting apart. Just the cold November wind and Adrien’s warm lips on hers.

“Thanks,” Marinette murmured, pulling back with a small laugh.

“Anytime,” Adrien said as a soft buzzing drew his attention to his pocket. “I should...probably let you get to work.”

“Please tell your father that next time he wants me to design something, I need at least a month or so lead-time,” Marinette chuckled, stepping back with a small twinge of regret. Duty once again called and Marinette found herself unable to spend her time as she wanted.

“Let it never be said that Gabriel Agreste has reasonable expectations of anyone,” Adrien chuckled, leaning in for a brief peck on the lips. “I’ll call you tonight?”

“Sure,” Marinette said, arching up and stealing one last kiss before fumbling with the doorknob behind her. Against all inclination, Marinette managed to stop herself from dragging Adrien indoors with her, letting him go with a smile and a wave as her heart thumped noticeably against her chest with each beat. She managed to contain the bubbling squeal of joy until Adrien was out of sight, almost floating upstairs on a wave of giddiness that she hadn’t experienced in weeks.
“That boy is mine~ That boy is miiiiii~ne!” Marinette sang as she stepped through her trapdoor, spinning around and drawing a fresh sheet of drafting paper from under her desk. “What do you think, Tikki? Put the tablet aside and go back to basics?”

“If you think that’s best,” Tikki said quietly, floating out of Marinette’s clutch and perching on the edge of the drafting table as Marinette went to work, scratching out a design as she hummed a jaunty tune under her breath.

“You know, the alley behind my house was not at the top of my list for places to have my first kiss with Adrien, but honestly I’ll take it,” Marinette chuckled, pencil rhythmically scratching on the page as she drew.

“As long as you’re happy,” Tikki said softly.

“And I know it’s going to be a rough go of things until December, but God, I have a shot,” Marinette said with a fierce laugh. “I have a shot to show the world what I can really do, you know? I mean, M. Agreste could have given me a little more lead time, but-”

“He’s...M. Agreste now?” Tikki asked, raising her eyebrow.

“To my knowledge, he’s always been M. Agreste,” Marinette said.

“You’ve just never referred to him like that,” Tikki said.

Marinette felt her elation start to slowly ebb away like air out of a worn balloon. “Well, he is my boss now.”

“I thought you weren’t working for Hawkmoth,” Tikki said. “Isn’t that what you told Chat? That you weren’t-”

“I’m not working for Hawkmoth,” Marinette said, frowning as a low, pounding headache began to creep up on her. “I’m working for Gabriel Agreste.”

“Who is Hawkmoth.”
“Who is occasionally Hawkmoth,” Marinette said, ripping the design off the drafting board and tossing it in the trash. “Ladybug is still not working for Hawkmoth.”

“And you’re not Ladybug?”

“Not when I’m on the clock at Gabriel,” Marinette said, avoiding Tikki’s probing gaze as she tried to focus on her drawing. “Tikki, if we could save the lecture for another time, that would be peachy; I need to get an idea going so I can start putting something into production.”

“Of course,” Tikki sniffed, floating away as Marinette’s pencil flowed across the page, cutting sharp corners and weaving wide lines as she struggled to ignore the headache she could feel coming on. “Wouldn’t want to disappoint your new master, now would we?”

Marinette’s pencil snapped the second before her patience did as she whipped around, with a frustrated snarl. “God why can’t you just...why can’t you just be happy for me right now?! Why can’t you just be happy that my hard work and dedication is finally starting to pay off?!”

“How am I supposed to be happy that you’re working for-”

“Gabriel Agreste; a man with the contacts and clout I need to succeed in the fashion industry which, by the way, is the career I’ve wanted for myself since I was four!” Marinette sighed, shaking her head. “I have worked, and struggled, and perfected my craft, but that doesn’t mean anything if I can’t get my foot in the door. And for all his faults, Gabriel Agreste is that foot in the door.”

“His faults don’t worry me as much as the fact that you’re working too closely with Hawkmoth,” Tikki said. “He is pulling you under his wing! The closer you two work together, the more chances he has to-”

“To what?” Marinette laughed. “To find out I’m Ladybug? Tikki, I’ve given him nothing to go on; no reason to suspect that his future protege is his reluctant business partner! He doesn’t know anything except exactly what I want him to know.”

“I know, but...I have a bad feeling about this,” Tikki said, rubbing her temples with a sigh. “Working so close to him sets my teeth on edge...if you let anything slip-”
“Give me some credit; I was partners with Chat Noir for four years and he never suspected anything,” Marinette said, turning back to her drawing with a shake of her head. “You need to have a little faith in me Tikki; we are on track to end this once and for all!”

“How?!” Tikki demanded. “Chat has done nothing but give you the slip for almost two months now. You ran the last time he stared you down and nearly got yourself caught in the process! You have nothing to go on!”

“Nothing except one of Chat’s confidants,” Marinette reminded Tikki, turning away from her kwami as she defiantly tried to sketch.

“...what are you planning on doing to her?”

“What am I planning on...doing to her?!” Marinette said, turning to Tikki. “Doing to her?! Tikki, who do you think I am? You think I’m going to kidnap her in the middle of the night and make her tell me where Chat Noir is? You think I’m going to squeeze her for information or hold her hostage to draw Chat Noir out?! No, I am not going to do anything to Kagami; we are just going to wait until Chat Noir shows up again and then we are going to bag him!”

“And if Kagami gets caught in the middle-”

“Then hopefully Chat Noir has the wherewithal to be concerned for her safety,” Marinette said, the pounding in the back of her head increasing in tempo. “He brought her into this; she’s his responsibility, not mine.”

“So Chat’s responsible for everything now?” Tikki challenged. “Responsible for Kagami, responsible for this fight, responsible for-?”

“Would be a nice change of pace, wouldn’t it?” Marinette grumbled. “About time he started showing some damn responsibility after flitting around like a Comic-Con refugee for our entire partnership.”

Tikki glared at Marinette for a long moment. “Is he responsible for that business at the shelter as well?”

Marinette’s pencil stopped scratching as she just glared at the page, lip trembling and nose scrunched in defiance. “...I intend to fix that.”
“So it is your responsibility after all-”

“You just love scolding me, don’t you?” Marinette laughed bitterly, shaking her head. “Everybody just loves slapping my hands the second I’m not completely perfect, don’t they? The second I’m not a pure, selfless paragon of all that is good and holy, you and Master He and Chat all start wagging your fingers at me like I’m a naughty child! Because everybody else gets to have fun and make mistakes but not Marinette. No, it’s just duty and sacrifice and responsibility for me, isn’t it?!?”

“Marinette, I’m only saying this because I’m getting worried about you!” Tikki cried, gently touching Marinette’s shoulder. “You’re not acting like yourself; you’re angry and-”

“Yes, I’m angry!” Marinette snapped. “I’m angry that I am the only one in this city who has to put her life on hold! I’m angry that my partner of four years is being a spoiled brat and waging a pointless war just to hurt me! I’m angry because I have this little nagging voice in my ear that has to undercut my every decision and question my choices! I thought you were on my side!”

“I am, but-”

“You would just rather I go back to being the doormat who put the whole world’s needs before her own!” Marinette said, brandishing her pencil at Tikki. “You would rather I just continue to carry the weight of the world on my shoulders with a happy-go-lucky smile on my face! You would rather I go on being Ladybug without a grumble or complaint because fuck what Marinette wants, right?! Did it ever occur to you, Tikki, that I have other wants and needs and desires besides being a superhero?! Did you ever think that being Ladybug isn’t what I want to do for the rest of my life?!”

Marinette’s lips trembled from the force of her words as Tikki just stared at her, as though she was properly seeing Marinette for the first time.

“...I didn’t know this was such a pain for you,” Tikki said, eyes turning flinty as she turned away. “Fine...once this is all over and done with we can talk with Master Fu. I’m sure with Hawkmoth out of the way, you’ll be free to find someone else to take your place.”

Marinette said nothing as Tikki turned and floated into the dollhouse with a light slam of the small plastic door. She glared stubbornly at the sketch in front of her, pencil weaving lines around the small drops of water that landed on the page.
Ladybug: Hey can I ask a favor?

Alya: Shoot

Ladybug: Chloe told me about the pet shop today

Alya: Shelter

Ladybug: Right right the pet shelter

Ladybug: I was hoping you could put a post up on the Ladyblog clearing the air around the charities and businesses Chat Noir supported.

Ladybug: We want to try and avoid misunderstandings like that in the future.

Alya: Yeah, I was actually thinking of doing a piece on the Abels.

Alya: You know their shelter was open during the occupation in the forties?

Alya: I just think it would be helpful to remind people that their fellow citizens don’t deserve the blame for whatever is going on between you two.

Ladybug: Right right.

Ladybug: Send it over before you post it and I’ll check it over.

Alya: Oh, you don’t need to do that.

Alya: The Ladyblog is sorta my deal so you don’t really need to worry about it.
Ladybug: Right, no, sure.

Ladybug: I just thought that with certain high-profile communications, I should really stamp it to give it some more credibility.

Ladybug: Not that the Ladyblog isn’t credible!!!

Ladybug: It’s just...you know.

Alya: I don’t lol.

Alya: Do you not trust me to print the right story?

Alya: Because that’s sorta what I do.

Ladybug: Nononono!

Ladybug: I totally trust you!

Alya: So why would you need to “check it over” before I post it?

Ladybug: No, you’re right

Ladybug: I’m sorry if I implied I didn’t trust you

Ladybug: Go ahead and post whatever you’d like
Ladybug: Heyyyyyy there ace reporter!

Alya: Hey ya.

Alya: You see the post?

Ladybug: I did, I did.

Ladybug: GREAT work as always, Alya.

Ladybug: Just had a teeny tiny suggestion.

Alya: Yes?

Ladybug: Well, in the second paragraph you say

Ladybug: “The Paw-n Shop was one of six homeless animal shelters endorsed by Chat Noir who helped raise more than fifty-thousand euro for animal charities last year alone.”

Alya: Were those numbers off?

Alya: That’s what we reported the same time last year, isn’t it?

Ladybug: It is, it’s just...well, it’s a little flattering towards Chat Noir, isn’t it?

Alya: The truth is the truth whether it’s flattering or not.

Ladybug: I’m just wondering if we need to include it here.
Ladybug: We’re trying to unite the city and I feel like lines like these might give the Chat Noir fans on the forums fuel for their arguments.

Alya: Lines like those are in every back-issue of the Ladyblog.

Alya: What do you want me to do; archive every article that even remotely praises Chat Noir?

Ladybug: I don’t think we need to go that far.

Ladybug: But don’t see how bringing up Chat Noir’s past good deeds is relevant here.

Ladybug: He’s lost the right to glowing editorial when he did what he did.

Alya: I’m just trying to tell a complete story.

Alya: People will connect with these shelters better if I bring up what Chat’s done for them in the past.

Alya: It’s relevant because it creates an emotional connection in the minds of the readers.

Ladybug: An emotional connection that puts our enemy in the limelight.

Alya: So you’re saying, what, I need to take it down?

Ladybug: I’m just asking you to show a little more tact when it comes to bringing up Chat Noir in the future.

Ladybug: And maybe consider limiting Chat Noir’s presence on the Ladyblog to just the facts.

Ladybug: That’s all
“Is it just me or is Ladybug getting...snippier than usual lately?” Nino muttered, reading Alya’s texts as she paced back and forth across the length of Chloe’s penthouse.

“Snippy isn’t the adjective I would use,” Chloe said, leaning on Nino’s shoulder as she read the texts. “She is really scolding you, isn’t she?”

“Maybe consider limiting Chat Noir’s presence to just the facts!” Alya chirped in a high-pitched, overly saccharine mockery of Ladybug’s voice. “Like who the fuck died and appointed her editor and chief of the Ladyblog?! I don’t see her name anywhere on the staff-roll!”

“It is on the header, the page title, most of the forum names-” Chloe trailed off as Alya shot her a venomous glare. “What?! You’re the one who erected a digital shrine to the woman. You’re surprised she’s acting like she owns it?”

“Yeah, well, if she thinks my website exists just to glorify her spotted ass, she’s got another thing coming,” Alya muttered.

“I thought we were playing the smart game here,” Nino said, leaning back in his chair. “You already posted one story Ladybug had a hand in creating; what’s the harm in taking out one line about Chat?”

“Because look what happened the last time I posted something Ladybug wanted in print!” Alya snapped. “This city devolved into a fucking police state complete with foreign mercenaries breaking windows and dragging eighty year olds in for questioning!”

“That isn’t your fault though,” Nino said, gently reaching out to lay a hand on Alya’s shoulder.

“But it is my responsibility,” Alya said, brushing Nino off as she paced over to the window. “Everything I post is my responsibility and if what I post leads to people getting hurt, then…then I don’t know if I should be posting it.”

“If you don’t, someone else will,” Nino countered. “Someone with less journalistic scruples than you.”
“Scruples,” Alya laughed bitterly. “I thought I traded those in for my Miraculous weeks ago.”

“Oh please, you think Nadja Chamack hasn't done some questionable things in pursuit of a story?” Chloe sniffed. “You don’t have to fix this now, Foxy.”

“She’s got a point,” Nino said, snaking around the side of Alya’s resolutely turned back. “We’re trying to fix this; we’re trying to get to the bottom of this-”

“And fat lot of good we’re doing so far,” Alya sniffed, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “People are getting hurt and for all the shit we talk about being ‘Team Paris’, we can’t seem to keep this city from falling apart.”

“Give us a little credit; we never expected shit to get so sideways,” Chloe said, fidgeting with the tip of her ponytail as Nino tried to console Alya. “We agreed to slow things down, right?”

“Yeah, but-”

“So the rest of the city didn’t get the message,” Chloe said. “If anything, this is gonna make Buggy and Kitty more nervous; nervous enough that maybe they’ll let something slip.”

“In the meantime, we do what we can to keep the people of Paris out of the line of fire,” Nino said, wiping a tear off Alya’s cheek. “We keep an eye on our friends and when we figure out who’s really working with Hawkmoth-”

“We pull their hair out by the root and put them in jail,” Chloe said with a toothy smile that Alya found oddly comforting. “And the Ladyblog can plaster it all over Paris.”

“I know, it’s just…” Alya let out a shaky sigh as she leaned against Nino’s shoulder. “I hate fumbling around like this… I hate not knowing if the next step I’m taking is the right one.”

“Isn’t that what we’ve always been doing as heroes?” Nino murmured into her hair. “We’ve never known what we were doing; we just-”
“Followed Ladybug’s orders,” Alya said. “And for all we know-”

“-she could be following Hawkmoth’s,” Chloe said. A still, awkward silence filled the apartment, punctured by the occasional sniffling from Alya as the three of them looked down at the city beneath them.

“Great, thanks for bumming us out Alya, ” Chloe sniffed, drawing a watery chuckle from Alya.

“I don’t see you making with the good news,” Nino snorted.

“Oh, ho, ho, funny you should say that, Shelly,” Chloe said, drawing three identical envelopes from her handbag. “Because guess who’s about to make you two popular.”

“Luka, can I have a minute?”

Luka’s eyebrow twitched, shoulders instinctively tightening as a white hot jolt of irritation crawled through him.

“Yes, Marco?” Luka said, closing the door to the back alley as he turned to face his manager.

“Look, you’ve been doing great handling the graveyard shift solo,” Marco said. “Everything’s set up fine and unpacked properly-”

“Why do I feel like there’s a but coming?” Luka sighed.

“I can’t pay you for four hours if you clock out after one,” Marco said, crossing his arms.

Luka’s frown deepened. “What are you talking about; I’m here all night and I hand off to Stephan in the morning.”
“The card reader has your badge leaving just after one,” Marco said. “The cameras in the loading bay show you walking down the street. Now, if this is something to do with your mom, I understand, but-”

“Marco, I have been working graveyard for weeks now and I haven’t so much as ducked out for a cheeseburger mid-shift,” Luka said, agitation bubbling up inside him like molten metal. “Even if I was, what difference does it make?! You said yourself that you didn’t have any complaints on how I closed up, right?!”

“Luka-”

“I just don’t get why my balls are the only ones being busted over this!” Luka snapped. “Simon can’t be bothered to show up half the time and I don’t see you riding him!”

“I don’t rely on Simon like I rely on you,” Marco said, eyes narrowing. “I don’t want to micromanage you, Luka-”

“Could have fooled me,” Luka muttered, snagging his jacket as he turned to leave. “I’ll be here for my shift tonight; my whole shift, thank you.”

Marco’s reply was cut short by the sound of the door slamming behind him as Luka stepped into the chilly night air, fists balled in his pockets as he shot the security camera outside the loading bay a dirty look.

“Fucking idiot,” Luka muttered under his breath. “Moron acting like I don’t know where I’ve been...trying to tell me I’ve been sneaking out...prick…”

Blood pounded in his ears as he ducked into an alleyway, glancing around before brushing his fingers across his belt buckle. In a flash of light, Mayura’s power settled over him and Luka immediately felt more at ease. The weight and banality of his life seemed to melt away, leaving nothing but pure, perfect peace that seemed to lift him with every step he took. There was a simplicity to being Mayura; as though all the doubt and stress that plagued his daily life was taken away and all he was left with was power and purpose.

It was that purpose that got him endless surveillance; purpose that got him through every failed battle and protected him from Queen Bee’s barbs.
Fuck em, Mayura thought as he floated above the rooftops. I’m not doing this for them...I’m doing this for-

Mayura paused as he always did across the street from Marinette’s bakery, glancing in her bedroom window to see her hard at work, pinning periwinkle blue fabric to the back of a mannequin. He wondered if he should stop in for a moment but she had a look on her face told him that she was deep in the middle of a design streak he didn’t feel like interrupting. Some of his favorite Sunday afternoons had been spent idly plucking away on his electric guitar while Marinette drafted or stitched in the corner. There was something so peacefully domestic about it; the sound of pencil on paper broken only by the occasional guitar lick and a smattering of conversation. In the early days of his mother’s diagnosis, Marinette’s loft had been an oasis of peace; a place where he could just escape for a few hours and spend time with someone he looked forward to spending the rest of his life with.

A cold, sick sensation trickled down throat as he imagined Adrien occupying his spot on Marinette’s fainting couch, sneaking up on Marinette and kissing the top of her head, tickling her as she laughed and playfully slapped his hands away-

Mayura turned away with a low, primal snarl, leaping into the night towards Kagami’s house to start his evening surveillance.

Mayura hadn’t moved in a little over an hour.

At first Kagami thought her security system had shorted out, displaying the same image as she pretended to watch TV. But the more she looked at him, the more she noticed the lack of any noticeable fidgeting or pacing like Mayura usually did when he watched her apartment. Instead, he just stood there, almost unblinking as he watched her front door with an almost single minded focus.

To be honest, it was more than a little unnerving.

Kagami made a show of stretching in front of the window, cracking her neck as she feigned a yawn and turned the television off. Keeping an eye on the figure across the street, Kagami made her way upstairs, knocking twice on the door to her office with a glance over her shoulder.

“Is that the pizza guy?”
“Ha ha,” Kagami said, wincing as the door to her office opened to a dark, chilly black oubliette. Kagami ducked in, tugging her cardigan around her shoulders as she descended the steps into Chat Noir’s Sanctuary.

“Hey, where’s my gorgonzola and ricotta calzone?” Plagg called from the far side of the Sanctuary.

“The pizza store refused to make it and called me a monster for ordering it,” Kagami said, sliding next to Chat Noir as he scowled at an apple on a pillar made of obsidian.

“Our friend still up there?” Chat Noir asked, growling in frustration as his Cataclysm peeled the skin off the apple.

“He’s just...staring at me,” Kagami said, glancing at the map and case files they had moved into the Sanctuary. “Hasn’t moved in an hour so...it’s very weird.”

“Yeah, well, he’s a weirdo,” Chat Noir muttered. “A big spineless weirdo who does whatever Ladybug tells him to do, including standing in the freezing wind for hours on end.”

“He does seem to have stepped up his patrols recently,” Kagami said with a shudder. “It was lucky that Ladybug let you know she was taking more of an interest in me; I shudder to think what would happen if Mayura found our files in my office.”

“Either I got lucky or Ladybug’s getting sloppy,” Chat Noir sighed, scratching the back of his head. “Both are probably signs the world is coming to an end.”

“I have to admit that I was surprised she texted you like that,” Kagami said. “It was almost...careless.”

“Too careless,” Chat Noir chuckled, biting his bottom lip. “The fact that she tipped her hand like that means we’re either getting to her or she’s losing control of the situation.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Kagami asked. “If Ladybug’s off balance then she’s more likely to make a mistake, right?”
“We need Ladybug to be off-balance but not think she’s off-balance,” Chat Noir said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “If I really wanted to screw Ladybug.”

“And I’m sure you have,” Plagg snickered.

“I would make her think she was in control of the situation until i was ready to make my move,” Chat Noir said, shooting a sharp glare at Plagg. “Once she knows she’s backed into a corner, she can start planning her way out. No, if we want to beat Ladybug, we need to convince her that she has the upper hand; let her think she's got me pinned down at your place while we work on figuring out a way to stop her. As long as she thinks her plans are working, she’s got no reason to alter her course of action.”

“So that's our plan for now?” Kagami asked. “Run the clock out?”

“I don’t believe for a second that Ladybug and Hawkmoth actually get along,” Chat Noir said, folding his arms as he looked up at the map. “As much as she's willing to hold her nose and work with him, I don't think they're having slumber parties at the Hawklair. They want this all over fast and the longer we make them wait for their neat and quick ending, the more friction we can create between them. All we need to do is frustrate them until they start fighting amongst themselves and swoop in once their war spills out into public.”

“And while we’re waiting, Andre’s security goons are starting to pick apart people who were close to you,” Kagami countered. “The longer you go without showing yourself, the more room people have to imagine you as some kind of boogeyman.”

“So what; start pulling cats out of trees and hope it improves my cred?” Chat Noir snorted. “I doubt the Ladyblog is gonna run a fluff piece on my sweeter side after that business with the shelter.”

“No, but just waiting for Ladybug and Hawkmoth to turn on each other doesn’t strike me as much of a plan,” Kagami sighed. “If you had the others on your side...could you take Ladybug and Mayura?”

Chat Noir frowned at the map for a long moment, saying nothing as his eyes scanned over little purple push-pins embedded in the paper.

“Maybe,” Chat Noir said, shooting a sidelong glance at Plagg. “Not sure yet...might need a few more tricks up my sleeve.”
“I’ll see what other kinds of toys I can rustle up for you, but you still need to get the other three on board somehow,” Plagg said. “Which means you need to prove Ladybug and Hawkmoth are working together.”

“It’s that, or find Hawkmoth’s hidden base ourselves and cut the snake off at its head,” Chat Noir sighed, rubbing his temples with the tips of his fingers. “So we have three ways forward; wait for Hawkmoth and Ladybug’s partnership to dissolve, get the others on my side to fight Ladybug and make her tell me where Hawkmoth is, or find Hawkmoth’s base and nab him with his pants down.”

“We can start pursuing them all at the same time and see which bears fruit first,” Kagami said, rubbing her chin. “I wonder if there’s a way to talk with them without drawing Ladybug’s eye…”

Chat Noir glanced at Kagami as a thoughtful smile spread across his face. “You up for one more date?”

Chapter End Notes

I'll be real, this chapter was really hard to write for some reason. I think because it's in the way of five chapters I REALLY want to write which are coming up very shortly. Hopefully this wasn't as boring for you to read as this was for me to write!

Next time we have high society intrigue! Plots! Secrets! Charcuterie!
“Oh...you just wore your suit?”

After almost three months of partnering with her, Mayura had come to appreciate the way Queen Bee managed to be effortlessly condescending. It was a real talent to be able to piss someone off with only a glance and an inflection of tone; if he ever wanted to become a professional asshole, Mayura knew the perfect mentor.

“Not everybody has a hundred euro to spend on a new dress,” Mayura muttered, glancing at the black and yellow ensemble Queen Bee wore over her superhero costume.

“Honey, the underwear I’m wearing costs more than a hundred euro,” Queen Bee said, adjusting her glittering topaz earrings with a patronizing look. “A tie would have been nice at least. This is a high-class event, after all.”

“How am I supposed to accessorize this?” Mayura asked, gesturing to his purple and blue feathered cape. "I'm dressed like David Bowie and Elton John abandoned their lovechild in Freddie Mercury's closet."

“If Carapace can accessorize with a car tire of a shield hanging out on his back, you could have at least made an effort,” Queen Bee said, gesturing to Rena who was straightening the black and green tortoise shell tie Carapace wore. “Look at Rena; just a black dress, heels, and some jewelry. Something to look like you didn’t just walk in off an Avengers set.”

“Come on; we’re superheroes. We don’t need to dress up to impress that lot,” Mayura said, gesturing through the curtain where Mayor Andre’s speech could be vaguely heard.

“*That lot* is paying for your drinks tonight, Tweety, so you might want to stow the holier-than-thou attitude before you start shmoozing,” Queen Bee sniffed.

“Can you save the charm for after the party, Chloe?” Ladybug said as she stepped in through the back door, glancing at her stylized teammates with a frown. “Were we...supposed to dress up?”
“Oh, look who’s suddenly overdressed!” Mayura crowed.

“Enough!” Ladybug hissed, shooting Mayura a warning glare. “Let’s...let's just get through this night in one piece and then you two can kill each other.”

“Looking forward to it,” Queen Bee sniffed, sliding between Carapace and Rena Rouge and linking her arms through theirs. “Our cue’s coming up; don’t trip on your ego on the way out the door.”

“More likely to trip all over yours,” Mayura muttered, ignoring the playful elbow from Ladybug as he offered his arm for her to take. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” Ladybug said, lacing her arm through his with a small smile. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Mayor Andre’s voice came through the curtain. “It is my privilege and honor to welcome the Heroes of Paris!”

Ladybug stepped through the curtains into a storm of flashing lights and thunderous applause that echoed off the walls of the massive, domed ballroom decorated with banners of red and black. A sea of well dressed, beaming faces looked up at her as she waved back, her own smile feeling a little too forced for the occasion.

“I could get used to this,” Mayura muttered, waving at the audience as they ascended the podium, each pausing for a perfunctory handshake shot with Mayor Andre who looked almost beside himself with glee.

“I hope you won’t mind saying a few words,” Mayor Andre muttered, gesturing to the microphone podium that looked out over the crowd.

“Figured you’d ask,” Ladybug said, holding up a small, folded strip of paper as she approached the mic stand. The applause died down as she cleared her throat, all eyes watching Ladybug as she prepared to speak.

“Good evening,” Ladybug said. “Thank you, Mayor Andre, for inviting us here tonight. I know I speak for my team when I say we are thrilled and honored to be a part of tonight’s festivities.”
Ladybug allowed a small break for the applause that followed, shooting a sidelong glance at her team who were all watching her intently. Mayura was an unabashed beacon of pride, shooting her a warm smile and an encouraging nod when she met his eyes. The puzzling threesome of Queen Bee, Carapace, and Rena Rouge were harder to read; each intently watching her with a neutral expression of interest that made Ladybug somewhat uneasy.

“These past few months have been trying for all of us,” Ladybug continued, glancing out over the crowd. “Chat Noir’s betrayal has hurt me tremendously, but I have found strength in a new team of heroes dedicated to bringing peace and prosperity to Paris once and for all.”

Another applause break, punctuated by another storm of flashing lights from the cameras that seemed to snap from every corner of the ballroom.

The applause died down into a comfortable silence, punctuated only by the sound of heels on cold marble. “Tonight, we—”

Ladybug’s voice caught in her throat as her eyes followed the source of the sound. Descending the ornate staircase at the back of the ballroom, dressed in a lavender gown that flattered every dangerous curve of her body, was Kagami Tsurugi. And on her arm, dressed in a sharp black suit and emerald tie that caught her eye from across the room, was her boyfriend.

“She is *looking* at me,” Kagami muttered under her breath as they descended the stairs, the silence stretching out for a few uncomfortable seconds.

“You’re a beautiful woman in a backless dress; *everyone* is looking at you,” Adrien said, keeping his eyes on Ladybug as she stared openly at him and Kagami. The fact that Kagami’s presence so quickly unnerved Ladybug was a point in their favor and there was something supremely satisfying about watching Ladybug lose her carefully guarded composure.

“Um...tonight we come together to...to stand in the spirit of unity and...and peace!” Ladybug said, clearing her throat with a somewhat uneasy smile.

“Seems we’ve nettled her,” Kagami muttered, eyeing Mayura whose expression had notably darkened as his eyes fell on her. “You sure this is a good idea?”
“We’re just here for a party,” Adrien said, smiling as Ladybug met his eyes yet again. He hadn’t seen her since the battle on the rooftops and hadn’t had a proper face-to-face conversation with her since the business at the mayor’s residence. Being in the same room as her put him on edge, but he wasn’t nervous; this might have been Ladybug’s soiree, but this was Adrien Agreste’s arena. A place of power and privilege and polish he had been born into and raised in. He may not have always been comfortable with his father’s peers, but he knew how to talk to them; knew how to be charming and witty and so posh that no one would suspect him of a thing.

Ladybug didn’t have such advantages. She stood too tall, puffed out her chest too much, and looked like she was trying too hard to impress herself on the people that surrounded her. Being a superhero granted her entry into the great game of Parisian high society without a rulebook on how to play it.

“So on behalf of the Heroes of Paris,” Ladybug said, raising a glass of champagne a waiter placed on the podium beside her. “Thank you for your support!”

The audience around Adrien erupted into applause, cheers, and whistles as Adrien just stood there, staring Ladybug dead in the eyes as she turned back to look at him.

“Un...fucking...believable,” Mayura muttered under the roar of applause as he stared at Kagami and Adrien. “You turn your back for one night and model-boy steps out with his ex.”

“I’m...sure it’s just a friends thing,” Ladybug muttered, feigning a smile as Mayor Andre pulled them into picture.

“Ladybug-”

“Can we not talk about this right now?” Ladybug hissed, descending the stairs behind Queen Bee as she watched Adrien and Kagami make their way through the crowd. “Keep an eye on her; see if you can send a knight to her house in case Chat Noir is using this gala to do something at her place.”

“ You should keep an eye on her,” Mayura muttered, glancing at Kagami as she kissed Queen Bee on the cheek. “She’s got her hands all over your-”
“Adrikins!” Queen Bee cooed, pecking Adrien lightly on each cheek. “I didn’t think you were coming!”

“Who else is supposed to make apologies for my father?” Adrien chuckled. “Dad’s working late, but he promised to stop by as soon as he was free.”

“I should hope so!” Mayor Andre said, pulling Adrien into a tight hug. “Man his age needs to be thinking about stepping down; spending more time with his family.”

“Maybe if you say it, he’ll listen to you,” Adrien said, turning to Kagami. “I believe you know my date for the evening.”

“Of course,” Mayor Andre said, kissing the hand Kagami offered. “We don’t forget our Olympic heroes in this city….but let’s bring home gold next time, eh Mme. Tsurugi?”

“Oh course,” Kagami chuckled, meeting Mayura’s glare with an expression of feigned surprise. “But we are in the presence of true heroes tonight.”

“Forgive me; I’m being rude,” Mayor Andre said, turning to the assembled heroes behind him. “This is-”

“No introductions needed, Uncle Andre,” Adrien said with a toothy smile, grasping Carapace by the hand with a firm shake. “I’m well acquainted with our city’s finest.”

“I’m sure the cops would disagree with you there,” Carapace chuckled.

“Let them,” Kagami said, taking Rena Rouge’s offered hand. “Kagami Tsurugi; pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Rena said, eyes drifting between Adrien and Kagami. “I must be behind on my celebrity gossip; I heard a rumor that Adrien was spotted hand in hand with an up and coming designer.”

“An up and coming designer that unfortunately had to skip out to design a dress for the Gabriel London show,” Adrien said with no small amount of pride.
“Gabriel finally found someone to take under his wing then?” Andre said with a coy smirk.

“Someone to put him out of business some day,” Adrien chuckled, glancing at Mayura as though noticing him for the first time. “Don’t believe we’ve been introduced; you’re May...uka?”

“...May ura,” Mayura corrected with a tight smile, squeezing Adrien’s hand a little longer than strictly necessary.

“Yes...Team Ladybug’s new leading man,” Adrien said, eyes finally falling on Ladybug who lingered uncomfortably at the edge of the group. “Though I thought Carapace would have beaten you out for seniority’s sake alone.”

“Thank you!” Rena Rouge, Queen Bee, and Carapace said in shocking unison as Adrien brushed past Mayura, taking Ladybug’s hands in his own with a warm smile.

“Lady of the year,” Adrien said, bringing one of Ladybug’s hands up and kissing the back of her knuckles. “We meet again.”

“M.Adrien,” Ladybug stammered with a small, shaky smile. “How nice to see you again after so long.”

“Don’t seem to be in need of rescuing as often these days,” Adrien chuckled, ignoring the scowl Mayura made no effort to hide. “Doesn’t seem to be that many opportunities; hasn’t been an akuma attack in, what, two months?”

“Yes...seems Hawkmoth’s newest pawn has taken the akuma’s place,” Mayor Andre sniffed.

“But you don’t need to worry your pretty little head about that,” Mayura said, clapping Adrien hard on the shoulder. “Team Ladybug won’t let Chat Noir get to you.”

“I don’t think you will; especially after the four-star security service my friend has been getting from you,” Adrien said, turning to Mayor Andre. “Ladybug and Mayura have been keeping an eye on Kagami ever since they thought she had a brush with Chat Noir.”
“For her safety,” Ladybug butted in, shooting Kagami a smile she hoped was convincing. “And with her permission, of course.”

“Yes, Mayura’s been like a second security system for weeks now,” Kagami said, locking eyes with Mayura. “It’s...comforting to know Ladybug could spare someone to make sure I’m safe.”

“All part of the job,” Mayura said.

“A job you seem to take very seriously,” Kagami said, glancing at Rena Rouge who had one ear cocked to the conversation as she chatted with the Dutch ambassador. “Can’t imagine watching me all night is an easy job.”

“All night?” Queen Bee asked, glancing at Mayura with a thinly disguised sneer.

“In a completely professional capacity,” Mayura clarified.

“Mayura is very thorough,” Ladybug laughed somewhat awkwardly. "And very committed to his post."

“Proper replacement for Chat Noir then,” Adrien said, keeping one eye on Ladybug as he clapped Mayura on the shoulder.

“More than just a replacement, right Ladybug?” Mayura said, turning to Ladybug who downed the rest of her champagne with one fluid gulp.

“Mayura’s...well, he’s been great,” Ladybug said, plucking another flute of champagne off a tray as a waiter came around. “A real credit to the team.”

“Well, that calls for a toast then,” Adrien said, raising his own glass and lightly rapping his knuckle against the side of the flute as he locked eyes with a rather pale looking Ladybug. “Excuse me! Can I have everyone’s attention?”
“That’s really not necessary,” Ladybug said as a series of musical pings drew the small crowd’s attention to Adrien and Ladybug.

“I’ll make it quick,” Adrien muttered, turning to the crowd with his best model’s smile. “Sorry to interrupt, everyone. I promise I won’t take up too much of your time.”

“For those of you who don’t know me, I’m Adrien Agreste,” Adrien continued, ignoring the mortified look of confusion Kagami shot him. “You may recognize me from the godawful bus ads my father’s marketing division cooked up.”

Adrien waited for the smattering of polite laughter to die down, silently drinking in the way Ladybug seemed to shift uncomfortably under everyone’s attention.

“What you may not know is that I’m also a part-time damsel in distress,” Adrien continued. “In fact, I think my school's yearbook committee is going to vote me Most Likely to Get Attacked by Akuma. These last few months are probably the longest I’ve gone without being targeted by one of Hawkmoth’s superfreaks.”

“Now, most sane people would have just up and moved,” Adrien said, eyes roaming over his costumed former comrades. “But as anyone who has lived here recently can tell you, you can always count on the Heroes of Paris to do the right thing. Every one of us, in some way or another, has been saved by the efforts of Ladybug and her team at some point. Whether that’s being protected from direct akumitization or being protected from all the...frankly silly ways Hawkmoth has attacked our city, we can always count on Ladybug to step up and do the right thing.”

With no small amount of satisfaction, Adrien turned to Ladybug, meeting her pale, sickly complexion with the most genuine smile he could muster.

“Even with the...unfortunate business involving Chat Noir, I know we can rely on Ladybug and her new team to bring Hawkmoth to justice and avenge the thousands of innocent people he’s harmed over the years,” Adrien continued, sweeping the crowd that ate out of the palm of his hand. “I believe now, more than ever, we are on the road to a future without Hawkmoth and whatever cronies choose to support him!”

*Oh, does that make you uncomfortable?* Adrien thought as clamors of support rang out through the crowd and seemed to unsettle Ladybug more and more with each passing cheer.
“To Ladybug,” Adrien toasted. “The most honest, faithful, and truest friend this city has.”

“Ladybug!” The crowd toasted, clinking their glasses together as Ladybug fought to keep her smile from faltering.

*Smile all you want, Adrien thought. I can tell when you’re faking.*

Get a hold of yourself.

Ladybug pressed her temples against the sides of her head, taking deep breaths through her nose as the cold autumn air lashed against her cheeks. She didn’t know how a toast in her favor could feel like a slap in the face until hundreds of people were applauding her for something she wasn’t doing, hadn’t done, and had no intention of doing. Every beaming smile, every shake of the hand pricked her conscience until she had to flee the ballroom, stealing away and sequestering herself on a balcony away from prying eyes and grateful civilians.

Get a hold of yourself.

She didn’t know if the champagne was to blame for the churning, gnawing sense of nausea that lingered in the back of her throat or if facing the public for the first time in weeks was exposing the cracks in her barricade of justification. To hear Adrien so warmly and so openly praise her, innocent of the things she had done to keep him safe and happy, was almost more than she could bear. It made her want to run from him; not even look him in the eye on the off-chance she saw a glimmer of respect or admiration-

“Will you get a hold of yourself?”

Ladybug whipped around to see Gabriel Agreste staring down at her, a glass of champagne in his hands and a barely concealed sneer on his face.

“How long have you been here?” Ladybug asked, quickly wiping her eyes with the back of her hands.
“Long enough to see that display Adrien put on and watch you slink out of the ballroom like a wounded puppy,” Gabriel sniffed, taking a sip of his drink.

“Wow, I’m surprised you actually showed up to one of your son’s presentations,” Ladybug scoffed.

“Spare me the guilt trip,” Gabriel said. “Your absence is being noted; it’s only a matter of time before your feathered friend comes poking around for you.”

“Let him poke,” Ladybug muttered. “I needed a minute to myself.”

“You’ve taken more than one-”

“Oh, go to hell,” Ladybug grumbled.

“I’m trying to leave, actually,” Gabriel said, turning to head back inside. “Moping in the cold doesn’t make things better; it’s just a balm for hurt feelings that goes away before you know it.”

“This coming from a guy who disappeared from the world after his wife went missing?” Ladybug muttered, following him back into the ballroom.

“When you have lost as I’ve lost, you can talk to me about coping strategies,” Gabriel sniffed. “Until then-”

Gabriel stopped in his tracks, eyes narrowing as he looked into the crowd. “What...is she doing here?”

“Adrien brought her as a date,” Ladybug said with a shrug, eyes catching Kagami’s purple gown in a sea of black and white. “Didn’t you know that?”

“Not her,” Gabriel said, palming the top of Ladybug’s head and tilting her gaze over to a tall, white haired woman in a crisp white suit that looked oddly like-

“Oh you must be fucking kidding me,” Ladybug muttered as Master He turned, catching her eye.
with a small, secretive smile. “Did you know she was coming?!”

