Lights Out

by cescalia

Summary

Chat Noir and Ladybug, the two regular posters from the video game forum, coincidentally meet in a dark room. One time off turns into an arrangement and it becomes difficult to hide their anonymity.
It started a few months ago, at the annual Christmas party of Agreste Corporations that consisted of
GABRIEL and other famous brands. Agreste Corporations was a French manufacturer and marketer
of prestigious high-quality clothes that were held in high regard all over the world. The company
owned many labels that distributed internationally and their brands were worn by many celebrities.

Said Christmas party was thrown on the 22nd of December in Agreste Co. Headquarters in Paris, a
six-floor typical Haussmann style building. All of the employees and everyone associated with any
of the corporations were invited. It was a massive event that anyone would have wanted to join. As
the guest list was vast, there was barely any room left to move around the floors.

Marinette, who had been appointed as a new designer for GABRIEL brand just in the beginning of
the fall, was excited to attend and meet different people. She was allowed to develop her own line on
the side, but since she was still gathering ideas, she earned generously from working for GABRIEL.

It was ridiculous how prepped up the guests were, but it was to be expected, when the event
included people at high positions and the status was not merely a word in this perspective.

Around 11 pm, she was exhausted from establishing connections. The alcohol she consumed at the
banquet was making her head dizzy and legs wobbly. So she took off down the corridor to find a
room where she could rest for a while in silence before going back, since the party was supposed to
last until the morning.

It’s fine. It’s fine to hide from people, everyone does that. Social interactions could tire anyone out.

Stumbling across the storage room on the ground floor, in which she had never been, Marinette
turned on the light switch and discovered shelves full of items. In few minutes she had lost herself to
admiring the silky and soft fabrics and pondering over which she could use for her designs.

Her lull of thought was broken when she heard the sound of the door she had come from opening
and closing again.

Before she could turn around and acknowledge the incomer, while quickly trying to come up with
excuses for why exactly was she in the storage room on a Saturday night, the only light bulb lighting
the small room burnt out.

“Hello?” Marinette called, mainly to make herself known to the person, but a small part of her was
unnerved to be in the pitch dark aside from the faint emergency exit sign with a stranger. Moreover,
when that person could have started moving and realized she had been in the room all along.

From where she imagined the door was, she heard a thud. She had probably startled them. It slightly
smelt of burnt hair due to the now useless bulb that was surely still scorching hot. The company
should really contact their technology supplier or at least invest in fluorescent lights.

“…Hi? What are you doing here? Shouldn’t everyone be up at the party?” A male voice she didn’t
recognize answered her. She had no clue why someone would come to the storage room except for
the same reason as she.

“I just wanted to get away from the excitement. So did you, I presume.”
“I wasn’t expecting anyone to be in this room. I’ll leave.”

“Wait!” Marinette blurted out. The man didn’t say anything, so she reckoned he was waiting for her reasoning, why she stopped him from leaving the room.

“Who am I talking with?” he asked instead when she hadn’t replied.

Marinette hesitated. She could have said her name and found out who he was, but she was intrigued. And wanted to extend the mystery of the situation.

“I would rather not disclose that information.” Surprisingly, the man chuckled, clearly amused by her response.

“Fair enough. What do I call you, then?” In this moment, she realized that he had actually decided to stay and continue their conversation instead of going back to the party.

In the end, she decided to give him her username she had on the videogame forum, where she spent most of her free time addressing the best techniques and reporting bugs that appeared in the new games.

“You can call me Ladybug.”

“Ladybug the insect or the character from Ultimate Mecha Strike?”

“Both.”

“You play that game?”

“Quite often, yes.”

He didn’t say anything for a while. She was almost afraid he’d left, but she hadn’t heard anything to indicate that. The door stayed close, but faint light was coming out from under it.

“I’m taking a shot in the dark here, but do you by any chance have a user on astrucjeuxvid.fr?”

“Actually, I do.” He was quiet again. It was frustrating. Did he know her from the forum? It seemed highly likely that the name Ladybug meant something to him.

“Do you…are you part of the forum yourself as well?”

For some reason, she dreaded the answer, but she was almost sure he was, he wouldn’t have asked otherwise. This person possibly knew her from a different point of view contrary to how she usually presented herself. What were the odds of meeting someone from a French forum dedicated to video games in the storage room of fashion house headquarters near midnight?

Maybe he was someone she had given tips to on how to beat the Stormy Weather in AkumaCity, or who had seen her name pop out on the threads. Maybe he was one of the regular users who always seemed to hang out in the chat room, even if it was around 4 am.

“Chat Noir, at your service, my lady.”

That she hadn’t been expecting. Chat Noir, the constant presence in the community, one of the main contributors to the forum posts and her best friend. If you could call him that.

It had started off innocently, of course. He messaged her about one of her posts years ago and since then they started talking regularly. With puns aside. And flirting. She liked to say that it wasn’t
reciprocal, but that would have been a lie. It was fun, but they didn’t meet in real life. Their relationship was restricted to the internet.

It had been easily avoidable as well. Just reject all his offers, which she had been doing for years. He didn’t seem to mind, but he still kept trying.

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“Unless you’re not Ladybug, the extraordinary gamer, our savior, then please forget I ever said anything.”

These kind of Cinderellaesque meetings did not happen in real life.

She couldn’t help, but laugh. “It’s me, *chaton*.”

Hearing a silent sigh of relief, she came to the realization that she wasn’t the only one nervous about the sudden revelation. There was nothing they could do about it now.

“Let’s just say, this was quite an interesting course of the conversation. You really took a longshot here.”

“He, who doesn’t risk, never gets to drink champagne.”

“The champagne was horrible. Nobody wants to drink it.”

He laughed. It was this certain kind of laugh that made a person forget every single thing except the sound which existed to be heard by one person only. She was almost sure she had stopped breathing.

The darkness gave her a safe blanket of anonymity, when her cheeks warmed and her heart was thumping in her chest. She had rebuffed his requests to meet her and actually play some multi-player games face to face so many times just to have a mere coincidence throw them together.

She had tried to keep her internet life and real life separated and not share any photos of herself, even if she took pictures of objects. Chat Noir was the same, but he didn’t send her any pictures. This, of course, made her cautious about his life on the other side of screen.

Discovering Chat Noir was a decent person, with prestigious background judging by his attending the party, she wondered if his reasons not to share his life were caused by caution as well. Or his credibility. And she respected that.

His requests to meet her were not based on to satisfy his curiosity, but a genuine effort to establish a tangible friendship.

“Are you still cautious about your identity?” He asked quietly. She didn’t want to disappoint him, but she couldn’t lie either. She was terrified. Even more now that he was within her reach.

Her sight was blocked, only being able to see his outline emerging from the darkness as her eyes were still adjusting to the lack of light source, but her other senses were heightened. She could smell the scent he was wearing. It smelled expensive.

“Ladybug?”

He stumbled across the room, having hit his foot on the object on the floor.

“Shit! Who put that box here?”
Chat Noir was much nearer now due to the mishap and Marinette resisted the urge to run away. What was she supposed to say or do, she wanted to tell him everything; how his messages brightened her day, how his knowledge could have almost surpassed hers, which was impressive and how much faster her heart beat at that moment.

She wasn’t far from the door, only a few shelves away and next to the table, which she assumed was meant for cutting the fabric, if the person didn’t fancy carrying the heavy roll upstairs.

For a single moment she felt a hand touch her breast, which prompted her to hold her breath. He must have been trying to grasp the idea where she was standing, and had stretched his arms out to be aware of his surroundings. This resulted in him accidentally groping her. He realized it a second later than she did.

“I’m s-so sorry; this was not, not intentional at all.” Marinette noticed some kind of motion; he likely withdrew his hands and stood before her.

Unbeknownst to him, she hadn’t minded the contact. On the contrary, it set a flame. She trusted Chat; he understood what she was saying, her ideas were always heard and he was enjoyable to chat with. He was involved in fashion business - to assume he was attractive, was a simple conclusion to reach.

She liked to believe that Chat Noir was a creation of her imagination that the real person was a complete turnover from how he portrayed himself online, and she had been projecting her desires on a fictional image, but she couldn’t have been more wrong. He was exactly what she hoped he would be.

To test the ground, Marinette extended her hand and rested it on his arm muscle. He tensed underneath her palm, which she therefore slid upwards to his shoulder, his neck and to his cheek, where she stopped the movement.

Chat brought his own hand on her bare skin below the elbow. She shivered at the unexpected contact and tiny goosebumps appeared on her arm. There was something highly erotic about touching another person in the dark, especially if she harbored some feelings for him.

“Ladybug, are you certain, it’s a good idea?”

Marinette’s other hand joined the first and she moved the former behind his head to cup his neck and bring him closer. Their foreheads bumped into each other and she saw a faint gleam of his eyes that were staring into hers correspondingly.

“I’ll have time to think about it later.”

Was it the alcohol she consumed earlier or the anonymity that she selfishly kept to herself, it helped her to be a little bit more brave and bring their lips together.

He responded hesitantly, but sweetly, as if trying to slowly taste her and not give her any reason to doubt his intentions – he didn’t want to overstep her boundaries.

It was driving her mad that even now he, with the warmth of his mouth sending waves of pleasure around her body, was a perfect gentleman as he had always been in the forum and in their DMs. She needed more; this had been what was missing in her life.

She lost all of her rational mind.

Marinette pulled him even closer to her that their mouths were pressed against each other, and licked
his lower lip for him to open his lips. As he did so, they simultaneously let their tongues tentatively
brush one another. She allowed it to go even further when her fumbling fingers attempted to undo
the buttons of his shirt near the collar.

He stopped the kiss there, breathing heavily and having not moved an inch since separating their lips
from each other. Before she could curse her hasty actions, he spoke.

“Are you sure you want this?” His voice was barely above the whisper. She nodded her head and for
extra confirmation she expressed her desires out loud.

“Yes. Do you, do you want this? Do you want me?”

“Gods, yes.”

They instantly continued kissing, but even more ferociously than before and now with added
undressing performed by both parties. She felt with an added dose of excitement his bulge that would
have made her act even more recklessly to rush and take off his pants, if she didn’t have to take off
his shirt first.

She was half way through undoing all of the buttons of his shirt until he found the hidden zipper of
her dress behind her back and carefully pulled the zipper down.

When he reached the end of the zip, he helped her out of the clothing item. They both knew how
important it was not to damage the garments, being involved in the backstage of fashion world.

In a haste to touch his bare skin, Marinette quickly undid the rest of his shirt’s buttons and slipped the
top off his shoulders. His lips moved towards her neck and she tilted her neck so he had easier access
to the exposed area.

Chat’s fingers grazed her breasts and she whined, blindly searching his arms to guide them to cup her
assets. He did so gladly and sucked at that one spot on her neck, biting gently at her skin and
nibbling it with his teeth, his tongue occasionally smoothing the mark.

