No Ring? No Problem

by Word_Devourer

Summary

Adrien Agreste's greatest secret is that he's the alter-ego of one of Paris' heroes, Chat Noir. His second biggest secret is that he doesn't actually have a miraculous. Not that that's going to stop him from fighting alongside Ladybug. After all, Paris needs all the heroes it can get.

Notes

This is prompted, as you might be aware, by the blog 'terrible-miraculous-ladybug-aus' who, despite their name, still acquires a few diamonds in the rough.
Link to the post in question is:

So, that in mind, enjoy some not-actually-really-crack content!
Adrien Agreste: Like Batman, but a Cat (Catman?)

As Adrien Agreste, make that Chat Noir, sat, half crushed in the hand of giant stone monster, he could feel the malice in the thing’s eyes, and, more viscerally, feel his ribs groaning.

He gave his best grin, trying not to show the slowly intensifying pain.

“All right,” he said, “Now’s the moment when you surrender, because Ladybug has a plan.”

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It was almost a case of right place, right time, except, instead of being the 77th caller, he’d been the person who had already been 3/4ths of the way to superhero when there had been a sudden demand for superheroes.

Adrien Agreste had lived a sheltered life. His father had been constantly worried about his safety, since his mother had… vanished. As such, he’d been kept inside to a degree that probably violated certain childcare laws.

Not to say, of course, that Adrien had nothing to do. He’d had lessons in Chinese, piano, fencing, and numerous other subjects, with some of the finest teachers money could buy. And, of course, with such a concerned father, he had been signed up for self-defense classes. A dozen different disciplines, probably thousands of hours, by now. He had never even been in an alley, but if someone ever came at him in one, they’d be in for a surprise.

Adrien, for his part, hadn’t minded, so much; it wasn’t that the lessons didn’t get tedious (they did) or that they weren’t exhausting (they were). No, he had loved them because, well, they reminded him of one of his few outlets. Comics. Old, new, it didn’t matter; if it was a classic superhero, he’d read it, and every time he took a hit, or fell down, those same images rose in his head.

After all, superpowers might not exist, but superheroes? If Batman could do it, then Adrien Agreste, would be ready if Paris ever needed a caped crusader of its own.

Of course, it was hard to be a superhero from inside your bedroom, but, if nothing else, small spaces become less boring when you find creative ways to navigate them. At first, he’d been content to test his skills on the tiny climbing wall. Then, when that had become boring, he’d found new challenges; make it to the second floor with only the fire-pole, or only the skateboarding ramp, or make it to the ceiling from the lower level, or…

He may have, well, cracked a few bones from bad falls, and yes, one of his fingers still bent oddly, but he wasn’t about to tell his father (Imagine the look he’d give him), and the results had been remarkable. He only used steps for appearance’s sake, now. He could sprint on the narrow edge of the glass rails without even worrying about falling. Past the first few months, he’d even realized that if he could open the window, which he could, he could go wherever he wanted.

Except, of course, that he couldn’t.

Adrien Agreste was a celebrity. Adrien Agreste, leaping across rooftops, or down seemingly impossible heights, or scaling buildings, any of it, would land him on the headline of a tabloid talking about how Gabriel Agreste had clearly had a child with a spider-woman (or, considering the quality of said tabloids, a spider-man was entirely possible).
So, if he was going to do anything outside, nobody could know it was him.

Well. He was rich, with a sizeable discretionary fund to himself (courtesy of his father’s attempts to teach him financial responsibility. It really hadn’t done much). As it stood, all it had taken was a bit of careful spending, and a metric ton of video tutorials, and he had… Well, it wasn’t the most super of suits, but it had excellent mobility, and certainly didn’t look like anything Adrien Agreste would be seen in.

And so, in a fairly well-crafted leather catsuit, Adrien Agreste headed outside.

He’d almost lost the whole game when someone had asked who he was, but had managed a swift recovery by giving his name as The Black Cat, which he later amended to Chat Noir, just to be… Suffice to say, it sounded better to the ear.

He’d been pleased with his success, and, to the best of his knowledge, he’d gone mostly unnoticed, both as Adrien, and as Chat Noir, for well over a year. And then, he hit the goldmine; a chance to go to school. Maybe his father didn’t want him to, but he wasn’t his father; he couldn’t live with only one friend. And so, he’d set out for the world, and like any good superhero, (though, if he was honest, it was mostly just to soothe his surprisingly agitated nerves) he had packed his suit.

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A fine young lad, seemingly well-built, physically, at least, to wield the Black Cat Miraculous. And would he…

He made for the steps, at a jog, and then… stopped. He looked over, eyes a strange mixture of fear and concern.

A car curled around the corner.

The boy looked down at him, back at the car, and came to a decision.

He sprinted, faster than he would have believed, (Clearly some kind of athlete.) and skidded to a halt, scooping up the cane.

“Are you alright, sir?” he asked, glancing back.

“Much better now, thank you.” He made it to his feet. “Thank you for-” he said, but…

The boy was sprinting for the steps, with that same impressive turn of speed from before. No time to talk, it seemed.

But no luck. His guardians seemed to have made it there first by a blink.

He stood there, and looked at a window, seeming to contemplate it as an entry, and then he sighed, and the resistance dropped from his shoulders.

Oh yes, he’d be the perfect candidate

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Adrien had, of course, a good conception of alternate universes; after all, how many times had those comics rebooted, by now? He was well acquainted with the idea that some things stayed the same, despite changing the circumstances around them, while others did not. So, to learn that things had gone a bit differently wouldn’t have surprised him. He probably wouldn’t have considered what was
about happen, though.

An argument with his father had sent him back to his room, unable to handle things.

And then there had been the sounds of conflict, and he’d forgotten about it.

He stared out the window.

_That was a monster, a proper monster; a stone giant._

The world seemed to blur around him, becoming stretched and strange as he tried to fit the thought into his head.

A monster.

He shook off the daze, mind already leaping ahead.

If there was a monster, _somebody_ needed to fight it, and guns weren’t working.

Either it was unstoppable, or guns wouldn’t cut it. Either way, he wouldn’t forgive himself if he didn’t even try.

Instead of looking down at his desk, where, had he looked, he would have seen a small octagonal box with a ring, he looked back at his backpack, where a black suit was waiting for him.

There wasn’t even a question in his mind, as he made for the suit. He never even saw the box.

…

By the time he made it outside, the monster was gone, but that much of an issue, simply because he could follow the path of destruction.

He started running, only to look up at a screaming noise from above.

A red figure was falling, coming straight for him, and-

The figure seemed to catch on something, and with the sound of something elastic, bounced back, mere inches from the ground.

As he had a moment to see the figure, he realized what he was looking at.

Red suit, black spots, mask. There was a string in her hands, that looked far too weak to be holding her up, but the facts were the facts, it _was_. She was _dressed _like a superhero, and she’d shown up in a way the average person simply _couldn’t _have

She struggled, and the other end of the string came free.

She flopped to the ground, and while he was staring at her, still amazed, he staggered, as something solid hit him in the head.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry!” she said, as whatever the thing was… A yo-yo? Retracted into her hand, “I’m super clumsy, and I just… Who are you?”

“Ch- Chat Noir,” he said, with more confidence than he suddenly felt at the appearance of an _actual _superhero, “I guess you’re here to fight that monster too.”
“I- Yes,” she said.

“She said, shrugging, “no time to waste then. He headed that way.” And he set off, at his full speed.

Only a few seconds later, she had caught up with him, running along beside him, not even seeming to think about the speed she was going. If they were going to work together, he’d need to be faster.

“So, um,” he said, trying to talk with measured breaths, “where’d you come from?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you just fell out of the sky, but how did you get there.”

“This thing,” she said, yo-yo in hand, “is… I think if I knew how to use it, I could get around the city quickly, but… For now, I might as well just stick with you. Bad idea to get separated, right?”

“I guess,” he said, “but doesn’t that just mean you’ll end up getting on the scene later?”

She didn’t have an answer for that.

By the time they made it to where the monster’s trail of destruction had led, he was beginning to get a stitch in his side.

All the same, he managed to make it into the stands, for the monster had set his sights onto a stadium, a few paces ahead of his partner, in time to see…

Massive rock monster, yes, and, somebody down on the field, clearly about to take a hit that they could not stand.

He had no range. He had nothing but-

“HEY!” he shouted, the loudest he could, and the monster’s head snapped to him. He started leaping down the bleachers, three rows at a time. “How about before you do something stupid to him, you and I have a frank conversation, huh?”

He hoped that… He needed her name, didn’t he. He hoped that she was following him, because she seemed to have actual superpowers.

He made it to the grass, and took advantage of its momentary confusion to catch his breath.

She landed next to him.

“Hey,” he said, “I never asked. What’s your name?”

For a second, she didn’t answer, then, “Ladybug?”

“Cool,” he said, as the monster rushed him.

Well, how better to confuse a giant monster than by rushing it right back? It’d have quite a time catching him when he was so small, and so, so comparatively low to the ground. That was a good way to think about going up against a monster far larger than yourself, right?

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Master Fu knew what was happening, of course; how could he miss it? The problem was, of course,
that video footage of the incident was nigh-impossible to get, because the news outlets seemed to be in shock.

However... He didn’t know how he’d done it, but he’d found one person streaming video. Some tiny superhero blog had a livestream, from the fight itself.

People never ceased to amaze him; no powers, and she still had the nerve to take video right up close to a monster.

The camera wobbled as she looked from their new Black Cat to their new Ladybug. The sound of heavy breathing as she ran forward.

“Hey,” she said, “what are you waiting for?”

The new hero winced at the question, and, jolted to action, rushed in.

The camera panned, revealing the Black Cat, caught in the monster’s hand, and the Ladybug sliding underneath the monster, wrapping up its legs. One good pull, and...

“A bit hesitant,” said Wayzz, “but very promising.”

“Agreed.”

The Black Cat rolled away from the monster, and made it to his feet, he stood there, bouncing gently, clearly looking for an opening.

Wayzz froze. “Strange,” he said.

“What?”

Wayzz hesitated, but continued. “I have known Plagg for millennia, master. I have seen many of his wielders in action, and they always have something in common; something I don’t have a word for. This one does not.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” said Wayzz, confused, but not uncertain, “that he is not transformed.”

“What!?"

“I cannot see the suit well enough to tell the material, but he has no baton. His movements are fluid, but entirely human. Everything he has done has been within human limits. He is not transformed."

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“Hey, do you have any superpowers?” said Chat Noir, hoping for... Well, at this point, he’d take something to power him up to where she was, because god was he getting out of breath.

“I... I think so,” she said, and with a ‘here goes nothing’ shake of her head, called out “Lucky Charm!”

In a burst of red, she’s holding...

“A wetsuit?”

He sees her frantically think something through, dodging another clumsy strike by the monster.
“Tikki said that there’s something on this thing we have to destroy,” she said, “like, an item.”

“Oh, good,” he said, trying to not ask, ‘who’s Tikki?’

“And the only place it could be at this point, is his hand,” she said.

“Right, right, cool, cool,” he said, narrowly avoiding death.

“Oh…” she said, “Alright. I’ve got a plan, but you’ll have to trust me.”

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“Wayzz, I have a task for you.”

“You wish me to check on the status of the ring?”

Master Fu smiled. “Exactly.”

“I will return shortly.”

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As Adrien Agreste, make that Chat Noir, sat, half crushed in the hand of giant stone monster, he could feel the malice in the thing’s eyes, and, more viscerally, feel his ribs groaning.

He gave his best grin, trying not to show the slowly intensifying pain.

“Alright,” he said, “Now’s the moment when you surrender, because Ladybug has a plan.”

A plan that was apparently to get captured herself?

“Now!” she called, and…

Hydraulic pressure was quite a thing, he supposed, as she dropped down from the monster’s fist, now pressed open by the filled wetsuit, and smashed the… Rock? Crumpled paper?”

The monster disintegrated around him, and he fell to the ground, landing rather gracefully, all things considered.

“Now that,” he said, running up to her, “was impressive. Pound it!”

She seemed surprised, but willingly bumped his fist. “I could say the same to you. You’ve really got a head for this superhero stuff.”

“Aw, thanks! Now, I’d probably better get out of here, civilian life to get back to, and all.”

“Of course, I’ll just…” and she gestured towards the boy who’d been left behind when the monster had disintegrated.

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Wayzz had returned, and Master Fu instantly knew that something had gone wrong, he just hoped that-

“Master. The ring is gone.”

Well… That was… That was bad.
It was minutes ago, now.

A small box on Adrien’s desk. Technically, his property, presumably, but not anything where a quick look would cause trouble, surely.

The intruder staggered back as a figure manifested from the box, slipping and swirling about madly.

Eventually, the motion stopped, and… *That was a Kwami. Adrien had a Miraculous in his room, why was there-*

The kwami looked around. “Why do I get the impression this isn’t your room.”

“It isn’t.”

“Ah. Then how about you close the box, and forget you saw me.”

“I’m afraid that’s not an option.”

“Well, how about this, then. If you’re *not* going to do what I want, how about some introductions? I’ll go first. I’m Plagg, and *I could destroy this whole city* if you made me mad.”

Silence.

“Well, aren’t you going to introduce yourself? Or have you reconsidered.”

More silence, and then, “My name is-
Chapter Summary

Plagg makes a deal.
Adrien tries to go to school again.
Ladybug tries to keep her nerve to be a hero.
Chat Noir makes a terrifying discovery.

Chapter Notes

I'll be honest, I don't know how long this story will go, but I think there's definitely some ground I want to cover.

“-Nathalie Sancoeur.”

“Huh,” said Plagg, and stared at her. He seemed to be considering something.

“Why aren’t you surprised by me?” He said, drifting sideways, as if to see her from more angles
She cocked her head, “why would I be?”

“Because I just materialized out of a ring, don’t play dumb.”

“You did, yes.”

“So I’ll ask you again, why weren’t you surprised?”

“I am surprised. I don’t know why Adrien had a Miraculous in his room, and I would certainly like the answer to that.”

“And you know what a Miraculous is,” said Plagg, and, silently, she began to regret saying anything. She’d had him at an utter disadvantage mere moments ago, but now…

“I have expertise on the subject.”

He stared at her, and she got the impression he was trying to figure something out.

“Really. And where did you get that ‘expertise’?”

“From my employer,” that wasn’t much of a secret. Mr. Agreste would be receiving his miraculous shortly either way. This kwami would know that much whether she told him or not..

“Employer who…?” He said, getting a bit closer to her face, a shrewd expression on his.

“Who what?” she said, turning away, walking to the door, box in hand.
“How does he know.” She turned towards the path that would lead her to the hidden entrance to Mr. Agreste’s private room.

She shrugged, and Plagg seemed to get something, saying suddenly from behind her, “He’s got Nooroo, doesn’t he?”

She stopped.

“He does! So he’s the supervillain I was hearing about, here to terrorize Paris, or whatever.”

She shook her head. “He is not here to terrorize Paris. If Paris is terrorized, it’s merely a side-effect.”

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Adrien was making his way through the streets now. He hoped that whoever saw him wasn’t paying attention to where he was going. That would be supremely awkward; goodbye secret identity, hello Mr. Agreste.

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“Really. And what does he want?”

She shrugged. “You.”

Plagg sucked in a sharp breath. “The power of destruction in his hands, huh? Well, I don’t take kindly to-“

“And the Ladybug Miraculous.”

Plagg went silent, and then muttered, “That’s worse.”

Well, she’d given information, maybe she could get some before passing off the ring.

“You believe he will do something evil with the wish?”

Plagg rolled his eyes. “Maybe. Doesn’t matter.”

“Why?”

“Because, Nathalie, wishes have a price. Whatever he wishes for, he won’t like paying for it.”

Now that was useful information.

“What does he want?”

She hesitated, but then, he would doubtless find out either way. “He wants his wife returned to him.”

“Back from the dead?” said Plagg, and didn’t wait for an answer, “doesn’t matter. If he wants her back, someone’s going to take her place. Maybe him. Maybe the ‘Adrien’ kid you were talking about.” He looked up, “who knows, it might even be you.”

She turned on her heel to look at him, expression neutral. “Then that is the price I will pay.”

Plagg backed away, slightly, taking her in.
Then, in a… disgusted? Annoyed? Some strange tone, he let out an ‘Oooh.’

“I can’t believe,” he muttered, clearly annoyed, now, “that I get out for the first time in… however long, and I’m immediately dealing with love. Again.”

She shut her mouth, her expression, for the first time since her shock, not blank. She couldn’t quite keep the anger, not at the kwami, at herself, off of her face.

Plagg seemed to realize something, and then, “Ooh,” he said, in a different tone this time. He turned to look at her. “You’re willing to die for him. Or, at least, you’re trying to get him his wife back, even though you’re in love with him.”

She clenched her fists, and, with an effort, steadied her expression. Her name was Sancoeur, and she lived up to the name. She had to.

“You know,” said Plagg, “I think it might be a good thing you found me.”

“And why is that,” she said, her emotion already invisible again.

“Because you can save everyone a bunch of trouble. I think you can help everyone out at once.” He shrugged. “Including you.”

She looked at him.

“Don’t give me to him,” he said.

“Are you asking me to sabotage Mr. Agreste’s work?”

“Did you capture the akuma?” asked Tikki.

Adrien stared at the TV. Dozens of them, maybe hundreds. But… Immobile?

“I’m saying,” said Plagg, “that I’ve seen people get their wishes granted over, and over, and over, and it never goes well. Every wish comes with a price, and it’s never quite worth it. I’ve seen more people than you’ve ever met ask for a wish, and then make another to fix what went wrong in the first one. They ruin their lives, and, yeah, they get what they want, but they’re never happy about it. I’ve seen societies collapse because the wrong person got their hands on us.”

“And how do I know you aren’t lying, trying to manipulate me?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, sure, I’m a big manipulator. Honestly, even Tikki’s better at it than me, and she’s a ray of sunshine who’s never told a lie in the past 3 millennia. Well, two, technically, I think she might have- The point is, I don’t trust anyone with a wish, especially someone who’s willing to be a supervillain to get one. I think it’s that they overestimate how useful a wish is, makes them think any price is worth paying.”

“Do you really think you can convince me that easily?”

“I don’t need to convince you of it right now,” said Plagg, “I just need you to be thinking about it.”
She didn’t answer.

“So, how about a deal,” he said.

She didn’t answer for a second, and then, hating herself for saying it, “go on.”

“He can’t use me to get the Ladybug Miraculous. Trust me, using me would be going all in. Much better odds if he sticks with the Butterfly, and,” he sighed, “forcing other people to do his dirty work. If you give me to him right now, you haven’t helped him.

Nathalie hadn’t said anything, which he took as his cue to continue.

“So there’s no rush. There’s no reason you have to do it now. But if you do, you can’t take it back. He’ll have me, so even if you change your mind about supporting him, or,” he rolled his eyes, “whatever, you’ll always want to support him, or whatever, but about letting him have the wish...”

She heard footsteps, and, quietly, said, “he’s coming.”

Plagg was suddenly behind her, and Mr. Agreste was in front of her.

“Hello, sir,” she said.

He smiled, “everything is going well. Soon, I will have their Miraculouses.”

“That?” she said.

“This, ‘Ladybug’ and ‘Chat Noir,’” he said. “They may have defeated Stoneheart, but I can feel the same wounds, waiting for me to bring the copies to life. Perhaps when he returns to school tomorrow, I will find my opening.”

“Of course, sir.”

And then he was moving on.

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So that was who she was so interested in? Well, Plagg supposed, humans were weird, but even so, this one seemed a bit odd to care so much about.

There was a bigger issue, though, and she’d noticed too.

“Who is Chat Noir.”

He shrugged. “No clue. It sounds like a name one of my owners would come up with, but whoever he is, I never transformed him. I’ve been here the whole time.”

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He had been.

“Anyway,” he said, “more importantly, why you shouldn’t give me to him.”

Of course, he would come back to that. She’d warned him, and hadn’t handed him over. She’d hidden him from Mr. Agreste, which, in itself, was worrying her.

She was cautious, of course she’d warned him. As he said, she couldn’t take it back, so she should
at least hear him out, right?

“Even if you end up giving me to him, you should personally want to do it later.”

She closed her eyes, trying not to let the grating voice into her head.

“Think about it. If you give me to him, he’s happy, but it doesn’t change anything. He still needs to beat Ladybug. But… If you wait until he’s beaten Ladybug, he got most of the way there, but you’re the one who really made it happen. You care about what he thinks about you, don’t you?”

She did. And he was right. Not, that she should do it, but… She did care.

She looked at him, disdain now visible on her face. Not really disdain, even, more… Annoyance, because he was right.

He shrugged. “And, in the meantime, I can tell you about exactly what happens when people get wishes.”

She looked after where Mr. Agreste had gone, and back at the kwami.

She slipped the ring-box into her pocket.

She was going to regret this, wasn’t she.

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Adrien had faced down a giant stone monster. He wasn’t about to let anyone tell him what he could or couldn’t do.

Sure, those stone giants were still around the city, but they hadn’t done anything. In the meantime, whether anyone in his house liked it or not, he was going to school.

Adrien had, of course, a good conception of alternate universes; after all, how many times had those comics rebooted, by now? He was well acquainted with the idea that some things stayed the same, despite changing the circumstances around them, while others did not. So, to learn that while some things had changed, that others stayed remarkably, impossibly similar wouldn’t have surprised him.

And so it was that he entered the school, he was greeted by Chloe, the only friend he’d been allowed for years. He was still been beleaguered for autographs, and was still directed to a seat in front of Chloe herself in the class.

He still saw her place the gum, still tried to remove it, at the worst possible moment.

He still made an instant enemy of the girl with hair so black it could have been blue, and still only had a chance to salvage this day by the fact that the kid with the hat seemed willing to be his friend.

A few moments later, a girl ran into class, seemingly upset, but she took her seat, and the teacher began to take roll, seemingly unbothered by his presence, which he was infinitely grateful for.

“Ivan?” she called, and… No response. She looked back to where this boy ‘Ivan’ must usually sit, seeming concerned.

And then, in a crash, the door was gone, and another stone giant was there, or was it the same one?

In an instant, it had taken the girl who’d come in last, and Chloe, and was gone.
So they were moving again.

That meant he had a job to do. It was time to go to work. For a second, he contemplated forgetting the outfit, and just running after it.

But… No, this thing had attacked twice, even though they’d won the first time. If it came back again, it would know who he was if he didn’t put on the disguise.

He had to pull a full-on Clark Kent, and find… A phone booth, or, even just a locker.

Well, he knew where the lockers were, at least.

He was off, leaping over the railing, grabbing on to it, slipping down to the first floor in only a few seconds.

Years of photoshoots had left him with a skill for changing clothes quickly, so he managed to switch outfits in… must have been half a minute, at most.

He ran, outside, and, almost immediately found himself confronted by… That was the friend, the friend of the girl who hated him now, pinned up against a wall by a car.

And that was Ladybug, hauling it away from her with brute force.

His breath caught oddly. *Incredibly strong.*

She noticed him.

“Chat Noir!”

“Hello again,” he said, “I didn’t expect to see you again so soon.”

“Yeah,” she said, seemingly annoyed, “I didn’t expect to be doing this again myself.”

“Why?”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is that I know what happened. My kwami told me that to stop this happening, we… I need to ‘purify’ the akuma that’s turning Ivan into a villain.”

“Got it,” he said. *What was a kwami? She kept saying that word like he should know what it was.*

“He was headed to the Eiffel Tower,” she said, and made to set off in that direction with her yo-yo.

She looked back at him, and said, “Right. You can’t do that.”

He shook his head, “I can run pretty fast, but not fast enough.”

“Alright,” she said, “this might get a bit awkward, but you’ll have to trust me.”

“I-“ he tried to say, but suddenly, she had an arm around his torso and…

He was flying. He was flying, over rooftops, with his only source of support being her arm around his waist. And… He felt safe. More to the point, he could feel his face burning from the proximity to her, which was something new for him. He was pretty sure that he’d heard about this before, but he couldn’t quite place the word for it.
And then they landed, and she let him go, and he knew why, but why did she have to let go?

He shook it off, and when he looked back up…

She’d already saved Chloe’s life. It looked like the monster had thrown her off the tower.

And… A man in blue, a police officer, it seemed, was talking to her.

“I’m sorry young lady, but you need to leave this, to the professionals.”

She seemed to almost crumple at the words, which stirred up an irrational degree of anger.

“Hey!” he shouted, marching up to him.

The officer turned.

“She just saved that girl’s life. She’s already beaten this thing before, so don’t you try telling her that she should leave it to you! Maybe you should leave this to the professionals!”

The man seemed taken aback, and he placed a hand on Ladybug’s back, and pulled her away.

“Don’t listen to him,” he said, with an angry glance back, “you’re the hero Paris needs right now.”

She straightened up, and nodded. “Right. Thanks, I needed that.”

And that was when Stoneheart had roared, and the Butterflies had swarmed.

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Staring at the tablet, Nathalie was nodding softly.

“Alright,” said Plagg, “he does have good presentation, I’ll give him that. I mean, it’s a bit hard to make out the face, but definitely a solid effort.”

She ignored him, looking down at the ring, which she’d hung on a chain around her neck, low enough that it was invisible unless she wanted it seen. Such a simple, elegant design, for such a loud, annoying occupant.

“Seriously, though,” said Plagg, returning to the same topic he’d touched on a full three times already. “you’d better get some camembert. I like swiss, but trust me, you won’t like me when I’m on a diet of swiss. If you want me happy and healthy, you get me camembert.”

It was on her shopping list, which surprised even her.

She rubbed her eyes. She’d missed his entire exchange with Ladybug and… Chat Noir, she supposed. Plagg had seemed as confused as she was, but, he called himself Chat Noir, and the name certainly fit.

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He still couldn’t find the word for it, but he knew why he’d felt it. The way she strode out front of the crowd, stared down the giant head, that had called itself ‘Hawkmoth.’ He felt the strange warmth in his chest.

And then, when she had, in a frenzy, annihilated it, purifying every butterfly that formed it, he’d taken a sharp breath, and staggered.
He knew what he was feeling.

Chapter End Notes

In other news, I feel like it can't be very common to use the 'Nathalie & Plagg' relationship tag, but... I mean... It definitely fits here.
Two Brushes with Death

Chapter Summary

Chat Noir is very in love, despite the inopportune timing, and then proceeds to almost die.
Marinette almost dies, and then proceeds to be very in love.

Chapter Notes

I didn't expect it to go quite this long, but I definitely wasn't going to cut it off early to match some arbitrary word-limit.

Love. He was in love with her.

“Alright,” she said, turning back to him, and he wasn’t ready for this; no, no, he needed a few seconds to process what had happened, but- “Chat Noir, are you ready for this?”

“No,” he whispered, so quietly she couldn’t possibly have heard. Not ready to move on from what he’d just felt, but… He grinned, like a proper superhero, one with no fear before the villain. “Any time you are, Ladybug.”

“Alright,” she said, “We’ll need to lure him inside. And then… And then we’ll work it out from there.”

“Sounds good to me,” he said, and tried to prepare himself for what he already knew was-

He was flying, but that wasn’t why he felt weightless.

And then she put him down, and he was back inside his own body, rather than on cloud 9.

There was Stoneheart, still as big as ever, and frankly, scarier than last time (Adrien hadn’t gotten much sleep the previous night; side-effects of near-death experiences).

“Looks like the Akuma’s still in his hand.”

There certainly didn’t seem to be anywhere else the Akuma could be. Not that he really knew what an Akuma was, but he thought he got the idea. “So, we get him to open his hand,” he said.

She nodded, and they set about their work.

Of course, getting something that big to open its hand was quite a chore, but with both of them working together…

And then the rest had arrived.
Hawkmoth grinned. They had barely managed one. There was no feasible way they could face down an army of them.

Certainly, Ladybug could use her Lucky Charm, as she just had, but what was she supposed to do with a backpack?

‘Distract them,’ she had called, and Hawkmoth would admit, Chat Noir did an excellent job. He ducked and dove across the field, narrowly dodging dozens of different strikes. He was utterly untouchable.

Until he wasn’t.

The slam of a massive fist knocked him to the ground, and even as he immediately recovered his feet, the momentum was gone.

She had the plan. From what little she could tell, she just had to get Mylene a bit closer to Stoneheart, and she could make something work.

And then Chat Noir had yelped in pain, and her attention was diverted.

“Ladybug!” he called, “are you-“ she saw the fist come down, heard the scream, and then the sickening thump of his body hitting the wall.

“Perfect, he is incapacitated. Now, finish Ladybug, and my victory is complete!”

She didn’t have time to help him. She had to finish this now, and hope she could help him afterward.

She slipped forward, and wrapped the yo-yo around the original Stoneheart, his arm, his head. The perfect alignment, and all she had to do was-

His vision had blurred from tears and raw pain. At least one of his ribs had to be broken.

Then, he’d seen a red figure, Ladybug, moving with purpose. And then she’d stopped, and it had looked like she was… Doing something he couldn’t quite see.

Something in his head had screamed, because the first rule of self-defense he’d learned was to never stop moving, and if she wasn’t moving-

He was on his feet, only realizing when he was halfway there that he’d been right. One of those monsters was winding up a strike that would do to her what it had done to him.

She was hauling something.
There was a *slam* in the ground next to her, as she pulled the hand closer to Stoneheart’s face, and she turned to see…

He was on his feet, eyes glazed over, but he’d moved the fist just off course enough that it hadn’t… No time to think about it.

She pulled, and Stoneheart took a faceful of Mylene. And then, *threw* her, and the Akumatized item. Ladybug bolted after both, suddenly understanding the purpose of the parachute.

--

She was moving again. Good. He pulled back, and dodged. Once. Twice.

And then another strike made contact, and… He would have expected there to be a worse feeling than hitting that wall. It turned out there was.

That feeling was *not* hitting a wall.

He was in the sunlight again, all of Paris blurring around him as he spun, over and over. For a second, he thought he could see something large and red, and then, for an instant, a person, and then both were gone, and *he*…

Was stretching, slowing down so fast it would have hurt even if he *hadn’t* been injured.

His vision steadied, to Ladybug, *his* Ladybug, staring at him breathlessly.

She smiled, relieved, and suddenly *he* was the breathless one.

A twitch on the string, and a steady arm escorted him to the ground.

Then, she turned with purpose, and said, “No more evildoing for you, little Akuma.” A giant, fluid motion of the arm. “Time to de-evilize!”

He missed the next few lines as the pain shot through his whole torso again. He managed to recover in time to see a pure white butterfly flapping away into the sky.

--

She turned back to him, and… strained smile, crooked posture. He taken a few serious hits.

“Sorry,” she said, “if I’d been a bit quicker, you might not be hurt right now.”

He smiled, and, despite the pain, it reached his eyes, “and if you’d been a bit slower, Paris would have fallen to Hawkmoth. I’ll take that trade any day.”

“I’m afraid we might have to,” she said, “but… Tikki told me about one more thing I can do, that might help.”

She turned to Mylene.

“Excuse me,” she said, getting a nervous jump in response, “can I, take that back?”

Mylene relinquished the parachute willingly.

“Thanks,” she said, noticing, back towards the tower, Ivan staggering off the steps, heading in their direction.
“What are you doing?”

“A miracle, I think,” she said, not quite sure herself.

Well. Here went nothing.

She threw the parachute to the sky.

“Miraculous Ladybug!”

The sky lit up in flashes of red, glowing and streaking out, across all of Paris.

--

Right. Superhero. He shouldn’t be surprised to find out that she had truly impossible-seeming powers, beyond even the scope of that ‘Lucky Charm’ thing she used, but still, he wouldn’t deny he was impressed, and the look of joy on her face as she took it in...

There was a flash of light, and he gasped in pain, staggering forward, as something twisted in his chest.

It still hurt, but, less. He stretched slightly, and realized his bones weren’t broken. Cracked, maybe, but intact, at least.

Then, things finally seemed to settle down.

She smiled at him. “Better?”

He smiled back. “Better.”

She nodded, satisfied, and looked down at… A crumpled piece of paper. She pulled it open. A careful look, and she looked at the girl Stoneheart had taken hostage.

“You should probably read this,” she said, handing the paper over.

She walked back to him, and looked over her shoulder.

The girl had hugged… Ivan. Ivan was his name.

“I think they’ll be just fine,” she said, turning to watch them. After a moment, she nodded to herself, “And I’m sure we’ll meet again, next time Hawkmoth tries to get our Miraculouses.”

His brow furrowed, but before he could say anything, he heard a tiny beeping, and she shook her head.

“I forgot, I’ve only got five minutes, and you…” she paused, “actually, you didn’t use your ability did…”

She had turned to face him, and was looking at him like something was wrong. Ah, good, he wouldn’t have to explain that he didn’t have powers.

“They’re waiting,” she said, staring down at his torso.

He looked down to see wisps of that same red light, recognizable at this distance as being made of hundreds of individual pieces. Ladybugs, if he’d had to guess.
“They put things back to how they should be,” she said, “I thought they’d be done with fixing your wounds, but I think… They’re waiting for me.”

“To do what?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “but I don’t think it’s anything bad.”

“Oh. Okay.”

She raised a hand, cautiously, and said, “let’s see if-

And then there was a flash of blinding red, and for a second, he couldn’t feel anything.

Then, suddenly, he was standing the locker room again, blinking in new surroundings.

He looked down, to see he was back in his normal clothes. A look in his backpack revealed that, yes, his suit was there.

For a second, he considered that he might have dreamed it, or something, but his ribs still ached, and as he walked out, everyone he could see seemed… Panicked? Worried? Uncomfortable, certainly.

Well. He couldn’t tell them that everything was alright without revealing too much, but if nothing else, he could act as unconcerned as he was, and head straight back to… Where was the class?

It took a few minutes, but thankfully, the boy from earlier, ‘Nino,’ if he remembered right, was sitting inside the classroom when he’d looked in, with a large pair of headphones on.

Adrien sat down, and Nino pulled back one side of the headphones.

“Hey dude,” he said, “wondered where you’d gone off to.” Adrien was scrambling to find to find an excuse, but the kid smiled the single softest smile Adrien had ever seen (seriously, if he could bottle that and use it for photoshoots, he would have been the most desirable teen model in France), and said, “good to see you’re alright.”

“Thanks.”

A second passed. “I guess everything’s alright. They didn’t catch much on the news, but it looked like Ladybug and Chat Noir won pretty emphatically. Actually, there was a sort of,” he scrolled back the video, to what the cameras had captured of what happened when Ladybug had called out her ‘Miraculous Ladybug,’ “thing, and then the door was back to normal.”

“Puts things back to how they should be,” he repeated, understanding what she’d meant.

“Pretty much, yeah.”

--

She’d seen it on the news that things had gone wrong.

“I suppose,” she said, to the kwami, who, for some reason, she hadn’t replaced in his ring yet (she needed to get to that), “you lack the ability of Mr. Agreste’s kwami to bestow abilities at a distance.”

Plagg snorted. “I wish. If I did, I’d be sitting somewhere sunny,” his eyes seemed to gleam, “eating camembert, and sleeping. I might do both at once, if I could figure out how.”

A simple creature, with simple dreams. She looked forward, internal expression contemplative. Yet,
 somehow, it, or, she supposed, they were endowed with incredible powers.

“Mr. Agreste will be returning shortly,” she said.

The kwami took the hint, vanishing to-

She stiffened slightly and looked down, expression reproving. She couldn’t see a lump on her shirt, but she could feel a warm pressure from the inner pocket of her suit-jacket, where the kwami had apparently decided to hide out.