“If I knew she was coming I would not be here,” Gabriel said, backing up as Mayor Andre took notice of them. “I shouldn’t be here; I-”

“Gabriel!” Mayor Andre called, parting the crowd and making his way through the crowd, trailed by a woman whose smile seemed less like a greeting a threat. “I was just about to go looking for you, I’d like you to meet-”

“Dr. He Quiong,” Master He said, taking Gabriel’s free hand and shaking it before he could fully extract himself from the situation. “Director of Medical Research and Chairman of the Lotus Medical Group.”

“I...uh...Gabriel Agreste,” Gabriel muttered, pulling his hand away as soon as courtesy allowed him to and shooting her a shaky smile. Ladybug was aware on some level that Gabriel was a black hole of charisma, but seeing him interacting with his peers really drove home the fact that her ex-mentor had lived as a shut-in sorcerer for the last few years. It was honestly astonishing that Adrien had anything even remotely resembling a personality, considering the stoic, charmless adults he had to model himself after.

“And you must be Mme. Ladybug,” Master He said, holding out her hand for Ladybug to shake. “The lady of the evening; a great pleasure to meet you.”

Still nonplussed by the appearance of a woman who had kicked her around like football and came within inches of unraveling her whole scheme, Ladybug just stared at Master He for a long second until Mayor Andre interrupted with a polite clearing of his throat.

“Dr. He just made a surprisingly generous donation to expand the research division Paris Central’s children’s hospital,” Mayor Andre said. “The oncology department in particular is looking to get a full overhaul.”

“There’s a number of cutting-edge treatments that have been making my patients’ lives in Hong Kong remarkably easier,” Master He said, hand still hovering in mid-air for Ladybug to shake.

“That’s...yeah, that’s generous,” Ladybug managed to choke out, shaking Master He’s hand as quickly as humanly possible and retreating just as quickly. “Very generous...thank you for your support.”
“I was actually wondering if I could pick your brain on some outreach efforts,” Master He said, taking a sip of her drink. “I understand you and your partner did quite a few sick kid visits and-”

“I was actually in the middle of talking to M. Agreste about doing some promotional work for him,” Ladybug said, shooting a glance at Gabriel who looked mortified at the suggestion. “We were maybe thinking about running some ads where-”

“Excuse me, M. Agreste?” A waiter hovered on the edge of the circle, waving to get Gabriel’s attention. “We have a call for you at the front.”

“Oh thank god,” Gabriel sighed, shooting Master He and Mayor Andre a shaky smile. “If you’ll excuse me-”

“But-” Ladybug reached out for Gabriel as he slipped through the crowd, silently glaring daggers at his retreating back. “You lousy, good for nothing-”

“Quite the party, isn’t it?” Ladybug tensed, turning back to see that Mayor Andre had slipped away, leaving Ladybug and Master He standing relatively alone off to one side of the ballroom.

“What are you doing here?” Ladybug hissed.

“Mingling with Paris’ high society and drinking the mayor’s wine,” Master He shrugged, smacking her lips thoughtfully as she regarded the glass in her hand. “I expected...more out of wine served at the Mayor of Paris’ party. I mean, I am partial to Californian vineyards but this is honestly just grape juice-”

“If you came here looking for a fight-”

“My girl, if I wanted to fight, we would be fighting right now,” Master He chuckled. “You have nothing to worry about tonight; you should enjoy the party. It is in honor of all the hard work you do protecting this city, isn’t it?”

“Oh spare me the guilt trip,” Ladybug said, glancing around to see if anyone was listening. “What do you want?”
“A decent glass of *Gewürztraminer* to start with—”

“With me,” Ladybug said through gritted teeth, catching Carapace’s eye from across the ballroom.

“What I’ve always wanted, Mademoiselle,” Master He said. “For you to live up to the trust Master Fu put in you. Even after this...bad business with your partner, there’s still time for you to do the right thing.”

“And you’re an expert on this, Mme. Cloak and Dagger?” Ladybug asked.

“Well, I’m always open to a second opinion,” Master He said, looking at Rena Rouge across the hall over her glasses. “Why don’t we ask your team; see if they have anything to contribute—”

Ladybug’s hand lashed out, catching Master He on the elbow with a hard squeeze and a sharp glare. “Stay...away...from them .”

“Or what?” Master He said, leaning in with a challenging smirk. “You’re going to attack a frail old woman in front of the Mayor? Tell his goons that someone who builds hospitals for children with cancer is working with a terrorist?”

“I’m not above that—”

“Yes you are,” Master He said. “Much as you pretend you aren’t, you are still very much above that. There is still quite a ways for you to fall, Ladybug; the bad news is that the longer you fall, the more damage you’re going to do to yourself when you finally hit rock bottom.”

Ladybug set her lips in a thin line, flinching a little as Master He lightly patted her on the shoulder on the way past.

“I’ll let you get back to your well-wishers,” Master He said. “Try the meatballs next time they come around; they were very juicy.”
Ladybug watched Master He go, fists clenched and shoulders tense as Carapace slid up beside her.

“Who was that?”

“No one,” Ladybug muttered, snatching a plate of meatballs off a passing plate. “No one at all.”

Carapace frowned, glancing at the tall woman in white who shot him a friendly wave as she disappeared into the crowd.

“Gentleman on line two for you, M. Agreste,” the concierge said as Gabriel stepped into the reception hall.

“Did he say who he was?” Gabriel asked, relieved that he could get away from the prying eyes of that wrinkled old witch.

“A...business associate of yours,” the concierge said with a helpless shrug. “Said that you had missed the last few meetings and he was calling to check up on you.”

“What meetings? I’ve never missed a meeting a day in my-” Gabriel trailed off, looking down at the receiver with sudden dread. “...leave us.”

The concierge bowed, slipping away as Gabriel slowly lifted the phone to his ear, handling it like it was an angry rattlesnake ready to strike. “...hello?”

“Having fun, Gabriel?”

Gabriel tensed, stomach dropping as a low, familiar voice came across the other end of the line.

“What do you want?” Gabriel said, glancing around to see if anyone was listening in.
“Is that any way to talk to a friend?” The voice chuckled. “I’m just calling to see how you’re holding up; it’s been a few months since we talked and I-”

“I am doing fine, thank you,” Gabriel snapped. “How did you even know I was here?”

“An exclusive gala thrown by the Mayor of Paris seemed like the best place to catch you at this time of night,” the voice continued. “You missed our last check-in; I wanted to make sure our little project was moving forward smoothly.”

Gabriel’s stomach turned, leaning on the desk for support as he glared daggers into open air. “...the...the specimens are doing fine. I’m...I’m feeding them tonight, actually-”

“You know, you’re more nurturing than I took you for.”

“Do not patronize me,” Gabriel said, fidgeting with his tie clip. “...I had to put one into play.”

“...is that right?”

“Consider it a test drive,” Gabriel said, straightening up as a couple walked past the front desk. “I saw an opportunity to bid for the... antiques I wanted and I took it.”

“Ah, so that schism between Ladybug and Chat Noir was your doing?” The voice laughed. “I saw something about Chat Noir working with Hawkmoth on the evening news; I would be very interested to meet him when I come to town.”

“You’re...you’re coming to Paris?” Gabriel asked, feeling a cold chill run down his spine even as music and laughter floated down from upstairs.

“We are coming to Paris,” the voice clarified. “We’d like to see how our investment is developing...and see if we can’t help you speed the process along.”

“I told you, I have everything.-”
-handled, yes,” the voice said dismissively. “I'm sure you think you do.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“Well, just a friendly warning not to count your Miraculous before they hatch,” the voice said. “Enjoy the party, M. Agreste.”

“Wait, what are you-” Gabriel trailed off as the line went dead with a snap, the dial tone purring in his ear as he quietly put the phone down.

*He’s coming to Paris,* Gabriel thought, a cold, sickening dread washing down his back. *They’re coming to Paris… she is-*

“Everything okay, Uncle Gabriel?” Gabriel flinched, whipping around to see Queen Bee hovering behind him, hand outstretched and a concerned look on her face. “You look a little pale.”

“I’m fine,” Gabriel coughed, straightening his tie. “Bad meatballs; that’s all.”

Queen Bee frowned as Gabriel brushed past her, tilting her head as she her attention to the phone behind the desk.

Chapter End Notes

SO this was originally supposed to be much longer but the second half of this is getting toothy and the conversation between Gabriel and the Enigmatic Man seemed like an ominous enough note to end on.

NEXT TIME: Omnious Ladrien, more ship-tease than a sex shop for tugboats, and Gabriel's mystery project gets unveiled! Will Master He get a decent glass of wine?! Which one of our heroes will get food poisoning from the meatballs?! Tune in next week/later this week to find out!
“Ow!” Adrien rubbed the spot on his shoulder where Kagami’s fist struck. “What gives?”

“ Took the words right out of my mouth,” Kagami said, crossing her arms. “What was that little display about?”

“Can’t a guy show a little gratitude?” Adrien said, leaning against an ornate pillar as he watched Ladybug mingle with the crowd below. Master He’s tall, pale figure orbited her ever so slightly, keeping one eye on her as Ladybug did her best to avoid the older woman’s gaze. “I thought this was supposed to be Ladybug appreciation night.”

“You wanted to hurt her,” Kagami said, narrowing her eyes at him.

“By saying nice things about her?”

“Adrien-”

“Fine; so I twisted the knife a little,” Adrien huffed. “So what?”

“I don’t have any issue with fighting Ladybug when we need to, but being unnecessarily cruel-”

“Who said it was unnecessary?” Adrien said, catching Ladybug’s eye with a small wave. “Ladybug was always one to feel guilty when she inadvertently harmed someone; this is a girl who apologizes to akuma victims she thinks she had a hand in creating. That speech proves she’s still got a nugget of good left in her that may make turning her on Hawkmoth easier.”

“That, or she’s just worried the world is catching on to her,” Kagami said.

“Either way suits our endgame,” Adrien shrugged, glancing down at Ladybug. “Which is to unsettle Ladybug and make her question the path she’s on.”
“Was that Master He’s idea or yours?”

“Hey, I’m capable of coming up with plots on my own,” Adrien sniffed, locking eyes with his mentor for a brief moment before they poignantly looked away, neither wanting to give Ladybug any reason to suspect a connection between them.

“Well warn me next time you’re planning on coming up with a plot on your own,” Kagami muttered.

“It was a spur of the moment play; won’t happen again,” Adrien muttered scowling at the crowd beneath him. “Ready to get back to mingling with the Chat Noir Hate Club?”

“You didn’t really expect this to be a sympathetic crowd, did you?”

“No...but there’s a difference between knowing the whole city hates you and having people tell you how much they hate you to your face,” Adrien sighed, running a hand through his hair. “The American ambassador literally called for my head on a plate.”

“He’s an American politician; of course he’s calling for wanton and unnecessary violence,” Kagami said, laying a hand on his shoulder. “You’ll have your chance to prove them wrong.”

“The thing is...I won’t,” Adrien chuckled ruefully. “See...if I bin Ladybug and I take out Hawkmoth, there’s no one left to clear Chat Noir’s name when all is said and done. Paris is never going to know what happened; it’ll be like Ladybug, Hawkmoth, and Chat Noir all disappeared overnight.”

“The other three-”

“Don’t have the kind of clout that Ladybug has,” Adrien said, watching his former partner make her way through the crowd, shaking hands with ambassadors and business leaders. “Her word is gold and if we strip her Miraculous away from her, she’s not going to be in any position to retract her smear campaign. Chat Noir will always be the traitor who sold his partner out and teamed with Hawkmoth.”

“Maybe there’s a way to get to Hawkmoth without going through Ladybug?” Kagami suggested. “If
we take him out first…”

Kagami trailed off as she fumbled to come up with a solution that didn't involve eliminating Ladybug.

“You think she’ll be any more likely to help me after I take out her meal ticket?” Adrien said, shaking his head. “My reputation can’t be a deciding factor in our plans going forward; bigger things are going on than the fact I've dropped off Paris' top hero poll completely.”

Adrien’s eyes drifted towards the banner detailing the heroes of Paris, silently mourning the absence of Chat Noir’s green and black symbol next to Ladybug’s.

“No...stopping Hawkmoth is the only thing that matters anymore,” Adrien said with a resigned sigh. “No matter what happens, Chat Noir’s days as a public hero are over. Just gonna have to get used to that.”

“...well, if it means anything,” Kagami said, leaning in and kissing Adrien’s cheek. “You’re the only hero I still respect.”

"Really?” Adrien said with a weak smile. "Not even Carapace?’

"He's fine, I guess,” Kagami shrugged. "But I have to wonder if-"

“A- hem .”

Adrien turned around as he felt a figure approach them from behind, stepping out of the shadows and approaching them with a suspicious glint in his eye.

“You’re making the rounds tonight, aren’t ya?” Mayura said. “Superheroes...up and coming fashion designers...Olympic athletes; you’re a popular guy, huh?”

“One of the perks of being the mayor’s godson,” Adrien said, trying not to look too tense as Mayura approached. “Enjoying the party?”
“Not as much as you are, clearly,” Mayura said, glancing at Kagami. “Not interrupting anything, am I?”

“Well, we were just about to make passionate love on the balcony,” Adrien said dryly. “I’d ask you to go, but you seem to have a thing for watching my friend-”

“Oh, I’ve watched more than just your friend,” Mayura said, eyes narrowing as Adrien’s fists tightened in his pocket, fingerling his ring as Mayura spoke. “I’ve actually watched you come and go a few times, now that I think about it.”

“Sadly, the teleporter I’ve been working on isn’t functional, so we have to use doors like common street-people,” Kagami said, raising an eyebrow. “Do you have a point?”

“I’m just curious if M. Agreste’s girlfriend knows he’s sneaking out of your house at all hours of the night,” Mayura asked, leveling his gaze on Kagami.

“Of course she does; we are part of Adrien’s fawning harem of wildly obsessed love slaves,” Kagami said dryly, earning a chuckle from Adrien. “We have a rotating schedule, you see; we pass him around depending on the night of the week.”

“I think we may have an opening,” Adrien said, standing up straight and locking eyes with Mayura. “If M. Mayura can keep up with our wild physical exploits, that is.”

“Oh, I think you’ll find I’m more than either of you could handle,” Mayura said, tensing as Adrien drew up to his full height.

“Maybe I can be the judge of that,” Kagami said, stepping between them, laying a hand on Mayura’s chest to stop his advance. Before he could react, she grasped Mayura by the wrist and started tugging him down the staircase.

“Wait, where are we going?” Mayura said, glancing back to see Adrien had vanished from the corner he was standing in.

“I think I owe you a dance for all you’ve done to keep me safe,” Kagami said, catching Adrien’s eye.
as he melted into the shadows behind her.

“Y-You know, I’m technically, still on the clock!” Mayura stammered as Ladybug watched him get all but dragged onto the dance floor by Kagami. “Ladybug probably wants me to run security or-”

“This doesn’t seem like your friend’s type of party.”

The soft voice in her ear made Ladybug jump, spinning around to find Adrien at her shoulder, watching Kagami awkwardly position Mayura’s hands as she guided him through a rather frenetic waltz.

“Not all of us are on Paris’ seasonal gala invite list.” Ladybug said, feeling unnaturally exposed even behind a suit of impenetrable fabric. Interacting with Adrien as Ladybug only seemed to heighten her anxiety; just being around him meant that she had to put up more and more of a front to avoid directly lying to him. “Your girlfriend seems to be showing him the ropes.”

“Good thing she knows how to lead,” Adrien said. “And an ex-girlfriend actually; my girlfriend got hung up with work and couldn’t make it.”

“That’s...too bad,” Ladybug said.

“It’s fine; I’m used to my loved ones bailing on me to work on clothes at this point,” Adrien chuckled, thankfully oblivious to the way Ladybug winced almost audibly. “Being Gabriel Agreste’s son has conditioned me to accept ‘design time’ as an excuse for pretty much anything.”

“I’m sure she’ll find a way to make it up to you,” Ladybug said. “...I think. Probably.”

“I’m not too concerned about it,” Adrien said, offering a hand to Ladybug. “Care to dance?”

“I would make Mayura look graceful by comparison,” Ladybug chuckled, rubbing her arm somewhat self-consciously.
“Somehow, I doubt that,” Adrien chuckled, jerking his head towards the dancefloor. “Come on; let’s give the Ladyblog something to print tomorrow.”

“Your girlfriend won’t mind seeing you out with another lady?” Ladybug asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Last I checked, a dance wasn’t a wedding invitation,” Adrien said, leaving the invitation lingering in the air as Ladybug looked at his hand. Part of her (the rational, fearful part of her that wanted to put as much distance between herself and Adrien as humanly possible) wanted to come up with another excuse; wanted to slip back into the comforting tedium of entertaining the elite of Paris.

A larger part said, fuck it; I want to dance with my boyfriend.

“Alright, but if I step on your toes, you can’t sue me,” Ladybug said, taking Adrien’s hand.

“Believe me, Ladybug, suing you is the last thing I want to do,” Adrien said, gripping her hand tightly as he wheeled her onto the ballroom dance floor.

“Did she tell you she had Mayura watching Kagami?”

Rena Rouge shook her head, hair tumbling down as Carapace dipped her backwards.

“Not a clue,” Rena Rouge hissed, spinning into Queen Bee’s waiting embrace as the small crowd watched them dance. “Did she tell you anything about her little nightly survey routines?”

“Okay, first of all, hand on my back like you’re doing a proper tango—”

“Chloe, focus!”

“Fine; guess I’m leading,” Queen Bee sighed, grabbing Rena Rouge’s hand and tugging her close as they danced back across the ballroom floor. After fruitlessly trying to slip away from the crowd for half an hour, Queen Bee tugged them both on the dance floor. Now everyone in the room was watching the three of them trade partners, but no one could hear their conversation over the band’s
“Shock of shocks, Ladybug didn’t loop me in to her pervert voyeur gameplan,” Queen Bee said, twirling Rena Rouge around and wrapping her arms around her waist as she watched Kagami and Mayura dance on the other side of the ballroom. “Which means we’re slipping further and further out of Ladybug’s inner circle.”

“You know, it’s rude to ignore your dance partner.”

Mayura’s gaze snapped back to Kagami’s less than impressed expression as she wheeled him around the dance floor.

“It’s rude to not dance with the one that brought you too,” Mayura sighed, shooting a shaky smile to the crowd of onlookers. “We’re breaking all kinds of etiquette in front of all these fancy people, aren’t we?”

“The only thing fancy about these people are their clothes,” Kagami muttered under her breath. “So I think some breaches in protocol can be excused.”

“Does that include stepping out with someone else’s boyfriend?” Mayura asked.

“You know, going to a party with someone doesn’t count as dating,” Kagami sighed, arm sliding around Mayura’s waist as the music slowed. “Dancing with someone doesn’t either; otherwise your date would be an accomplice to adultery right now.”

Mayura stiffened, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Ladybug wasn’t watching. To his relief and slight disappointment, Ladybug didn’t seem to be paying any mind to him at all. She was wrapped up, physically and emotionally, with Adrien who guided her across the dance floor like a fish through water. Every now and then, he would say something that would draw an audible laugh from Ladybug, a beaming, genuine smile crossing her face for the first time since they got there.

“Green around the gills?” Mayura looked down to see Kagami had followed his gaze to the happy couple across the room.
“You wouldn’t...be interested in running away with Adrien Agreste, would you?” Mayura asked, earning a dry laugh from Kagami. “It would really help me out a lot if pretty-boy was off the market...permanently.”

“So I should kidnap him and taken him to America for a casino wedding?”

“I will sing at your wedding if you do,” Mayura promised. “Hell, I’ll pay for your wedding if you do.”

“If you knew what kind of weddings my family throws, you wouldn’t be so quick to offer,” Kagami chuckled.

“How much would it cost me to get you to publicly make out with him somewhere where Ladybug could see him?”

“More than I think you could afford,” Kagami said, watching Adrien and Ladybug cut their way through the crowd. “We’ve agreed not to kiss each other like that anymore.”

“You...used to be an item?” Mayura said, pretending he and Marinette hadn’t gone on more than one double date with Adrien and Kagami.

“For a while,” Kagami said with a fond, somewhat distant smile. “For as long as we needed each other like that.”

“No chance of rekindling an old flame?” Mayura asked.

“Not so long as we want to burn different things,” Kagami said, shaking her head as though to clear a thought or a memory from her mind. “Sorry; I’m not the one to distract Mme. Ladybug from her affections. Mme. Dupain-Cheng has done that already, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“Yeah...that’d be nice,” Mayura sighed, looking down at Kagami with a curious frown. It was strange to think that this woman that had Ladybug so on edge was shorter than even Marinette was; that for all her supposed strength and cunning, she looked and felt like just another woman his age; another college student who liked BBC dramas from the 70’s and salt and pepper chicken from the takeout place down the street.
Did she even know that she was helping a monster?

“No dress tonight?”

“Thought the suit would be enough,” Ladybug chuckled, setting into an even rhythm as Adrien led her around the dance floor. “You’re not the first person to roast me on it either.”

“Let it never be said that the second most fashionable person I know will miss a chance to make snarky comments about someone else’s clothes,” Adrien chuckled.

“After your father?”

“After my girlfriend,” Adrien said, privately wondering if exposing that much about Marinette was a good idea. There was nothing to suggest that Ladybug had any inkling that he was Chat Noir but the ominous way she ended their last conversation had put Adrien on edge.

“Really?” Ladybug said, raising an eyebrow.

“You would think the head of a multi-billion dollar fashion empire would have a better sense of personal style,” Adrien sighed, earning a bubbly giggle from Ladybug. It had been so long since he had heard Ladybug laugh that the sound of it almost stopped Adrien in his tracks. It was a sudden, stark reminder that at one point, they would have probably attended this function as friends.

As far as she knew, they still were.

”Don’t let him hear you say that,” Ladybug chuckled.

”I’ve said it to his face on more than one occasion,” Adrien said, glancing at Rena Rouge as they wheeled past her and Queen Bee.
“You think she’s onto us?” Rena Rouge asked as they waltzed past Adrien and Ladybug.

“If she was, would we be able to do anything about it?” Queen Bee asked, noting the tall, white haired woman who seemed to be watching them from the balcony. “Wanna see if you can figure out who Grandma is and why Ladybug doesn’t want to get within fifty meters of her?”

“I’m sure I can think of something,” Rena Rouge said, twirling Queen Bee into Carapace’s waiting grasp. “Cover for me!”

“So what’s our gameplan?” Carapace muttered, catching Queen Bee mid-twirl.

“Make a scene,” Queen Bee said, twirling her fingers in Carepace’s tie. “Keep their eyes on us so your girlfriend can sneak away.”

“If I wanted to turn heads, I’d have Alya wear that dress you bought her without her suit,” Carapace said, watching the flat of Queen Bee’s gloved hand slide up his chest and wrap around his shoulders.

“What can I say; I know how to flatter a pretty figure,” Queen Bee said, squeaking as Carapace hoisted her off her feet and over his head to a smattering of applause from the onlookers.

“Does that extend to the hundred euro undies you told Mayura about?” Carapace asked, falling backwards as Queen Bee dipped him low.

“If you’re lucky, you’ll find out,” she said, tugging him back up.

“Fingers crossed we all have a little luck on our side tonight,” Carapace said, watching as Rena Rouge ducked behind a pillar and a sharply dressed waiter stepped out the other side.

Mayura waited until Carapace and Queen Bee had whirled past them before he spoke.

“He’s dangerous,” Mayura blurted out before he could stop himself, drawing Kagami’s curious frown.
“Adrien?” Kagami laughed.

“Your other blonde friend,” Mayura said quietly, watching Kagami’s expression retreat behind a barricade of cool, collected composure. “The one you’re meeting with.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” Kagami said, glancing away with a confused chuckle.

“I’m sure you do,” Mayura said. “You know he’s working with Hawkmoth, right? The whole city knows it.”

“By he I would assume you mean Chat Noir?” Kagami sighed. "Look, I don’t know what Ladybug’s told you, but-"

“I don’t know what he’s told you, but it isn’t true,” Mayura rambled on, pausing on the outskirts of the dance floor to command Kagami’s full attention. “Please...help us take him in. You don’t want to help someone who’s in bed with someone who’s...who’s akumitized you before, do you?”

Kagami flinched as though Mayura struck her, eyes hardening as she instinctively pulled away from him. “…I would never assist someone who I thought was working with Hawkmoth.”

Kagami pulled away, turning to leave before glancing back at Mayura, a strange, pleading look in her eyes. “And neither should you.”

"Wait! I'm-" Mayura watched her go with a sigh, the pale, purple butterfly tattoo on Kagami’s shoulder catching his eye as she disappeared through the crowd.


“Do you ever get used to it?”
“Getting stared at like you’re a circus freak?” Adrien asked, carefully avoiding the gazes and snapping camera phones of the audience surrounding the dance floor. “You tune them out after a while; just a faceless mass of eyes and camera lenses.”

“That’s...worse somehow,” Ladybug chuckled, tightening her grip around Adrien’s waist. “Reminds me of an akuma Chat Noir and I fought back in the day-”

“Papa Razzi,” Adrien chuckled.

“You...remember?” Ladybug said with a curious smile.

“I remember the artsy, high maintenance photographer my father fired for back-sassing him about shot composition one too many times,” Adrien said, shooting Kagami a glance as she disappeared into the crowd, leaving Mayura standing somewhat dumbstruck on the corner of the dance floor. “I also remember the blob of flesh and camera equipment that terrorized the city until you stopped him.”

“I’m not even going to pretend like that one didn’t give me nightmares,” Ladybug said with a small shudder. “Especially after what he did to-”

Ladybug trailed off, clearing her throat as an unbidden memory seemed to bubble to the surface.

“Turned him into a photograph, didn’t he?” Adrien said.

“Mmhmm,” Ladybug murmured non-committedly.

“Must be nice having a unified team for the first time in your career,” Adrien mused, eyes roaming over Carapace and Queen Bee. “Gotta be rough, not being able to rely on your partner to keep himself out of trouble.”

“I mean...it kinda was,” Ladybug sighed, shaking her head. “Seemed like every other week Chat was getting himself captured or brainwashed or turned against me...of course, it was always to protect me or one of my teammates or some poor bystander that got caught up in it. Papa Razzi only got himself caught because he was protecting Chloe of all people.”
“Chloe doesn’t deserve to be protected?” Adrien asked, bristling through his facade of nonchalance.

“That came out harsher than I meant it to,” Ladybug said with an apologetic chuckle. “The point is that Chat Noir was... is someone who only ever got himself in trouble to keep someone else out of it.”

“You’re speaking pretty warmly of someone who stabbed you in the back,” Adrien said quietly.

“Yeah...well, it’s hard to cut someone off after four years of partnership, you know?” Ladybug sighed, laying her head on Adrien’s shoulder.

“Even if that partner is working with Hawkmoth?”

“Three months of working with Hawkmoth doesn’t erase four years of fighting against him,” Ladybug said. “Doesn’t...doesn’t the good Chat Noir did for this city outweigh the bad?”

“I don’t think it works like that,” Adrien said, catching Master He’s eye as she looked down at the dance floor from the balcony above them. “It’s not a scale where every bad deed can be balanced with a good one; killing one person and saving a hundred still makes you a murderer.”

“But if he...if he turned things around,” Ladybug said, a worried edge creeping into her voice. “If he...if he stopped working with Hawkmoth and helped me take him down in the end-”

“Doesn’t erase three months supporting a megalomaniac in a butterfly suit,” Adrien said, jaw setting as his eyes swept over the black-clad Stigma personnel that lined the walls of the ballroom. “I couldn’t forgive someone for doing something like that; I don’t think this city would either.”

A tense, uncomfortable silence slipped between them for a long moment, the magic of the evening broken as Adrien was once again forced to confront the reality that the small, sad-looking girl in his arms was responsible for empowering Hawkmoth, alienating his allies, and turning the entire city against him.

He hadn’t realized that a small part of him was clinging to the hope that he and Ladybug could be friends again until that hope crumbled to the tune of smooth jazz and idle conversation.
“This is a mistake,” Adrien suddenly blurted out, dropping Ladybug’s hand as he pulled away. “I...I have a girlfriend; I shouldn’t be-”

Adrien turned away before Ladybug’s confused, teary expression could weaken his resolve, fighting his way through the crowd even as Ladybug called after him from the dance floor.

Where is he?

Master He’s eyes wandered from face to face, muttering under her breath as she tried to hone in on the overpowering sense of wrong that pressed in on all sides of her. He was here; she could feel him here, and yet every time she tried to hone in on his location-

“Excuse me, Madame, would you like another glass of champagne?”

Master He turned her attention away from the dance floor with a disappointed sigh, glancing at the smartly dressed held a tray of champagne out with a beaming smile. “…that’s very good, actually.”

“Yes, the ‘96 is particularly ripe and-”

“I meant the disguise,” Master He said, glancing back at the dance floor. “Most people might have just imitated one of the waiters on staff, but it looks like you created one wholecloth. Very smart; reduces the chance of running into a duplicate.”

“I...I’m sorry, Madame, I’m afraid I don’t follow," the waiter said with a confused smile.

“It’s the shadow that gives you away though,” Master He said, nodding at the shadow that trailed behind the waiter. A pair of long, vulpine ears trailed behind waiter’s shadow, a stark contrast to the suddenly uncomfortable young man that stood before her. “Nothing a little training won’t fix though; no one masters the secrets of a Miraculous by themselves.”

The waiter said nothing, quietly looking Master He over as she watched Adrien pull back from Ladybug.
“I’m happy you came up here, you know,” Master He continued. “I wanted us to meet sooner; in the past, Master Fu would have passed you off to me or another Vizier for training after you had been selected. We had a whole training regime built out; martial arts, sorcery, spiritual diplomacy. We were always supposed to be...more than just fighters battling brainwashed civilians...but I suppose things have changed quite a bit.”

“I’m sure Master Fu and Ladybug have told you all you need to know,” Master He said, turning her attention back to the waiter as she fished a business card out of her pocket. “But if there are any questions you have while Master Fu is in the hospital, feel free to look me up. In times like these, us Chosen need to stick together.”

The waiter looked a the card, swallowing heavily as his features clouded with confusion. Once or twice, he opened his mouth, but whatever it is he wanted to ask seemed to get lost on its way to his mouth.

“Are you...is Chat Noir...” The waiter swallowed, accepting the card with a small nod. “Thank you, Madame...please enjoy the rest of the evening.”

“Of course,” Master He said as a small, puffy ball of feathers poked its head out of Master He’s collar.

“When you next talk to Trixxy...tell them that they still owe me fifteen drachmae,” the kwami said, narrowing their eyes at the waiter. “They know why.”

Frowning in confusion, the waiter just turned to head down the stairs, holding on to the rail to keep their legs from shaking.

"Oh Quingfu...you're really in for an earful this time," Master He sighed, turning her attention back to the crowd.

“Adrien!” Ladybug elbowed her way through the crowd, making her way to the far door that Adrien disappeared through. “Adrien, I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to make you-”
Ladybug stepped out on to a deserted balcony, glancing around for any sign of her boyfriend.

“-uncomfortable,” Ladybug sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. The warm, glowing faith Adrien had in her should have made her feel better, but his sharp, almost cold dismissal of Chat Noir for ‘working’ with Hawkmoth just made her precarious position that much more uncomfortable. If it ever got out that she and Hawkmoth had worked together-

_No one is going to find out._

Maybe he would understand; if Gabriel could convince her that his goals were worth pursuing, then surely Adrien would come around-

_He is never going to find out._

Ladybug sighed, leaning on the balcony as she watched the first of the party guests trickle out of the opera hall and towards their waiting cars. She had spent all night in the company of people who thought the world of her; who tripped over themselves to praise her for all the good she had done for the city. But the more the night wore on, the more they seemed to be mocking her with their beaming smiles and their overly flattering tones.

They believed her; they bought her lie hook line and sinker...and yet, there was a gnawing sense of dread that crept up on her every time she had to lie or avoid the subject to keep from lying.

_Isn’t Adrien worth all this? Doesn’t he deserve to be happy?_

“Bee in your bonnet, bugaboo?”

A chill ran down Ladybug’s spine as a snide, familiar voice she hadn’t heard in years chirped over her shoulder.

“...Plagg?” Ladybug whispered, turning around and spying a small black figure perched on the railing.

“...Plagg?” Ladybug whispered, turning around and spying a small black figure perched on the railing.

“Long time no see, _Marinette_ ,” Plagg sneered. “You seem like you got a lot on your mind...but I
guess helping the bad guys takes its toll on you, huh? Don't worry though; I couldn't tell Chat Noir your identity even if I wanted to...and boy have I wanted to."

“Then what are you doing here?” Ladybug hissed, glancing around for any figures in black lurking in the shadows.

“Just here to deliver a message,” Plagg said, patting a small black envelope at his side. “The kid sends his regards; pretty cheesed that he couldn’t make it tonight, but he wanted to give you his best.”

“Texting got old?” Ladybug said, warily looking at the envelope with Chat Noir’s signature green symbol on it. “He had to graduate to ominous notes?”

“Well being a drama queen is a Chat Noir prerequisite,” Plagg chuckled, passing the card to Ladybug. “Spent most of last night writing it, so I’m sure he’d appreciate your attention.”

“I’m sure,” Ladybug said, carefully taking the envelope as she eyed the kwami. “How is he?”

“You care?” Plagg snorted bitterly.

“I never stopped,” Ladybug insisted. “He was the one who-”

“Oh, stow the poor wounded Ladybug routine; you’re the only one who buys it,” Plagg said, examining his claws with a bored expression. “Chat Noir is doing just fine without you, Princess. I won’t lie; he spent a fair few nights crying over you back at the start, but after the whole Ladyblog debacle? Something...harder took its place. Bout time if you ask me; the sadboy routine gets so tiresome after a while. I’m happy he’s getting in touch with his uglier side, frankly.”

“It’s going to get a lot uglier, the longer it goes on,” Ladybug said, kneeling down in front of Plagg. “Help me; please! If we work together, we can all come out on top. Chat Noir included!”

“Yeah, I’m sure you really care about Chat’s impending treason charges,” Plagg sniffed. “You really think I’d sell my kid out like that? You think I’d sell my partner out?”
“Why am I the only one who is willing to bend on this?!” Ladybug groaned. “Nobody is happy about this deal; least of all me! I am working with someone I personally despise, but I can swallow my disgust for him long enough to work towards a goal we both want! You’re telling me that Chat would rather be reviled as a traitor than give up his Miraculous for half an hour tops?”

“You know how he is; he’s got a spiteful streak in him a mile wide,” Plagg said. “He’s given up on being a celebrity; seeing Hawkmoth behind bars and you without your earrings is the only thing he cares about anymore.”

“Does he think it’ll be that easy?” Ladybug said, narrowing her eyes at Plagg. “Does you really think I’ll just let him ruin my plans without a fight?”

“So if it came to it...you’d really fight us to protect Hawkmoth?” Plagg responded. Ladybug said nothing, holding Plagg’s gaze for a long moment. “Man...you know, I’d almost prefer it if Master Fu just didn’t wake up at this point. It’d be better than seeing what you’ve turned into because if the coma doesn’t kill him...finding out you were working with Hawkmoth would.”

Ladybug’s hand lashed out, fingers wrapping around Plagg before he could fly away.

“What are you doing?!” Plagg hissed, squirming between her fingers as she tucked him close to her chest. “Let me go!”

“I’m sorry,” Ladybug said, holding Plagg tight as he tried to get away from her. “This fight needs to end before someone gets actually hurt; if you’re not going to help me...then you’re staying out of it. Sorry; Guardian’s orders.”

“You’re... not the Guardian!” Plagg hissed, biting at Ladybug’s hands ineffectually.

“I don’t see anyone else who’s up to the task,” Ladybug said, clutching Plagg tightly against her chest. “Take it up with Master Fu when he wakes up; feel free to wreck me on my performance evaluation.”

“You...don’t know...what you’re doing!” Plagg whimpered. “You...really...think...you can... grab a kwami?!”

Ladybug blinked as Plagg phased through her hand with a cackle, turning in mid air and sticking his
tongue out at her as he floated back out of reach.

“Oh, I can’t believe you actually tried that!” Plagg laughed, carelessly phasing through her hands as she grabbed for him again. “You actually thought you caught me, didn’t you? You’ve never tried to grab a cat that doesn’t want to be grabbed, have you?”

“Wait!” Ladybug pleaded as Plagg extended his middle claw, twirling away over the edge of the balcony. “Wait, come back! I-I don’t know what came over me, I—”

“Nice try, Traitorbug.” Plagg taunted, extending his middle claw as he twirled away. “Tell Tikki I’m coming for her! And a pissed off, hormonal teenager with a magic flamethrower and karate skills is coming with me!”

Ladybug grabbed for Plagg as he flew away, disappearing against the black of the night sky before she could give chase.

“Agh!” Ladybug spat, kicking the railing with a frustrated snarl. “Stupid, stupid, stupid, god, you’re stupid!”

Why did she do that? What made her think she could actually pocket a kwami like it was a stuffed animal? Mentally swearing at herself, Ladybug picked up the card Plagg had left behind, carefully prying open the seal and tugging the letter out.

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**Dear Ladybug,**

*Sorry I couldn’t make the party; it was a black tie affair and the only suit I own has a tail for a belt. Something tells me I wouldn’t have made it through the door without tripping a hundred security alarms anyway. I’d make it up to you, but I think by now we’ve danced our last dance at a charity gala.*

*I’ve been hitting the gym pretty hard lately; I hope you haven’t been slacking off because the next time we meet, I’m coming for you claws out and teeth bared. It’s amazing the things a guy can accomplish when he has a proper tutor, though I can’t really say that bit is all your fault. The old man never took much interest in me beyond making sure I didn’t slip the leash and when he gets better, I doubt I’m going to be calling him ‘Master’ anymore.*
Don’t worry; Master He is taking good care of him. I know you two got off to a rocky start, but she’s been working round the clock to make sure Fu comes through this no worse for wear. Granted, I don’t think he’ll be pleased to hear that his special favorite has taken up butterfly watching as a hobby, but other than that he should make a full recovery.

I really do hope you enjoyed the party; I hope it reminded you of the kind of person we both know you’re capable of being. Even the fact that the whole city took your word over mine is a testament to the work you’ve done to keep it safe over the years. People look up to you, and until recently, that’s always been for a good reason.

This city is never going to remember me as anything other than Hawkmoth’s goon even if when I get those earrings off you. I’m making peace with that (bit by bit and with no small amount of plate smashing) but that’s nothing compared to what’s gonna happen to you if things go sour.

Tell me; what more are you willing to do for this guy?

I’ve never taken you for one to cheapen yourself to impress a guy, but you’ve lied, cheated, and turned on your partner in the last three months. So is he worth it? Is Hawkmoth’s family worth your integrity? God knows you weren’t perfect, but you were absolutely the best of us. And maybe you think that entitles you to a little misbehavior; I just wish you would have taken up vaping or something. At least that isn’t as douchey as what you’re doing right now.

What am I trying to say here? You’re the one who’s good with words here.

I guess what I’m trying to say is that I miss Ladybug; I miss my friend and I miss my hero. I miss the person who slapped me in the face and taught me what being a hero was all about. I miss the person you used to be and I guess, in spite of everything, I’m still waiting on Ladybug to save the day.

But I’m not going to wait forever.

I’m not looking for a fight, but something tells me a fight is the only way this is going to end; against each other or against Hawkmoth. And if it comes to that, I won’t hold back; I’ll beat you and take your Miraculous to stop you from becoming a monster like Hawkmoth. I’ll beat you in memory of the hero who taught me how to fight for what I believe in. I’ll beat you so that Paris never has to find out that their beloved hero turned on them after years of faithful service.
Ladybug will be fondly remembered as Paris’ best hero; whether you’re still the one wearing the spots is your call.

Love From Best Wishes

Chat Noir

P.S. You might want to destroy this before our friends find it; I can imagine this would make for an aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaawkward conversation if Rena or Carapace got their hands on it.

Ladybug stared down at the note for a long moment, rereading a few key lines long enough to commit them to memory before quietly shredding the letter and scattering it to the wind. There was no room for tender words between old friends in this new Paris she found herself in.