She was burning; his skin was hot to the touch. She could feel the sweat gathering on the nape of her
neck where she had thankfully pinned her hair up to a gracious bun and his hands that were slowly
but steadily fondling her breasts were not moving smoothly against her skin due to the heat and the
bra she still had on for some obscure reason.

She caressed his toned bare stomach, which made her wonder if he was a model by any chance.
Whisking away the thought for later analysis, her hands grasped the front of his belt buckle over the
slacks and she hoped to further the amount of his skin uncovered, before his hands halted the
process.

“Wait.”

Her body was too warm; it was barely manageable to function normally. She had no idea how he
had the willpower to unlatch himself from her, she couldn’t have done it herself. Her mind was hazy
from lust.

“I don’t have protection. Do you?”

Curse you, universe. It was nearly perfect and of course they had forgotten the most important thing.

“No, but I’m on the pill.”
“I don’t want to risk that.” He nuzzled her neck and she sighed in dejection. Contrary to what she would have guessed, she was all the same aroused, maybe even slightly more.

He must have sensed it, since his mouth began to press soft kisses across her collar bone and his palms lightly squeezed her body, his lips travelling lower and lower. Marinette understood the direction he was taking too late - overwhelmed by the sensation - when his hands had already latched onto her tights along with her silk panties and were dragging them past her thighs, knees, and in little time, they were on the floor with the black heels she chose to wear that evening.

Chat lifted her up on the table behind her, which she had even forgotten existed. He was kneeling in front of her almost naked body aside from the bra, which one strap had fallen off to her shoulder.

His lips dragged wet kisses on the inside of her upper leg, at the same time spreading her legs apart so he could come closer to the place which was aching for his touch the most. Marinette whimpered as soon as he touched her with his tongue.

Detaching his mouth from her core, he wet his finger and pushed it slowly into her opening that was already slick due to her arousal. She moaned in pleasure, when he started thrusting it repeatedly in and out, in a moderate pace.

His tongue soon joined to build up her peak, and he licked her clit with the flat side without simultaneously halting his motions. Occasionally he would take the finger out to focus entirely on working his tongue around the nub while spreading her folds wide to get better access. As he returned his finger to her entrance, he continued sucking her and added another finger to bring her greater satisfaction.

She couldn’t stop her body reacting the way it did, ankles wrapping behind his head as she lightly pressed her pelvis against the motions his mouth repeatedly made.

“Chat.”

He hummed against her clit, voicing his appreciation, and the vibrations almost drove her to the relief she was waiting for. Her hands grasped gently at his hair as Chat nudged her with his nose, lightly touching the core with his thumb at the same time not even once stopping the motions of his fingers inside her.

Just as she figured she couldn’t bear it, silently begging for her release, Chat managed to swirl his tongue around her clit and flick it quickly, which brought her over the edge. Her legs gave up, not being able to support her weight any longer, since she was almost slipping off the tabletop. She might have collapsed to the ground if Chat hadn’t had a firm grip around her thighs.

He let her release play out, lazily licking his way over her entrance and crazing her clit with the fingers that were slick from the fluid. Marinette brushed her hands into his soft hair and goaded him to stand back up. She pecked his lips and rested her head in the crook of his neck while affectionately scratching his head behind the ears, where he seemed to be the most sensitive.

The blood was ringing in her ears, clogging them as if the flight had just took off, her heavy heartbeat that was loudly echoing hurt her ears. The intensity of her orgasm had rocked her off balance.

Chat wrapped her arms around her waist and gently caressed her skin.

Her body had not yet recovered fully after the culmination - no man had ever been able to meet her needs as ideally as Chat Noir had. That reminded her that he hadn’t had any sort of satisfaction.
Marinette felt guilty that she only thought about herself, and was planning to correspond with the same, until he interrupted her process of thought.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Chat’s hands lingered on her naked back and he leaned his forehead against her shoulder. She was entirely relaxed in his arms, feeling safe and loved. Sadly, nothing lasted forever.

The next minutes they spent looking for their missing clothing pieces on the floor and attempting to put them on correctly. Neither wanted to leave the presence of the other. In the end, it was Chat who broke the silence.

“Can I meet you again?”

She hated that the room was wrapped in the darkness. She hated that she didn’t have courage to tell him her real name. She hated that he sounded heartbroken as if it was their first and the last meeting.

It was supposed to be only one night. They weren’t meant to meet in the first place, but life was full of surprises and coincidences. In the messages, which they still regularly exchanged, he didn’t seem to want to bring up the subject at all. Maybe it was her fault. Since the ball was in her court and it was her decision.

She did want to continue, too badly. He exceeded her wildest dreams; he was gentle, caring and loving. Every time she got the notification from the forum, her fingers itched to answer his lighthearted messages with a proposal.

At home, on her desk sat a table lamp which soft yellow light illuminated the copies of her designs she had improved for next day’s designer meeting. Her laptop was turned on, the page of Chat’s contact info opened so she could instantly see when he was online. He hadn’t been online for seventeen hours.

Once in a while sipping the strawberry tea from the mug that coincidentally had small cat faces doodled on, Marinette swirled the pen in her hand and wrote notes that might have been worth to mention at the session. She wasn’t even sure that Chat worked in the building. Was he even part of the GABRIEL, she had no way of knowing unless she asked.

She stared at the flashing text cursor in the chatbox (heh!) while her fingers were itching to write a message. It was terrifying; what if he said no, what if he changed his mind and actually didn’t want to meet her again. She couldn’t concentrate on her designs and notes unless she took a leap of faith.

January 9th

To: ChatNoir

Hey, so I understand I haven’t mentioned the “incident” at the Christmas party since now, but I’d like to see you again.

January 9th

To: ChatNoir

Well, not see, but lights out, like before? Is it okay with you?
It was done. Now she could stop wondering.

She was wrong thinking that after sending the message she could work unfazed. He wasn’t online, but every minute he could be since he didn’t go AWOL for long periods without telling her beforehand. Marinette minimized the browser.

Gulping the leftover tea, that was already lukewarm, down her throat, Marinette took the mug to the sink to wash it while trying very hard to not think about Chat Noir and the message. She left the mug to dry next to the sink and tried to keep herself busy.

There were still sticky dried spots of the syrup on the kitchen counter, which she hadn’t had time to clean up in the morning. The tea kettle had a layer of limescale in the bottom, which could be cleaned as well. It wasn’t as if she had nothing to occupy her time with, but she couldn’t ignore the laptop from the corner of her eye.

Her heart was thumping in her chest and she had to force her limbs to move and not freak out about his possible answer. Because he WOULD answer, he always did. There just was a question when he would answer.

It could have been minutes since she left the table, or it could have been an hour, but the waiting was driving her insane. The chatbox didn’t have specific timestamps or worse, the checkmark and the dreaded “seen” script. He wouldn’t know when she looked at the messages, the forum had an algorithm to only display the time she had lastly visited the forum. She was ready to take a look.

With slightly shaking hands Marinette opened the browser again and saw the response. Reading quickly over it, she sighed in relief. He hadn’t turned her down.

January 9th

From: ChatNoir

Of course. Do you just want to talk in person?

It was even irrational to think he would have not responded in a polite manner. They were friends. He had completely respected her. He had clearly wanted her. Why did she ever think differently?

To: ChatNoir

I’d like to continue where we left off.

And take it further. Marinette tapped her fingers against the table, waiting for his answer seeing that it displayed that he was currently online and undoubtedly interested in an outcome of their conversation as well.

From: ChatNoir

Your wish is my command, my lady.

From: ChatNoir
If you were wondering, I do work in the building occasionally.

To: ChatNoir

Tomorrow, 18h15?

From: ChatNoir

I’ll be there.

Marinette took her laptop from the table and turned off the lights of the room. The afternoon every other day a meeting was held on the fourth floor. As she arrived at the door, most of the people from her department, which was the biggest, were already there sitting and typing notes.

Gabriel Agreste only showed up at the meeting on Wednesdays. He hadn’t arrived yet, but the atmosphere had a certain kind of nervousness attached to it. Even designers who had worked under Gabriel for years were wary of his unpredicted wishes.

One man in particular was shuffling at his seat and constantly folding and unfolding his hands in front of him. His face shined with cold sweat and Marinette knew he didn’t have good news to share. She tried to remember what his specialty was and where the problem could lie in, but before she could ponder over it, Gabriel Agreste marched through the door.

The shift in the room was noticeable. People sat straight and turned their attention to Gabriel. He had his laptop in front of him as well, but the lid was closed. He was writing notes in old fashioned way, scribbling in the notebook a few remarks before he turned to the woman sitting on his right.

“Has Mr Salz confirmed the shipment of chiffon?”

“Yes, the latest they will arrive in the office is on Wednesday. Our representative chose the second option, which was the one from Lyon factory and less springy, because of that there was an issue in our computer system, which was solved quickly.” Alexandrá answered in one breath.

Gabriel nodded and wrote few remarks in his notebook before turning to the man sitting on the left of Alexandrá.

“Any news about the involvement of CYLA during the launch event?”

“Not yet, sir. Adelaide talked on the phone with Marco and apparently they had already scheduled meetings with other possible suppliers in case CYLA won’t get back to us. I called the head of the department, but there was no answer.”

Gabriel didn’t say anything, but wrote notes.

“Ms Joden, do you have anything to add?”

“No, sir.”

“I will send out e-mails out to the creative team,” he gestured towards Marinette and her closest coworkers, “concerning the subject of managing the timetables of the sought out models. Does anyone have any questions?” He asked addressing the whole table.

“Excuse me, sir,” the man who had been restless before the meeting spoke up,”Mr Unos has reached out to the secretary at the desk again today and there has been no improvement since last Tuesday.
He claims to have misplaced his files and therefore cannot insert the much needed data.”

Gabriel pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed at the same time with many other people in the room. Mr Unos had been a constant annoyance since September.

“Would anyone inform the incompetent Mr Unos about the program’s instruction manual in his computer folder and especially the chapter about retrieving the files?”

The man quickly nodded and relaxed instantly when Gabriel called the end of the meeting before leaving the room, people scattering out in tow.

Arriving back in her office, Marinette laid out multiple sheets of paper on the table displaying various designs with a notebook of her notes next to them. In once for a while she circled details on the designs or wrote notes to her book while she was swinging her crossed leg.

Gabriel Agreste had sent her and the other few designers a bunch of ideas on Monday that he had drafted and that were supposed to demonstrate the main theme for next spring’s collection. She wasn’t quite happy how he preferred the use of silk and chiffon as these were one of the hardest materials to work with.

He had also written few thoughts about the general colours and embellishments and the date of when he expected to see the other designers’ drafts for the collection.

She was fiddling with the phone in her hand, constantly looking at the last message Chat sent her, confirming that they will meet again. She said tomorrow. This was now today.

A sharp knock at the door interrupted the silence of her office slash studio. There weren’t any appointments at this hour, so she didn’t know who to expect. The model she was supposed to be working with this season wasn’t supposed to arrive until the next day.