Mr. Agreste was angry; of course he was. More than that, though, he was determined. The way he’d walked had told her that much, and the quiet look he’d given her, not quite accepting, not quite disbelieving, had confirmed it.

--

Adrien wouldn’t have believed it, if someone had predicted the future yesterday. His father was letting him go to school.

He’d meet people. He might have friends. Maybe he could be actual friends with Nino, instead of just acquaintances! Maybe even best… Well, it wouldn’t do to get ahead of himself.

He would have thought nothing could bring down his mood… And then he’d received an unmissable reminder that things wouldn’t be perfect.

She was staring at him with a disdain that reminded him of his father on a bad day, when he’d done something unworthy of the Agreste name. She was sitting where Chloe had been yesterday.

He tried to talk to her, but she didn’t want to hear it. Considering what she thought his first interaction with her had been, he couldn’t say he blamed her.

He sat down next to Nino, and wondered how he could be a superhero with the guts to take down a monster one day, and the next be unable to tell the truth (a truth that didn’t even incriminate him) the next.

“It’s alright, dude,” Nino had said quietly, next to him, “she’ll come around once she knows what happened.”

“I hope you’re right,” he’d said.

…

And so, now, he took a deep breath, and looked up from his locker.

He hadn’t told her the truth all day, and every time he met her eyes, he had to look away.

Maybe tomorrow.

He zipped up the backpack, with the suit peeking out at the bottom. Really, he needed to find a better way to conceal it, otherwise people would have some awkward questions.

He pulled out the umbrella, thanking Nathalie’s forethought in making sure he had one. He never did thank her enough.

He walked out of the locker room, to the door.
The door swung open, and the rumbling of the rain met his ears. He walked out, for the first time in his life almost feeling free; for once, he was in the world, Adrien Agreste, not Chat Noir; He’d been out here in costume so many times, but never as himself. The rain covered things in a layer of mist that left him hidden from the eyes of the world, from any member of the paparazzi that would look for him. But he was outside.

And then, instinct took over, before he even registered what he was doing.

--

Curse her lack of forethought. She had an umbrella at home, by the door, even. Her mother had even reminded her that it was supposed to rain today.

And now… Rain. Rain, everywhere, and she, was going to get soaked, and there wasn’t anything she could do about it.

She had been stuck, not quite willing to go on, when the perfect reason to leave hit her, because Adrien Agreste was following her out. She looked back at him to see a strange, wondering look. Was that how models worked? Did they never see rain? Was that why he wasn’t putting up his umbrella?

She shook her head. It didn’t matter; either he’d figure it out, or he wouldn’t, and considering what she knew of him, she really didn’t care which option he took.

“Hmph,” she said, and started on her way home.

And then, almost immediately, she received a grim reminder of what it meant to be Marinette rather than Ladybug, as her foot slipped from underneath her.

Her life didn’t flash before her eyes, but time seemed to stretch out. A bit too much weight on her right foot, and even though her left was still solidly on the ground, she couldn’t recover. Her head was on a collision course with the pavement, and there was nothing—

She registered the shout almost a second after it had happened.

Her vision cleared to the sight of an attractive, blonde boy. His expression was the one that immediately follows immense terror, the one accompanied by wide eyes and heavy breathing. It wasn’t just terror; it was terrified concern.

As her mind cleared, she could feel his arms trembling, as he held her back barely an inch from the ground. He was… On the ground with her?

“You okay?” he said.

Words wouldn’t come. She’d been mocking him in her head seconds ago, and he’d just saved her from what would have been a concussion at best. He dove to catch her. He had to be mostly soaked now, and his umbrella was slowly skittering away across the stone in the wind.

She blinked. His face was so close, and so, so concerned.

She licked her lips and managed to say ‘Fine.’

His head dropped in relief, and he let out a sigh. She faintly felt the warmth of his breath on her forehead.
Then, in an instant, he was back on his feet, and his hand was there.

She took it, and… He was unexpectedly strong. He didn’t give her something to pull herself up on, he pulled her up.

She stood there for a second, still dazed.

“Um,” he said, looking away, “I know, it’s a bit out of the blue, considering what just happened, but, I wanted to explain what happened. Yesterday.”

Yesterday was full of memories of being Ladybug. For a second, she remembered Chat Noir, who had looked, really, so much like Adrien, and then she remembered herself. The odds her superhero partner was someone she knew were infinitesimal.

He meant what had happened with the gum. It seemed almost useless to discuss when he’d just, done that, but it seemed to matter to him.

“I,” he said, and sighed, “I was trying to get it off of the seat,” he said, “Chloe put it there, and, I… I didn’t want to throw her under the bus. She’s been my best… Only friend for years. It didn’t seem right.”

She’d been even further off than she’d thought. He wasn’t like Chloe. Not at all.

A few hastily made assumptions cracked in her head, borne down on by the weight of something she couldn’t quite process yet.

He looked her up and down, and looked away, with a displeased expression.

“And now I’m making you stand here, listening to me, when you’re already soaked.” He was suddenly a few feet away. His hand blurred out, grabbing his umbrella, which had been barely at the edge of his reach. He looked at her earnestly. “I can’t turn back the clock on that,” he said, holding out the umbrella towards her, “but please, take this.”

He glanced away, and she caught a glimpse of a car waiting for him.

He saw her looking, and chuckled gently. “You’ll definitely need it more than I will.”

She was staring now, and she knew it. She looked down to the handle. All she had to do was take it, but, well, his hand was there, and somehow, touching it suddenly seemed… forward.

With an effort, she stifled the voice, and reached out.

He gave it easily, letting go almost before she’d even gotten a grip.

Her hand was shaking now, uneasy on the umbrella, his umbrella, the one he’d been holding in his hand, mere seconds ago.

And then her thumb hit the button, and the umbrella flopped in on her head.

In the darkness, she realized that this was her second chance at a first impression, and she’d blown it. And then, he was laughing.

She pulled up the cloth of the umbrella, expecting to need to dig herself a hole to hide in, but…

He wasn’t laughing at her. That beautiful, beautiful laugh wasn’t at her expense.
She giggled. What else could she do?

Love. She was in love with him.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't realize that I slipped in the cinematic parallels until near the end. Like, them both catching each other was unexpected. I literally added the end of the the last chapter to this one for that perfect book-ends vibe.
(Incidentally, Marinette was terrified she Thanosed Chat Noir until she asked Tikki about it)
We All Keep A Secret or Two

Chapter Summary

Nathalie can’t catch a break.
Marinette... Also can't catch a break.
Nino... Well, he can't either.
Adrien isn’t having the best day either.
Ladybug is in for quite a shock.
At least Plagg seems to be in a good mood!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was inexplicable, at best.

She loved quiet time. Moments when it was just her, and her work. No calls to make, just careful, methodical organization.

Which was why she couldn’t account for the fact that she still hadn’t left the ring at home. She could have easily stowed the kwami away, and, if she’d wanted to talk to him, pulled him out then.

He was a safety risk. His voice was annoying. He didn’t even contribute anything while she was working.

He poked absently at her pencil, rolling it back and forth across the table.

Her pencil, which she needed.

She reached down, and without a work, picked it up.

She stared blankly. He was sitting on the pencil in her hand, with a faintly annoyed expression.

She began to write.

“Haven’t you ever heard of asking permission,” he said.

“Have you?”

“No.” He’d answered that very quickly.

“This is my pencil,” she said.

“Yeah? And this is me getting super bored being out here.”

“Perhaps you should find a way to occupy yourself,” she said, and realized that she’d added an extra ‘L’ to a word.

She looked at the word, then at Plagg, holding on to the upper half of the pencil.

No, she decided, and flipped the pencil.
“Woah, woah, woah!” the kwami managed to get out, as he was suddenly upside-down, and shaking gently back and forth. “How about you—” the pencil was right way up again, “ask before flipping me over, huh?”

“You didn’t ask before stealing my pencil,” she said simply.

He huffed, and floated away from the pencil, as she was still writing. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see him floating in place.

She glanced up to see him scrutinizing her carefully.

Then, with a suddenness that surprised her, he started laughing.

For a few seconds, she continued writing, but when the laughter continued, she sighed, exasperated, and turned to look properly at him. “What?”

“I just realized,” he said, “you do have a sense of humor.”

“Do you?”

He cackled. “Only when I’m bored!”

She had practiced the art of keeping her face neutral, but that just meant that she noticed even the tiniest shift in her own face. She was, on some microscopic level, smiling.

“Plus,” said Plagg, “you wished the kid a happy birthday, and that didn’t sound like it was pure manners.”

She had. “It seemed unfortunate that he had to be denied something he wanted on his birthday.”

“Aha!” said Plagg, and he’d gone back to purely annoying. “So you’ve got sympathy too.”

“As do most humans,” she said, resuming her work.

Plagg snickered, “was it supposed to be obvious that you’re human?”

She looked up sharply from the paper, and over at him, slowly and directly. “That’s an old question. Let me ask you an old one of my own: Would you like to see Mr. Agreste now?”

He seemed taken aback. “Sorry,” he said. “For what?” she said, the momentary glimmer of anger already quashed. After all, her apparent lack of emotion was much of why she was here. Mr. Agreste had been, and she fought to keep her face level at the thought, impressed by it.

Anybody else might have found it difficult to tell Adrien that be wouldn’t be having a birthday party, but for her, it was just an ordinary day.

--

It was Adrien’s birthday. She’d looked it up a few days after the… umbrella incident, and while Alya had questioned her sudden change of heart about him, once she’d figured out how Marinette
felt, she’d shrugged, and just told her to get him a gift. It had taken her a few days to admit that it seemed a sensible option. A week of soul-searching to find the perfect gift. One long, careful look at his outfit, and then a few weeks of work.

And that was why she had this scarf now, boxed up with a ribbon, and ready to give.

Alya grinned “C’mon, girl, just give it to him, he’ll love it.”

“He’s the son of a fashion designer! He’s a model, why did I think I could give him clothes when-

“He’s going to love it just get out there and give it to him,” Alya said, with a careful, but forceful, shove.

And then she was in front of him.

“Oh, hey Marinette.”

“Hhhi Adrien, I was wondering to bump into you because- I mean wanting, of course, wanting you- I mean wanting to see you- I mean, y’know, talk to you, because I wanted to talk to you.”

He seemed confused, “You wanted to talk to me because you wanted to talk to me?”

“Adrikins!”

“Because I wanted to give you a lift- I mean, a-

“Buzz off, Dupain-Cheng,” cut in Chloe, with a vicious shove.

And there was the ground again, rising up-

She jolted, and suddenly her hand was secured held by Adrien’s.

He pulled her upright.

“Careful there, Chloe, you could have seriously hurt her!”

Chloe rolled her eyes. “She falls all the time anyway, she would have been fine. The important thing is that I ordered the best gift ever for your birthday, and,” she looked away, as if telling a tragedy, “it didn’t arrive.” She looked back up, and, with a completely different expression, the one you brought out when sharing an insult about someone not present, said, “the postal workers never get things done in time when it’s actually important.”

“Oh,” said Adrien, clearly taken aback, “well… That’s too bad, I guess.”

Chloe walked away, and Marinette could smell the smug satisfaction that Adrien had believed her.

Adrien looked back over at her, and said, “So, Marinette, sorry you got interrupted, what were you saying?”

She was about to respond, when his phone beeped.

He looked down, confused, and pulled out his phone. Confusion turned to alarm. “Aw man, I just realized, I’ve got a shoot in five minutes! Sorry, I’ve got to go, you’ll have to tell me whatever it was later.”

And then he was running, slowly at first, and then he accelerated, far beyond what she could have
done.

*He could really run, couldn’t he.*

Nino looked over at her, and shrugged, “I guess that’s the life of a model, huh?” He sighed. “Always busy. Dude’s not even getting a birthday party, and that’s just not right.”

He looked down. “I mean… Unless I can convince his old man.” He looked up. “From what Adrien’s said, he’s a bit stuffy, but maybe I can make him understand why it matters.”

And he’d set of with purpose after Adrien.

--

She had managed to rearrange almost *everything*. All she needed was a spot to place a meeting with the stylist, and, considering the Agreste household was her best client, that wouldn’t be much of an issue.

She had pulled up her phone, ready to key in the number, when the doorbell rang.

She pulled up the relevant screen.

A young girl with black hair seemed extremely surprised by the camera. She flicked over. Her friend, surprised, but not shocked, per se.

“Yes?”

“I…! I’ve got a gift. For… For Adrien!”

A fan, presumably. Or a classmate. Possibly both.

“Hm,” she said, under her breath, and tapped the screen. The mailbox opened.

The package was deposited, and she closed the mailbox.

She retracted the camera.

“Happen often?” said Plagg.

“Occasionally,” she said, walking to the mailbox. “Usually, it’s fan-mail. One boy sent in a letter a day for a week.” She still remembered the name, signed in messy cursive. ‘Wayhem.’ Adrien had found it quite awkward, and she’d told her as much the next time he’d brought a letter. He’d stopped, which had frankly surprised her.

“Huh,” said Plagg, “yeah, I still don’t get humans. What, does he just look really good to you guys?”

“He is famous, and a model. Many people seem to take that as an invitation.”

She opened the mailbox. A small rectangular package awaited her. As she picked it up, it seemed to have the *give* she would associate with clothing.

“Yeah. That’s weird,” said Plagg, “like, cheese? Cheese is easy. It doesn’t talk back. It smells good. It *tastes* good. I guess he doesn’t talk back, but still, just seems kind of pointless.”

“I’m well aware of how pointless it is,” she said. “They don’t seem to care.”
She walked in silence the rest of the way to the atelier, and had just sat down, taking a careful look at the ribbon (She’d need to redo it after checking the contents), when her phone rang.

She straightened immediately, because she only ever heard that tone when Mr. Agreste was calling her... And in her dreams... When Mr. Agreste was calling her.

“Sir?” she said.

“Remember to give Adrien his birthday gift today,” he said.

“His birthday gift?”

“You did remember to get him one on my behalf, yes?”

She froze, and knew her eyes betrayed just a hint of fear. “Of course sir. I’ll take care of it.” she said.

“Good,” he said. “That is all.”

He hung up.

She covered her face with a hand, and let out a slow hiss of air.

“Whoof, looks like somebody’s getting hysterical.”

She looked over at Plagg. He raised his eyebrows, with an amused grin.

“I am his personal assistant,” she said. “If there is something to be done, that has not been done, I am at fault.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Plagg, rolling his eyes, “I get it, you care about him more than you care about yourself.”

Her eyes caught on... She’d said it was a gift, hadn’t she?

A careful once over revealed that it wasn’t signed.

“Ohhh!” said Plagg, clearly delighted, “getting a bit creative with our gifts, huh?”

Nathalie did some quick math in her head. The odds the girl was a classmate were low, surely. If she was smart-

The doorbell rang again, and she realized she’d have to put her mental math regarding a swift redistribution of credit were put on hold again.

She checked the cameras again.

--

“You put in a week of blood, sweat and tears on that,” said Alya, “how could you not sign it!”

“I had planned to give it to him in person! I wouldn’t have needed to sign it!”

Alya groaned.

“It’s alright! I can… I can tell him it was from me tomorrow! Or… Or maybe I can go back and…” the idea died with the memory of that disinterested voice that had come from the speaker. She
wouldn’t find any kind of help there.

“Well,” said Alya, “good luck telling him tomorrow. Both of us saw exactly what happened last time you two talked. I don’t think it’s changed in the past ten minutes, and I doubt it’ll change by tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Marinette, grimacing.

“Better get ready.”

“I will.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

“By the way,” said Alya with that wheedling smile Marinette had already come across once or twice since meeting Alya, “you never did tell me how you went from hating him to having the world’s biggest crush on him.”

“Gotta go!” said Marinette, a few notches too high, “I really ought to practice for tomorrow! Also, lunch!”

--

Alya watched her go, with an amused smile.

She looked away, and rolled her eyes, still smiling.

Marinette had the heart of a hero. She’d stood up to Chloe, not just on their second day, but every time since, and yet, somehow, the sight of one (1) pretty boy was enough to send her spinning. How was she supposed to not laugh at that a little bit?

--

“Hey dude, c’mon, join the party! It’s all for you!”

Adrien stopped dead. It was a clown in full primary colors. With a bubble wand for a head.

He blinked.

That was Nino.

That was Nino’s voice.

He’d come back, in…

This was Hawkmoth again. It had to be.

Finally, a few seconds late, he grinned. “A party!?”

“Yeah man! You gotta take a look at this!”

He kicked the door wide open.

“Hey guys! The birthday boy just arrived. The party can really start now!”

Without looking back, he jumped over to… A full DJ setup? It was marked “DJ BUBBLER!” in a… terribly gaudy font.
He was cordially invited. A birthday party in his honor. Hosted by a villain.

By all rights, he should get ready to fight, but…

No. He had to fight, and he couldn’t join this party. After all, if he joined, how would he get out later when Ladybug showed up to fight.

The partygoers were looking at him. He smiled nervously, shook his head, and ran.

Behind him, he heard a shout. “Alright dudes, Adrien’s in, let’s see you get down!” He made it to his room, and, glancing out the window, saw… The villain was confused.

Must have noticed the birthday boy wasn’t there. That meant he didn’t have much time.

--

“You seem relaxed.”

She shrugged. The confines were cramped, but not quite claustrophobic.

“You know. If you wanted, I could get us out of here.”

She looked at him.

“You’ve just got to say two things: Claws out, and Cataclysm.”

--

Ladybug had noticed what the Bubbler had. Adrien wasn’t there. She’d arrived too late to see him go inside, but just in time to see the Bubbler leap back over the crowd to the door.

“Adrien?” he called, voice carrying across the courtyard. “Dude!”

She cracked her neck, and followed his jump.

He was out of sight, probably already… Where was Adrien’s room? Did he know?

“Alright!” called Alya’s voice from behind her, “you got this, Ladybug.”

Right now? Her second villain after Stoneheart. It was absolutely too early to declare her a pro at this.

But, whatever fear she felt at this new villain was overridden, first by the need to use her powers to help those who didn’t have them, and second, to protect Adrien.

Bubbler walked out of a door off to the left.

“Not in there,” he said, and looked around. His eyes fixed on her.

“Well hello there, Ladybug,” he said, “are you the reason Adrien didn’t show up to his birthday party?”

“There, actually,” called a voice from upstairs, “that would be me.”

She looked up, and there, standing at on the balcony at the top of the stairs, was Chat Noir.

He vaulted over the banister, leaped down to the banister of the stairs, and with one more leap, hit the
ground. He straightened up, and grinned at the villain. “I figured if you wanted him, then the first thing I should do was to get him out of here.”

This seemed to incense the Bubbler.

“Alright,” he growled, “I guess I’ll get back to him later. For now, I guess it’s time to follow up on my end of the bargain.”

The bubble wand in his hand lashed out, and she was suddenly very busy with bubbles.

Her yo-yo spun around, a de facto shield.

Chat Noir dove behind her, minimizing their area, and while she could barely see his motions, she could feel him copying her movements.

For an instant, she wondered why he didn’t block for himself, and then the bubbles stopped.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” she said, with a victorious grin.

There was a loud clack.

“Yeah,” said Chat Noir, “and I wasn’t even ready.”

He stepped up beside her, and she saw in his hand a shiny black staff.

She was surprised he hadn’t brought it out when Stoneheart had attacked, but now seemed like a good time too.

“Do better?” asked the Bubbler, gesturing to the scattered, but still intact, bubbles she knocked around the room. “I already have.”

And suddenly, they were coming from all directions, and there was nothing she could do.

For a single, blinding second, there were bubbles everywhere, and then…

She almost thought nothing had happened. Then, she realized that the strange color in the air was from a single, large bubble that had surrounded them.

“Now,” said the Bubbler, “how about a deal. You give me your Miraculouses, and… tell me how to find Adrien Agreste, and I let you out.”

“Never!” cried Ladybug.

Chat Noir paused, before shaking his head. “Yeeaaah, that’s not really an option.”

The Bubbler looked down. His fists clenched.

Then, in a sudden rage, he shouted “FINE!”

And the bubble smashed through a window.

--

He just registered that the courtyard was empty now, as the guests had managed to escape, and then…

Oh… Oh… It was a good thing he didn’t have a fear of heights, because he was now scared of
heights even *without* having a fear of them.

Ladybug looked down, surprised, but the kind of surprised that’s still in the fight.

“Okay,” she said, “we’ve got to get out of here.”

She closed her eyes, and seemed to think for a second.

Then they snapped open again, and she grinned.

“I’ve got it! Tikki told me about your ability! You just have to use Cataclysm, and we can *bust* this bubble, and get out of here!”

He froze.

“What’s wrong, Chat Noir? You didn’t use it *already* or something, did you?”

He inhaled. He inhaled some more. Eventually, in a tone far higher than the superheroic drawl he tried to project, he said, “I… don’t know, exactly, how to tell you this, Ladybug…”

Chapter End Notes

I always have a bit of trouble writing Alya. The problem is writing a character who, as a friend, absolutely cares about Marinette, and would go through hell for her. The other side, though, is that Alya loves messing with Marinette.

In other news, hoo boy, Ladybug's going to have a bit of a moment in the next chapter.
Chapter Summary

A Chat Noir from another universe seemed quite excited to be stuck in a bubble with Ladybug.
All things considered, this universe's Chat Noir would give it a 10/10.

Chapter Notes

Kicking it off with the scene I meant to put in Stoneheart; it just did not happen in the plot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“What do you mean you can’t do that? Didn’t your kwami explain how?”
“I have no idea what a kwami is?”
“You… The little creature that comes out of your Miraculous?”
He pursed his lips, and slowly shook his head. “Still kind of fuzzy on what a Miraculous is.”
“Like your ring…” she stared at his hand, “It is a ring, isn’t it?”
“Is what a ring?”
“You Miraculous.”
He looked around uncomfortably. “I don’t think I’ve got one.”
“Wh- then how did you transform?”
He was visibly confused.

She laughed, uncertainly. “You did transform, right? I mean, it’s not like you just owned a leather catsuit… Right?”

He stared at her. “Well…”

The bubble was dead silent for about five seconds.

She looked away, clearly confused.

“So… You don’t have a Miraculous.”

“Don’t think so.”

“You just… Own a catsuit.”
“Yyyeah.”

She took a deep breath. “Why?”

He chuckled, a bit nervous. “I um… Didn’t want people to recognize me outside.”

“Would they?”

“I mean, a few people might. I definitely didn’t want word getting back home.”

She laughed. “What, did your family never let you out?”

The smile died at his lack of a response.

She sucked in a breath.

“Oh… Sorry.”

He shrugged.

She leaned back against the bubble-wall, and shook her head. “You’ve been doing all this without powers.”

“Yup.”

She straightened, suddenly, “but wait! That doesn’t make sense! You’re too agile, and fast, and… and… you know, everything!”

He shrugged. “I mean, I was taught a lot of it. I figured out the rest of it myself. It’s not like I had anything better to do, right? Even made the suit myself.”

She looked at it.

She hesitated. “Is that… the first thing you made?”

“Well… I mean, sort of. This is like the third version of it after the last ones fell apart.”

“Ah. Well. For what it is, I guess it’s pretty good.”

He snorted, amused. “Well, seeing as you didn’t have to make your own suit, from what you’re saying, I don’t think I have to take that kind of faint praise from you.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m just saying, when…” she looked around at their confines, and took a deep breath, “when we get out of this, I can… Point you towards someone who can make you a better one, alright? She’ll just need your measurements.”

“Oh,” he said, grinning, “a friend in the fashion industry, huh? I see you’re well-connected, milady.”

She shrugged.

The bubble was silent again.

Eventually, she spoke again. “You really did all of this without superpowers, though?”

“Every bit of it.”

She laughed, ruefully, “you’re a better hero without them than I am with them.”
He rolled his eyes. “That’s not true.”

“It is, though! You’re the one who saved stopped Stoneheart from crushing Kim. You’re the one who got up close while I was just standing in the back, frozen. You…” she grimaced. “you got your ribs broken, and still risked your life to keep Stoneheart from hitting me.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, and?”

“And what did I do?” she asked.

She hadn’t meant it as a real question, but-

He held up a hand, and started counting off, “Saved Chloe Bourgeois, stood up to Hawkmoth in front of all of Paris, came up with, not one, but two genius plans using the most unlikely tools possible, saved that girl when she was falling off the Eiffel tower, saved me when I was falling, stole my heart, and overall, proved that you have what it takes to be a hero, despite your lack of self-esteem.”

He held up his hands. “Eight fingers. Seven, if you count the plans as one thing.”

She laughed. “Well, I think some of those might be a bit of an exaggeration.”

“I think a wet suit is definitely pretty unlikely.”

She shook her head. “You know what I mean. I think it’s a bit rich to say I’ve stolen anybody’s heart.”

He chuckled. “No, can’t you tell? I’m smitten beyond my capacity for rational thought.”

“I think what you’re feeling is the height,” she said, looking down.

He looked down, grinning. He was, though she couldn’t see it, blushing slightly under the mask. “Smitten as a kitten.”

Ladybug didn’t look up. “Congratulations. Any chance you had is now gone.”

“What? You don’t like puns?”

Now she looked up. “I like good puns.”

He gave her a shocked, pained look. “Ladybug, how dare you!”

“You’ll have to do better than that.”

“Oohh,” he said, the look fading to a knowing smile. “Alright. You want to see better.”

“No, no, wait,” she said, realizing her mistake, but it was too late.

--

Plagg was getting bored.

For her part, she thought it would have been relaxing; the bubble was quiet, the whole area was relaxed. The view was spectacular, both above and below.

“Good afternoon,” she said.
“G- good afternoon?” came a panicked voice on the other end.

“I am calling to schedule an appointment for Gabriel Agreste.”

“Um. Ma’am, I’m in a bubble right now. I’m, about, a thousand feet in the air, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but there are a lot of people in bubbles right now.”

“I am aware,” she said, “I am in a similar situation.”

“And you’re calling me now!?”

“I doubt the villain responsible will cause any lasting harm to Paris,” she said, scrolling down the screen, “so it seems only sensible to take advantage of the available time.”

“I… Y’know what? No, I’m sorry, you can do your work if you want, but I cannot focus up here,” he said, and hung up.

“Hmmph,” she said.

“What was his deal,” said Plagg.

--

Hawkmoth was good at controlling villains, and he was certain, certain, that he could have forced the Bubbler to retrieve the heroes immediately.

On the other hand… Where was Adrien?

At first, he’d been inclined to accept that Chat Noir had likely placed him in a secure location, and it would be no issue, but the Bubbler had been designed to comb all of Paris looking for people of specific qualifications. It had only taken a few minutes., and the results came back clear; Adrien wasn’t anywhere the Bubbler could find him.

Hawkmoth had simply paused at that.

Another search, also nothing.

Hawkmoth pinched the bridge of his nose.

This was a game of hide-and-seek he hadn’t expected to be quite so… difficult.

There was, of course, a simple solution.

“They know where he is,” he said, “bring them down, take their Miraculouses, and when they are powerless, they will have no choice but to tell you where he is.”

The Bubbler cracked his neck. “Sounds good to me.”

--

“I am boooored.”

“Do you expect me to do something about it?”

“Well, you could transform and get us out of here.”

“No.”
“Well then… Actually, guess what; I’m bored enough that it actually sounds less boring to hear about your boring, tedious job than to do nothing.”

“Really.”

“The worst it’s going to do is knock me out.”

She shrugged. It wasn’t like she had anything else she could really do right now. And, if it was her talking, she wouldn’t have to listen to that grating voice that seemed to bounce off the walls of the bubble in truly aggravating ways.

--

“Oh thank goodness,” said Ladybug, leaning back against the wall.

“Aww,” said Chat Noir, “I still had more!”

Ladybug chuckled, “I don’t doubt it. I do doubt that they were any better.”

“You wound me.”

“No more than you wounded me with the quality of your jokes.” She shook her head. “Alright. Time to get ready.”

“Right.”

“The Akuma’s got to be in the bubble wand, right?”

Chat Noir nodded, “makes sense.”

They waited.

When they were about a two hundred feet up, dropping quickly, Ladybug nodded.

“Alright, time for a Lucky Charm!”

A long, narrow object dropped into her hand.

“Is that… An ice pick?”

Chat Noir shrugged. “Dunno, but ten bucks says it can pop this bubble.”

“And twenty says that if we do it right, that’s all we need to do.”

“On my signal, then. I pop, you take.”

“As you wish.”

--

“But if you care about it so much, why not make a board and mark where everything could go? Obviously, that’s a huge waste of time, but you don’t seem to care.”

That sounded weirdly like sudoku. Nathalie liked sudoku.

--
“Hey dudes,” said Bubbler, in that too-loud voice, giving them a surprisingly menacing grin. His whole appearance managed to be surprisingly menacing, considering his design and color scheme. Maybe it was the evil clown vibe he gave off. “Let’s talk.”

“What?” said Ladybug.

“I said-“

“I can’t hear you!”

He seemed taken aback.

Chat Noir looked back and forth between the two of them.

“I SAID-“

“I CAN’T HEAR YOU!” screamed Ladybug, and he winced at the sound.

“Why not?”

She did her best impression of confusion. “YOU SOUND REALLY QUIET!”

“Well,” said the Bubbler, stepping forward, “it’s not the bubble. Guess you just went deaf!”

“DEATH?”

The Bubbler leaned forward. “I said,” his face was almost up to the Bubble’s surface, “DEAF!”

Ladybug leaned forward, and he joined her, mere inches from him, only separated by the shimmering surface of the Bubbler.

“AND I SAID!” said Ladybug, and then, so quiet he almost couldn’t here, “now.”

“What?” said the Bubbler.

The ice-pick lashed out, and he jumped in surprise as the bubble burst.

“What!” he managed, as Chat Noir already had his hands on the bubble wand. He pulled.

“Hey!” shouted the Bubbler, wrenching back, “let go of that!” He was… exceptionally strong.

Chat Noir held on for dear life as his body was jerked around. In an instant between jerks, he managed to loop an arm into the bubble wand, which left one hand free…

--

Ladybug couldn’t get close. To get in close enough to touch the wand, she would have to get through Chat Noir’s body, which was whipping around dangerously fast.

“Hey, Bubbler! I’ve got someone I’d like you to meet!” called Chat Noir, and she caught a glimpse of his hand at his side.

“What?”

The baton in his hand exploded forward, slamming the Bubbler in the face.

He did what any creature with natural reactions would do, pulling his hands up to his face.
Chat Noir wrenched the bubble wand free.

“No!”

But it was too late. The wand was in Ladybug’s hands, and snapped.

The Bubbler, hand still outstretched, dissolved in a ripple of black mist, leaving… Nino Lahiffe, intact, if a little confused.

Ladybug grinned. It was time to purify a butterfly.

“Pound it,” Chat Noir said, holding out a fist.

She took the offer.

“Miraculous Ladybug!”

The ladybugs swarmed out, and when they had cleared, Chat Noir looked down at himself. Sure enough, they were waiting to put him back.

She looked at him. “Before I send you back,” she said, “Your outfit’s really starting to bother me, now that I know why it looks like that.”

“I swear you didn’t care about this before.”

“I didn’t, but now… Look, let me write down her address. I’ll tell her ahead of time that you’re coming.”

“Right,” he said, and lead the way to Gabriel’s atelier.

“Here,” he said, snagging a post-it note, “this should work.”

“Right,” she said, grabbing a pen.

“So… should I show up in costume?”

She stared ahead. “Definitely.”

“I’ll probably get some funny looks. Could be awkward for her later.”

“Maybe if you show up after dark?”

“Could she leave the window open?”

Ladybug sighed, “second floor.”

“Sounds good to me.”

She looked up again, “Oh. Right, you can climb, can’t you. Alright, just, be careful nobody sees you, alright?”

“I may not be a burglar, but a cat…”

“You’re not that either.”

“You know what I mean.”
“Yes I do,” she said, and passed him the paper. She seemed to think, and then nodded, “I’ve got a second. Adrien will be okay, right?”

“Oh yeah; trust me, he already knows the villain’s gone. I’m sure he’ll be back in his room in a few minutes.”

She nodded.

“Alright. You ready to go?”

“Any time you are.”

She nodded, and there was that same blinding flash.

He was back in his room, in plainclothes.

--

Ladybug wound up, and flew from the room.

--

Gabriel Agreste stared.

He had spent a full minute at least, just reaffirming his commitment to his goals after the Bubbler had been defeated, and then spent some time standing there, trying to really take in what he’d just said. So why had Ladybug still been in his house. What had she been doing in his atelier, of all places?

He shook it off. The Bubbler had been in here earlier, perhaps she’d been checking for something.

--

“Oh wow, you really are boring. I didn’t expect you to actually do it.”

She shrugged. “It’s a sensible design.” She turned to face him. “You have contributed to the field of organizational science. How do you feel?”

“Absolutely disgusted.”

“Good. That is traditional in these circumstances.”

He looked at her for a second, confused, and then snorted. “Yeah, yeah, I get it.”

As he looked at her, Plagg was surprised to see… The quietest smile he’d ever seen on a human.

Chapter End Notes

Plagg & Nathalie is a dynamic I never considered exploring, but seriously, it's probably my favorite part of writing this fic thus far, which is interesting, as it wasn't a goal, and just sort of happened by default.
The Many Looks of Chat Noir

Chapter Summary

Did you know, Black Cat is not actually as specific a descriptor for an outfit as you might think.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Plagg was missing. Plagg was missing, and they had no clue where he was. They’d left him in the boy’s house (Adrien, he now knew the name) and then Plagg had not been there.

Wayzz had searched, but found nothing. Master Fu? Didn’t really have an option.

What kept coming back into his mind was that Chat Noir looked like the boy they’d given the ring to. He looked exactly like him, and he dressed right, and, when a villain had attacked earlier today, he’d even been wielding a baton just like he should have been.

It was like… It was like… Like he’d transformed into Chat Noir, but it hadn’t worked. The suit was… off, according to Wayzz. The baton was mundane, just an ordinary weapon; of good quality, but without the strength and versatility of the real thing. He hadn’t used Cataclysm even once.

And yet… He had every part of the kit, without the charge of the ring.

He was meant to be Chat Noir, and he was.

And yet he wasn’t.

--

The time was 10:27pm, and Marinette was strangely nervous.

The problem was, she needed a design. Not just any design; one that looked good, and matched Chat Noir. Right now, his outfit reminded her of her own, but constructed poorly. It was plain. Frankly, she was slightly annoyed about that in herself. She was a designer, so why had she made her own suit so… lackluster?

Tikki had said that it reflected her own desires in her moment of transformation. Sure enough, she hadn’t really wanted anything at that moment. She hadn’t been expecting anything, either.

Hm… Maybe she’d get a re-do on that at some point.

For tonight, though, her focus was Chat Noir.

It was 10:29.

There was a knock at the window.

She looked at it, and saw… A figure in all black.
It would have been terrifying, had it not been for the fact that she had been expecting him. As it was, he still looked eerie.

She pushed the window open.

“Good evening, Chat Noir,” she said.

He sighed, obviously relieved. “Okay. Thought I might have had the wrong window. You don’t usually think about people living inside a bakery. Especially not ones supposed to have skills with clothing.”

She shrugged. “I might be a baker’s daughter, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have my own skills.”

He nodded, smiling, and then frowned, looked down.

“So, Ladybug did say you were on the second floor, but she didn’t mention that there was kind of a desk in the way. I’d rather not take out your computer on the way in.”

“I couldn’t speak to it,” said Marinette, “but… can you make it up to the roof?”