Tell me; what more are you willing to do for this guy?

“Everything going okay?”

Ladybug didn’t even look up as Mayura slid alongside her, leaning on the railing as she stared out over the crowd.

“...I’ve had better nights,” Ladybug chuckled weakly, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “You?”

“Just spent the night being forced to dance against my will by our prime suspect,” Mayura sighed. “That girl is an aggressive lead, I tell you what.”

“You attract a certain type, don’t you?” Ladybug mused, looking up at Mayura through red, watery eyes. Unbidden and acting on an old instinct he ought to have suppressed by now, Mayura raised his hand, cupping Ladybug’s cheek and brushing a tear away.

“Don’t waste your tears over him,” Mayura said.

“How did you know I was thinking about Chat?” Ladybug asked.
“I was actually talking about Adrien,” Mayura said. “I saw him run off and you run after him; I just thought-”

“No...it’s not Adrien I’m upset about,” Ladybug sighed, turning away from Luka’s touch. “...I tried to reason with him. I tried to reason with him so many times and he’s just...not listening to me. After four years of trusting me with his life he doesn’t trust me with this...and I don’t know how many more times I can ask him.”

“So stop asking him,” Mayura said, shaking his head. “...how many chances is this guy supposed to get? What does he have to do to prove that he isn’t interested in your mercy anymore? What more are you prepared to do for this guy?”

Ladybug said nothing for a long moment, just chewing her lip and watching people come and go. Seeing her so sad, so defeated sparked something irrationally defensive in Mayura. He wanted to bundle her up and kiss her forehead and tell her everything was going to be okay; that the disappointing guys in her life weren’t worth the energy it took to cry over them. She didn’t deserve this; she didn’t deserve to be let down and mistreated all because she wanted to do the right thing.

It wasn’t fair.

“You deserve better than this,” Mayura said, laying a hand on her shoulder and turning her to look at him. “I’m just...sick of watching you waste your life waiting for this guy to turn around and respect you. If he hasn’t by now, then he just won’t ...you’ve got...you’ve got too many people who want to see you happy to waste time on the ones who’re working against you, you know?”

“I wish it was as simple as that,” Ladybug murmured. “I wish I could just...close my heart off to him and completely forget about all the good times we had together...but I can’t. I can’t stop holding out hope that there’s going to be a moment when he finally...gets it. Like if I’m just...talk at him long enough or find the right words to say...I can bring him back around...”

“Your words aren’t the problem,” Mayura said, hand sliding down her shoulder and lightly squeezing her hand. “Maybe you should stop waiting for him to come around and start...start paying attention to what’s right in front of you.”

Over Mayura’s shoulder, a flutter of purple in the crowd below drew Ladybug’s attention to the distant figures of Adrien and Kagami, making their way out of the building. Even from her perch
high above him, his bright, beaming smile lit up the sea of dull black and white around him as he said goodnight to everyone who crossed his path. It was that smile—warm, open, and inviting—that had snared her all those years ago. It was that smile that was worth all the uncertainty and friction she suffered through; that smile that made stomaching his father worthwhile.

She wouldn’t cross the road to protect Gabriel’s interests but she would walk through fire to protect Adrien’s smile.

“Thanks,” Ladybug said, brushing past Mayura as she headed towards a nearby staircase. “I needed that.”

Mayura fumbled for her arm as she left, fingers meaninglessly grasping at the air where she once was as he watched her leave.

*It doesn’t matter what you do. Her eyes have only ever been on his.*

Mayura’s mouth twisted into an ugly grimace as he turned, glaring down at Adrien as he made small talk with Kagami outside the opera house.

*It makes sense, you know. He has everything his heart desires; why wouldn’t Marinette also be his?*

“Tell me about it,” Mayura muttered, shaking his head as a dull, throbbing headache slowly started to creep into the back of his mind.

*Some people are just born lucky, I suppose.*

“Yeah,” Mayura said, watching Gabriel approach Adrien with a bitter frown. “Lucky.”

Rena Rouge had only been hit by a truck three times during her stint as a superhero, but as she stumbled back into the opera hall, Dr. He’s business card clutched in her wobbly fingers, she felt as though she had been run over a fourth time.
Who the hell is Dr. He? Who the hell is Master Fu? What the hell is a Vizier? Why did that woman talk like we should have met at some point?

A flash of black and red caught her eye as Ladybug bounded down the stairs, disappearing in the crowd that headed out the front door. Blood pounding in her ears, Rena Rouge followed, weaving between tipsy National Assemblymen as she chased Ladybug’s back.

“Ladybug!” Rena called, grabbing for Ladybug’s elbow as she peeled away from the crowd. “Ladybug...we need to talk”

“Can it wait?” Ladybug sighed, glancing at someone in the crowd with an impatient whine. “I’m late for an important-”

“This is important,” Rena said earnestly, trailing behind Ladybug as she headed down a staircase that wound around the outside of the building.

“Okay, well…” Ladybug arched her neck at the crowd with a small wince. “Shoot me an email and I’ll get back to you tonight, okay?”

“Does the name Dr. He mean anything to you?” Rena blurted out. Ladybug stopped in mid step, slowly turning around to look at Rena with what passed for a confused frown.

“She’s...that doctor the mayor invited, right?” Ladybug said slowly. "Yeah, she wanted to work with me on some sick kid visits...why do you ask?”

“Uh...no reason,” Rena lied, using every ounce of her willpower to force her voice to stop shaking. "She asked me to do something similar, actually.”

“...really?” Ladybug asked, glancing Rena up and down. “She didn’t talk to you about...anything else?”

“Is there something else she should be talking to me about?” Rena Rouge asked, fighting to keep the accusatory tone out of her voice as she locked eyes with her hero. Ladybug was silent for a long moment, slowly shaking her head.

“No...just the hospital thing,” Ladybug said, turning to go. “I’m...I’m sorry if I was a little curt with
you the other day; about the Chat Noir story, that is. I don’t mean to tell you how to do your job or anything, but—"

“It’s fine,” Rena said with a small wave of her hand. “Have a safe walk home.”

Ladybug offered her a wave and a friendly smile that would have put Alya at ease only a few months ago as she zipped into the night, over a building and into the cold November evening. Rena Rouge quietly watched her go, stealing away from the crowd until she was sure she could de-transform without anyone spotting her.

As Trixx’s power washed away from her Alya felt her resolve break, slumping down on the staircase as a chill that had nothing to do with the weather washed over her. She tucked her head into her hands, taking great, heaving, sobbing breaths of air, not even caring that her gown was getting soaked as she sat on the cold, wet staircase.

“Ai?” Alya glanced up as Carapace and Queen Bee came down the stairs behind her, settling on either side of her as Carapace whipped his coat off and draped it over her bare, shaking shoulders. “Hey, what’s the matter?”

“Does…” Alya took a deep breath. “Do either of you know who Master Fu is?”

Queen Bee and Carapace shared a glance, shaking their heads in confusion. “Should we?”

Alya shook her head, wiping her eyes with the back of her hands as she stared in the direction that Ladybug disappeared. “Guys...Ladybug isn’t being honest with us.”

"You enjoy your dance?"

"My partner was a little...forward," Kagami said, arm looped through Adrien's as they made their way out of the auditorium and into the chilly night air.

"Well I know he didn't try and cop a feel because I'm pretty sure you would have evaporated him by now," Adrien snorted.
"He tried to warn me about Chat Noir," Kagami continued.

"Did he now?" Adrien said, smiling and waving at a friend of his father’s as he passed.

"Said that he was dangerous to be around."

"He's right, you know," Adrien said through a fake smile.

"Not as dangerous as he thinks he is," Kagami said dismissively.

"Kagami, if they're looking at you-"

"I am fine, Adrien," Kagami said, shooting Adrien a look that dared him to argue with her. "Don't talk to me like I'm some kind of hapless fool who doesn't know what she's getting herself into."

"If you insist," Adrien muttered as he felt Plagg wriggle back into his pocket. “You make the delivery?”

“Went off without a hitch,” Plagg said, sliding up and nestling in Adrien’s collar as Kagami glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. “Whatever sweet nothings you wrote your ex-bugaboo have been delivered.”

Adrien just nodded, tucking his hands in his pockets as he leaned against a railing overlooking the carport beneath them.

“What did you say to her?” Kagami asked softly.

“Something between former friends,” Adrien sighed, running his hands through his hair. “I don’t know...I figured I’d try to reach her one more time. Give her another chance to...stop all this.”

“You think she’ll take it to heart?” Kagami asked.
“...no,” Adrien chuckled, shaking his head. “When Ladybug gets it in her head to do something, she goes after it with everything she has. I just...I had to try, you know?”

Kagami nodded, laying a hand on his arm with a somewhat useless shrug. She made peace with the fact that she would never fully understand the kind of relationship Adrien and Ladybug used to have, but she still found it odd that they were both fighting so hard to stay on the same side. It was a breed of stubbornness; just as they refused to give ground, they refused to let the other go, resulting in a tense, tug-of-war with Paris in the center.

“I’m sure you did everything you could,” Kagami said, bitterly wishing she had something to offer Adrien besides empty words of comfort. “...you think it’s too cold for ice cream?”

“Maybe, but that still doesn’t mean I won’t plough through a bucket of mint chocolate chip right now,” Adrien chuckled, looping his arm around Kagami’s shoulder. “Come on, I think Andre’s place is still-”

“Adrien!”

Adrien’s head whipped around to see a pair of black pigtails bobbing their way through the crowd, followed by string of excuse-me’s. Her pink, floral raincoat stood out like a beacon cutting through a crowd of people with more cars than personality traits as she bounded up to him, nearly slipping on a wet patch of stone as Adrien fell forward to catch her.

“Tell me you didn’t run here,” Adrien laughed.

“Two busses and a....you know what, it’s not important,” Marinette said, waving her hand dismissively.

“It’s almost midnight; what are you doing here?” Adrien said, looking Marinette up and down in disbelief.

“I was just...I wanted to see you tonight,” Marinette said, chewing on her lower lip.

“Don’t you have a deadline you have to-”
“It can wait,” Marinette said. “I...feel bad about standing you up—”

“You had something more important to work on,” Adrien insisted, glancing at Kagami. “Ask Kagami; this party was a snorefest.”

“I know...but I want to have at least half a date with you before this thing with the fashion show ruins my life,” Marinette said, turning to Kagami. “Do you mind if I steal him away?”

“Can’t exactly steal the willing, can you?” Kagami chuckled. “I should probably be getting home, anyway; I’ve had enough culture for one night.”

“You sure?” Adrien said, glancing at Marinette. “I’m sure Marinette wouldn’t mind if you tagged along.”

“Thank you, but I’m actually feeling a little unwell,” Kagami said, holding her stomach for effect as she shot Marinette a pointed look. “Bad meatballs, I think; you two go on without me.”

“If you say so, feel better, thanks for keeping Adrien company!” Marinette said quickly, grabbing Adrien by the hand before Adrien could interject.

“You attract a certain type, don’t you?” Kagami chuckled to herself, watching Marinette tugging Adrien down the street, arms swinging as they skipped past a line of luxury sedans waiting to reach the valet stand. A strange, gnawing fondness tugged at her heartstrings as she watched Adrien walk away, part of her yearning for a world where they wanted the same things out of life. Kagami sighed quietly to herself, shaking her head as she leaned on the railing. When it came to Adrien, what-if would always be the hardest question to deal with.

“...he was here.”

Kagami jumped a little as Master He’s voice came from beside her, her sharp gaze scanning the crowd of people that slowly trickled out of the building.

“...he was here?” Kagami asked, tugging her shawl tighter around her shoulders as she picked up on Master He's meaning. “How can you tell?”
“His stench was everywhere tonight,” Master He said, nose wrinkling. “A...putrid odor that follows those who practice vile arts. It was much stronger than I thought it would be; nearly overwhelmed me once or twice. But every time I thought I knew who it was coming from, I got...confused. Distracted long enough that I felt him slip away from me...he was right here, and he completely hid himself from me.”

“I didn’t know he could do that,” Kagami said, eyes lingering on the faces of the men who passed her.

“Neither did I,” Master He chuckled, fingering her Miraculous somewhat self-consciously. “I took him for a talented amateur toying with powers far outside his ability to control, but now...now I think we’re really dealing with someone...some thing dangerous.”

“How dangerous?” Kagami asked, dreading the answer as the old woman leaned against the balcony, glaring out into the sea of people that stretched out in front of them.

“I don’t know,” Master He said. “I’ve battled some of the worst people this world has ever seen; crossed paths with necromancers and demonologists and bloodthirsty warlocks who powered their art with the blood of the innocent. All of them had a noxious odor about them but this...this Hawkmoth is the worst thing I’ve sensed in quite a long time…and gods only know what he’s done to earn such a stench.”

Of all the things Gabriel Agreste despised about being Hawkmoth, Feeding Night was far and away the worst.

Nooroo’s biggest strength was a crippling weakness when he could feel the fear of the akuma that shrunk away from his touch. It always took him longer than he thought it would to corral five fluttering butterflies and seal them in a specially prepared container. And all the while, he had to deal with the gripping, soul-crushing fear coming from creatures that knew their lives were coming to an end.

*Kung Food...Mr. Pigeon...Prime Queen...Despair Bear...Befana.* Five more assets he had to sacrifice and five less akuma he could call upon were things with Ladybug to deteriorate. He had done his best to keep his most stalwart pawns safe, but he had lost a fair few along the way he had hoped to keep in his back pocket for later.
And there was no getting out of Feeding Night.

Hawkmoth approached the sealed, valuted door that lay at the far end of his lair, muttering an incantation under his breath as he keyed in a passcode. Even by his paranoid standards, the security measures he used to keep his patron’s project safe were extreme. A state of the art security system used by most Swiss banks was backed up by almost every ward and protective spell Gabriel had committed to memory. But even through two and a half feet of magically reinforced steel, Hawkmoth could feel gnawing, roiling anger seeping out in waves. The sensation only grew stronger as he disentangled the security wards, nearly bowling him over as the heavy door slid open, slow enough to give both Hawkmoth and his victims time to dread what lay beyond.

Five large, black butterflies beat against the clear, magically strengthened glass that stretched from floor to ceiling of the vault, banging against the screen as Hawkmoth approached, fighting down his fear and revulsion. He placed the jar of terrified akuma in a cylinder outside the glass, sealing it and pressing a button that sucked the akuma up and into the enclosure. Almost immediately, the black butterflies stopped trying to escape, turning in sync to fix their gaze on the quivering akuma.

The sensation of being devoured, body and spirit, was not one that Hawkmoth found any easier to endure with the passing of time and the heightened empathy Nooroo afforded him forced him to endure every second as the black butterflies descended on the akuma. He felt their wings being torn by sharp, piercing teeth; felt their fear and horror as their essences were drained from their trembling bodies in ribbons of purple light, flowing into the black butterflies that shuddered and grew ever so slightly.

It was over in a matter of moments as five mangled, shredded akuma carcasses tumbled through the air like falling leaves, landing on a pile of grey, drained akuma that covered every inch of the floor inside the enclosure.

Hawkmoth stumbled backwards as the black butterflies, now sated, leveled their rage against him once again, straining against the glass as Hawkmoth fumbled to reapply the spells that kept them sealed. The heavy vault door groaned closed behind him as he frantically slammed it shut, locking the black butterflies away and cutting off the tide of hate, anger, and ravenous, neverending hunger he felt wafting off them.

Hawkmoth leaned against the vault door, taking deep, steadying breaths as he detransformed, straightened his tie, and walked out of his lair through a crowd of fluttering akuma.

The only solace he took was that as long as Mayura was active, there was one less to feed.
Call this chapter cornstarch because this plot just got t h i c c.

So this fic is about to head into the events leading up to the prologue pretty soon here so, suffice to say, shit is gonna get real. We got one more decompression chapter before we're on track for the prologue so prepare thine butts.

Prepare them I say.

I may be taking next week off completely to do Adrigami Week (and you should too) but after that we're back on track. Thanks for all the amazing comments so far; I read every one of them (and mentally note who's correctly picking up on my breadcrumb trails).
Chapter Summary

"Once an evil deed is done, then it never ends. It goes on, and it will go on forever."

Five Deadly Venoms (1978)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I said we have it covered.”

“You said that almost three months ago,” Gabriel spat, fidgeting with the band of his watch. “I want to know what it is you’re doing to bring Chat Noir’s ring to me.”

“Firstly, I’m not bring Chat Noir’s ring to you,” Ladybug said, narrowing her eyes at Gabriel. “I am using it to help your wife and son; you can fall into a ditch and die for all I care.”

“You know, I have new respect for Chat Noir, and not just because he's proved to be a bigger threat than we took him for,” Gabriel sneered. “Because anyone who’s had to deal with your sunny personality and what you consider wit ought to be given some kind of national award.”

“And any woman who tolerated you long enough to marry you needs to be evaluated for brain damage!” Ladybug spat. "Might want to book the CAT scan before you thaw Emilie out!"

“You shut your-” Gabriel stopped short, taking a deep breath as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Okay... okay... what’s the plan, Ladybug? How are you going to move this project forward? Because for the last three months we’ve done nothing but spin wheels while Chat Noir has continued to gain strength.”

“What happened to ‘I need to proceed carefully’?” Ladybug sniffed. “I am working as hard as I can to draw Chat Noir out”

“And yet you haven’t moved against Kagami Tsurugi,” Gabriel said.
“I thought that wasn’t someone I could go after without being sure,” Ladybug asked. “What’s with the sudden rush? You never seemed to be in too much of a hurry before.”

“Do not mistake my prudence for lack of care,” Gabriel said, narrowing his glare at Ladybug. “My wife’s safety and my family’s happiness have always been at the forefront of my mind and if you aren’t going to take this seriously, then the least you can do is let me send an akuma to-”

“No...more... akuma ,” Ladybug said, ice dipping off every word. “I thought I made that clear by now.”

“One discreet agent could find out what Kagami knows and have Chat Noir’s identity under an hour!” Gabriel insisted. “No one would even know that you and the akuma were connected!”

“You think that’s why I don’t want to use akuma?” Ladybug laughed, shaking her head. “I can’t tell if you’re delusional or you’re just willfully ignorant of the suffering you’ve caused.”

“No one is more aware of the suffering I’ve caused than I am,” Gabriel said, palming the spot where the Butterfly Miraculous would have been. “And no one is willing to pay the price more than I am.”

“Make other people pay the price more like it,” Ladybug snorted. “The answer is no, Gabriel.”

“Then you are just going to have to hurry,” Gabriel said. “Or-”

“Or what, Gabe?” Ladybug said, crossing her arms. “You forget that the only reason you’re not rotting in jail right now is because I decided to have mercy on the unfortunate people who care about you. Keep running your mouth and I might just change my mind about letting you walk free after this.”

Gabriel’s lips pressed into a thin line, glaring at Ladybug as she turned to leave. “You just sit tight and let me handle this my way. You’ll get what’s coming to you...you’re just going to have to be a little patient.”

Gabriel waited a few seconds after Ladybug left before grabbing a glass off his desk and hurling it at the wall with a frustrated snarl.
Queen Bee paced around Rena Rouge, looking her up and down with a curious frown as she did. A pair of brown eyes followed her every movement as she poked Rena Rouge in the shoulder, studying the way the suit flexed around the tip of her gloves.

“Not bad,” Queen Bee admitted as Rena Rouge just crossed her arms with a self-satisfied smile. “Certainly feels real enough...though I have to wonder...”

Queen Bee’s fingers threaded through Rena Rouge’s hair as she leaned in, kissing her full on the mouth. Rena Rouge tensed in surprise for a brief moment, stumbling back a few steps as her hands snaked around Queen Bee’s waist with a soft sigh of contentment.

Queen Bee broke the kiss after a long moment, glancing at Carapace as he leaned against a nearby wall. “Sorry, does this bother you?”

“Why would it?” Carapace shrugged, glancing at the dazed, slightly giddy looking Rena Rouge as she wound her finger through Queen Bee’s hair. “This is purely...scientific, isn’t it?”

“My favorite kind of experiment, in fact,” Queen Bee purred, stealing another quick series of kisses as Carapace sauntered over to them. “Care to give an expert opinion?”

“Sure,” Carapace said, tilting Rena Rouge’s head back and kissing her as his hand trailed down her back. Rena Rouge squeaked as Carapace lightly squeezed her bottom, breaking the kiss with an appraising tilt of his head. “Hm...almost. Obviously she lacks Alya’s stellar personality but-”

“A hem .”

Carapace, Queen Bee, and Rena Rouge looked up to see...Rena Rouge standing in the doorway, tapping her foot against the floor.

“Care to explain yourselves?” Rena Rouge asked as her doppleganger waved cheerfully at her.

“What? After poofing her all morning, I figured she deserves a little break from being repeatedly destroyed,” Queen Bee said, twirling a strand of auburn hair between her fingertips. "She's had
“And you’re just too cute to poof,” Carapace pouted, squeezing the doppleganger’s cheeks. “Look at this face; how can you not want to kiss this-”

Rena Rouge snapped her fingers as the doppleganger disappeared in a poof of orange colored smoke. The second she did, Rena Rouge let out a small gasp, stumbling back against the doorframe as her hand came up to her mouth. Even after the duplicate had disappeared, she could remember, with crystal clarity, the taste of Chloe’s lipgloss and the feeling of her fingers running through her hair despite the fact that she had been two rooms away when her partners had kissed her duplicate.

Well that answers that question, Rena Rouge thought to herself.

“Something wrong?” Queen Bee asked.

“Nothing,” Rena Rouge coughed into her hand. “J-Just heartburn, that’s all. Your turn; how’s training going?”

“Well, you’ll be pleased to know that I’ve graduated from two-pump chump to five-pump chump,” Queen Bee said, brushing her shoulder off. “And that’s five Venom stings without losing any potency or being forced to break transformation, thank you very much.”

"Thank me very much for being your guinea pig," Carapace mumbled.

"Well, that'll help if we go up against five easily freezable enemies," Rena Rouge said. "Nino?"

“Wayzz and I managed to improve my barrier ability,” Carapace said, pulling his shield out. With a flick of his wrist, a rim of energy expanded from the shield, broadening it as Carapace poked his head around the side. “Not exactly a perfect defense, but should be enough to shrug off some of Chat Noir’s tamer attacks...or Ladybug’s for that matter.”

Rena Rouge nodded, chewing her lip thoughtfully. “…if it came to it, do you think we could take either one of them?”
“Is that where we’re headed?” Carapace asked, sharing an uneasy look with Queen Bee.

“I don’t know; after that ballroom thing, I don’t know much of anything anymore,” Rena Rouge laughed ruefully. “So best to be prepared for anything, hm?”

“Well, if Ladybug needs to make out with a clone, we know yours are up to the task,” Carapace chuckled.

“Not really sure I’d be up for that anymore,” Rena Rouge muttered, running a hand through her hair with a sigh. “Alright...let’s hook up tomorrow night-”

“Forward, but I won’t say no,” Queen Bee shrugged.

“-for some extra combat training,” Rena Rouge said, rolling her eyes as she stepped out onto the balcony. “I’m gonna follow up with some akuma victims; see if we can wring a little more information out of them.”

“You need some backup?”

“Thanks, but...I just need some space to clear my head,” Rena Rouge said with a shaky smile. “I’ll call you if anything comes up.”

“Okay, if you’re-” Carapace trailed off as Rena Rouge springboarded off the balcony, tumbling off Le Grand Paris and into the cold December morning.

“Man...she could have at least left us a clone to play with,” Queen Bee muttered to herself, smacking her lips thoughtfully. “...Alya wears raspberry lip gloss?”

“You know what the weird thing is?” Carapace chuckled, rubbing his own lips. “She hates raspberry.”

“Hey...would you be mad at me if I left school?”
Marinette turned around, spitting out the pin she held between her teeth as she frowned at Adrien? “Like drop out?”

“Nothing like that,” Adrien said, picking at a loose thread in the afgan draped over Marinette’s fainting couch. “I mean...I have the credits to graduate already; at this point, I’m just spinning wheels until spring, you know?”

“I kinda wondered why you were taking a History class you passed already,” Marinette said, biting her lip. “I mean...I thought you liked school?”

“I do,” Adrien shrugged, rubbing the back of his neck. “I just...well, I feel like I have a lot of other stuff I could be doing with my time besides sitting through class and doing meaningless assignments. I mean, last week M. Lecourt just put an old science video on…”

“Most people would consider that a good lesson,” Marinette chuckled.

“Not to someone who doesn’t need to take it…” Adrien grumbled, flopping back against the couch. “I just...I have things I want to do, you know?”

“Things for your father?”

“You could say that,” Adrien said, staring at the ceiling. “Don’t you ever feel like we’re...just wasting time? I mean, I know you could probably take equivalency exams and start preparing more for design school, right?”

“I could,” Marinette said, glancing at the nearly finished gown she was preparing for the London show. “But...Alya and I promised we’d walk together at graduation...I know that sounds silly, but it would mean a lot to me.”

“Well, then it’s not silly at all,” Adrien chuckled, rolling over on one elbow to look up at her. “I just...I don’t care anymore. I don’t care if I walk or not and early graduation could give me some more time to prepare for college...or work...or run a marathon. Anything besides just killing time five days a week.”
“Well...if you feel that strongly about it,” Marinette shrugged. “You should do it.”

“You wouldn’t be upset?”

“Upset that you decided to do something unconventional to chase your dreams?” Marinette said.

“I don’t know about dreams,” Adrien chuckled, eyes roaming over the piles of half-finished designs that lay cluttered around Marinette’s room. “I don’t know if I even really have a dream, if I’m being honest with you.”

“What?”

“Not like you, anyway,” Adrien sighed. “I mean...you come alive when you talk about your art. You’ve known what you wanted to do since you were a kid; you’ve been lining up to break into the fashion world for years now, right?”

“Well...yeah, I guess so,” Marinette shrugged. “But you have dreams! You’re so good at so many things!”

“And I’m not super passionate about any of them,” Adrien shrugged. “I don’t really have a dream job or anything that makes me as excited as you are about design. I’m not jazzed about fashion or science or business or fencing...they’re all just kinda things I do. I mean compared to you and Dad and Alya, I’m just...dancing through life.”

“You’re also eighteen,” Marinette chuckled, wheeling across her bedroom until she was in front of Adrien. “You have the rest of your life to figure out what you want to do; and if you want to graduate early, you can.”

Marinette leaned forward, lips brushing across his in a brief, chaste kiss.

“I’ll do the dreaming for the both of us until then.”
Nino: Bro

Nino: Brosephys

Nino: Broseidon

Nino: Brobi wan Kenobi

Nino: Broman Reigns

Nino: Bro Diddly

Nino: Brodius Maximus

Adrien: I’m here I was just wondering how many funny things you had left to say

Nino: i got a whole internet list but

Nino: dude alya said mari told her you tested out of school?

Nino: like full on graduated?!

Adrien: Yeah I had to take a few tests and complete a few projects but that was that.

Adrien: Your boy is a lycée graduate and everything!

Nino: wow all responsible and shit…

Nino: so no more class for you, huh?
Adrien: Nah; I was going to wait for spring, but I’m working on something that requires some of my time.

Nino: your dad?

Adrien: Yeah something like that.

Nino: dang you’re really speedrunning adulthood

Nino: jumping into a corner three hundred times to clip directly to the workforce

Adrien: My strategy guide is coming out next month.

Adrien: Are you mad I didn’t tell you first?

Nino: just surprised is all

Nino: you always liked the classroom stuff more than me

Adrien: I still do; I just need some time on my calendar.

Nino: i get it; we all got irons in the fire

Nino: just let me know how i can get time on adrien agreste’s busy schedule

Adrien: Totally!

Adrien: We should do something this weekend Calcium Bro-mide.
Adrien: ...no?

Nino: 4/10 apply yourself

Nino: hey busybee did adrien tell you he was dropping out of school

Chloe: WHAT?!

Nino: gonna take that as a no

Chloe: YEAH CUZ THIS IS THE REACTION OF SOMEONE WHO IS IN THE KNOW!

Chloe: WHEN DID HE TELL YOU???

Nino: i heard secondhand from al who heard from mari

Chloe: WTF??

Chloe: M. Perfect Attendance is suddenly just leaving?!

Nino: i guess he tested out so he technically graduated but

Nino: idk have you talked to him much since this whole thing started?

Chloe: the thing we’re Not Supposed to Talk About on Personal Cell Phones?

Nino: yeah and say it more ominously next time
Nino: i don’t think you’ve creeped out the stigma agents monitoring our phones yet

Chloe: omg they’re not monitoring our phones are they????

Chloe: that’s like supes illegal!!

Nino: something tells me they don’t really care

Nino: i just think that we mighta let adrien fall by the wayside in all this

Chloe: well it’s not like we’ve been playing spin the bottle and braiding each other’s hair!!

Chloe: we’ve had a lot of irons in the fire lately

Chloe: but if it makes you feel better, schedule a play-date with adrien

Chloe: i’m sure he’d appreciate it

Nino: yeah…

Nino: i just feel like i haven’t even thought about him lately, you know?

Nino: what with all the...stuff going on

Nino: and now he’s gone and graduated himself without even telling us!

Chloe: honey if he put up with me this long, i don’t think he’s gonna kick you to the curb for a few missed lunches
Chloe: the boy has a warm, forgiving heart

Chloe: which is really easy to take advantage of, unfortunately

Chloe: so long as you steer clear of the Gabriel Agreste Asshole Spectrum you’re golden

Nino: mm guess so

Nino: not exactly a high hurdle to jump tho is it?

Chloe: the bar is so low ants/Adrien’s father trip over it

Chloe: so uhhhhh

Chloe: off topic but is your girlfriend okay??

Nino: define ‘okay’

Chloe: functional?

Nino: yes

Nino: that’s about all we can say for her though

Chloe: still bummed about the Ladybug thing?

Nino: aren’t you?
Chloe: well…

Chloe: i mean, do we even know this doctor is telling the truth?

Nino: not really

Nino: but that’s the problem, isn’t it?

Nino: we don’t know who’s telling the truth and who’s working us

Nino: or if everyone is working us

Chloe: and that’s twisting foxy’s tail?

Nino: doesn’t it twist yours?

Chloe: i guess but i don’t have a ladyblog to keep running

Nino: i think that’s a big part of it too

Nino: she’s always prided herself in telling the truth and nothing but the truth

Nino: but she can’t be sure the shit ladybug is saying is even half-true

Chloe: or even a quarter true

Nino: i would settle for a lie that’s not end of the world horrible

Chloe: sometimes i lay awake at night and fantasize that this whole stupid thing is because Chat Noir
stole Ladybug’s last cookie

Nino: chloe we already know you lay awake at night fantasizing over ladybug ;)

Chloe: >:O

Chloe: be nice to me or i’ll steal your girl(‘s magic clone)

Nino: >:O

“Show me.”

Chat Noir took a deep breath, focusing on the apple in front of him. “Cataclysm!”

Black energy laced from his fingertips, arcing across the apple and slowly draining the color out of the otherwise perfectly preserved piece of fruit. Chat Noir let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding, picking up the smooth, grey apple from the table and holding it up for Plagg’s approval. The little kwami twisted this way and that, inspecting it with a thoughtful frown. After a long, tense moment, Plagg nodded.

“Not bad, kid,” Plagg said, crossing his arms as Chat Noir took a bite out of the featureless apple. “Takes quite a lot of focus to destroy something as immaterial as a color.”

“What’s next; destroying smells?” Chat Noir asked. “Please say you’ll teach me how to destroy the smell of camembert.”

“Well now I’m never teaching you that,” Plagg sniffed. “But keep it up and you might even be able to purify akuma.”

“That isn’t a Ladybug-only thing?”
“Well...the nice and pretty way is,” Plagg muttered. “But with a little practice you might be able to completely destroy Hawkmoth’s link to the butterflies he sends out.”

“Or used to send out,” Chat Noir said, frowning down at the apple core in his hand. “I doubt Hawkmoth is gonna put another akuma out while Ladybug is still working with him.”

“Well, you never know; unlimited powers of destruction are more useful than most people give them credit for,” Plagg said, patting Chat Noir’s head.

“Even if my powers involve fireballs and all-consuming fields of destructive energy,” Chat Noir said, staring down at his hand with a flex of his fingers. “You got anything more...robust? Precise? Something I don’t need to spend weeks learning how to control effectively?”

“Why do you think I’ve been making you do concentration drills this whole time?” Plagg asked, nodding over to the towering wall of figures carved into the black obsidian of the Sanctuary walls. “I’ve been going back and forth with a friend of mine for a while, but he wouldn’t agree to train you until you learned a bit more...focus.”

“And, have I lived up to this mysterious Black Cat’s standards yet?”

“That rather remains to be seen…”

Chat Noir turned around to see a tall, black-clad figure materializing out of the smooth obsidian wall of the sanctuary. His long, raven black hair was secured in a tight bun on top of his head as cold, amber eyes regarded Chat Noir. A black scarf wound around his nose and mouth, concealing the lower half of his face from sight. Worn, black robes wrapped around his body, secured with a wide green sash that secured a simple, unadorned black sword to his hip.

“Nice getup; does the League of Shadows know you raided their wardrobe?” Chat Noir snorted, extending a spear with a flick of his wrist as the masked stranger made no motion to attack him. “You must be Plagg’s friend; you as murderous as the last one?”

The figure wordlessly glanced at Plagg who just shrugged. “Big...Greek...hates women?”

“Ah...so Diomedes has already had his hands on you,” the figure nodded, watching Chat Noir snap his fingers, igniting a puff of flame with a raise of his eyebrow. “That explains the foolhardiness…”
“Hey!” Chat Noir huffed.

“Trust me; he was plenty foolhardy before Diomedes got his hands on him,” Plagg snickered.

“Hey!”

“I’m well aware of how foolhardy your newest charge can be,” the stranger sniffed, paying no mind to the pout Chat Noir sent his way. “I’m not quite sure what more you expect me to do for him; he already seems to have mastered my Black Hole technique.”

“Your Black Hole technique?” Chat Noir said, opening an inky black portal in the air between them with a flick of his fingers. “You trademark it or something?”

“Plagg’s limitless powers of destruction are rather...lacking in imagination,” the stranger said, closing the portal with a flick of his own wrist. “Tell me, did you work with him to develop his own technique before you roused me?”

“Ain’t exactly got time for that, Sasuke,” Plagg said, waving his paw dismissively. “Ladybug’s gone off her rocker and the kid here is gonna need every trick we got to take her down.”

“Sasuke?!” Chat Noir echoed.

“Is that so?” The man called Sasuke said, cocking his head to one side as he regarded Chat Noir curiously.

“He’s been practicing a lot lately,” Plagg said, ignoring his charge’s weeaboo outburst. “And I think he’s ready...I want you to give him Fang.”

“Is that right?” Sasuke asked, hand resting on the pommel of the blade. “After everything we went through to create it, you want me to give it to this child?”

“Hey, I’ve been practicing swordfighting since I was was a child,” Chat Noir said, eyeing the sword
A dry, raspy chuckle echoed off the walls of the Sanctuary. “You’re an energetic one, aren’t you?” Sasuke said in an archaic form of Japanese Chat Noir could just barely understand.

“Ask my girlfriend how energetic I can be,” Chat Noir replied, extending a second spear as Sasuke’s fingers casually wrapped around the hilt of his sword.

“Arrogant...articulate...and a foul attitude to boot,” Sasuke chuckled. “There’s no doubt about it...you are a Black Cat. What’s your name, boy?”

“Adrien Agreste,” Chat Noir said, gripping his spears tighter as Sasuke slowly drew his weapon. The flat of the blade was a pure, inky black metal that seemed to draw in the faint light that surrounded them. A thin sliver of green traced along the edge of the blade, glinting as Sasuke leveled it at Adrien.

“A strange name…” Sasuke mused. “Very well Adrien Agreste. I, Sarutobi Sasuke, will judge your progress. Defeat me, and this weapon will be yours.”

Kagami looked up as the door to her office slammed open, a worn, dejected looking Adrien slumping out and immediately collapsing on the floor at her feet.

“Hello, dear, how was your day?” Kagami said as Adrien rolled himself over with the last of his energy.

“Sasuke...is...a prick ,” Adrien groaned.

“Adrien, if you’ve been using the time-distortion in your Sanctuary to marathon garbage anime-”

“Garbage anime you watched.”
“Garbage anime I tolerated because we could make out during the filler episodes,” Kagami sniffed, turning and walking down the hall as Adrien whimpered on the floor. “Don’t think for a second that I share your cheap otaku aesthetics.”

“That’s rich coming from a woman who owns a full set of Inner Senshi linger—” Adrien grunted in pain as Kagami whipped a throw pillow at his head from down the hall.

“Hey...Nino?”

Nino closed his locker to see Marinette hovering just at his elbow, rocking back and forth on her heels.

“Is there...something wrong with Alya?” Marinette asked, fidgeting with her bag’s strap.

Boy howdy, where to start?

“What makes you say that?” Nino shrugged as casually as possible, weaving his way through crowds of students trickling out of the school building.

“I don’t know...she’s been kinda evasive with me lately,” Marinette shrugged. “I keep trying to make plans with her and she keeps brushing me off...and hanging out with Chloe for some reason.”

“Well, they’ve been lifting buddies for a few months now,” Nino said diplomatically. “I know they’ve been running in the morning too.”

“It’s Chloe though,” Marinette said, narrowing her eyes at Nino. “You know... Chloe.”

“Yeah, I know ,” Nino said, bristling a little on his teammates behalf. “What’s wrong with Alya making more friends?”

“Friends that hate me?”
“Chloe doesn’t hate you,” Nino sighed. “It’s not freaking college anymore, Marinette; people change. We’re not the same people we were at fourteen, are we?”

“No, just...I feel like my best friend is keeping something from me and I don’t know what it is,” Marinette sighed.

“Yeah...tell me about it,” Nino sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Did Adrien tell you he was leaving school?”

“We talked about it,” Marinette shrugged. “He made up his mind though.”

“To work for his asshole dad’s company?” Nino snorted, shaking his head. “You really believe this is what Adrien wants?”

“Four years ago I’d say this was Gabriel pulling his strings but...I think this is all his call,” Marinette said. “He isn’t a pushover anymore; I think if this was his father’s idea, he would have resisted it on principle alone.”

“I don’t know if he has a stubborn streak or if he is a stubborn streak, you know?” Nino chuckled, shaking his head. “Still...weird to think that we came all this way together and we’re not even gonna graduate together.”

Marinette laid a sympathetic hand on Nino’s shoulder. “He isn’t going to slip away from us; we’re not going to let him slip away from us.”

“Yeah, if he thinks he can just ditch us, he’s got another thing coming,” Nino said, squeezing Marinette’s hand. “You oughta turn a little of that stubbornness on your girl; kidnap her and head to the movies or something. I can’t really go into it too much but...she could use a break.”

“Yeah, we could use a girl’s night or…” Marinette’s eyes widened. “Or a girl’s weekend!”

“Yeah, make a weekend out of it,” Nino said. "You got something in mind?"
"I think so...I mean, I have to see if Adrien's cool with it but...no, he'll be fine," Marinette said, turning to leave. "Thanks Nino! I should really-"

Marinette stopped in her tracks, glancing at Nino somewhat uncertainly. "...hey, Nino? Do you know...how much time Adrien has been spending at Kagami's place?"

"He's been spending time at Kagami's place?" Nino frowned. "He hasn't mentioned anything to me about that."

"I...I see," Marinette nodded.

"I-I mean, if he is, it's probably nothing to worry about!" Nino said quickly. "H-He's not that kinda guy, you know?"

"Yeah...you're right," Marinette said, shooting Nino a small wave. "Thanks."

Nino watched Marinette walk away, quietly wondering how long Adrien and Kagami had been hanging out without him.

"Nah, it's fine," Nino muttered. "Yeah...yeah, it's totally fine..."