“Come in!”

The assistant that was working for another designer on the floor – she had refused getting an assistant for herself although it was strongly advised – entered the room and seemed quite hesitant to take on a conversation, but as it was her job to pass on important information to her as well, she opened her mouth.

“You were assigned a male model to work with for the next three months.”

Marinette rested her phone on the table and tilted her head confusingly at the assistant.

“Male? I thought I was supposed to only work with Claire, from the E.C. Management?”

“It’s Mr. Agreste’s orders. Every designer is expected to contribute prototype designs for both sexes. Mr Agreste is aware you work better with females, so Claire is coming next Monday instead and he is supposed to meet you in thirty minutes.”

“Very well, thank you, Émilie!” The girl’s eyes instantly brightened, maybe she was constantly overlooked that a bare mention of her name lifted up her mood.

Émilie closed the door after exiting the room and Marinette sat on the chair to gather all of the loose leaflets back in one block. Rubbing her temples, she tried to remember which models were not yet booked for the runway. Unless it was a largely sought high-priced man, but she doubted it. He hadn’t yet sent out the e-mail he promised about the timetables, so she could only guess for now.
Gabriel Agreste wouldn’t assign her a busy male model, who would have to miss their meetings for other shows or shoots. It was simply unheard of.

As she deemed it useless to work on figuring out the female fashion theme that would still fit in the wider picture and her style, she started sketching the ideas for the other sex.

It was always advised to have something ready to show for the model, so they could give their input in what usually suits their skin tone and edges. It made working with them easier and smoother.

She may have been too lost in her thoughts to have heard the knocking on her door, because the man she was waiting for barged in 10 minutes early, closing the door after entering.

Marinette was left staring at uncommunicative and irritating Adrien Agreste.

Slamming her sketchbook closed, Marinette stood up and walked out behind the table.

“Is this a joke? Were you assigned to be my model?”

“Apparently,” he made a face and Marinette was almost ready to slap him, if only it wouldn’t have costed her job and the possibility of Adrien pressing charges for assault. And she didn’t condone unprovoked violence. Mental slap it was.

Covering her face, Marinette was wondering how she would survive these months in the presence of the asshole, who insulted her designs before he had even met her. But what to expect from spoiled snobby rich guy, who had had everything handled to him since the birth.

He was exactly like Chloé, who constantly had to be in the spotlight and on her line of sight at the fashion related events, hanging off her bestie Adrien’s arm.

She wasn’t allowed to be impersonal with her coworkers, but this was different. Adrien and her; it would never end well and everyone in the department knew it. Apparently, Gabriel Agreste didn’t get the memo.

“Look, I’m not any happier about this arrangement than you are, but I can’t very well quit doing my job to please you. My father asked me to be the model for you and I couldn’t refuse. Although, I’m already fully booked.”

Marinette proceeded to glare at him, silently begging for the earth to swallow her, so she wouldn’t have to see his face ever again.

“You once said, you will remain professional. Here’s your chance. I assure you, If you refuse to communicate clearly, it will not work out.”

Seeing no way of avoiding doing actual work, she reluctantly had to agree.

“Alright,” Marinette picked up her sketchbook and walked up to Adrien whose eyes followed her every move. “Strip.”

Adrien didn’t even bat an eye and started taking off his clothes. Every self-respecting designer got the accurate measurements of the models they were working with for better fit and accuracy.

Marinette was deliberately looking away from his torso and used the excuse of searching for her measuring tape, although she knew it was in the first drawer.

She was still not completely prepared for the sight, because she could feel her cheeks getting warm
and he noticed, of course, because the slight smirk was evident on his face. Asshole.

But as she was used to being around gorgeous models, she ignored everything except the task in hand. She wrapped the tape across his bare shoulders and he stared ahead, not minding the contact, whenever her fingers brushed the skin.

As Marinette crouched - face to face with his navel - and was tailoring his hips, he shifted. She looked up and her eyes met his for a slight moment until he lifted his head back up.

He wasn’t blushing, but there were goosebumps on his arms and for a second Marinette let her mind wonder to what had brought this on, since the only thing she had done was grazing his hip while she connected the two sides of the tape.

The notebook had a page dedicated to Adrien Agreste for now.

---

**FOUR MONTHS AGO**

Adrien left the office thirty-three minutes after his work officially ended. He didn’t have any modelling jobs booked the day, so he had a scarce free evening. He still had an early photoshoot in the morning, but he didn’t have to worry about that now.

He preferred stairs to the lift that was often crowded. Most of the people’s work schedule was erratic, so it was plausible that there were people scurrying around the corridors even as late as half past seven.

Adrien was about to exit the building, when he saw he wasn’t alone and there was a dark-haired woman near the door, holding a number of files tightly to her chest. According to the portfolio on top, she was designing clothes, which made him realize that he recognized her from yesterday’s meeting.

The new designer that had started the work not much time ago stood under the doorway as the usual August pour downs extended to that day’s September weather. He thanked his foresight in the morning for grabbing a black umbrella, so he didn’t have to get wet.

Seeing the petite woman, who he hadn’t had a chance to greet the previous day, standing with a sour look and looking at the seemingly never-ending rainfall, he decided to use this moment to get to know her better. He wasn’t in a hurry, for once.

“Hello, you are Marinette Dupain-Cheng, the new designer for the GABRIEL line, am I right?” She immediately jumped, not expecting him in the slightest and span around to meet him face-to-face.

He presumed that she would know him, or at least smile in a greeting, but she did something way worse. She scowled.

“I have no interest in talking to you,” her voice was monotone with a hint of animosity. He supposed he couldn’t really blame her. People often thought he was a jerk and stuck up snob who got where he was, only because of his connections.

“Hey, we will most likely work together in the future. I don’t want there to be any bad blood between us.” Maybe if he showed her that he didn’t have ill intentions and tried his hardest to be on the same ground with her, she would ease up? But her hostile stand didn’t change.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m completely professional.”
“Good.” Was she hinting at something? If she did, he didn’t pick up what she was seeking to aim.

She rolled her eyes and positioned herself so she couldn’t even see him from the corner of the eye. This kind of behavior wasn’t that unusual as the people in the fashion business often exaggerated, but this seemed personal.

“I’m sorry, have I done something to offend you?”

Marinette huffed.

“You are a vile person; I don’t want to associate with the likes of you. I will remain civil, if there ever rises a need for us to work together. Hopefully never.”

His presence must have bothered her a lot, because at that moment, Marinette turned around and stepped out of the sheltered doorway. She got drenched in seconds, but she didn’t appear to have a care in the world.

“Marinette, wait!” Adrien shouted, but his attempt was futile - Marinette continued walking in the rain.

In a rare fit of rage, he stomped back inside. If that was what she thought of him and wouldn’t hear him, then let her be. She wasn’t ranked high in the list of the designers yet – he didn’t have to interact with her unless she showed incredible promise, which was doubtful.

---

January 10th

From: ChatNoir

I’ll arrive first.

Chat Noir was already in the storage room when she got there. She hadn’t turned on the lamps in the corridor to avoid light seeping into the room and him seeing her.

“I thought you might have changed your mind.” She was late due to an error on her part and had to interact with the management team to correct it. It took longer than she expected.

“No, I haven’t.”

“I’m glad,” she could hear the cheery tone in his voice. The closer to the door he walked, the faster Marinette’s heart was racing. It was real. It was happening again.

He comped in the darkness and she reached out to meet him halfway. Surprisingly, he just took a hold of her hand and pulled her closer.

“Hi.” She was still getting used to the darkness, but she could barely make out some distinctive features of his face.

His other hand came up to brush the strands of her hair that hung next to her bangs. It was difficult to breathe.

“Hi.”
“Your hair is down,” his knuckles were softly touching her cheek as his hand slid down the length of the lock of her hair that was closed between his fingers.

Her body instinctively leaned towards his touch and she could feel the warm breath on her skin. His breathing was as laboured as hers.

Opposed to their previous meeting, this time neither was ready to make the first move. It seemed much more real. They were going through it once more.

Marinette snaked her free hand behind his neck to bring him closer. He exhaled a breathy laugh and moved his chin downwards. She tilted her head and almost pressed her lips on his, but at the last second she backed away. He involuntarily followed her retreating figure, before noticing and stopping.

“If you don’t want to do this, I understand,” he whispered.

“No, no, that’s not it. It’s just strange.”

“Strange? …Yeah, I suppose it is. I’ve never done something like that.”

“Me neither… Look, I’m not an awfully adventurous person. I have a job, which I’ve always dreamt about and I’m dedicated to pursuing my career. I don’t go out of my way to make time for relationships.”

“…Is this what it is? A relationship?”

“No! I mean, yes. Relationships – relationships don’t necessarily have to be romantic, right?”

“Yeah…,” his voice trailed off with a hint of disappointment. He cleared his throat quickly after.

Marinette realized that she had gotten herself into an unfavourable situation. She didn’t want to give an expression that she wasn’t interested romantically! It was the opposite of that. But the damage was done. He stepped away.

To make matters worse, a sudden and short shrill noise echoed the room, which seemed to come from the pocket of Chat’s slacks. He cursed under his breath and was going to turn his phone off, but under the glow of the dim light he checked the screen for few seconds.

She had fortunately turned her head before Chat got his phone out of his pocket, so she couldn’t see his face, but she still had noticed that the screen light illuminated his hair. Chat had light hair, possibly blond.

Marinette tried to not think too much of it, but couldn’t help but wonder how many blond and nice co-workers she knew. Not many. There was Christian from the floor below. He greeted her quite often and he wasn’t bad looking. Noticing the course of her thoughts, Marinette had to squeeze her eyes shut and block her mind. She had been the one to set boundaries, not him.

“Was it something important?”

“Oh, no, just a reminder of the event I forgot to delete from the phone.”

She had a bad taste in her mouth; even the possibility that he could leave her now, made her sick. She had grown already too attached to the man whose face she didn’t know.

“If you need to go, we can meet at another time.”
“I declined my invitation, it’s okay.”

Convincing herself that Chat wanted to be there with her instead of whatever obligations he needed to fulfil, was hard when her insecurities in relationships were her biggest obstacles.

“LB?”

Marinette charged forward and gently touched the corner of his mouth with her lips. The tension in his body didn’t ease when she pressed another kiss on the other side of his mouth and moved her hand to his chin.

He had lowered his head to match her movements. Experiencing it fully sober brought butterflies into her stomach.

He sighed softly and his warm breath tickled the side of her neck. She pulled his face towards her and joined their mouths together. He responded eagerly.

Chat’s hands wrapped around her torso as his arms crossed behind her back. Her own hand slid down his toned stomach and stopped at the edge of the T-shirt he was wearing. It surprised her that he was dressed so casually, which probably meant that he didn’t work in the building today. The thought of it thrilled her as he deemed her important enough to show up here from wherever he worked at that day.