He shrugged, “shouldn’t be an issue.”

“There’s a way in up there.”

“Perfect,” he said, and was swiftly out of sight.

She still couldn’t believe that he didn’t have any powers.

Anyway, powers or not, he was probably already up on the roof.

She clambered up onto her bed, and popped the door to the roof open.

He smiled at her, apparently delighted. “Ah, I see. Very convenient.”

She shrugged. “We have a balcony. We have to get to it somehow.”

“I suppose,” he said.

‘Come in,’ she didn’t quite say. She’d really only met Chat Noir three times now, and nobody knew he was going to be here.

He’d already established himself as very strong and agile.

“You alright?” he said.

With a penchant for acting ‘romantic.’

“Fine! Fine,” she said.

…And he’d fought through the pain of broken ribs to keep a rock monster from hitting her, not to mention that if she had misjudged him, she could always transform.

“Alright,” he said, “you just kind of-

“Please, come in!”

He seemed taken aback by her suddenness.
“Alright?”

She slipped back to the floor, shaking her head. She’d be *fine.*

She walked over to her desk, and picked up a tape and a piece of paper.

She turned around, and jumped, because she hadn’t heard him come through after her. He was standing, hands at his chest, looking around her room. He seemed startled by her surprise, but she shook it off.

She took a deep breath.

“Okay,” she said. “If I’m going to make something, I’ll need your measurements.”

He nodded.

“So… Just give me an idea, what’s your weight?”

He stared into space for a second, “about 56 kilograms?”

Seemed a bit high, but… “Height?”

“175 centimeters, give or take.”

She nodded, slowly. That seemed sensible enough.

“Alright,” she said, holding up the measuring tape, “Then let’s get started.”

--

“Honestly? Because I’m curious.”

That seemed appropriate.

“You *are* aware of what they say about curiosity.”

He shrugged. “I’m immortal, I don’t think a little curiosity’s gonna kill me.”

She sighed. “Fine.” She slipped the ring off its chain and onto her finger. Almost disinterestedly, she said “claws out.”

There was no posing. Instead, she was simply sitting at her desk at home, in…

It wasn’t black leather. The shine, for one thing, was missing.

She silently stood up, and, wondering why she hadn’t gone there before transforming, starting walking towards the mirror.

For a moment, something seemed wrong. And then she realized that she couldn’t hear herself walking. If she kept her mouth closed, she was utterly silent.

The material… Obviously, it was magic, but in mundane terms, it looked like…

It reminded her of black wool. A soft, matte black, unlike Paris’ resident superhero. Except, she couldn’t *feel* it. There was no itch. It moved smoothly with her, as if it was *part* of her. In fact, it seemed almost as if it *was* part of her. It covered her hands impeccably, except for the palms, which were rubbery, almost sticky. As she walked, the sensation of each step suggested the soles of her
feet were similarly coated, which was an odd contrast with the seemingly formal shoes (still in matte black) that she was wearing.

She made it to the mirror, and finally was able to see her own head.

She hadn’t expected a new color, and she hadn’t gotten one, except… Well…

Had she met herself on the street, she wouldn’t have recognized herself. Her face was completely covered. The ears seemed unnecessary, but then again, it was the only sign that this was supposed to be a feline design.

The only splash of color was the bright green of her eyes. She tilted her head, and there was a reflected flash as the light caught them.

The overall effect was one of muted dignity. It seemed… Appropriate, and, if she was any judge, quite stealthy.

She said her first words since transforming. “Claws in.”

Plagg reappeared, flitting away from her.

“Aww…” he said, “you’re not even going to destroy something? I’m itching to use a Cataclysm.”

She looked at him.

“Hmph. Well, I’ve got to admit,” he said, slowing himself to a gentle float, “I at least like the look.”

“I suppose you put some significant time into it?”

“Nah,” he said, “that was pulled straight from your head.”

She blinked, slowly, and looked at him. “You didn’t say that you would be reading my mind.”

He shrugged, “I mean, it’s more about making sure the suit matches you. Trust me, I’ve had owners who would have hated that look. Like, the guy in a catsuit out there now? I guarantee you he would have made it shiny, well, shinier, if he could. Like, look at him! He gets in close, and jumps around. He already tries to draw as much attention as he can.”

“I’m surprised you bothered to pay attention.”

“Eh. Cat-suits are kind of my thing. Anyway, it’s pretty obvious you’re more assassin than anything.”

She looked at him. “Appropriate.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, I get it, you really are some big-time assassin.”

She shrugged, and walked away. Plagg’s grin faltered. He fixed the back of her head with a searching look.

It did seem plausible, somehow.

--

Marinette was blushing, and was, as a result, carefully measuring anything she could find that put her face out of his line of sight.
It wasn’t her fault. She’d taken Alix’s measurements last year, and, well, she’d had to retake a few measurements, because Alix had somehow thought *flexing* was a good idea when she was trying to get accurate measurements. Why escaped her, but *the point was*…

The point was, she’d told Chat to stop flexing.

And then he’d given her a slightly confused look, and *started* flexing.

She wasn’t blushing because she was *impressed*, even, it was pure embarrassment at having misread things so hard. Of course, *he* didn’t know that, which was, in itself, feeding back into the whole-

She took a breath, and stood up. “Alright! That’s all of it.” Her face was still a bit red, but that wasn’t going to stop her.

“Alright!” He stepped forward, and then turned to face her. “So… Did you already have a design in mind?”

She shrugged, walking over to her desk. “Did you?”

“Well…” he said, “I would have been happy to stick with what I had already, but… Well, Ladybug apparently couldn’t stand to see me wearing this?”

“You made it yourself, right?” she said.

--

He breathed in, about to respond, and then hesitated. “What did she tell you about… Everything.”

“I know that you don’t have a Miraculous. I know that, for now, you want everyone to think you do. I know you made that outfit yourself.”

“Okay,” he said, pulling a chair over to the desk. “Well. Like I said, this was Ladybug’s idea, so I guess as long as it’s better than what I’ve already got, I’m fine.”

She looked at him, or, he supposed, his suit.

“Did you mean it to be that shiny?”

He scratched the back of his neck. “Well… I thought it looked cool.”

She shrugged. “I suppose. When I make one, do you want me to keep it like that?”

“If you could.”

She scratched something into her notebook.

“You know,” he said, “materials for this kind of thing aren’t exactly cheap.”

She shrugged. “I know.”

“But,” he said, “you’re already putting probably a lot of time into this; I don’t want to make you pay for materials too.”

“It’s fine,” she said, “really.”

“Marinette,” he said, and realized that he’d never actually introduced himself to her as Chat Noir,
nor, technically, had she introduced herself, “I am not going to let you pay for materials.”

She snorted, still scratching away at the notebook, “You don’t control how I spend my money.”

Chat Noir pursed his lips. “I do control whether I actually wear the suit.”

She gave him a look.

He looked her dead in the eyes. “I won’t wear it unless you let me compensate you properly.”

—

He wasn’t kidding. He wanted to pay her for this, when it had been her idea originally. Of course, he didn’t know it had been her idea, but…

“Trust me,” he said, “I’ve got the money for it.”

She stared him down for a few seconds longer, and then broke eye contact.

“I’ll send you the bill when I’m done,”

He visibly relaxed.

Well… If she wanted high-quality materials, that would come at a price. It would certainly be nice to not have to worry about that, if nothing else.

Strange, though, that he had easy access to money when he seemed to be trapped inside his own home when he wasn’t in costume. It sounded familiar, but she couldn’t place it.

“So,” he said, “any idea when it’ll be done?”

She shook her head, “it depends. Inspiration, motivation, time… Necessity. Some of those seams are already coming loose.”

“Well,” he said after a second, “I guess when it comes down to it, all I really need is the mask.”

“You’ve just moved up my deadline,” she said, without looking up.

Surely he wouldn’t actually… Well, he had broken ribs for hero work, who knew how far he’d go.

He laughed. “Sorry; that was a joke.”

She relaxed. “Probably for the best,” she said, “I have a persistent mental image in my head now, and the less I have reason to remember it, the better.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

She shook her head. “Don’t worry about it.”

For a minute, they sat in silence. “So…” he said eventually, “should I get going, or…?”

She’d been wondering the same thing. On the one hand, his presence still felt awkward. On the other… He’d probably like the outfit better if he got a say in the design, and, from what little he’d said, he’d probably be happy for the excuse to be out of his house.

“Maybe,” she said aloud. “I was going to ask a few more preference questions, but it’s hard to know what to ask before I’ve even got a basic design. I’ll probably have a better idea in a few days, so if
you want to come by later this week...”

“I- It would be pleasure,” he said, and, out of her peripheral vision, she could see him smiling.

“Alright,” she said, “See you then, but, for now, we could probably both use some sleep.”

“Oh right,” he said, grinning, “school tomorrow.”

“It started a few days ago for me,” she said.

He nodded, “Same here.”

Then, he was up the ladder.

“Good night, Marinette,” he said, “I suppose I’ll see you... soon?”

“Yup! Goodnight, Chat Noir.”

And then he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

It felt like the Marichat came out a bit awkward, which was interesting. I suppose, even though I didn't think about it going in, they really don't know each other that well. Well, they'll get to know each other better sooner or later, I'm sure.
Chapter Summary

Marinette is suspicious, but doesn’t know what exactly she suspects. Alya is suspicious for fun, but thinks she might be on to something. Adrien is suspicious, and really hopes he’s wrong.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There was a rhythm to things, now. A rhythm to the attacks, at least. A monster would attack, and be taken on by Ladybug and Chat Noir. Then, after everything had gone quiet, a few days would go by in relative silence. Then, four or five days later, another one would attack, and the cycle would start over.

It felt like what Marinette would expect from being struck by lightning. The first time is a surprise, and then you could feel the next one building up. The day after an attack, people were always happier, not because of the attack, but because Hawkmoth likely wouldn’t send another for a few days.

Around three days, people began to get on edge. The fourth day was the one where school became difficult. People kept checking their phones, glancing out the windows, waiting. Teachers would assign homework for the fourth day, and there was always the momentary hesitation as they remembered what would probably happen on that day.

The fifth day was the grim one. If there hadn’t been a villain on the fourth, it was nearly certain that there would be one on the fifth. Everybody knew it.

They had only hit day six once, and considering the villain had been obsessed with deadlines, the general consensus was that they had succumbed to the nerves, and almost been relieved when Hawkmoth gave them the option to close the open-ended terror.

The strangest part was seeing how other people reacted. Alya, kept nervously checking her phone, both to see if something had happened, and to check the charge, whether she still had it. When a villain did attack, she immediately calmed down; after all, she had something to do.

Time seemed to turn back for Nino, as if it was a year ago, when he hadn’t spoken to anyone. He would sit in some secluded corner, playing music loud enough to drown out his nerves. He’d only pulled back because Mme. Bustier had heard his music playing from her desk during a silent study session and had mandated he not destroy his ears.

Chloe got louder, as if trying to fill the gaps left by everyone’s silence. Sabrina barely said a word past the third day, even to say ‘yes’ to Chloe.

Alix and Kim both put on a brave show, but when they weren’t actively reminding the class how unphased they were, their nerves showed through the cracks.
Most of the rest of the class followed Sabrina’s example, to one extent or another, slowly growing quieter as their fate drew closer.

According to Alya, there were really only two people who managed to even fight it effectively.

Both Adrien and Marinette, according to Alya, managed to shake off their worries in class. According to her, when one was around, the others could almost forget anything was wrong.

She had even, with a smirk, suggested that both of them together would be enough to purge the whole mood from a room, were it not for the fact that Marinette kept tripping over her words when Adrien was around.

Marinette had decided early on that if she was going to try to help people as Ladybug, she was going to do it as Marinette, too. It had seemed only right that she did her best to give them some semblance of normalcy when they were waiting for the shoe to drop. As for Adrien…

She could have put it down to his nature, kind, caring, and maybe just oblivious to forget his own fear.

She would have been wrong, though, and she knew it.

Adrien kept pinged her mind. Sure, whenever she thought about him, things went hazy, but that couldn’t quite disguise that something was going on.

It wasn’t that something was wrong with him, but there was something that wasn’t quite clicking.

The same feeling hit her, over and over; He was barely taller than her, but when her backpack had been on top of the lockers (3 guesses who’s idea that had been) he’d barely seemed to notice that the top of the lockers was a full two feet above the top of his head. He’d given Nino a hug to try and pull him out of his reclusion (surprisingly successfully) and had easily lifted him off the ground. She would have said it was just strange for a clothing model to be so physically competent, but she’d watched a fencing practice, and she’d be trying to figure out why she knew the person clearly outclassing everyone else in the room, only for it to be Adrien. It wasn’t just strange, it was familiar.

He would laugh, and she would get a sense of déjà vu. He would make a joke, and for the barest instant, that smile looked like… something. It didn’t feel like Adrien was secretly evil, or anything like that, more like she was getting glimpses of something beneath the surface. She could feel something in her mind, but every time she looked for it, what he reminded her of, she couldn’t quite remember it.

It was maddening.

--

Alya had been thinking; Ladybug was a hero for all Paris, right? The thing was, though, she was also a regular person on the side.

The million dollar question, of course, was who.

Of course, Alya knew that the odds that she knew Ladybug in real life were slim to none. Then again, it was a nice distraction when villain anxiety was creeping up on her, to take her classmates, and, one by one, try to imagine them as one of the heroes. She would spend a few hours playing conspiracy theorist. Yes, Juleka stayed quiet in class, but maybe that was just to avoid drawing attention to her civilian alter-ego! Of course Kim’s build, while similarly athletic, was far different from Chat Noir’s, but there were ways around that, if he was determined.
And so, the better part of a month had passed, and she’d finally landed on Chloe, which seemed, implausible. Of course it did. Chloe and Ladybug looked nothing alike, and acted even less alike.

Still, with the dogged determination of someone with nothing better to do, she set about it. Who knew, maybe it would be fun.

…

Two failed voicemails to Marinette, a surprisingly convincing reason to believe Chloe was Ladybug, and a hushed conversation with Nino later, and Alya was surprised to find that she was having fun.

…

One failed investigation, and a sentencing to a weeklong suspension later, Alya would have admitted that she was not having fun.

--

Adrien was, to put it mildly, confused. A weeklong suspension seemed kind of harsh for looking in someone’s locker, but just as confusing was Alya’s reasoning. Chloe? Ladybug? There was no way!

And then Marinette had been sent to the principal’s office, which was, in itself, almost as strange.

But, there’d been nothing for it. He’d been in class, and he couldn’t exactly leave.

He’d been calmly resigning himself to waiting to have any idea about what had happened, when the projector lit up.

“Good morning, Paris!” said the villain; it had to be a villain, normal people didn’t wear outfits like… Well, he did, but he didn’t appear on unexpected screens greeting Paris.

‘Deliverer of truth?’ ‘Going to unmask Ladybug?’ ‘Lady Wifi?’

Adrien pinched the bridge of his nose. It had only been two days since the last attack. Hawkmoth was apparently moving up this week’s schedule. Fantastic, just bully for him. Adrien had been planning to spend today trying to make up a bit of the ground he’d lost with Marinette over his disastrous first impression. She still seemed to dislike talking to him. Chat Noir, on the one occasion he’d visited, she’d gotten along with fine, but as Adrien… Well, the point was it wasn’t happening today.

Mme. Bustier dismissed them. ‘Stay safe,’ she’d said.

Stay safe? Adrien had a bad habit of missing homework, and today, when he had a better idea of his own? It might be a day for a bit of danger.

Alya had been sure that Chloe was Ladybug. Lady Wifi had said that she was going to unmask Ladybug. It could be a coincidence, but the two of them looked similar, and Alya couldn’t have been happy about the unjust suspension. The conclusion seemed obvious enough.

So, it was with persistent jitters that he fought his way through his schedule, which had, itself, moved up.

--

His feet were getting sore, which he hadn’t expected to be possible when he was transformed.
She was a promising villain, and her goal was aligned with his, in a strange way. Of course, he knew Chloe Bourgeois, and it seemed nigh-impossible that she would be Ladybug, but if nothing else, when the real Ladybug showed up, she could do the same interrogation to her.

The issue, though, was the invaluably boring prep time.

She had to prepare her introduction. She had to rehearse her introduction. She, apparently, had to record dozens of different clips of her own reactions. She…

He managed to soften a groan to a sigh. He had seen her… fan blog. He’d even kept an eye on it; after all, he knew from himself that a single, sufficiently dedicated person could do incredible things. She just might find out who they were. If nothing else, she stockpiled clips of them, which he had combed over for any hint as to how to defeat them. He still hadn’t drawn out Chat Noir’s Miraculous’ ability, which meant he hadn’t even truly challenged them.

Of course he kept up with her blog. What that meant, though, was he should have known she would do this. He’d seen some of her more edited videos; transitions, interviews where she was both interviewer and interviewee, the perfect diction that came from dozens of repeated takes. She clearly put significant time into it. Unfortunately, for her, right now, significant time seemed to mean hours. By the time he realized how long it would take her, he’d already been up here so long it felt like she had to be almost done. She wasn’t. There was always something else, and frankly, he didn't know how even in the most unlikely of circumstances she would use all of what she'd made.

Hours passed. Eventually, gave up on standing, statuesque, in the middle of the room. He started flipping his cane, higher, and higher. He started counting, the catches, but gave up around 1000. He leaned against the wall, trying not to break something. He resisted the urge to try catching one of the butterflies the normal way, by hand. He leaned up against a wall, and tried to come up with new villain ideas. Even though he intended to win today, it didn’t do to be unprepared. It wasn’t easy, though, with a persistent voice in his head. He tried to catch some butterflies by hand, and wondered whether it would have been more efficient to simply detransform and come back later.

--

Adrien’s schedule had been abruptly moved up when he’d come home, but now, he had caught up, which meant it was time to do some work. More accurately…

“Hey, Nathalie, do you think I could go visit Chloe?”

She looked at him. “Adrien, there is a villain loose.”

“Well, yeah, but people are still driving around, and it’s not like she’s got any reason to dislike me.”

“And why do you want to visit Ms. Bourgeois? You haven’t asked to see her since before the beginning of the school year.”

Adrien, with his best concerned friend expression (he was very good at that one, since he did it even more genuinely quite frequently) said, “her locker was broken into this morning. She seemed pretty upset. I wanted to check up on her.” All accurate statements, if not entirely connected.

Nathalie gave him a careful look. “And what would you like me to say if your father asks why I let you out during an attack?”

Adrien paused, and looked down. “You can tell him… Tell him that if he still has to do designing work during villain attacks, then I still have to check up on my friends during villain attacks. And, everything else I just told you.”
Nathalie’s head tilted up slightly, and then, after a second, let it down, a single nod. “Inform your chauffeur I’ve given my permission.”

“Thanks Nathalie!” he said with a smile, and ran off to his room, to pick up his backpack (after all, how else would he have his suit if Lady Wifi did show up).

—

She didn’t respond aloud, and he had run off too quickly to see the small smile on her face.

“Aha!” said Plagg, jolting her back to the moment, “There’s a smile.”

She turned to face him, dropping the smile. “Yes?”

He shrugged, in midair. “Eh, it’s just weird every time you do something human.”

“You care a great deal about others’ humanity, considering you aren’t human.”

“Well, I mostly work with humans. Actually, only humans. And other kwamis, but not usually. The point is, you actually care about him, don’t you.”

“Of course I do.”

“Good kid?”

“Of course. He is very well raised.”

“Oh. By who?”

She turned a withering look on him, but couldn’t actually deny that Mr. Agreste had been comparatively distant.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.”

“He has his father’s determination, when it suits him.”

“Huh. He’s the kid whose room I ended up in, right?”

“Yes.”

“The one whose room you were snooping around in?”

“I needed to speak to him, and he happened to be elsewhere when I checked his room. Beyond that, I was simply curious as to why there was a ring box on his desk.”

“Mm. Mm…” said Plagg, “Well, anyway, I’m just saying I don’t think I’d have been disappointed with him if you hadn’t gotten your hands on me first.”

“Hm,” she said in agreement.

—

“Alright, I’m ready.”

“Mhm,” he said, barely registering.

“I can see it now, an evening interview with Ladybug and Chat Noir. At least, if Chat Noir makes it
“Excellent,” he said, barely meaning it.

It was a nightmare. He’d knocked on the door, and Chloe had answered, fully dressed in the suit, yo-yo, the earrings, the mask, everything. The only reason to doubt it, which he was frantically hanging on to was that her hair was different. She’d greeted him, and invited him inside, without even commenting on the clothes.

He took a deep breath, and was about to start… Interrogating? Investigating. Investigating whether that last bit of hope he was clinging to was real or not, and, if she really was Ladybug, why she would reveal her identity so easily to him.

He really, really hoped that she wasn’t. Chloe was an old friend, but he really didn’t want to find out he’d somehow fallen in love with her.

“So,” he said, “that’s, um, quite a suit.”

She grinned, and then looked away, with that fake disgusted expression she sometimes put on. “Ugh. You wouldn’t believe what I had to go through to get it.”

“Ah,” he said. He’d hoped she’d say something a bit more telling. As it was, he still couldn’t be sure, so if he could just find the right question…

And then, her phone had rung. She’d picked it up, looked at it, slightly confused, and slid to answer.

“Hello?” she said, and suddenly, Adrien didn’t need to worry about interrogating her himself. He had Lady Wifi coming in with a dynamic entry to do his job for him… And then, probably, fight him.

Chapter End Notes

So, fun fact, in the actual Lady Wifi episode, we jump cut from the morning (like, an hour after school starts) to the evening, with the actual fight taking place at night. Hawkmoth has canonically kept a villain running for at least 9 hours. Did he go to the bathroom? Did he eat? I have no idea. The life of a supervillain sure can be rough, though.
The Price of Heroism (Your Pants)

Chapter Summary

Chat Noir has somewhere to be, but Adrien has somewhere he already is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chloe dropped the phone as Lady Wifi dove out of it. A single spin around the room, and four of those circular icons like the one he’d seen in her first broadcast were up in the corners. That was the icon for ‘recording,’ wasn’t it?

“Wh-“ Chloe had time to say, before being frozen in place.

He caught the edge of a grin on Lady Wifi’s face, and then she remembered he was there.

He dove to the side, and she missed the first swipe. One more, though, and she was prepared, and with this backpack on, he took a lock to the foot, and suddenly found himself rooted to the ground.

“Sorry,” she said, locking up his other foot as well. “I can’t have you running around while I’m broadcasting. Speaking of which…” She flicked out a few more record icons. She snapped her fingers and one of them lit up.

“Good evening, Paris,” she said in her best dramatic voice, “You doubtless remember my mission statement from earlier; To bring you the truth about Ladybug. Well,” she snapped her fingers, and a different one lit up, this one facing Chloe, “let’s talk about that. We see here a young woman in the suit, the mask, the earrings. A set of clothes that aren’t even available as costumes on the open market yet, though I’m sure it’s coming.”

“Now,” she said, locking Chloe’s feet in place, “the hair might seem a bit strange, but a wig, may I say, is much easier to come by than the full suit. Who would doubt, then, that the girl beneath this mask is Ladybug? But then, who is she?”

She looked at the icon. “Why don’t we find out? And, just for fun…” She unfroze her

“-at!?” finished Chloe, and jumped, or, tried to jump, back at the villain’s sudden appearance in front of her.

“Good evening, Ladybug,” said Lady Wifi, “I just thought you’d like to be around for your unmasking, considering what happened this morning.”

“Excuse me!? This morning!? What are you talking about?”

A record zipped over and lit up.

“Oh right, that happened when you weren’t being Ladybug,” said Lady Wifi, “We’ll talk about that after we’ve got this mask off.” She grabbed the mask despite Chloe’s best attempts to avoid her hand, and pulled the mask away. She mock-gasped, “Chloe Bourgeois?”
Chloe didn’t seem to have any proper response to this.

“Now,” said Lady Wifi, “an interview may be in order.”

The door to the balcony slammed open hard enough to crack the glass. “EXCUSE ME!” said Ladybug, the, he breathed a sigh of relief, real Ladybug, “You- You just- I- CHLOE BOURGEOIS!? That’s really what you think of me!?”

Lady Wifi seemed taken aback.

A different record lit up. “Well, Paris, it looks like things are getting interesting.”

Adrien, standing silently, was marveling at how relieved it was possible to be while unable to move because of a villain.

Chloe wasn’t Ladybug, but Ladybug was here.

And then Lady Wifi froze her.

“Alright, Paris,” she said, “time for a quick reset, as we find out who the real Ladybug really-

Adrien didn’t do ball sports, but Lady Wifi was a big enough target to work with. His backpack hit her squarely in the back, and she stumbled forward. Her hand, already stretched out, grazed the stop icon on Ladybug, and it pulled away.

Ladybug blinked, as she realized what had happened, and then jumped back as Lady Wifi came up with a vengeance.

She didn’t have a choice but to retreat under the barrage of icons. There was a crash from below, the sound of a window smashing.

“You,” she said, running after her, and then stopping. Ladybug seemed to already be out of reach.

“I had her,” she said, turning to face Adrien, “I had her, and YOU,” she had the backpack now and had her arm wound up to-

A shadow crossed her face, and her arm silently shook, as if she was fighting the impulse to throw it at him. Then, with a suddenness that surprised him, she threw it straight through the window, off the balcony, hurtling towards to pavement below.

She sighed, almost a growl, and looked at him.

“You know what?” she said, “you want to help her so much?” she paused for an instant as if to let the question sink in. “you’re going to watch her lose.” She flicked an icon, this one with the ‘play’ symbol, out into the air in front of him.

“Hah!” said Chloe, “As if. Even without her sidekick, Ladybug is still far too much for you to handle.”

Lady Wifi took a breath. “First, if he hadn’t thrown a bookbag at my head, I’d have already won, and second,” she froze Chloe.

“Enjoy the show,” she spat at Adrien, walking out of the room.

He watched her go, and then waited.
“Okay,” he said aloud, softly.

So, he was trapped in place. His suit was a hundred or so feet down, along with his baton, and Ladybug was facing off against a villain who only needed one hit to reveal her identity to the world, and take her Miraculous to Hawkmoth.

Well, this was fantastic, and he definitely needed to get to her if he wanted to…

His foot was glued to the ground.

Except… He could still wiggle his toes. Obviously, that wasn’t saying much, but if he could wiggle his toes, then there was some movement left, right?

He shifted his foot, and found that it moved inside his shoe.

He planted his other foot on the heel of his shoe and pulled.

His foot inched up, and then something snagged.

He looked down.

“Oh no,” he groaned. Apparently, whatever was touching the symbol was glued to it. The symbol was touching the hem of his pants.

“No, no, no, no.” He sighed. Chloe’s eyes were open, but she hadn’t moved.

So… What was he supposed to do once he was out? He’d said all he really needed was the mask, but that had been a joke. Besides, he didn’t even have a mask, and unless Chloe had a Chat Noir suit in… In her room…

He blinked.

She’d made herself a Ladybug suit. She clearly thought of him as less than Ladybug, who was to say she wouldn’t fob off Chat Noir on somebody else? It was… Plausible.

He groaned. Was he really supposed to take off his pants and a shoe on the off chance Chloe would have put in the time to get the full set?

The screen floating in the air in front of him lit up.

“Well hello, Ladybug! Ready for a rematch, I see. And Chat Noir is…?”

“You think I’d tell you that?”

“Aha! Got him sneaking up on me? We’ll have to wrap this up quickly, then.”

Adrien pursed his lips, and hurriedly started pulling off his pants.

He really hoped Chloe couldn’t see anything.

Two shoes and a pair of pants later, and… If he were Chloe, where would he keep a Chat Noir suit?

He doubted she wanted her… costuming choices easily accessible, so probably not in her actual closet. She’d keep it somewhere hidden. Somewhere…

He mentally thanked the fact that they’d been friends for so long, because he actually had an idea.
When she’d been younger, she’d kept a toy-chest at the foot of her bed, it had been how he’d learned
the word ‘mahogany,’ but the point was, when she’d gotten older, she’d put it under the bed. Out of
sight, but maybe not out of mind.

Please. Please.

When he entered her bedroom, the chest was out, and open. He let out a sigh of relief.

There, neatly folded, (clearly not Chloe’s work), was a black suit, a mask, and even a baton.

Well, they said to dress for the job you wanted…

She’d slipped into the floor below, a large dining room, specifically.

The question was, how to fight someone who only needed one hit to utterly disable you?

Now, if she could break her cell signal, she had a sneaking suspicion that Lady Wifi would be a
good deal weaker, but the problem was, how?

If she could get her to the basement… But how?

The other issue was that Chat Noir was missing, which meant she was only functioning at about half
of her full capacity. She couldn’t afford to wait for him, especially considering that Adrien was up
there.

She hissed in a breath. She’d left Adrien up there, alone, with a villain.

Alright. Alright, she didn’t have time to think about that. Just focus on getting her into the
basement.

So, if she could just go to the stairs-

The elevator dinged.

“Well hello, Ladybug,” said Lady Wifi, grinning, as she set a few choice locations to record, “ready
for a rematch. And Chat Noir is…?”

“You think I’d tell you that?”

“Aha! Got him sneaking up on me? We’ll have to wrap this up quickly, then.”

Right. Right, she could do this, couldn’t she?

Do what? She was alone, against someone she really didn’t want to be alone against. Chat Noir
couldn’t get places as fast as she could, so even if… Even if he knew, there was no guarantee he’d be
here fast enough to help.

The thoughts had flickered by in a millisecond, and, with only the fake confidence that Chat Noir
relied on daily, said, “It’s just a shame he won’t get a chance to meet you.”

And then the fight began, and everything blurred.

She was on one side of the room, then the other. She wasn’t counting how many locks Lady Wifi
threw, but even if she had been, she would have lost count. They peppered the walls, they were
painted across the tables she’d overturned as de facto cover. She tried to land strikes on Lady Wifi, but either they were weak, or she just didn’t care.

Time passed; seconds, minutes, she didn’t know, but it passed, in a terrifying stalemate.

And then, in a flash, she landed the perfect strike. The phone went flying, and without a thought, she bolted for it. All she had to do was-

Even without the phone, Lady Wifi was strong, and the force of her tackle sent Ladybug off course. She was on the ground, and managed to wrestle her way into a position where she could see her enemy. It was no use, though. Hawkmoth apparently loved making his villains superhumanly strong.

Lady Wifi grinned, triumphantly, as she fought Ladybug into a position where her arms were above her head.

“Close,” she said, “real close, but not close enough.”

Ladybug looked over. The cellphone was close enough that if she could just reach her arm over, she could… But her arms were pinned, and Lady Wifi had managed to get one hand free enough to start removing earrings.

“Allright, Paris,” she said, and with a jerk of her head, a record symbol flew over, “the moment you’ve aalll been waiting for.”

But Ladybug had seen what she hadn’t. Behind the record symbol, barely visible against the darkened room, was a figure in black.

Just a few seconds. If she could just hold out a few seconds.

“No interview first,” she said.

Lady Wifi grinned at her, “interview after. Now,” and her hand was slipping to Ladybugs left ear.

She jerked away, and managed to buy a fraction of a second, but then, her hand was on her ear, and-

Lady Wifi jumped as something bounced off of her head.

“What!” she said, turning away for an instant.

It was all the distraction Ladybug needed to pull her hands free, and grab onto her hair. One good wrench, and she was off.

They both bolted for the phone at the same instant. Their hands closed around it simultaneously.

She was stronger, but Ladybug knew that if she could open up just an instant for-

Chat Noir had an arm around her neck, and was pulling, which was distracting her enough that Ladybug could-

Ladybug let go of the phone as Lady Wifi’s foot went straight into her stomach.

She slid back against the floor, and, as she sucked in a breath, thanked whoever was responsible for the fact that the Miraculous seemed to let her recover her breath faster.

She dodge Chat Noir, and as he hit ground, pulled him away in the instant between Lady Wifi
getting them both off of her and regaining the use of her phone.

She pulled him behind a table, and they sat there for a second, as he caught his breath.

“Alright, you’re here,” she said, “I think that means it’s time for a Lucky Charm!”

Something boxy landed in her hands.

“Oh, thanks!” called Lady Wifi, “putting yourself on a time limit? Makes my job so much easier.”

“You think she’s coming after us?”

“Don’t know, but what do I use a toolbox for.”

“I don’t know I thought that was your-

“Got it.”

“Oh. Good.”

“Take this,” said Ladybug, handing him something small and black, “She’ll be looking for it. Now, can you distract her while I do something?”

The record icon hit a wall.

“There we go,” said Lady Wifi, “Now, let’s see what our heroes are up to.”

Chat Noir slid the ring onto his finger.

“I can do that,” he said, grinning.

He dove out of cover, and popped to his feet.

“Your heroes,” he said, dodging to the side of a lock, “are about to win this fight.”

Chapter End Notes

That chapter title exists only because I couldn't think of a better one. On the other hand, it's one of my favorites, so I'll take the trade.
“Oh really,” said Lady Wifi, giving him a few more to dodge, “and how exactly are you going to do that?”

He slipped to the side, “Oh I couldn’t tell you. You’d be better off asking Ladybug.”

“Is that so,” she said, and seemed to suddenly notice, “and speaking of which, where is she?”

He shrugged, feeling a breeze as a lock went over his shoulder. “Exactly where you least expect her.”

“So what you mean to say is, you have no idea.”

“Haven’t the foggiest idea.” He dove to the side, managing to roll to his feet, dodging four consecutive icons, “but, the upside is,” another dodge, “I’m definitely going to start a personal highlight reel of myself after this.”

“There won’t be an after this,” she cut back, and he had to dive behind a table in response to a flurry of icons.

“Agree to disagree?” he said, as a record got an angle on him.

“No,” she said from the other side of the table.

He tried to dodge as she flipped the table, but he took a knock from one of the legs, and felt the telltale sensation of his leg being locked down.

He was on his stomach now, and he thought he might have managed to pull a foot away from one more lock before she managed to pin it down.

His hands were next, locked in place.

“Now,” she said, “time to get that mask…” she paused. “What happened to your suit?”

Ah, yes, the troubles of stealing a suit tailored for someone smaller than him. “It’s a rental,” he said, trying to hit the genuine tone while still sounding like he was joking, “I wanted to try out the crop top look; I hear it’ll be all the rage next summer.”

She looked down, “and the bare feet?”

“It’sss… The hippy look,” he said, not wanting to say that he didn’t have time to put on shoes. “trust me, it’ll be back in fashion by spring.”
She stared at him, and then shook her head. “Well, I’m sure you’ll have time to explain once we get that mask off.”

“What, you’re really going to reveal my identity at this angle?” he said, his cheek pressed into the ground.

“If I trusted you to not try something if I turned you over, maybe not,” she said, “but I don’t.”

He felt more than heard the shadow cross her face, a thrum of something malicious.

He saw her grin out of his peripheral vision.

“I just heard the most remarkable thing,” she said. “Apparently, if I pull off your ring,” she said, a finger just brushing his wrist as she reached over, “you’ll be powerless, and better yet, your mask will vanish. Does that sound about right?”

He was panicking now. Ladybug had been right; she was after a ring. Because she thought it was a Miraculous. No, wait, wait, (he could feel her reaching out to unlock his hand) he knew what he had to do. Ladybug had mentioned it back when the Bubbler had attacked, something like-

“Catastrophe!” he shouted, and felt her freeze.

“What?” she said.

“Oh,” he said, channeling every ounce of smirking confidence he could, “that’s just the ability I get from my Miraculous. You won’t want to touch my hand for the next… Call it five minutes.”