The elevator door opened and Gabriel nearly fell face-first onto the floor in front of him.

“T’m alright!” He said to no one, voice echoing off the bare walls of Emilie’s chamber as he stumbled forward. The bottle of Grey Goose dangled limply from one hand, vodka burning the back of his throat as his hands ran over the plants that surrounded Emilie’s pod. A small sigh of despair slipped out as his hand brushed across the withered, desiccated plants that only seemed to increase in number as the days went on.

Time, as always, was Gabriel’s greatest enemy.

“Hello dear,” Gabriel called, leaning against the wrought iron gate that separated the pod from the rest of the chamber. “How was your day?”
Emilie’s silence pressed in all around him as Gabriel took another drag off the bottle, coughing and spluttering as a drop ran down the wrong pipe.

“Mine was alright,” Gabriel sighed, blowing a low, hollow note across the neck of the bottle. “Gearing up for the London show...should have a good turnout this year...something about this crop of designers is...well, I think my company is in good hands after I...well, after I retire at least…”

Emilie said nothing as Gabriel rolled the half-empty bottle between his hands.

“Adrien has a new girlfriend…” Gabriel continued. “Brilliant...creative...strong-willed enough to keep him on the right track...with a woman like that at his side, I won’t be surprised if he surpasses all our expectations...already a lycee graduate and everything…though I don’t think he’ll be attending Cambridge like you hoped.”

Gabriel’s last word echoed off the wall as he stared blankly at his wife, watching each rise and fall of the sleeping woman’s chest in case it was the last.

“He’s...doing quite well, actually…” Gabriel continued, the liquor making his vision swim and his tongue feel thick in his mouth. “Plenty of friends...some of...better quality than others. I know you’d call me a snob for saying so, but Mme. Tsurugi is certainly a cut above Andre’s girl...though there’s the small matter of the fact that she’s standing in the way of my plans to save you…”

Gabriel swished another sip of liquor around in his mouth thoughtfully.

“That’s her only sin, really,” Gabriel said. “Supporting...supporting someone who wants to stop a lunatic from destroying her city...in, any other story but ours she’d be the hero…”

Gabriel’s mouth twisted into a bitter scowl. “And so...if I want to save the life of the woman I love...I have to cut off another piece of myself...I have to compromise again ...and again...and again...I have to wonder if there’s even enough of the man you married for you to recognize anymore…”

Every turn had another twisted decision lying around the corner. It was almost as though the powers that be enjoyed toying with Gabriel; taking his promise to rescue his wife by any means quite literally.
Well, Gabriel? What’s it gonna be? You man enough to do this? Or are you a liar and a coward?

“I’ve come too far,” Gabriel muttered, grabbing at his hair. “I’ve given up too much...it can’t end now...it just...it just can’t…”

It was the same dance he always did and the warm fuzz of liquor numbed him as he surgically removed parts of his soul with every morally bankrupt decision. Every time he thought he couldn’t sink any lower, he found new tiers of desperation to slither into; propelled by good intentions and no small amount of self-denial.

But he had no choice...he had to fix this.

“I keep asking myself...when will it end?” Gabriel murmured, running a hand through his hair. “Even though I know the answer already…”

Gabriel leaned his head back, staring up at the peaceful sleeping face of his wife with a shaky smile.

“It never ends,” Gabriel said, glassy eyes staring into space as he felt himself growing goggier and goggier. “It just goes on...and it goes on forever.”

The bottle of vodka tipped over as Gabriel slumped against the wall, cold, grainy alcohol soaking his pant leg. As he drifted off, his last shred of consciousness clung to the warm, smiling image of his wife he feared would never see again.

Chapter End Notes

Broke up this chapter into two bits because I finished the first half and I'm almost done with the second bit. First of two filler eps before the London show and everything starts rolling towards the finish line. Doing a lot of setup here so I wanted to break it up into two more digestible bites.

And yes, Sarutobi Sasuke is Chat Noir’s latest mentor. The requirements to be a Chat Noir are 1) Rich 2) Big Ego 3) Likes black 4) Ninja.
“She just wants to spend time with you.”

“You think I’m happy revising purchase orders on vacation?” Marinette sighed, glancing over the rim of her laptop as Emma fruitlessly tried to cast her line in the water, the fishing pole wobbling and whipping in the fading afternoon light. “There’s always work to do—”

“That’s just the point, babe.” Adrien sighed, looking over the rim of his sunglasses. “There’s always work to do; no matter how hard you work, work is still there in the morning.”

Marinette bit her lip, idly tapping away as Emma fished a bottle out of the ocean. “I know...I promise, I just need a little more time.”

“There isn’t going to be anymore time, love,” Adrien said softly. "We're running out of time together...you know that, right?”

“What?” Marinette reached out, fingers brushing against Adrien's shoulder as it dissolved, turning into sand that pooled at her feet. The tide rose and as Emma turned to look at her, the cold ocean washed over her head, dragging her out to sea.
“Emma!” Marinette rose, legs sinking into the sand with a silent scream as she tried to run after her daughter. The beach opened beneath her feet, thousands of pounds of sand rising above her head and filling her lungs as she sank deeper into the ground. “Emma!”

“Emma!”

Marinette shot up, sheets tangled around her legs and panting heavily as she fumbled for some kind of purchase. Her head banged on the side of the bedframe, groaning in pain as she fumbled around for Adrien's hand. It took her a long moment to realize she wasn’t on the beach and her hypothetical daughter with Adrien wasn’t being pulled out to sea as the warm light of the morning slowly filtered through her blinds.

“Ngh...what a weird dream,” Marinette muttered, shaking her head as she rolled out of bed.

Alya watched Ivan stir the ice around in his drink, an uncomfortable silence lingering in the coffee shop between them.

“That’s all you remember?” Alya asked, making a note on her notepad.

“That’s all I remember,” Ivan said. “Same as you and everyone else who Hawkmoth targeted...darkness, anger, confusion...and then the aftermath.”

“Right,” Alya sighed, trying not to let her disappointment show. “Thank you, Ivan...this was really helpful.”

"Is it?"

"I'm...trying to get a more complete picture of everyone's experiences," Alya said. "I hope I wasn't too intrusive here..."

“Believe me; you’re not the only one who’s been curious,” Ivan chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. “This is the second interview like this I’ve had in so many weeks.”
“Really?” Alya frowned. “Someone else has been interviewing past akuma victims?”

“I...thought you two would have been working together,” Ivan said, frowning in confusion. “Kagami said she was working on something to submit to the Ladyblog...she hasn’t told you about it?”

“...no,” Alya said, glancing up as a familiar figure in a smart lavender peacoat stepped into the coffee shop. Kagami’s eyes swept the cafe, locking with Alya’s for a second before turning away as she she stepped up to the counter to order. “Excuse me.”

She was acutely aware of the fact that Kagami was avoiding her gaze as she approached, although as she cleared her throat, Kagami dryly glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. “Yes?”

“Hi,” Alya said, fidgeting with her notebook. “How’s...it going?”

“...fine,” Kagami said.

“It’s, uh, Alya, by the way,” Alya said, awkwardly holding her hand out. “I know it’s been a while since we talked, but-”

“I know who you are,” Kagami said simply, turning back to the counter.

“...right,” Alya said, clearing her throat. “Uh...I was just talking with Ivan over there and he said that you were working on something to submit to the Ladyblog; something about akuma attack victims, and-”

“Still working on it,” Kagami said coolly.

Okay...well, if you need any help with it or want to compare notes-”

“I just want to make sure I have all my facts straight before submitting it,” Kagami said, eyes flickering back to Alya's with something resembling contempt. “I wouldn’t want to tarnish the Ladyblog’s spotless reputation for integrity with...misinformation.”
Alya teetered backwards, blinking as Kagami stirred honey into her tea. “What’s...what’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I value the credibility of your website,” Kagami said, raising an eyebrow. “Don’t you?”

“Right...of course,” Alya said, pulling a business card out of her purse. “Well...if you have any information-”

“I know where to contact you,” Kagami said, turning to leave as Alya’s arm caught her around the elbow.

“Listen,” Alya said, voice dropping to a pleading hiss. “I am trying to get to the bottom of all this; I am trying to figure this out...help me. Please. If you know something about Hawkmoth or Chat Noir or-”

“Why don’t you just ask your friend Ladybug?” Kagami asked, eyes narrowing. “I’m sure she’ll tell you everything you need to know.”

Alya’s grip slackened enough for Kagami to slip out, leaving her standing in the middle of the coffee shop, weakly clutching her notebook as she watched Kagami leave.

Marinette whipped the blanket off the mannequin, stepping back and carefully studying Gabriel's expression as he took in her finished design. The soft, flowing periwinkle blue gown glistened with small, silvery butterflies that caught the light of Gabriel's office as he turned it this way and that. In spite of the fact that Gabriel Agreste was a madman and some kind of evil warlock, Marinette still found herself holding her breath as he examined her work.

“You...like Milanese styles, don't you?” Gabriel muttered, watching the way the silk moved as the mannequin turned.

“You think it's too derivative?” Marinette said, suddenly terrified that the dress she had slaved over for weeks was going to be laughed out of London.
"All fashion is derivative," Gabriel said. "The only original designer was the first neanderthal to sew leaves into a skirt; we've all been living in the house they've built for thousands of years now."

"So...you think it'll show well?" Marinette asked.

"I think...yes, I think you'll impress quite a few people," Gabriel nodded, the barest hint of a smile crossing his face. "I admit, you've already impressed me."

Marinette found herself grinning at this, fighting the urge to whoop in delight. "That's...high praise."

"Praise you've certainly earned," Gabriel said, twirling the mannequin around with a nod. "Yes...I daresay you'll impress quite a few of your future colleagues at the London office."

"Colleagues?"

"This is...very unorthodox," Gabriel chuckled. "But you are not an ordinary intern, M. Dupain. I was going to wait until you had finished school but...well, our London offices have a position open, and-
"

"You're...offering me a job?" Marinette asked.

"College students need money, right?" Gabriel shrugged. "We have a junior designer position open by the time you start school. It would be mostly part time so you could keep going to class, but-
"

"There's...there's got to be someone more experienced for the job, right?" Marinette said, head swimming at the thought of having a job lined up before leaving secondary school almost too much to imagine.

"Experience comes to everyone in time," Gabriel said. "But you're more than talented enough to step into a design position. Your aesthetic is already well in line with Gabriel's brand, and-
"

"I appreciate the offer," Marinette said. "Really, I...this is more than I could have hoped for, but...well, I always thought I would start my own label after school, you know?"
Gabriel nodded. "I would expect no less from you; I had the same ambitions when I was your age. Of course, I thought that gumption and talent alone were enough to start a business. I admit, I spent more than a few years subsisting off of ketchup packets and ramen while I tried to make it as a starving artist."

"But starting an enterprise like a fashion label requires money; contacts. A reputation for excellence that's only gained through rigorous work," Gabriel continued as Marinette chewed her lower lip. "Breaking into this industry isn't easy; I don't need to tell you that our peers spend as much time gatekeeping as creating actual art. No matter how good you are, they won't give you a chance unless someone more...established vouches for you. I spent three years working for the bloody Gap making polo shirts and khakis and by the end of it, I was stable and knew enough investors that were willing to take a chance on an up and coming fashion designer."

"I have no doubt you'll branch out on your own someday," Gabriel said, patting Marinette on her shoulder as he stepped past her. "But I insist you at least consider the benefits of working for Gabriel; even for a little while."

Marinette nodded, eyeing her gown as Gabriel fished an envelope out and pressed it into Marinette's hand. "I know Adrien would appreciate it."

"Yeah...I'm sure he would," Marinette muttered, pulling out a pair of tickets and tapping them against her hand thoughtfully.

"Hey...can I ask you-"

Marinet's train of thought ran headlong into a wall as Adrien peeled his shirt off, flicking it off to one side as he carelessly started unbuttoning his pants.

"Mmhmm?" Adrien asked, neatly folding his jeans as Marinette was suddenly reminded of the fact that Adrien had all the modesty of someone who had been modelling for most of his life.

"Um..." Marinette blinked, suit jacket slipping from her fingers as her eyes roamed over her boyfriend's bare shoulders. Had they always been so...defined? So broad? It had been a year or so since the last Gabriel swim catalog, but Marinette was almost certain that Adrien had never been so...

"Did you really need me to try on your menswear piece or was that just a cheap excuse to get me in
my underwear?" Adrien chuckled, lightly tilting Marinette's chin up as her complexion darkened another shade of red. "Because, technically speaking, you don't need an excuse."

"I..." Marinette cleared her throat. "N-No, I actually wanted some help but...I think you might be a little too...uh...broad for this piece..."

"Maybe if you start designing athletic wear," Adrien said, thumbing the fabric of the dress-shirt thoughtfully. "You were gonna ask me something?"

"I think?" Marinette said. "Sorry, it's just...uh..."

"You want me to get dressed again?" Adrien chuckled.

"No!" Marinette said a little quicker than she intended, burying her face in her hands as Adrien laughed.

"You wicked woman," Adrien sighed, covering his chest demurely. "Coaxing me up to your room while your parents are away and ravishing me with your lustful eyes!"

"Shut up!" Marinette squealed, pushing Adrien back until he tripped over the fainting couch, falling back with a sigh.

"Oh, you brute," Adrien moaned, sprawling out on the couch and wriggling in a way that made Marinette's pulse spike in her chest. "You're so rough with me, Marinette~"

"Will you stop being so hot for ten seconds so I can think straight?!" Marinette said, yelping as Adrien tugged her down on to the couch with him.

"Only if you stop looking so cute when you're flustered," Adrien said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Tease," Marinette pouted, bringing her fingers up to block a kiss. "Wait...before you get all flirty and I completely lose the ability to string sentences together...I wanted to ask...is it...I just..."
"Something on your mind?" Adrien asked as Marinette averted her gaze a little guiltily.

"Alya's...been having a hard time lately," Marinette said, biting her lip. "This whole...Chat Noir thing and the Ladyblog have had her run ragged. I haven't had that much time for her lately, so...would it be okay if we make the London show a girl's weekend? Just me and her?"

"Oh..." Adrien blinked, rubbing the back of his neck. "Well...I mean...if that's what you want-

"I want both of you with me," Marinette sighed. "I want my whole family and all my friends there but...I just get one seat. And I know your father could probably whip out another chair for you if you asked but-

"You need some Alya time?" Adrien nodded, chewing his lip thoughtfully.

"Would...that be okay?" Marinette asked. "You wouldn't be disappointed?"

"Well...not gonna pretend that I haven't been looking forward to this weekend," Adrien admitted. "But...if you and Alya need a little time to bond, I get it."

"Really?"

"You're gonna have a hundred more shows," Adrien chuckled. "And I'll be at every one of them. One weekend is not going to make a difference in the long run."

"You...are honestly the best," Marinette sighed in relief, leaning in and kissing him softly on the lips. "What did I ever do to deserve you?"

"Honestly, I'm just dating you because your parents own a bakery," Adrien said as Marinette giggled into his shoulder.

"I'm sure I owe you a dozen scones for being such a good sport," Marinette said, eyes drifting down to Adrien's bare chest. "Or maybe two given how much you're working out."
"I thought you might like that," Adrien said, watching Marinette's fingers splay across his bare chest, chewing on her lower lip. "So...you still need a model or can I get dressed?"

"You could..." Marinette said, glancing up at him a little shyly. "Or..."

"Or?" Adrien asked as Marinette guided his hand up to the top button of her blouse.

"Well...not exactly fair if only one of us underdressed, is it?" Marinette said.

"Not fair at all," Adrien said, leaning in and capturing her lips with his as he started to tease the buttons on her shirt open.

The worst thing about getting his ass kicked by a five hundred year old ninja was that Sarutobi Sasuke didn’t even seem to be trying.

The jarring ring of steel on steel echoed throughout the Sanctuary as Chat Noir advanced, raining blow after blow against the shimmering green edge of Sasuke’s weapon. The ease with which he repelled Chat Noir’s blows was disheartening, one hand weaving a black and steel shroud around him that blocked Chat Noir’s hardiest attacks.

“What was it you said?” Sasuke asked, head cocking to one side as his sword clashed with Chat Noir’s staff. “That you had been training with a sword since you were a child?”

Chat Noir grunted as Sasuke’s boot came up, striking him hard in the chest and sending him rolling black across the obsidian floor.

“Seems you should have kept practicing,” Sasuke murmured as Chat Noir wobbled back to his feet.

“Yeah, well, private lessons are a bitch to finance,” Chat Noir chuckled, rubbing his chest with a wince. “So...out of curiosity, how many more times are you gonna kick my ass before you recognize my worth and let me use your sword.”

“Perhaps when you demonstrate your worth, I’ll recognize it,” Sasuke sniffed, calmly returning his
weapon to his scabbard. “Have you had enough for one day?”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Chat Noir panted, leaning on his staff. “I got you right where I want you, pal.”

“Ah, so the witheringly incompetent display you’ve been putting on was a cunning ploy to lure me into a false sense of security,” Sasuke nodded. “Of course, by telling me this, you’ve completely divulged your strategy to a man who’s been trying to cut you in twain all day now.”

“Oh, you’ve been trying?” Chat Noir said, surreptitiously unlatching the spear from his back as he pretended to rub his spine

“I admit, I’ve had to put a little more effort into completely negating your attacks today,” Sasuke said, resting his hand on the hilt of his sword. “I suppose that counts as progress doesn’t it-”

Sasuke deftly jumped into the air, landing on the haft of Chat Noir’s staff as it lunged for his feet. Fang slid from its sheath just in time to parry a spear thrust that clipped the side of Sasuke’s face as Chat Noir used the haft of his staff to flip him end over end. Sasuke grunted as he flipped over, countering a staff strike even as he landed on the wall, bracing himself against the full force of Chat Noir’s blow.

“What did I tell you?” Chat Noir said, teeth glinting in the dim, green light. “Right...where I want you.”

Alya hovered outside the hospital entrance, twirling the business card between her fingertips as she ignored the persistent buzzing in her pocket.

“You think I can trust her?” Alya muttered as Trixx burrowed into her collar.

“Can’t say,” Trixx chirped.

“What do you mean you can’t say?”

“Look, there’s a lot I can’t really talk about,” Trixx sighed. “Not the least of which because I genuinely don’t know. After the temple was destroyed, Master Fu didn’t know who to trust.”
"Destroyed?"

"Someone on the inside attacked the temple and made off with the Peacock and Butterfly," Trixx muttered. "Master Fu hasn't been in contact with the other Masters except He since. Even so...I don't think she has his full trust."

A chill ran down Alya’s neck. “So...this Master He might have been the one to-”

“Alya!”

Alya jumped, hands instinctively raising in defense as someone whipped her around. Trixx dug into Alya’s coat as Marinette stumbled backwards, taken aback by the sharp look in Alya’s eyes.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, calm down!” Nino said, running up as Marinette shot Alya a shaky smile, eyeing her raised fists warily. “Damn, girl, you nearly took Mari’s head off.”

“S-Sorry,” Alya coughed, flicking her hair over her shoulder to cover Trixx’s hiding spot. “Too much coffee, I guess…”

“Well, maybe switch to decaf,” Marinette chuckled, rocking back and forth on her heels. “I tried to call you, but you didn’t answer.”

“Oh...y-yeah, sorry,” Alya said, glancing at her phone screen with a wince at all the notifications. “Just...taking a walk and lost track of time…”

“Mari here had a question,” Nino said, nudging Marinette forward.

“So...we’ve both been super busy lately,” Marinette said, fidgeting with her coat buttons. “Well I’ve been super busy...and I know we haven’t really hooked up that much-”

“It’s fine, Mari,” Alya said, shaking her head. “Look, I know Adrien’s dickhead of a father has been keeping you up at night working on his show-.”
“Well, that’s kinda what I wanted to ask you about,” Marinette said, fishing an envelope out of her pocket. “I was actually wondering if...well, I was wondering if you’d like to be my plus one for the weekend.”

“...wow, gotta admit that asking me out in front of my boyfriend is pretty gutsy, but-”

“You know what I mean,” Marinette sighed, brandishing the ticket packet at Alya. “Come on! It’s an all expenses paid weekend in London and tickets to the hottest fashion event of the year! It’s gonna be great!”

“You and I have different ideas of what makes up a great weekend,” Alya said, shooting a look at Nino. “Look...Nino and I are working on this project, and-”

“I can handle your part of the project for one weekend,” Nino said, shooting Alya a significant look. “You’ve been working on our project for weeks now and it’s only fair that you get a break.”

“Well the project is at a delicate point right now,” Alya said through her teeth. “And maybe now isn’t the best time to take a break.”

“Or maybe keeping in touch with your mental health is just as important as this project,” Nino countered.

“Did we have a science project or something I forgot about?” Marinette muttered to herself.

"Look, flattered as I am, I don't think I can spare the time," Alya sighed, shooting Marinette an apologetic look. "Sorry."

“Alright,” Nino sighed, taking his glasses off. “I didn’t want to have to subject you to this, but since you’re playing hardball, I got no choice. Mari?”

Marinette turned to Alya, eyes wobbling as her lip started to tremble.
“Oh come on,” Alya huffed, crossing her arms as Marinette sniffed audibly and conspicuously.

“No...I understand...” Marinette sniffed. “I mean...it is my first main fashion show, but...no, I understand...it’s important to work on your project...maybe...maybe next time, we can-”

“Alright fine!” Alya huffed, chuckling in spite of herself as Marinette threw her arms around her. “God damn you and your puppy dog eyes; I feel sorry for Adrien.”

“How do you think I got him to agree to give up his ticket?” Marinette chuckled.

“Wait, I’m stealing Adrien’s seat?”

“Don’t worry about it!” Marinette said, hooking her arm through Alya’s as she tugged her down the street. “I cleared it with him already; anyway, we need to get you fitted!”

“F-Fitted?!"

“Well you gotta wear something spiffy!” Marinette said as Alya turned back to Nino with a fearful look in her eyes. "Something orange would look great on you!"

Help, she mouthed as Marinette pulled her down the street.

"Haaaave fuuuun~" Nino chirped, waving after them.

"...full disclosure, I'm just a little turned on right now."

"Full disclosure, so am I," Nino said, watching Adrien's shoulders flex as he hoisted the creaking, groaning barbell high over his head in one fluid jerk. "Has he been working out with you?"

"I thought he was working out with you," Chloe said, taking a long sip off her water bottle. "We're better as friends, we're better as friends...god, those could abs could grate cheese..."
Nino squirted Chloe in the face with his water bottle, upending the rest of the bottle on his head as Adrien wiped his forehead with the corner of his shirt.

"What is that, 110kg?" Nino asked, arching his neck around to count the plates. "Man, you gotta hook me up with this personal trainer of yours."

"He's kind of a jerk," Adrien chuckled, accepting a towel from Chloe as he sat down on the bench. "Not sure if you guys would really want to train with him."

"Keep training and you're gonna kill half of Paris when the swimsuit issue comes out," Chloe muttered. "If you haven't killed Marinette already."

"Have you given Marinette a tour of the new and improved Agreste design?" Nino asked, nudging Adrien in the shoulder.

"No comment," Adrien said, ears turning pink as he averted his gaze.

"A better question is are you still letting Kagami tour the Agreste design?" Chloe asked as Adrien started choking on his water.

"Wh-what?!" Adrien spluttered, pounding on his chest.

"Come on; level with me," Nino said, sitting down on the other side of Adrien. "You've been spending a lot of time with Kagami lately."

"A-As friends!" Adrien insisted, standing up. "We're not, we don't...wh-who thinks we're still-

"Riposting each other?"

"We're not!" Adrien insisted, grabbing his workout bag. "We're just...she's helping me with...d-don't tell anyone we're fooling around, because we're not!"

"Dude, we're not!" Nino said. "We're just-"
"Gosh, is that the time?" Adrien laughed, glancing at the bare wall. "Wow, hours sure pass, huh? I should go shower, thanks for spotting me, great workout, okay bye!"

"Dude!" Nino watched Adrien stumble through the door to the locker room, sharing a worried glance with Chloe.

"Well at least he wasn't acting suspicious."

“Focus.”

Chat Noir sank into a low stance, gripping the hilt of Fang in one hand and the scabbard in the other as he struggled to pull the sword free. Sasuke’s arms crossed across his chest, leaning against a pillar as he watched Chat Noir struggle to even draw the weapon.

“Ugh, did you glue this or something?!" Chat Noir huffed, scabbard trembling as he inched the blade out of its sheath, tugging it out ever so slightly before it snapped back, slipping out of his hands and clattering on the floor. “I feel like I’m being hazed…”

“This is why we don’t rush training, Plagg,” Sauske sighed, shooting the kwami a dark look. “You’ve spent so long training his control, you’ve neglected to build his strength. Fang requires more than just a steady hand; it requires the strength to wield it without it being overcome.”

“Maybe I overdid it a little,” Plagg sighed as Chat Noir retrieved the weapon, glaring town at the scabbard. “Should have had him hit the gym between precision training…”

“The way you two bozos talked, I thought all I needed was control and inner peace or some boring crap like that,” Chat Noir muttered, bracing his foot against the base of the scabbard and tugging with both hands. “What’s the trick here?”

“There is no trick,” Sasuke said, holding his hand up and summoning the blade to his grip. With a flick of his wrist, he drew the blade in one smooth motion. “Weilding this artifact requires the strength of will to control its immense destructive power and the focus to keep it in check. Lacking one or the other will leave it dormant in its sheath, waiting for a worthy hand to draw it.”

“Gee, that’s all?”
“It’s the same challenge every Black Cat faces,” Sasuke said, returning the weapon to the scabbard, tossing it back to Chat Noir as he returned to his casual lean against the wall. “To protect the world from devastation—”

“-and you unite all peoples within our nation?” Chat Noir snorted.

“A fine way to put it,” Sasuke said, glancing over at Plagg as he sunk his teeth into a droopy piece of Camembert. “It’s our responsibility to ensure Plagg’s power is used wisely... and ply natto- breath over here with disgusting food to eat.”

“The sacrifices we make for the fate of the world,” Chat Noir sighed as Plagg glared at him.

“Don’t listen to them, sugar,” Plagg cooed, rubbing his cheek on the wheel of cheese. “They don’t understand what we have together...”

"You need to draw on the same power you use to create a Cataclysm,” Sasuke said. "Summon the fear and anger and hatred that lies dormant in your heart and pour it into your weapon."

"I don't need any of that to use my powers," Chat Noir said, narrowing his eyes at Sasuke. "I get along fine without stewing in any of that."

"Then you are leaving a great deal of power lying on the table," Sasuke sighed. "As Ladybug draws her strength from positive emotions, our greatest power comes from the darker corners of the human heart. To deny your own feelings is to deny the rightful source of your power."

"So all I need to do to surpass Ladybug is load up on horror movies before I fight her?"

"Simply being afraid or being angry is meaningless," Sasuke said dismissively. "It's knowing how to channel them into something positive, something useful, that makes you a hero."

Chat Noir stared at the sword in his hand, twirling the scabbard around thoughtfully as he tried to remember the last time he honestly did anything constructive when he was angry.
“Are you going to be okay while I’m gone?”

“I’m not a five year old, Al; I can handle myself,” Nino said, lightly bouncing on Alya’s bed as she packed an overnight bag. “What’s the worst that can happen?”

“Funny; I’ve been asking myself the same question for the past few days,” Alya sighed, tossing another sweatshirt into her bag. “If anything happens, you’re on your own.”

“Except for Mayura or Chat Noir,” Nino pointed out.

“Which may very well be the cause of something going wrong,” Alya said. “I mean, my faith in Ladybug hasn’t been the strongest lately, but does that mean we can totally trust Chat Noir? What if they’re both working towards something that spells bad news for Paris? I don’t know...maybe I should tell Mari-”

“No,” Nino said, hopping to his feet. “Al, you’ve been burning at both ends for weeks now; twice we’ve needed to remind you to eat because you won’t pull away from poring over maps or going through akuma reports!”

“Yeah, well, this is-”

“-important, sure,” Nino said, cupping Alya’s cheeks and forcing her to look at him. “This is probably the most important thing we got going on right now, but it isn’t the only important thing we got going on right now. If something big is on the horizon, then we need to be in good shape if we want to stand up to it!”

Alya pouted as Nino squished her cheeks.

“You’re going on shore leave,” Nino said, kissing her forehead. “The city isn’t going to burn down if you take one weekend for yourself...besides, this is Mari’s big day!”

“Hard to believe after all these years, she’s finally breaking through,” Alya chuckled. “Yeah...would be nice to get dolled up and just enjoy a party for a change...you know I’d bring you if I could.”
“You girls just enjoy London,” Nino chuckled, booping Alya on the nose. “We’ll make up for missing dates when things settle down.”

“Or…” Alya said, looping her fingers through Nino’s belt and tugging him closer with a small smile. “We could start making up right now.”

“Right...now?” Nino asked.

“Right now,” Alya echoed, kicking the door to her room close and flipping the lock shut.

“Remember; anything goes wrong-”

“I’ll call you,” Luka said, hoisting Marinette’s suitcase into the luggage cart. “You sure you don’t need me to come along?”

“Luka-”

“What if Chat Noir decides to lash out at the fashion show?” Luka countered. “Or if someone gets ink on their dress and akumitized? I don’t like you running off by yourself like this...”

“I have Rena Rouge with me if anything goes wrong,” Marinette said, glancing over at Alya and Nino as they came down the walkway. “But all things considered, I think it’s going to be another quiet weekend. Chat Noir hasn’t shown himself in almost three months; I doubt he’s going to stick his head up tomorrow.”

“If you say so,” Luka muttered, tensing up as he caught sight of a tall, blonde figure in black leaning against a lamp-post. For a moment, through the crowd of passengers, he could have sworn it was Chat Noir. But as the crowd parted, he was greeted by the no-less unwelcome sight of Adrien Agreste, expectantly looking across the platform at Marinette.

“Enjoy the break,” Marinette said, patting Luka on the shoulder as she trotted off to greet Adrien. The sight of Marinette so bouncy and happy after months of being so tense was soured by the fact that she was only happy when she was around Adrien. His stomach churned as Adrien scooped her off her feet, kissing her softly on the lips in front of a crowd of onlookers.
Luka turned away, mouth twisting into a snarl as he came face to face with a familiar pair of sunglasses waving a twenty euro note in his face.

“This where I drop off my luggage?” Chloe Bourgeois said, stuffing the note in Luka’s shirt pocket and lightly patting him on the cheek as she passed, leaving a mountain of suitcases on the train platform behind her. “Careful with the handbags; they’re expensive .”

“Do you not even recognize-” Luka trailed off as Chloe sashayed away, glancing at the pile of luggage with a shrug. “Welp…”

Whistling to himself, Luka headed back up the escalator, leaving Chloe’s baggage unattended on the platform.

“Thanks for being so cool about this,” Marinette muttered as Adrien traced her cheek with his thumb. “I promise I’ll make this up to you-”

Adrien silenced her with another kiss. “No need to apologize; you and Alya deserve some quality time together. Not like there won’t be other opportunities to see you show your stuff, right?”

“Yeah...still, first of many; would have liked to have the whole gang there,” Marinette said a little ruefully.

“When you’re putting on your own shows, you can give out as many tickets as you want,” Adrien said. “If you’re hard up on places to eat, you two should hook up with Chloe. We’ve been so many times that we’ve got the restaurants scoped out by now.”

“Thanks, but I’ll...wait, time out,” Marinette said. “Chloe’s going?!”

“Why wouldn’t I be going?!” Chloe said airly, drifting over and resting her elbow on Marinette’s shoulder. “I’ve been on the invite list since I was in diapers; haven’t missed a Winter show in my life and I’m not about to start now.”

“You thought Gabriel Agreste’s goddaughter wouldn’t be on the invite list?” Alya said, sliding up
alongside Marinette as she caught the tail end of their conversation.

“I...guess I just didn’t think about it,” Marinette chuckled, shooting Chloe a sidelong glance. “Is...Ladybug okay with you going?”

“How would I know? Buggy hasn’t been in contact all week,” Chloe shrugged.

“You didn’t clear this with her first?” Marinette said, narrowing her eyes at Chloe.

“Honey, this may come as a surprise to you, but Ladybug isn’t my mommy,” Chloe chuckled, tugging on Marinette’s pigtail. “I don’t need a signed permission slip from Her Royal Bugginess before I go on a field trip.”

“What if she’s relying on you to protect the city or-”

“Ahem.”

Marinette and Chloe glanced up as Nathalie Sancouer cleared her throat behind them.

“I hate to rush goodbyes along, but we have a tight schedule to keep,” Nathalie said, adjusting her glasses. “Ladies, if you would follow me-”

“Guess that’s our cue,” Marinette sighed, leaning up and giving Adrien a long, lingering kiss on the lips. “I’ll send you pics.”

“I’ll catch the stream,” Adrien said, cupping the sides of her face and kissing her forehead.

“...this isn’t gonna become a thing, you know,” Marinette said softly. “Me taking off and leaving you behind...I’m not gonna make this a pattern or anything.”

“Mari-”
“You don’t have to pretend not to be disappointed, Adrien,” Marinette said, rubbing the back of his fingers with her thumbs. “I know you were looking forward to touring London with me.”

“London will still be there after the show is done,” Adrien said, kissing the back of her hand. “And there’s nothing stopping me from kidnapping you and taking you there whenever I please.”

“Nothing but a three story house and my parents, you mean.”

“I’ll find a way,” Adrien said, kissing her forehead. “Go. Enjoy your last hours of anonymity because tomorrow you’re gonna be pelted with offers from every fashion house in Europe.”

“I’ll try,” Marinette said, reluctantly pulling back as Nathalie cleared her throat again. “I’ll call you tonight after the show?”

“Looking forward to it,” Adrien said, stepping back as she hopped up onto the train. “Knock em dead.”

“I-” Marinette flinched as the doors closed in front of her, cutting her off from Adrien as he cheerily waved up at her.

“If you’re quite ready,” Nathalie said, nodding towards the first-class compartments. “M. Agreste has arranged luxury transportation for you and your friends.”

“Is...M. Agreste not travelling with us?” Marinette asked, glancing around the cab in confusion. Alya and Chloe chatted a little too chummily in a private compartment, but there was no sign of Gabriel or any of his entourage.

“M. Agreste had a bit of business to attend to,” Nathalie said airily as the color drained from Marinette’s face. “Regrettably, he will have to miss this year’s show.”

“He’s...staying in Paris?” Marinette frowned, stomach lurching as the train lurched forward, picking up speed as they left the station.

“Thank God,” Chloe sighed as Nathalie shot her a sharp look over the rim of her glasses. “…what?”
“Well at least our ladies’ weekend isn’t gonna be spoiled by your boss breathing down our necks,” Alya chuckled as Marinette started the window, wondering if the train was still too fast to leap out of safely.

“I hate to burst your bubble, girls,” Nathalie said. “But we’re not going to London for an extended vacation. Mme. Dupain-”

“-Dupain- Cheng ,” Alya said.

“-is going to have a full schedule ahead of her,” Nathalie barrelled on, shooting Alya a sharp look as Marinette wobbled into a seat next to Alya, clutching her carry-on bag. “We have to get her and her garments backstage and ready to fit as soon as we arrive; I'm afraid any girl time you had planned will have to-”

“Oh my God, why are you like this?!” Chloe groaned, drawing a nasty glare from Nathalie. “What is missing from your life that you have to be such a buzzkill every hour of every day? Don’t you have a spreadsheet to fuck or something?”

Alya and Marinette barely stifled a snort of laughter as Nathalie just sighed, rolling her eyes as she turned to leave. “If you need anything, please do not hesitate to ask.”

Marinette was momentarily jostled out of her stunned silence as Alya slowly turned to look at Chloe with a beaming, triumphant grin.

“Damn, girl, next time just stab her; it’ll be less painful,” Alya said as Chloe just sniffed.

“If Gabriel Agreste is the whip on Adrien’s back, Nathalie is the hand that swings it,” Chloe said, shooting an icy glare at the woman’s back as she left. “Don’t let the innocent little robo-maid act fool you; that woman has anti-freeze where her blood should be...and a computer where her heart should be...and...and...a calculator where-”

“Stop while you’re ahead, Chlo,” Alya said, glancing at Marinette. “Nervous?”

“Kinda…” Marinette said, chewing on her lower lip. “I just...I don’t know...I have a bad feeling for
“It’s probably Nathalie; she has a talent for making people feel like shit,” Chloe said, not looking up from her phone. "And dressing like Barbie movie villains."

“Relax,” Alya said, nudging Marinette’s shoulder. “You know you’re gonna kill this, right?”

Marinette nodded, watching the countryside roll by as they pulled further and further away from the city.

“Guess I’m just…a little worried about leaving home,” Marinette muttered, fighting the rising sense of unease that crept up on her.

Pressing her face against the glass, Marinette’s eyes turned up to the cold, grey sky as one by one, the first snowflakes of the season descended on Paris.

Across town, in an unassuming little bookshop off to one side of the main street, a shy, bookish young man by the name of Mercer sat hunched over the table. A delicate paintbrush traced the contours of the small plastic figurine that sat in front of him on a hand-painted tablemap that stretched from one end of the game table to the other. A figure depicting a monstrous, floating eye with flailing arm tentacles roared silently at a tall black dragon figurine. A hooded, sunken figure with a missing hand and eye pointed its remaining hand menacingly at a lumbering horned lizard that was nearly twice the size of the dragon. Hordes of orcs, bandits, and impossibly large spiders sat strewn about the table as Mercer put the finishing touches on a towering black knight figurine.

The buzzing of a cell phone caused Mercer to nearly drop the figure, splattering a huge glob of purple paint all over the knight’s helm. Sighing in frustration, he wiped his hands on his jeans and fumbled for the phone with his clean hand.

“Hi Liam, I…seriously?” Mercer sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “But…I swear, we’ve been trying to put this game together for months now and…no…no, that’s fine…don’t worry…no, I’m not angry, I just…I should probably go.”

Sighing under his breath, Mercer hung up the phone, tucking it back into his pocket as he wiped the paint smear off his knight figurine.

“Never mind the fact that I spent the last week writing this session,” Mercer grumbled to himself,
picking up the well-worn leather notebook he used to scribble in. “I swear, it’s like...it’s like I’m the only one who even cares about this campaign anymore! They all begged me to be the game master and when I want to play, are they here? No! It’s almost as if...as if-”

A cold chill passed down Mercer’s spine, followed by a warm, bubbling sense of anger that only amplified his own irritation. The passing, fleeting annoyance he felt at his friends for bailing on him turned into anger which gave way to a roaring inferno of anger that blotted out all rational thought.

And through that haze of hatred, anger, and bitter disappointment, a voice spoke.

*Hello, Mercer...or should I address you as Gamemaster?*

The figures on the tabletop rattled as long, ornately stylized black robes covered Mercer’s ordinary clothes.

*It’s such an annoyance when people break their engagements...although wouldn’t it be more fun if Paris itself was your gameboard?*

Five gruesome, tentacle-headed monster figures began to stretch and enlarge as a black blindfold wound its way around Gamemaster’s eyes, a single, unblinking purple eye shining above his forehead. The knight figure rattled, stretching to scrape the ceiling of the bookshop as dozens of bandit figurines came to life, cold black eyes staring at the newly dubbed Gamemaster.

*I could make this whole city your fantasy land...I just need one small favor from you.*

The monsters turned, kneeling before the black cloaked figure as Hawkmoth’s voice rang in the back of his mind.

*Bring me Kagami Tsurugi.*

Chapter End Notes
Hello everyone! And welcome to Critical Role! A show where a bunch of us nerdy ass-
...wait.

Welcome to what I've affectionately named the Stag Night Arc. While the ladies are
away, the boys are gonna play/burn the entire town down!