She tugged at the shirt and pulled it up, he raised his arms to get it completely off; temporarily stopping kissing her. In haste, she discarded her own blouse.

His arms instantly grasped the bare skin of her back and his hand movements made her shiver, although the room temperature was warm and she felt as if her whole body was heating up. With a fast motion, her bra was off and his palms cupped her breasts that were now exposed.

She quietly moaned into his mouth as he was repeatedly massaging her breasts and once in a while flicking the nipple. He unlatched his mouth from hers and moved his lips down the side of her neck towards her chest. Chat took one of her nipples into his mouth and sucked at it dearly without stopping the movement of his other hand on the breast he was currently not giving attention to.

Her fingers were fumbling with the belt buckle of his jeans and she succeeded in releasing it fairly quickly, pulling his pants down an inch before Chat gave his hand to help her out. Just as he had dropped his pants to his knees, her nimble hand palmed his length coaxing out a soft moan from him.

It seemed that they were both quite silent lovers. He was hard already and she could feel the bulge enlarging in her hand due to the slow caressing motions over the thin underwear.

She sank down and kneeled in front of him grasping his cock and pulling it from his pants. Before she could take him in her mouth, Chat wrapped his palm around her wrist.

“You don’t have to,” he said in a raspy voice.

“I want to.” He softly groaned in response and she took it as a sign to guide his member into her mouth and slowly take it out again.

She began with slow licks at the tip and dragged her tongue toward the base. One of her hands moved to his balls and softly fondled them without causing much friction. At times Marinette enclosed her mouth around his cock completely and sucked while silently humming and creating vibrations that tested the nerve ends.
In the minutes she spent on paying attention to his dick, his erection stayed upright and she was directed by his expressive low moans and sighs. As she felt the tap on her shoulder, she detached her mouth and looked up into darkness.

“I don’t want to finish just yet.”

Marinette would have nodded in understanding but the action itself would have been useless as he didn’t see her. Her hands slid upwards his body from thighs to stomach to his shoulders, until she could take a hold of his face and pull him towards her lips. He responded without a second thought.

Her skirt had a zipper on the side and she would have gotten rid of it, but she chose to only remove her underwear instead. Chat’s mouth had moved to her neck again and he was currently pressing wet open-mouthed kisses on her bare and sweaty skin.

He caressed her thighs and butt under her skirt before lifting her on the table where he had previously eaten her out. To not repeat their previous mistake, Chat leaned down to his pants and fumbled in dark in his pockets to find the foiled packet.

When he had opened the pack and put the condom on with practiced ease, Marinette spread her legs, gently grabbed his cock and guided it to her entrance.

He thrust forward and she melted in his arms. His thrusts were slow and through, filling her up and making her feel like as she had been missing something and she could have never been whole without him.

She grasped his shoulders and held on as he moved inside her, moving faster and harder until she felt the tingling feeling building up inside her, under her belly and she shattered when she was brought over the edge, him following shortly after.

Marinette was worn out, resting against his sweaty body and breathing heavily. This was what she had wanted. She only wished it was real. She wished it wasn’t just a quickie in the storage room. She wished that she had him. After she had ruined everything, she would not have him more than for a physical fulfilment.

“Friday?” Her voice sounded strained.

“I can’t make it on Friday.”

“You have a date?” He gave a weak chuckle.

“No, I have an event my father insisted on attending…,” he swallowed drily,” Ladybug, I’m not sure if I’ve made myself clear. I only want to be with you.”

“Oh.” ‘Tell him! Tell him you want to be with him, too!’ But she didn’t do it.

If the light wasn’t obscured, she would have seen Chat’s rueful smile, acknowledging and accepting that Ladybug was not romantically interested in him.

“What about Monday?” He finally said.

“It’s alright.”

January 15th
To: ChatNoir

I’m afraid I can’t make it on time, so I might be late for 15 minutes the most.

To: ChatNoir

Wait for me there.

“Did you hear that Mr Unos situation was solved today?” Marinette took a pin out of her mouth and stuck it in place to hold two pieces of fabric together beside his hip.

“Finally. What a nuisance that guy was.” Marinette held the edge of the cloth up with one hand and adjusted it for perfect fit. “Your waist seems thinner than the last time I measured.”

“I had to meet up with Mr Harfield today.”

Marinette made a sound of recognition.

“Understood.” Harfield often let others wait for him for hours and then ate salad in front of starving models. Adrien hadn’t probably eaten since breakfast early in the morning.

She wasn’t going to ask if he had to cut down his diet and follow the same ridiculous restrictions as Claire. Claire had been quite openly dishing at the corporate leaders of her management company in the morning, when she came to meet Marinette.

Claire also shared her thoughts about the brand launch she attended on Friday and how the owner had proudly declared that small businesses would soon be forgotten in the past. Building her own brand had always been a dream of hers and to hear that some “wealthy and socially superior” man deemed her dream worth nothing was upsetting. Especially when he had to have approved the tacky ice sculptures to be used for the event that didn’t even hold any snob value.

She worked in silence and he didn’t find it necessary to have a small talk either. You could cut the silence with a knife as neither of them felt comfortable or at ease. This partnership was not meant to happen.

Marinette spent the lunch break in the office, eating from takeout box and her hands furiously swiping off the designs that had not been approved yet and never would be, since these involved feathers that Adrien was allergic to and had conveniently forgotten to mention to her in hopes of making her work harder than it needed to be.

On phone call about the next meeting she was much harsher than usual and snapping at him due to her frustration of not being able to make it work, when her job depended on getting along with him. She had tried, once or twice to mend things between them.

Such as when before she was forced to work with Adrien, the model she met at Julien David fashion show, introduced them to each other without being aware they had already met. She had been stoic that night, but still accepted a drink from him and not combusted from anger when he casually asked about how well her original designs were received in the design team. He had no right to bring up her designs when he had so cruelly insulted them even before her contract with Gabriel fashion house was signed.

When she arrived in the storage room downstairs, Chat was already there as expected. When he leaned his chin on her shoulder and breathed slowly and deeply, her heart was beating fast betraying how she felt about him and the situation.
A few minutes passed without him moving or talking and she realised she was okay with not giving way to sexual acts. It didn’t matter that he didn’t want her at that moment like that. It was understandable and she respected him. She would be there for him offering the comfort that he needed.

“Oh, I’m sorry, this day has been hectic. My co-worker has been giving me a hard time.”

Her fingers slid through his hair that was soft and conditioned. He shifted his position and nuzzled her neck that was bearing the elegant and fresh Givenchy scent she hadn’t forgotten to put on in the morning. Marinette made a noise of agreement, to show him she was listening but not particularly interested to give him an adequate answer.

“We don’t agree about anything.”

Her hands circled around his shoulders that were covered with a cotton t-shirt.

“Anything?”

“Anything…that has any depth.”

“And why is that?”

“When she’s not perpetually condescending me, I get along with her scary well, which is why I’m so confused by the attitude she sometimes has towards me. As if I was the sole reason things didn’t go right in her life.”

She breathed in the scent of the perfume and shower gel that had soaked into the shirt.

“From the moment I met her, she was rude and unpleasant. She had already made up his mind about me. I can’t help but feel frustrated that she constantly belittles me.”

“You’re not with her right now.” She whispered and moved her lips toward his and he initiated the kiss that could have made her toes curled if anything could have made her act that way. The most she felt was the hollow feeling and the tickling in her stomach that was caused by him and only him.

They didn’t need to move forward, because this was enough for them for one frail moment.

January 26th

From: ChatNoir

8:15pm?

To: ChatNoir

Yes.

All of the people were waiting around the table, or those who were late to get a spot, were leaning on the walls of the room. They were expecting Gabriel, whose usual spot on the table was vacant although the meeting was supposed to have begun seven minutes ago.

Abruptly, the door swung open and one guy who Marinette recognized as the one who often runs the most trivial errands rushed in, adjusting the stack of papers better in his hand.
“Mr Agreste sent me here to announce that he will arrive in few minutes and only wishes to meet with his design team. He will meet the rest of you at regular time next week.”

Marinette stayed rooted at her spot on the table with other designers while most of the room started to walk out of the room to get back to work.

It took Gabriel twenty minutes to finally announce his presence to the designers that could have made or killed his brand. He was stiff and straightforward. In the end, Gabriel had changed his mind about two of Marinette’s designs during the day’s meeting, because apparently he got “inspired” by the haute couture show he saw the same week, so she needed to start from scratch with these two.

“After these five outfits are finished, I might ask for you to attend the final fitting and then move on to the second assignment.”

Marinette didn’t answer him, because he was already distracted by his timetable and when he crossed the threshold of the meeting room door, he was gone with the wind.

To say that Marinette was upset, was an understatement. Not much time was left until the deadline for the presentation for her designs and now he had deemed her work lower than mud and she had to start all over again. The most hurtful was the realisation she couldn’t devote her time to Chat.

In afternoon, Adrien was fidgeting on his spot more than usual, constantly being distracted and not listening to her directions. She could have sent him away due to his annoyingly changeable mood, but she couldn’t waste any time.

He was angry. And she had no idea why. Frankly, she didn’t even care. She only needed him for her job after all. Of course, she didn’t appreciate him lashing out on her when she already had a shitty day to being with, due to his shitty father.

“Can’t wait to retire at 26.” He sighed in answer to her another outburst she wasn’t exactly proud of, but it was easy to share her nasty thoughts with a guy she wasn’t fond of in the first place. She would have felt guilty if she hadn’t been blinded by her frustration towards the things that didn’t even concern him.

“Would you stand still for a minute!”

He huffed and puffed but unlike the wolf he wasn’t fatigued and he continued to add his unnecessary cold comments in the end of her rants that were directed mostly towards him.

The evening Marinette spent with Chat in tight embrace and intense dance of limbs that made her feel whole for some minutes and made her feel powerful and in charge of the near future, where she didn’t have to take into account what her boss needed and what her co-worker demanded of her.

---

February 1st

From: ChatNoir

I’ll land at 2:20pm, so don’t expect an answer before that. Hopefully I can manage to send a quick message. Don’t worry, I’ll be there tonight.

Marinette noticed Adrien in the building, but they didn’t interact even for a minute. This wouldn’t have happened without her pushing herself to focus solely on her work and not the social interaction which didn’t excite her at all.
The talk he had with his father regarding the extension she was given as an exception didn’t magically erase everything else he had done to her. It shouldn’t have been that hard after all, since she started working with Adrien later than others. Nothing could make her change her mind about him.

What mattered was Chat Noir in her arms, his body entangled with hers and her secrets and worries shared with him.

“I misjudged him a little. He’s not the worst.” His fingers slid down her spine and she shivered, because as always, her shirt was spilled on the floor and some of the buttons loosened from their seams that she sewed back every time.

He hummed and pressed his lower face into the crook of her neck, his breath tickling her skin. Of course he was glad she had changed her mind about Adrien, because he already had developed a resentment toward her annoying co-worker that often became the third person in their relationship, which he couldn’t stand at all.