“And if I do?”

Destruction, she’d said. “There won’t be much of you left.”

He felt the sensation from before, Hawkmoth conversing with her again, more time for Ladybug to do… Whatever she was going to do.

Lady Wifi stood up, and began walking around him as he struggled vainly against the locks. “Not very flashy, is it,” she said, “usually you can see these abilities.”

He looked up at her. “It doesn’t need to be flashy. Trust me, I don’t want you disintegrated any more than you do.”

“Well,” she said, “then I suppose, we’re back to our first plan. Tell me, Chat Noir,” she said, reaching down for his mask, “which side is your good one?”

There was a crackle, and he felt his hands slide along the floor.

He chuckled, unable to help himself. “It’s not my good side you have to worry about,” he said, as she recoiled, surprised by her vanished restraints, “it’s my dark side,” and he lunged at her.

He was entirely outclassed, and he knew it. Sure, she recoiled from his ring-hand, but as soon as she caught his wrist, he couldn’t even scare her.

But wow, what a line.

“You see,” he said, trying to knee her unsuccessfullly, “villain fighting is a two-person job. I knew from the start that I couldn’t take you on alone. Hawkmoth, whatever else I’ll say about him, is pretty good at making strong minions.” She had both of his wrists, now, one hand around both the
phone and his wrists.

“So I can’t fight you alone,” he said, and grinned, “but me and Ladybug?” As if on cue, the yo-yo slammed into the back of her head, and she lost her grip enough to get a foot to her guts.

“We could take on the world.” He tried to resist the urge to punch the air. After all, however good the line was, they still hadn’t won yet.

But really, what could she do? She was surrounded, and the instant she turned to look at Ladybug, he had an arm around her neck, and while she was ripping him off, Ladybug was closing the gap, and Lady Wifi’s legs were out from under her as a toolbox slid straight into her ankles at a breakneck pace.

As she went down, the phone flew out of her hands, and even as she crawled forward, she staggered under Chat Noir’s influence, and- crack. The butterfly fluttered out, and almost immediately, Ladybug was winding up to purify it.

Chat Noir hit the ground as Alya collapsed under his weight, and he rolled away.

He came up to his feet,.

“I don’t know what you did, but I’ve got to say, I’m impressed,” he said.

She shrugged. “Just had to break the cell tower on the roof. Speaking of which, and she threw the toolbox skyward, “Miraculous Ladybug!”

And then, things were back. Everything but him.

“Denial of service, huh,” he said, smiling at her. This was his partner. Lucky. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

She rolled her eyes, “just did what I had to do.”

“Hey,” he said, “I don’t suppose… It might be nice to get to know each other outside of hero work?”

She sighed, smiling sadly, “I guess you didn’t have a kwami to tell you. I can’t share my identity. It’s too dangerous. And… I shouldn’t know yours either.”

“Well,” he said, “I’ll be keeping an eye out for you, yeah?”

“Sure,” she said, “but I’m pretty different, usually. You’ve probably… Well,” she said, laughing, “I guess you don’t have a Miraculous, so you’d still be…” her expression froze, and died on her face. She seemed… not quite mortified, more like terrified.

She sucked in a breath.

“What?” he said, and then she dismissed him, and he was suddenly… Back in Chloe’s bedroom.

He looked down, and made a tiny noise of terror.

“Adrien,” called Chloe from the other room, and he could tell by the sound that it wasn’t the first time she’d called his name.

He poked his head around the edge of the doorframe.
“Yes,” he said.

“Adrien!” she said, turning to face him. She looked at his upper body, visible around the edge of the door, then at his pants and shoes, still sitting in the middle of the room. His backpack, he noted, was sitting next to them.

“Oh thank goodness you’re okay,” she said, “I would never have gotten over it is you had died.” She gasped, “I could never have lived in this room again!”

“Sorry to scare you,” he said, “now, if you could slide me my pants?”

She looked down, and with an expression of nervous distaste, picked them up between two fingers.

He laughed. “They’re not a biohazard, Chloe.”

“They’re so tacky, though,” she said.

He shook his head, smiling, “They’re jeans, Chloe, if you think they’re bad you should see the superhero boxers.”

She couldn’t seem to decide whether he was joking or not. She handed them over.

“Speaking of which,” he said, “I should probably see if anybody’s making them with Ladybug patterns, yet. I’ve got a real superhero to support, and I haven’t taken the chance.”

“Please,” said Chloe. “I get loving Ladybug, but that would be completely gauche, and it’s not like she’s ever even going to see them.”

Adrien was glad that he was pulling on his pants behind the shelter of the doorway, because his head had just tossed up a few situations that could lead to Ladybug seeing said hypothetical undergarments, and his face was… Well, suffice to say, he was glad Hawkmoth probably didn’t have plans to send a bull themed villain at the moment.

--

Marinette had gone catatonic on her bed. ‘you’re still…’ still what? Blonde? Strong? Athletic? A kid with a taste for bad jokes? A penchant for helping people out? One who was on the scene a bit too quick, considering how many floors he should have had to climb? Had a restrictive home life, but a bit of financial leeway?

He hadn’t even bothered to introduce himself when he’d come by to get his measurements taken. Of course he hadn’t; he already knew her.

Of course, it wasn’t like he was identical. Chat Noir… Chat Noir smirked, where Adrien smiled. Adrien would say something kind and earnest if he caught you when you were falling, while Chat Noir would probably make a cheesy pun about how you were falling for him. And yet… She knew what Adrien had been reminding her of.

She stared at the ceiling. She’d… Fallen in love with Chat Noir? And, Adrien had fallen in love with… Her. Except, not her. Not confident, not-

There was a knock at the roof.

Well. Five guesses who that was, and the first five didn’t count.

This was… This was good, she decided. She’d wanted to see a bit more of him, if only to figure out
what to do about the whole… Everything.

She reached up, and, hesitated, before sitting up (it would seem odd to answer while on her back).

“Hello,” he said, and looked around, “I… I suppose I was assuming that this would be when you were working on the suit. You said,” he paused, “that it might nice if I could come by and talk about refining the design, but, I never really did, so I figured… Better late than never.”

She managed to muster up a genuine smile. “Come on in.”

She slipped off of the bed, and pulled out a notebook.

…

It took only a few minutes before she realized that his heart wasn’t in it.

She sighed, and quietly closed the notebook. “C’mon, Chat, why are you really here?”

He looked up as if to protest, and then gave up.

He shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said, “I’m just, kind of confused, I guess, and I thought if anyone could help me, it would be you.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I think,” he said, carefully placing the words, “that Ladybug might know who I am.”

She pursed her lips. She hadn’t exactly been subtle. “Alright.”

“And,” he said, “I figured… She knows you, right? She sent me here, so she must. But… She’d only been a hero for a week or two at that point, so I didn’t think it would make sense for her to have met you… As Ladybug.”

“Hm.”

“So, I guess, I was wondering. You know who she is, don’t you?”

“Chat. You know I can’t tell you.”

“I know,” he said, quickly, “I’m not asking for the answer, but… You know her, as… whoever she is, under the mask, right?”

How was she supposed to deny it? She nodded.

“So, you, probably, knew her from before? Probably for a while, right?”

She nodded again.

“So… I guess, I was wondering, if you knew…” he shook his head, “how do I put this… If you knew why she reacted like that. She seemed, bothered by who I was.”

Did Marinette know who Chat Noir was? Would Ladybug have told her? Did Marinette know how Ladybug felt about it? Did Ladybug even know?

“I…” she hesitated. “I don’t think I could tell you.”

He took a deep breath, and nodded. “Okay. Okay! That’s… That’s fair.”
For a second, they both sat there.

“So, said Chat Noir, “you still had some more designs, right?”

She smiled. “Yeah.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh Marinette, what a twisted web you've found yourself in. Well, at least you figured it out within a month. Can you imagine how weird it would be if it took you a whole year? Ah, but what would the odds of that even be.
Impossible Choices

Chapter Summary

There's are moments out there, for some of our characters. Some of them are dreading theirs, while others waiting for it.

Chapter Notes

A bit of a shorter chapter this time, but I didn't want to just pad for length, so this is where I'll cut it.

Chat left fairly late, near midnight.

Marinette couldn’t shake things.

“Tikki?” she said, eventually unable to keep silent, “can we talk?”

“What is it, Marinette?” came Tikki’s voice, as she flitted out in front of her.

She sighed, and stared after where he’d gone, out the trapdoor. “I need some advice.”

Tikki looked at her gently.

“It’s… Well. It’s Chat Noir.”

“You want to tell him.”

“Hmm,” she said, almost a melancholy laugh, and nodded.

Tikki didn’t say anything.

“I know. I know, one of us could be captured,” said Marinette, “and if we know who the other one really is, then they’re also in danger.”

Tikki nodded softly. “I suppose you should know, now, that that’s only one side of it.”

“What do you mean?”

Tikki made a sound somewhere between a sigh and a groan. “I know that you wouldn’t give his identity away easily, no matter what might happen. You know how important it is.”

“Of course.”

“But what if the opposite happened, and he was captured?”

“What?”
“If it took handing over your Miraculous to save him, you would, wouldn’t you?”

Marinette wanted to deny it, but… She would.

“And…” said Tikki, “If happened, you would be giving someone limitless power. Someone willing
to take hostages.” Every word seemed to hurt her, but she continued, “So… It’s important that
Ladybug and Chat Noir don’t know who the other one is, so that… So that it’s easier to make that
choice.”

Marinette stared. “That’s…”

“I know. You were always supposed to know, someday. Not now. Not before you had the
strength to give him up if you had to.”

“Marinette,” said Tikki, looking at her as if about to cry, “I’ve lived for a long time. I’ve seen my
owners make both of those choices. And… As horrible as it’s been to see her keep me, and risk
Chat Noir, it has always been worse when she’s given me away. Terrible things happen when the
wrong people get wishes.”

Marinette’s breath caught in her throat.

A long second passed.

“But,” she said, “I know. I can’t forget, can I?”

Tikki chuckled, still seemingly on the verge of tears. “No. Not something like that.”

“And…” said Marinette, “I mean… Adrien doesn’t even have a Miraculous to give up, does he?”

Tikki seemed surprised by the statement, but nodded. “No,” she said, “he doesn’t.”

“So. Even if he knew, he couldn’t put Paris at risk if I was captured.”

“No,” she said, eventually, “He couldn’t.”

“So, I don’t make things harder for him, if I tell him, because… Because he doesn’t have a choice to
make.”

She nodded.

“And… It’s not like… Like I can stop caring about him, right? I already know who he is.”

--

It was several minutes later, and Marinette had finally gone to sleep. Tikki, meanwhile, was worried.

The first thing, of course, was that Plagg was unaccounted for. She couldn’t shake the thought that
no matter what, he should have shown up. Even if whoever had him didn’t want to save the city,
whether maliciously or out of fear, the vast majority of people who had ever picked up a Miraculous
had been drawn to use it.

Plagg should have shown up, and that was the basis of most of her fear, right now.

There was more, though, because of Chat Noir, *Adrien*.

The problem wasn’t Adrien himself; she barely knew him, and she was already proud of what he’d
accomplished. He’d supported Ladybug, and contributed well to the duo, not to mention his self-sacrificing nature. Nobody could have asked for a better Chat Noir. A better wielder of the ring.

The problem was, he wasn’t a wielder of the ring. He was perfect for it, even going so far as to join the fight despite having no special powers. Ladybug and Chat Noir, whatever their names were in their time, always gravitated towards each other. They balanced, like he balanced her. Even the personality reminded her of many of the previous wielders; when he was wearing the suit, she would almost forget that it wasn’t a real transformation.

The point was, he was clearly meant to be Chat Noir. And when something was meant to happen, it almost always did.

Which meant… Plagg going missing was extremely worrying. The million-to-one shot had come through, or something powerful, possibly stronger than Hawkmoth, was at play. That was worrying, and she hoped that whatever it was, there were good intentions behind it.

She barely slept that night, unable to stop rolling the problem over in her head.

--

It was Friday, and Marinette felt dead in her seat.

She’d have stayed up late even if she’d passed out the instant she’d hit her bed, but she hadn’t fallen asleep quickly. Things had kept running through her head.

Adrien, when he walked in, was visibly tired as well, which only surprised her for an instant, before she remembered that she’d seen him staying up late, because he’d been staying up late with her.

It was strange. She knew who he was. She knew that she wanted to tell him who she was.

So why did it suddenly seem so impossible?

Well, of course, there was the irreversible nature of things; once she told him, the cat was out of the bag… so to speak.

Then, of course, there was the fact that she had a crush on him. In retrospect, it seemed almost unavoidable. He was an attractive superhero with an earnest smile and a penchant for catching her when she was falling. Talk about low hanging crush material. The point was, he’d walked in, and she’d felt the power of speech leave her. Telling him she knew a few of his dearly kept secrets seemed difficult enough just from that.

Then of course, even if she could convince herself that it was a good idea to tell him, and muster up the gumption to say it out loud, getting those circumstances to overlap with a moment when she was alone with him (which, of course, would make it harder to talk aloud) seemed like a thousand to one shot, at best.

And, right now, the chances were lower, because she couldn’t afford to be alone with him because…

“Hey. Alya. You okay?”

Alya looked up from her phone, where she’d been entranced by a video.

“What? Oh,” she looked down, and back up. She shook her head. “Uh, fine, yeah.”

Marinette looked at the screen. Chat Noir, stalling for time, as Ladybug slipped out a window in the
“It’s kinda weird,” said Alya, turning her attention back to the screen. “I’ve been wanting better footage of Ladybug and Chat Noir for a while now. I finally get it; I finally get it, and it’s footage of me fighting them.”

“Hmm…” said Marinette.

“It feels weird.”

“Yeah,” said Marinette, “I bet.”

Alya sighed, and then perked up. “But! The way I see it, I can’t not have fought them at this point, and I have the footage, so I might as well use it.”

Marinette smiled.

Alya would be fine.

Marinette, meanwhile, was slowly stacking up secrets that she was keeping from Adrien, and she didn’t want to be keeping any of them. Unfortunately, it seemed just as difficult to tell the secret as it was to keep it. She didn’t want to stay where she was, but she couldn’t move forward. It was like she had her face pressed up against a locked door. All she needed was a moment where the door was unlocked, and she’d be past it.

--

Nathalie rarely felt fear. It was an emotion she was good at dismissing, on the rare occasions it showed its face.

Unfortunately, it was hard to quell the gentle anxiety that seemed to fill her stomach these days.

She always listened carefully before acting. Right now, she almost wished she didn’t. If she’d handed Plagg over the minute she’d acquired him, he would never have had time to tell her about the dangers of wishes.

If he hadn’t told her, she wouldn’t have doubted her choices. She wouldn’t have had any reason to keep him. She wouldn’t have checked for herself that his grim stories were true.

Most of them were.

Which meant, in the end, that if she’d been a bit less inquisitive, she wouldn’t have started to dread the idea of Mr. Agreste acquiring the Ladybug Miraculous.

How did the saying go? Curiosity killed the cat. Well, Plagg seemed fine; she was the one suffering for her questions.

What would she even do? Give him the ring, and let him destroy himself? Or, hold it back, sabotage his endeavors, and watch his dream collapse in on itself? Or, came the thought, unbidden, she could sabotage him now; a dream half completed was worse than if you had never even made progress. Or, perhaps, she should give him the ring, offer to help him, and then, maybe, she could help him stop after his first wish, and stop the destructive cycle before it began.

She was trapped. She couldn’t support his wellbeing while supporting his goals. She couldn’t bring him down safely, especially if she wanted to avoid making it clear that she had… betrayed him. She
didn’t want to let him risk himself with the wishes.

And so, she was trapped, dreading the day when she was forced to choose.
Seven Months of Failed Attempts

Chapter Summary

Welcome to the Spring, where Hawkmoth is back in business, and Ladybug is still having trouble explaining the situation to Chat Noir.

Chapter Notes

Why yes, I did do a timeskip because I messed up the chronology, thank you for noticing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Days passed, and Marinette found the problem stubbornly resilient. Every time she felt ready to tell him, they were in class, or he was eating lunch with Nino, or he would say something mildly complimentary, or even just make some expression that turned her stomach to jelly, and her efforts would fall apart. It turned out that the odds of the two of them being alone, together were low, at best.

A week passed. Telling him who she was as Ladybug was nigh-impossible. She couldn’t afford to distract him during a critical mission (they were all critical missions, if she was honest) and afterwards… Afterwards, she needed to fix things, as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, that didn’t leave nearly enough time to tell him, and on the one occasion she’d tried, her own ping of discomfort had registered as her dismissing him to her powers, and she hadn’t managed it.

Weeks passed. Chat Noir came to visit her as she worked on his suit. He lounged around the room, as strangely liquid as his namesake, while she measured, and cut, and sewed, and silently tried to muster up the will to tell him. The problem was that she was never ready to do it the minute he arrived, and the longer they sat there in comfortable silence, the stranger it would sound out of the blue. Imagine it, Chat Noir, lying halfway off the chaise longue, humming quietly to himself as he fell most of the way asleep, and she would say, what, ‘You should know I’m Ladybug,’ and…?

Months passed. She finished Chat Noir’s suit, and, for good measure, added some proper outerwear to it. Winter arrived. Hawkmoth seemed almost to go into hibernation, only reminding them of his existence once in the two weeks on either side of New Year’s Day (not that Marinette knew it, but it wasn’t exactly enjoyable to stand in a large, unheated room with a large, open window in it). It shouldn’t have surprised anyone that he got a villain for Christmas; after all, even villains got Christmas Miracles (if not Christmas Miraculouses).

January passed uneventfully, to the point Marinette almost could have believed that her quest to explain to things to Chat Noir was unnecessary.

The fifth of February was a bleak reminder that Hawkmoth wasn’t done, as a villain drained what little color was left in the world, attempting to cripple them emotionally. Slowly, week by week, Hawkmoth seemed to have remembered what he was doing, and Marinette was forced to realized that months had passed, and yet she still hadn’t told Adrien the truth.
In March, she redoubled her efforts, and once or twice, could have almost managed to say it, had she not stumbled over her words, and lost her will.

--

She shouldn’t have been surprised. Yes, it had been a warm, sunny April morning, but it had all the two red flags that should have been dead giveaways; public humiliation and Chloe. Maybe she’d been a bit too busy with her own anger at Chloe to notice. Maybe she’d been annoyed that she’d been put in a group with her. Really, she was almost lucky that she hadn’t been Hawkmoth’s target.

But that had been in the morning, and things only went bad after school, by which time she’d already been busy with schoolwork.

--

Adrien stared. He’d seen some strange things, but a rain of berets? That was new.

Then, the flying hairdryer had appeared, and he’d decided it was a good time for Chat Noir to make an appearance.

He had the change down to a fine art now. He ducked behind a bookcase, where nobody would be looking, considering the flying appliance.

Marinette was a miracle-worker when it came to quick-change clothes; she had managed to make his suit almost comfortable to wear under his normal outfit. The pants, of course, were a trick, considering that he was wearing shoes, (he’d started wearing his hero boots as if they were his normal shoes. Nobody had really noticed) but after getting over his annoyance, he’d had to admit, that he wasn’t superman; he couldn’t find a phonebooth and transform in a blur. So, he had, unfortunately, been forced to invest in tearaway pants. Of course, it wasn’t so bad; he was, after all, wearing actual pants underneath, but even having them in his closet had felt weird for a while.

The shirts, of course, were easier, and he’d gotten good at pulling them off in only a few seconds. They had the added bonus of messing up his hair, too, which he had decided to make an official part of his look. The sleeves buttoned magnetically to the main body of the suit, and, naturally, to themselves once he had them in proximity. It wasn’t exactly the most sturdy design, until he actually did up the zippers on each sleeve, but it worked, and it worked quickly, so he couldn’t really complain.

And then, it was just the mask, which was almost identical to how he’d had it in his original design.

The main difference, which still made him smile every time he put it on, as he was now, was a set of black ears, which, were… utterly useless, and had made her groan when he’d suggested them. They were, however, stylish… in his opinion.

He pulled out the baton, and Adrien Agreste was officially gone.

Chat Noir stepped out to the sight of Ladybug wrangling the hairdryer.

“You know,” he said, “I’m always blown away by how quickly you get on the scene.”

“Really?” she said, hauling a bit harder.

“Really! It seriously takes my breath away.”

“Uh huh, and yet you still have enough breath to make jokes.”
“What, are you surprised I can still talk?” he said, as she was pulled past him, “it wouldn’t make any sense for the cat to have my tongue.”

“Ah yes, because you have the cat’s tongue.”

“Because, I am, in fact, the cat.”

“Metaphorically speaking,” she said through gritted teeth, as she rode the giant hairdryer.

“Do my ears look metaphorical to you?”

“No…” she said, managing to crash it down. He popped his baton to its full length, and with a single savage strike, punched a hole in the hairdryer. “…but they do look tacky.”

“Oh, you think these are tacky?” he said, flicking one of the ears, “You would have loved the bell. Did you hear about the bell?”

“I’m aware of it, yes,” she said, looking around the library. Her eyes caught on something, and he followed her gaze to…

All things considered, it was a pretty good design, considering some of Hawkmoth’s creations. The purple skin with the red hair was almost stylish. The stripes weren’t even bad, really. Chat Noir managed to register the stylus and tablet, before he bolted.

They chased, but before they could even get close, there was a barrier blocking them, and he was out of reach.

By the time Chat Noir found a way he could slip past, they were far too late to catch up.

“Well,” said Ladybug, “it looks like we’ve got another villain on the loose.”

“Yup,” said Chat Noir, “one who has a bone to pick with Chloe.”

“Hm. Could be pretty much anybody.”

Chat Noir sighed. “Yeah… She really doesn’t make people like her.”

“Not at all.”

“Any idea who’d be mad at her?”

She hesitated, and he saw the same look he’d seen several times in the past month. Something was bothering her, and he still couldn’t tell what.

“Ladybug?”

She shook her head, and the expression was gone.

“You’re in class with her…” she said.

He tried to think back. “Right! Nathaniel. He dropped his notebook, and… Well, she started mocking him for what he was drawing.”

Ladybug nodded, and they sat down at one of the tables on the second level of the library.

“That would explain the pen he had.”
“That’s probably where the Akuma is.”

“I bet… Does this mean we’ve got to bodyguard Chloe, again?”

“Maybe? Honestly, after the last two times, I’m almost tempted to let her sort it out herself.”

He sighed. “C’mon, Bugaboo, you know we can’t do that.”

She took a deep breath. “I know.”

“She was actually kind of helpful last time.”

“I don’t think we should give her too much credit for making a villain so angry it lost concentration on the fight.”

“I mean, you don’t have to like her methods to admit that what she did was still kind of impressive.”

“I guess… Alright. Fine, we’ll go keep an eye on her, but… You can’t just leave your stuff lying around.”

“No.”

“Alright. Meet me in… Call it half an hour?”

“Sounds good.”

--

Marinette sighed as she set down her bag a bit too hard.

“Ouch!” came Tikki’s voice, muffled.

“Oh! Sorry, Tikki. I was just…” she sighed, as Tikki zipped up, out of the bag. “You know what it is. Chloe. She just… She doesn’t learn. You would think that after being the reason for more than one villain, you would eventually start not… Hurting people. And she doesn’t.”

“I know, Marinette, but it doesn’t help anyone but Hawkmoth to let it get to you.”

“C’mon, Tikki, how am I supposed to just… Not be angry?”

Tikki smiled gently. “It’s not just about not being angry, Marinette. It’s about not letting anger control you!”

Marinette breathed deeply, and nodded, slowly. There was a buzz from her pocket.

She pulled out her phone and… 5 missed messages!?

A few quick taps, and… All of them were from Sabrina.

Marinette would have liked to call back, and at least offer some explanation for why she’d left, but she didn’t have a chance, as her window… Vanished?

She recoiled as the villain, the one who had been Nathaniel, slipped into the room.

Tikki would probably be recharged by now, but there was no way she could transform without making it painfully obvious that she was Ladybug.
“Hello, Marinette,” he said, voice surprisingly gentle.

--

Gabriel Agreste cracked his knuckles, standing at his workstation. This would be perfect. He’d lost literal days of time to time-consuming villains. This one, meanwhile, had some common decency, which, in this case meant that, A. he had a schedule Hawkmoth could plan around, and B. he didn’t even have any particularly destructive plans in the meantime, so it wasn’t much of a risk to leave him unattended.

After the disaster of Lady Wifi, he’d simply had to at least try detransforming with a villain on the loose. He had been extremely gratified to learn that they didn’t stop working when he did. Of course, he’d lost one or two good villains to inattention, but all things considered, the price was worth it, in comparison to the time he would have lost if he’d had to constantly babysit them.

--

Adrien had the suit on. The sleeves were zipped up, the ears were on, (and incredibly stylish), and he was ready.

All he had to do was slip out, and meet Ladybug where they always-

His phone rang, and he pulled it out.

“Hello, Marinette,” he said, his voice Adrien again.

“Adrien,” she said, and he frowned; she sounded worried, “There’s a problem.”

“What?” he said.

There was a long pause.

“Alright. I know this is strange, but I know that you’re Chat Noir, alright?”

He took a deep breath, and tried to sound sincere. “What are you talking about, Marinette?”

“Adrien, you’re not going to convince me I’m wrong. I know.”

He paused for a long time. Long enough that denying it was implausible. “When did you figure it out?”

A silence. “A while ago. Since the time you told me you thought Ladybug knew who you were.”

“Ah. Guess I wasn’t subtle.”

“You were working at a disadvantage.”

“What do you mean?”

Another pause. “That’s… I can explain that, all of it, later. I’ve wanted to explain things for a while, but right now, we’ve got something more urgent. It’s… Actually, the reason I had to call you.”

“Okay?”

“The villain, Evillustrator, apparently, isn’t planning to go after Chloe. Not tonight, anyway.”
His eyes widened. “How do you know?”

“How?… I got him to promise he wouldn’t.”

“What!? How?”

“Because in exchange, I’m going to his birthday party, on the Seine.”

“And-“ Chloe’s mockery earlier came back to him. Nathaniel had a crush on Marinette. No wonder he’d invited her to his birthday party. “Got it.”

“It shouldn’t be too difficult. I can distract him, and all you’ll have to do is break his pen.”

“I’m assuming Ladybug knows about all of this too?”

A silence. “Ladybug will be working undercover.”

“Undercover?”

“Trust me, she’ll be there when you need her. You can quote, her, on that.”

That was... Ominous. But, he didn't have a choice but to work with what he was given.

“Alright. What do I need to do?”

Chapter End Notes

Kind of strange how durable the fabric of reality is, vis-à-vis who gets angry and when. You would think, with Hawkmoth around, we would get a lot more of the Butterfly effect, but apparently not.
Chapter Summary

The Evillustrator is a tricky enemy to fight, but our heroes are certainly capable. There is, however, another little issue that they'll have to deal with.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chat Noir was extremely capable, for an ordinary person. Without literal superpowers in the mix, he would have considered himself the equal of just about anyone.

Unfortunately, there were superpowers in the mix. Obviously, that didn’t make him useless, but it did mean that while he rarely thought about it, the idea of taking on a villain with Ladybug ‘undercover,’ was a nerve-wracking prospect.

Still. There was nothing for it, which was why he was tailing Marinette (a fact of which she was well aware) down towards the river.

He stopped, half concealed by a tree, as he caught sight of the boat. He took stock of it, and nodded, slowly. He could get onto it, and assuming this ‘Evillustrator’ didn’t have surveillance, he’d never even see him coming.

Hopefully, Ladybug would be ready, because he wanted to finish this quickly.

He moved to be the rest of the way concealed as the Evillustrator greeted Marinette, but he stared after the two of them.

If he hadn’t known the circumstances, he would have thought Marinette was actually happy to see him. He clenched a fist around his baton. But she wasn’t. She was going to distract him, so that he could have an easy shot on the stylus.

They were on the boat now, and if he didn’t get moving, he’d fall behind. The cabin of the boat, if that’s what it even was, was blocking his line of sight, which meant he didn’t need to hide. He sprinted down to the waterline, and slipped into the river.

He’d only been swimming once or twice in his life; for all the manor was luxurious, it didn’t have a swimming pool. It took a minute or two to figure out how to swim, by which time the boat was already moving. It took another five minutes of swimming in the still frigid water of the Seine to make it to the stern of the boat.

Already out of breath, he grabbed onto a hanging rope, and internally thanked the Evillustrator for his aesthetic sense; too many smooth lines and he wouldn’t have had a chance.

For a moment, he rested, hanging from the rope, and then, with a shiver, remembered that Marinette would be stalling for him right now. She had to be wondering where he was by now.

As quietly as he could managed, with his teeth clacking, he climbed aboard.
He blinked in the light from… it looked like he’d created a miniature sun in the center of the deck, on top of a miniature Eiffel Tower? The decorations didn’t matter. What mattered… He looked down at a bench, where Marinette and the villain were sitting.

“Could I try?” she was asking.

“Of course!”

She had her hand on the stylus. He wasn’t touching it anymore.

Chat Noir took a deep breath, and tried to shake off a bit more of the chill from the water. All he had to do was buy Marinette a few seconds, and it was game over.

Right.

He pressed the button on his staff, and immediately regretted it. It made the same clack he’d heard it make every time he’d ever used it how could he be so stupid-

“Marinette,” he was saying, frozen in place, “give me back the stylus.”

“What? Why?” said Marinette, but he was already reaching for it, and-

He dove forward, unable to come up with a better plan, and, half by skill, half by chance, managed to place the trajectory properly.

The Evillustrator staggered forward as he got a back full of Chat Noir.

“Break it now!” he shouted, pulling his staff into the villain’s neck, as Marinette backed away.

He grinned as he saw the stylus bending in Marinette’s hands; just a little more pressure, and-

Then he was flying forward, and, smashed, back first, into Marinette’s stomach. She yelped, and as they keeled over backwards, he saw the stylus, barely a hint of a shape in the dark, flip, end over end, up, up, and away.

The Evillustrator was diving forward, over their heads, hand outstretched, and Chat Noir didn’t need to see it happen to know from the way he stood up when he landed. He had the stylus.

He turned to the two of them, and Chat Noir saw… Rage, maybe betrayal.

“You…” he said, and clenched a fist, “You lied to me? You took advantage of how I felt to…” his shoulder’s fell, and the betrayal turned to disappointment. “You’re no better than Chloe.”

“If you want to break your promises, maybe I’ll have to break one of mine. And in the meantime,” there was a flurry of motion on the tablet, and they were trapped, in some kind of clear box, “I’ll give you a free trip to the bottom of the river.”

A single slash across the tablet, and he felt, more than saw, the hole in the ship. They were going down.

“Maybe I’ll come back and get your ring later,” he said, “It should be pretty easy, unless you’ve learned to breathe water by then.”

And with that, he was away.

--
“Well, they don’t call them catfish for nothing,” said Chat Noir, but faintly, as if he wasn’t thinking clearly.

She shifted him off of her, catching a good look at him as she did it. He was soaked, and, as she was learning, freezing cold. More to the point, he probably hadn’t enjoyed being thrown at her. She knew she hadn’t enjoyed getting bowled over.

“Chat Noir?” she said.

He shook his head, and let out a breath. “I- Sorry. I can’t take another round in the water. Too cold. Too… new. Never really been swimming before, I wouldn’t recommend it.”

She shook her head. “C’mon, Chat Noir, we’ve got to get out of here.”

He nodded, quickly. “Right.” He made it to his feet, and did a quick 360. A slam of the staff into the wall confirmed that it wouldn’t break easily.

He pushed against the wall, and let out a hiss. “It’s too heavy to slide, so unless,” he wedged the staff into an upper edge, and pushed. He stood, clearly shoving with all his might, but after a few seconds, he shook his head. “I can’t get it more than a few inches. If I had a bit more muscle to work with,” he looked at her, and shook his head, “but unless you’re way stronger than you look, we’re trapped.”

She clenched her fists.

He cocked his head, and gave the box an appraising look. “If Ladybug wrapped it up from the outside, she could probably get a good angle, not to mention she’s strong enough, but…” he sighed, and shook his head like an animal as caged as he was. “She said she’d be here. Why hasn’t she shown up?”

“I… About that,” said Marinette, hating the words as they came out of her mouth. “You… might have noticed that I’ve been trying to tell you something. For a while?”

“What?” he said, turning.

His gaze was directly upon her, and she wasn’t strong enough for this, she wasn’t-…

“…wasn’t supposed to go like this,” she said, biting her lip, trying to remember that it was their lives on the line. “But. You.”

“Marinette?” he said, visibly concerned.

She sighed. “I-“ she paused, and shrugged, face apologetic. “Spots on?”

…

…

She let out a breath.

“I’ve been trying to tell you, but… It just hasn’t worked.”

Silence.

Every word seemed somehow harder than the last.
Quietly, she said, “We’ve got to get out of here.”

“We- yeah. Yeah,” he said, shaking his head as if trying to get the rest of the water off.

She carefully put her hands on the staff, and he seemed to get the idea, and, in silence, they tipped it over. They were free.

Free, but definitely not clear. They hadn’t really even fought the Evillustrator, and Chat Noir already seemed down for the count. This was why she had never wanted to tell him during a mission.

--

He was numb, mostly from swimming in near freezing water. He was seeing stars, as if he hadn’t been breathing, and he didn’t know why.

It felt like he was going to die. He was definitely going to pass out at the rate he was- He straightened up. “Alright,” he said, “let’s get off this boat. We’ve got a job to do. If you would do the honors?”

She seemed surprised. “Are you… alright?”

There was a blurry thought in the back of his head… Something was wrong. Something he had to deal with.

Maybe there was something he had to deal with in the back of his head, but in the front of his head, the villain loomed larger.

“Yeah,” he said, “bit cold, but I’ll live.”

He should really learn how to swim properly, and, possibly, get some kind of swimming gear from Marinette… He looked at Ladybug, and it felt like he’d sprained something in his brain. He shook it off.

There was water on his feet, now.

“Okay. Let’s get out of here.”

No matter how many times she did it, he still felt a burn in his cheeks when she picked him up and flew away with him. It didn’t matter what the villain was, or how dangerous it was, his mind always found a second to appreciate it.

--

They were on the balcony of the Grand Paris Hotel, outside of Chloe’s suite, and Chat Noir seemed normal.

She set him down, and he spun his staff once or twice, as if to get a feeling for the weight.

“Any plan?” asked Chat Noir.

“In the immediate sense? No.” She said, looking in at the room. It was a scene of destruction. “But… He did say he couldn’t draw without light, so if we can cut the lights…”

“When would he have…” Chat Noir shook his head, “got it. Lights off, Evillustrator neutralized.”
They slipped silently inside, and heard Chloe, from her room. She sounded like she was upset about *something*, but not in physical pain.

“No, not the *cashmere!”*

“Oh is that what this is?”

A pained shout.

“Well, that’s what it *was*, anyway.”

“No, please, stop you can’t-“

They rounded the corner, trying their best to stay out of sight.

He was… erasing the clothes out of her closet, as she stared on in horror.

Another sweater went missing, and Ladybug shook her head. She wasn’t in the *habit* of sympathizing with villains, but she wouldn’t deny that she would have been tempted to follow his example, given the opportunity.

“Alright,” she whispered, “on three. You hit the lights, and I’ll go for him.”

Chat Noir nodded.

Chloe finally caught sight of them. And let out an audible gasp.

“One.”

The Evillustrator looked sharply at her, and was following her gaze.

“Two.”