We are getting into the downward slope now! Will Kagami fall victim to this Critical
Ripoff? Will Adrien achieve his weaboo destiny in time to save his friend? Will Nino
and Luka realize they've been duped? Can Mayura overcome the anger in his heart to
team up with Chat Noir? Will Chloe ever get her luggage back? Will Andre the Ice
Cream Man achieve his lifelong dream of making an ice cream that never melts?

...no to the last one. Andre's dream is forever out of his reach.

Happy Kofimania everybody! NEW DAY ROCKS! NEW DAY ROCKS! NEW
DAY ROCKS!
Killer DM

Chapter Summary

I realize not everyone is up on D&D bullshit like I am so I've linked images of the monsters I'm describing for context.

Chapter Notes

I'd just like to state, for the record, I started writing this before Thomas announced Felix so whatever he's going to do with him in S3 is gonna be not canon for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Marinette’s head swam as the sum of her nightmares seemed to rise around her with the smoke. Her ears dripped droplets of red in the snow, naked for the first time since she was fourteen years old. Adrien cradled his hand to his chest, an angry red welt the only sign a ring had ever been on his finger. His other arm dangled uselessly from his shoulder, bent and twisted in an unnatural way that made Marinette sick to look at.

“I’m sorry,” Marinette said feebly. “I know that doesn’t even begin to help, but I swear, I’m so, so…”

Marinette trailed off, staring at the floor where Hawkmoth disappeared.

“We can still fix this!” Marinette said, a manic edge creeping into her voice. “I-I can get my team—our team—and we can figure out what h-happened, right? We can still find them…w-we can get them back, right Adrien?”

She took a hesitant step towards him, ignoring the dull, throbbing pain in her ears as she watched his back, silently pleading for him to turn around and just look at her.

When he did, Marinette suddenly wished he hadn’t.

“ We ?” Adrien echoed, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand before finally meeting her gaze with a look of anger and disappointment cold as the snow that piled around her ankles. “What makes
you think there’s a we anymore?”

11:00 a.m. - Paris

Thirteen Hours Earlier

“I’m surprised your girlfriend is okay with you missing her first show.”

“Her idea, actually,” Adrien shrugged, hanging his coat up as Kagami closed the door after a cursory glance around the street. “She and Alya need a little girl-time, I guess…”

“Lucky you; you get to catch up on training while your girlfriend gets showered with praise by the fashion elite,” Kagami chuckled.

“As someone who’s spent most his life being showered with praise by the fashion elite, I think I’ve earned a weekend off,” Adrien sighed, rolling his neck. “Guess I get to spend my Saturday getting kicked around by a Sengoku sadist.”

“Lucky you,” Kagami said, leaning against the doorframe. “You don’t want my help?”

“Would if I could,” Adrien said, unlocking his Sanctuary. “I would love to double team an ancient ninja with you.”

“Phrasing.”

“-but I think this is one sword you’re not going to be able to help me with-”

“Dear God, Adrien, phrasing,” Kagami groaned, shoving Adrien through the door. “Go play with your ninja friend.”

“Call me if things get weird!” Adrien called, disappearing into the dark as Kagami closed the door behind him.

“Like my life isn’t weird enough with you around,” Kagami sighed, shaking her head.
The sound of a whetstone sharpening against steel echoed throughout the chamber as Sasuke methodically polished the glimmering green edge of Fang.

“Tell me something, Plagg,” Sasuke said, eyes flickering up to the shadowy shape that hovered a few feet in front of him. “Do you think one artifact of power is going to be enough to tip the scales in this fight of yours?”

Plagg shrugged, scratching the back of his neck. “To be honest, I’ve been trying to stack the deck in the kid’s favor ever since Ladybug sold us out; since we don’t have the time to train him properly, I just have to hope that giving him enough tricks to throw at Ladybug will be enough to bring her down.”

“Is she that powerful?”

“Her power isn’t what I’m concerned about,” Plagg laughed ruefully. “The girl is...smart. Smart, cunning, and good at using the tools at her disposal to win fights in surprising ways. We’ve only won so far because the girl is scary good at coming up with battle plans on the fly and executing them before her enemies can get too much traction under them.”

“I see,” Sasuke mused, watching the glimmering green sheen of power shimmer along the edge of the weapon. “So...it is fair to say Adrien Agreste hasn’t had the need to fight with all his capabilities until now.”

“He’s never had to really try at anything,” Plagg chuckled. “So this hustle thing is pretty new to him, you know?”

“I noticed,” Sasuke said, sheathing his weapon as the door to the Sanctuary opened. “Well then...let’s see if we can’t wake him up a little.”

11:00 a.m. - London

“Where the hell is my luggage?!?”
Chloe glared at the baggage carousel, tapping her heel on the linoleum as rows of black baggage passed without any sign of her yellow, honeycomb-patterned suitcases.

“I tipped that stupid bagboy and *everything!*” Chloe growled, fishing her phone out of her pocket. “I swear to God, if he left them on the platform-”

“Keep up, ladies,” Nathalie called, not looking up from her PDA as *Gabriel’s* assistants hauled Marinette’s bags to the limo. “We have a tight schedule to keep!”

“*Unclench, Sancoeur!*” Chloe snapped. “We’re two hours ahead of dress rehearsal! Your itinerary can *wait* until I have more than *one* pair of pants!”

“You think at least *one* of them would have made it,” Alya chuckled, shouldering her overnight bag as Chloe fumed.

“Can we ditch her?” Marinette muttered.

“Who, Nathalie?”

“No, Mme. Fussybee,” Marinette sighed. “*Really* don’t need any extra drama today…”

“Oh *relax,*” Alya said as Chloe slunk back over, pouting furiously.

“We need to go shopping,” Chloe insisted. “*Now.*”

“Oh my God, can’t you just wear what you’re wearing?!” Marinette groaned, gesturing at the cream colored tracksuit Chloe wore.

“I’m gonna pretend you didn’t even ask that,” Chloe said.

“What?!! This is...this is nice!” Marinette said, fingering the corner of Chloe’s sleeve. “Total fashion statement; rub it in those snobs’ noses!”
“Give me your dress then and...actually, I don’t want to wear whatever bubblegum disaster you probably packed,” Chloe said, wrinkling her nose.

“Girls, play nice,” Alya sighed, stepping between them as a venomous look crossed Marinette’s face. “Look, we have time before the show; can’t Chloe duck into a boutique and pick something out?”

“You want me to buy off the rack?!”

“Well it’s that or look like a Khardashion Khlone,” Alya said, rolling her eyes as Chloe clutched her chest in pain.

“I hate to be the buzzkill,” Nathalie said, clearing her throat.

“You do not,” Chloe said.

“-but we have a tight schedule to keep,” Nathalie said, looking over her glasses at Chloe. “Mme. Bourgeois is more than welcome to go shopping, but Mme. Dupain-Cheng has appointments to keep.”

“Fine, we’ll be quick,” Chloe sighed, looping her arm through Alya’s and tugging her along. “Come on, Alya; let’s start with Bond street and work our way down-”

“Hang on!” Marinette snapped, grabbing Alya’s other wrist. “Why do you need Alya to go with you?!”

“To let me know if I look tacky or not,” Chloe said, rolling her eyes.

“I feel like I could already tell you the answer to that right now,” Marinette said, glancing up at Alya. “I thought we were gonna spend time together?”

“We are, but don’t you have a bunch of work to do before the show?” Alya asked. “I’m just gonna be sitting around anyway; might as well make sure that this one stays on task.”
“But—”

“I’m afraid Mme. Cesaire is right,” Nathalie said. “I fear your friends will be underfoot while you’re preparing for the show.”

“But—” Marinette glanced between Nathalie and Alya. “C—Can’t we just put Chloe in a cab or something?!”

“Relax, girl,” Alya said, patting Marinette on the arm. “Go do your fashion mogul thing; we’ll be there for the show.”

“But—”

“Mme. Dupain, we really must be going,” Nathalie, said, laying a hand on Marinette’s shoulder.

“We’ll see you after the show!” Alya said, waving as Chloe tugged her towards the taxi queue.

“...this girls weekend is gonna suck, isn’t it?” Marinette sighed, trudging after Nathalie as she beckoned.

12:00 - Paris

“You heading to work?”

Irritation spiked as Luka tugged his jacket off the coat-rack, pulse pounding in his ears as he shook his head.

“Mmhmm,” Luka said non-committedly tugging his coat around his shoulders.

“You sure about that?” Juleka asked.
“Why would I not be sure about that?” Luka snapped.

“Because Marco called asking if you’ve been sick or something,” Juleka said, each word pricking at his already fragile temper. “You were supposed to close last night-”

“I know.”

“And apparently you no-showed-”

“I know.”

Juleka pursed her lips in annoyance. “Well do you know that I had to call the power company twice this month because apparently someone didn’t know he had to pay the bill on time?”

“I know!” Luka snapped, voice echoing off the bare walls of the kitchen. “God, don’t you think I know the fucking power bill needs to be paid?! I have been the one paying it for the last year now! Do you think I’m some kind of moron who up and suddenly forget what he’s responsible for?!”

“I didn’t say that, I just-”

“Just let me worry about my shit and mind your business!” Luka shouted, a tense, palpable silence following as Juleka stared at him, mouth open and eyes shimmering.

“You know...I don’t know what your fucking damage is,” Juleka sniffed, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “But you’ve been acting like a total prick lately!”

Luka watched Juleka stomp up the stairs, followed by the sound of sniffling as he all at once felt the prickling anger leave and a cold, clammy sense of shame seeping in where it had been moments earlier.

What the hell is wrong with me? Luka thought, stepping out into the cold as snowflakes tumbled past his cheeks. Even below the shame that burned his cheeks and stung his eyes, a low, smouldering irritation lingered in the back of his mind. Every horn honking, passerby shouting, and infernal Christmas song only stoked the coals. It was like an itch that he could never quite scratch; an ache
that only got worse with time.

The only thing that seemed to ease the bubbling sense of disquiet that hung over his head was helping Ladybug. Even something as mundane and tedious as watching someone’s house for weeks on end took on new meaning when doing it for Marinette. The solace that he was contributing to something greater than the seemingly dead-end life he was building for himself got him through shifts at the grocery store and hours sitting by his mother’s bedside.

Transforming into Mayura behind a dumpster, he kicked off the ground, reveling in the wind rushing past his face and the snow flying at him as he made his way across the rooftops towards the house he was meant to watch.

A flicker of movement caught his eye as he sailed over the street, a manhole cover rattling as a distinctly red, scaly tail disappeared into the sewer. Mayura frowned, using his fans to buffet his flight as a pair of tall, bearded strangers with thick hoods drawn over their faces glided down the street. Unease crept into the back of his mind as he landed on the rooftop across the street from Kagami’s house, eyes narrowing as he peered through her kitchen window. He could make out the figure of Kagami, standing in front of the stove and stirring something. Behind her, he could barely make out a prone figure on the ground, the hulking form of Kagami’s bodyguard unconscious as three small, reptilian creatures crept towards the kitchen.

“Shit,” Mayura muttered, flicking open his fan-communicator. “Shitshitshit shit!”

He was halfway through dialing Ladybug’s number when the two figures he passed on the street slowly glided along the walkway. From his new position, he could see that what he had mistaken for beards were in fact long, twitching octopus tentacles that jutted out from their faces.

“Shit !” Mayura moaned, glancing between the communicator and Kagami, oblivious to the danger that she was in.

12:15 - Paris

Kagami was not oblivious to the danger she was in.

She had heard the back door open, heard Goto fall with a cry her assailants couldn’t quite stifle in time, heard the scratching of claws on her hardwood floor behind her as increased the heat in the pan. The inch or so of oil just about boiled when the kitchen door opened behind her, the same scratching clawsteps catching her ear over the sound of jazz trumpets blaring from her speakers.
Humming under her breath, Kagami took out a large chef’s knife, keeping one hand on the pan of oil as she felt something small creep up on her, the foul smell of rotten meat and sewage filling the kitchen with every labored breath.

As soon as they stopped behind her, Kagami moved, taking the pan of hot oil and hurling it at her assailants’ face as she pulled the knife from its sheath. A feral, reptilian screech filled the kitchen as a small, nearly naked little red lizard person fell back, dropping its club and howling as it fell backwards.

The sound of sizzling skin filled the kitchen as a second lizard creature leapt up on to her counter, hissing as he dove at her face. Kagami sidestepped, grabbing the creature’s back and jamming it facefirst into the lit gas range the pan had been heating over. The lizard screeched, face bubbling and distorting as though it had been made out of plastic as the final lizard creature attacked, leaping over its fallen friends and coming at Kagami with a wicked looking dagger that dripped with a purple and foul smelling liquid.

It was a clumsy lunge, and the beast paid for it.

Kagami leaned back, just far enough to avoid the creature’s short reach, and drove the blade of the chef’s knife straight into the lizard’s head. It twitched, legs going limp as it sunk to the floor of the kitchen just in time for a tall, blue and purple knight to crash through the wall with a massive warhammer.

“Look out!” Mayura called, somersaulting in and drawing a quill. “You’re under...attack?”

Mayura glanced around at the corpses of the red lizard creatures, eyes roaming between the two horribly burned ones and the leader who seemed to have knifed before it could knife Kagami.

“Am I?” Kagami asked, pulling another knife out of her kitchen block and warily looking at Mayura. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Mayura’s eyes trailed up the knife that pointed at him. “Wait, wait, wait, you think they’re with me?!”

“You did just knock my kitchen wall in,” Kagami said, eyes flitting to the pair of hooded figures that glided up to the hole in the wall. Mayura turned as the figures lowered their hoods, revealing pale monsters with bloated, bulbous heads that resembled an octopus perched on a pale human body.
Four cold, black eyes fixed Kagami as a cold, hollow voice crept into the back of her mind.

_Come with us_, the creatures said, extending two unnaturally long fingers in her direction. _Resistance is-

The literal train of thought cut off as a sharp, peacock shaped dart whipped out of Mayura’s fan, neatly spearing the creature in chest.

“Yeah, I think we could tell where that speech was going,” Mayura said, wincing as howling screech of pain echoed throughout his mind and the two tentacle headed creatures charged.

“An unexpected attack by a third party! Why didn’t _I_ think of including that? Francois wants to complain that my combat is too easy? Let’s see how he deals with a surprise attack next time his bard tries to get out of the fight by fucking the-”

“Focus!” Hawkmoth snapped, tapping his cane in irritation as he stared at the destruction through Mayura’s eyes. It was bad enough that his unwitting pawn had blundered into the kidnapping attempt, but the sound of various fantasy creatures shrieking in pain as Mayura fought them off was bound to draw unwanted attention sooner or later.

His plan _hinged_ on nobody noticing what he was doing until it was too late to stop him. All he could do was _hope_ he didn’t have to trigger Mayura until he absolutely needed to.

Hawkmoth didn’t want to learn the hard way that his little akuma experiment was out of his control.

**12:00 - London**

Marinette’s fantasy of catching up with Alya while she made final alterations to her runway show pieces appeared to be slipping further and further away. After initial fittings and a whirlwind of handshaking and polite laughter, Marinette found herself hurried off to a private workroom to make final alterations to the suit and gown she would show that afternoon.

And as it turned out, sewing was dull work without someone to talk to.

Normally, she would have been bouncing ideas off Tikki but her kwami had become more and more untalkative over time, answering in short, one-word answers when addressed and spending much of
her time asleep in Marinette’s handbag. The silence was made all the more pronounced by the sounds of laughter and chatter that filtered through the walls of the dressing room as Marinette worked; a stark reminder of the isolation that had haunted her for months.

“Long way from blanket capes and princess tutus, isn’t it?”

Marinette hadn’t heard the door open behind her, but as she spun around, she saw a dark haired young woman leaning against the door frame, grey eyes studying the blue dress and suit ensemble that draped over the mannequins.

“Brigitte?!” Marinette squeaked, nearly knocking the chair over as she stood up and nearly tackled the older woman in a tight hug. “What are you doing here?! I thought you were in Toronto until next week!”

“Felix offered to cover for me so I could hop a flight back,” Brigitte said, tweaking Marinette’s nose. “Didn’t want to miss the moment our little amateur turned pro.”

“Ex cuse me, Madame,” Nathalie said, panting as she jogged to catch up with Brigitte. “I’m afraid we can’t have guests in the design...oh, M. Cheng, I-I didn’t realize you had arrived.”

“I wanted to say hi to your wunderkind designer first,” Brigitte chuckled, ruffling Marinette’s hair.

“Forgive me,” Nathalie said, glancing between the two. “I didn’t realize you two were related.”

Brigitte’s eyes narrowed, head tilting to one side. “What makes you think we’re related?”

Nathalie noticeably paled a few shades. “I-I-I’m sorry, I-I just assumed-”

“That just because we both have the same last name, we’re related?” Brigitte continued, lips pursing as Nathalie’s lip twitched in irritation. “Is every Sancoeur in the world part of one big happy family?”

“Bri,” Marinette sighed, shaking her head.
Brigitte’s scowl relaxed into a mischievous smirk as she lightly tapped Nathalie on the shoulder. “Relax; I’m just messing with you; I’m just saying hi to my cousin before she gets too big and famous to associate with a poor civil servant like me.”

“Poor?!” Marinette scoffed. “Your Knightsbridge townhouse begs to differ.”

“While my husband may be endowed with all the earthly luxuries one could desire, I am content to spend my days caring for the less fortunate,” Brigitte sighed, ignoring the raspberry Marinette blew in her direction. “I only hope you don’t forget about your humble cousin who let you tear her blankets up to make your first gowns.”

“I’ll try,” Marinette said, glancing at Nathalie. “Can you call security on her? This deranged madwoman harassing my workflow.”

“Fine, I know when I’m not wanted,” Brigitte responded by calmly raising her middle finger over her shoulder as she walked out. “Break a leg, kiddo; find me after the show and we can do dinner or something.”

Marinette returned the one fingered salute as Nathalie turned to her, mouth agape.

“Did you just...did you just flip off a Nobel Prize nominee?!” Nathalie whispered.

“She started it,” Marinette shrugged, frowning at her workstation. "Nathalie, have you seen my phone?"

"Not recently," Nathalie said, glancing around the room. "Shall I check your bags?"

"If you could, thanks," Marinette said, turning back to her dress. "I promised Adrien some pics of the show."

"I'm sure he would appreciate that," Nathalie said, backing out of the room with a smile and small bow. She waited until she was down the hall before reaching into her pocket, examining the bright red blinking AKUMA ALERT notice on Marinette's lockscreen. Glancing over her shoulder, Nathalie popped the battery out of Marinette's phone, tossing it in a nearby trashcan and quickly making her way away from the dressing rooms.
“Ahhh man...I can’t believe I’m doing this,” Nino muttered under his breath, walking towards Kagami’s home with his hands shoved in his pockets. “This is totally not my business, right? Adrien’s cool; he wouldn’t cheat on Mari...right?”

Wayzz shrugged, peering out of the edge of his coat as snow tumbled down from the side. “I could not tell you; though the concept of human romance eludes me as a general rule.”

“I mean, Mari should know if he’s screwing around, right?” Nino said, chewing on his lip.

“I could not tell you,” Wayzz repeated. “Would telling her not bring her pain?”

“Well, yeah, but...look, romance is complicated,” Nino sighed, frowning as a couple ran past him as fast as they could. “She’ll be mad at Adrien, but if he is stepping out on her, she’ll be happy in the long run, right?”

“...if you say so,” Wayzz said. “So...your goal is to watch Adrien and Kagami mid-coitus, yes?”

“What?” Nino exclaimed as a police car rocketed past. “God, no dude! Don’t be weird!”

“Then how will you know Adrien is being unfaithful?”

“Look, if I see anything suspicious, I’ll know what...to...do,” Nino trailed off as a large, shadow passed overhead. Looking up, he saw a massive, floating head hovering down the street, a single unblinking eye above a widely grinning mouth filled with sharp, cruel teeth. Tentacles with swiveling eye-stalks wiggled and looked in every direction as it sailed over the buildings towards Kagami’s house.

“...is that suspicious?” Wayzz asked.

“How...is a giant floating eyeball fiend... a stealthy solution?!”
“Um, actually, a beholder is a challenge rating thirteen aberration, not a fiend, so technically-”

“It doesn’t matter!”

“...well, actually, it does matter because-

“I don’t care!” Hawkmoth bellowed, watching people run in horror as a floating monster leered down at them from on high. “You were supposed to do things quietly! If Chat Noir finds out what we’re up to-”

“I seriously doubt that even Chat Noir is equipped to deal with my monster manual,” Gamemaster chuckled, flipping through pages of the akumitized gamebook as he watched the beholder roll up on the battle in Kagami’s courtyard. “Even if Chat Noir showed up, he’s going to be too late to stop my creations; you’ll have what you want and Paris can become my own personal Tomb of Horrors.”

“Well hurry up!” Hawkmoth demanded, fidgeting with his cane. “The longer you spend futzing about with your toys, the more chances this has to go horribly wrong…”

Mayura ducked behind Hendrix’s form as a pale purple blast of energy sailed over his head. Sliding between the knight’s legs, he hurled a feather shaped quill straight into the tentacle beast’s head, allowing himself a small moment of triumph as the squid monster fell, dissolving into a pile of dust on the street.

“Damn...and I was looking forward to calamari after this,” Mayura chuckled, glancing back at Kagami with a thumbs up. “One down!”

“Ya —bloody— tta,” Kagami deadpanned, wincing as Hendrix’s armored form was blown apart by a purple blast from the surviving squid monster. “One to go; let’s finish this takoyaki fry before any more freakshows show-”

A horrible wrenching sound of grinding metal and stone came from behind her. Kagami whipped around to see her townhouse slowly and steadily rising out of the ground, lifted by an invisible force until it hung high over the street.

Mayura crowed, punching the air as the second octopus monster went down, a feather quill passing through its chest as it dissolved into dust. “And another one bites the…”
Mayura paled as he turned around, staring straight into the horrible eye of the monster that had lifted Kagami’s house up from its foundation.

_You will come with us_, the floating eyeball monster said, hideous voice pulsing in the back of their minds. _Resistance is-

A blur of green rocketed at the creature’s eye, blinding it as the near translucent shimmer of energy that held Kagami’s house over the creature’s head fizzled out with a snap of energy that sent the house tumbling back to earth. A shimmering, geodesic dome of energy popped up around Kagami and Mayura as the house tumbled down around them, splinters of wood and stone all raining from the sky and bouncing off the energy shield harmlessly.

“Yeah, I think we all know where that speech was going,” Carapace said, recalling his shield with a flick of his wrist as the beholder slowly rose from the rubble, a pained, psychic scream echoing through their minds as he saddled up next to Mayura. “Where’s Ladybug?”

“I think she’s gonna be a little late to this one,” Mayura said, extending his fan with a flick of the wrist as all eleven eyes of the creature turned to look at him with a singularly baleful gaze. “Where’s Rena Rouge?”

“Occupied,” Carapace winced raising his shield as he stepped in front of Kagami. “What’s this guy’s problem? Other than his contact lens bill?”

“I seem to have angered a fantasy enthusiast,” Kagami said, wishing she had something more than a kitchen knife to protect herself with. Worse still, the door through which Adrien had disappeared into currently lay under a ton of indistinguishable rubble. “I don’t think _that’s_ the akuma though.”

“Ugly enough to be one,” Carapace mused, glancing at Mayura. “Can you get her out of here?”

“What about you?”

“I’ll take care of _this_ mess; catch up with you later,” Carapace said, nodding at Mayura and Kagami who shared an uneasy glance. “Look, Ladybug’s out, Rena’s not here; I’m senior superhero on duty, so do what I say and get Kagami away from this weirdo!”
“You can’t take this thing by yourself!” Mayura insisted, wincing as a lime-green bolt of energy shot out of one of the beholder’s eyes and fizzled out against the shield dome.

“Well find me some backup then!” Carapace said, grunting as spiderline cracks began to appear in the dome. “You got any dangerous friends that are down for a fight?”

“I think we have one,” Kagami said, glancing at Mayura. “Can you take me to the hospital?”

“I don’t think a doctor is gonna help much here-”

“Can you get me there or not?! Kagami demanded.

“I...maybe?” Mayura shrugged. “We should see if Ladybug’s answering her phone; maybe she’ll-”

“Dude, if Ladybug isn’t here now, she’s not coming,” Carapace grunted, struggling to hold the shield against the beholder’s onslaught. “It’s just us; you need to get Kagami out of here, find the akuma, and figure out what we need to do to stop it!”

“But-”

“Oh for God’s sake, are you a superhero or not?!” Kagami snapped, grabbing Mayura’s collar and tugging him down to her eye level.

“Shield’s coming down, dude,” Carapace said. “You gonna answer the lady or not?”

Mayura nodded, scooping Kagami off her feet and crouching as the barrier started to falter. “Can you buy me a few seconds?”

“I’ll buy you more than that,” Carapace grunted, pushing his shield against the barrier and slowly siphoning its power into it. The beholder fired another laser bolt, but Carapace caught it on his shield, reflecting it back at the creature and hitting it square in the central eye. It roared in agony, eye stalks flailing wildly as Mayura made a break for it. The beholder whirled around, open eye-stalks targeting Kagami as it started to float after it.
“Hey, eyes on me!” Carapace shouted, dropping his shield on the ground and stomping on it, using the recoil to jump high in the air and come crashing down on the monster’s skull. Carapace grabbed hold of one eye-stalk, planting his feet against the monster’s skill and tearing it off with one mighty tug.

“Sorry; was that your favorite?” Carapace chuckled, kicking his shield back up on to his arm as the beholder turned its attention to him with a snarl. “Don’t worry; I’ll even you up a little.”

12:30 p.m. - London

“How does my butt look in this?”

_Exquisite_, Alya thought, glancing at the slim cream colored dress Chloe modeled.

“Fine, I guess,” Alya coughed, scratching the back of her neck as Chloe pouted thoughtfully at her reflection.

“Fine or _fiiiiiine_?”

“You look good in everything you wear,” Alya said offhandedly. “Just pick something and let’s go-”

“I need to look better than _good_,” Chloe huffed. “I’m getting to the age when I seriously need to start considering picking up a trophy husband or wife. These fashion shows are _killer_ meat markets.”

“I spent a thirty minute cab ride with you listening to how much you can’t stand the—what did you call them?—self obsession Prada clowns with no personality?”

“My first spouse doesn’t _need_ to be someone I like,” Chloe said, narrowing her eyes at Alya. “Just a rich moron who I can convince that seat belts cause cancer or something.”

“I feel sorry for the next person who ends up with you,” Alya sighed, frowning at her blank phone screen. “...hey, can I ask you something?”
“Yes, I will have a passionate fling with you in London and promise never to tell Ni-”

“Chlo, focus,” Alya sighed, running her hands through her hair. “Do you...ever wonder how Ladybug suddenly got the Peacock Miraculous?”

“Probably had it on a shelf somewhere and didn’t tell us about it,” Chloe said, wrinkling her nose as she glanced at Pollen sticking their head out of her bag. “Sweetiebee, do you know anything about the Peacock Miraculous?”

“Only that it and the Butterfly were taken at the same time,” Pollen shrugged. “We have not met up with Nooroo or Duusu in a long time; I cannot even begin to speculate where they might have been.”

“But they could have been together?” Alya prodded.

“I cannot say,” Pollen said. “I can speculate a great many things, but I am sure of none of them.”

“But if they were taken together...and Ladybug just happened to have the Peacock...” Alya trailed off, rubbing her temples.

“You know a weekend off isn’t a weekend off if you spend the entire trip working, right?” Chloe sighed, shaking her head. “Alya, we are on one of the finest streets of fashion in the whole world, about to go to an event people sell their grandmothers to attend where your best friend is going to debut as a fashion designer for the first time.”

“I know, but-”

“Our bullshit superhero lives are going to be waiting for us at home,” Chloe said, laying her hand on Alya’s shoulder. “If your head isn’t screwed on right, I’m going to have to be the reasonable one on this team and that’s not gonna be a good look.”

Alya rolled her eyes with a fond sigh. “Nino doesn’t count for anything?”
“He can be the sweet, nougaty center of Team Paris,” Chloe said, fishing her phone out of her bag. “Come on; no more Ladybug talk. Let’s send your boyfriend a selfie; make him jealous that he’s missing you trying on cute clothes.”

Chloe frowned at her blank phone screen. “Shit, my charger’s in my bag; is yours working?”

“Just passed out,” Alya sighed, fidgeting with her power button uselessly as a chill ran down her spine. “You think...you think Nino will be okay on his own?”

“Oh please; he’s probably having the time of his life right now.”

1:00 - Paris

Carapace was not having the time of his life.

The concrete beneath his feet erupted in a shower of stone as the beholder blasted the ground with an eyebeam, sending bits of the street raining down on his shield. The dust cleared in time for Carapace to see the eight foot tall head lunge at him, clamping down hard on his shield and biting on his arm. Even through the tough, nigh-impenetrable battle armor his suit provided him he could still feel the long, cruel teeth clamping down, trying to snap his forearm in half like a candy cane.

“Ugh...this nerd shit is really getting old!” Carapace grunted, grabbing another eye-stalk and ripping it off. It let go with a pained howl as two independent eye-stalks swiveled around, firing two searing blasts of energy that ripped through the side of Carapace’s suit, singing the skin beneath it as he staggered back.

“...okay, that’s new,” Carapace said, shakily holding his side with one hand as he raised his shield to deflect another energy attack.

Really hope Kagami’s coming through with the backup...

1:00 - Paris

“Sir, your daughter isn’t picking up her phone!”
“Well keep calling her!” Mayor Andre demanded, looking out the window at the strange creatures that floated over the city. “Tell her it’s an emergency; tell her that-”

The windows rattled as something large landed on the roof of the building. The panicked scrambling in Mayor’s office died down as everyone looked up, frozen in terror as a long, black, serpentine neck snaked down past the window. One bright green eye the size of a car tire opened, looking in at the panicked office workers for any sign of its quarry. After a painfully long, tense moment, the creature took off, claws digging into the roof and sending tiles raining down on the street below.

The black dragon took off over the city, firing a jet of noxious green acid in the air as it went.

“...get me Capt. Van der Meer,” Mayor Andre said quietly. “Tell him to do whatever it takes to get this city under control again...”

1:00 - Paris

Master He stood at the window, hands folded behind her back as a large, scaled monstrosity lumbered down the street, feet crushing cars with every step as its horns scraped the sides of buildings. The hospital shook as the creature walked past it, the panicked screaming of doctors and nurses falling deaf on Master He’s ears.

“Master?” Jun asked, hovering at her elbow. “What are we to do?”

“Lan...inform Chat Noir that Kagami has been abducted,” Master He said, calmly folding her glasses and placing them in her breast pocket. “Keep Master Fu safe at all costs.”

Her apprentices shared an uneasy look before nodding, snapping into action as Master He calmly adjusted her bracelet, walking down the hallway towards the stairs that led to the roof.

1:00 - Paris

“Hey Nino, I don’t know what’s going on, but it doesn’t look good,” Chris Lahiffe said, adjusting
the strap of his bookbag as he ran down the street, careful to avoid the swooping, winged creatures that divebombed passing civilians that got too close. “I’m gonna bunker down in the library, call me when you get this—”

The ground beneath his feet buckled upwards as an explosion rocked the street. Chris fell back, phone clattering uselessly on the ground as he scampered back, away from the widening hole in the streets below. Through the dim haze of dust and powdered concrete, he could see a variety of figures slowly walking out of the bit, the sound of rattling bones filling the air as they moved. Leading the skeletal army out of the Paris Catacombs was a tall, hooded figure that floated a few feet off the ground. A single, green eye stared out of a sunken face as it moved, and as it raised its arms, Chris could see the mangled, burned out stump where one hand should have been.

Paralyzed by fear, Chris lay there, watching the dead of Paris rise under the power of a new and terrible master.

1:15 - Paris

“Tell me that isn’t a zombie army,” Kagami said, wrapping her arms around Mayura’s chest a little tighter as he carried her towards the hospital.

Mayura looked down, wincing as the street opened up beneath them and hundreds of skeletal figures poured out of the ground. “You know, I’m starting to wonder if having a pit full of skeletons really counts as a tourist attract—”

“Look out!”

A winged, horned devil creature collided with Mayura’s figure sending both him and Kagami tumbling through the air. A scream of surprise caught his attention as another winged creature plucked Kagami out of the air by her ankles, carrying her in the opposite direction.

“Oh no you don’t!” Mayura hissed, whipping a quill at the devil as he plummeted. The quill sank into the creature’s skin, harming it enough to drop Kagami as Mayura kicked off a nearby roof, plucking her out of the air before she could fall.

“Mind where you’re going!” Kagami squawked, clinging to him tighter as he dashed over the rooftops, trying to put the creatures behind them. Grabbing at Mayura’s fan, Kagami plucked a quill
out, holding it like a dagger as another winged devil dove, claws extended. Kagami whipped the quill at the creature’s head, savoring the cry of pain it made as it tumbled out of the air, smashing against the street below and dissolving into dust.

“Where do these things keep coming from?! Mayura panted, landing on a rooftop and whipping around, ready to take out the remaining pursuers. A flash of white caught his attention as three pale blades shot past his head, each burying in the chest of one of the monsters and dissolving them into a puff of dust. Mayura turned to see a tall, thin masked woman dressed all in white, twirling a pair of long, white daggers between her fingers as she landed on the roof.

“Master,” Kagami almost sighed in relief as Mayura threw an arm out in front of her, glaring at the old woman with mistrust.

“If I wanted to harm you, I wouldn’t have waited until you turned around,” Master Crane said, stowing her daggers in a sheath on her belt. “Are you alright?”

“More or less,” Kagami shrugged, brushing some dust off her shirt. “Any sign of anyone else?”

“No; Mayura, Carapace, and I are the only ones who seem to have gotten the memo,” Master Crane said, glancing at Mayura who suddenly looked uncomfortable. “Any idea where your friends are?”

“Could say the same about your backstabbing cat friend,” Mayura challenged, crossing his arms over his chest.

“This is not the time to be bickering about this,” Kagami sighed, shooting Mayura a sharp look. “Paris is being torn apart by the legions of hell; if Chat Noir is out there, he’s our best hope of stopping this thing!”

“If he isn’t already helping whoever summoned these freaks,” Mayura countered, anger bubbling at the mere mention of Chat Noir’s name. “It’s a moot point; we can’t even purify this akuma without Ladybug!”

“I think you’ll find that Ladybug isn’t the only one capable of expelling evil,” Master Crane said. “If we can locate the akuma, there’s a chance I could capture it and expel Hawkmoth’s influence.”

“A chance?”
“A chance is all we have,” Master Crane said, straightening up. “I don’t know what Ladybug has
told you, but we are very much supposed to be on the same side here! Whatever grievance you may
have with me, we need to put the good of this city before our personal squabble! We need to—”

A shadow blocked the sun out as a large, black shape flew over head, wheeling above them and
turning around, each wingbeat buffeting the air around them with loud, almost painful thumps. The
rooftop shook as the creature landed on the far side of the roof, a hooded, robed figure hopping off
the dragon’s back.

“Isn’t this great?!” The akuma crowed, gesturing out over the city. “I’ve had the Vecna and
tarrasque figures for years but I’ve never been able to run an encounter with them! And now, all of
Paris can take part in the biggest battle in the history of the game!”

Mayura and Master Crane both stepped in front of Kagami, daggers and quills at the ready. The
dragon let out a low snarl that shook the air around them, green acid dripping from its jaws and
burning holes in the rooftop at its feet.

“But as interesting as this encounter is, Hawkmoth is very interested in speaking to that friend of
yours,” Gamemaster said, producing a worn, leather book from the folds of his cloak. “So you can
either come quietly…or my beasts can take you by force.”

“It’s up to you,” Gamemaster said with a wide, glinting grin that sent a shudder of fear running down
Kagami’s spine. “How do you want to do this?”

"Concentrate!"

"I am!" Chat Noir insisted, struggling to draw Fang out of its scabbard. "Yelling at me isn't going to
make me concentrate any more!"

"You are still not applying yourself," Sasuke grumbled. "You are capable of more and yet you
are still holding back!"

"I've been applying my tail off all all morning," Chat Noir sighed, tossing the sword down and
flopping down on the floor of the Sanctuary. "I need a break."

"And what if you didn't have time for a break?" Sasuke sighed. "What if your life depended on your ability to master this technique?"

"Good thing it doesn't, right?" Chat Noir sighed, glancing up as Plagg floated in, panting.

"Kid, we gotta go!" Plagg said.

"Whoa, calm down Plagg," Chat Noir chuckled. "I don't think I've ever seen you this tilted-"

"Kagami got attacked by an akuma while you were training; Master He is doing all she can to fight but-"

"What?!" Chat Noir demanded, springing to his feet. "Is she okay?! Where's everybody else?!"

"Only Mayura and Carapace have shown," Plagg said. "Master He and Mayura are protecting her, but they can't hold out for long with the whole damn city is on fire; this akuma is summoning all kinds of crazy monsters to try and snatch Kagami!"

"Damnit," Chat Noir hissed, plucking Fang off the ground and running for the stairs. "I gotta go; I'll bring this back later!"

Sasuke watched Chat Noir run up the stairs, snapping his fingers as he reached for the doorknob.

???, 1:30 - The Sanctuary of the Black Cat

The door vanished in a puff of green smoke, leaving Chat Noir grasping at the empty air.

"What?" Chat Noir stammered, pounding the smooth obsidian wall where the door had been. "What the hell?! Where did the door go?!"
"I don't know; only a Black Cat can-" Plagg trailed off, turning back to Sasuke. "...Sasuke?"

Sasuke said nothing, hands folded on the hilt of a sword that poured out of the smooth obsidian of the floor.

"This lesson is not over," Sasuke said simply.

"What's going on?" Chat Noir said, glancing at Sasuke. "Did you-"

"This Sanctuary is as much mine as it is yours," Sasuke said, drawing the weapon. "I have returned it to the normal flow of time...and you will leave when I decide you can."

"Are you serious?!" Chat Noir spat. "My friend's life is at stake here; my city is under attack! This isn't some kind of game-"

"And yet you have been treating it as such!" Sasuke bellowed, voice echoing off the walls of the Sanctuary as the obsidian walls fell away, dissolving into black sand that swirled around them. "This has always been a matter of life and death! You have always needed this power to save your friends! And if you are not going to train like your friend's lives depend on it, then you are going to fight like their lives depend on it!"

The Sanctuary dissolved into a pastoral scene of feudal Japan painted in shades of black and silver. A pale, sickly green moon hung high in the sky above them as they stood in what appeared to be some kind of courtyard. A tall, drooping wisteria tree towered over them, swaying in the breeze as Sasuke raised his weapon in front of him.

"Sasuke, this isn't funny," Plagg said seriously, stepping between them. "If Kagami gets captured, Hawkmoth can pull Chat Noir's identity out of her! That's curtains for us and curtains for the world as we know it! He has to save her!"

"Then he has to master that weapon and use it to cut me down," Sasuke said. "Before his friend meets with an unfortunate end."

"You sick son of a bitch!" Chat Noir spat, grabbing for the hilt of his sword. Fear and anger bubbled up inside him, releasing the sword with a snap of green light. The black blade hummed in his hand, the green edge thirsting to slice something as Chat Noir gripped the hilt with both hands.
"You see what a little motivation does?" Sasuke chuckled. "We're finally making some progress."

"I hate you!" Chat Noir hissed, sword pulsing with green energy as his head thrummed with anger.

"Good...now do something with it," Sasuke said coolly.

The air between them was still, almost peaceful for a single moment before they both lunged, blades clashing against one another in a shower of green sparks.

Chapter End Notes

Shit's hit the fan and the girls are nowhere in sight! Can Chat Noir defeat his evil sensei before Kagami meets with an unfortunate end? Will Mayura realize the person he loves more than life itself has betrayed him? Will Carapace survive soloing a beholder? Will Nathalie ever get superkicked in the face for supporting Hawkmoth? Will Alya ever get that threesome she wants?