He made her forget about the outside world, her work, and Adrien whose personality irked her so much that she couldn’t think rationally without constantly throwing him under the bus.

---

**February 2nd**

**From: ChatNoir**

_The sheets are soft. I'm so tired from work and the flight that I'm delusional._

Chat had left the country. She knew that, but she still had the strong pull to go back to the storage room and hope that he was there, waiting for her, but of course he wouldn’t be. He had never lied to her, so she was sure he was far away from her.

The deadline to submit her designs to Gabriel was closely approaching, only 10 days left to lay her talents over that simply. She had agreed to the job, so she had the matching responsibility. The looming weight of five new designs that she needed to produce in less than a month for the rest of the assignment stayed with her until she presented them all.

Her fingers were blistered and swollen from sewing by hand the fabrics that were difficult to work with. The bags under her eyes deepened to purplish blue from countless sleepless nights. She wasn’t able to double check her measurements on the model that would surely wear them during fashion week. It wasn’t good news to Marinette who was reaching the edge of depression as Adrien didn’t appear that week, nor the next week.

The number she was given from human resources department was outdated and she was losing her mind. It was possible to finish the designs without exact fitting, but she had a compulsive need to make it perfect and impress the head designer. Her dreams were crushed as Gabriel did of course not appreciate her turning in the designs late despite her missing male model.

---

**February 15th**

**To: ChatNoir**
"Please tell me you are still coming tonight. I need you.

“I missed the deadline, the extended deadline, because you weren’t here when I needed you to be. I waited for hours, my phone in hand, and you were unreachable! You can’t imagine the wraith I got from your father for submitting the outfits with imprecise measurements a day later, because you didn’t bother to show up!

Adrien in front of him had an emotionless face and dark bags under his eyes indicating that he supposedly had a night flight and came to work without a rest. It showed dedication and strong will, but she didn’t take it into mind.

“Your job is not my problem. I had to leave for Milan for two weeks, which in case you forgot I specifically mentioned. You were in charge of the meeting times and you had access to my assistant’s and my personal number. I thought an exceptional designer like you, would be able to finish the final alterations without a model.”

She gulped down the clump that was poking up from her throat, because she knew now that she had forgotten. She had actually forgotten he was abroad, because she had been too distracted with Chat’s absence. He was not to blame.

“I told you to meet me in my office, when the second assignment was posted on the web.”

“No, you told me to be here only when you specifically asked for me to attend. Don’t blame me for your mistakes!”

Marinette hated when he was right. She couldn’t bear to give him the satisfaction.

“Contrary to what you believe, I do not intend to harm your job at every possibility. You’re acting as if I’ve deceived you, which I have not. Don’t throw stones, when you live in a glasshouse.”

“I’ll have a final talk with my father and revoke my partnership with you. I’m no longer an inconvenience to Her Royal Highness.” He mocked her by bowing in her direction right before he turned around and stormed out through the door.

Her stubbornness to admit she was in the wrong left her with still half-finished designs, exasperation and no model.

“I missed you.”

Marinette blindly reached in the darkness until warm hands grasped her hands in theirs.

The warmth of his body was comfortable against hers and she didn’t want to let go. The time when he wasn’t around didn’t make her forget the feeling of his skin next to hers. He was able to make her let go of mundane worries. The only thing that mattered was him and how he fit with her.

When he left the room and realized that someone had turned the light off in the corridor, he had to blindly make his way towards the stairs.

Almost ready to go back upstairs to the level he was supposed to be meeting the assistant of the marketing campaign for the jackets for the new line, Adrien discovered he didn’t have his jacket on.

Mind unclear from the sleepless night and foolishly forgotten that Ladybug was still in the room, he marched back to retrieve the item and opened the door.
The bulb in the room was repaired.

“What are you doing here, Agreste? Shouldn’t you be on the way to getting me fired?” As if the venom was dripping down with her words, Marinette glared at him from inside the storage room, her notebook that she always had with her in the hands.

He didn’t know what to say or do, so he was just staring into space, not apprehending the truth that was right in front of him. Ladybug was Marinette. The woman he admired, but who he also shared a mutual dislike with. Scratch that, who completely loathed him.

With a heavy heart he closed off his emotions and in an icy tone he gave her the answer.

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” And then he left.

March 27th

To: ChatNoir

I haven’t heard back from you for over a month. I’m assuming you are busy with your job and catching up after the trip, since you haven’t been replying in the forum threads as well. I miss you.

April 10th

To: ChatNoir

If you’re here, please let me know.

May 15th

Access denied

The page you’re looking for cannot be found. Contact our administrator for additional information.

Chapter End Notes

Been in works since 2016, finally had motivation to finish after many glasses of wine, liquor and brandy. Don’t drink kids. My first time writing smut, had to put my poor beta through this. Take it, I don’t want to see it anymore.

xx

(if there are enough angry readers demanding a happier ending, I could potentially write it)
She was devastated, inconsolable.

She had been the person who thought everything was perfect, only to find out in the worst way that it wasn't.

The truth was in the open. When a guy was into you, he would do whatever it takes to be with you. It didn’t matter if he had work troubles or drama within family. If he wanted to contact you, he would, if he wanted to see you, he would and if he wanted a relationship, he would put in the work. Women often worked hard to keep making excuses for men. Now she was that silly woman.

Marinette was building up theories about his character to cling onto the idea that the last few months were something of real worth and not just wasted time and that the feelings he gave her were not just smoke and mirrors. She was holding onto that last sliver of hope that he might step back into her life.

The last time she had been with someone, way back when she was studying, she had had a feeling in her gut that this was it. To his merit, the guy had contacted her the next day. Receiving a text that it wasn’t going to work out—she was used to that as well. With Chat she didn’t even have that luxury. She knew Chat was a good person, he wouldn’t do that to her without a reason, right? Was she wrong to have trusted him?

What she couldn’t bear to face was plain and simple—he realised after some months that he couldn’t see it working out in long term. He might have regretted starting it in the first place. She didn’t quite realise she had cared that much.

She felt used and disrespected.

Nobody else around her knew how bad it felt. It hurt, the aching was unbearable. It felt like someone had punched her in the gut. The disregard was insulting.

She hadn’t just lost someone she had a sexual relationship with, she had also lost a good friend who she had trusted and loved. In the simplest terms they had been seeing each other casually for four months. The ground rules of their—agreement had never been clear in the first place. If she had been brave enough, they would have defined it for what it was—an actual relationship. He had wanted it and she denied him. Absence of complete honesty from the start was the final nail in the coffin.

There was never a thought in her mind that he had somehow found about who she was. They hadn’t shared details about their lives, especially during the last time they were together. And if by some coincidence, her identity was the reason for his departure, why would it have been a deal breaker? She was relatively unknown and hadn’t made any waves, not any she was aware of. Most likely he had never even heard of her.

She shouldn’t have insisted on keeping their identities secret. Maybe then he wouldn’t have left her. She put her heart out there and she got burned. It was as simple as that.

It had been almost two months since she last heard from him. Her job… she was able to wrap things up, because she had thrown herself into work every moment she was awake. After Adrien left his position as her model, her designs were worn by the alternate who had the same sort of build. The designs didn’t fit as well, but it had to do.
Gabriel wasn’t pleased with her actions, but due to her receiving no repercussions or no pay cuts, she figured he had at least been satisfied with her creations. She didn’t know what happened to Adrien, last she heard was that he travelled abroad again, right after he told Gabriel to release him from the partnership.

A few times, she almost called or texted Adrien’s personal number. Since his previous assistant had recently gone on paternity leave, the corporative number was no longer used, which was also the reason why HR department had outdated information when she had tried to get in contact with him. She wanted to apologise for her rash actions and cattiness, but she never went through with it.

She was ashamed, had been in wrong and certainly too prideful at certain points. Even now, she had too much pride to ask for assistance. She would struggle and put up walls around her and people would just end up leaving her.

Without a model or an assistant, she was an anomaly in the team. Her broken heart embodied as a sickness that was accompanied by sleepless nights, loss of appetite and detachment.

Others around her had noticed, of course. Her job was taking a toll on her. She worked overtime and spent long days in her office that sometimes turned into nights. Some looked at her dark under-eyes that she had pitifully tried to cover up with concealer. Some asked if she was okay. Some pretended nothing was abnormal.

Ultimately, Chat never came back for the jacket he had left behind. She didn’t dare ask around if anyone knew who it belonged to. He wouldn’t have wanted her to find out his identity this way. Odd, that she still cared about that, when he obviously didn’t.

The jacket was decently elegant, black, and plain compared to last season’s ones. Sometimes, when she felt particularly lonely, she would take it from the hanger from her office closet where she stored it and inhale the fabric, although his scent had long vanished.

She missed Chat’s presence in her life.

After sending another message in her low moment to the profile that hadn’t been updated since that night, she decided she had to move on. It was no use pining over someone, who didn’t give a damn about her. And the first thing she needed to do was to get rid of the jacket as it was a constant reminder of things she couldn’t have.

The clothing department was on the fifth floor and usually packed with items used for photo shoots, runway shows and events. Almost all of them were GABRIEL or other brands under Agreste Corporations umbrella that specialised in jewellery or shoes, except few additional and collaborative pieces.

The people in the department kept detailed records—if a jacket was missing, they would have it documented. If it was Chat’s personal clothing item, the department would then receive a new piece for their collection. She couldn’t keep it any longer.

Thankfully, as it was a lunch break, the only person present was the one managing the front desk. She set the jacket on the table and asked the man working there who it might belong to.

“GABRIEL, spring 2019 menswear, got it. I’ll check the database.” Considering it wasn’t yet released to the public, Chat must have been involved with GABRIEL’s designers in some way as her last project was about designing the spring wear. The thought made her feel queasy. He was much closer than she expected. It was a real possibility she had met him before, maybe even worked with him.
The time he spent on typing and checking the records, her hands were sweating and her pulse sped up. It was going to give her the closure she needed. She was prepared to find out who he was. She was prepared to associate a name and a face with her heartbreak.

“You’re right, it came from here.” Her heart skipped a beat. The man leaned closer to the computer screen, adjusting the glasses on his nose. “Lent out for promotional use for unlimited time on January 29th this year.”

“Promotional use?”

“It means that it’s being used for events that require Agreste Co. clothing. These events are in most cases private where there’s not much press around. Backwards thought process naming it in the records if you asked me. This jacket particularly was also used in marketing campaign according to the information listed or well, intended to be used as it actually wasn’t included in the final version.”

“There is no name attached?”

“Not in our system, you need to ask the marketing team who would have worked with him. I fear I can’t give you anything else.”

He was a model. Chat was a model. She wasn’t familiar with the models who participated in the campaign, but she could easily find it out. Now, she wasn’t even sure if she wanted to. The jacket wasn’t in her possession, she didn’t have anything to do with it anymore and thus she didn’t need to search for the person who it had been issued to.