“Are you really siding with *her?”* he asked.

“Three,” she said, the element of surprise truly gone now, and lashed out with the yo-yo.

As she’d expected, he was quick on the draw… so to speak. There was already a barrier by the time she would have made contact.

--

He knew this room like the back of his hand; he’d spent hours here when he was younger, and Chloe had been his only friend.

A flick of the switch, and the lights in the bedroom were out. The Evillustrator let out an angry grunt.

“Can’t fight in the dark, can you,” he said.

“Maybe not,” said the Evillustrator, “but there’s a flaw in your plan.” The room was dark enough that he couldn’t quite hear what was going on, but he could hear Ladybug fighting, and then, silhouetted against the light of the rest of the suite, he grinned back at them.

With a single swipe of his stylus, and a single spin around the room, Chat Noir could just make a twitch in the décor. The light switches were all gone.
“Now,” he said, “How about we try this again, and this time, no cheating.”

Ladybug dodged a sawblade as it spun into the bedroom, sinking itself into the wall near Chloe.

“No cheating? Well how do you feel about a Lucky Charm!”

Without a thought, he rushed forward. It always took a second to figure out how to use a Lucky Charm, and if there was one job he was supposed to do, it was buying her that second.

The Evillustrator’s gaze snapped to him, away from Ladybug, as he rushed out of the darkness.

He dove under another sawblade, and barely registered Chloe screaming about her hair, as he-

Tried to get to his feet, only to stumble as the ball and chain at his ankle tripped him up.

He could still fight, if he could-

His hand was affixed to the ground, a metal cuff around his wrist, and, as in the instant he noticed it, the other one was locked down, too.

He was trapped, unable to do anything as the Evillustrator rushed to him.

He tried to clench his hand down, but Hawkmoth always made his villains strong. He couldn’t hold stop him from-

What was the word? Cataclysm? Catastrophe? He opened his mouth, and knew it would already be too late.

He looked up, even as the Evillustrator did, at the sound of smashing glass.

The room was plunged into sudden darkness, and Chat Noir barely made out the sight of a small rubber ball bouncing off the Evillustrator’s head.

He jerked back, hand coming off of the ring as he fumbled for his stylus.

He looked around wildly, dazedly, the stylus scratching on the tablet vaguely. He was on his feet now, looking around in what could almost have been terror.

And then… The yo-yo whipped into his hand from below, and the stylus went flying up.

It was like back on the boat, but this time, Ladybug caught it as it fell.

A crack, as she snapped it, and Chat Noir felt the restraints vanish.

He hastily adjusted his ring, as Ladybug purified the Akuma.

A second passed silence, as they simply stood there.

“Fix things, Ladybug! Fix things!”

Chloe ran in, and… He blinked. Her ponytail was half missing, and as he looked back into the room, he could just make out the spot where the other saw had hit the wall.

--

Yeah, like she was going to just not put things back.
She rolled her eyes. “Miraculous Ladybug!”

The lights came back on. Chloe had her hair back. Chat Noir…

She couldn’t talk to him about any of this here. She’d have to wait, for now. He’d have to wait.

This was going to be a mess, wasn’t it.

He stood up, and grinned. “Another day, another Akuma.”

She pursed her lips, and with a forced smile, let the Ladybug’s take him.

Chloe had realized that her closet was intact again, and was taking the opportunity to appreciate that fact.

It seemed like it was time to go home.

And so, she did. She flew over the buildings of Paris, barely seeing them. She didn’t notice the chill in the air, still present from Winter.

She’d told him.

She’d told him, and she didn’t even know how he’d reacted.

She didn’t even know if he’d still be willing to work with her, or, at least, if wanted to; she didn’t doubt that no matter what he felt about her, he’d do what it took to keep Paris safe.

She landed on the balcony of the bakery, and pinched the bridge of her nose. She’d have to see him in school tomorrow. She wouldn’t even be able to talk to him, though which meant-

She slipped into her room.

- that she’d simply have to deal with things, unable to sort them out, for…

“Hi, Ladybug,” said Chat Noir, standing in the middle of her bedroom.

Chapter End Notes

You know, I never expected to write a reveal that went quite like that. It just sort of happened.

Writing’s funny like that.
Chapter Summary

Why is he in Marinette's room? Why isn't Marinette here? And, most of all, what is he forgetting?

Chapter Notes

I didn't expect Adrien to be this affected by the glamour surrounding the Miraculous, and yet, somehow, he was. It's strange really, I should be the one choosing what happens in this story, but sometimes things happen in the story and I'm confused as to how they got there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Another day, another Akuma.”

It was a few minutes earlier, and he had to admit, he was feeling pretty good about things. No lasting damage done, no ribs broken. Life was good.

He’d been happy to see the flash of light. It had been a late night, and he wanted to have his well-deserved sleep.

He smiled, as the light set him down.

And then the smile dropped, because this wasn’t his room.

What was he doing in Marinette’s room?

He hadn’t been here before he’d gotten dressed, right? Nobody should have been expecting him here, so why would the Ladybugs leave him here? He was tired, and kind of cold, and would like to be home. And speaking of people who should be at home, where was Marinette? Did she have…

He closed his eyes. The same thing in the back of his head was aching again. It wasn’t a physical ache, just the sense that something was wrong. Because Marinette had been in the box with him, right? How had she gotten out of there? Ladybug had… Been in the box with him, and transformed in from of him. He knew who she was, because…

His eyes were closed, and he was definitely getting a headache now.

Ladybug, was, Marinette. The thought stuttered in his skull.

He opened his eyes, and he was definitely breathing hard now.

There was something he was missing. Some thought he’d just had.

It was important. He had to remember it.
He heard the sound of feet on the roof.

_Was that what it felt like when he arrived to visit Marinette?_

The roof opened up, and, without warning, Ladybug was in the room. She seemed to be concerned about something, muttering something under her breathe.

Then she noticed him.

“Hi, Ladybug,” he said.

_What was she doing in Marinette’s room?_

That same ache was in the back of his head again.

Because, she was…

“Spots off,” she said, and suddenly it was Marinette on top of her bed.

It felt like a mule kick to his skull, because _Marinette was Ladybug._

_Ladybug had just revealed her identity to him again. Again._

He blinked. He’d already known… Whatever he’d just learned.

He’d learned something important.

No. He’d learned it _several times_. He didn’t know, right now, what _it_ was, but it felt like holding onto something _very_ slippery, and _very_ hot.

Marinette was looking at him strangely.

“Oh, hey!” he said, “Sorry, I was…” hadn’t it been Ladybug on her bed just a few-

His mind _snapped_ back from the thought.

“I was a little out of it. The ladybugs left me here, for some reason, and I’m not quite sure why.”

Marinette inhaled, softly. “They try to put things where they need to be. I guess they thought _you_ needed to be here.”

“Right,” he said, “Right! Because. You. You’re,” that same lag from the last times, “Ladybug,” he said, finally. She was Ladybug. He _knew_ that. He _knew_ that she was Ladybug.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m…” he said, furrowing his brows, “a bit out of it, I think.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Had to swim in the river earlier. Didn’t really know how to swim. Had to figure it out. Very cold. Then, _that_ plan fell through, and I had to fight a villain with-“

--

He paused for an inordinately long time.
“You,” he said, finally, and his shoulders dropped.

He shook his head, as if trying not to pass out.

“I am…” he yawned, “Way too tired for how tired I am.”

She pursed her lips. Why he wasn’t understanding, she wasn’t sure, but it wouldn’t help anyone if he passed out in her room, especially considering his home life. “You’d better get home. We have school tomorrow.”

“Right. Right, because you know who I am.”

He started climbing the ladder, and she heard him mutter. “Because… Ladybug knew and she told… No. How does…” He shook his head, and climbed out onto the balcony.

Seconds passed, and she saw him slip down past her window.

She sat down at her desk.

“Is he okay?” she asked.

Tikki, now floating by her shoulder, smiled. “He will be. We ask you to be very careful with your identity, but even if you aren’t, it’s not easy to learn it. Especially when you don’t have a Miraculous of your own.”

“If… If he hadn’t been here, when I’d gotten back…”

“He would probably have just forgotten when he went to bed.”

“But I transformed in front of him! If it’s that hard to remember, why do I even have to bother hiding it at all?”

“Hawkmoth would have an easier time seeing through it,” said Tikki, “and so would anybody who had known you for long enough. You’re still Ladybug, even when you’re not transformed! It’s just harder to see that if someone hasn’t known you for very long. I don’t think he was thinking straight, either, so even without the magic hiding it, he might have doubted it.”

“So… He’ll really understand it later?”

“Someday.”

“Someday!? How long will it take?”

Tikki shrugged, still smiling. “It depends. Sometimes a few days. Sometimes months.”

“Months?”

“Sometimes,” said Tikki. “Usually much less, if you don’t try to hide it anymore.”

“Come on, Tikki,” said Marinette, with a rueful laugh, “you know I haven’t been trying to hide it.”

“I know,” said Tikki.

--

Adrien opened a bleary eye. His alarm had been going off for a few minutes now, but he was
having trouble getting up.

Alright. He was a superhero. He would not be defeated by his own alarm clock.

He sat up, and rubbed his hand.

He blinked.

He was still wearing his suit.

He looked at the door, still thankfully closed, and sighed.

He stood up, and locked it.

It could have been a serious issue if Nathalie had seen him in the suit. He was just lucky that she had been a bit late with making sure he was getting up on time.

It was time to face the day, and he was going to do it.

He got dressed in a blur, and, with as much dignity as he could manage, tried to rub away the marks from where his mask had pressed into his face. Of course, he could pass it off as having slept on his pillow funny, or something, but it didn’t do to raise suspicions.

Wow. Last night was a blur. He couldn’t shake the feeling that something important had happened, beyond just the villain, but he couldn’t think of it.

As he rode to school, it was starting to bother him that he couldn’t remember.

He couldn’t for the life of him remember, until he walked into class, and locked eyes with Marinette. She smiled… encouragingly?

Right. She knew who she was.

That wasn’t it, though, was it? There was something else. Something about Marinette.

He sat down, and frowned.

He looked back, and…

Surely not. The thought felt like a scratch on the windshield of his mind. He scrubbed at it, but instead of going away, it just got stronger.

He looked back to the front.

He should have been more surprised. More bothered. He knew his Lady’s identity. He knew who Ladybug was. And yet, the thought seemed almost trivial, barely worth thinking about.

He sighed, and, faintly distracted, not by the realization that Marinette was Ladybug, but by his own reaction to the information, tried to focus on class.

--

Nathalie was never late. She was, however, tactful enough to stay silent upon seeing something so… worrying.

She sat at her desk, externally tapping away at a tricky bit of logistics that would end up being an
issue if Mr. Agreste decided to go to one of his own fashion shows; it paid to be prepared after all.

Internally, she was hyperventilating.

‘Moving him closer to his children should hopefully have the two-fold effect of stifling his interaction with other guests and keeping them in check.’

Adrien was the Chat Noir that was saving Paris. Mr. Agreste regularly had combat by proxy with his own son.

‘As for his wife, she is to be moved to sit closer to his wife, as she is his son.’

The ring she now possessed had been meant for Adrien. Even without it, he had still found a way to fight back.

‘Although their children have proven unruly in the past, they can be trusted to save Paris, granted the appropriate repercussions for their failure.’

Which meant… What? What could she even do with this information, now that she had it?

‘It is likely that Mr. Agreste will take control, despite their wishes, and-

“Jeez, I know you usually write pure gobbledygook, but today, it’s practically unintelligible. Seriously, what’s Gabey taking control of? And I’m not an expert on how your ‘families’ work, but I’m pretty sure you can’t be someone’s son and their wife at the same time.”

Nathalie read what she’d just written, and silently deleted it.

She pinched the bridge of her nose.

“This complicates things further,” she said, aloud.

“Yeah, I’m getting that. Seriously, isn’t there a whole split, like, even if you weren’t their son, you couldn’t be their wife, because of how words work?”

She let out a breath through the nose.

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Oh, you mean that he’s the guy in the cat suit?”

“Yes.”

“I mean, that shouldn’t be much of a surprise.”

She looked at him.

“Think about it. He was supposed to be fighting crime in a cat suit anyway. Why are you surprised that he ended up doing it?”

“Because he never knew he was supposed to.”

“Yeah? I’m pretty sure there a whole ‘fate’ thing here. Really shouldn’t be much of a surprise. Anyway; he’s still the same kid Gabe’s been fighting this whole time. What’s the big deal?”

“Mr. Agreste is fighting his own son. To bring back his wife.”
“And he’d care about that?”

She looked disparagingly at him. “Yes. He would never do anything to knowingly hurt Adrien.”

Plagg snorted. “Yeah, like keep him locked up.”

The disparaging look intensified, but Adrien’s freedom was extremely limited.

Plagg shook his head as if to suggest that he was done with the line of thought. He seemed to be thinking, his forehead scrunched up. “What would he do if he knew?”

Her first instinct was to suggest that he would stop trying to fight the heroes, and give up, but that wasn’t right, was it? He wanted his wife back, even if he wouldn’t hurt Adrien to do it.

“He would find some way to safely contain Adrien until everything was over.”

“Of course he would,” said Plagg, audibly tired, “proving, once again, that he has no idea how that kid works.”

“And you do?”

Plagg gave her a look. “I’ve seen enough superhero duos to know that the kid is disgustingly in love with Ladybug. Like, he’s not faking it, that’s actually just how my owners express affection.” He paused. “Which is weird, because it’s nothing like how I do.” He shook his head, as if to shake off the tangent. “The point is, if you put him in a cage while she’s in danger, either the cage is breaking, or he is. Honestly, even if Gabe were to get his wife back, if Ladybug got hurt while he was trying to do it… Well… I honestly don’t know what people without infinite destructive power do at that point, but it wouldn’t be pretty. Except in a destructive way.”

She sighed. She almost wished she hadn’t let Plagg watch the few interviews that the Cesaire girl had managed to get, not to mention the one official one.

So she couldn’t tell Mr. Agreste, or risk hurting Adrien. She couldn’t not tell him, either, or she would risk Adrien being hurt. No matter what she did, Adrien was left in a bad position. She couldn’t stop Mr. Agreste, either, simply as a matter of principle.

The whole situation was a mess.

She looked at Plagg.

“You seem to know quite a bit about the situation. Do you have advice?”

He scoffed. “C’mon, you’ve known me for like a year now, you know I don’t do advice.”

She looked back at him, and raised an eyebrow.

She opened a drawer, and didn’t react at all to the pungent smell coming from it.

“But I know that you do take bribes.”

Plagg hesitated, and took a deep sniff.

“Huunh,” he said, seemingly dazed. He nodded his head side to side. “I do take bribes.”

Chapter End Notes
He does take bribes.

And, just so we're clear, Plagg isn't going hungry, but it is a known phenomenon where cats who haven't been fed in 20 minutes will insist that they are starving, and why doesn't anybody love them? Nathalie just isn't a pushover like Adrien would have been.
Chapter Summary

Weeks have passed, and Chat Noir can finally remember who Ladybug is. Good for him!
Chloe has expanded her lead for the title of 'most villains caused.' ... Good for her?

Chapter Notes

I just realized, I keep using villains that were obsessed with Chloe. I didn't mean to do that, and I think it's kind of seeping into the nature of Marinette's dislike for her. I mean, that makes sense, but I just realized that, like, 4/5ths of the villains were after Chloe. (Even Stoneheart took her hostage, so I'm counting him)

I mean, maybe it's just that of the sum total of villains, most of the ones Chloe caused were important to the plot? So it's not as many as it might look by pattern recognition? Unclear, but there's definitely a pattern going on in this fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marinette had seen a lot of strange things happen since she’d become Ladybug. She’d fought villains with powers both scary and strange, been awake at hours she never would have contemplated before, fighting enemies she never would have imagined.

And yet, the one that really got her, even after all of that, was watching Adrien slowly remember that she was Ladybug.

It was strange; they’d be having a normal conversation, or, well, as normal as it could be when she couldn’t keep her words straight, and then, suddenly, he would blink, and seem, what, scared? He would lose track of what he was saying, and then, after a few seconds, seemingly forget about it.

She would see it happen when she was walking past him and he happened to notice her. Sometimes, he would give his normal, friendly nod, and others, he would give her a look where, if she didn’t know better, she would say he awe-struck. Occasionally, her mind would bypass awe-struck and go straight to suggesting love-struck, but she’d gotten good at shutting that one down quickly.

It was strange to watch it progress. Watching him remember who she was was like watching an engine start; she could see shudders of the thought, coming through more and more often. Once, after a week, he carried on a whole conversation in that visibly unsettled state that he was always in when he remembered.
It was almost two weeks later that she knew that he really did know it now.

He’d walked in to class, and his eyes had already been on her. He’d given her a soft smile, the kind that offered its support and trust, and had seemed almost reluctant to look away from her as he sat down. He knew she was Ladybug; more than that, he thought of her as Ladybug. That was the look he sometimes gave Ladybug after a fight that had left them both drained. It was the smile that was easier to use than saying that she was going to be fine, that he had her back.

She kept her face carefully steady, even as he was no longer looking at her, because she was definitely going to die because that smile had been entirely too much for her to handle. She could barely handle it from Chat Noir, because at least then, with the mask on, it seemed almost professional. Coming from Adrien…

Yeah, she was going to die.

--

Adrien was a little bit too busy to notice Alya whispering frantically to Marinette behind him. Specifically, he was busy with the fact that something was clearly going on with Chloe.

She was visibly exhausted, which was something she always tried to hide. He hissed in a breath when she moved her hands away from her face, because she was missing most of her usual makeup. No matter what ended up happening, she always found time for makeup. He’d been there once or twice when Akumas had attacked, and if she was so much as smudged, she would immediately go fix the issue.

Maybe it had something to do with Sabrina going missing? Chloe wasn’t, though he didn’t like to think of it, the best friend around, but if she considered anyone a friend, it was Sabrina. Well, and maybe him, technically.

He was just contemplating asking her what was wrong, when she sat bolt upright and yelped.

Ms. Mendeleev looked sharply at her, but Chloe was looking behind her.

“Quiet.”

“Someone just pulled my hair!”

Mylene pulled back, clearly worried, and put her hands up. Alix put a hand on her shoulder.

“Well, it wasn’t Mylene, and it wasn’t me. So, unless someone in here has really long arms—

“Something invisible has been harassing me!”

The class was silent, and someone nervously laughed, but Ms. Mendeleev seemed to have less sympathy. “Ms. Bourgeois, in this classroom, we do not believe in ghosts.”

“It’s not a ghost, it’s—” Chloe began to pull on her purse, as, strange as it sounded, it began to visibly pull away from her. “—something invisible! An Akuma!”

Ms. Mendeleev rolled her eyes, “You expect me to believe that a supervillain would go to the trouble of creating an invisible monster, for the sole purpose of annoying you?” She turned back to the board.

It was the wrong moment to turn away, though, as whatever the invisible thing was, for there was no
denying that there was something invisible now, finally got the purse away from Chloe, and started hitting her with it.”

“Ms. Bourgeois,” she said, turning around to the sight of Chloe hurriedly retreating from the sound drubbing she was receiving, “if you will not sit in your seat, I will send you for a visit with Mr. Damocles, and we’ll have to-“

Chloe finally managed to recover her purse, and promptly flung it as far away from her as she could.

Adrien sighed, as the action seemed to have ended.

“Well, it looks like Chloe’s gotten the attention of another villain,” said Marinette behind him.

“Which means,” said Adrien, already halfway turned in his seat to watch, “that Ladybug and Chat Noir will have to show up and deal with it.”

Marinette looked at him, and smiled, softly. Then she sighed. “As usual.”

--

Chloe had gone unbothered for the rest of the day, likely because the perpetrator knew that they had tipped their hand. Chloe had passed out on her desk, and it had been so at odds with her personality that the teachers had collectively taken a look at it, and quietly ignored it.

She woke up, though, as the final bell of the day rang, and had seemed dazed for a moment; then, she’d realized where she was, and had given the whole class a look that dared them to acknowledge that she’d been asleep in front of them.

Nobody did.

And so, Marinette returned home, with the same faint annoyance she always had when there was a villain after Chloe. They never seemed to be that dangerous, in the public sense. They didn’t even usually go after her immediately. They could always wait until the end of school, or later than night, or whatever, but she still had to deal with them.

Seriously, what was a simple invisible person going to do, besides being annoying? Honestly, if it kept Hawkmoth occupied, what was the actual harm, except to Chloe?

She took a deep breath. Of course, she couldn’t let that happen. Yes, Chloe was awful, and was almost inevitably the source of the villains coming after her. Yes, she was obnoxious to be around, and never seemed to be actually grateful that they’d saved her. And yes, Marinette was pretty sure she’d come pretty close to being one of the villains attacking Chloe, once or twice.

But Ladybug and Chat Noir were the saviors of Paris, and Chloe, however awful she was, was part of Paris. It wasn’t like they could just kill her, or just let villains do whatever they wanted to her.

However much she might feel like it sometimes.

But seriously, how was it even possible to cause that many villains?

--

He really wished that he could get around as fast as Ladybug could. He’d wished it for quite some time, but unfortunately, Ladybug couldn’t stop by every day to pick him up.

He supposed that that was part of the reason it bothered him so much less when Chloe had a villain
after her. She was, after all, his neighbor, so he could easily (relatively speaking) stop by.

Which was why he was adjusting his clothes in the well-hidden security of his own yard. Then, he was clambering over the fence. Ladybug would be there soon. Marinette would be there soon, came the reminder from his mind, which, now that it could remember, seemed very taken with the idea. In any case, it would be best if he was there to meet her.

He dropped to the ground, and straightened up

Mayor Bourgeois seemed to be giving a press conference. Well, Chat Noir had related, but separate, business to attend to.

“It is my decree that any attack on my daughter, be taken as an attack on all of Paris.”

That seemed… Fair enough, Chat Noir supposed, as he managed to round the crowd, and made it to the doors.

It seemed Ladybug had been waiting for him, because she dropped down just as he made it there.

“Hawkmoth giving you more trouble, I guess?” said Chat Noir. The mayor turned to face them.

“Ladybug, Chat Noir, I’m glad to see you.”

“Chloe’s got another villain after her, I suppose?” Said Ladybug.

“I,” he cleared his throat, “I suppose she has had rather a lot of villains come for her. Hawkmoth seems to see her as a high-profile target. People tend to notice, or, I should say, you two notice when she’s being attacked.”

“Well, when there’s a press conference about it…” said Chat Noir.

He seemed abashed.

“We’ll help,” said Ladybug, though she seemed annoyed by the thought.

--

She accepted the call.

“Sir.”

“Nathalie,” came Mr. Agreste’s voice from the other end, “delay any incoming callers. I will be unavailable for quite some time.”

“Of course, sir. Vanisher is ready to strike?”

“Soon.” The line went dead.

Nathalie put her phone away.

Well. As villains went, ‘Vanisher,’ was not the most dangerous, though potentially very effective. It was remarkably relieving that she wouldn’t have to worry about Adrien’s wellbeing so much, today.

Better still, she could speak freely. After all, she was practically alone in the mansion right now. Mr. Agreste was in the observatory, or, lair, or whatever term he preferred that day. Adrien, of course, was fighting the villain. The serving staff were… well, she knew where they would be right
now, all of them. They were well out of earshot, and if they weren’t, they were somewhere that would get them fired.

She pulled out her tablet, and flicked to the news; a villain like Vanisher wouldn’t make good TV, but it was always interesting to see if an attack showed up; many didn’t.

They were still going over the mayor’s speech from earlier.

Well, that was to be expected. It wasn’t quite every day that Mayor Bourgeois made a speech.

Her phone buzzed, a near silent alarm, and she felt Plagg perk up in her pocket as she produced a wedge of cheese from the drawer. She never needed to tell him, and she wasn’t clear if it was because he could smell it as she took it out, or whether he could somehow hear the drawer opening, or the phone buzzing. It didn’t matter, though; whatever it was, wherever he was, he always woke up immediately when it was time to eat.

He slipped out of her jacket, and picked the wedge up from the desk.

“Hm…” he said, giving it an appraising look. She watched. “Yeah,” he said, eventually, in the voice of a true connoisseur, “I’ll take it.” And without any fanfare, he shoved the whole piece into his mouth.

“You always do,” she said, “now, I have to make a call, so please be quiet.”

Plagg turned to face her. “When am I not?”

Nathalie gave him a steady look.

He grinned back at her.

“I seem to recall a few lamps broken,” she said, eventually.

“And I seem to recall a shifty looking bug,” he said.

“Which, even if it is true, is a poor excuse for property damage.”

“Please,” he said, “Gabe causes way more property damage than me on a regular basis. The only difference is Ladybug puts it all back once she’s done beating him. And,” he continued, “when you consider what I can do, I’ve been incredibly restrained!”

“Your legendary destructive powers, which you have never once displayed.”

“Because Paris has the cheese. I don’t want to destroy it.” He shook his head. “Besides, Kwamis can’t be recorded by digital devices. We just don’t show up.”

That was… Actually new information to her.

“Actually, you can’t really even draw us that easily,” he said, seeming to have actually gotten to something he was interested in. “Usually the paper ends up destroyed within the week. Seriously, putting a book of Kwami portraits in the library of Alexandria was a bad choice.”

She really shouldn’t have been surprised.

“It did burn pretty nicely, though,” he said, “so it wasn’t a total loss.”

He settled back down. “Anyway, what was I talking about?”
“Nothing,” she said, pulling up her phone, letting the barest glimmer of a smile through. “You were going to not distract me while I was dealing with a call.”

“Ah,” he said, and she knew by his face that there was about a 50% chance of this call going well. “Not distracting you. Got it.”

--

“How do you expect me to listen to somebody who has put Paris in danger dozens of times by now!? She lied about what happened with Sabrina! She’s lied about every villain she’s caused, and she expects us to believe she’s telling the truth! Not to mention,” she muttered, “she has no respect for personal space, and-“ she stifled the rest of the phrase. “How am I supposed to trust, or even work with, someone who constantly makes herself harder to work with? Who makes you not even want to work with her?”

She switched off the screen. It felt like her emotion had gone dead. Ladybug, saying that about her? She had been the one who had known where the Akuma was hidden. And how was it supposed to be her fault that villains kept coming after her?

Into the deadly still space in her mind, she felt a fire rising.

Someone was going to get burned.

Chapter End Notes

Oh yeah, the big problem here isn’t Vanisher. After all, she didn't even get her own episode.
But you already knew that, didn't you.
Problems of Cataclysmic Levels

Chapter Summary

Antibug attacks.

Chapter Notes

Real talk, this chapter went places I wasn't expecting it to. Not in a bad way, but I wasn't expecting to see some of the things I just wrote in this story.

Ladybug rubbed at her eyes. “Well,” she said, “all that aside, it looks like you can remember—” she looked around, as if making sure nobody was watching “—what you were having trouble with before. If you want to talk, or, you know, anything, it would be fine by me if you wanted to visit tonight.”

He seemed almost surprised, but then he nodded, slowly. “Of course. If nothing else, this is the first time I’ve really known who you are. Or, at least, been able to connect the two…” he paused, and nodded his head back and forth, “the two people who are really very similar, if you’re thinking about it.”

She kept her face straight, and hoped the red in her mask would camouflage a bit of the blush.

She shook her head, as her earrings beeped again. “Well, I guess I’ll see you tonight then.”

“It’s a date,” he said, with a wink, and she laughed, trying to take it for the joke she knew it was.

“Well, anyway,” she said, “I’d better send you back home before I run out of-

“Ladybug!” Came a voice from the stairs.

-time.” She swore internally, and turned to face-

Another villain.

Normal people didn’t dress like that, like her with the colors inverted.

“Okay,” she said, “that’s not good.”

“And you’re almost out of time.”

“Yeah…”

“Alright,” he said, cracking his neck. “Vanisher was more of a warmup anyway. Get yourself fixed up, and I’ll buy you time.”
“Sooo,” he said, strutting forward, “I see we have an admirer, huh? I think you got the colors wrong, though.”

She hissed at him. “The colors aren’t wrong. Not for Antibug.”

“Huh,” he said, “honestly, I’ve got to say it’s not the best name for a tribute to Ladybug. You know, it kind of feels like you’re against her.”

“I—” cut back Antibug, and broke off. “Where is she.”

“What?” he said, making a show of looking around. “Oh,” he said, turning back to her, “I think she’s a little bit camera shy. She’s always nervous around her fans.”

“I am not a fan!”

He looked at her, clearly, intensely surprised. “Really!? You’re not a fan? Are you saying,” he said, putting on his best awed expression, “that you’re the fan? Well, I’m not sure you’ve earned it to be the definitive fan of Ladybug! I’m pretty sure I can give you a run for your money.”

She was visibly incensed now, and he knew that as soon as she attacked, he was going to regret everything he’d said.

So she couldn’t attack.

“I mean,” he said, pacing back and forth, each turn a little closer to the elevator, “Who better to appreciate Ladybug that me? I’ve seen her in action more than anyone, and I’ve got to say, the press really doesn’t do her justice.”

“I hate Ladybug!” she said.

“Well,” he said, “just because you’re not the biggest fan doesn’t mean you can’t be a fan. Don’t let me discourage you that easily.” He’d pressed the button now, and didn’t quite breathe a sigh of relief. The elevator was on the ground floor. The door slid open.

“You—” she stopped, as a dark shadow crossed her face. “You’re trying to stall me.”

Already inside the elevator, he grinned. “And that’s how I know that you’re only a cheap knockoff of Ladybug.” The door began to close. “She would have figured that out on her own.”

She roared, and flung her yo-yo at him, but the door closed before it could touch him.

Now. He needed to buy time. The most time would be from the longest ride. Top floor.

He registered that he was out of sight, and felt his knees go weak. Fake confidence took effort at the best of times, and against a villain who was probably designed to go toe to toe with Ladybug herself, it was not a pleasant experience.

He looked up and groaned. Why did these elevators have to be so fast!?  

Well, at least Antibug probably couldn’t call a ride from a floor above him.

Alright, so, the plan was simple; buy time. All he had to do was get the door to close again, and he’d have bought himself another elevator-ride of time.
The bell dinged for the final time. He was on the top floor.

He braced himself.

The door opened, and she wasn’t here. He breathed a minute sigh of relief, and then registered the pounding of footsteps from the stairs.

Oh.

He reached his hand over and started pressing the close door button again.

The door smashed open as Antibug flew through it.

_Why did it take so long for the elevator to let the door close again?_

He grinned at her, as if his victory was assured, while just out of sight, his finger was practically buzzing from the speed of his presses.

The door began to close as she rushed towards him.

Half closed.

Three quarters closed.

A slam that made him jump, as she hit the call elevator button.

The door, traitorous as ever, slid back open.

She was standing right in front of him.

“So…” he said, trying not to let the nerves show through his smile, and failing miserably, “going down?”

--

“I don’t think they’ll begrudge us a few cookies,” she said, as Tikki began eating, as quickly as she could.

She sighed, because Antibug was definitely Chloe, and more to the point, she was pretty sure it was her fault somehow. Come to think of it, she had left Chloe in a room that she already knew had security cameras.

Alright. Now, where was Chat Noir?

He wasn’t in the lobby, but she hadn’t seen him leave.

Her heart sank. They could be on any floor, and she’d be losing valuable time, even after she transformed, if she couldn’t figure out where they were.

“Oh Ladybug!” came an unnecessarily sing-song voice, from… Outside?

She stepped outside, and…

Above her, silhouetted against the sky, was Chat Noir.

Her heart sank, and he tried to give her a jaunty grin, but it was not working for him.
“Don’t you want to save your partner? After all, what are you without him? Certainly, not a match for me!”

“Tikki?”

She shook her head. “I need another minute.”

“He’s trapped,” she said, hand twisting in her hair, “and I can’t do anything about it. This is all my fault, if I hadn’t-

“Marinette!” said Tikki, sharply enough to knock her out of the moment. “Chat Noir never gives up on the fight, even without a Miraculous. Even when you’re not transformed, you’re still Ladybug.”

“I,” she looked away, “But if I can’t-“ She looked up, expression suddenly alight. “Still Ladybug. I’ve got it.”

“Maybe I should just drop him? Find out if cats really do land on their feet.”

Marinette to a breath, and steadied herself. She had to get the voice just right.

“Or maybe,” she shouted upwards, “You should meet me in the lobby and we can really test whether I’m a match for you or not!”

She didn’t stick around to find out whether Antibug would take her up on the offer. If she came down here, she’d find Marinette, and Hawkmoth might start to figure things out.

She made for the stairs, and started bolting up them, three at a time.

She was out of breath after the first flight, but that didn’t matter.

“I’m ready!” said Tikki.

“Spots on,” she gasped, and felt her lungs suddenly open up, no longer struggling to get the air she needed.

She stopped bothering with the stairs, instead jumping up levels at a time, making it to the top in seconds.

--

Marinette bolted back into the hotel, and he was momentarily grateful that Antibug hadn’t been looking over the edge when ‘Ladybug…’ who was actually Ladybug, but… The point was, she hadn’t seen Marinette.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t entirely clear on how he was going to not die right now. He was hanging, restrained, at a height that would absolutely kill him to fall from, at the dubious mercy of someone who absolutely did not like him.

He felt a shift in the pole he was hanging from, as she seemed to be debating something internally.

A shudder that made his stomach pitch awfully, as she muttered something, presumably to Hawkmoth.

The news crews, presumably recognizing a story when they saw it, were back on the scene, and he tried to smile for the cameras, but god was he failing.
Then, without warning, he pitched forward at least thirty degrees, only stopping when the pole clacked into the railing. Antibug leaped over the edge of the balcony, down towards the lobby. There wasn’t enough fake confidence in the world for this, or at least not enough in him. He didn’t think the pole he was affixed to had any reason not to slide, which meant that—

He twitched, unable to quite stop the movement, and he heard the pole slip on the railing. Okay. Okay, he had a few more feet before he was going over, so maybe—

Another slip. He had a feeling that had vomiting not been enough motion to kill him, he’d be throwing up right now. As it was, he held terrifyingly still, trying not to even breathe.

Another slip, this lasting almost a half-second, and he knew that if he slipped again, he was going down, and there wasn’t any recovery at that point.

He could hear Antibug shouting something from down below, but he didn’t have the mental space right now to register what she was saying.

The pole slipped again, and he lurched impossibly forward. This wasn’t a slide. This was falling, and he was—

A jerk, and he suddenly wasn’t falling. He swung, and knocked into the wall.

He was hanging from—his senses returned, and he heard something above him.

“Gotcha.” Her voice was audibly strained, but he still recognized it.

“Ladybug?”

He could feel her arm shaking.

“I’ve got you. I’ve got you.” She practically bellowed, and he rose, faster and faster, until, in a few seconds, he was back on the balcony.

She managed to find the place where the sheet had him wrapped up, and in a spin, he was free.

He turned himself over, and she was kneeling over him, and—

Her face was… breathtaking. Not to say that that she looked physically any different from usual, but… He wasn’t sure what the point had been of saving him, because that look, the one of terrified concern, the one that looked like she was on the edge of crying, the one that had seen him about to die only a few seconds ago? That look was going to give him a heart attack.

And then, the terror broke, and she sighed in relief, pulling him into a hug, and he discovered that he was about to discover what lay beyond ‘heart attack.’

He could already feel tears in his eyes, as he weakly put his hands on her back.

For a single second, the rest of the world didn’t exist, and it was just the two of them.

But then, Ladybug sighed, her whole body collapsing forward, as if carefully leaving the tension and the moment behind.