These questions and less will be answered next time!
7:00 a.m. - Paris

Master Fu’s eyes slowly opened to the sound of a heartbeat monitor and a room he didn’t recognize.

He slowly pushed himself up, grunting in pain as his arms trembled from the effort. Fumbling around for his glasses, he squinted out the window as his still foggy mind tried to make sense of the scene outside. He was in Paris...or he thought he was at least. The Paris that had been his home for almost a hundred years did not have a strange, black and red tree taller and wider than the Eiffel Tower growing in the center of it. It did not have thick roots and vines covering every surface of every building, bulging and pulsing with strange, glowing red fruit that seemed ready to burst.

“What...what’s going on?” Master Fu muttered, feeling around for his Miraculous as the door behind him opened.

“Well...at least you’re awake.” Master Fu turned to see the tired, careworn face of Master He stumbling into the room, slumping into the chair next to his bed with a long, drawn out sigh.

“...what happened?” Master Fu asked, dreading the answer as Master He dropped her face in her hands. "When did you get here...how long have I-"

“You're still weak...” Master He said, pushing Master Fu down on to the bed. “You need to sleep; we’ll talk about it when-”

“Qiong.” Master He reached for his friend’s hand. “Please...”

“...your pupil, Marinette, betrayed you,” Master He said quietly, reaching for Master Fu’s hand and giving it a soft squeeze. “She allied herself with Hawkmoth and, through her actions, delivered the Miraculous to him...he is gone...and so are the Ladybug and Black Cat Miraculous.”

Master Fu took a deep, shaky breath, nodding as he tried to make sense of everything. “...Marinette?”
“Almost completely unharmed,” Master He said almost derisively. “Couple of cuts that didn’t even need to be healed…she really is such a lucky girl...”

“...and Chat Noir?” Master Fu asked, watching Master He’s face darken. “Where is he? Is he...what happened to him?”

“I did all I could for him, but...” Master He shook her head with a deep, shaky sigh. “...it’s still too early to tell if he’s going to survive the night.”

1:30 - Paris (The Day Before)

It was times like these, squatting behind a pile of rubble while people ran screaming past her, that Nadja Chamack wondered if she shouldn’t have gone into celebrity gossip journalism.

TMZ writers didn’t need to worry about dodging eye beams and fleeing creatures spawned by a costumed freakshow’s imagination. She wished there was some other way to gain journalistic cred other than constantly subjecting herself to the possibility of a painful and embarrassing death.

But if she was going to be surrounded by suffering, violence, and superhuman monsters, she was going to be damn sure that she got it on film.

“Th-This isn’t part of my contract!” Theo whimpered, leveling the camera at the battle taking place between Carapace and a large, floating eyeball monster down the street.

“Other duties as assigned covers battlefield journalism,” Nadja said, adjusting her blazer as Carapace deflected another eyebeam into an abandoned building. “Keep your camera on the action; if we die, at least our footage will win an award.”

1:45 - London

“You really had to go on a whole damn shopping spree, didn’t you?”
“What, you expect me to come to London and not pick out shoes?”

“Not when we’re up against a deadline,” Alya sighed as Chloe waddled after her with arms full of bags. “Pick up the slack, Bee Movie; we got a dress rehearsal to make.”

“You could help me, you know,” Chloe pouted.

“Yeah, I could,” Alya conceded, shoving her hands in the pockets of her coat as they wove their way through a crowd of holiday shoppers all clustered around a storefront. “But then you wouldn’t learn your lesson.”

Chloe started lagging behind, frowning as she tried to see what everybody was looking at. “...Alya?”

“No; we’re done ducking into boutiques,” Alya sighed, glancing at her watch. “I feel like a shitty enough best friend as it is; I should at least be there to say hi to Mari before she goes on stage.”

“Alya,” Chloe called, bags slipping from her hand and piling on the street below.

“I don’t care how many bags you have or how much your feet hurt; I’m not helping you carry-”

“Alya!” Chloe snapped, pointing at one of the large screen TV’s barely visible through the thick of rubberneckers all craning their necks to get a look at the screen.

“What, do you want to buy a big screen TV or...” Alya trailed off, blood running cold as a helicopter feed showed a very familiar skyline on fire. One screen was trained on a large, black dragon menacing a trio on a rooftop, Mayura’s gaudy purple ensemble standing out as he stepped in front of Kagami and a woman in white Alya had never seen before. The other screen showed a large, squirming eyeball monster, firing a beam at a lone figure in green. Even through the haze of smoke and the grainy camera lens, Alya recognized the wobbly figure, barely raising his shield to deflect another blow.

“...Nino,” Alya muttered weakly, eyes wide in horror as the monster lunged-

1:45 - Paris
-and clamped down hard on Carapace’s arm.

“You know something?!” Carapace spat, struggling to free his shield from the creature’s mouth. “I’m getting reeaaaaally sick of this Final Fantasy bullshit!”

One of the creature’s eye-stalks started to glow, snaking over the rim of Carapace’s shield. The crackle of energy gave Carapace enough time to look up, ironically coming eye to eye with an attack he had no way of protecting himself from; no way of defending himself against except-

Acting on pure instinct, Carapace lunged, grabbed the eye stalk, and swiveled it around to aim directly at the monster’s body as it fired. The beholder didn’t have time to scream before a jet of green energy arced out, instantly evaporating it and reducing the monster that had destroyed half a city block to dust.

Carapace brushed the remains of the creature off his shield, wincing as he held his injured side. “Alright...who’s next?”

A high pitched scream caught his attention and Carapace whipped around to see a woman scrambling away from a small horde of skeletal monsters, each swinging rusty looking melee weapons in slow, ponderous arcs at their victims.

“I had to ask, didn’t I?” Carapace sighed, jogging down the street with a painful wince. “Hey numskulls! I got a bone to pick with you...ahhh man, even Chat Noir would have groaned at that...”

1:45 - Paris

“It’s up to you,” Gamemaster said with a wide, glinting grin that sent a shudder of fear running down Kagami’s spine. “How do you want to do this?”

Master Crane tensed as the black dragon bared its teeth, shooting a look at Mayura out of the corner of her eye.

“You need to get Kagami out of here,” Master Crane said sternly, drawing her daggers.
“Why does everybody stick me with guard duty?” Mayura muttered.

“You have a trusting air about you,” Master Crane said, turning to Kagami, digging something out of her pocket and slipping it into Kagami’s pocket before Mayura could turn around. “Go; I will find you once this is all settled.”

“You can’t be serious,” Mayura said, gesturing to the dragon. “There’s no way you can handle this thing by yourself!”

“I can handle more with one hand than you could with two, boy,” Master Crane chuckled, twirling her weapons around as the dragon leered at her, teeth dripping with acid.

“Well, you can certainly try,” Gamemaster chuckled, folding his arms across his chest as the dragon’s neck snaked forward. “But is it really a good idea to discuss battle strategy in front of your enemies?”

“It is if you know there’s nothing your enemy can do to stop you,” Master Crane said.

“I don’t know if that’s courage or hubris,” Gamemaster said, tilting his head to one side thoughtfully. “I suppose there’s only one way to find out.”

Gamemaster snapped his fingers, and the dragon lunged, mouth agape at Master Crane. Two quills from Mayura’s fan struck the beast in the eyes, distracting it long enough for Master Crane to leap high in the air, crashing down on the dragon’s head with a mighty kick that shook the building and sent roof tiles sliding down on to the street below.

“Right...have fun with that!” Mayura said, grabbing Kagami around the waist and taking a running leap off the edge of the building.

“Wait!” Kagami cried, reaching out for Master Crane as she fell backwards, gliding over the rooftops as Mayura ran as fast as he could.

“You two play nicely now,” Gamemaster chuckled, levitating off the rooftop as Master Crane narrowly avoided a jet of burning acid that melted the air conditioning unit behind her. “I’ve got
more than just one encounter to manage right now…”

2:00 - The Sanctuary of the Black Cat

The melodic din of steel on steel was the only thing that broke the oppressive silence of the Sanctuary. Each sword strike echoed in the stark, barren wasteland as Chat Noir dove at his prey, swinging with wild abandoned as his mentor carelessly deflected every thrust and slash with practiced ease.

Plagg could only watch as his Black Cats tore at each other, leaping up on to the dilapidated roof of the palace as they battled.

“Time is running out, Adrien Agreste,” Sasuke said coolly, ignoring the snarl of fear and anger as he leapt in the air, stepping on the flat of Fang as Chat Noir thrust recklessly at his feet. “It is one thing to be capable of wielding this power; you must have the strength of will to use it effectively.”

“Spare my the Jedi bullshit!” Chat Noir spat grunting as Sasuke jumped off the blade, kicking Chat Noir in the face as he jumped off. “Kagami’s life is in danger! I don’t have time for this!”

“If you put as much energy into your training as you put into your whining, you would no doubt be a master by now,” Sasuke sniffed, raising a hand and catching Fang on the flat of his palm. “Honestly...how do you intend to save your friend with such a dull weapon?”

Why isn’t it cutting him? Chat Noir winced, watching the green glimmering along the edge of his sword flicker and fade to a dull silver edge.

“You’re going to have to do much better than that!” Sasuke sneered, kicking Chat Noir back off the roof and sending him tumbling to the ground below. “That sword has been the manifestation of my hatred for more than five hundred years. To wield it, it must become the manifestation of yours...you cannot destroy me unless you really wish to.”

2:00 - London

Marinette glanced at her watch, tapping her foot against the floor as she peeked out from behind the curtain separating the backstage area from the audience. The small venue had been transformed into a winter wonderland, complete with artificial snow and spinning snowflakes hanging high above the catwalk. From her position behind the curtain, Marinette could see the full house chattering with one
another, mouth twisting in displeasure as she noticed two conspicuously empty seats in the front row.

“Where are they?” Marinette sighed. “Probably held up on another one of Chloe’s shopping sprees...why did she have to come anyway?”

“I’m sure your friends...er, friend...will be along shortly,” Nathalie said, glancing at her tablet. “You should make sure your models are well fitted; the show is due to start soon.”

Shooting one last look at Alya’s empty seat, Marinette sighed, trudging back towards the fitting room.

“They better have a good reason for being so late.”

2:00 - London

“You don’t understand; we need to get on the next train to Paris!”

“I’m sorry, miss, we can’t accommodate any more passengers,” the station attendant said with a helpless shrug. “We sold the last two just a few moments ago, and-”

“Got em!” Chloe crowed, grabbing Alya by the shoulder as she brandished a pair of tickets triumphantly.

“How did you-”

“Backpackers took a bribe,” Chloe said, gesturing to a pair of Americans counting euros and high-fiving one another. “Coach tickets, but-”

“God bless your rich father,” Alya sighed, grabbing Chloe’s hand as they ran for the turnstile. “Come on! We have to-”

2:30 - Paris
“- go back!”

“Keep your voice down!” Mayura hissed, throwing his cape over Kagami as another pack of winged devils passed overhead, searching for any sign of their quarry.

“You don’t understand; she’s the only one who can put a stop to this!” Kagami insisted, grabbing Mayura by his cloak’s lapels.

“What about your pal? I don’t see anybody tall dark and furry stepping up to save the day,” Mayura muttered. “...you’re not even denying it anymore, are you?”

“...there’s a very good reason as to why Chat Noir isn’t here,” Kagami said, biting her lip.

“Or he knows you’re in trouble and just doesn’t care enough to stick his neck out to save you,” Mayura snorted.

“Well, I don’t see Ladybug sticking her neck out either,” Kagami countered.

“That’s different, she-”

“-is lying to you,” Kagami said firmly. “She has been lying to you for months now!”

“Funny; she told me that Chat was probably doing the same to you,” Mayura said, crossing his arms. “What makes you so sure Chat Noir is telling you the truth about Ladybug working with Hawkmoth; what makes you sure he isn’t using you to get at Ladybug’s Miraculous?”

“Because I know him,” Kagami said firmly.

“And I know Ladybug,” Mayura said. “She’s the most selfless creature in the universe; she always puts everybody else’s needs way before her own. I don’t think she’s even capable of doing something like that; it’s not in her character.”

“Nobody’s that perfect,” Kagami said, suddenly wishing she the akuma had the decency to kidnap
her with her coat on.

“You’ll see,” Mayura said earnestly. “Ladybug will be here before you know it.”

“For my sake, I hope you’re right,” Kagami muttered, shivering slightly.

“Want to bet on it?”

“You don’t have the money to bet with me,” Kagami said, reaching into her pocket and running her fingers over the small, smooth object Master Crane had slipped her.

2:30 - London

“Okay...you guys know what to do?”

“Marinette, they’ve been doing this their entire lives,” Nathalie said, shooting the couple an apologetic look. “First timer.”

“Right, no, sure, of course,” Marinette laughed a little too loudly, reaching out and adjusting her male model’s tie for the thirteenth time. “B-Break a leg, you two...but don’t actually break a leg...oh god, please don’t break a leg; please don't trip and break a-”

“And that’s our cue,” Nathalie said, ushering Marinette’s models out on to the runway as she spoke into her headset. “Dupain-Cheng walking; cue the snowflakes.”

Marinette closed her eyes, pressing her back against the wall as she listened to the crowd through the curtains. She couldn’t tell if the murmurs, and applause were anything more than perfunctory and polite; a nagging, anxious voice in the back of her mind sneered that they were all laughing at her behind their programs. But as her models approached the end of the walkway, the smattering of applause only seemed to increase in volume.

“You can open your eyes,” Nathalie chuckled as Marinette’s models stepped back through the curtains, artificial snow clinging to their clothes.
“It’s over?” Marinette asked, glancing at Nathalie as she moved on to the next designer in the order. “Already?”

Nearly a month of round the clock work had come to less than a thirty second walk across the stage accompanied by a smattering of applause. She had *debuted* without any of the life changing fervor that she expected to come with her first fashion show.

“Queue up; you’re walking out for the finale,” Nathalie said, shoving Marinette between her models as they queued them behind some of Gabriel’s senior designers. Marinette’s head swam as she was ushered through the curtain and on to the runway. Artificial snow tumbled down from the rafters as the darkly lit crowd rose to their feet, applauding the parade of designers as they each made their way down the runway in turn. It was almost surreal the way time seemed to move in slow motion, each fleck of snow hanging in the air for a long, ponderous moment as she walked through them, bathed in the spotlights and the sound of an adoring crowd cheering her name.

*I have arrived,* Marinette thought, bowing at the end of the runway as a wide, beaming smile spread across her face. *This is the best day of my life!*

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2:30 - Paris

“This is...the worst fucking day...of my whole life.”

Carapace kicked a charging skeleton in the chest, shattering it into a pile of broken bones as he guided a crowd of terrified Parisians through the backstreets.

“Stick close!” Carapace said, raising his shield and breaking into a sprint as a crowd of skeletons rose to block their path. A tide of bones broke across his shield as he ran, cutting a path through the crowd and skidding to a stop on the far side of the crowd. With a flick of his arm, his shield ricocheted off the street lamps on either side of the street like a pinball, cutting through the remaining mob and landing at Carapace’s feet.

“You know...the worst part of this shit is that you guys don’t even drop any good loot,” Carapace muttered, waving the crowd forward as the sound of gunfire came from the next street over. A small squad of armed, black-clad Stigma operatives were wildly spraying their weapons in the air, bullets harmlessly bouncing off the cackling devils that swooped down and attacked them with wicked abandon.

“Get to library!” Carapace called to the crowd of civilians, pointing across the street. “Hole up in the
bunker in the basement until this blows over—"

“Hey Michelangelo!”

A blue and purple blur sailed overhead, raining a shower of jagged feather shaped quills down on a few straggling skeletons that tried to wobble to their feet. Mayura landed behind him, Kagami hopping off his back and driving her foot through the skull of a skeleton trying to pick up its sabre.

“I’m more of a Donatello guy myself,” Carapace said, kicking his shield back on to his wrist. “What happened to backup?”

“You know...compared to the dragons I’m acquainted with,” Master Crane panted, dodging out of the way of a lunging bite attack. “You are a very poor copy.”

Master Crane dashed up the dragon’s neck, leaping and sinking her daggers into its soft, translucent wings as it started to take flight. The beast howled in pain as she slid down, shredding its wings and sending it crashing back down to the rooftop.

“Sorry; flights are cancelled,” Master Crane said as the dragon snarled, eyes burning with malice as it opened its mouth, roaring in pain and anger as it charged.

Carapace cocked his head as a dragon’s roar echoed across the city.

“She’s occupied,” Kagami said tightly, turning in the direction of gunfire as a Stigma guard was carried high over the city streets and dropped in the Seine as two winged devils bumped fists with a cackle. “I see security is doing...nothing.”

“And here I thought Americans with assault rifles were the answer to all life’s problems,” Mayura chuckled bitterly as a pair of Stigma guards jogged up led by a tall, bald man with a stern expression.

“Capt. Van der Meer,” the bald man said, introducing himself with a crisp salute. “I’m in charge of Stigma operations in the city of Paris.”

“At ease, dude,” Carapace said, rolling his shoulders with a wince. “What’s the sitch?”
“My men are doing what they can to combat these creatures but...truthfully, this is a little bit out of our pay grade,” Capt. Van der Meer said. “We didn’t sign up for this.”

“Just roughhousing civilians and acting tough at the Mayor’s parties,” Kagami said, raising an eyebrow as Capt. Van der Meer glared at her.

“We haven’t been able to locate Ladybug or any other heroes,” Capt. Van der Meer said, clearing his throat. “Do you have a status update on Rena Rouge or Queen Bee?”

3:00 - Train to Paris

“Okay...okay,” Alya sighed, leaning down so she could talk while her phone charged hooked up to the plug next to her seat. “Stay off the streets; I’ll call you when it’s safe.”

Alya pressed her face against the glass, watching the countryside roll by as Chloe slid into the seat across from her.

“Daddy knows I’m on the way back,” Chloe sighed, crossing her arms. “The only problem is that we’re not going to be able to pull into Paris as long as the akuma is rampaging.”

“What?!”

“They’re gonna stop us half an hour outside the city limits,” Chloe said with a tight smile. “That’s fucking Eurostar for you...”

“Did you tell them you were Queen Bee?”

“They weren’t impressed; something about “protecting the lives of their passengers” or some shit like that,” Chloe sighed. “Maybe we should have grabbed a private jet.”

“Where the hell would we get a private jet?”

“French embassy?” Chloe shrugged. “Ambassador Bernard owes my father quite a few favors...let’s
just stay that the woman he checks into Le Grand Paris with isn’t always his wife.”

“Should have led with blackmail first,” Alya sighed, leg jiggling as she chewed on her lower lip. On the television screen in the aisle, live footage of the battle was interspersed with cell phone footage from civilians on the ground. Her chest tightened as grainy footage of Carapace leading the charge through a wave of animated skeletons came on screen, pride mingling with worry as he led a crowd of strangers through the city.

“I hate this…” Alya sighed. “I hate not being able to help him.”

“Hey, if anyone can hold the line until we get there, it’s Shelly,” Chloe said. “He’s practically unbreakable.”

“Now is not the time I want to test his stamina,” Alya said.

“I can rent you a hotel room if you want to test his stamina later,” Chloe said, satisfied that a small, reluctant laugh slipped out of Alya’s tightly pressed lips. “Just focus on getting ready to bail his butt out of trouble when we stop.”

“How? We can’t even get into the city!”

Chloe just smirked, pointing to herself.

3:00 - Paris

“Rena Rouge and Queen Bee are gonna be here...soonish,” Carapace said, glancing at Mayura. “No sign of Ladybug yet.”

“She’ll be here,” Mayura said firmly, turning to the Stigma team. “Until then, we need to do everything in our power to keep Kagami safe. If you gents can help with that?”

“You’re sending me off with the goon squad?” Kagami sniffed.
“It’s that or keep riding me like a showpony all over town.”

“The showpony has put on a better show than these rent-a-thugs,” Kagami said, jerking her head in Capt. Van der Meer’s direction.

“...excuse me, ma’am,” Capt. Van der Meer bristled.

“You’re excused,” Kagami said.

“Look, it’s too dangerous for you to stick around us,” Mayura sighed.

“It’s too dangerous to even be in Paris these days,” Kagami countered. “If the fantasy geek decides to come after me, there’s not much the Rambo Fan Club can do to protect me; they’re not exactly monster hunters, are they?”

“Excuse me,” Capt. Van der Meer growled.

“Girl’s got a point,” Carapace said, poignantly ignoring Capt. Van der Meer’s huffing and puffing. “Not like Stigma is earning that mayoral cheddar Andre’s been paying them.”

“Excuse me!” Capt. Van der Meer snapped. “How is it our fault that we weren’t prepared to deal with a delusional manchild’s psychotic fantasy?!”

“Hawkmoth is a delusional manchild!” Kagami said, jerking her thumb over to the river where a large, club wielding cyclops was batting Stigma guards into the water while a small gaggle of winged demons cheered him on. “And i’m not exactly brimming with confidence that the Mayor’s PR stunt is up to the task of-”

A low, bellowing roar shook the ground and rattled the windows lining the street surrounding them. Carapace slowly turned to see a large, lumbering monster slowly making its way down the street, claws dragging on the ground and feet crushing cars as it moved. A mouth the size of a small house hung open, teeth dripping drool on the street as it slowly, inevitably, made its way towards them.

“You boys don’t happen to have one of them Pacific Rim robots lying around, do you?” Carapace
asked as Capt. Van der Meer slowly backed up, eyes wide in mute horror as he fumbled for the radio on his vest. “Evangelion? Gundam? Anything big and punchy we can throw at that thing?”

“A-A-All units, fall back to the Mayor’s residence!” Capt. Van der Meer said as his companions dropped their guns and ran down the street as fast as they could.

"Okay, running away works too!" Carapace called, waving after them. "What's the matter; never seen a giant world-ending monster before?!!"

“And they call us cowards,” Mayura sighed, watching the best mercenaries money could buy flee through the streets as the lumbering beast made its way towards them. “What’s the call?”

“Get Kagami somewhere safe,” Carapace said, shouldering his shield. “Out of the city, if you can...hell, I'd hop a train if I were you.”

“Okay you definitely can’t handle that by yourself,” Mayura said.

“I don’t think an extra pair of hands is what’s gonna make the difference here,” Carapace chuckled, watching an empty building crumble as the creature’s tail carelessly swipe through it. “But we can’t let this guy get Kagami; I’ll keep his attention for as long as I can, but you two need to hoof it.”

Mayura and Kagami shared an uneasy glance as the street trembled with every approaching footstep.

“...I’m coming back for you,” Mayura said, sweeping Kagami off her feet. “I'll...I’ll find some kind of help. I can bring that bird lady and-”

“Don’t sweat,” Carapace said, waving over his shoulder. “I’ll catch you on the flipside.”

Mayura nodded, leaping off the street and away as the earth shaking monstrosity grew ever closer. Carapace took a deep breath, straightening up as his communicator buzzed on his arm.

“Answer,” Carapace said as Queen Bee’s face filled up the back of his shield.
“Hey!” Queen Bee said. “We’re on the way; just crossed over to the continent. Train’s gonna stop half an hour outside the city, but-”

“That’s great,” Carapace said, hoping the fear didn’t come through in his voice. “Alya with you?”

“I’m holed up in the toilet right now; I can go get her if you-”

“No, that’s fine,” Carapace said, shaking his head as the shadow of the tarrasque fell over him. “Just...take care of her, yeah?”

“What? What’s going on?”

“And tell her I love her,” Carapace said, swallowing heavily. “She knows, but, uh...just tell her for me, will you?”

“Nino, I know superheroing is kind of our thing, but if you’re planning on doing something pointlessly heroic-”

3:30 - Train to Paris

Queen Bee’s communicator cut off, leaving her staring blankly at a black screen.

“Nino? Nino?!” The notification light next to Carapace’s communicator went dark and tapping it seemed to have no effect no matter how hard she tried to reach out to him again. Dropping her transformation, Chloe slipped out of the bathroom, turning to see her entire car staring up at the tv screens in the aisle, identical expressions of fear and horror on their faces...except for Alya, whose own pained, terrified expression spoke of fear far deeper than detached shock.

“Run...” Alya whispered, clutching her hair as she watched grainy footage of Carapace standing unmoving between the library and an impossibly large thing that grew closer and closer with each step. “Please...please run...please...run...”

3:30 - Paris
“You really want me to send a tarrasque after one hero?” Grandmaster asked as Hawkmoth watched Carapace defiantly stand between the tarrasque and the library. “You must really hate this guy…”

“Hatred has nothing to do with it,” Hawkmoth said, lip curling into a reflexive sneer. “He’s just...a bad influence.”

The unbelievable stench of decay and rot that came from the behemoth’s mouth was almost enough to knock Carapace over. Cruel, beady eyes glared down at him curiously, as though it were a cat that couldn’t decide if the strange little thing in front of it was worth eating or not.

“Come on!” Carapace shouted, banging on his shield like a dinner bell. “Come and get-”

As he sailed across the street and crashed through the wall of a building, Carapace wondered if he hadn’t made a huge mistake.

Chapter End Notes

RE: DND Monsters being less impressive than their D&D counterparts a big part of that is it's limited by Hawkmoth's own power. He can't create something more powerful than himself, but he can create similar looking creatures that are fun to punch.

I broke this chapter up into two more digestible chapters (I know I'm whipping a lotta shit at you as fast as I can so let me know if this gets too dense) so if all goes well, I'll have the next half up soon.

Also, big shout out to whoever made the Truth and Consequences Trope Page! (https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Fanfic/TruthAndConsequences)
3:30 p.m. - Paris

Marinette's stomach turned as she stepped through the sliding doors of the hospital, dodging a paramedic wheeling another patient into an overcrowded waiting room. The sound of chattering family members talking in hushed tones with doctors greeted her as she made her way to the front desk.

"I'm...I'm here to visit Adrien Agreste," Marinette said quietly.

"Are you family?" The receptionist asked.

"No, I'm his..." Marinette trailed off, unsure of even how she could possibly fit into Adrien's life after all this. "I'm a well-wisher."

"Right, well, visitation is limited to approved guests only," the receptionist said, turning back to their computer. "I'm sorry, we're very busy, as you can see-"

"No, I understand," Marinette said, nodding mutely. "It's just...c-can I get a message to him? Is there any way I can-"

"Technically, I can't even tell you if we have an Adrien Agreste in this hospital," the receptionist said, glancing over their spectacles. "You understand, this is an issue of patient security; we can't just-"

"I understand..." Marinette said. "But...can we-"

A firm hand grabbed Marinette by her elbow and steered her away from the receptionist's desk through a crowd of packed and panicked patients.
"You need to leave," Kagami said quietly but firmly as she steered Marinette towards the door. "Now."

"Kagami, I-"

"You cannot be here right now," Kagami insisted, voice even but betraying barely restrained anger. "You need to go before-"

"Is he okay?" Marinette asked as Kagami steered her out the front door again. "Please...please just tell me he's okay..."

"...okay?" Kagami echoed incredulously. "Is...he okay? Did you seriously just ask me that?!!"

"I-I didn't see him after the ambulance took him out," Marinette sniffed, rubbing her eyes. "I couldn't tell how bad it was..."

"Oh, he's fine," Kagami said airily. "Just six broken ribs, a fractured orbital bone, a split lip, a collapsed lung, on top of the dislocated shoulder, three broken fingers, a splintered forearm, and-"

"Oh god..." Marinette moaned, bile rising in her throat as she fumbled for the wall for support.

"The doctors are fond of saying that it's a 'miracle he survived'," Kagami said conversationally. "We had to tell them he was hit by a truck because that was the only thing that explained the injuries...oh, and Luka is alive by the way; another small miracle given the fact that...well, that's really not your concern anymore."

"I never...I never wanted this to happen..." Marinette said, pressing her fingers against her lips as her eyes drifted up to the gnarled and tangled tree roots that twisted over the buildings across the street. "I didn't want this...I tried to fix this...I-"

"That doesn't matter right now," Kagami said, glancing around. "It's not your problem to fix; we are going to handle this. But you need to leave before Chloe-"

Kagami trailed off, glancing over Marinette's shoulder. "...damn it."
Marinette turned around to see Alya and Chloe standing on the sidewalk behind her, clutching porcelain travel-mugs of steaming coffee. The pained, disappointed look on Alya's face was hard enough to bear, but that was nothing compared to the way Chloe was glaring at her, eyes red, puffy, and leveled at Marinette with more anger and antipathy than Marinette had ever seen before. Marinette realized that the bickering, the snarks, the thinly veiled barbs Chloe had lobbed at her in the past hadn't been hatred; not compared to the anger Marinette felt wafting off Chloe like great waves of heat.

Marinette's first thought was, Wow, I don't think I've ever seen Chloe look this angry.

Marinette's second thought was, Gosh, that coffee cup is getting awfully close, isn't it?

3:30 - London (The Day Before)

The euphoria of being surrounded and praised by designers Marinette had looked up to since she was a child was somewhat diminished by irritation that grew with every minute that Alya and Chloe weren't with her.

I could have been here with Adrien, Marinette thought as she laughed at the French Ambassador’s joke. I gave up spending time with my boyfriend to make time for her, but is she here? Noooooo, she’s probably off making out with Chloe in a closet somewhere...

Nathalie cleared her throat, drawing Marinette’s attention to a tall, dark-skinned woman in a sharply tailored blue dress. “Marinette, may I introduce-”

“Angelina Loveless,” the woman said, stepping forward and shaking Marinette’s hand. “Head of Gabriel’s London branch.”

“I know...I-I mean, I know who you are...I mean...n-nice to meet you,” Marinette laughed. “I very much enjoyed the article you put out in Vanity Fair last month.”

“Thank you,” Angelina said with a warm smile. “And I very much enjoyed the work you put out today; honestly a breath of fresh air in a dry winter landscape. I don’t think I’ve seen a showing that strong in quite a few years.”
“M. Agreste’s design last year was quite nice,” Nathalie interjected.

“It was nice the first ten times he designed it too,” Angelina sighed, ignoring Nathalie’s irritated scowl. “To be blunt, Marinette, we’re creatively in a bit of a rut which is why I’m hoping you’ll consider accepting a position with us while you’re in school.”

“Isn’t there some kind of interview process?” Marinette chuckled.

“You just went through it,” Angelina said. “Your skill and attention to detail was apparent in everything you produced today; at the risk of being too presumptuous, I think you would make an excellent addition to our staff.”

“Well...that’s-”

“Of course there will be a more formal offer and we can negotiate your salary when the time comes,” Angelina said, patting Marinette on the shoulder. “But I do hope you’ll accept; we’re in dire need of new blood. If we stagnate for much longer, I’m afraid this house’s days are numbered.”

“Of course...th-thank you,” Marinette said, unable to keep the beaming grin off her face as Angelina was called away by a friend.

“You’ve impressed a great many people today, Marinette,” Nathalie said with a rare smile. “Seems M. Agreste’s faith in you was well placed.”

“I hope he doesn’t think I plan to make a career out of working for him,” Marinette sighed. "This is...great; more than I could have hoped for. But I'm still committed to starting my own brand."

“It doesn’t need to be forever; it just needs to be for now,” Nathalie said, patting her shoulder. “And for now-”

“Out of the way, peons, family coming through!” Brigitte crowed, knocking Nathalie to one side and throwing an arm over Marinette’s shoulder and rustling her hair. “Look at you, all grown up and wowing the posh folk!”
“Nathalie, I thought you had this madwoman thrown out on the street,” Marinette giggled, pushing her cousin off. “I’m going to have to press charges.”

“Good luck, nerd; Felix’s firm built the new police station,” Brigitte said, sticking her tongue out. “I told you when we were kids that I was going to embarrass the hell out of you when you finally made it big and that shame bill has come due.”

“I’m gonna need to get that on a payment plan or something,” Marinette chuckled.

“You need to pick up your damn phone more too,” Brigitte sighed, smacking Marinette on the shoulder. “I’ve been trying to call you for, like, an hour now; your mom and dad called and they’re totally safe. They’re hunkered down outside town until the akuma clears out.”

A cold chill ran down Marinette’s spine as Nathalie paled. “What?”

Nathalie cleared her throat. “Ah, Marinette, have you met Donatella-”

“You haven’t heard?” Brigitte said, opening her phone to a live feed of Paris in flames. “First akuma attack in months; pretty nasty one too.”

No...he couldn't have. Marinette stared down at the phone in mute horror as it scrolled through scenes of an army of monsters swarming over the city.

"Carapace and the uh...uhhh...Peacock Lad are the only ones who showed up so far," Brigitte said. "Ladybug still nowhere to be seen, which is kinda weird, considering- hey !”

Brigitte managed to catch her phone as it slipped out of Marinette’s shaking fingers. “Where are you going?”

That...son of a bitch! Marinette mentally swore at herself as she made a beeline for the bathroom. Of all weekends, why did he pick this one to attack...unless-

“Marinette?” Nathalie called after her, jogging as she tried to head Marinette off. “Where are you going?”
“To pee,” Marinette said, shooting a dark glare at Nathalie. “Is that allowed?”

“Well, if one must go, then one must-”

“And then I’m going to find Alya and Chloe,” Marinette said. “I’m starting to get worried about them.”

“I-I’m sure they’re perfectly fine,” Nathalie said, following Marinette into the restroom. “There’s a couple more designers I’d like you to introduce you to before I-”

Marinette locked the door as soon as Nathalie was through, grabbing her by the lapels and slamming her hard against the door with more force than she thought she was capable of.

“Does he know?”

“I...I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Cut the bullshit!”

“M-Marinette, you’re hurting me-”

“Does...he... know?” Marinette repeated, locking eyes with a trembling, wide eyed Nathalie.

“Marinette...this is a very delicate matter that-ooof!”

Marinette’s forearm smashed into the side of Nathalie’s head and the older woman went limp in her arms.

_Stupid, stupid, stupid, STUPID!_ Marinette thought, dragging Nathalie into the stall and locking the door. _How did he find out?! I was so careful; I gave him nothing to go on!_
“Tikki,” Marinette called. "We need to go!”

"What's happening?" Tikki muttered, glancing down at Nathalie with wide eyes. "Marinette, did you-

"Hawkmoth...akuma...Paris..." Marinette took a deep breath, fighting the rising tide of panic that welled up in her. "We need to get back to Paris now!"

“Hawkmoth attacked Paris...today?” Tikki said, eyes narrowing at Marinette. "Marinette, does he know that you're-

“Not now Tikki!” Marinette cried. “I need you to transform me!”

Even as Ladybug’s power flowed through her, Marinette couldn’t dispel the cold, gnawing fear that came from the fact that the identity that she had guarded so carefully had somehow fallen into her enemy’s hands. He knew; that was the only explanation for it. He sent her out of the city, gave her everything she ever wanted, and used that to give him a clean path at Kagami.

And now, Paris was paying the price for it.

Ladybug swung out the bathroom window, arcing around the side of the building and crashing through the patio doors into a stunned ballroom.

“Monsieur Ambassador!” Ladybug called, marching up the French ambassador. “I need a favor!”

4:00 - Paris

“ You...are a fucking dead man.”

The fact that Ladybug’s voice didn’t raise above a venomous whisper did nothing to diminish the fact that Hawkmoth was now on the shitlist of one of the most powerful beings in existence. He quickly closed his communicator, taking a deep breath as he looked out at the chaos and destruction that reigned over the city; destruction that would be all in vain if his akuma failed to
deliver on his promise.

He hated akuma; flighty, overly emotional, entirely unreliable creatures prone to fits of madness and losing sight of their objectives. Hawkmoth couldn’t even rely on Gamemaster to kidnap a single person without blowing up the entire city in the process. Was this the universe’s way of toying with him? Was this punishment for usurping the power of the Butterfly? Was he condemned to a cycle of futile violence as his goals continued to slip further and further out of his reach?

These were not new questions; Hawkmoth had mulled over them after every akuma gone completely wrong. But with Ladybug’s impending foot in his ass, he found himself oddly pensive. If he was still capable of doubting himself, he might have wondered if his latest desperate attempt to resurrect his wife was entirely worth all the suffering it caused.

But that was a question he had answered a long time ago; there was no way left for him, but the way forward.

“Pick up the pace,” Hawkmoth muttered to Gamemaster. “I’d say you have about an hour left before things go very sour.”

Carapace stumbled to his feet shakily, steadying himself on a crumbling column as the tarrasque leered down at him curiously. The mindless, almost benign cruelty was terrifying; this creature didn’t care about him enough to hate him. No matter what he threw against it, he was just a curiosity; something to be toyed with and then devoured when his capacity for entertainment had run dry.

Fortunately for Carapace, he was more entertaining than most people gave him credit for.

“You know...I never much liked the Godzilla movies,” Carapace said, narrowly avoiding a titanic claw swipe that obliterated the sidewalk he was standing on only a few seconds earlier. “Especially the shitty American versions.”

If the creature understood Nino, it made no mention of it as it quietly turned, lumbering towards the library with the careless determination of a toddler hellbent on demolishing a sandcastle.

“Okay, I take it back!” Carapace cried, jogging out in front of the creature, throwing up his shimmering, translucent shield and stretching it as far as he could around the library. The tarrasque mindlessly swiped at the shell, nearly shattering it with a single swipe of his claw as Carapace scrambled up the creature’s tail, climbing up its back as it scratched against his defenses.
What do I need to do to put this thing down? Carapace thought, sailing over the top of its head and whipping his shield hard at one of its eyes. A ear-splitting roar of pain and frustration shook Carapace to his core as a large, clumsy claw knocked Carapace off the top of its head and on to the concrete below.

Well...got its attention, at least. Carapace mused, watching one beady eye turn to him with unparalleled malice and contempt. Carapace raised his shield as the tarrasque raised its enormous, carsized foot, casting a shadow over Carapace as he brought it down with more speed than should have been possible. The air left Carapace’s body in one, pained gasp, the street cracking around him as literal tons of weight crashed into him in one, fell blow.

I can’t die here… Carapace thought, struggling to move as the creature raised its foot for another blow. I can’t die here...I can’t die here...

“I...can’t...die...here…” Carapace grunted hands reaching out as the foot came down and the world went dark.

4:30 - London

As it turned out, being Ladybug meant you could just ask the French ambassador to use his private jet. It also meant leaping through customs and being hustled out onto the tarmac as the Embassy’s support staff briefed her on the situation.

As it turns out, an embarrassingly tight suit of red and black super-spandex was practically diplomatic immunity.

“The akuma has been active since early this afternoon,” one of the Ambassador’s assistants, a woman named Annalise, mentioned as the plane taxied down the runway. “His efforts seem to be concentrated on capturing a particular person; one Kagami Tsurugi, a Japanese immigrant and former Olympic athlete.”

“Any idea why Hawkmoth is targeting her?” Ladybug asked, knowing full well the answer.

“Not at the moment; your partner, Mayura, has done a good job of keeping Mme. Tsurugi away from the akuma’s clutches...Carapace, on the other hand, seems to be having a rough go of things.”
Ladybug nodded, refusing to glance at the image of Carapace being batted around by a lizard the size of an apartment building. The sick, gut-wrenching sense of fear and guilt that had haunted her all afternoon had to be pushed down; she could tear at her clothes and beg forgiveness when her friends and city were safe again. “Any sign of Rena Rouge or Queen Bee?”

“Customs reported Mme. Bourgeois left on a train bound for Paris some hours ago,” Annalise said, glancing at her tablet. “Train should be approaching the city shortly, but she’ll need to be carried in by van...no sign of Rena Rouge though.”

*If Chloe got on the train, then Alya probably left with her,* Ladybug thought, chewing on the corner of her lip.

“There is also the small matter of this strange woman in white,” Annalise said, bringing up a clip of Master Crane fighting a black, acid spitting dragon on a rooftop. The elderly woman moved with speed and struck with strength that belied her frail appearance. “Is she an ally of yours?”