Trying to distract herself from Chat’s possible identity and prevent herself from marching up to the marketing team, she focused on completing and perfecting her next assignment, which she had almost finished. As Gabriel Agreste often asked his subordinates to do things that were not in their job description, she didn’t want to rush and be bombarded with excessive tasks. After working so many hours in the last months, she still wasn’t doing enough.

Considering the unpredictable April weather, she unfortunately caught a small cold. She couldn’t afford to take out any sick days, so having a box of tissues around her desk to wipe her runny nose was a necessity.

When Marinette stepped into the building lobby before leaving to her lunch break, she was stopped by a woman she had seen before but never talked to. The woman thanked her in passing for delivering Adrien’s jacket to the clothing department, since it was presumed lost after Adrien appeared to have misplaced it. There was only one Adrien modelling for GABRIEL.

“Adrien Agreste?” Marinette wasn’t certain if the room was spinning or if she was going to pass out.

“Mhm. They had to rearrange the whole marketing campaign for that reason as there was no other sample available in that time frame.”

She didn’t feel good.

“Do you… have any idea… where he is now?” He knew about her. And he had made his decision.

“No, but I heard he had another business trip shortly after he came back from Italy in February. He has such a busy schedule that he can’t ever catch a break. Such a shame, he seems so miserable all the time. It must be hard to have such demanding father. I’m certain that he feels as he can’t leave the industry, even if he wanted to,” she said with a hint of sadness in her voice, “Is everything alright? You’re looking pale, almost green.” The woman caught sight of the tissue in her hand. “Oh, it must
be the cold, I hope you get well soon!”

Marinette nodded and left.

She skipped lunch to cry in her office.

SIX MONTHS AGO

After the candidates’ applications were reviewed by human resources management, the portfolios were sent to vacant positions department, where they were accompanied with feedback in the form of comments. The added comments only affected the choosing process if they leaned overly positive or negative. Otherwise, Gabriel Agreste, who made the executive decision, didn’t take the notes into account.

The selected designers didn’t see the comments themselves, but rumours in the building spread. Possible newcomers were an easy topic to chat about during coffee breaks.

The selection for the open position in the design team was in its final phase. Marinette’s application had been outstanding. She had done her fair share of unpaid internships, since working for GABRIEL required previous experience in fashion field. She had graduated without honours, but two of her professors had written reference letters, which was what actually counted. It didn’t hurt that Gabriel Agreste was familiar with her work. Now, she only had to wait few days to find out, if she got the job or not.

So far, Marinette’s circle of associates from Agreste Corporatives consisted of Gabriel Agreste himself—as she had competed in his design contests when she was in college–Chloé, who used to go to her class for almost a decade and who couldn’t be nice, even if she was paid to be; and Jasmine from the Human Resources, who conducted her initial interview and who loved to gossip.

Marinette and Jasmine met in the morning before she received the results of the contest in a café down the road, which with its homey atmosphere and muted earth tones relieved Marinette from the stress.

Jasmine loved to add spoonfuls of sugar into her macchiato that she also topped with whipped cream and cinnamon. Marinette couldn’t understand how someone could drink such a sweet drink. She thought she had seen it all during the time she worked with her parents in their bakery.

After short greetings and catching up on recent news, Jasmine jumped in to involve her into the fashion and office rumour mill.

“You didn’t hear it from me, but I heard someone wrote in your portfolio that your designs were tacky, juvenile and only place they belonged was a trash can.” Marinette almost spit out her coffee and raised her eyebrows at the information laid out to her. “And that wasn’t all! Apparently that whole comment had consisted of personal attacks and insults on your person, not just work. Incredibly unprofessional.”

That was surprising; she hadn’t spent enough time in the building to possibly have already made a negative and long-lasting impression. The opinions were subjective, but this went beyond the line. It was no longer constructive criticism or a blunt remark, but unnecessarily rude and frankly insulting comment. She trusted Jasmine, so she had no reason to believe she would lie to her. Not about that.

“You remember who it was?” For a person working in HR, it wasn’t that unusual that Jasmine wasn’t skilled at putting names and faces together, since she only had to deal with facts and numbers.
“I can’t recall a name. Blonde hair, attractive—might be a model I’m not sure—close to Mr. Agreste and moves in high places, often seen with that girl, who can be quite mean and clingy. Oh, one time she came to the reception desk, right, and then started arguing with the poor guy who was attending the desk that day about why she didn’t get the employee of the month award. Unbelievable!”

There was one mean girl she knew very well and if she wasn’t wrong, she hadn’t changed a bit. “…Chloé?”

Jasmine gulped down another sip of her sugar bomb. “Yeah, that’s her!”

Chloé only had one friend—if you could call him that—who happened to be blond, a model and close to Gabriel. Daddy’s boy, grown up child star, the richest most famous male model in the country—that’s what everyone else said about him. She had no idea what she had done to offend Adrien Agreste. She hadn’t even met him. In her teenage years, she even used to have an embarrassing crush on him.

“Great, then I know to stay away.”

Marinette hadn’t even been selected for the job yet and she already had an enemy in the company.

No wonder he never contacted her again.

People were rarely what you expected. Often the projection they wanted to see never quite matched up to the ideal.

Online interaction was nothing. It was words on a screen.

She knew she had been idealising Chat Noir and that he couldn’t possibly measure up to the image she’d created in her head. She hoped that if she finally met him, his flaws and the differences between them would change her mind about him. Unfortunately, the reverse had happened. She had only grown more in love with him and got involved in a sexual relationship that could have potentially turned into a romantic one.

It was perhaps the worst feeling she had ever experienced and had to come to terms with. She feared it was not going to stop.

The picture she had created regarding Adrien was totally false if Chat had been sincere with her, which she was sure of. She had taken an immediate dislike. The forced teamwork had unintentionally led to conversations that were not just limited to work, but she had been stubborn and not looked past the first impression that seemed so uncharacteristic of him now.

They had actually gotten along when she allowed it to happen. She had never quite seen how the thorn in their relationship had mostly been her, not him. He was hostile only to match her disdain towards him.

That day in the rain… he had acted like he didn’t know what he had written about her designs in the portfolio. He had taken her for a fool as she wouldn’t have known what he had commented and pretended there was no ill history between them. She didn’t like liars, and especially not when it concerned her.

From that moment on, she had justified her hatred based on that one comment and the fake facade he had put up around her. If she had been honest with herself, she would have recognised the hatred as mostly just misdirected anger that she had displaced onto him.
Maybe she shouldn’t have taken his opinion so personally, but it was hard to let go of the initial showing. Maybe she had been wrong about him. Maybe there was more to the story; she just had never bothered to read the next chapter.

Though, she had to accept the reality—he had cut her off. It’s scary that some people just had that switch and were perfectly able to move on like nothing happened. He obviously didn’t care about her anymore.

She was partly to blame for it, she had messed up, but it didn’t fully excuse his behaviour. He could have said goodbye, he could have said something. Business trip or not, he found out and went silent. It was still painful and disappointing.

If he wasn’t the one to reach out, it had to be her. She had to be the one to swallow her pride and make amends.

It took her two days of preparing herself to call the personal number he had given her when they still worked together and which she had thrown in her desk drawer under all the clutter assuming she didn’t need it. She pushed the digits on her phone and with a shaking hand she raised it to her ear and waited.

‘The number you have dialled is not in use.’ The message repeated and Marinette had to disconnect the call. It was as if the world didn’t even want them to be together. An entire universe conspiring against them.

Still, she had to try one more time.

As she was close to the HR department, she didn’t bother sending them a message and asked straight from the desk for Adrien’s contact number. Adrien wasn’t listed in the corporate contact database as he had to be officially part of Agreste Co. associated modelling agency. It was ridiculous, considering that all his contracts and offers went through Gabriel’s assistant Nathalie.

Due to his close contact with the higher ups, his personal contacts were still saved and could be shared to the design department when there was a corresponding request. Marinette, eligible for the request, thus asked for Adrien’s new phone number. Unfortunately, even they didn’t have it.

“You know models”—administrator gestured with hands—“insane fans. Not terribly unusual to get harassed by them and needing to increase the security. Adrien switches phone numbers quite often.”

“You’re looking for Agreste?” The guy with a beard and multiple earrings in his ear appeared from behind her and leaned on the table.

When Marinette affirmed it he spoke again.

“He was upstairs in Gabriel’s office just now.”

The only reason he was there was because this was his job. Yet again his schedule had been so busy that he had to wonder if he’d ever get a next day off. He envied the ones who had a regular, consistent and secure 9 to 5 job.

He was prepared to pack his things again when his father asked to see him after the driver picked him up from the airport. The time zone difference and overnight flight had really messed up his sleep and although it was around 3pm, the only place he wished to be was in his apartment bed which he hadn’t been able to use for at least four months. Living in hotels most of the time had its perks, but for once he missed the time when he had been constantly locked in his home mansion.
The day he flew in to New York, he had a shoot right away, and after that he had been taken to a studio where he needed to be until way after midnight. Contrary to popular belief, he rarely managed to explore the sites and do touristy things. Business trip to him meant double amount of work and no energy to even leave the hotel, when he was finally done.

He had to constantly wear the expensive suits and tailored clothing, which made flying, even in business class, a difficult time. Work hours stretched into long nights, which in turn lead up to the parties and social gatherings he was invited to attend. The mornings were always early and the amount of sleep he could get insufficient.

If the hotel personnel weren’t aware of his profession, they often assumed him to be one of the flight crew of some kind of commercial airline as the hotel room he occupied was as pristine and impersonal as it had been before his arrival.

The only redeeming feature of another exotic trip—as the media liked to call his work obligation—was that he had a familiar presence with him—his bodyguard since he started modelling. Surrounded by people, who were constantly doing coke and had a permanent smell of smoke and booze stuck to them, affected him and having a family member or well, closest to a family member with him was a relief. Sometimes he wondered if Gorilla cared more about his well-being than his own father.

This industry was not pretty as much as people would like to think it was. His father had been extremely strict and controlling, but due to this he had thankfully had a tame and not sexualised youth. He had never touched or desired drugs and other addictive substances, and people he worked closely with could be trusted—Gabriel had made sure of it. Compared to other models, it hadn’t been that bad for him. He should be grateful, some would have said, which was appalling as they really believed what other models had to endure was the expected norm.

In the end, his father had left for his meeting already and the office was vacant save for his assistant. He hadn’t even bothered coming to see him after not seeing him for months. It really made him wonder why his father made him wait if he never showed up. When Natalie informed him of his next week’s schedule that she had organised and handed to him, he accepted it with a short nod and left the room.

Walking back to the stairs to get back to the car that was waiting for him to drive him to his apartment, he stopped when he came face to face with Marinette.

Her expression didn’t betray her emotions. She just took one look at him and entered her office. When she was out of his sight, he exhaled and put his hand over his chest trying to calm down his heart rate. He had dreaded the moment it would happen, but now, when it was over, he didn’t know what he had even expected.