As she breathed back in, and straightening her back, looked back down at him with an expression he couldn’t quite parse.
“Alright,” she said, “We’ve got a villain to fight, and she’ll probably be back to check on you soon.”

“Soon? More like *now!*” came Ant BUF’s voice. “I should have known you would *never* go toe to toe with me in a fair fight.”

Ladybug’s fist clenched, as she stood up. He only caught a glimpse of the fire in her eyes as she turned, but her voice was hard.

“Chat Noir and I are a team. That’s why you’re going to lose.”

Right. He had a job to do. He scrambled to his feet, and retrieved his baton, which he’d dropped on the balcony when she’d been wrapping him up.

“Strong words, Ladybug. Let’s see how they match up with reality. *Anti-charm!*”

“*Lucky Charm!*”

Oh. Of course. What else would it have been? Ant BUF hefted the giant, implausibly-shaped sword. Implausibly shaped, but he would wager *extremely* effective.

Ladybug, for all she was in a fighting mood, apparently agreed with his assessment that such a weapon would be *extremely* dangerous when they had so little room to maneuver. Her arm wrapped around him, and in an instant, they were above, no longer on the balcony, but the roof itself.

The pool was closed over right now, the glass cover so clear it seemed almost nonexistent.

Strange though it looked, it was the most open area they *had*. Ant BUF was only a few seconds behind them, seemingly slowed by her heavy weapon.

Ladybug was staring down at the pouch she’d gotten from her Lucky Charm.

She looked up at Ant BUF, then at him.

“Hey, Chat Noir, have you ever played baseball?”

He hefted his staff. “Never too late to learn.”

Ant BUF was charging, but as the marbles *burst* across the surface of the pool, she skidded to a halt.

“You really think I’d fall for that?”

“We had kind of hoped,” said Chat Noir.

“She’s stuck there,” said Ladybug, quietly, “if we keep the pressure on, she’s trapped.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

--

Chat Noir juked to the side, giving her a clear angle to start harassing Ant BUF with the yo-yo. She took every shot she could find, and while the sword worked well enough as a shield, she seemed to be having trouble keeping up as Chat Noir started probing her defenses with his staff.

Perfect, perfect, at this rate, she’d leave an opening, and they’d have a chance to break… Probably the earrings, if she had to bet.
And then, Chat Noir had slipped on a marble.

“Hah! What was that about me losing!?” The sword came up, and the yo-yo, swung with her most savage force, simply bounced off, and the sword was coming down, and-

The glass shattered beneath Antibug, and, as if time was stretching, Ladybug saw…

A burst of shards flecked with black. A splash of water, coming up around Antibug’s feet, and in the middle of that splash… A hand, pitch black, which, even as she watched, wrapped around Antibug’s leg, and-

The sword fell from her hands, smashing, embedding itself in the glass, barely a breath from Chat Noir.

And, in an instant, Antibug was embedded in the glass herself, arms at her chest, holding her on the sides of the smashed hole in the pool.

Ladybug didn’t hesitate, but she could just make out an impossibly dark figure swimming back down in the pool.

She slid to Antibug, ignoring the weak punch she managed from the position, and cracked the earrings in her fingers.

The suit melted away, and in an instant, it was Chloe hanging from the hole in the glass.

Ladybug, reached down, and yanked her out of the hole, onto the glass cover.

Then, she collapsed onto her knees.

Too much had happened today. Adrien was finally able to remember who she was. They’d fought two villains. She’d almost seen Chat Noir die. Twice. And…

She looked down, and blinked because… The level of the pool was lower than it should have been, and she could see why. There was a hole in the bottom of the pool.

“Ladybug,” said Chloe, “What happened?”

She took a breath, and, unable to muster any more anger, at least not enough to override the rest of her mind, looked at Chloe.

“Look,” she said, "I know you look up to me. That’s…” she shook her head. “The first step to being a hero, is not creating villains. Just… Remember that, okay?”

“I- What are you…” Chloe seemed bewildered, but managed to say, “Okay?”

She grabbed a marble, and without even looking up, tossed it skyward.

“Miraculous Ladybug.”

The flash of light went out, and she didn’t watch for what it fixed. Usually, it amazed her to see it, but right now, she wasn’t in the mood.

“You saw that too, right?” she said to Chat Noir, "what happened just now?"

He nodded.
“And we’ll talk later?”

He managed a weak laugh. “Sure.”

She nodded. “Alright.” The ladybugs took him away.

“Now,” she said, looking back at Chloe one last time, “I’m going to go home, and take a nap.”

Chloe didn’t respond, as she leapt from the building.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will feature a jump back in time. Not much. Just a few minutes. We're going to see what just happened, from a different perspective.
Silent as Cats' Feet

Chapter Summary

Nathalie has a job to do, and she will see it done.

Chapter Notes

Hey, to the commenter who I told on chapter 14 that Nathalie and Plagg would probably be important in the next chapter? Probably ended up meaning 'in chapter 16'.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Well, maybe she didn’t want him to bother her, but then again, it wasn’t like she could do anything if he did. Well, maybe he could find the compromise. He grabbed a pen.

“I am aware. However, Mr. Agreste’s schedule has experienced a sudden and unavoidable intrusion… That will not be an option… No… We will simply have to reschedule.”

He popped the cap off the pen, and found an empty spot in her schedule. If it was in the schedule, she was required to do it, right?

“Mr. Agreste is, as you’ll already be aware, very busy.”

Now, how did human letters work, again? No. Wait. He remembered.

“Of course. No, this is nothing to do with the quality of your work; our continued patronage should make that clear.”

M-O- Now, to make an ‘R,’ you just took a ‘P’ and added the diagonal. He glanced up, and saw Nathalie slowly and deliberately look away.

“For most mundane questions, I have all the information you will need…” She bristled. “That is irrelevant, but I am his personal assistant…”

‘MORE.’ Perfect, he was halfway there, give or take. Now, a big round ‘C,’ and… He looked up. There were urgent voices, and they weren’t coming from the phone.

“Is there no available time slot? If there is not-

He dropped the pen, and she looked over at him. He didn’t see it, too busy staring at her tablet. He looked at her, not trying to hide his alarm. He jerked his head at the screen and got out of the way.

“One moment,” she said, stepping over to-

He saw her eyes widen, as they focused on… Not Ladybug, definitely not Ladybug, and below her, on the screen…
She took a breath. “Unfortunately,” she said, “a villain is attacking, in close enough proximity that I will need to call back later... Of course. We will resume this conversation later.” She hung up, and jammed her phone back in her pocket.

“Well?” said Plagg.

Her hand tightened at her side.

“Listen,” he said, “you won’t fight him outright. You don’t want him to get the earrings. And you 
really don’t want him—” he jerked his head at the screen, where Chat Noir was hanging at a deadly height, “—to die, so the way I see it, you’ve got one option.”

She involuntarily let out what could almost have been a soft growl. “Do you really expect me to go against Mr. Agreste?”

“No. I expect you to save the kid, and I expect you to trust me, because the way I see it, I’m literally your only friend, and I think I’ve earned a bit of trust.”

The look on her face was tricky to parse, but after a second, he could see the tension snap. She sighed, and, visibly bothered by it, pulled the ring from its chain.

She gave him a look that as good as said ‘Don’t make me regret this.’

She slipped the ring onto her finger.

“Fine,” she said. “Claws out.”

For the first time in a millennium, he grinned as he felt the inexorable pull of the ring, and didn’t even try to fight.

--

She had no time to waste. She pulled open the window, and slipped out, landing on the thin lawn of grass behind the mansion.

Now, she couldn’t let the villain see her, or else Mr. Agreste would know that something was wrong, and then... Who knew what he would do. Suppose he knew that someone else had the ring. How would she ever be able to give it to him without alerting him to her resistance?

It didn’t matter; Adrien’s life took precedence. Speaking of...

She pulled back as the villain jumped down, even though she was almost invisible at this distance. Where was she going...?

She looked up, and- Chat Noir, Adrien, was barely wedged into the railing. One bad twitch, and he was dead.

No. Not dead. He would be fine, because she could catch him.

But... There were cameras on him. If she showed herself, they’d know, and then Mr. Agreste would know.

Even at this distance, she saw him slip, just a little; maybe the transformation had augmented her eyes, maybe not, but she had to get closer, get ready for the worst-case scenario.

She was a mere blur in the air, as she slipped behind a tree, close enough to-
Another slip, and she could see the panic on his face.

A single twitch was sure to bring him down. She braced herself for what she would have to do. Maybe she would reveal herself. It didn’t matter if it kept Adrien alive.

*Adrien was falling. Her child was falling and-

He jerked to a halt, and she froze, body still coiled to spring, ready to save him. She could just make out an arm, red, with black spots. Slowly, laboriously, he ascended, and the tension dropped from her body, as-

*Her child? She shook her head. No, not *her* child, just-

She shook her head again. The semantics didn’t matter, because *Antibug* was still coming for the heroes, and with what she had already done, it was clear that she was out for blood.

A glance at the news-cameras. They were focused on the balcony. A glance in the window, and…

*Antibug was making for the stairs.

Surely, she wouldn’t notice someone silent on her heels.

The most anyone would have seen was a bolt of black as she was suddenly inside the lobby.

She could *hear* Antibug on the steps, leaping her way cacophonously up the flights.

Nathalie followed, utterly silent, making it to the top floor mere seconds behind the villain.

“Chat Noir and I are a team,” said Ladybug, “That’s why you’re going to lose.”

Nathalie sighed internally, sneaking a glance around the corner of the wall. *They were still alive. Good.*

“Strong words, Ladybug. Let’s see how they match up with *reality. Anti-charm!*”

Anti-charm. What was *Anti-charm, and why did it-* Another glance, and she felt the sensation like lead in her stomach. That was a sword. A massive, murderous sword, and they were supposed to fight her with what?

*“Lucky Charm!”*

A small bag, full of *something*. The problem was, it didn’t matter *what* was in the bag, when Antibug had a sword that looked like it could easily cut them in *half*. One false move, and they were *dead*.

Ladybug, in what Nathalie would have easily called the best move, just behind *running*, made for the roof.

Fine. *Fine.* She could work with this.

She hesitated, because she would have *bet* that the cameras were still on that balcony.

She would just have to take the back route.

She made for the rear of the building, slipping out onto the wall.
One leap, and she was hanging from the ledge. She looked over the edge.

“Never too late to learn,” said Chat Noir, and smashed the bag with his staff.

“You really think I’d fall for that?”

“We had kind of hoped.”

“She’s stuck there,” said Ladybug, quiet enough to be on the edge of even her hearing, “if we keep the pressure on, she’s trapped.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Well, trapped she might be, but that sword was still deadly, and one false move would be the end.

She couldn’t risk it. She had to cut this fight short, but… She hadn’t revealed her existence yet. She couldn’t afford to do it recklessly.

She needed a plan.

And then…

The pool. A glass floor.

If there was one place nobody watched for an attack, it was below their feet.

She slipped back inside.

Now. The pool. She took a dozen steps or so.

*Here.*

She cracked her neck, and hoped this would work.

“Cataclysm,” she whispered, feeling the burning energy filling her hand. She leaped, taking a deep breath.

The solid surface of the ceiling gave way like so much smoke. And then, without warning, she was in the pool, and she slipped her feet on either side of the hole she’d just made. She could feel the energy in her hand draining away, and she clenched her fist. She needed just a little more.

She looked up, and through the distortion, could just make out a figure of black, with flecks of red. She still had the sword, and-

Another figure in black fell, and the sword came up.

She didn’t think. She didn’t have time to.

She simply leapt.

The floor, like the ceiling, gave her little resistance, as the last of the Cataclysmic energy shattered the glass, and she wrapped her hand around Antibug’s leg, pulling her down into the pool because how dare she do something to put Adrien in danger, how dare she-

She cut off the thought as the sword cracked into the glass. She had done her job. With luck, they could do theirs. She had to get out of here.
She let the current pull her back down the hole, and in mere instants, she was flying from a window at the back of the hotel. Anyone who saw her would have trouble describing what exactly had bolted past them, and likely wouldn’t have thought to pay attention to it entering Agreste Manor.

She slipped into the room, and, not having realized she’d left it open before, closed the door to her office.

She let out a sigh, not more than a whisper, and straightened up.

Now, if she’d done her job right, Ladybug should be about to-

There was a flash of light, and when she could see again, she realized that she was dry again.

Good. It looked like things were back to normal, which meant-

She stopped dead, because… She was grinning. She was grinning in what she would have guessed was a roguish manner. She hadn’t known she was even capable of that, and yet… She was just glad that her mask covered her whole face, as she wiped the expression off of her face.

She shook her head, and whispered, “Claws in.”

--

And then, it was the two of them again.

She silently placed the ring back on its chain.

She sat down at her desk, and rubbed at her eyes.

“Impressive!” said Plagg, “Usually, it takes years to Cataclysm multiple things without recharging. Then again, I guess you had a good reason to, so maybe not so crazy.”

She opened her mouth, and then closed it. She sighed. “How much of that was you.”

He cocked his head. “How much of what?”

“What?”

She pursed her lips. “How much do you remember when you’re transformed?”

She shrugged his head from side to side. “I mean, most of it. What did you have in mind?”

“How much of my personality was your personality?”

“Ah.” He took a breath. “Well, usually my wielders get a little more, eh… Dashing, than you do, but there was a bit of that.”

“I assumed.”

“And… Well, you didn’t really do too much, so I don’t think you really got too much of me on you.”

She sighed, quietly. “I stay as calm as possible. You understand that by now.”

He shrugged, “I mean, yeah.”
“So,” she said, “Adrien.”

He looked at her, and seemed almost confused. “What about him?”

She gave him a long look.

He stared back, and then-

“Oooh,” he said, nodding. “That was you.”

She continued staring.

“What? You’re surprised?”

The stare was taking on an almost hostile feeling.

“I thought it was pretty obvious you cared about him.”

She seemed kind of distressed.

“What? You’re basically his mother.”

Her eyes widened, and she seemed almost affronted. If it hadn’t been for her expression when she’d seen Adrien was in danger, he would have said this was the most emotion he’d seen out of her in months.

“What!? It’s true! I mean, maybe some other relative, but I’m pretty sure you’re the closest thing he’s got to a mother either way.”

Her face had gone bright red, now, and she seemed… Terrified?

Ah. Well, there was only one solution here.

“Ah, don’t worry,” he said, cheerily, “I know, a lot of humans I’ve met have been terrified when they realized they’d been forced into parenthood. It’s one of the big human things I’ve seen, so trust me when I say that entering this new stage of life is not the end of your whole life, it’s just-

She swatted at him, and he tumbled away, cackling. “There we go!”

She chuckled, her face down on her desk, seemingly mortified by the whole conversation.

“Aw, I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard you laugh!”

She sighed. “I suggest you don’t get used to it.”

“Alright, Mom.”

She groaned.

Chapter End Notes

Aw, don’t worry Nathalie, it’s going to be fine! People do stuff like this all the time! Why, I can think of dozens of examples where someone has had to become a superhero
sabotage the work of their employer, who is a supervillain that they are in love with, to save said employer's son, who is also a superhero, but one without superpowers, while also dealing with the fact that you are bad with emotions, which the situation is forcing you to deal with.

Well, actually...
Chapter Summary

It's been quite a day, and Marinette and Adrien have a lot to talk about. He knows who she is. He almost died, twice. And, perhaps strangest of all, they've acquired what appears to be a new ally.

Chapter Notes

Oh man, I just realized that it would have been a sick as hell narrative design to not include the bits with Plagg and Nathalie, and make it more of a surprise when, just, this hand reaches up from the depths.

Of course, then I wouldn't get to tell the side-plot with the two of them, but can you imagine if you'd had no idea that was coming? Or, wait, was it not obvious? My perspective may be a bit skewed, seeing as I wrote it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Marinette awoke to the sound of knocking.

“Marinette? There’s someone here to see you.” That was her father.

Who would be here to-

Her brain caught up with her situation.

“It’s not Alya, is it?”

“No, it’s a boy. Kind of a handsome one?”

She almost exclaimed, “Adrien?” but managed to choke on the word. Her father would have a field day with that, as would, she supposed, her mother. “Did he give his name?”

“Were you not expecting him? I can send him away, if you want.”

“No, no, I just… I may, have… invited Adrien Agreste over.”

“Oh, isn’t that the boy you talk about with Alya?”

She choked on the statement. “Do not tell him about that.”

He laughed. “Don’t worry, I’m a bit more subtle than that…” He laughed again. “A bit.”

“Anyway, should I send him up?”

“Yeah. Yeah.”
She sat up, and rubbed sleep from her eyes.

Normally, she would have switched into her pajamas to sleep, which meant that she was, for once, intensely grateful for how tired she’d been. She hadn’t even thought to get out of her daily clothes.

After a minute, she heard her father’s muffled voice from below. A second passed.

A knock at the trapdoor.

“Marinette?”

“Come in,” she said, her voice a few notches too high.

Adrien climbed into the room, and closed the door behind him.

He looked back, as if to make sure the door was really closed, and then smiled back at her.

“I thought I’d take the front entrance today,” he said, with a wink.

“Right,” she said, trying to bring her voice back down.

“I mean…” he said, “now that I know… Well, I guess I knew that you knew, but now I know, you know?”

She laughed, and managed to get her response out, despite stammering a few words. “Make that into a tongue twister.”

He sat down on the chaise longue. “I knew you knew, now I know?”

She nodded, a little nervously. “There you go.”

They sat there for a second, and she tried not to mess with the wrinkles in her shirt.

“So… I don’t, really, have any actual questions for you right now? I’m just… I don’t know, happy to know. It’s nice to properly meet you.”

“I… I guess this is the first time, in a weird way,” she managed to cover over the nerves, this time. “Well, hello! I’m Ladybug, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Ah, yes, and I am Chat Noir.”

“Charmed, I’m sure,” and suddenly it was just her and Chat Noir, bantering back and forth like usual. Strange how even after months of knowing, they still felt subtly distinct.

“Everyone is.”

“Ah yes, of course, you and your roguish good looks.”

“Quite.”

Silence for a few seconds. Whatever else they were thinking about, neither of them was quite focused on introductions. Adrien was the first to break the silence.

“So,” he said, “about what happened earlier. With Antibug.”

She nodded. “I remember. There was someone in the pool; I think they somehow, blasted a hole up from the floor below.”
“Blasted is the wrong word for it,” came a voice that made Marinette jump, before she remembered that Tikki had no reason to hide anymore, “I know what they did. I just don’t know who they are.”

Adrien seemed surprised. “Oh,” she said. “We haven’t been introduced.”

“I… No, we haven’t” he said, “You’re… Tikki, right?”

“Mhm! It’s a pleasure to meet you properly, Adrien!”

“You too.”

“What were you saying, Tikki?” Said Marinette.

Tikki seemed almost reluctant to explain, but after a second, sighed. “You remember how I told you, back in the fall, about how Chat Noir had an ability called ‘Cataclysm?’ Back before we knew that he didn’t have the ring.”

“Yes,” said Marinette, “Was that…”

She nodded. “I don’t know who it was, but they have the ring. They have Plagg.”

“Plagg?”

“The Kwami of the Black Cat Ring. I was wondering why he’d gone missing. I think we might have found out.”

“So… We’ve got another hero,” said Adrien “Or, at least, someone else fighting against Hawkmoth,” he shrugged, “Someone who saved my life.”

“We might need to talk about that later,” said Marinette, “you… almost dying,” she shook her head, “but, right now, I’m just wondering, if they’ve had the ring, why has it taken them this long to show up and start helping us?”

“Maybe they only got it recently?”

Tikki shook her head, “I doubt it. It takes a lot of skill with the ring to use Cataclysm on two things in one transformation. Or… A lot of will.”

“A lot of will?”

“It’s…” Tikki hesitated. “If you’re experienced with a Miraculous, you can do things that seemed impossible at first. Usually, the only ways to… Learn how to do things like that are either by hard practice, or by… Needing to be able to do them.” She looked up, sharply, “I don’t like telling my owners that, Marinette; sometimes they… take dangerous risks.”

“Don’t worry, Tikki,” she said, “I’m not about to do anything crazy.”

She nodded, and then her cheer was back, “Good! You’ll learn it all, someday.”

“So, you think they haven’t shown up because they’ve been practicing?”

“It’s possible.”

“Hm,” said Marinette, “it seems kind of strange that they show up when we most need them. I bet they weren’t planning on showing up.”
“True,” said Adrien, “and… They didn’t show up. I was keeping an eye on the news footage, and they’re not in it. I don’t think anyone else even knows they exist.”

“So they’re trying to stay hidden. Makes sense. If Antibug had been looking out for them, things might have gone wrong.”

“Not to mention,” said Adrien, contemplatively, “That also means Hawkmoth still thinks I’m the one he has to go after. He doesn’t know he should be looking elsewhere.”

Marinette sighed. “Speaking of which… You almost died today. Twice.”

Adrien shivered, but nodded, and managed to rally himself. “It’s a risk of the job.”

Marinette gave him a look. “Adrien, you could have died.”

He smiled, ruefully, “Well? So could you.”

“But,” she jerked her head away in frustration, “I have actual superpowers. No matter how hard you train, I can probably still take a harder hit than you.”

“I—” he paused, and then sighed, “—I know. But… If I hadn’t been there today, Vanisher would have grabbed your earrings. Even if she hadn’t, you wouldn’t have had time to get something for Tikki when Antibug attacked. Either way, then you wouldn’t have had superpowers. You’d have been worse off than me.”

“And if I’d been a little slower, you would have fallen to your death!”

“That’s why you weren’t. It’s like you said; we’re a team. That’s why we won. We cover for each other.”

“Except,” said Marinette, trying to keep the distress from her face, “I didn’t! The only reason Antibug didn’t manage to… To… You know. Is because,” she fumbled for a word, “some Guardian Angel showed up. If they hadn’t been there, you would…”

“I know. I know, but listen. It doesn’t matter.” He seemed frustrated by her disbelieving look. “Not- I’m not saying I don’t matter. I’m saying that… You remember Stoneheart?”

She nodded.

“The broken ribs?”

She nodded again.

“I said, back then, that if the price for saving Paris was a few broken ribs, I would pay it. And, if the price is… bigger, then… Hawkmoth can’t be allowed to get the Miraculouses. That’s what it comes down to.”

Marinette groaned. “You’ve read way too many superhero comics. You can’t just say stuff like that.”

“I don’t like it either, okay? But, what else am I supposed to do? Leave you to fight Akumas by yourself?”

“Yes? I… I don’t want to see you die. I…” She felt her own tongue trying to seize up, but, she let out a shuddering sigh, and looked him in the eye. “I’m fighting to save Paris, but if the price is saving Paris is you… I’m not sure it’s worth it. If that’s the deal, then I want a different deal.”
“I know,” he said, “because… I feel the same way about you. That’s why I have to stay by your side. I’m not as fast as you, or as strong, or as… Anything, but if I’m the reason that you’re still standing at the end of a fight, then I’ve done my job.”

“Chat Noir…” she said, and then shook her head. “No, hold on, what did you just say? ‘Not as anything’?”

“I… Maybe?” he seemed almost disturbed by the angry expression she’d suddenly taken on.

“Because, let me make this clear, the reason I have a problem with you working with me isn’t because you’re useless. Which of us has talked down a villain? You. Which of us managed to convince Alya to stop trying to figure out our identities during combat? Y-

“I think that was both of us.”

“I… Maybe, but I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t have listened if you hadn’t been helping. My point is, I’m not saying it’s a good idea for you to stop fighting villains. I’m not saying I’d last a day without you. I’m not saying that I think you’re useless. I’m saying—” Now, her tongue really did rebel, because she knew what she meant; what she wanted to say. What came out, though, was “I’m saying I don’t want to risk you.”

He looked down, visibly abashed by her vehement defense. Then he looked up, and, with his eyes glimmering with tears, said earnestly, “I know. That’s what I was saying… I don’t want to risk you either.”

They sat there in silence again.

Minutes passed, and the pressure was building in Marinette’s head; blood pressure, most likely, considering how hard to was blushing (praise be for warm lighting).

“So…” said Marinette eventually, “what do you think the odds are my parents listened in on some of that?”

Adrien pursed his lips. “Low? You’d know them better than I would, right?”

“I mean, I doubt they listen often, but when I have, ‘a boy’ over, they might make an exception.”

“Ah,” said Adrien, grasping the crux of the issue. He looked over at the trap door. “Well… I mean, what would they even think?”

She shrugged. “I… I really don’t know. Judging by the trouble you’ve had over the past few weeks —” she cursed the phrasing even as she’d said it, because if her parents were listening in, that would sound highly suspect. She plowed forward. “—they’d probably be pretty confused.”

“True. I mean, for what it’s worth, your parents seem like the cool kind.”

“The ‘cool’ kind?” said Marinette, an edge of skepticism in her smile.

“Y’know, respects your privacy?”

“I… Yeah, I guess, if that’s how you define cool, they’re pretty cool. I mean, they pry, but at least when they’re prying, they let me know.”

“See? Cool parents.”

She giggled.
More minutes passed.

“You know,” said Adrien, “I think you might have hit the nail on the head, earlier.”

She gave him a look.

“Guardian Angel. It’s a good name, and kind of a thing already. Nobody bats an eye if you say you have a guardian angel watching over you.” He rocked his head from side to side. “Plus, you know, they’re supposed to be invisible, and I’m pretty sure we’re the only ones who even know they exist.”

“True.”

“Or… Maybe just Angel?”

--

It wasn’t quite true. After all, Chloe had lost memories, precious memories, that she wanted back. She needed to see what she’d become, even though the sight of herself, of Antibug, bothered her for reasons she couldn’t quite name. She had to see the whole thing.

And so she watched. She watched herself coming down the stairs. Watched Chat Noir distract her, even saw Ladybug slipping away. She saw herself rushing back up the elevator as Chat Noir stood visibly distressed, in the elevator.

She saw herself hauling him into her room.

She’d seen the news report. She knew what happened next. She knew that she would show up next in the lobby, which is what she watched.

She saw someone run through the lobby, into the stairwell. Then, Antibug had entered, and stood, confused. She was… Looking for Ladybug, looking for… Chloe’s eyes widened, and she rewound, and… The cameras were grainy, and the image was small enough that she couldn’t make out the girl’s face, the face of Ladybug.

She watched the stairs, as Ladybug ran upwards, but at the speed she was going, her face was a blur. The only time she stopped was as she transformed. There was a single frame, if she looked closely enough, where she could kind of see the face. It was a familiar face, that she couldn’t recognize in the slightest. After staring, spellbound, wracking her brain for minutes, she shook her head.

She could look at that later. Right now…

She went back, and watched as she, Akumatized, cast about for Ladybug. Her gaze had fallen on the stairs, and, seemingly determined to catch Ladybug, she’d followed.

Chloe had looked over at the section of screen showing the stairs, but-

Something caught her eye, back on the lobby section. She looked, but saw nothing. A rewind, and…

A flash of black. Frame by frame, she saw something pitch black blur its way across the lobby, making for the stairwell.

It followed her up the stairs.

It hid behind a corner outside her room, when the news report said that she’d confronted Ladybug
and Chat Noir outside. It had looked, and then recoiled.

Seconds passed, and the figure had paced, visibly nervous, and then made for the window. A bit longer, and it had slipped back inside. She stared as it stepped forward, and looked upwards. Then, in its hand, a black mist. Then, in a single leap, it was gone, into the ceiling, instantly replaced by a torrential flow of water.

Chloe stared.

She’d already stared at the footage from the roof, and every time, she’d been confused as to why the glass had broken under her feet.

This time, she saw the dark blur under the water. This time, she saw the hand pull her down.

She had trouble sleeping that night, even though she was still bone tired from Vanisher’s harassment.

…

The next day, she had, of course, let Sabrina sit with her again; after all, what was the point of school if you didn’t have someone to do your homework for you?

The next part had been more difficult.

Something was going on. Something inexplicable had happened with Ladybug and Chat Noir, and, as much as she hated to say it, there was only one person she would admit to herself knew more about the heroes than her.

“Cesaire,” she said, and Alya turned to face her, visibly annoyed already.

“What, Chloe.”

She already regretted this, but it was her best bet. She stifled the distaste that she was feeling.

“I need to know something. Something about Ladybug and Chat Noir.”

Alya raised her eyebrows.

“Big fan like you, I’d have thought you’d know everything about them by now.”

“Shut it. I need to know if you’ve seen anyone following them. Or…” she pursed her lips, “if they’ve won any fights they shouldn’t have.”

Alya seemed confused. “Following them?” her annoyance had given way to reluctant curiosity. “Fights they shouldn’t have won. What are you talking about?”

She didn’t know. She almost gave up the idea, but… No. This was fine. This was just doing what she normally did with Sabrina, with Alya. Get her to do the work, reap the rewards herself.

“So you don’t know. I would have thought the girl who prides herself on knowing about them would know.”

“Know what,” said Alya, the annoyance returning.

“There was someone in black following them yesterday.”

“Right, when you were attacking them.”
She wanted to cut back with something biting, something to make Alya never want to talk about it again. But she couldn’t, because Alya did pay closer attention than she ever could have.

“Yes,” she said, acid in every syllable, “when I was attacking them. I saw a black figure following them. I was hoping you wouldn’t be useless, and would actually know something about it, but apparently not."

The annoyance was gone, replaced with a cross of the same curiosity, and disbelief.

“You’re…” she shook her head. “You’re trying to mess with me.”

Chloe rolled her eyes. “Please. If I were ‘messing with you,’ you wouldn’t even be in this school.”

“Ah,” said Alya, “like the time you got me suspended.”

“Exactly. Like that time you ended up fighting Ladybug and Chat Noir.”

She knew she’d gotten in a good shot. Alya bristled, but couldn’t quite justify a response. The perfect jab; the one that didn’t leave her open to reprisals.

“So you expect me to, what, look into this for you?”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re going to look into this, because you won’t be able to help yourself, and then you’ll post about it on your stupid blog, and I’ll read it.”

Alya seemed annoyed, and then cocked her head. She barked a laugh. “You follow the Ladyblog?”

Chloe froze. A second passed. Two.

“No,” she said, finally.

“You do!” She walked away, laughing.

Chloe scowled after her. Well, whose fault was it that she wrote the best blog about the heroes, amongst the meager pickings?

Chapter End Notes

Didn’t expect to see Chloe interacting in a not-100%-hostile way with Alya, but that’s where we’ve ended up, I guess.
The Mystery of the Ring

Chapter Summary

Chat Noir’s existence is a puzzle, and not one to be taken lightly. Tikki needs to relay some information. Marinette refuses to not relay some information.

Chapter Notes

Featuring: Master Fu being pretty sure that I'm writing a story where Chat Noir isn't supposed to have the ring, and Marinette, hitting her limits on listening to people.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marinette had been sitting in her bedroom.

It was the day after Antibug had attacked, and Marinette was trying to keep herself focused on the homework she needed to catch up on. Yes, there was a lot on her plate, and yes, she was worried, but unfortunately, the only way to have less on her plate was… To eat it? Metaphorically, eat her homework. (No seriously, Mme. Bustier, Ladybug ate my homework!)

“Marinette,” said Tikki, her voice unexpectedly serious, as it had been so often, recently. “Tikki?”

She seemed almost embarrassed, but she continued. “You know that… That I try to make sure that secrets stay secret, right?”

“I…” After a second, she nodded. She always had a good reason, but Tikki kept secrets. “Yes.”

Tikki nodded, slowly, hesitantly. “Well, there’s… There’s one that I think you need to know about, now.”

“Alright,” said Marinette, her stomach faintly unsettled by Tikki’s serious demeanor.

“You never really asked where I was before I ended up on your desk.”

“I, hadn’t thought about it. I guess I thought you just showed up where you were needed.”

“Hm,” said Tikki, a soft laugh, “No, when I’m in my Miraculous, I can’t really do anything. Someone put me there. Someone tried to put the Ring in the hands of someone who would use it.”

“But they didn’t.”

“Until now,” agreed Tikki. “And that’s why I need to talk to him. He needs to know that Plagg has reappeared, and… you were always going to meet him, someday.”
“And… ‘Someday’ means today, now.”

“Yes.”

“What about Adrien?”

Tikki hesitated. “I don’t know. Usually, whoever has the ring would also meet the guardian, but… He doesn’t have the ring.”

Seeing Marinette’s affronted face, she quickly continued. “I know! I know. He’s done more than anyone could have asked of him, even without the ring. That’s why I want to ask him. Maybe he’ll be able to help.”

“And… Who exactly is ‘he’?”

“The Great Guardian.”

“…Okay. That sounds, official.”

Tikki nodded.

--

Alya had called later, snagged some specifics, which Chloe had grudgingly given.

Then, not quite believing that she was acting on a tip from Chloe Bourgeois, she carefully crafted the question.

“What is the strangest thing you’ve seen when Ladybug and Chat Noir have been fighting villains? We’re looking for user submitted stories of the wacky and the weird, or the spooky and the creepy, or, if you prefer, the downright inexplicable.”

Vague enough that she didn’t get people fabricated what she wanted to hear, but seeing some kind of shadow following them would certainly qualify.

--

Marinette, only now realizing that this would leave her even further behind on homework, followed Tikki’s directions through the streets of Paris. What she wanted to do was ask Tikki what ‘Great Guardian’ even meant, but unfortunately, Tikki needed to navigate, and so, she was forced to walk in silence as Tikki told her where to turn.

There were worse days to be walking, of course; Spring had arrived in earnest, and the breeze was warm. Marinette didn’t have the luxury of paying attention to it, though, as her brain chased itself in circles.

“This is the place!” said Tikki, eventually.

Marinette stared. She’d swear she’d been here before, but she couldn’t quite remember when. It had been… A month, give or take?

She stepped inside, and the memory practically slapped her in the face.

Marinette sighed. “I guess I should have realized most people wouldn’t know how to treat kwamis.” She shook her head.
The old man in the Hawaiian shirt looked at her. “What are you saying?” he said in a strong Chinese accent.

Tikki slipped upwards. “Master, we’ve seen the Ring.”

He seemed surprised, straightening slightly. Then, something in his posture shifted; less stiff, less hostile.

“Oh,” he said, and his voice was different, too; smoother, and more natural, “I see. Well then, please, make yourselves at home.” He gestured towards a stool off towards the wall.

As Marinette tentatively walked over to the school, he stepped surprisingly spryly to a small stove with a teapot on top of it.

“It’s almost ready,” he said, “it’s,” he chuckled, “lemon-ginger, if you want any.”

“Um…” said Marinette, “Sure, I guess.”

He nodded, and carefully poured two cups. Then, he glanced at Tikki, who nodded. He… Marinette wasn’t sure why he had a thimble, but that was definitely a thimbleful of tea he was pouring for Tikki. Then, equally surprisingly, he poured another thimbleful.

When the tea was properly distributed, he took a single long sip, and, slowly exhaling, looked at the two of them.

“So,” he said, “explain what has happened.”

Marinette looked at Tikki.

Tikki shrugged. “We were transformed.”

The old man nodded. “I see. Blurred memories.” He looked at Marinette. “Then I suppose you will need to explain.”

Marinette glanced between the two of them.

“Oh-okay?” she said. “There isn’t much to tell. Yesterday, a villain named Antibug attacked. She…” Marinette shook her head. “The part that sticks out is right at the end. I had used my Lucky Charm, and we had her stuck in one place. We were trying to break her guard, so we could get to the Akuma, but… Chat Noir slipped, and she was going to… She had a sword. She had a sword, and he was… Down.” She shook her head. “I’m not explaining this well.”