“...she’s an ally of Paris,” Ladybug said, watching Master Crane stab at the creature’s unprotected belly. “At this point, I’ll take help from whoever’s offering it…”

“The only...odd bit of information is that Chat Noir is nowhere to be seen,” Annalise said. “He hasn’t been seen in nearly three months now...if Hawkmoth was launching a full scale attack on Paris, wouldn’t he send his new sidekick out as well?”

“I...couldn’t say,” Ladybug chuckled a little nervously. "Hawkmoth's plans have always eluded me..."

“There’s also the small matter of the fact that Hawkmoth attacked while both you and Queen Bee were overseas,” Annalise said, glancing over the rim of her glasses at Ladybug. “Is there...something the government needs to be aware of, Mme. Ladybug?”

*Just the small fact that I basically served Paris to Hawkmoth on a silver platter.*

"Nothing I can think of,” Ladybug said, gripping her seat-rests as the plane took off.

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4:30 - The Sanctuary of the Black Cat
“Come on!” Chat Noir cried as he crashed through the side of a crumbling grey wall, rolling on the ground as Sasuke pounced, sword narrowly missing Chat Noir’s ear.

“How long are you planning on running?” Sasuke asked, catching Chat Noir’s desperate kick and hurling him over the top of the roof. He regained his bearings just in time to crash headlong into the wisteria tree, sending a shower of pale purple blossoms raining down as he slid down the trunk.

Chat Noir had been outclassed a number of his times in his career; the downside of having to hold the full breadth of his powers back in every battle meant that he was frequently forced to fight with less than a full deck. But never in his life had he been so thoroughly and roundly trounced, even against fencers far outside his own skillset like Kagami. Sasuke was more than a superhero; he was a warrior with years if not centuries of experience in battle. The fact that Fang still couldn’t even scratch Sasuke’s skin was even more disheartening; the secret of the sword still eluding him as he fought.

“Plagg, any tips?” Chat Noir panted, pushing himself to his feet as Sasuke casually strolled through the hole Chat Noir left in the building.

“Stab him!” Plagg snapped, floating at his shoulder. “You know, that thing you’re supposed to do with a sword?”

“I'm trying!” Chat Noir cried, watching his dead-eyed mentor slowly walk across the courtyard towards him.

“That is your problem,” Sasuke said, gripping his weapon with both hands. “You try. You make an effort, you do your best, but you do not do. You are Chosen, by one of the greatest Powers in creation, and you choose to limit yourself; to make fumbling, grasping attempts at greatness and then whine when you are not successful. Even blessed with an artifact forged by the Ladybug and Black Cat Miraculouses, you are unable to beat an old man with a rusty sword.”

Chat Noir gripped Fang with both hands, glaring at the dull, lifeless edge of the sword.

“You lack teeth, little cat,” Sasuke said as Chat Noir snarled at him. “You are a soft, spoiled, gummy little creature mewling at injustice instead of biting down and ripping it apart with your teeth...and as long as your fangs are blunt, so too will your Fang be.”

“And what’s just about letting an innocent person die just to make a point?!”
“I’m not the one letting your friend die,” Sasuke shrugged. “You are.”

“Shut up!”

“You have all the power to save her,” Sasuke said, pointing the tip of his weapon at Chat. “So why haven’t you? Every minute you spend here is another minute your dear little Kagami is in danger.”

“That’s because you won’t let me leave!”

“And what do you plan on doing about that?” Sasuke asked, head cocked to one side. “Threaten me? Appeal to my better nature? Cry and hope I have a soft spot for soft little rich boys who aren’t getting what they want...I mean, what’s to stop me from killing you?”

Plagg paled as much as a pitch black cat could pale, shooting a worried glance at Sasuke. “What?! Hey, Sasuke, buddy, d-don’t joke like that!”

“When have I ever joked about killing someone?” Sasuke asked, slowly circling Chat Noir. “And when have I ever failed to kill someone I wanted to kill.”

“I can’t die,” Chat Noir said, glancing at Plagg. “Plagg won’t let me….he can bring me back like last time, right?”

“How many times can he do that, I wonder,” Sasuke mused. “He isn’t the god of life, you know...even his powers of creation are limited in scope.”

“If I die-”

“If you die, whatever Master selected you will have to find a new patsy,” Sasuke said, gripping his weapon even tighter. “I care not; I’m getting tired of babysitting you at any rate.”

Sasuke calmly returned his weapon to his scabbard, hand hovering over the hilt as he watched Chat Noir through lidded eyes. Even through the defiant look of anger on his face, Sasuke detected the
barest glimmer of fear.

“So...these are the stakes,” Sasuke said, gripping his weapon. “I am going to kill you. I am going to kill you until Plagg cannot save you; I will resign your useless body to dust beneath my feet and return to my rest. Your friend will likely be tortured for information and die in great pain. Your city will burn and your enemies will triumph; your kwami will be taken and used for this Hawkmoth’s perverted plan and the last, shreds of your conscious soul will wail in the cold underworld reserved for restless and hungry spirits, powerless to do anything about it.”

“Please...let me go,” Chat Noir begged, gripping Fang harder to stop his fingers from shaking. The cold, overwhelming malice that wafted off Sasuke was almost palpable; a sharp, metallic sensation that foretold his imminent and violent death. Every inch of him screamed to run; to escape from this cold-eyed predator and find somewhere to hide.

But he was out of places to run...and out of places to hide.

The blade rose in a wide arc as Chat Noir fell to one knee, seemingly ready to accept the death that came for him. And as Sasuke cleared the field in one mighty pounce, his last thought was of Kagami...and how he had completely, and utterly failed her.

4:45 - Paris

A chill passed through Kagami that had nothing to do with the biting air that surrounded her. A low, terrible sense of dread pitting in the deepest parts of her stomach as Mayura ran her through the streets, dodging and weaving through broken buildings and sidewalks split in half. The distant sound of gunfire barely registered in her ears as they ran.

“Where are we going?” Kagami asked.

“I...I don’t know,” Mayura said gait slowing as they ran past Adrien’s house, head tilting to one side. “Can we...can we crash in there?”

“Something tells me Gabriel Agreste will be a worse threat than Hawkmoth if we upset his perfectly maintained living room,” Kagami muttered.

“You have any better ideas?” Mayura shook his head, unable to shake the nagging, strange sensation that bringing Kagami inside that house was the right thing to do.
“At this point the sewers would be a better bet than staying on the streets,” Kagami said, glancing up as she spotted Master Crane’s figure hanging off the side of a lopsided black dragon as it crashed into a nearby building. “I’ll take skeletons over giant flying lizard monsters any day of the-”

A voluminous cloud of purple gas began pouring out of the sewer grate at Mayura’s feet, almost ensnaring them with long, skeletal hands as he leapt away just in time. Kagami slipped from his grip, stumbling and rolling on the ground as a pale, one-eyed figure in tattered purple robes materialized in front of them, stepping out of the smoke and leering down at them.

“Alright...this one’s yours,” Mayura said, flicking his fan out as a sea of vacant eyed, shambling skeletons made their way down the street towards them.

“You can have the rest, then,” Kagami said, tucking herself behind Mayura’s cape as much as she could as the floating, one-eyed lich raised its remaining hand.

“Now would be a good time to learn how to fly,” Kagami said, watching a crackling beam of energy coalesce around the lich’s fingertip.

"Hammett!" Mayura cried, summoning a knight that materialized in front of him just in time to be completely evaporated by the lich’s energy beam. Mayura took his chance, lunging at the lich and slicing at him with the sharp edge of his fan. A thin, translucent shield of energy materialized in front of the lich before the attack struck, knocking Mayura aside as he turned his attention to Kagami.

No! Mayura scrambled to his feet, diving at the monster's back with two quills drawn. He flung them forward, summoning his final two knights that the lich destroyed with another blast of green energy, shattering them into dust as Mayura flung himself in front of Kagami.

"Get out of here!" Kagami spat as another crackling beam of energy formed at the monster's fingertip. "He wants me alive; he doesn't care about you!"

Mayura dodged backwards, watching the beam carve a crater in the street where he stood a moment before. "Sorry...Ladybug's orders; can't exactly walk away from my post now, can I?"

"Ladybug isn't here!" Kagami protested, watching Mayura dance out of the way of another attack. "Don't be an idiot!"
"Can't...Ladybug's partner is always an idiot," Mayura said, throwing himself in front of Kagami as the lich turned his glowing green finger towards her. Mayura winced, tensing as his world went green and throwing his arms up to defend himself from the attack. He braced himself for the pain, shielding Kagami with as much of his body as he could...only the pain never came.

"You..." the lich rasped, frail voice betraying a hint of surprise. "Identify yourself."

Mayura cracked an eye open, watching the lich stare vacantly in open eyed shock as the deflected energy beam destroyed a nearby building. A long, black, glittering sword crackled with green energy, a familiar black glove wrapped around the hilt.

“I...I don’t believe it…” Nadja muttered, elbowing her cameraman as they stared out of a broken shop window. “Keep rolling!”

“Nadja, we lost you there, is everything okay?” A voice in Nadja’s ear said as the smoke cleared and the scene before them came into focus.

“...I don’t know,” Nadja said, clearing her throat. “Mayura and the victim seem to have been saved by a figure that looks like-"

5:00 - 30 mins outside Paris (Train)

“Alright, we’re coming to a stop!” Rena Rouge said, bouncing on the balls of her feet as the train rolled to a halt. Across the tracks, she could see the black Stigma vans rolling alongside the train to meet them. “Your dad’s men are coming through for us!”

“Foxy…” Queen Bee said, tugging at Rena Rouge’s arm and pointing at the TV screen everyone in the car seemed to be transfixed by. Rena’s stomach clenched, expecting to see another scene of grim horror or devastation.

“Is that...who I think it is?”

5:00- Airspace over the English Channel

"Ladybug...can you explain this?"
Ladybug glanced up as Annalise turned her tablet to show her a livestream of a familiar looking figure in black protecting Mayura and Kagami from the akuma.

Oh crap...

5:00 - Paris

“That...that isn’t possible!” Gamemaster’s protestations barely registered as Hawkmoth’s head swam with fear and frustration in equal measures. “Th-That’s cheating! You can’t deflect a Disintegrate spell with a sword! What kind of bogus houserules are you running, Hawkmoth?!”

“No…” Hawkmoth mumbled, shaking his head as he stared out the window at the scene on the street below. “No, no, no, no, no!”

“What do I do?”

“Send that Godzilla thing after him!” Hawkmoth spat, spittle flying from his mouth. “Send every monster you have after him! I don’t care what you have to do; crush him, destroy him! Bring me that Miraculous!”

The tarrasque stared at the battered, motionless figure of Carapace beneath him, head cocking to one side curiously as a voice buzzed in the back of its mind.

Get to the center of town, Gamemaster’s voice said. Destroy anything that gets in your way.

The tarrasque grumbled, turning and leaving Carapace lying in the crater its foot had left. The problem with being so big, the tarrasque reasoned, was that its toys tended to break much faster. It was a shame that the little green thing hadn’t survived; he would have been fun to play with later-

The tarrasque was halfway down the street when it felt a sharp tug halt it in its tracks. Grumbling, it tried to flick its tail free, thinking it had caught on a building or something, but after a moment of wriggling and flicking, it didn’t seem to be breaking free.

Disgruntled, it turned, squinting to see the very tip of its tail trapped between the chest and the arm of
the tiny green chewtoy as he sat up, breathing heavily as he struggled to keep the monster in place.

“Where...do you think... you’re going?!”

Master Crane wrenched her dagger out of the black dragon’s neck, watching it fall limply to the rooftop and dissolve into dust as she sensed a familiar presence somewhere nearby.

“Hm...bout damned time you showed up, boy,” Master Crane chuckled, wiping her blade on her leg as she collapsed on the edge of the roof, head resting against the balcony. “Leaving an old woman to do all the work by herself...downright uncivilized.”

Capt. Van der Meer fumbled for his communicator as his mercenaries tensed, looking to their captain for advice.

“A-All units,” Capt. Van der Meer stammered, staring at the hand-held television screen. “We have a confirmed sighting of Subject Jinx. This is not a drill; all units, converge on the first arrondissement and prepare to engage!”

The soft, simmering irritation in the back of Mayura’s mind erupted in an inferno of blind, all-consuming anger at the sight of a tall, black figure standing between him and the glowering lich, sword drawn and blade crackling with glittering green energy.

_Damnit...of course he decided to show up..._

Kagami’s mouth fell open as their savior turned with a warm, apologetic smile that seemed to be reserved exclusively for her.

“Hey,” Chat Noir said. “Sorry I’m late.”

5:00 - Paris

“Yes...we have confirmation,” Nadja said. “Chat Noir has arrived to challenge the akuma!”
I GUESS EVERY SUPERHERO NEEDS HIS THEME MUSIC

Out of curiosity, what's your favorite akuma?
How Do You Want to Do This?

Chapter Summary

Buckle up; this is a bigun

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

5:00 - Paris

“...I understand you’re not taking your pain medication.”

There honestly wasn’t much of Adrien that Nathalie recognized under the gauze and plaster casts that covered almost every inch of exposed skin.

“The doctors...seem to think it would help, given your...condition,” Natalie said, trying hard not to look at him. His hair was matted and tangled, still caked with blood in some spots. The one arm that worked had been handcuffed to the edge of the bed; a precaution to keep Adrien from hurting himself any further. His lip was held together with a row of crude, ugly stitches that his father would have despised if he was still alive to see them.

“I’ll...I’ll see about getting you some clean clothes from home,” Nathalie said as Adrien mutely stared straight ahead, his one working eye glaring into empty space as Nathalie spoke. “If you need any books, or...or anything to occupy yourself, I can-”

“Did you know?” Adrien asked, voice quiet but trembling with barely restrained fury that sent a chill running down Nathalie’s spine.

“Adrien...your father and I-”

“Did...you...know ?” Adrien repeated, turning his eye towards Nathalie.

“...I helped your father with everything,” Nathalie said quietly. “But...you have to understand...Adrien, he loved you more than anything...h-he was just trying to give you your family
back...he was trying to—"

“Thank you, Nathalie,” Adrien said, turning away. “You can go now…”

“Adrien...please, try to—"

Adrien's voice thrummed with a strange reverberating baritone as the shadows in the room seemed to stretch, snaking across the walls towards her in hostile and alien patterns that made Nathalie stumble as she hurried to leave the room. Adrien didn’t turn to watch her go, teeth grinding as he bit down on a scream that threatened to claw its way out of his throat.

5:00 - Paris (The Day Before)

Kagami’s mouth fell open as their savior turned with a warm, apologetic smile that seemed to be reserved exclusively for her.

“Hey,” Chat Noir said. “Sorry I’m late.”

At a complete loss for words, Kagami said the first thing that came to her mind. “You...unbelievable prick!"

“No need to thank—” Chat Noir blinked. “Wait, what?"

"Sorry I’m late?!" Kagami hissed. "Are you kidding me?! If you were any later I'd be mummy food by now!"

"I-I got here as fast as I could!" Chat Noir insisted. "Really, I-"

Kagami brushed past Mayura, tackling Chat Noir with a fierce hug.
“Where the *hell* have you been?!” Kagami all but sobbed in relief.

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4:45 - The Sanctuary of the Black Cat

The blade rose in a wide arc as Chat Noir fell to one knee, seemingly ready to accept the death that came for him. And as Sasuke cleared the field in one mighty pounce, his last thought was of Kagami...and how he had completely, and utterly failed her.

...and then he just thought of Kagami.

A gout of green flame erupted from Chat Noir's hand as Sasuke went in for the kill, startling him for the faintest hair of a second. Chat Noir sprang from his kneeling position, blade wreathed in a crackling green energy as he stepped past Sasuke with a quick slash.

Silence reigned again for a long, tense moment broken by Sasuke's cry of pain and surprise as he fell to one knee, clutching the wound in his chest as a dark sea of red spread from the cut. Sasuke's sword fell apart, clattering into two neat little pieces that landed on the flagstones at his feat. A breath of silence later and the sound of creaking, groaning wood signaled the fall of the wisteria tree that slowly toppled over, divided by a neat, perfectly smooth cut through its trunk.

“Damn...I was actually trying to kill you,” Sasuke chuckled, watching Chat Noir sheathe his new weapon. “Your hatred...your fang is...sharp.”

“The door,” Chat Noir said. Sasuke raised his trembling fingers, snapping them as a gate at the far side of the courtyard started to glow with an otherworldly light.

“The sword...is always sharpest in the moment you draw it from its sheath...” Sasuke said, falling forward as a shower of wisteria blossoms fell around him. “...and it draws power from your inner strength...your hatred.”

Sasuke’s eyes dimmed as Chat Noir stepped past him, making no motion to help Sasuke to his feet.

“My partner...my Ladybug and I made that together...” Sasuke muttered. "When...when she was gone...all I had left to fuel it was my anger...and as long as you keep yours burning...it will cut true for you as well...”
Chat Noir paused at the edge of the clearing. “...don’t flatter yourself. I don’t hate you at all.”

Sasuke lifted his head, staring at Chat Noir’s back as he looked up at the tumbling wisteria blossoms. “What?”

“When I cut you just now...I wasn’t even thinking about you,” Chat Noir said, examining the sword in his hand thoughtfully. “I was thinking about Kagami...and how I needed to protect her. Seems like that was all I needed...you just had the bad luck of being in my way.”

“I’m sorry that hatred was the only strength you could rely on,” Chat Noir stepped towards the gate, disappearing through the light. “But this power is for her sake...not yours.”

”Heh...cocky brat,” Sasuke chuckled, dissolving into ash as the scenic battleground blew away in the wind.

5:00 - Paris

“Long story,” Chat Noir said, glancing up at the floating lich in front of him. “This our akuma?”

“Funny; I was gonna ask you the same question,” Mayura said, unfurling his fan as the dull, pounding pain that lived in the back of his mind grew more insistent. In spite of the necromancer and his army of skeletons that surrounded him, his blood boiled at the mere sight of Chat Noir. It wasn’t Gamemaster that had turned on Marinette; it wasn’t Gamemaster that had made Marinette cry.

It was Chat Noir.

“Just one of his puppets,” Kagami said. “You’re looking for a robed man with a book; I’m pretty sure that’s the item you need to destroy.”

“Thanks for the assist, Tweety, I can take it from here,” Chat Noir said, shooting Mayura a sharp two-fingered salute and an infuriatingly smug smirk. “Go find your ex; tell her to get her spotted butt down here before-”

A quill narrowly missed Chat Noir's head as Mayura dove at him with a wild, reckless kick.
Carapace grunted, holding on to the tip of the tarrasque’s tail with all his strength. His arms felt like lead, his legs shook from the exertion of holding the monster in place, but still his grip held tight. If it got away, there was no telling just how much damage it would cause; how many lives would be carelessly trampled under its feet.

Not on his watch; not as long as he had the strength to stop it.

“Hey... freakshow!” Carapace spat. “You’re...going... nowhere!”

Carapace slowly climbed out of the crater the tarrasque had punched him through, slowly pulling the enormous tail hand over hand with strength he didn’t know he had. He pulled as the tarrasque dug its claws into the street, trying to struggle free even as Carapace’s muscles swelled with pulsing green power.

“So... Wayzz... help... me... out!” Carapace grunted, bracing his legs against the street as green light flowed from his bracelet. At first, he thought the forty foot tall monster was shrinking as his arms as the tail became easier to manage and it took less and less strength to keep the wriggling monstrosity in one place. Through the haze of pain and adrenaline, he didn’t realize what was happening until the crown of his head stood taller than the roof of the library.

The tarrasque turned around, eyes widening as he now stood eye-to-eye with a much, much larger Carapace grinning wickedly as he wrapped his arms around the tarrasque’s waist.

“So... Suplex city, bitch!” Carapace roared, wrenching the tarrasque up off the ground and back over his head into the river.

“What the hell ?!” Chat Noir spat, blocking Mayura’s frenzied kick as a tremor shook the ground. “You really wanna start a fight right now?! Do you not see the zombie wizard floating right in front of us?!”

“That freak is only here because of your pal!” Mayura said, sweeping at Chat Noir’s leg as he bounded over him. “You’re the only threat I care about right now!”
“Mayura, stop!” Kagami cried as Chat Noir threw his arm out in front of Kagami. “You two should be working together; Ladybug is lying to you!”

“Ladybug doesn’t lie!” Mayura spat, rushing Chat Noir again, feinting with a brace of quills and following up with a punch that managed to stagger Chat Noir a little. “Not to anyone and not to me!”

“Wow...how do you do that?” Chat Noir asked, blocking another punch with the scabbard of his sword.

“Do what; kick your ass?”

“Is it like a ventriloquism act or-”

“What the hell are you talking about?!”

“I’m just wondering how you manage to talk with Ladybug’s dick in your mouth all the time!” Chat Noir spat, blocking a kick on the sheath of his weapon. “What, you think because you used to play tonsil hockey, she wouldn’t lie to you?! She uses people! She used me for almost five years! And now she’s using you!?”

“Shut up!” Mayura roared as Chat Noir flipped him up over his shoulder, hurling Mayura into the crowd of skeletons that pressed in on all sides. The lich raised his hand, firing a piercing bolt of energy that Chat Noir only barely managed to avoid as the street erupted at his feet.

“Don’t talk like you know us!” Mayura said, charging through a line of skeletons and swiping at Chat Noir with the blade of his fan. “You’re just pissed because she trusts me more than she trusted you! Because I’m loyal! Because I don’t question her! Because I’m just better than you!”

“I’m pissed for a lot of reasons, junior,” Chat Noir said, kicking Mayura hard as he sailed over Kagami’s head, blocking another energy blast the lich aimed at her. “Your two-faced ex-girlfriend being one of them-”

“Don’t talk about her like that!” Mayura snarled, charging Chat Noir with a flurry of fan swipes that he only barely deflected.
“Don’t make me hurt you, idiot,” Chat Noir grunted, sweeping Mayura’s legs out from under him and sending him to the flagstones at his feet. Chat Noir pounced on Mayura before he could recover, pinning his shoulders to the ground with his knees. “You know what, this whole superpowered ex-thing is getting super old, anyway; I think you should leave it to the pros—”

Chat Noir gagged as he felt something close around his neck, yanking him backwards before he could relieve Mayura of his Miraculous. As he was dragged across the street, he saw a squad of black-clad Stigma operatives all leveling guns at him, one operating the steel lasso that dragged him down the street.

“Mayor Andre, we have Chat Noir in custody,” Capt. Van der Meer spoke into his mic. “Situation is under control!”

“You don’t have control of shit, cueball,” Chat Noir spat, slicing at the steel lasso with Fang and scrambling back to his feet as Mayura launched another attack. He dodged backwards, stumbling as a rubber slug fired from a shotgun collided with his shoulder. The suit protected him from damage, but the force of the bullets drove him back, breaking his focus long enough for Mayura to land a kick that sent Chat Noir tumbling down the street. A skeletal monster raised its mace to strike, but Chat Noir simply rolled away, catching it by the ankle and throwing it back at Mayura. The skeleton exploded into dust as Mayura charged, the razor tips of his fans catching on Fang’s scabbard as Chat Noir raised it to defend himself.

“Do you morons not see the akuma tearing this city apart?!” Chat Noir said, battering at Mayura with his sheathed weapon.

“An akuma you probably caused!” Mayura snarled, swiping at Chat Noir with frenzied fan attacks. “You think I’m stupid?!”

“You really don’t want the answer to that question!” Chat Noir said, stumbling as Mayura drove him into the wall of skeletons that closed in around them. His sword flashed from its scabbard, a green arc slicing through the bony horde before returning to its sheath with a sharp snap. Bones and broken weapons fell around them in a shower of crumbling dust, mingling with the snowfall as Chat Noir raised his hand to pluck an incoming projectile out of the air. The Stigma guards balked as Chat Noir opened his hand, letting the bullet fall to the ground with a clink.

"I am not getting paid enough for this," Capt. Van der Meer muttered, watching Chat Noir weave out of the way of another bullet. In a flash of black, he was before them, eyes glinting green as he thumbed his sword out of its scabbard. As they raised their guns to fire, the weapon flashed again, returning to its scabbard as the assault rifles in their hands fell apart, neatly severed in two.
"Take a powder," Chat Noir said, kicking Capt. Van der Meer through a portal that deposited him in a dumpster across the street before turning to face the remaining guards. "You guys wanna join him?"

The remaining guards looked at their broken weapons, dropping them as they raced to be the first to get as far away from Chat Noir as possible.

"Americans...only brave when they have a gun in their hands," Chat Noir scoffed, glaring at Mayura. "Look, if you really want Daddy to spank you that badly, I'll oblige; just let me get Kagami out of here before-"

Chat Noir glanced back at the spot where the lich and Kagami had stood a second before, only to see them completely gone. “Kagami?!”

“I would be more worried about yourself right now if I were you!” Mayura said, lunging at Chat Noir with a wild look in his eyes.

“We’re coming up on the city,” the Stigma driver called towards the back of the van. “Our units are engaging with Chat Noir as we speak-”

"Backup!" A panicked voice came from the radio. "We need backup!"

"Sounds like Chat Noir's engaging his foot up your asses," Queen Bee snorted.

“What about the victim?!" Rena Rouge demanded.

“Mayor Andre’s priorities are clear; we are to subdue Chat Noir at all costs,” the Stigma driver said. “You will assist us in capturing Chat Noir, then we will-”

“Oh, I’m sorry, time-out, were you just giving us an order ?!” Queen Been scoffed. “You?! Do you even have a name or are you just Stigma Goon #4324?”

“That isn’t-"
"I wasn't asking!" Queen Bee said, glancing at the blinking light coming from Rena Rouge's communicator. "You gonna get that?"

"You think it's Hawkmoth calling to surrender?" Rena Rouge said, flipping her communicator open to see Ladybug's panicked face.

“Hi!” Ladybug said. “I-I’m on my way back to Paris; we’re almost there—”

“Wait, back to Paris?!” Queen Bee said, leaning on Rena Rouge's shoulder. “Hawkmoth decided to run a D&D campaign and you were out of town?!?”

“That’s…not important right now,” Ladybug said. “I got called away for a…mission…Hawkmoth—”

“Wait…how did Hawkmoth know we’d all be out of town?” Rena Rouge said, narrowing her eyes. “You and Mayura are the only ones who know our identities, right?”

“…y-yes, of course!” Ladybug said a little too quickly. “Look, I’m coming in hot; we’ll regroup when we get in—”

“Wait…” Queen Bee said, glancing at Rena Rouge. “What’s our priority order here? Do we go off Chat Noir or the Akuma first?”

“Take the akuma down!” Ladybug snapped, panic creeping into her voice. “Chat Noir isn’t the threat right now; stop that akuma at all costs!”

Rena Rouge nodded, sharing an uneasy look with Queen Bee as she flicked her communicator shut. “Kind of a change of tune, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry, ladies, but we’re making a beeline for Chat Noir’s location,” the Stigma guard said. “Ladybug’s orders or not, we can’t…what in the hell?!”

The van came to a halt as the city skyline came into view. Rena Rouge and Queen Bee leaned
forward, squinting at a massive shape that looked strangely like-

“Ho...ly...shit…” Queen Bee murmured, watching a forty foot tall Carapace hoist a massive, squirming lizard creature up on to his shoulders. “I didn’t know he was that much of a...grower.”

“Is that...The Jade Colossus?!” Master He chuckled in disbelief, clapping like a schoolgirl as the tarrasque was hurled down to the ground with a monstrous crash. “I never thought I'd live to see it again! Oh, Quingfu, you need to live long enough to see how your pupil has surpassed you!”

For all its touted horror, a tarrasque was just a big lizard; a creature that relies on being bigger and stronger than anything else. The fact that another creature could be bigger or stronger than it was a reality this creature was simply incapable of imagining.

So when Carapace hoisted the tarrasque overhead, slamming it hard through an abandoned construction site, it was, to put it lightly, flummoxed.

The tarrasque snarled, scrambling to its feet as Carapace approached, twirling a wrecking ball like Ladybug’s yo-yo. Power coursed through him as the tarrasque lunged, getting a face full of metal ball for its trouble. The tarrasque’s horn splintered, breaking a nearby car in half as the wrecking ball came up, catching it under the chin and sending it tumbling backwards into the far side of the construction site. A snarl of confusion and pain echoed across the city as the tarrasque shakily stood up, blinking as Carapace kicked it hard in the stomach, grabbing it between its legs and hoisting it feet-side up in the center of the construction site.

"Gotch style, baby!" Carapace crowed, jumping in to the air and bringing the tarrasque back down to earth.

Piledrivers are, despite looking like a deathblow, usually safe when done by trained professional wrestlers who take the proper safety precautions. Carapace was not a trained professional wrestler and didn’t care much for the safety of the giant wriggling lizard he drove headfirst into the concrete, shattering its neck with nearly seven tons of its own bodyweight.

“Yes!” Rena Rouge crowed, causing the Stigma driver to wince in pain as a tremor rocked the earth. “Kick his ass, baby!”

“S-Sir, we have visual of Carapace fighting a large...lizard thing,” the Stigma driver said into a microphone. “We’re en route to assist.”

"N-Negative!" The panicked voice from the radio said. "Get over here and help us take Chat Noir
"in!"

"But-"

"Now, soldier!" The radio said before going completely silent.

"Uh...s-sorry, ladies," the driver said. "Looks like we're still going to fight Chat Noir."

"I'm sorry, what was your name again?" Queen Bee asked, sliding into the front seat.

"Uh...S-Stan?" The driver said.

"Stan," Queen Bee echoed with a smirk. "Can you be a doll and open your window?"

"Uh..." Stan rolled the window down as Queen Bee unbuckled his seat belt. "Y-Yeah, maybe some fresh air will do me some g-oooph!

Queen Bee's foot collided with the Stan's chest, kicking him out the driver's window and on to the grass outside. "Enjoy the fresh air!"

“We'll return it later” Rena Rouge said, sliding up into the passenger's seat as Queen Bee threw the car into drive. “I didn’t know you had your license!”

“My what now?” Queen Bee said, slamming her foot on the gas as they skidded down the road, leaving a spluttering Stigma guard in their wake.

The tarrasque crumbled into dust around Carapace’s feet as he felt himself shrink, head spinning as he fell to his knees, breathing hard as every muscle in his body ached. Grunting, he wobbled to one foot, steadying himself on his shield as he grit his teeth in pain.

“...get up, Carapace,” Carapace said, hauling himself to his feet as the sound of gunfire echoed throughout the streets. “Come on...get up...not done yet…”
Kagami opened her eyes, and was instantly greeted by the sight of a seven hundred foot drop to the broken streets below.

Head swimming, she fought the urge to wretch as she struggled against the tight iron chains that bound her wrists, spinning around as she glanced around the city for any sign of Chat Noir. The last thing she remembered was that one-eyed zombie wizard’s hand on her shoulder and a cloying, sickening sensation of fear as her consciousness slipped away from her. Now she appeared to be dangling off the edge of the Montparnasse building, wind whipping at her cheeks as the akuma hovered in front of her.

“You can’t imagine how pleased I am with this turn of events,” Gamemaster said, a wide, beaming grin stretching across his face as a small cadre of monsters amassed on the roof behind him. “A city in flames, an evil overlord with a stranglehold on an entire population and at the very last second...the hero arrives! Finally...a challenge worthy of my skill as a game designer!”

The purple mask of the akuma glimmered over his face, but Gamemaster seemed to pay it no heed as he waved his hands, summoning a giant floating crystal ball from thin air. It levitated above the Montparnasse, swirling with purple smoke for a moment before clearing, broadcasting an image of Gamemaster and Kagami for the whole city to see.

"Chat Noir,” Gamemaster said, voice amplified and booming over the ruined rooftops. “You have been a thorn in my lord Hawkmoth’s side for far too long.”

Mayura and Chat Noir paused, weapons raised as they both turned to look in the direction of the swirling crystal ball over Montparnasse building.

Chat Noir’s stomach plummeted as Gamemaster stepped to one side, revealing a familiar figure dangling precariously over the edge of the building.

Kagami...

Your feeble struggle against my master’s wishes has carried on long enough!

“Shut up!” Hawkmoth spat, squeezing his temples in abject horror as his akuma started bloody monologuing. “Shut up, shut up, shutupshutup shut up !”

Chris Lahiffe frowned up at the crystal ball, phone camera rolling as the people around him started muttering to themselves.
“Hawkmoth is against Chat Noir?”

“Ladybug said that they were working together…”

“Why is Hawkmoth attacking his own guy?”

“Theo, tell me you’re getting this!”

“Gonna get on the Ladyblog this time,” Chris muttered. “You’d think being the editor’s future brother in law would count for something but nooo…”

Unless you want your little friend to suffer the consequences of your insolence and insubordination, you will surrender your Miraculous to me immediately…

Ladybug could feel Annalise’s eyes narrow at her suspiciously as she watched the feed, quietly trying to sink into her seat as their airplane bounced on the runway.

“Ladybug…” Annalise said. “Do you have any explanation for this?”

You have fifteen minutes to comply, or your friend shall suffer a most tragic fate.

Rena Rouge leaned out the window, holding on for dear life as Queen Bee drove them closer and closer towards the city.

“Chloe...call me crazy...but I don’t think Chat Noir is working with Hawkmoth…”

I eagerly await your response…

The Stigma guards glanced uncertainty between Mayura and Chat as the orb hung motionless in mid air, switching to a timer that ominously started ticking down from fifteen minutes.

“See?!” Chat Noir spat, gesturing towards the giant floating image in the sky. “Did you not hear the
man?! Why would an *akuma* call me out and demand my Miraculous?! Why would someone who *clearly* aligned himself with Hawkmoth try and hurt my friend?!”

Mayura frowned up at the crystal ball, trying to make sense of what he had just seen. Hawkmoth was supposed to be working with Chat Noir...but if he sent someone to attack his friend-

*Marinette doesn’t lie.*

Of course, Marinette wouldn’t lie to him...but if she had been mistaken about-

*Marinette is never wrong.*

No...Marinette was never wrong; she was the smartest, most honest person in the world...but

*Marinette doesn’t lie; Marinette is never wrong.*

“Something’s...something’s not adding up…” Mayura grunted, clutching the side of his head. “Why would- *ngh!*”

Marinette doesn’t lie; Marinette is never wrong.

“Dude, my friend is in danger…” Chat Noir said, holding his hand up as the Stigma soldiers all trained their sidearms on him, glancing at their captain for a signal to fire. “It *sucks* that your friend lied to you; believe me, I know how you feel-”

“M...L-Ladybug doesn’t lie,” Mayura panted, eyes screwed shut as his fingers pressed against his temples.

“She lied to you!” Chat Noir spat, gesturing to the armed Stigma guards. “She lied to *everyone!* She's been doing nothing but *lie* her perky butt off for the last *three months!*”

Marinette doesn’t lie; Marinette is never wrong.
“N-No...she wouldn’t,” Mayura whimpered. “She…"

"Which one of us is Hawkmoth attacking," Chat Noir asked. "And which one of us is stepping up to fight him?!"

"I...I don't..." Mayura grunted. "Maybe...maybe you're-agh!"
“Shut up!” Mayura spat, fans flaring out as the guards at his sides raised their weapons. “This...this is some kind of trick! Y-You set this up to throw people off your trail; to turn this city against her! You really think I’m stupid enough to fall for that?! You really think that—”

A rustle of movement caught Chat Noir’s eye as a battered looking Carapace stumbled into the square, glancing between Mayura and Chat Noir uneasily.
“Am I interrupting something?” Carapace asked, shouldering his shield.

“Long time no see…” Chat Noir said, holding his hands up as Carapace limped towards them. “Listen...I need-”

“Don’t listen to him!” Mayura snapped. “This whole thing; all this destruction is just a ruse! He’s trying to make it look like Hawkmoth and him aren’t working together!”

“I know you don’t trust me...but the only thing that matters is making sure we stop this thing,” Chat Noir said, nodding towards Gamemaster’s position. “The only thing that matters is-”

“The only thing that matters is doing what Ladybug tells us to do!” Mayura spat, pointing at Carapace. “Don’t tell me you’re actually listening to this maniac?!”

“Honestly?” Carapace shrugged. “I don’t really know what to think-”

“Well your job isn't to think !” Mayura said. “Your job is to trust; trust and do what you’re told! And she told us to keep this city safe!”

“I am keeping the city safe! Did you not see me suplex a goddamned kaiju just now?!” Carapace spat, jabbing his finger at Mayura. “You were supposed to keep Kagami safe, and instead I find you dick-measuring with Nightwing over here!”

“Listen, I don’t care what happens to me!” Chat Noir pleaded. “Just...let me save my friend; please. If you want to settle this after Kagami is safe, we can...just let me get her out of danger.”

Carapace’s time spent with Chat Noir had been fleeting and halting over the years, but he had never seen Chat Noir look as scared as he did right now. His normally cocky, playful demeanor was gone, replaced with a singleminded fear that didn't seem to be fake.

“Our orders are to capture and detain Chat Noir at all costs,” Capt. Van der Meer said, raising his pistol. “Acceptable losses are something we have to-”
“Whoa, time the fuck out, Stormtrooper,” Carapace said, holding his hand up. “When it comes to civilians, zero loss is acceptable loss; that’s how we’ve always done things.”

“Mayor Andre-”

“I don’t give a fuck what Chloe’s daddy said,” Carapace said, glaring at Mayura. “The safety of our people comes ahead of anyone’s grudge match; we rescue Kagami, we stop this akuma, then we worry about whatever comes next! That’s what we’re doing!”

“That’s not what Ladybug wants!” Mayura spat. “Whose team are you on anyway??”

Carapace glanced at a wild-eyed Mayura, backed by a small contingent of gun-toting goons, and Chat Noir, hands raised and looking at him with a pleading expression.

“...Team Paris,” Carapace said, shield glowing with power as a large, geodesic dome popped over Mayura and the Stigma guards, sealing them in an impenetrable bubble.

“No!” Mayura snarled, slamming his fist against the dome as the Stigma guards started trying to find ways through the shield. “You fucking traitor! When Ladybug gets back, she’s gonna-”

“Man, shut the FUCK up about Ladybug!” Carapace snapped, shrinking the bubble to push his prisoners closer together. “Say Ladybug one more goddamned time and you boys are gonna get really cozy in there!”

“Thanks,” Chat Noir said, frowning as Carapace’s shield started to beep.

“You better scamper,” Carapace grunted, reinforcing the shield as Mayura banged his fist against it. “I don't think I can keep them here too long.”

Chat Noir nodded, shooting Carapace a grateful smile as he took off running down the street.

“Hey!” Carapace called after him. “I really hope you’re not working with Hawkmoth or I’m gonna look like a total asshole after this.”
“Don’t worry; you’re gonna look fine when all this is said and done,” Chat Noir said, shooting him a sharp salute as he charged down the streets towards the Montparnasse.

“Hope you’re right,” Carapace said, sitting down in front of the dome as Mayura and the guards just glared at him. “Might as well get comfy, boys; we got at least four minutes left.”

Carapace’s shield beeped again, the bubble flickering as Mayura hit it. “Huh…guess I used too much juice…”

“You know you’re **fucked**, right?” Mayura glowered. “Even if you get away, I **know** who you are.”

“And I know who **you** are,” Carapace said, watching the timer run down on his transformation. “Maybe not your name…but you’re a fucking **tool**, dude. A self-important…upjumped little tool who doesn’t deserve the power you’ve been given. And the **first** chance I get, I am **taking** that power away from you, whatever Ladybug has to say about it.”

Mayura’s lip curled into a smirk as the beeping on Carapace’s shield grew more insistent. “Funny…I was gonna say the same thing!”

A shimmer of light signaled the end of Carapace’s transformation. Mayura lunged forward blindly as the bubble dropped, reaching out to grab a hold of Carapace and-

Mayura heard the horn and managed to skid to a halt before crashing headlong into the side of a black van that blocked a detransforming Carapace from Stigma’s sight.

“Hey!” Mayura shouted, raising his fist to bang on the side of the van as the door slid open, his fist connecting with an open palm that effortlessly blocked his blow.