She had hatred in her heart that was deeper than her need for truce.

He walked over to her office and heard a sneeze followed by Marinette blowing her nose. The door was ajar. He owed it to himself and Marinette to get things out there, before they agreed to part ways. He took the unclosed door as an affirmation that she didn’t mind being disturbed and as an invitation to come in, so he opened it—closing it completely afterwards—and stepped into her office where he had been many times before.

Marinette sat on her desk, next to the box of tissues and wasn’t at all surprised to see him entering into the room.

“Do you know?” He needed confirmation, even though the answer was obvious. As resourceful as
she was—she had figured it out without question.

She didn’t respond.

He put his hands in his front pockets and waited near the door. If he stepped any closer, it would be more difficult.

“You left me without letting me have any say in the matter!” Marinette wasn’t looking at him, but out of the window. It had started raining again.

“What was I supposed to do? We were never on the same page.”

“You could have sent a message, you could have called! You just went ahead and made the choice to end it alone. You knew and you didn’t say anything!” She rose from her seat on the table and looked at him. It wasn’t loathing she was speaking from, but hurt and the feeling of betrayal. He hadn’t wanted this to happen, but it did.

He took a step closer. Her hands tightened into fists at her sides, struggling for control over the situation in hand and holding herself together to prevent falling apart.

“I should have told you when I found out, but I didn’t know how. I didn’t know how to react and how to confront the fact that you despised me and wanted nothing to do with me. We wouldn’t be in this position, if we had been honest with each other from the beginning.”

“So it’s my fault? Is that what you’re saying?”

“No! No… it’s not. I don’t know how to be around you. You disrespected me at every turn and you had this hatred towards me from the start that for the life of me I cannot understand.”

“That’s not true!” He continued on.

“I tried to make amends with you and you didn’t listen. I was willing to look past our differences—I wanted this to work out. I know you were under a lot of pressure and it may have been easy for you to dump all the shit you were dealing with on me, but there’s a line and you crossed it that day. I thought it was easier if I ended it before both of us got hurt.”

In his perspective, he had done the sane and emotionally healthy thing by ending things with her. Their friendship was over, regardless. He had wanted something, which he was never going to have. No matter how much he wished things could go back to the way that they were, they just couldn’t.

Adrien turned away as Marinette crossed her arms and leaned forward. It was already a sinking ship, might as well watch it burn.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now? No matter what definition the relationship we had fell in, I considered you to be my friend. Past couple of months I was worried sick not knowing what happened to you until I just had to accept I was not worth your time and spend the rest of my life questioning what it was I did wrong.” She put her hands up in surrender. “You know what? That's fine. It doesn’t matter anymore. I just wish you'd have told me.”

It seemed that they both had difficulties recognising what either of them was basing their arguments on. Connecting the relationship that they had in the forum as Ladybug and Chat Noir with the dynamic between Adrien and Marinette wasn’t an easy task to accomplish.

“I didn’t expect things to turn out like this.”
“And you think I did? You think I wanted him to be you?” He drew in a sharp breath and she was shocked at her own foulness. She was acting like a brat. “I-I’m sorry, this was uncalled for.”

The feelings of anger, resentment and sense of loss—it poisoned her mind, she couldn’t think clearly. Chat had often reminded her to take responsibility for her actions. Why couldn’t she follow his advice now, when it was the deciding factor, whether they could get out of this mess or not? She wasn’t just burning the ship, she was dropping a bomb on it.

“Marinette, what did you think was going to happen?”

It was evident that he wasn’t interested in restoring their relationship. Shame on her for expecting anything different. She was only making things worse and it was too late to retreat.

“You can’t do that to me.” Her voice caught in her throat and she was on the verge of tears. She had made a mistake once and she was not going to make that mistake again. “I wish you never came back.”

She just broke down.

Marinette took another tissue from the box and swiped at her eyes with it before blowing her nose again. She hated feeling so vulnerable around him. She had to reapply mascara when it was over, right now she didn’t care about how she looked. He hadn’t given shit about her appearance before anyway.

She was resigned to the fact that she was going to lose him either way after this conversation. She wasn’t stupid. She didn’t deserve his forgiveness or his respect.

Adrien wanted to step out of the office for a minute and take a breath. He had had time to think about their situation, but it seemed that Marinette had just recently found out and without intending to do so, he had rubbed salt in a fresh wound.

The standard disclaimer as to why one shouldn't get involved with someone at work was that it was difficult to avoid awkwardness and embarrassment when things had gone sour or when the colleagues kept making inappropriate comments about things that didn’t concern them. They didn't work directly together on a daily basis, but they had worked on the same project, and once in a while they would attend the same meetings and events. Absolutely no contact in their line of work was out of the question.

He thought she would be glad if she had to interact with him only when it really couldn’t be avoided. She had always complained about her co-worker when he was in the role of Chat Noir.

Her present-day reaction to his abrupt departure spoke volumes. He hadn’t considered that she valued what they had as Ladybug and Chat Noir more than to be swayed by their dysfunctional relationship in public as co-workers. He had made an assumption and been wrong.

“I want you to know that I never meant to hurt you. It just turned out that way.”

Marinette looked crushed. She was crying and he couldn’t do anything about it. He wasn’t even able to hold her.

“It all happened so quickly, I acted without thinking and made a decision to shut myself off from the situation. I didn’t understand exactly how I felt, and had to process things for few days. I focused only on avoiding my own discomfort.” He threaded a hand through his hair.

“I deleted my account the same night I found out who you were and couldn’t undo it later. Next
thing I knew I was on flight to New York and far away from these circumstances.” In retrospect, there was so much he could have done.

She was leaning on the table blankly staring at the wall.

“I don’t need your reasons.”

“Despite what people often think of me, I’m used to giving and not getting a lot in return. Eventually, I don’t have anything left to give. I just… really didn’t think you’d want to see me again. You wouldn’t understand.” Marinette straightened and lifted her chin.

“No, I don’t understand. Why are you telling me these things? You started it when you insulted my designs and verbally attacked me for no apparent reason. I didn’t know–what had I ever done to you?”

His mouth was slightly open and he was utterly confused.

“I have never insulted your designs.”

“You left a comment on my portfolio with offensive remarks, don’t you remember?”

“I don’t provide feedback on designers’ portfolios. It’s a conflict of interest, because my notes might influence my father’s final decision. I swear I’ve never seen the inside of your portfolio.”

“…If it wasn’t you, then who–” She suddenly remembered that conversation from café.

It was almost eerie thinking back and remembering Adrien’s speech to remind her that it wouldn’t work out if she refused to communicate clearly. He told her exactly what was going to happen, and it did.

“The things I said–” He raised his head. “I shouldn’t have assumed. I’m sorry, I got it all mixed up.”

At some point they just had to put an end to it.

In a horrible way, she had been sabotaging herself all along. She had been the worst version of herself when she was around him and her actions had only been amplified in her misery and spite.

Adrien had been someone she already didn’t like, an easy target for her to go after and take her anger and frustration out on. She had acted like a child and started problems where there didn’t need to be any. Instead of making amends, she berated him for months.

The endless conflict had borne out of mutual animosity, and it had been too much for either of them to overcome.

“There's no excuse for my behaviour. I was lashing out. I was being immature and petty, and saying everything I could possibly say to hurt you. I attacked you on personal level multiple times. I allowed it to get this far, I really am sorry.”

His hand moved to scratch the back of his head—a nervous tick she had caught on to during the time they kept on arguing over meaningless things, never settling out their disputes.

“No, I'm the one that's sorry. I'm not going to try and fool you here by saying that, you know, we were close and talked about our issues outside all that. We both made the same mistakes. I've said some things that I regret saying and I'm fairly certain it's the same vice versa. I don’t think it was fair for you to treat me the way that you did as my partner.” It was hard not to take it personally when someone treated you poorly, even if it had very little to do with you. She hung her head in shame as
he carried on.

“I want you to know… that I meant everything I said in that room and I’m—I’m truly sorry for putting you through the uncertainty—it wasn’t my intention to cause you any pain.”

“We can’t change what’s happened.”

As much as she wanted to hold Chloé accountable for what she did—setting things in motion in the first place—it was Marinette’s own fault for misunderstanding and presuming the rumours were true without seeing any actual proof or asking Adrien himself. He had tried and she had shut him down.

“Why did you think it was me?”

“Chloé.”

“Ah. Makes sense.” He nodded.

“How can you stand to be around her?”

“I have an exceptional ability to blankly space out through egotistical monologues.” Adrien said with no added humour in his tone and she gave a mirthless laugh. He shifted from one foot to the other.

“She’s not always nice, but she’s… the only friend I have.”

Chloé had no respect for anyone, but wanted everyone else to respect her. She couldn’t have it both ways. The only means for her to have some sort of self-worth was to make others feel isolated and unsupported. If Chloé was all Adrien had for companionship, Marinette shouldn’t have been taken aback by Adrien’s lack of communication skills. Networking—he aced it, but he had without fail been deprived of a sincere friendship.

“Why didn’t you—“

Adrien shrugged. “You refused to listen. I thought there was no use in talking to you.” Averting his eyes, Adrien fixated on the trails rain left on the window glass, water trickling down. “I wish things had been different and we could go back and just erase all the bad things that have happened but we can’t… we just have to go with it, right?”

He was not going to silently torture himself knowing he wanted something with her that he was never going to have. It would never be like it was.

“I… I would have told you… the truth about myself, but I had too many doubts. I thought you’d be disappointed in knowing who I actually was. I’m not that amazing gamer Ladybug in real life. I didn’t want you to think of me any differently.”

He scoffed. “I don’t give a fuck about that. Do you remember our first interaction, the first thing I wrote to you in the forum?”

She had been playing AkumaCity on Stoneheart level the week the game came out. On the forum thread she had offered a solution for everyone how to defeat him, since nobody else before her had been able to.

Unfortunately, she hadn’t known about one of the key elements, which was purifying the butterfly. In forgetting to do so, the game restarted with increased difficulty that was almost impossible to get through without knowing the cheat codes. She had gotten so much heat from the users that had been starting out and couldn’t get on the easy levels. Of course, she blamed herself for ruining everyone’s experience. The situation had been her fault.
That’s when Chat Noir sent her a private message and offered to help her. She had shown the most vulnerable side of herself to him and he had given her the courage to pull off the most incredible game move and defeat the main villain Hawk Moth, at least temporarily.

“When I talked with you, I didn’t focus on your insecurities or your mistakes. I wanted you to get better, you had potential, and I wanted to help you in the game. In that moment, I knew that whoever you were behind the screen, I lov–” He choked on his words. “I would... I would want to be with you.”

Marinette touched the tear duct of her eye with her middle finger and turned her face away, sucking in her lips and blinking repeatedly as her eyes had welled up with tears.

“And I still feel the same way right now.” His face looked pained. “I don't know what else to tell you at this point of time.”

He took a step back and he positioned himself ready to leave the room.

All the blood rushed out of her body.