The old man laughed. “I understand well enough. Please, continue.”

“Antibug was about to, um, chop him, and then…” she hesitated, the image still fresh in her head. “Then something came up from below. There was a hand, that came out of the floor. It pulled her down, and got her trapped, so that she couldn’t stop us breaking the earrings.”

He raised his eyebrows. “As if someone had burrowed their way up?”

“I… Not exactly?” said Marinette, “We were on the glass cover of a pool, so it was more like smashing their way through.”

“Hm.”

“But, later that day, Tikki told me that it had looked like… Like… What did you say, Tikki?”
Tikki nodded. “Whoever it was, they didn’t just smash their way up. I know a Cataclysm when I see one. Not just that,” she said, and looked down, “I only saw them from a fraction of a second, but they moved like they were transformed.”

He nodded, slowly. “I see.”

“They used Cataclysm twice.”

He seemed to almost choke on the tea he was sipping.

“Remarkable.” He looked upwards, lips moving silently. “Very remarkable. They cannot possibly have had the Ring for more than eight months, and yet…” He shook his head.

“Truly, exceptional.” Marinette jumped, and, looking down, her eyes focused on a small green… Kwami. That was a kwami, with a turtle shell, drinking tea from the other thimble he had set out.

He looked up, and saw her staring. “Oh, my apologies, I haven’t introduced myself. I am Master Fu’s kwami, Wayzz.”

“Aha… I see,” she said, her mind attempting to process the information that was not making sense.

A long second passed.

“Wait, can kwamis exist without a Miraculous?”

Wayzz laughed. “Oh no, we are bound to them.”

“So, wait. There’s a Miraculous for you, and Tikki, and the ring, that’s Plagg, and Hawkmoth has one, and…” She stopped and shook her head. “How many are there?”

“Oh, a great many,” said Wayzz, cheerfully.

“That is why he’s called the Great Guardian,” said Tikki.

She snapped back to look at Master Fu, who nodded.

For a solid second, her mind churned through the information.

Then, she shook her head. “Wait! You mean that Chat Noir could have actually had superpowers this whole time and we just let him do this on his own?”

“Hmm,” said Master Fu.

“I mean, that’s what you’re saying, right? You have the ability to help him do his job without risking his life so much, and you’re just… not?” She looked at Tikki, “surely you must’ve thought of that at some point!”

“Ladybug… Er, pardon me, I don’t believe I’ve been introduced to you properly.”

“I- Marinette,” she said.

“Marinette,” he said, “I understand your concern, but please, allow me to explain.”

She… Stopped. She nodded, and waited.

He hesitated for a second, and then, nodded. “8 months ago, Wayzz sensed that the Butterfly
Miraculous had been awakened, to evil ends. Hoping to protect the city, I bestowed the Ladybug Miraculous on you, and the Black Cat Miraculous on a young man. Later that day…” he shook his head, “you both showed up to fight against Hawkmoth’s first villain. However, the man I had given the Ring to, did not have it.”

“Wait, you mean… You tried to give the ring to Adrien?”

He raised his eyebrows, and then nodded. “I suppose you would have discovered his identity, with no glamour hiding it.”

“And he knows ours,” added Tikki, quietly.

“Surely he did not discover it on his own?”

“I told him,” said Marinette. “I mean, at the time, I didn’t have much choice, but, I had been wanting to tell him for… Months.”

He seemed confused, but shook his head, and continued.

“So. I sent Wayzz to see where the Miraculous was.”

“It wasn’t there,” said Wayzz.

“He searched for the Miraculous in the house, but… Every Miraculous can fit in a pocket, as can every kwami. If it was there, he couldn’t find it.”

Wayzz seemed chagrined, but nodded.

“It was as if the Miraculous had simply vanished. A Miraculous, once found, is rarely kept hidden for long, especially with a villain like Hawkmoth to fight. Normally a kwami will urge its wielder towards fighting evil. Even Plagg would do so.” He sighed. “But I was explaining why I had not given Chat Noir a new Miraculous.”

He seemed to recenter himself. “That was the first question; where had the first Miraculous gone, what was to stop a new one from vanishing the same way? The second was… Stranger.”

“Stranger?”

He nodded, and sighed. “He did not have the ring. Despite that, the only reason I realized was because Wayzz has an eye for it.”

Wayzz shrugged. “Every kwami has seen people transformed by every Miraculous often enough to recognize them. He was close, but to the practiced eye, he was certainly untransformed.”

“Exactly. Had Wayzz not told me, I would never have known that he was not transformed. If Nooroo has not told him, I doubt even Hawkmoth knows.”

“Having the correct clothing is unlikely. The correct training is similarly unlikely. Both of them, combined with the instinct, when a villain attacks, to stand against it?” He shook his head. “He was meant to be Chat Noir. Even without the Ring, the two of you have stood against Hawkmoth for months.”

“Mhm,” said Marinette, frowning.

“So. If he was meant to be Chat Noir, what happens if he is given a different Miraculous? Raw strength and resilience may be a trap.” He shook his head. “I… Don’t truly know, but I attempt to
avoid making decisions I cannot take back, until I am certain they are correct. And… You have been successful. Paris has been untouched. Every Akuma has been purified.”

“Even now, when Antibug came so close… The wielder of the Ring returned, to keep him safe.”

“So… You’re afraid you’d mess something up by giving him a different Miraculous?”

“Precisely. There is little restricting him from using another Miraculous, but compromising the identity of Chat Noir could potentially be catastrophic.”

“I see,” said Marinette.

It wasn’t… It wasn’t what she wanted, but Miraculouses were strange; she knew that much already.

She sighed. “Fine. But…” she pursed her lips, and then nodded. “If you’re doing this, you’re going to tell him in person.”

The other three seemed alarmed by the statement. “Marinette, my existence and location are not information to be shared lightly,” said Master Fu, “giving the information to more people is dangerous.”

“So is fighting Akumas without a Miraculous,” she said. “He’s put his life on the line too often, without anything protecting him, for me to keep secrets from him.”

Master Fu looked her in the eye. She stared back, unwavering.

He seemed to stare into her mind, as if gauging something. Then, he looked down. “Very well. I suppose he has earned it just as much as you have. Shall I expect to see him soon, then?”

“As soon as possible,” said Marinette. “I owe him this much, at least.”

Chapter End Notes

No, seriously, what were the odds of the same person they tried to give the ring to showing up dressed like he had successfully received it, with the skills to act like it as well? The only way it makes sense is if some outside force was messing with the universe, almost as if...

Seriously, they're dangerously close to figuring out that they're in an AU, and I'm really not prepared to deal with that.
Chapter Summary

Alya follows the breadcrumbs, and hits gold. Well, she hits something, anyway.
Adrien makes a new friend, despite his best efforts.
Marinette is pretty sure that the word for what Alya has found is not 'gold.'

Chapter Notes

Featuring everyone’s favorite person! Everyone, in this case, being everyone who doesn’t know her very well.

Days passed, and then weeks. Alya’s question on the Ladyblog received dozens of responses, but none of them quite what she was looking for.

No confirmation for Chloe’s remarkable claims.

Of course, that didn’t mean the question had been a waste; it had been one of the most lucrative questions she’d ever had, as far as responses went. It seemed like the heroes had an inexplicable streak in them, and Paris was happy to tell her all about it.

‘I saw Chat Noir do a Batman impression while he was chasing after a villain,’ read one entry.

‘Here’s a good one: They actually defeated a villain in the store I was in, and then Ladybug gave me fashion advice. Like, I was getting ready for a date later, and she just, like, gave me some advice on what to wear. Actual good advice, too,’ said another.

‘Chat Noir was dancing in the park during a villain attack. He had a hat on? I mean, that may have been a dream, but I definitely remember it. The villain was a birdman? Did that even happen?’ Mr. Pidgeon had in fact attacked, strange as it was to remember, although she hadn’t heard about Chat Noir in the park.

And then, the day after an attack…

‘The Arc de Triomphe collapsed on the villain. Neither Ladybug nor Chat Noir were near it, so I don’t know how that happened.’

An hour later, she got another response. ‘I swear to god, there was something on the rooftops last night, during the attack. Like, something fast.’

Coincidence? Maybe.

A few clicks took her to the user’s profile, where, score, they had contact info.

She pulled up a messenger app.
‘Hey, I’m the girl who runs the Ladyblog. I saw what you were saying about a figure on the rooftops? It sounds like a really interesting story, but I wouldn’t be able to share it without more details. You got anything else?’

‘Not really. I couldn’t really see it? All I know is that I saw its shadow, or, like, it blotted out the moon for a second, and when I looked, I’m pretty sure I saw it running along the rooftops. You know those videos of Ladybug running on the rooftops you get from helicopters? It looked kind of like that.’

‘Like, another hero? Now that’s a story. As I say, though, a bit tricky to run without more corroboration. Still, thanks for sharing, and, depending, I might be able to put out an article sometime!’

‘Aw sweet! Hope I wasn’t just seeing things, or this’d be kind of awkward.’

Now. What had Chloe said? Someone following them, and fights they shouldn’t have won?

Chloe had, begrudgingly sent her a recording of the video. The quality was terrible, since it had been filtered both through the camera and the phone, but...

A figure on the rooftops at night, trying its hardest to be stealthy. Sure sounded like what Chloe had described.

Ladybug and Chat Noir had a shadow, keeping an eye on them.

Did they even know about it?

--

More weeks had passed, and school was, incredibly, almost over. The sun finally seemed to have returned for good… Well, until next winter, anyway.

The days were warm. People were… Wearing crop tops and going barefoot, for some reason. That fashion oddity aside, it looked like it was going to be a beautiful summer.

Marinette still couldn’t relax. There was too much on her plate for that.

In a shocking twist, despite weighing heavily on her mind, her crush on Adrien was the least of her worries right now.

More urgent in her mind was that Hawkmoth had seemingly taken the defeat of Antibug as a challenge, and his villains had seemed more ferocious, since then.

Which, of course, meant that her worries about Chat Noir’s safety, about Adrien’s safety, had been a bit too accurate for comfort, and, even if he’d said that he understood why he couldn’t have a Miraculous, after meeting with Master Fu, she would swear that he seemed almost disappointed. The only reassurance she had was some kind of ‘fate’ answer that frankly didn’t seem especially reliable.

Of course, they always had Angel (The name still felt wrong in her head, but, then again, so had Ladybug). As the villains had slowly become more brutal, they had seen more of their silent protector, always vanishing mere moments after appearing. And silent, they discovered, truly was the word. Angel’s footfalls were inaudible, breath, barely audible and, as far as speaking went…
Ladybug was in a tight spot, but high, far too high, for him to reach in time.

The villain had lured her to the top of the Eiffel tower, the observation deck at the very top, and where had he been? Running, as fast as his painfully inadequate legs could carry him, because the elevator had been destroyed.

And then… He felt someone grab at the back of his suit, and without warning, he was airborne.

He flailed, tried to break free, until he’d realized who it was.

He’d gasped. “Angel?”

He felt them almost lose their grip on him as they froze in place suddenly enough to jerk him.

They looked sharply towards him, and he almost shivered as their eyes flashed green in the lights that still shined on the stairs.

Then, they seemed to shake off whatever had been bothering them, and continued climbing, one handed, carrying his full weight, but far faster than he ever could have on his own.

“I,” he stammered, “who are you?”

They didn’t respond aloud, but he caught them shaking their head in his peripheral vision.

“Um… What are you?”

The ascent slowed minutely, as Angel gave him what he would have sworn was a confused look.

“I guess… You don’t talk much.”

They had made it to the top of the tower. Angel shook their head. Her head? He was… at least 80% sure that that was a ‘she.’

She knocked his shoulder with the back of her hand, and jerked her head towards the room in the middle of the deck, where the fight was still going on.

Ladybug was still up, but she wasn’t looking good.

Angel gave him a pointed look. A finger to him, then to the room. A finger to herself, then up, towards the roof.

He nodded. “Got it.”

Alright, time to get some attention.

“Well!” he said, kicking in the door, which had already been hanging open, “I just climbed the Eiffel tower, and my legs sure are tired!”

“Chat Noir!” said the villain, “And here I thought you were supposed to be slow.” The last word was spat into the air, clearly directed at Hawkmoth.

“Well, you’d be surprised how fast I can move when someone’s messing with Ladybug. Speaking of, how are you, milady?”
She was back on her feet. “Never better.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said the villain, “I took on one of you, I’ll take on both of you.”

“Oh, but I’ve got a trick up my sleeve,” said Chat Noir, hoping it was true.

“Oh really,” said the villain.

There was a crackle, and the villain jerked their head upwards, as chunks of black dust fell from the ceiling. Then, without warning, the whole section of the ceiling caved in.

The villain had put up both arms as a shield, but looking up meant no looking over.

The fight had been over in seconds.

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Angel didn’t talk. She didn’t even seem to breathe. She was there, and then she was gone, a consummate professional. She was practically invisible, and certainly nigh undetectable.

Which was why Marinette was about to get whiplash; she was about to find out what Alya had been so intrigued by for the past few days.

Alya had been humming happily, muttering quietly to herself, changing a word here and there; the telltale sounds of her work on an article for the Ladyblog.

“And do the heroes... even know...? Hmmm... If, they read, this blog, they will, after, today.”

Marinette looked over. “Know about what?”

Alya had looked up from her phone, seemingly surprised. “Oh! The topic of my next article. Shadow.”

“Shadow?”

Alya nodded.

“And... When you say Shadow...?”

Alya looked furtively from side to side. “I mean,” she said, “that they have a friend behind the scenes that the world doesn’t know about.”

Marinette blinked, because she knew someone matching that description. So how did Alya know about her.

“What do you mean? If the world doesn’t know about her, how do you?”

Alya chuckled, almost abashed. “Well, it’s a funny story about that. You remember when Chloe got turned into Antibug?”

Marinette nodded.

“Well. Apparently, she wanted to watch the fight, so she got the security footage, and she saw something weird.”

“Shadow.”
“Exactly. Now, I’m as surprised as you are that she came to me with that information, but, basically, she wanted to know about it, and knew I’d go looking, so… Have you paid attention to the Ladyblog recently?”

Marinette rocked her head side to side. “I’ve skimmed.”

“Well, I posted a question, asking for their strangest hero stories. Basically, anything weird or funny that they’ve seen from Ladybug or Chat Noir. I figured that if Shadow was real, I’d catch some stories in the net. And I did.”

Marinette had seen a question to that effect, but she wouldn’t have associated it with Angel.

“I got a few… Promising responses. I wanted to gather a bit more info before I posted anything, just to avoid giving out false information, you know?”

“Sounds like smart journalism to me,” said Marinette.

Alya nodded, and then looked up, smiling. “And then I hit the motherlode. A direct encounter with him, and I got the interview of a lifetime.”

“You… Talked to, Shadow?” said Marinette, trying not to comment on ‘him,’ which she had no right to have information about.

“Well,” said Alya, “maybe not of a lifetime, when I say a direct encounter, I’m not talking about me. I’m talking,” she said, pulling up a video on her phone, “about her.”

Marinette stared. The image on the screen was of a girl about her age, with reddish-brown hair. On the screen, Marinette could just make out an orange overshirt.

“This,” said Alya, “is Lila, and she saw the shadow up close and personal. Actually,” she said, “if you want to meet her… You remember Mme. Bustier said we were going to have a transfer student?”

Marinette hadn’t been paying too much attention, but it sounded familiar. “Yeah?”

Alya looked pointedly at the screen.

“She’s been everywhere, met everyone, done everything, like, it’s a miracle she’s not a celebrity already.”

“Oh,” said Marinette. Of course, she did want to know more about their mysterious protector, but if Hawkmoth found out… If nothing else, they’d have to deal with alert villains, ones looking for attacks from hitherto unexpected angles. Hawkmoth had stepped up his game with Antibug. It seemed likely enough that he’d find a way to step things up again if he discovered he had a new enemy.

So… So…

“So,” she said, “why the need to share all the info?”

Alya gave her a surprised look. “That’s my job! That’s what the Ladyblog is here for!”

“But,” said Marinette, desperately hoping that Alya was in a reasonable mood, “if… If you’ve got a hero trying so hard to stay hidden, are you sure you want to expose them?”

Alya seemed perplexed by the answer. “I mean, does it count as exposing for a hero? It’s not like
I’m going after his identity. I just think Paris deserves to know about its heroes.”

“And what about Hawkmoth? Do you really want to tell him he’s got another enemy?”

“Oh!” said Alya, “gotcha. He already knows, so I wouldn’t be making things worse.”

“He… Already knows? How can you know that?”

“Hah. It’s in the interview. I’m telling you, it was the interview of a lifetime. Lila really knows how to tell a story. Here, watch.”

She hit play, and Marinette stared at the screen, as the image buffered, and then kicked into motion.

“Hello!” she said in bright tones, “I’m Lila.”

“And, as you all already know, I’m Alya,” said Alya, looking at the camera, “Now, you guys are probably seeing this a while after I’ve recorded it, depending on how long it takes me to get all the content I want.”

Lila laughed. “I’m pretty sure I can provide.”

“Oh, strong words,” said Alya, chuckling, “let’s see how they hold up. Right now, we’re here to talk about something that, honestly, is the biggest discovery I’ve caught wind of in a while. We’re not talking about Ladybug’s favorite meal, or Chat Noir’s secret love of cartoons. We’ve got something bigger! We’re talking about a whole new hero. Now, I’ve been hearing rumors about this, but for the first time, we’ve got a proper, up close and personal eye-witness; isn’t that right?”

“You bet!” said Lila, “I saw him with my own eyes, right in my room!”

Marinette’s eyes widened. ‘Been everywhere, done everything, met everyone.’ That’s what Alya had said, and Lila seemed to be delivering.

There was a giggle, and her eyes snapped momentarily up, to the sight of… She looked down at the screen, then back up. That was Lila. That was Lila, practically draped over Adrien. That was Lila, and she was absolutely flirting shamelessly with Adrien, and Marinette couldn’t even do anything about it.

She blurred back to where she was as Alya bumped against her hip.

“This is the good bit,” she said, grinning.

Marinette focused. Apparently, she’d managed to lose a fair bit of time in being affronted about Lila’s advances on Adrien, because she was getting to the end of the attack already.

“So, I was trying to stay out of the way, since I’m not, you know, a superhero, but this villain keeps coming after me, and Shadow just steps up and picks the villain up, by the scruff of her neck!”

“Wow! So, fast and strong!”

“Yup! And he just grabs the wand, and snaps it! Now, that’s when Ladybug and Chat Noir showed up. I don’t think they were even surprised that he’d already handled it. Ladybug just—” she snapped her fingers, “—Snapped it up.” Marinette blinked, because… That hadn’t happened. That had never happened.

“So, it looks like he can take a villain out by himself. Now that’s impressive.”
“I know, right? Well, I was sitting there, honestly shaken by what I’d just seen, and he turns to me, and smiles,” Lila’s expression went soft for a second, and Marinette would have almost believed she was in a genuine memory, had it not been for the fact that, for one thing, Angel definitely had a full face mask.

“He asked if I was alright, said I had been brave,” she shook her head, “I told him I was just doing what I had to,” a faint chuckle, “he said, I’ll never forget it, ‘sometimes, doing what you have to is the bravest thing you can do.’ I don’t think I’ll ever forget that.”

Alya had clearly bought into the story entirely, both on the screen and next to Marinette.

“Wow. Now,” she said, turning to the screen, “is, or is that not, the best story you’ve ever heard?”

Lila was rapidly overtaking Chloe for the ‘Most Vomit-Inducing Classmate’ award.

Chapter End Notes

Now, you might be wondering, ‘How does Lila know that Angel even exists?’ Well, the way I see it, she's a follower of the Ladyblog, and a hawk-eyed opportunist. It seems only fair that she'd have seen the writing on the wall vis-à-vis secret third hero, and just gone for it.
Chapter Summary

Adrien has something he wants to be doing. Unfortunately, he didn't account for his school's new member, who seems positively determined to smile sweetly at him as she makes his life a living hell.

Chapter Notes

This entire story has been an exercise in using the wiki. Seriously, I've reviewed so many episode plots for this fic. So many details I wanted to double check (and so many more that, in retrospect, I missed. I'll leave you guys to sort those ones out.)

Adrien, quietly trying to extract himself from Lila, was not living his best life. He hadn’t meant to get caught up in her sights; he hadn’t even known she was going to be joining the school, honestly.

What he had been planning to do was find a quiet spot to take a closer look at something he’d found. Something strange.

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It had only been, what, 10 minutes ago?

He had been about to walk outside; he’d had a fencing lesson to get to, after all.

He’d heard his father’s voice, though, and had stopped, because… Well, it wasn’t exactly implausible for him to be mad, but it was still kind of strange to hear that cold tone directed at… Well, not him. He hadn’t quite managed to stop himself from looking in. And when he’d looked in…

When he’d looked in, he had seen his father, on the phone, visibly incensed by the person on the other end. Adrien, if he’d been paying attention to it, would have recognized it as a fabric supplier who had sent a shoddy batch at the worst possible time for an upcoming fashion show.

But he hadn’t been paying attention to the conversation, because his father had given him something more interesting to look at.

Adrien stared. The picture of his mother was swung away from the wall, as if it was nothing more than a door, and there was a safe behind it.

Even as he looked, his father, as simply as if it was an everyday occurrence, picked up a book that had been sitting in front of him, and slipped it inside of the safe. He closed the safe, and swung the portrait shut.

Then, he rubbed at his forehead, as something from the other side of the call seemed to push him a
bit further into his annoyance.

“I am aware,” he said, “but that does not excuse-

Adrien stepped away from the door as his father made to leave. He quietly moved a few feet to the side, slipped behind a conveniently placed pillar.

He needn’t have bothered. His father was entirely focused on his conversation, practically marching past him, without so much as a sidelong glance.

Adrien stared at his receding back, and then looked back at the door.

He needed to make sure he hadn’t been seeing things.

He slipped into the atelier.

He tugged lightly at the corner of the portrait, and then a little harder. With a pop, it swung open.

Sure enough, there was a safe behind it.

He stopped. He knew he hadn’t been imagining things. He knew that. He had done what he’d come in here for. Besides, even if he wanted to open the safe, it wasn’t like he knew the code, right? So, even if, theoretically-

His fingers twitches as he remembered what exactly had been hiding this safe. It didn’t feel like his father would have put his safe behind her without a good reason. There was definitely something important in here.

So, maybe it was important, but his father wouldn’t make a code that would be obvious, would he? It wouldn’t be an anniversary or a birthday; anyone off the street could look that information up. He would go with something random, that nobody would ever…

His heart sank. There was a date that nobody would know; one that hadn’t been in the papers, or the magazines.

Quietly hoping he was making a connection that didn’t exist, he keyed in the date his mother had gone missing.

The safe beeped, and unlocked. He looked down, and sighed.

For once, he’d wanted to be wrong.

But. He wasn’t, and it was too late to change his answer.

He pulled the safe open.

The contents were… Strange.

There was a picture of his mother, as well as what looked like a book on Tibet; it certainly seemed to match the travel brochure for a hotel with ‘scenic views of Tibet’. He didn’t touch those. They seemed… Too personal.

Then, there was a small fan of feathers, leaned up against the back of the safe. It seemed kind of strange to have something like that in here. Perhaps it had been his mother’s? He didn’t touch it either.
In fact, the only thing he felt like he could touch without disturbing something personal was the book.

Besides, it wasn’t like he was going to steal it, he just wanted to look at it.

He pulled it out, and pulled it open.

Strange illustrations of plants, and oddly marked circles, like something alchemical.

He flipped forward, and then stopped dead. Stopped dead, because next to the indecipherable text, was an image of Ladybug. Or, not her. Someone dressed like her. He flipped forward, and found… Not himself, but someone dressed in black. There was an image of a ring, like… Like the one he was supposed to have. The one Angel had.

More pages forward, more colorful illustrations of heroes he didn’t recognize, until…

Hawkmoth. Or. Someone with the right Miraculous.

“Adrien?” came Nathalie’s voice.

He hastily closed the book, and-

He made the snap decision, and closed the safe without replacing the book. The portrait swung easily closed, and clicked back into place.

He realized too late that he hadn’t gotten the book out of sight, as Nathalie walked into the room.

She looked at him, and he tried to look like someone who hadn’t just broken into his father’s safe. He kind of doubted it was working.

Then, she looked at him, steadily, and blinked twice.

“At this rate,” she said, “you will be late for your fencing lesson. I believe your father would be displeased.”

“Sorry,” he said, “I was just, um, looking for my homework.”

There was an instant too long as she looked at him. Then, she nodded. “I had assumed as much.” Then without another word, she turned and left the room.

He stared, unable to believe his luck, and quickly shoved the book into his backpack.

Adrien almost felt conflicted about the fact they’d given their silent protector the name ‘Angel,’ because it sure felt like he had an actual angel of his own; how else was he supposed to explain how Nathalie had just gone with that? He would have suspected himself, and even he wasn’t even a suspicious person.

It didn’t matter, right now. He had a book that looked like it was all about Miraculouses, and he knew just the person to show it to. Well, okay, he knew just the person to show it to first; At least, he did if Marinette was still at school.

--

It was strange that a boy who had grown up as well educated and defended as Adrien had could be called unlucky. At this point he was only alive because she’d saved his life in combat twice, now, and the only reason that Mr. Agreste didn’t already know his secret identity was because she was
very careful to *keep* him from knowing. He was consistently in danger of physical injury, and he was in a position where that was his best choice.

And now this. Caught in the middle of stealing the grimoire. The *only* reason he wasn’t going to immediately get in trouble for that was because she had plausible deniability and was on his side.

She had a lot of experience making people's lives function, but even *she* would admit that this family took a lot of upkeep. Mr. Agreste had layers of secrets, as did Adrien, and keeping those two boundaries from overlapping in catastrophic ways added significantly to her workload. And what thanks did she get for her work, which had *definitely* outstripped her salary at this point?

She held her face steadily towards the front of the car. She knew *exactly* what thanks she got.

The way she saw it, she was *supposed* to be in this job to get paid, but it was hard to remember that sometimes. Mr. Agreste had, once or twice in the past few months, actually given some indication that he actually had some level of emotion, which had thrown her for a few loops.

Adrien, meanwhile…

She didn’t feel like much of an ‘Angel,’ but it *was* peculiarly satisfying to have someone call her one.

And, of course, small mercies, Ladybug and Chat Noir had accepted that she *was* on their side, which, frankly, could have *easily* been false.

Plagg had, of course, cackled for straight minutes last night at their nickname for her, after she’d transformed back, but she’d been too busy going to bed to even *talk* to him about anything.

Perhaps, once she arranged next week’s schedule, there would be a chance to bribe him into helping.

Perhaps.

--

It had been a simple plan; use the time between when he *arrived* at school, and the time when his fencing lesson started to show Marinette the book of heroes.

And then.

And *then*.

He tried not to judge people too quickly, but this girl was *not* making a good impression of herself. He was pretty sure that even in Italy, (which she had been quick to tell him was where she was from) this level of physical contact was reserved for people you had met at least *more than once*.

He didn’t *want* to be dragged into the library for an impromptu study session, but the problem was, of course, that he was absolute *garbage* at extricating himself from this kind of situation.

He had managed to catch sight of Marinette and even managed to make eye contact. Unfortunately, ‘eye contact’ probably wouldn’t tell her to follow him into the library, and he hadn’t had the chance to explain the situation. Really, he should have texted her while he was on the way, but that would have involved either leaving things purposefully vague, or else trusting his father *not* to be monitoring his texts, which, frankly, he wasn’t sure either way about. He *really* didn’t want to risk that. If his father found out he was Chat Noir… There was no way he’d let it continue.

--
So Lila was apparently a big-time liar, but a very charismatic one. Seriously, it felt like she’d hypnotized everyone in the school. Well, hypnotized might be a step too far, but, then again, whether or not she could actually hypnotize people, it didn’t seem like a good idea to leave her alone with Adrien.

She shoved down the mental image of Adrien falling in love with her and moving to Hollywood, and never questioning her lies, because-

That wouldn’t help.

“What do you think, Tikki?” she said.

Tikki seemed to weigh the question. “Well,” she said, “I don’t think Adrien’s going to fall in love with her and move to Hollywood.”

Marinette blinked. “Was I talking out loud?”

Tikki nodded.

“Sorry.”

“But, you’re right. She is a liar, and the sooner Adrien knows about that the better.”

“And the closer I am, the sooner I can tell him.”

“Exactly!”

And so, Marinette, not entirely doing it out of fear that Lila would seduce Adrien, made for the library.

--

It was amazing how quickly a person could grow bored, and certainly, Adrien was bored. He was the kind of bored you can only be when you aren’t doing something you really want to be doing. He wanted to show Marinette the book. He wanted to look at it himself. Unfortunately, he couldn’t do either of those things because Lila… Lila actually wasn’t here right now. Lila was looking for a textbook, which meant, if he was careful, that he could probably sneak a quick look in the meantime, right?

He slipped it out of his bag.

He looked at the cover, shook his head. There were so many heroes in this book, but the one image that he couldn’t quite keep out of his head…

Hawkmoth, or, if not Hawkmoth, close enough.

The markings next to the illustration certainly looked like writing, some kind of code, maybe, but he couldn’t read it. It felt like he was looking at something important, if he only knew what he was seeing.

“There we go,” said Lila, sitting down with a textbook, “now we can study together.”

“Right,” said Adrien, sliding his own textbook over the open book, “study.”

“Oh!” she said, pulling the book out from under his textbook, “what’s this?”
That definitely seemed like a violation of personal property (granted, the book wasn’t his, per se, but it definitely wasn’t hers), but what was he supposed to do? He couldn’t very well pull it back without making it clear that it was important, which he definitely did not want to do.

“Oh,” he said, “It’s just, um, stories, about superheroes.”

She gasped, and he had to fight not to recoil as she slipped her hand onto his. “I love superheroes.”

He tried to surreptitiously pull his hand away as she flipped through the pages, but then, stopped, as she stopped flipping.

“Ladybug,” she said, simply.

“Yeah, she’s in there,” he said, staring at the illustration. “She’s… She’s pretty amazing.” For a fraction of a second, he wasn’t trapped with Lila; He was in Marinette’s bedroom as she worked on some project and stubbornly refused to laugh at his jokes.

But no, he was here, and he was trapped, and-

“Oh come on,” she said, sliding in even more uncomfortably close, “a girl doesn’t need a mask to be amazing.”

On that, at least, they were agreed.

“You’ve got a bit of a crush on her, don’t you?”

A bit of a crush would be understating things. More to the point, this was absolutely none of her business.

“I, um,” he said, trying to find something comparatively noncommittal that didn’t sound like he was just trying to get out of responding.

“Hmm?” she said, her face inches from his.

He tried to pull away, but there wasn’t that much chair to maneuver in.

“Well,” she said, “I happen to know it for a fact.”

“W- what?” He said.

“That a girl doesn’t need a mask to be amazing? You see, Ladybug and I are friends. Close friends,” she pulled back from him. “Tell you what, meet me at the park, and I’ll tell you all about her.”

“Wh-“ he managed to stutter out, because he was pretty sure he would have noticed, but then again, if there was something he didn’t know, maybe today was just a day for finding out things he hadn’t known he hadn’t known?

Then, with a suddenness that made him jump, there was a slamming noise behind him.

He spun around, hoping to investigate the noise, but he had only managed a second of searching before his phone began to beep loudly.

He reached into his pocket and his eyes widened because-

“My fencing lesson starts in one minute! I’ve got to go!”
He began to gather his books as quickly as he could, even as she did.

Book, acquired. Textbook, right there with it.

He hastily slung the bag over one shoulder, and made for the door.

“Wait!” she said, her hand slamming into the back of his shoulder.

He staggered forward, and the bag swung off of his shoulder.

“What?” he said, spinning, expecting some kind of deadly news from how urgent her voice had been.

Then, without any warning, she was, once more, far too close to his face.

“So,” she said, putting a hand on his cheek, “after your fencing, at the park?”

“Uh,” he said. There was an easy answer here, either yes or no, but in the confusion, he couldn’t remember which it was for the life of him. “Yeah,” he said, “sure.”

And he ran, swinging the backpack back up onto his shoulder. Yes, it was unzipped, but that wouldn’t actually make anything fall out.

*It would, however, mean that if he hadn’t been watching, say, if he’d been distracted, someone could easily have reached inside and taken something.*

Chapter End Notes

With this chapter, this is my new longest fic.
Champagne all around.
Volpina

Chapter Summary

Marinette keeps her head, for once.
Adrien is... Agreste-ively oblivious.
Lila doesn’t know where her lies could possibly have fallen through.
Plagg hits payday on his cheese intake.

Chapter Notes

I’ll be honest, Marinette might be a step too collected in this chapter, but, we’re going to accept that, and move on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Lila had failed to account for one thing.

Marinette had been watching. Marinette had seen her take the book from Adrien’s open bag.

She carefully stayed out of Lila’s line of sight as she brought the book back to the table she’d been sitting at.

Lila opened the book, and flipped through the pages. Every few pages, she would pause, and then shake her head, and continue.

Eventually, she paused on an image of someone in orange colors, what looked like a Fox superhero.

“Hm,” said Lila, and closed the book.

Lila made for the exit.

“I’ve got to tell Adrien; she’s not just a liar, she’s a thief,” said Marinette as Tikki returned.

“I know,” said Tikki, “but if I’m right about what that book is, you need to get it back, even more than you need to tell Adrien.”

“Is it that important?”

Tikki nodded, gravely.

“Allright,” she said, deciding to trust her kwami. She followed Lila.

“Excuse me,” she said, in that worryingly sweet tone, to a passerby, “you wouldn’t happen to know when the fencing lesson is done today, would you?”

“Oh! Yeah, it’s probably just started. Usually, it’s about an hour, but I’m pretty sure they’ve got to
get out early because of… Something. Honestly, I’m not on the team, so I’ve really got no clue.”

“Aw, don’t worry! You’ve been very helpful, thank you!” she said, and turned to walk away.
“That’s all the time I need,” she said quietly to herself.

Marinette didn’t know what she needed the time for, but, she was, at least, relieved that she wouldn’t need to tail Lila for too long.

--

Plagg grinned at the lineup.

“Looks like my lucky day,” he said.

“Potentially,” said Nathalie, shifting one of the wedges slightly.

“Hah!” said Plagg, “Please, we both know I like cheese more than I dislike giving advice. Now, if I could get my down payment first?”

Nathalie slid a small piece of Brie across. It was gone in an instant.

“Alright,” he said, “let’s get this show on the road. What is it?”

“What were you laughing about last night?”

“Hah! I was laughing about…” he looked at her, and rolled his eyes, “rhetorical question, right? They’re the same question because they have the same answer, or something.”

She nodded.

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you. Apparently you’re an angel now. Honestly, it doesn’t really suit you.”

She raised an eyebrow.

He shrugged. “I don’t know, I’m not around humans too much, but aren’t your angels either…” he squinted, trying to remember. He shook his head, “Either they’re all glowy and light or they’re on fire and weird. Either way, not much like you. And,” he said, “I’m not sure destruction is usually their big thing.” He shook his head, “Anyway, I’m assuming you had an actual question.”

“What do I do,” she said, and her expression was even, but by now, he could tell that she was actually worried.

“Not sure you really do anything. I mean, obviously, you should probably still keep an eye on them —” he broke off. “Can’t believe I actually ended up wanting to do the whole transformation thing. That’s boredom, I guess.”