“…is there a problem?” Rena Rouge asked, tilting his arm to the side.

_________________________________________________________

A wall of shambling undead rose to meet Chat Noir as he tore down the streets towards the Montparnasse building, dodging broken gas-mains and shattered cars as he ran. The first wave of skeletal soldiers to rise against him fell as Fang flashed from its scabbard, reducing them to dust in one, fluid swipe. Fumbling to return his sword its resting place, Chat Noir kept running, ignoring jets of flames and more sinister things that shot out at him from darkened alleys.
The rogue warrior ran, dodging bursts of magical fire on his way to the sorcerer’s tower…

A strange, ethereal voice wafted over the streets as Chat Noir ran, seemingly coming from all directions at once as he got closer and closer to the tower. “What the hell…?”

He knew that any hesitation on his part would lead to his friend suffering a grisly death…

“Oh you gotta be shitting me with this,” Chat Noir muttered, vaulting over another skeleton as he approached the base of the tower. ”Do we really need the director's commentary?!”

As the brave hero approached the base of the tower-

“Yeah, I know, I’m doing it!”

-the smell of burning sulfur filled his nostrils. A searing, burning heat unlike any he ever experience erupted from the ground. Towering in front of him, blocking the entrance to the tower, a twenty foot tall pit fiend snarled at him, cracking a whip made of a thousand burning strands of metal forged from the anguish of all the prisoners of hell!

Chat Noir skidded to a halt, frowning at the empty plaza in front of the Montparnasse. “Uh...I do?”

Oh...sh*t. Hang on, I’m looking for the monster’s stats!

“Good luck with that champ,” Chat Noir said, charging through the entrance through the building unopposed.

Wait, wait, wait, that was gonna be an awesome fight!

“Pacifist run, baby!” Chat Noir chirped, charging through the empty lobby towards the elevator.

Seriously?! I spent a long time working on this encounter!
“Sorry, should have had your nerdbook open to the right page,” Chat Noir said, sliding into the elevator as the door opened and jamming the top floor button. "Have your toys ready for me to break next time."

Oh really? Well how about this?

Four swirling purple portals opened on the floor of the elevator around his feet, trapping him in the center of the elevator as four tall, imposing figures rose out of the ground. Each was clad in identical black armor adorned with jagged edges and each carried a similarly wicked looking battleaxe. Red eyes glared at Chat Noir as they turned, readying their weapons.

“Alright…” Chat Noir said, gripping the hilt of his sword as the black knights advanced. “Before we get started...does anyone want to get out?”

“Is there a problem?! Your boyfriend is the problem!”

“I would have thought the scary zombie wizard and the geekazoid on top of the Montparnasse was the problem,” Queen Bee sniffed, holding her hand up as Capt. Van der Meer started to edge around the side of the van. “That’s far enough, baldy; we're the only ones who get to see our partner without his suit on.”

“Miss Bourgeois, Carapace aided and abetted the escape of a fugitive of the law,” Capt. Van der Meer said as Mayura just pointed at him as if to say see? “Per your father’s orders-”

“I’m sorry, are you the cops?” Queen Bee asked, raising an eyebrow. “Are you the Paris police force? Do you have any legal authority to do anything? Or are you just heavily armed mall-cops my daddy called in as a publicity stunt?”

“Sorry, was I the only one who saw Carapace herding civilians to safety on live TV?” Rena Rouge said, eyes narrowing as Mayura bristled. “I didn’t see you taking care of anyone besides Kagami who you ditched the second Chat Noir showed up. Carapace has done nothing but protect the people of this city-”

“He also turned on us the second Chat Noir showed up!” Mayura spat. “He helped him get away!”
“Get away to stop the akuma and save the victim, which is what you should have been doing,” Rena Rouge said, crossing her arms. “That’s the priority.”

“Ladybug said-”

“Ladybug isn’t here,” Rena Rouge snapped, shooting a dark glare at a Stigma guard who tried to sneak around the side of the van. “And you haven’t even been Mayura for a whole season yet. Nadja’s hard-on for you doesn’t change the fact that you’re the junior hero here; you should have done what Carapace said and kept the victim safe!”

“A victim who’s probably in on this whole farce,” Mayura scoffed. “Ladybug doesn’t lie; Ladybug is never wrong! If she says that Chat Noir is what we’re supposed to worry about, then Chat Noir is the priority! Your boyfriend was out of line to-”

“You’re out of line!” Rena Rouge snapped, jabbing her finger at Mayura. “We’re not here to kick ass and fight for Ladybug’s affection; we’re here to protect the people of this city! And if Carapace thought that letting Chat Noir go was the best way to do that then-”

“Then maybe Carapace should be prepared to face the consequences of his decisions,” Mayura said, leaning in close enough to whisper. “Or maybe Nino should take responsibility for Carapace’s choices?”

Mayura thought threatening Rena Rouge’s loved ones was a wise strategic move until the fear in her eyes melted into cool, flinty anger. And then he knew that he had massively fucked up.

This was the scene Ladybug swung in to.

Rena Rouge had Mayura’s arm twisted painfully behind his back, knee pressing against his spine as he struggled to get off the ground. Queen Bee stood between Rena Rouge and the Stigma guards, holding the barrel of Capt. Van der Meer’s pistol against her forehead.

“Come ooooooooon, asshole, you were acting like such a big shit with that little peashooter just a second ago!” Queen Bee sneered, glaring up at the formerly composed security officer. “You want to shoot someone, shoot me, dick face! I dare you! See what happens, bitch! You got one shot and you better pray to your White Conservative American Jesus that you find some way to punch through my suit because I swear to Queer French Almighty God I will wear you like a fucking shoe if you fail, motherfucker!”
“Traitors!” Mayura grunted, squirming as Rena Rouge cranked his arm back behind his back. “Traitors! Sellouts! When Ladybug gets here, she’s going to—”

“Everybody stop! ” Ladybug cried, skidding to a halt as all eyes turned to her. Mayura wriggled out of Rena Rouge’s grip as she stood up, eyes narrowing as Ladybug jogged up, hands raised. “What’s going on here?! ”

“Oh that’s right; hide behind Mommy’s skirts,” Queen Bee sneered as Mayura stepped behind Ladybug. “Ladybug’s here, limp dick; what’s she gonna do, huh?”

“Chloe,” Rena Rouge said sternly before Ladybug could chastise her. To Ladybug’s surprise, Queen Bee shut up, shooting a sneer at Mayura as Ladybug and Rena Rouge stared each other down.

“You want to explain to me why my partners are brawling in the streets while the city is under attack?! ” Ladybug demanded.

“You want to explain to me why your boy here thought it was a good idea to ditch a victim in trouble to have a dick-measuring contest—”

“One he came up short in,” Queen Bee chimed in.

“-with Chat Noir?” Rena Rouge said, crossing her arms.

“I had a chance to take out Chat Noir,” Mayura said, bristling as Queen Bee scoffed audibly. “We had him under control, but Carapace—”

“Let Chat go to help the civilian,” Rena Rouge said, raising an eyebrow. “He seemed very invested in stopping the akuma. Kinda odd for someone in league with Hawkmoth, don’t you think?”

“It’s a lie,” Mayura said, turning to Ladybug. “Tell them!”

Ladybug chewed her lip, refusing to give herself the luxury of looking away from Rena’s piercing
gaze. “...what matters now is that we have a chance to put an end to this.”

“An end to what ?!” Rena Rouge demanded. “We have a city in flames and a nerd summoning monsters all over town! We need to take this thing out -”

“We need to capitalize on this mess and take out Chat Noir,” Mayura spat.

“Enough!” Ladybug snapped, taking a deep breath. “Look...this is out of control...and I should have been here to stop it.”

“No shit!” Rena Rouge snapped, gesturing to the devastation behind her. “You have to have known this was going to happen; what were you thinking leaving Paris at a time like this!!”

“Hey, Ladybug has been on call every day for the last four years!” Mayura snapped. "You've a part-timer but Ladybug hasn’t left-”

“Mayura!” Ladybug snapped, shooting him a warning look before turning back to Rena Rouge. “You have questions...and I promise, I’ll answer all of them. But we need to save Kagami and put this akuma down before it destroys the city. I will...I’ll explain everything later-”

“You’ll explain everything now !” Rena Rouge said, crossing her arms. “Why don’t you start with why Chat Noir’s friend was targeted by Hawkmoth?! And how he knew we’d all be out of town?! And-”

“And who gave you the right to question Ladybug!” Mayura growled, jabbing a finger in Rena Rouge’s face. “You’re nobody! She could get another Rena Rouge just like you in a heartbeat if you want to keep running your-”

“Mayura, shut up!” Ladybug snapped. Mayura stepped back, looking for all the world like a kicked puppy as he stepped back with a muttered apology. Queen Bee had stepped in front of Rena, fingers clenched around her top as Rena Rouge stared at Ladybug like she had seen her for the first time.

“Please…” Ladybug said, raising her fist. “I need you to trust me...just one more time.”
Rena Rouge glanced down at Ladybug’s fist for a long moment.

“Rena…” Ladybug pleaded softly, arm trembling as she stretched her fist out. “Please…”

Rena Rouge just shook her head, slowly walking backwards towards the van as an identical Rena Rouge loaded Carapace into the back of the van. Rena Rouge kept backing up, eyes watery as she just kept shaking her head until she hopped into the back of the van with the clone.

“Excuse me,” Capt. Van der Meer said, grabbing Queen Bee by the arm. “That van is Stigma property; you need to-”

A crack accompanied the heel of Queen Bee’s boot snapping up and colliding with Capt. Van der Meer’s nose, sending the hardened former Marine toppling back with a whimper of pain.

"Bill me later," Queen Bee snarled in English, sliding into the driver's seat with a stony glare in Ladybug's direction as she fired up the van.

“...it’s okay,” Ladybug muttered to herself as she watched the van drive away. “It’s fine...they’re just gonna drop Carapace off and then...and then they’ll be back…they'll be back…”

The sound of a distant explosion startled her as a gout of green fire erupted out of the side of the Montparnasse. Mayura steadied his hand on her shoulder, squeezing it gently. “I’m here...and I’m never going away.”

Ladybug looked up at Mayura with a pained expression. “Luka…” she said quietly. “About...about what the akuma said-”

Mayura surprised her by placing a finger on her lips, stunning her with a soft smile that belied the fierce, almost manic look of awe and devotion in his eyes. “You don’t have to explain anything...you never have to explain anything to me.”

Ladybug was surprised how empty such a declaration of a devotion felt; how much blind, unconditional love could feel like such a slap in the face. He was ready to wordlessly follow her down whatever path she led him down; even after her friends and partners had all deserted her, Mayura remained.
Was that a sign he was right? Or just that the ones who knew better had all turned their backs on her? But even if she was wrong...was she even capable of turning back now?

“We can fix this…” Ladybug said, nodding to herself as she turned to face the battle raging in the center of the city. “I can fix this...I can still fix this…”

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Ding!

The final hell-knight fell as the elevator reached the top floor. The hero, panting and out of breath, took a moment to sheathe his sword and-

“I know, asshole!” Chat Noir spat, holding his side as he kicked the crumbling body of the last black armored warrior. “God, you don’t have to narrate every single detail as I do it!”

-the hero screamed to the sky like a deranged lunatic. His callous disregard for the Gamemaster’s designs had clearly damaged his brain. Perhaps if he had engaged in the pit fiend battle like he was intended to-

“Oh fuck you!”

No, fuck you!

“Fuck you!”

Fuck you!

“Fuck-” Chat Noir kicked the door to the roof open. “-you?”

The scene that greeted Chat Noir was not the most encouraging one. A giant, rotting black dragon leered at him with one working eye, a thick, purple mist billowing from its mouth. Another dozen hell-knights stood arranged around the withered figure of the lich who pointed a menacing figure at him as he stepped on to the roof. Gamemaster held a thick, black chain in one hand with Kagami kicking and struggling at the end of it as he leered down at Chat Noir.
“No... fuck you,” Gamemaster cackled, purple electricity dancing across his fingertips. "The hero arrives to find the forces of hell arranged against him! His beloved is helpless in the clutches of the dark sorcerer and a vast army of the restless dead stand against him! All hope of rescue or help is out of his reach; the hero stands alone! What will he do? How will he prevail?! How... do you want... to do this?!"

Chat Noir grit his teeth, glaring up at Gamemaster’s numerous underlings as he tried to figure out a way to slay half-a-dozen monsters without Kagami getting caught in the crossfire. Ironically, he found himself wishing that Ladybug would give him one more half-baked, insane plan to run with. She could have probably made the akuma release Kagami by insulting his storytelling or-

...oh.

Chat Noir gave Gamemaster his very best disappointed look. “Wow... honestly, I expected better of your campaign.”

"I-; wait, what?” Gamemaster said.

“... really?” Chat Noir said, gesturing at Kagami dangling at the end of his chain. “You’re... really gonna do the damsel in distress thing?”

“Well... I wouldn’t call it a ‘damsel in distress’ situation,” Gamemaster said, rubbing the back of his neck as the lich raised a withered eyebrow at him. “I just-”

“You just... specifically targeted a woman for me to come running in with my giant dick-sword in to save,” Chat Noir clucked, shaking his head as Kagami glanced between her captor and her friend. “That’s, uh... kinda backwards, don’t you think?”

“N-Now hang on!” Gamemaster said, raising a hand. “Are you suggesting that I’m-”

“All this talk of me being the hero, but did it ever occur to you that she might be a more competent swordfighter than I am?” Chat Noir said, gesturing to Kagami with his sheath. “I mean, let’s be real, I’m not bad, but the only reason I’m here is because I have every Genji-main’s wet dream; Kagami is an Olympic level fencer, but did you give her any chance to show off her talent?”
“I-”

“Noooo, we gotta kidnap the girls so the boys have something to fight over,” Chat huffed. “I don’t know dude, it feels kinda...iffy, don’t you think?”

“Hey, I don’t appreciate the insinuation!” Gamemaster snapped as the hell-knights put their weapons down, leaning on the hilts as they waited for orders. “I’ll have you know that half of my gaming group are girls and-”

“-do you also sideline their characters so the bro-league can bust in and save them?” Chat Noir asked.

“I-I admit, I do feel rather sidelined,” Kagami butted in. “I don’t feel like I’ve been giving much of a role in your story beyond acting as a proverbial trophy to fight over. Chat Noir has been given so many interesting encounters and I’ve been sitting up here like a worm on the end of the hook. I’m surprised you didn’t put me in some humiliating gold bikini.”

"Not that you wouldn't look amazing if he did," Chat Noir said with a wink as the lich suppressed a gag.

“I-I would never do something like that!” Gamemaster spluttered as the dragon-lich let out an aggravated sigh. “A-And you were totally going to get your chance to shine!”

“When, pray tell?” Kagami asked, wriggling a little in her bonds. “Before or after Chat Noir stomps a mudhole in you and breaks that book that contains your akuma.”

“I mean, it’s your story,” Chat Noir said, holding his hands up as his eyes fell on the book. “Do what you want...you just might want to examine your preconceived biases or-”

“Alright look!” Gamemaster snapped his fingers, shattering the chains and dropping Kagami back on the roof. "The hero’s trusty friend frees herself from captivity, springing to her feet as she-oof!”

There were times in which Kagami really impressed Chat Noir. The speed with which her elbow lashed out and struck the akuma in the stomach was incredible. Gamemaster teetered back, book flying out of his hands as he tumbled over the edge of the building, grabbing blindly for purchase and closing around the back of Kagami’s shirt. She grabbed the book, whipping it at Chat Noir as
they teetered backwards and out of sight.

It was truly unfortunate that Gamemaster didn’t get to see what happened next.

Chat Noir started running towards the edge of the roof. A hell-knight charged, swinging a claymore at his head. Chat Noir ducked, spear lashing out and skewering the knight through the helmet.

The zombie dragon lunged, mouth open and teeth dripping with spit as Chat Noir fired a gout of green flame straight down its throat, igniting the billowing cloud of gas it was about to blow.

Chat Noir vanished into a portal, blinking through the ensuing explosion as he kept running. The lich barred his path to the edge of the roof, raising a cruel finger as green energy gathered at its fingertips. The beam fired as Chat Noir ducked, fingers crackling with black energy.

“Cataclysm!” Chat Noir dragged his hand along the roof, sending showers of stone flying off the roof as he charged. The lich raised a hand, conjuring a purple shield as Chat Noir struck, ripping through the shield and tearing through the lich’s body in one fell swoop.

He didn’t stop to see it dissolve into ash as he dove off the edge of the roof.

Ladybug watched the akuma and Kagami pitch over the edge, heart thudding in her chest as she raced across the city. A few seconds later (following a series of explosions that shattered the rooftop) a tiny, pitch-black pinprick dove after them, green blade lashing out and cleaving something in half as he chased the plummeting victims. A flutter of black butterflies flew off the akuma as he detransformed, flailing wildly as Kagami reached out for Chat Noir’s hand.

A black hole opened behind Mercer, sucking him in and spitting him out just above the river. He skipped like a stone a few times, falling into the water in front of a small squad of firefighters who dove in after him. Ladybug swung over the streets as Chat Noir caught up with Kagami, holding her close to his body as he pivoted, landing on his back and protecting her from the force of the fall.

Ladybug and Mayura landed as Chat Noir and Kagami rolled to a stop, Chat Noir cradling a clearly terrified Kagami close to his chest. Ladybug’s hand caught Mayura’s elbow before he could descend on them, watching Chat Noir mutter something to Kagami as his hand soothingly ran through her hair. His soft, caring expression hardened as he saw Ladybug standing there, tensing and glaring at her with more malice and accusation than she thought possible.
A fluttering black akuma butterfly floated down the street. Ladybug fumbled for her compact, but Chat Noir’s hand lashed out, snaring the akuma between his fingertips as he slowly stood up. He examined the wriggling butterfly between his fingers, turning it over as he seemed to be looking for something.

“**Cataclysm.**”

Hawkmoth screamed.

White, hot, searing pain arced through every inch of his being as it felt as though every molecule of his being was being split atom by atom until agony was the only thing his anguished mind could process.

A few seconds, or an eternity later, the pain abruptly stopped, and Hawkmoth collapsed to the floor of his sanctuary, curling in on himself and quietly sobbing in the cold, emptiness of his lair.

“Having a bad day Gabriel?”

Hawkmoth weakly looked up to see a blank, faceless reflective helmet mirroring his own anguished expression back at him.

Ladybug flinched as Chat Noir’s hand erupted in black energy, the Cataclysm arcing across the butterfly and enveloping it in shadows for a moment before the it faded. When his palm opened, a bright, purified purple butterfly flapped its wings hesitantly for a moment, fluttering off Chat Noir’s finger as it took off into the sky.

She wasn’t aware that her mouth was hanging open until one look from Chat Noir snapped it shut as he disappeared through a swirling black portal, leaving the small crowd murmuring to themselves and Kagami staring blankly up at the akuma as it departed.

Professionalism won out over her shock as she fumbled for her yo-yo. “Miraculous... **Miraculous Ladybug!**”

A stream of pink light flowed from her compact, washing over the city and mending the broken streets and burning buildings the akuma left in its wake. It took a few seconds for the damage that had been done to Paris to be completely undone... but the damage done to Kagami didn’t seem to have been fixed at all.
Ladybug tentatively approached Kagami, holding out a hand. “Here...let me help you-”

Kagami jerked back, snapping out of her daze. “Don’t touch me!”

Ladybug balked a little, shooting a nervous glance at the small crowd of people that surrounded them. “You’re in shock...we should get you to the hospital.”

The sound of Kagami’s palm colliding with the side of Ladybug’s face reverberated across the street, followed by a shocked gasp from the crowd. Ladybug staggered back, more shocked than actually harmed as Kagami slowly pushed herself to her feet, refusing to drop the baleful look of contempt she leveled at Ladybug.

“This is your fault,” Kagami hissed. “Your fault.”

Kagami stumbled back a few steps as Adrien jogged up behind her, pushing the crowd out of the way to support her as she clung wobbily to his coat.

“Come on...” Adrien said, steering her away. “We should get you someplace safe—”

“Hang on,” Mayura said, holding his arm out. “We need to see if that akuma told her anything useful.”

“Later...” Kagami said, looking vaguely ill. “I’m not...I need a moment...”

“We really should get a statement,” Ladybug said, shaking off the blow and stepping forward. “It won’t take long, if you could just-”

“God damnit!” Adrien snapped, the force of his voice shocking Ladybug into taking a few steps back. “Doesn’t no mean anything to you?!”

"I...I was just-"
"You act like you own this city!" Adrien snarled, advancing on Ladybug with a look she had never seen him wear before. "Like everybody has to do everything you tell them; like you’re the queen of fucking Paris or—"

Mayura’s temper roared and before he could stop himself, he had stepped forward, grabbing Adrien by the scruff of his shirt and hauling him up a few inches off the ground. “Enough.”

“Mayura!” Ladybug cried, rushing forward and tugging at Mayura’s grasp. “Let him go!”

“Don’t... ever speak to Ladybug like that again,” Mayura seethed, shaking Adrien a little.

Adrien’s infuriatingly bitter glare refused to flicker, even under the force of Mayura’s anger. “Or... what, asshole?”

“Leave him alone!” Ladybug said, pushing hard on Mayura’s chest until his grip broke. Mayura looked murderous, and despite facing up to a superhero, Adrien looked ready to take Mayura’s head off. She had never seen his soft, gentle features contort like that; like the only thing stopping him from slugging Mayura was the fact that she was in the way...

“Stay away from me,” Kagami said as Adrien guided her down the street, sparing one last glare as they rounded the corner.

Ladybug watched them go, rooted to the spot by fear and confusion as everyone slowly turned towards her. She could feel their suspicion burning holes into the back of her head, the dozens of cell phone cameras all trained on her. People hadn’t just seen that little outburst; people hadn’t just seen Chat Noir braving an army of monsters to stop an akuma.

They had recorded it.

“Ladybug!” Ladybug’s stomach plummeted as Nadja Chamack elbowed her way through the crowd with her camera-man in tow. “Ladybug, would you like to make a statement about the akuma attack?”

“Hey, come on, no interviews,” Mayura said, holding his hand up in front of the camera lens as Ladybug she tried not to melt into a puddle of panic in the middle of the street.
“Would you care to explain why the akuma attacked Chat Noir?” Nadja asked, shoving the microphone in Ladybug’s face as she instinctively took a step back.

“I...Chat Noir, uh...h-he must have…” The lie dried up in her throat as the bright light of the camera shone in her eyes.

“Hey, what did I just say?!” Mayura snapped, blocking Ladybug with his cape. “No interviews!”

“But why did Chat Noir fight the akuma alone?” Nadja pressed, slipping around Mayura’s cape as Ladybug’s breath hitched in her chest in short, painful gasps. “This was the first akuma you haven’t personally had a hand in defeating; where were you when this was-”

In one quick move, Mayura knocked the camera and the microphone to the ground, grabbed Nadja and Theo by the scruff of their shirts, and hauled them up off the ground. “What’s the matter with you?! Are you on his side?! Do you want to make Ladybug look bad?! Why don’t you just-”

Mayura found his arms bound to his sides as Ladybug’s yo-yo wrapped around his mid-section, yanking him back as Nadja and Theo dropped to the ground.

“Ladybug, what-” Mayura grunted as Ladybug hoisted him up over her shoulder, shooting an apologetic look at Nadja as she tore down the street, ignoring the cries of confusion and flashing camera lenses as she ran.

"I can come back if this is a bad time for you."

Gabriel shot his benefactor a dark look as the masked man seemed to smirk at him. "I am fine."

"Oh, we both know that's not true," the figure chuckled. "You endured the power of the Black Cat...I'm surprised you're even standing right now. I am just a little hurt that you felt like you couldn't be honest with me; if you had told me you and Ladybug were working together-"

"I failed to see the relevance," Gabriel said, watching the masked figure pace along the edge of the room, examining the pictures and baubles on his shelves. "You've never expressed interest in how I run my affairs until now."
"Maybe not...but I don't appreciate being lied to," the figure said, turning their featureless black mask to stare at Gabriel. "Makes me wonder if there's...anything else you're keeping from me."

"Of course there is," Gabriel said, leaning against the desk. "But I'm upholding my end of the bargain...so it's not your concern."

The figure seemed to regard him for a moment, tilting his head back and forth as though considering what Gabriel had said.

"Well, be unfriendly if you want," the figure said with a shrug. "I just came to see if you needed any assistance with our project. I see you've put one of them into production."

"The results are...unstable," Gabriel said, rubbing his neck. "Normal akuma have their emotions amplified, but Mayura...it's as though he's a creature bound by a singular urge; a being of pure id sworn to obey his driving impulse. I'm not sure if they're entirely...reliable."

"Depends on what you need to rely on them to do," the figure said. "In any case, you haven't even unleashed his true potential, have you?"

Gabriel said nothing, jaw tightening as the figure laughed at him. "Oh, you're not sure if you can control him, are you?"

"We are dealing with an immense amount of power," Gabriel bristled. "Exercising a little caution could save us a lot of trouble down the line."

"As you say, Gabriel," the figure chuckled, turning to leave. "But has anyone ever told you you're just a teensy bit too controlling?"

Gabriel said nothing, snarling at his benefactor's back as they left.

“Long day, Master?”
Master He sighed, rubbing the back of her neck as she stepped through the elevator doors to see her apprentices waiting for her.

“Getting far too old for this, Lan,” Master He muttered, shucking her coat and passing it to Jun as they shared an uneasy look. “What is it? Is Quingfu alright?”

“Yes, he is taking to the new treatment very well,” Jun coughed, scratching the back of her neck. “It’s just…”

“Kagami got home safe, yes?” Master He said.

“She did, but…” Lan opened the door to Master Fu’s room. “You have a guest, Master.”

Master He stepped through the door to see a young woman in an orange jacket who turned around as the door opened.

“Nice to see you again,” the woman said, holding her hand out as Trixx peeked their head out from the corner of her jacket. “Alya Cesaire. Do you make house calls?”

“Oof!” Mayura dropped to the roof as Ladybug let him down, spooling her yo-yo back up as he scrambled to his feet. “You should have let me teach them a lesson…”

“Mayura-”

“They had no right talking to you like that!” Mayura spat. “Accusing you like you did something wrong!”

“Mayura.”

“And that Theo creep, wasn’t he like twenty when he was creeping on you as a fourteen year old?!” Mayura scoffed. “Total sleazeball; not like his boss is too much better–”

“Luka,” Ladybug said, eyes narrowing at Mayura. “What...is wrong with you?!”
“What’s wrong with *me*?!” Mayura said. “What’s wrong with Rena Rouge ditching you like she did?! What’s wrong with Carapace stopping me from going after Chat Noir?! We could have stopped him if your sidekicks-”

“Rena Rouge didn’t let a civilian get captured!” Ladybug said, poking Mayura hard in the chest. “Carapace didn’t assault three civilians in three minutes!”

“They were questioning you!”

“So what?!” Ladybug spat. “God, Luka, what’s wrong with you?! This isn’t *like* you; you don’t haul off and start choking people because they disagreed with me!”

“Well maybe I should have!” Mayura said, grabbing Ladybug by the shoulders. “All those times you cried on my shoulder because of something Chloe did or a fight you had with Alya...you stick up for everyone else, but who sticks up for you?! Alya-”

“Alya is my friend!” Ladybug spat. “She’s not my sidekick, she’s not my lackey; she’s my friend! And sometimes friends get into fights or disagree with each other. I don’t *need* people in my life who blindly kiss my ass or worship the ground I walk on! I need a partner, not a protector! And if all you’re going to do is snap at anyone who looks at me funny, then maybe I can’t trust you as much as I thought I could!”

“No!” Mayura cried, falling to his knees and weakly clutching at Ladybug’s legs. “No, no, no, please, please don’t send me away! I-I’ll be good! I’ll be good, j-just please let me stay by your side! Don’t...don’t...”

To see such a calm, collected, cool-headed person reduced to a bitter, blubbering mess was equal parts unnerving and heartbreaking. Somehow, in the chaos of trying to capture Chat Noir and launch her fashion career, she had neglected to really check in on Mayura. She just assumed he was...fine. Luka was always...fine, right?

“Hey...” Ladybug said, quietly sinking to her knees and placing her hands on Mayura’s shoulder. “Come on...talk to me. What’s wrong?”

“I...I don’t know,” Mayura said, pressing his fingers into his temples. “I-I don’t really feel like myself lately...I-I think it’s just stress or-”
“It’s okay,” Ladybug said, running her hands through his hair. “I’m sorry for putting you in this position-”

“Don’t apologize.”

“I promise …this is gonna be over soon enough,” Ladybug said, slowly helping Mayura back to his feet. “You should go home; spend some time with your family. Maybe take a bath.”

“What are you gonna do?” Mayura asked, watching Ladybug glance over her shoulder.

“I gotta go have a talk with someone…”

A small pile of used tissues lay crumpled around the couch as Chat Noir’s fingers ran through Kagami’s hair. The silence was only broken by muffled sniffling and Kagami stared blankly into space in front of her.

“Why can’t he just…leave me alone?” Kagami sniffed. “Why can’t he just…leave me alone?”

Chat Noir said nothing, only glaring out the window of Kagami’s house as he privately swore that he was going to beat the ever-living hell out of Hawkmoth the second he got his hands on him.

Gabriel’s head bounced against the wall as Ladybug hoisted him off his feet, slamming him against the far-wall of his office.

“What did I say?!?” Ladybug hissed. “What did I fucking say?!”

Gabriel said nothing, eyes glazed over and unfocused even as Ladybug threw him to the ground. Something had taken its toll on him; his sickly complexion was a far sight from the cackling madman she expected to find.

“I…miscalculated,” Gabriel muttered, readjusting his glasses. “I-I expected to have this solved before your return, but…seems that Chat Noir is more dangerous than we thought.”
“No shit,” Ladybug spat, folding her arms. “And apparently he has a magic super sword! So now we have that to deal with.”

“I will not make that mistake a second time-”

“No shit you won’t!” Ladybug spat, grabbing the remote off the desk and turning on the television on the wall to show footage of Chat Noir battling Gamemaster’s minions. “Because guess what, genius?! Now the whole city knows that Chat Noir is fighting Hawkmoth! The lie our operation has been built on since the beginning is out in the open! My teammates know something is fishy and one of them dropped everything and turned on Mayura!”

“It isn’t my fault that your friend has anger management issues,” Gabriel said, wiping his mouth as Ladybug glared down at him. “You should have picked someone more...even tempered.”

“I picked the most even tempered human being on the planet!” Ladybug said, folding her arms. “How long?”

Gabriel said nothing, even as Ladybug dragged him back to his feet by his shirt collar. “How...long...have you known?”

“...a while,” Gabriel said.

“And how did you find out?” Ladybug demanded.

“Who else could it have been?” Gabriel said, locking eyes with Ladybug. “Only someone who...really, truly loves Adrien like I do-”

“Don’t compare us!” Ladybug spat, fear edging into her voice as she shook Gabriel. “I am nothing like you!”

“No...you are better than me,” Gabriel said, clutching at Ladybug’s fingers. “Better than I’ve ever been...more resourceful, more creative-”

“So that whole internship...” Ladybug’s mouth twisted “The fashion show...that was all a lie to-”
“No!” Gabriel said, prying Ladybug’s fingers off his shirt. “I would never sully my company by showing favor to someone who hasn’t earned it. You...you are a singularly gifted designer, Marinette-”

“Don’t call me that!”

“You are talented and brilliant and any accolades I afforded you are ones you have more than earned!” Gabriel said, gripping Ladybug by the shoulders. “And you’re strong and clever and you’re willing to do whatever it takes to protect people you love...and Adrien needs protection!”

“Stop it!” Ladybug smacked Gabriel’s hands off her shoulders.

“Because he’s kind,” Gabriel said, voice taking on a manic edge. “And he’s sweet and he’s compassionate and he’s caring and he’s weak. Weak and soft and helpless without someone to protect him! You know what the world does to people like that; people without the will to chart their own destiny!”

“Yeah?” Ladybug asked. “And who’s fault is that? If he’s as weak as you say he is...it’s because you never taught him how to be strong.”

Gabriel’s expression hardened as he stood up, lips pressing into a thin line as the desperate, grieving father became Hawkmoth without even transforming. “That is hardly the point...the only question is...does this change anything?”

“Of course it does,” Ladybug hissed. “You think we can just go back to being partners after this?!”

“We were never partners,” Gabriel said. “Just two people with a common purpose...I don’t see how that’s changed, do you? Our...arrangement is just a little more even-keeled now.”

Ladybug’s fists clenched at her sides as Gabriel straightened his tie. “We are...so close to achieving everything we want; on the cusp of putting this behind us once and for all. All you have to do is help me finish the job.”

“By kidnapping someone,” Ladybug said. “Someone who your akuma tormented for a whole day.
“We are not going to harm her,” Gabriel said, an icy chill creeping into his voice. “We are just going to get a simple answer out of her; one night and we can go on with our lives all the happier for it. You will be hailed as the savior of Paris; you will have everything you have worked your entire life for and I...I will quietly retire with my wife. We will make awkward small talk at Christmas but, other than that...you don’t have to deal with me.”

Ladybug’s lips pursed in a thin line, eyes scanning his suit for any sign of the Butterfly Miraculous. “And if I refuse?”

“Well...let’s not entertain such an unpleasant thought, Mme. Dupain-Cheng,” Gabriel said, folding his hands behind his back. “I wouldn’t want our working relationship to dissolve at such a critical stage...understand?”

Ladybug’s head tilted to one side. “Yeah...I understand you perfectly.”

“Good,” Gabriel said with a tight smile. “If there aren’t any objections...we should end this tonight.”

“I agree,” Ladybug said tightly. “So...if there’s nothing else-”

“I will await news of your success, Marinette,” Gabriel said, sitting down at his desk and turning his attention to his laptop. “Now...I have to review these press releases. London show was...quite a hit, it seems. My newest designer seems to have turned quite a few heads...”

The chilling ease with which Gabriel Agreste could go from talking about acts of terrorism to talking about business was almost enough to make Ladybug reach across the desk and throttle him; just to see him have a human reaction for once. Stepping out into the night, Ladybug latched on to a building, swinging across the newly restored city towards her house.

She made it almost a kilometer before she broke down.

Tumbling to the roof, she took three steps before de-transforming, hands lacing behind her head as she struggled to regain control of her breathing. Snow tumbled in great pillowy sheets, piling on her bare arms as she took three deep, heaving breaths...and screamed.
A raw, wavering howl of despair and defeat echoed throughout the unusually still and quiet city. Her hands tore at her hair as she sank into the cold snowy banks that piled up on the rooftop, oblivious to the freezing slush that bit into her ankles as curled in on herself, struggling to breathe as the world as she knew it tumbled around her.

You fucked up, her brain told her as she bit her lip so hard she tasted copper. You fucked up you fucked up you fucked up you fucked up you fucked up you fucked-

“Marinette,” Tikki’s voice whispered in her ear. “Marinette, breathe...you need to breathe.”

“I fucked up…” Marinette sobbed. “Oh god...oh god, he knows everything...he knows everything...Tikki-”

“Shh,” Tikki whispered, running her hand down her cheek. “Breathe, Marinette; just breathe.”

In spite of the all consuming urge to scream until her throat tore, Marinette stuck her head between her legs, taking deep, halting breaths that were interrupted by a stray hiccup every few seconds. The cold started to sink through her flimsy gown, but her desire to be warm was far outweighed by the desire to not be alone, the desire to just not be Ladybug.


“...you know the answer to that, Marinette,” Tikki said softly.

“He didn’t have his Miraculous on him,” Marinette said, shaking her head and pressing her hands against her temples. “He has a whole house to hide them in and if he thinks I’m coming for him…”

Marinette trailed off, watery eyes watching the cars come and go below.

“I need help…” Marinette admitted. “I can’t...I can’t do this by myself...and Luka...something’s wrong with Luka...oh god, what if he got to Luka?! What if he-”

“Marinette...there’s still one person left in this city who would gladly help you take Gabriel Agrest down a peg,” Tikki said.
“...no...he hates me,” Marinette blubbered miserably. “He’s not going to forgive me; not after what happened today...Kagami was right. This is all my fault.”

“Don’t be so quick to accept responsibility that you shoulder Gabriel Agreste’s burden as well,” Tikki said sternly. “I won’t deny that your...inaction has allowed this monster to flourish. But he is the monster here. He is the biggest threat facing Paris; even if Chat Noir hates you, he realizes that Hawkmoth needs to go down.”

“So what, just call him up?” Marinette laughed bitterly. “Hey Chat, I know the whole city hates you and I basically got you and your friend into trouble for trying to do the right thing, but can you get me off the hook, buddy?”

Tikki didn’t seem to have an answer for Marinette as she wrapped her arms around her legs. “I wouldn’t forgive someone who did that to me...I can’t even ask him to do that...”

“Marinette,” Tikki said, wiping a tear off her cheek. “You are not beyond help...but you need to ask for it. The only piece still on the board is Chat Noir...and judging by the performance he put on today, I would say he is a very critical piece. Gabriel thinks you’re going to kidnap Kagami, but you have time to rally Chat Noir and orchestrate a counterattack before he gets wise.”

Marinette bit her lip, shivering as she tried to find a way out of this situation that didn’t involve Chat Noir. Mayura was...not doing well. Rena Rouge and Queen Bee were all but openly hostile and Carapace was willing to put himself in danger to thwart her team. Chat Noir may hate her guts, but...stopping Hawkmoth was the only thing he cared about.

“What happens afterwards?” Marinette said, glancing at Tikki. “He isn’t going to let me keep you after all this is over...no ring, no wish...Adrien’s mom is gonna die...and this was all for nothing !”

“...maybe,” Tikki admitted. “But you can have a life with Adrien after all this is said and done. You can have a future for yourself, even if Gabriel Agreste doesn’t hire you; you don’t need him. You have never needed him...it’s not going to be a perfect ending, but that doesn’t mean it won’t be happy.”

Marinette nodded, rubbing the top of Tikki’s head. “I never wanted to lose you...I wanted to end this fight but...I-I like being Ladybug. I like having the power to help people...I-”
“Marinette...you have a job to do,” Tikki said firmly. “And you know how to do it.”

Marinette let out a deep sigh that plumed in front of her in a big puff of air. She let Ladybug’s power flow through her, wondering if this was the last time she was going to get a chance to transform. Would Chat Noir rip her earrings off the minute he saw her? Could she even match him anymore? What if he demanded she be tried alongside Gabriel for her role in this?

Ladybug shook her head, halting her anxiety spiral for a moment as she took out her communicator, taking a deep breath as she wondered how to start.

Ladybug: I was wrong.

Ladybug: I fucked up.

Ladybug: I fucked up so so bad

Ladybug: And I am so, so sorry for everything I did to you and your friends.

Ladybug: I will do everything in my power to make the last three months up to you.

Ladybug: But I need your help

Ladybug: Please.

Ladybug: We need to take down Hawkmoth; once and for all.

Chat Noir: eleven thirty

Chat Noir: old sparring spot

Chat Noir: come alone
We got one more breather chapter before we shift into MAXIMUM OVERDRIVE so better get your popcorn ready.

A bit of clarification; Fang wasn't created using a Miraculous Thanos Snap and Sasuke never possessed both. Artifacts in this world stem from Ladybug in conjunction with other heroes. She created the shell that Sasuke then poured his destructive power in to. Just wanted to clarify that since some folks on the trope page thought it was

Some of y'all really thought I would kill Nino, huh? Nah, Nino is unbreakable; he's the shield that suplexes kaiju that threaten the city. Team Paris has gone rogue, Hawkmoth has more cards than Ladybug thought, and Chat Noir finally does what Ladybug's done so many times; handle an akuma solo...for the most part.

Queer French Almighty God-willing he doesn't attack Ladybug on sight.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!