“Adrien, wait!” He stopped and looked back, his hand set on the door handle.

“I–I need you to know that I wasn’t completely honest with you. I should’ve said it before… I wanted a relationship. I was just too scared to admit it. “I screwed up. I’m aware that our situation is complicated… If there's ever anything I can do, anything you need, I will be there, just call.” His hand dropped from the handle. “You have my word on that. You don’t have to be alone.” ‘You don’t have to choose to isolate yourself.’

“See you around.” He said quietly.

It was as if he had taken her heart and shattered it on the floor. She didn’t want it to be over, but she couldn’t convince him to stay.

“Yeah.”

“Bye.” His body was stiff and his smile didn’t seem genuine. He couldn’t shake off the feeling that he was purposefully denying himself the happiness, but he didn’t know how to fix this. Every man had their right to destroy their own life.

“Bye.” She felt as if she was sucked dry and got stuck in a void. One of the strongest feelings she wished she was able to get over was the feeling of regret— if only she’d done things differently, she could have saved it. She had sentenced herself to a slow death by thousand cuts.

It just didn’t work out. And it was her fault, she was an idiot.

Maybe it was her fate to go through heartbreaks. Always yearning and never learning. She had just hoped this time things were different. For the most fleeting second, she hoped he would turn back and not leave again. He didn’t.

She did the best she could given the circumstances.

He closed the door after him and inhaled deeply, looking up to the ceiling, trying desperately to not let the tears fall that had formed in his eyes. It was so hard to keep his face and voice unaffected by her words. At least they had closure.
He was used to hiding a great pain beneath the surface. Having to walk away sometimes was one of the hardest things one could do.

This was life. It was really not fair. It just fucking sucked.

Self-blame, misguided anger, depression, lack of appetite—he had to endure it all last few months. He felt like he was losing it. Being near her, having feelings for her, but not being able to be with her had already been agonising. She was not to blame, she had set the boundaries and he had agreed on these terms. Every time he was reminded that she didn’t feel the same way about him. It had been bearable pain until now.

Ladybug—the forum and her presence in his life had been the only things he was excited about that weren’t beforehand decided by his father. His mother was not around anymore, and he had suffered greatly from it, his father more so as he had never been the same. He grew up with no friends, aside from Chloé and even he knew it was a shallow and unbalanced relationship. He was always expected to be someone, an image of perfection. In reality, he felt …empty.

Adrien hadn’t chosen to become a model, because of the lifestyle. He hadn’t chosen his path and made his own choices.

Ideally, if you worked for your family, you should have expected to be treated like any other employee, but Adrien had felt obligated to stay in the family business even after he became an adult and constantly received job offers that he would have considered taking if he had gathered enough courage.

He didn’t want to disappoint his father, but it seemed that he did it anyway without even trying to. He didn’t have much to lose, just his father’s respect or what was left of it. All he did was criticise him and he didn’t deserve it. He had to finally realise that he didn’t have to take it anymore and could dictate his own future.

The most important thing in life was to recognise what in life was the most important. And at times, gratification had to be delayed.

Gabriel Agreste was in a heated argument with someone on the phone.

“Are you incapable of following the notes I left? We can’t pay people out of your stupidity again.” She shouldn’t have been eavesdropping on their conversation.

The legal team of Agreste Co. was… something else. The arguments about dishonest values and disagreements between merchants and suppliers were frequent, but settled down quietly accompanied with exchanges of large sums of money. In this industry everyone knew everyone.

It didn’t necessary mean that the company’s business practices were either unethical or shady. It was just easier to not spend resources and burden the employees with meaningless lawsuits that only benefited the accusers, who most often were either antagonistic business associates or unsatisfied customers. It might have been immoral, but the aggrieved agreed to it.

As fashion was a business, it was naïve and erroneous for the world to assume that a fashion related corporation itself held a larger responsibility than the responsibility of company’s shareholders just because of its general accessibility to the public. It was unavoidable that the questions of ethical background and concept of capitalism affected the sales, but the management with Gabriel Agreste in front took care of even the smallest mishaps. His reputation was the most essential for him.

“I’m not cutting another deal with them,” he said stubbornly, “I don’t care what he says.”
Marinette raised a hand to knock on the door a couple of times, but the intensity of the conversation took a turn for the worse and she didn’t dare to interrupt him. She couldn’t leave as it was rare occasion, when Gabriel didn’t opt for working from his home office, and she didn’t plan on stepping into the ghostly Agreste mansion in the near future.

All she had to do was keep the door closed and wait out the storm.

During the eight months she had been working directly for him, she liked to believe she had gotten to know Gabriel well. He got a little frustrated sometimes, he screamed, he yelled. He didn’t tolerate disobedience. Nor tardiness.

To her relief, she grew out of the phase of being late to everywhere during the last years of school. It would be insolent of her to not show up in time for the meetings and appointments—yet it wasn’t on top of the list of priorities for Gabriel as he often made his employees wait for him.

However, Gabriel was wise to the downfall among others of his status. He was a good businessman and due to this he handled the company affairs with absolute professionalism. Despite his unpleasant calculating and overly controlling personality, he could also be polite and even sympathetic at times, so that he was very effective at getting people to do his way. He was good at persuading people to succumb to his wishes seemingly with no care for them.

He had been her favourite designer since she was young and she had been dreaming about working for him for just as long. Since coming to work for him, she still respected him and appreciated his hard work, undeterred by his many faults.

“He’s not expecting you.” Marinette quickly turned around to the voice and met a stoic-faced Nathalie, her arms securely crossed around the clipboard. She felt embarrassed for getting caught listening into private conversation as she could have very well heard confidential information and she knew that an explanation was in order.

“I didn’t make an appointment.”

“Mr. Agreste is not available until 4pm. You should come back after his afternoon meeting and I’ll see if he’s able to make time for you, Ms. Dupain-Cheng.”

“I–“

“Send her in.” Nathalie looked towards the closed door—surprise evident on her face—and she took a step back. Marinette hadn’t even noticed when the shouting inside the room had stopped. Gabriel apparently either had an impeccable hearing or he had a microphone hidden outside his office entrance.

Nathalie jerked her head slightly in the direction of Gabriel’s office—a sign of approval—and Marinette took a deep breath before she pushed the door open.

“Is there a reason you’re here? Do you need another extension? Or perhaps you want to resign as you’re making me doubt in your ability to do well under pressure.” He said nonchalantly, not paying attention to her whatsoever.

She didn’t handle it well, when authority figures talked down at her, in particular people she looked up to, and occasionally she had shed some tears out of frustration. She couldn’t appear weak in front of him now.

“I take full responsibility for any discomfort I caused in relation to the design project. Adrien was not at fault.”
Gabriel looked up from his desk for a second, but continued typing on his laptop.

She couldn’t make things worse for Adrien, when he wasn’t even in present. It didn’t do any good to completely ruin his parental relationship and do more damage than anticipated as she had no right to involve herself. She didn’t know how much neglect and emotional abuse he had endured, so she had to be careful wording what she said next.

“Did you really think it was in his best interest to pursue the partnership when his schedule was already full with the business trips and events? He wasn’t in the list of available models. There was no need to double his workload.”

“You and him never got along. In this line of work, you have to establish a good chemistry with the team, so it can succeed, regardless of how you may feel deep down. Adrien was perfectly capable of managing multiple commitments at once.” He took a pen from his breast pocket and signed the paper next to his laptop before he resumed his work on the computer.

She shouldn’t have been taken by surprise that Gabriel had known about the issues between her and Adrien and he had assigned him to be her model anyway.

“Since he was young, you have made him submit to the decisions that you would like refusing to consider how he may feel about them.”

Finishing typing the sentence, Gabriel leaned his elbows on the table, chin resting on the hands clenched in front of him, and focused his attention entirely on her.

“Did he tell you that?” His voice didn’t waver.

“You wouldn’t know. You’ve never had time to listen to him.”

Marinette had seen it—the cracking facade and serious emotional issues he took such meticulous care of not to show to anyone. He needed to define himself outside of his father’s influence and decide what was best for him himself.

“Adrien is allowed to leave the corporation just like all the other employees. I cannot prohibit it.”

“He hasn’t brought up the topic to you at all, is that what you’re saying?”

Gabriel was quiet. There was a tiny hole in the wall behind his chair from the time an enraged business partner threw a pencil at him. It wasn’t painted over, but Gabriel’s desk didn’t have any pens lying around either.

She waited for Gabriel to make the move that she expected—tell her to leave and reprimand her for wasting his valuable time.

“Marinette?” That was the first time he had addressed her with her first name.

“I have heard the stories about myself and they are for the most part fairly accurate.” He sighed. “I do care about my employees and my son. I’m certain you have noticed that this job isn’t easy. And it’s especially hard when you realise that you are hurting the people you care about.”

“I appreciate that you have come here and voiced your opinion. You have exceptional talent and despite your young age, I once wondered…” His voice trailed off and he looked at the small picture frame on his otherwise tidy desk. He coughed into his hand and adjusted his black-framed glasses.

Marinette raised her eyebrows and she felt a little bit uncomfortable standing there in the middle of
the room. This conversation had turned more personal than she had predicted. This was the most emotion Gabriel had ever knowingly shown. Nonetheless, his demanding job and any amount of grief he was feeling didn’t excuse the distance towards his son and depriving him of his freedom.

“I don’t think anything I could have said would have changed his mind.”

Her stomach was in knots. He stood up and walked over to the cabinet, where he pulled out a single sheet of paper from the drawer.

“The HR department gave me this a few days ago,” he gestured to the paper he was holding, a notice. Her eyes widened—he outright confirmed what she had suspected.

“Adrien is constantly being featured in the media, his absence will be noticeable. He agreed to cooperate and finish his previously scheduled commitments to ease the transition, so it’s not as if things have to immensely change here.” He stroked the wedding ring on his finger and looked at the calendar that hung on the wall next to him. “This is definitely something I have to share, but not right away.”

The conversation was now over. He didn’t hold back information and if he suspected anything about her and Adrien, he didn’t show it. At this point, she wouldn’t have been taken by surprise, if he actually had put two and two together.

As she was leaving, he spoke up and requested her to bring him the files on the next show arrangements from downstairs.

When she asked the reception desk to see the files, their response was limited to affirming that they hadn’t received the file folder yet. The receptionist did give her a sealed envelope her full name written on it in cursive. She thanked the secretary and took it back to her office.

She opened it without a second thought and unfolded the note.

Inside, there was an e-mail address.

Chapter End Notes

I hope it was worth the wait. I had it already written a month ago, but I’m in grad school as is my beta and she simply didn’t have time. This is the fic I’m the most proud of, as I have never done so much research for a single story before. I’m happy how it turned out and I feel that I really pushed my writing limits. Might write explicit fics again or I might not, I lean towards the latter.

A fic that inspired my story in the first place.

Thanks for reading! If you have any questions, let me know. If you want to chat about the show in general, you are free to do so.

xx

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