“A deadly poison,” said Nathalie, deadpan.

“Exactly. Anyway, I don’t see why you have to ‘do’ anything.”

“Because…” she said, slowly, and looked away. “Because, people have never,” she sighed, and, as if to buy herself a few seconds, slid a wedge of Camembert across the table. “I’m not used to people deciding they like me.”

--
“Ooohh,” said Plagg, grinning now, as half of the wedge vanished into literal oblivion, “got it, you’re asking for a how-to about friends.”

Nathalie froze. She looked over at Plagg.

He shove the rest of the cheese into his mouth, and put his hands up as if to surrender. “That’s not even a joke,” he said, mouth muffled by the cheese. “Luckily for you, I’m an expert on friends.”

“Are you.”

“No. But, I’m pretty sure that step one is actually talking. As in, out loud.”

She glared at him.

He rolled his eyes. “I keep telling you, people are blind. Do you know who Ladybug is?”

“Do I know her in person?”

Plagg took a breath, and then shrugged. “I mean, probably not, but trust me, if nobody’s figured out who Ladybug is by now, when basically everyone should have noticed that she vanishes every time Gabe sends another one of his villains, then you, with the living alone, and the everyone else in this house already vanishing whenever villains attack? Literally nobody will have any idea. He’s not going to recognize you by your voice. I mean, you never recognized him until you literally saw him in bed wearing the suit.”

She pursed her lips, and then nodded, slowly.

“You could literally go claws in in front of them, and it would still take them days to figure out who you were. They might not even figure it out, if the lighting was bad, especially since Ladybug has probably never seen your face, and Adrien doesn’t even have a Miraculous.”

“Do you expect me to just… Walk up to them after an attack?”

“Pff. No, that would be stupid,” said Plagg, “they’re used to you not talking at all. I’m not saying go looking for chances, I’m just saying…” He looked pointedly.

She slid over another wedge.

“I’m just saying,” he continued, “stop trying to not talk. Being ‘friends’ with people is easy when you’re constantly saving their lives.” He paused. “Well, usually.”

“And that’s the entirety of your advice?”

Plagg looked down at the remaining wedges of cheese. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“And you’re certain that they won’t recognize me.”

He snorted. “Seriously, the only person who would have even the slightest chance is Gabe, and he’s not exactly going to be around if you’re talking to them.”

He really wouldn’t be.

Then… Good. If they really wouldn’t recognize her, then it was a weight off her mind.

She nodded at Plagg.
“Thank you.”

“Eh, don’t mention it,” he said.

She slipped the cheese back into the drawer.

Now, what was next on today’s-

Her phone beeped.

She pulled it up, to find…

She followed the Ladyblog, as did Mr. Agreste. The style of the reporting was not to either of their tastes, but neither of them could deny that it was the most reliable, generally accurate information about Ladybug and Chat Noir available. And so, of course they subscribed.

Nathalie was generally in the habit of perusing the articles at home, but this one… This one caught her eye, because the girl who ran the blog, for all she got excited over the smallest things, meant what she said in her titles.

Which meant, if she was saying that she had found ‘The Biggest Secret You Didn’t Know Ladybug and Chat Noir Kept,’ she was serious.

Well. She was ahead on work. She supposed it wouldn’t do any harm to find out what exactly she was talking about.

“During the past year, we’ve seen it happen countless times; Hawkmoth sets a monster on the city, which is quickly repelled by our two resident heroes. But what if I told you there might be something wrong with one word in that last sentence? You might dispute ‘quickly’, or ‘resident’ or even ‘monster,’ if you want to get technical. The word that nobody ever thought to question, though, was ‘Two.’ Two superheroes. Today, I’m finally confident enough in my evidence to say that we can amend the number to three.”

Plagg, from where he was lounging on the desk, noticed her expression. “What, is somebody dead?”

She didn’t respond, shaking her head almost imperceptibly.

“Well, then, what’s the big deal?” Said Plagg, zipping up to an angle where he could see the screen.

“Oh, this girl,” he said, “The biggest secret… Blah blah blah… Bunch of setup for…” His eyes widened.

“Well that’s probably not good.”

--

Marinette had followed at a safe distance for almost twenty minutes now, following Lila through the streets, until she finally entered a jewelry shop.

Marinette had taken the opportunity to sit down nearby, and… Grimaced, as she’d discovered what the buzz in her pocket had been about.

Alya had posted the article.

Minutes passed, and, eventually, Lila exited the building, holding a small box.
Marinette glared after her as she sat down on a bench. She opened the book, opened the box, and grinned. She pulled a necklace from the box, a simple chain with a hook-shaped pendant at the end.

Marinette tried to get a closer look at the necklace, but was immediately interrupted, as Lila’s head snapped up.

Adrien was coming.

She immediately stood up, the book behind her back. Then, with an accuracy that was frankly impressive, she threw it behind her back, and it landed perfectly in a nearby trashcan.

“I’ll get the book,” said Tikki, even as Lila stepped up to Adrien and made to pull him to a bench.

Marinette considered her next move, only to realize that Tikki was by no means strong enough to remove the book from the trash. She quickly changed course, and assisted her kwami.

--

“So, um,” he said, “you… You know Ladybug?”

“Know her?” said Lila, laughing, “we’re practically best friends. You see,” she said, grabbing ahold of a necklace he hadn’t noticed before, “we’ve got something in common.”

The pendant on the necklace was familiar.

“I,” she said, grinning, “am a descendent of the Vixen superhero, Volpina.”

Adrien’s eyes widened.

“I saw her in the book!” he said, reaching for his backpack.

He broke off his rummaging as she punched his shoulder, almost playfully, “I’m sure you did! Volpina, you should know, is usually stronger than Ladybug, probably more celebrated, too.”

“Really?” said Adrien, now truly curious, “I’ve never heard of her before. Actually, I’d never heard of Ladybug before this year, so I guess that shouldn’t be a surprise.”

Lila laughed again, “Of course you have! The history just gets muddled, is all. If I gave you a list of all the people who’d used this Miraculous, you’d be surprised how many names you’d recognize.”

“Do you have a list?” said Marinette, and Adrien practically jumped, because he hadn’t noticed her.

Lila seemed surprised, but ably recovered.

“I don’t think we’ve been introduced,” said Lila with that easy smile on her face, “I’m Lila Rossi.”

For a second, Marinette didn’t respond, then she smiled brightly, “Oh, I know who you are! I saw your interview with Alya, on the Ladyblog!”

“Oh, did she get around to posting it?” said Lila, voice all polite interest.

“She did! The Shadow really fought off an Akuma in your room?” Marinette’s eyes flicked to him as she said it.

“Yes, he did!”
“Wow!” said Marinette, “And Ladybug and Chat Noir followed him in to finish off the fight?”

Lila nodded gently, and what Adrien caught of her expression was thoughtfully thankful. “It was amazing.”

As Lila looked down, Marinette’s eyes flicked from Adrien to her.

It still took him a second, and then his eyes widened as the idea sank in.

“Oh,” said Marinette, “Adrien, you had a book earlier, didn’t you? It looked kind of old, with a red cover?”

“Yeah!” said Adrien, reaching back inside his bag. The book was gone.

“Well,” said Marinette, reaching into her own backpack, “I thought it looked a bit like this book that I saw Lila throwing in the trash?” Lila’s head snapped up as Marinette pulled out… Adrien stared.

“I wouldn’t have made the connection, but she did have her hand in your backpack when you were leaving the library.”

“What!” said Lila, the very image of honest shock. “Are you accusing me of stealing!? How are we supposed to know you didn’t steal it yourself?”

Marinette’s smile faltered, slightly.

“I mean, couldn’t it be that you just wanted to borrow it, but didn’t know how to ask?”

“And then threw it in the garbage can when you got here?”

Adrien tried to stifle the trace of annoyance, as he jerked his head towards Lila. “I mean, nerves do strange things to people, don’t they?”

“You’re siding with her!? She’s a thief!”

“I’ve known Marinette for almost a year now,” he said, “I know she’s not a thief.”

Lila’s mouth opened, expression pure righteous indignation, “Well, neither am I, so maybe you should take another look at her! And maybe, next time, when I’m going to tell someone about my personal relationship with Ladybug, I’ll pick someone else.”

She stood up, and practically stomped away.

As she went, Adrien glanced sidelong at Marinette.

“So… When she says ‘personal relationship with Ladybug,’ she means…?”

Marinette shook her head, and sat down next to him. “She’s the biggest liar I’ve ever met. I don’t know how she found out about Angel, but because of her, if Hawkmoth didn’t already know about her, he does now.”

“Huh. So, she stole the book, I guess.”

Marinette nodded, her annoyance fading to the tired variety. “Stole it, went jewelry shopping.”

“Jewelry shopping?”

Marinette shrugged, “I don’t know why.”
Adrien looked ahead, but in his head, he was seeing a necklace. “I can guess. She’s probably not even related to a hero.”

“I doubt it,” said Marinette.

A long second went by.

“Well…” said Adrien, “You got the book back, at least. I was hoping to show it to you, so that’s actually perfect!”

She looked over at him, and giggled, face turning slightly red. “Perfect, huh? Well, Tikki wanted to see it, too.”

“I did,” said Tikki, flitting up between them. She zipped down, and pulled the book open in the middle.

“There is a spellbook that has been missing for a long, long time,” she said, quickly flipping through the pages. “Kwamis are not supposed to view the pages, but I want to be sure.”

“A spellbook?”

A few seconds passed, and Tikki closed the book.

“We need to take this to the Great Guardian.”

Adrien checked his phone. “I’ve got some time.” He looked over at Marinette, and extended a hand. “Well then. Shall we take a walk, milady?”

Marinette turned approximately the color of her suit. Then, after a second, “sure, ki—” she seemed to choke on the word. After a frantic second of trying to talk properly, she managed say, “sure!” a few notches higher than her usual voice.

He always loved that reaction, and always wished that he didn’t. It kept making him think, despite all evidence, that she liked him back.

Chapter End Notes

Adrien ‘Just A Friend’ Agreste, ladies and gentlemen, isn’t he something? Although, all things considered, Marinette isn’t doing too much better.
Grand Illusions

Chapter Summary

Hawkmoth realizes he may have been fooled in a most exceptional way.
Adrien decides he was definitely fooling himself, and regrets his choices.
Master Fu calls an expert on illusions.
Trixx is an expert on illusions, who is, incidentally, tired of being cooped up in the Miracle box.

Chapter Notes

I swear, I didn't mean for mutual pining to weasel its way into this story, but god, doesn't it just find its way in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was minutes ago, now, and something didn’t add up. Rather, many things didn’t add up.

The first problem was that the villain the girl had spoken about in the interview had not existed. She’d given very few specifics, and the few she had, had been faked. Clearly. He certainly would have remembered if a villain had gone toe-to-toe with some ‘Shadow.’

The second problem was that as a news source, this was a reliable blog. More to the point, the article below, without the interview, was, yes, entirely rumor, but rumor corroborated by what seemed like too many people to be pure coincidence.

The third problem was that, even though it seemed implausible that he would have an enemy he’d never heard about, if he did, it would explain a great deal. Chat Noir seemed loathe to use Cataclysm, so why had buildings kept collapsing at inopportune times? Ceilings, floors, and walls had seemed to have it out for him for weeks now.

The fourth problem, if he supposed that this ‘Shadow’ really did exist, was the question of where had his Miraculous come from? Which Miraculous?

That was where the problems really became troubling, because they notched perfectly into some questions he’d had regarding Chat Noir for some time now. The powers of ‘Shadow,’ seemed to involve some form of enhanced stealth, and that was all very well. The bigger issue was that it seemed that Chat Noir refused to use Cataclysm (understandable, considering its destructive potential), but Cataclysm had clearly been used.

That implied that Shadow wielded the Black Cat Miraculous. In which case, what did Chat Noir have?

Which was exactly where his lines of question collided, because he’d never seen Chat Noir do anything technically Miraculous. Ladybug carried him to get across the city, and he was certain that Chat Noir was weaker than her in every physical regard. Originally, he’d chalked it up to some
strange disparity between their respective Miraculouses, but he knew for a fact that both the Butterfly and Peafowl Miraculouses bestowed physical capabilities that Chat Noir simply had not shown, and with this new development…

Chat Noir had the ring… A ring. He wore the perfect suit for the job. He looked exactly like what you would expect a wielder of the ‘Black Cat’ ring to look like.

Gabriel’s eyes opened.

*What if that was the point?*

What if Chat Noir was a distraction? Not, that was to say, a distraction villain to villain (though he certainly was). What if the very existence of Chat Noir was a mere smokescreen for Shadow?

But what a smokescreen. Chat Noir, whether he did or did not have a Miraculous, had still proven that he wasn’t to be taken lightly. He was definitely far beyond the average person, despite his age, which implied some kind of specialized training, if, indeed, he didn’t have a Miraculous. He was a decoy beyond compare.

Gabriel leaned his head back into his hands. ‘*If, indeed, he didn’t have a Miraculous.*’ Before he went further with this discussion, he needed to lay his assumptions out to avoid having to qualify every thought.

Did Shadow exist? Did he, if he existed, have the ring? Was it a different Miraculous? Did Chat Noir have a Miraculous? The whole thing was a mess.

He could sort it out, of course; he was Gabriel Agreste, and that meant something. Unfortunately, that would take time, and he was supposed to be working.

Then, there was a familiar sensation, as if discontent itself had been fashioned into a needle and jabbed into his chest.

Well… He wasn’t going to focus on work any time soon, and he didn’t feel quite justified in going off to make more concrete efforts to determine the truth. Maybe he’d find out what exactly had happened to this most malicious girl, and then get back to work afterwards.

--

‘*Shall we take a walk, milady.*’

By all rights, she should have seen this coming. The phrasing, the way he’d offered his hand, the almost aloof expression; all of it should have warned her.

The point was, she should have expected to be walking down the street as if she was walking down the stairs to a fancy ball.

The worst part, the part that made it nigh-unbearable, was the fact that whenever she saw his expression, she could just make out the soft, real smile behind it. It was like he was making a joke, shared only between the two of them.

And so, through a combination of the painfully gentle way he was holding her hand, that smile that he wasn’t quite hiding, and the fact that she was in public and definitely getting a few looks, Marinette wasn’t sure she was going to make it to Master Fu’s.

A minute passed, and she was pretty sure that she was blushing about as hard as she was capable of.
Incredibly, it was about to get worse, as Adrien looked over.

He stopped abruptly, and she only managed to stop a second late.

“Sorry,” he said, the aloof look dropping, in favor of obvious concern, “am I embarrassing you? I can stop, if you like.”

“Uhhhh,” she said, unable to muster the response that was queued up in her head, which would have been, *please do stop, but also continue holding my hand because I’m in love with you.*

He looked at her for a second, and then looked down, seemingly embarrassed *himself.*

“Sorry,” he said, pulling his hand away. For a second, he stood there, hands clasped at his waist.

A second passed, as they stood there, both red in the face.

“I… Guess we should keep walking?” he said.

She managed to nod, and kept walking alongside him.

He’d held her hand. She’d made him think she didn’t want him to hold her hand, because she couldn’t get the words out.

Her fingers twitched at her side, and she wished she had the guts to slip her hand back to his.

But she didn’t.

Minutes passed, as they walked in silence. She tried to rally herself, but it was harder than it should have been.

He had taken *her* hand. He had stopped because *she’d* been uncomfortable. It didn’t seem to matter to her mind, which insisted death was preferable to returning the gesture.

--

They made it to Master Fu’s, and Adrien was still feeling the echoes of his blunder in his mind. If he’d noticed sooner, he’d have felt better about things, but it had taken *quite* a while to notice she was uncomfortable. That was bad for *both* of them.

But now was the time to put that behind him. They had *hero* business to attend to.

Then, he stiffened, as she grabbed his hand and gave it a single squeeze.

Then, even as he looked over, she walked swiftly into the building.

It took him a second to register what had happened. Then, he smiled. It seemed like she forgave him.

That was a relief, at least.

After a second more, he followed her inside.

--

The room was unchanged from the last time they’d seen it, which had been when Master Fu had explained the situation to Adrien.
“Master?” said Marinette, as she walked in to the sight of his back to her. He was sitting at a low table, with what looked like a cup of tea next to him.

He turned, and she saw what he’d been focused on. She’d know that blog anywhere.

“Hello, Marinette,” he said, and then, “Ah, and Adrien as well, I see. I saw that your friend has made ‘Angel’s’ existence public. Is that why you have come?”

Marinette was just beginning to shake her head when Tikki flew out of her purse.

“No! Master, we’ve found the spellbook!”

His eyes widened. “Really? Where? Do you have it?”

Marinette nodded, and pulled it out of her bag.

He reached out, and she passed it over.

He opened it somewhere in the middle. His eyes scanned over the pages.

“Where did you find it?” he said, looking up.

Marinette turned to Adrien.

“Uhh,” said Adrien, scratching the back of his neck. “I… I saw my father reading it? And he put it in a safe, so I was, well, curious.”

Master Fu seemed to consider the statement.

“I see. I assume he will be looking for it?”

Adrien nodded, “Yeah…”

Master Fu nodded, very slowly. “And he will know you took it?”

Adrien blinked. Then, after a second, he grimaced. “Yeah, if he checks the cameras.”

“Is it likely that he already knows?”

Adrien shrugged. “I don’t think he touches anything in the safe besides the book, so he probably won’t know until he tries to get it.”

Master Fu considered. “Very well. If we move quickly, we may be able to replace it before he has any reason to suspect it is missing.”

“But Master!” protested Tikki, “surely we can’t afford to lose it again!”

Master Fu smiled widely. “We cannot, but, fortunately, the very reason that the book must be returned is the reason that we will not lose it.” He held up the phone he’d been using to read the Ladyblog.

“High resolution, instant images, with no need to rely on film, truly luxurious. Of course, it will likely take an hour or so to copy the pages, but, given the time, it will be entirely possible to return the book and leave your father none the wiser.”

“Oh. Okay,” said Adrien, “So… Should we stick around while you do that?”
Master Fu shrugged, almost apologetically, and then frowned, as all three of their phones buzzed in unison.

There was a shared look, as all three of them retrieved the phones in unison.

--

‘Just got some footage of the meteor thing!’

*Below the caption was a video of a camera hastily coming up, as something in the sky, massive, and burning bright, fell towards the person taking the video. It was almost the perfect angle, as the object, which seemed to be a meteor, came directly towards the camera.*

*Then, as it drew close enough that a viewer would wonder how the person with the camera had even survived to post the video, there was an orange blur, which resolved itself into a figure in orange. For a second, it was unclear what was happening, but then, the meteor began to slow, finally stopping only a dozen feet from the ground.*

*The figure in orange, who seemed to be a girl, about the age of Ladybug and Chat Noir, looked down, and gave a smile for the camera. Then, with a visible effort, the meteor reversed direction, accelerating and accelerating, eventually flying away into the sky.*

*Seconds passed, as the person on the camera seemed to be in shock, and then the video ended.*

--

Master Fu stared as the video ended.

Then, he shook his head, and began quickly flipping through the book.

Wielders of Miraculouses reliably held to approximately the same colors as their kwamis. Ladybug was red and black, as was Tikki. Plagg’s wielder was reliably some variation on black with green eyes. He himself, when he had still been capable of easily transforming, had been the same shade of green as Wayzz.

The problem, then, was that *those* colors *only* belonged to Trixx.

Trixx, who was supposed to still be in the Miracle Box, along with the Fox Miraculous.

As Marinette and Adrien were still processing the video, he stood up, and walked over to the gramophone.

Either, Trixx was missing, or Hawkmoth was attempting some kind of trickery. Either way, this was *important*.

The unlocking sequence was almost second nature at this point, and in seconds, the Miracle Box was exposed.

He pulled it out and set it on the table he had been sitting at earlier.

He opened the box.

A second passed, and he nodded, softly.

He reached down for the Fox Miraculous and picked it up.
As expected, Trixx materialized.

--

Trixx hadn’t been expecting to be called on anytime soon, so to feel the strange tingle of materializing was an unexpected pleasure.

“Yes?” they said.

“My apologies for calling on you unexpectedly."

“I was getting bored, anyway.”

“You’re always bored,” said Tikki, giggling.

“And hello to you, too, Tikki! I’m guessing one of these two is your wielder?”

Tikki nodded towards the girl, “She is!”

Trixx nodded, as the girl waved. “So, I guess I’m going with him?” said Trixx, jerking their head towards the boy next to her.

“Actually,” said Master Fu, “before anything else, I have something I want you to see.”

He turned a screen to face Trixx, who watched carefully.

The video ended.

“Huh,” said Trixx, “not the worst fake I’ve ever seen, but… Not up to my standards.”

“I had assumed as much.”

“Wait,” said the boy, “who are you?”

Trixx turned. “I,” they said, “am Trixx, resident kwami of the Fox Miraculous. I believe you’ve already met the girl who’s copying my powers and look?”

“Powers?”

It seemed he wasn’t aware. “Illusions?”

The girl’s eyes widened. “So, the meteor was just an illusion?”

“Of course,” said Trixx. “I mean, so was she. Both, pretty well made, but definitely not well enough to fool me.”

“Strange that Hawkmoth would create a fake version of you,” said Master Fu, “Even to have heard of you…”

The two kids shared a look.

“Master,” said the girl, “A girl stole the book before we managed to bring it here.”

“She was saying she was a descendent of a fox superheroine, ‘Volpina,’ and she even had a necklace like… Like that one,” said the boy.

“She was the girl from the interview, the one who lied about meeting Angel?”
Master Fu looked down at the Miraculous. “I see.”

“Well then,” said Trixx, “I think we should show her what a real Fox looks like. It’s like you humans say, right? ‘Set a thief, to catch a thief.’”

Master Fu seemed to consider the idea, and then nodded, slowly. “Very well. It would do well to handle her quickly. If she has already proven an adept liar, she could do significant damage even without the aid of her illusions.”

Trixx stretched out. “Then let’s get to work.”

Chapter End Notes

Trixx is difficult to write, since we've got so little to go on. The best I've been able to do is try to go for that 'Sassy Fox' vibe. Very self-assured.
Chapter Summary

Volpina is a specialized villain. For best results, she needs a specialized hero, but our heroes are soon to discover that the fight they prepared for might not be the one that gets them.

Chapter Notes

I think Volpina might top Antibug in terms of fights most deviated from canon in this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Trixx eyed him up, as Master Fu handed the necklace over.

“You’re Ladybug?” they said to Marinette.

Marinette nodded.

“Well, no hard feelings, but I think you might just be here for the cleanup, and don’t expect much of it.”

Marinette seemed taken aback. “O- Okay?”

Trixx grinned, “Thought it’d be better if we kept the surprises for the faker. When I transform someone, they can always tell illusion from reality, and if he tells you she’s lying, she’s lying. This fight was made for me.”

“Now,” they said, turning back to him, “your line is ‘Let’s pounce.’”

He slipped the necklace on. He’d seen Marinette do this once or twice, but the idea of doing it himself felt surreal.

He shook his head in a ‘here goes nothing’ kind of way, and said, “Trixx? Let’s pounce!”

Trixx grinned, and flew straight into his chest, straight into the necklace.

The sensation was like when Ladybug used her Miraculous Ladybug to put him back where he was supposed to be. It was the same strange weightlessness, but this was warmer. It felt like drinking hot chocolate that stopped just short of scorching the throat, except the warmth spread quickly and deliberately out from the center of his chest.

And then, he felt the inimitable sensation of clothing spreading across his body, made stranger by the fact that his own clothes, which should have rumpled underneath, seemed to have been entirely replaced by the new material.
He practically staggered forward, as the sensation, which had made him stand up so straight he had been bent slightly backwards, abruptly ended, but the transformation wasn’t quite done with him, and as he drew a hand up to the prickle at his face, he found a mask, and above…

He wasn’t quite sure whose design the costume had been, but unthinking, he ran his hands back through his hair, and found that as he did so, there was more than he’d had, and… Well, he should have expected the ears.

He straightened up, and suddenly, he was back, eyes no longer burning in the light of the transformation.

For a second, he stood there, not quite able to muster a witty one-liner.

--

Adrien seemed to be at a loss for words, and Marinette was too, for her sins. Her sins, in this case, being that she was unable to take her eyes off him. Of the two of them, his aesthetics had been much easier to convert to an outfit; there wasn’t such a thing as ‘Ladybug Ears.’ The bit that was really getting her was the ponytail, though. His hair had shifted out of blonde, straight into orange, with a flare of white at the end.

Similarly messing with her head was the fact that, as his hair was in a ponytail, it had been pulled back, away from his forehead, which she’d also never seen before.

The net effect was that he was strangely unrecognizable, and she just knew that if she hadn’t seen him transform, her first instinct would have been to ask who the new guy was.

That was probably what he’d felt when she’d turned back to Marinette in front of him.

“Well?” he said, seemingly recovered before her, “How do I look?”

She fumbled with the words, for a second, but recovered. “Foxy!”

No, wait.

He grinned, pulling the flute that had materialized with the suit from his side. “Foxy, huh?” He twirled it in his fingers, clearly showing off. “I like it.”

Why had she called him foxy? No, she knew why, but why!?

Maybe it was time for Marinette to leave.

“Spots on!”

--

They left through the upstairs window, intending to head towards the Louvre where, according to the Ladyblog, the ‘meteor’ had almost hit.

Ladybug pulled up her yoyo and wrapped an arm around his waist, and then… Paused, for a few seconds, and slowly let go.

“Sorry,” she said, “I guess I don’t need to do that anymore.”

“I guess not,” he said, barely managing to choke on the impulse to tell her not to stop on his behalf.
She went first, and he looked out of the window. The drop should have been high enough to give him pause, but right now, transformed, it barely even fazed him. He backed, up, ran, and leaped.

He almost overshot the rooftop he was aiming for, unaccustomed for the sheer force he could muster. He stood on the roof, and for a second, couldn’t breathe, as the sheer adrenaline of being able to jump like that hit him.

He grinned, and started running, chasing after Ladybug, who had seen him make it up, and gone on ahead.

--

Hawkmoth contemplated his new villain. She was strange, to say the least.

That wasn’t to say her powers were anything exceptional; illusions were nothing beyond what he’d already created. Her design was strange, of course; it seemed that the creative process had resulted in something exceptionally reminiscent of the vixen superheroine from the grimoire. Still, even that made a certain sense; she was a liar by trade, and Hawkmoth himself was somewhat involved in the design ‘process.’

All of that was more or less run-of-the-mill. The strange part was what he felt when he talked to her.

The link he shared with his villains involved more than just his voice. It was a bit like being in their heads. Usually, they felt blurred, as if the transformation had muddied their minds.

Volpina was crystal clear, as if her mind was the inside of a study; everything was orderly, and neat, and viciously exact. If Hawkmoth hadn’t known better, he would have thought that she had planned on him Akumatizing her.

Well, if she held up her end of the bargain, it didn’t matter whether she’d planned it or not.

--

Behind the mask, Lila grinned.

She had them all fooled, and better yet, she had them doubting Ladybug and Chat Noir. If she could keep this up, the people of Paris wouldn’t even bat an eye when they were defeated.

She could see it now; defeat Ladybug and Chat Noir, ‘defeat’ Hawkmoth, become the greatest hero Paris had ever seen, reveal her identity. Maybe a girl didn’t need a mask to be amazing, but then again, if she was the girl who’d saved Paris, and discovered that Ladybug and Chat Noir were secretly in league with Hawkmoth, nobody would be able to say no to her, no matter what she asked for.

She stood a moment longer, drinking in the applause, before noticing Ladybug on a rooftop across from her.

Well, it was about time.

She leaped, landing next to Ladybug.

“Ladybug,” she said, “perfect timing. I know we’ve never met before, but my name is Volpina.”

“The self-proclaimed ‘Only hero Paris needs,’” said Ladybug, “I heard.”

She laughed. “I may have been exaggerating. I was excited. It’s not every day you catch a meteor.”
“It really isn’t,” agreed Ladybug, “that was impressive.”

A second passed.

“So,” she said, “where’s Chat Noir?”

“He’s taking the day off,” came a voice from behind her.

She turned, and saw… She didn’t know who he was, but he’d stolen her look. He even had the same flute.

“Hi,” he said, grinning, “call me Fox.”

“Fox,” she repeated.

He shrugged, still smiling, “I know, it’s not the most creative name, but hey. You’re probably wondering where I’ve been, but honestly, I could ask you the same.”

“Right…” she said, trying to churn the developments through her head. She was quick-witted, but this had been supremely unexpected.

“Mostly, I’m here because you are,” he said, shrugging, “seemed like an interesting coincidence to have two foxes, like a sign I was supposed to be here, you know?”

She caught herself, finally. “Of course!” she said, “I’m sure that’s exactly what it is. I think you’re just the person we need for this.”

--

Adrien had no insight to tell when people were lying, but Trixx…

Volpina didn’t want him here, probably because she didn’t know what he was capable of. Though he hadn’t considered it before, this could be even better than he’d expected. If he could always tell when she was lying, he might be able to get information by reading the shape of the lies.

“You see,” she said, “That meteor isn’t the only reason I’m here.”

“More an incidental thing,” he agreed.

“Because I’ve got special information about Hawkmoth. I think, if we move quickly, we can take him out, once and for all.”

He practically gagged on that one, as blatantly false as it was.

He didn’t gag, though, and kept his face straight. ‘Really?’ he said, “well then, by all means, lead on.”

--

Ladybug was, though she probably wouldn’t have said it aloud, an excellent tactician, and an inhuman midrange fighter, with agility that could put just about anyone to shame. She was not, however, good at lies, neither the telling or the detecting, which meant that even though she knew neither of them had said three truthful words strung together, she still felt like this conversation was outside of her reach.

It wasn’t even that she didn’t know what was true and what wasn’t. The issue was that ‘Fox’ kept
...and they had not coordinated for this.

And so, for now, all she could do was follow, and consider the slowly percolating idea in the back of her head.

They were in a unique position. They knew their enemy, but the fight hadn’t begun yet.

Lies weren’t her strong suit, but planning… Well, she could layer plans together all day, and she might have just the trick up her sleeve, if she could just find a way to pull it off.

--

The image of Hawkmoth on the rooftop looked half-hearted at best, and the only reason he knew it looked halfway convincing was the sidelong glance Ladybug gave him. He silently shook his head.

“So,” he said, “any idea what he’s doing out here?”

“Didn’t you know? He sends his Akumas from the rooftops. I’ve been trying to catch him at it for months now, and I’ve finally done it.”

Well _that_ was utterly fabricated. She had no idea whether what she was saying was true.

“Any idea how long he’ll stay like that?” he said.

“Not long at all. We’ll need to hurry.”

“Hurrying leads to mistakes,” he said.

“And not hurrying means Hawkmoth will run off.”

“Well why don’t we just follow him back?” said Ladybug, and he glanced sharply over. There was something in her tone, but he couldn’t quite get a fix on it. “If we figure out where he lives, we have the advantage, and all the time in the world to plan an attack.”

Volpina shook her head. “I’ve tried that. He only goes back _after_ he creates the Akuma. We can’t just let it run wild in the meantime.”

“Then one of us can track him, while the other one fights the villain.”

She seemed to consider, and then nodded. “Alright. You,” she said, pointing to him, “figure out where he’s going, while Ladybug and I deal with whatever villain he creates.”

He looked, and saw the exceptionally artificial shape of Hawkmoth leaping into the distance.

“Alright,” he said, “careful with that villain, Ladybug, I bet Hawkmoth made a really tricky one today.”

“I think we’ll be fine between the two of us,” said Volpina. He couldn’t tell if the betrayal really _was_ written on her face, but she was practically steeping in it.

He leaped, and heard the screams, oddly hollow, from down below. Another illusion. But he had a job to do; be the dutiful easy mark, let her get Ladybug alone, hope that Ladybug had a plan.

--

The problem was, that while her plan could pay off in a huge way, it wouldn’t be easy to make it...
happen, and if it went wrong… She shuddered just thinking about it.

They made it to the street, and Volpina bolted ahead of her, into a storefront. She spun back to face her.

“I can’t believe you would throw your lot in with Hawkmoth, Ladybug. Just because you can’t measure up to me.”

Ladybug stopped dead.

“I’ll just have to stop you.”

“What?” she tried to say, but the words sounded like they were coming through thick cloth, and what actually came out was a harsh voice, much like her own. “You can’t stop me, when I’ve got Hawkmoth on my side. And forget about Ladybug. I’m Miss Fortune.”

She pulled out her yoyo, and something caught her eye. Something else was wrong.

Her colors had switched. She looked like Antibug, now.

She realized that this was what Master Fu had meant. Even if she won, this was a kind of damage that a Miraculous Ladybug might not even be able to fix.

Chapter End Notes

In other news, Alya's got to be having a hell of a day. She just dropped the news of a secret third hero, only to have, in sequence, a new Fox heroine appear, Ladybug to turn evil, and in short order, another Fox hero appear. Like, do you just throw in the hero-news towel at that point?
No Ring, No Problem. Yes Fox Necklace, Yes Problem. (It's that simple)

Chapter Summary

Nathalie has a crisis and goes offline at the worst possible time.
That's all I'm going to say.

Chapter Notes

Well, guys, I figured out how this story is going to end.
Should be fun, let's do this.

He didn’t go far, only a few buildings, before stopping. He looked back, and saw that they were out of sight. A glance forward confirmed that ‘Hawkmoth’ wasn’t waiting up for him. It looked like she couldn’t use her illusions’ supposed senses. Well, that would make this next part much easier. All he would have to do was track them, and eavesdrop.

It would be easy, he thought, retracing his steps. Gather as much information as possible, and then simply step in when the fight started. He didn’t know whether she was good at combat illusions, but…

Well then.

Ladybug was covered by what looked like an illusion of herself, with the black and red swapped. It blurred oddly when she moved, in ways that weren’t quite consistent with reality. Of course, it was also literally translucent to him, but he got the feeling that that was more a matter of the Miraculous he was using.

Ladybug and Volpina fought their way into the building the screams had been coming from, a flower shop.

He leaped down, ignoring the shocked voices of the civilians who had to be having the strangest day of their lives, and rushed in.

Ladybug was, understandably, having significant trouble with her enemy. In a straight up fight, she’d have had no problem, but Volpina had summoned dozens of illusions of herself, and Ladybug, for all her skill, had no chance to keep track of the real one for more than a few seconds at a time.

Fox, though, was a different story. To his eyes, the real Volpina stood out like a sore thumb, and so, without a second look, he blitzed her.

By all rights, the fight should have ended there; he should have had an easy grab at the necklace, and she definitely should not have caught his hand.

And yet, by some twist of chance, she did, and for an instant, she stood there, staring him down.

“I thought you might come back,” she said, her voice almost seeming to fracture, as it came from
every illusion in the room.

“Fox?” said Ladybug, and he realized that she probably couldn’t see him properly through the sea of illusions.

“Over here,” he said, slashing his flute through the nearest illusions, dissipating them.

“No, over here!” came his voice, from a few feet to the side.

“No, I’m here!” the other side.

His own voice chorused from around the room, each a conflicting representation of his position.

--

The illusions had been bad enough when she hadn’t been able to tell where Volpina was, but this, not even being able to tell where her partner was, was even worse.

What she wanted to do was swing her yo-yo wide, and clear every illusion in the room at once, but if she did that, she was sure to snag on the shelves of flowers. She’d be practically defenseless, meaning that if Volpina could find even a few seconds, she’d have already lost.

She stood, for once at a loss, as the room practically erupted in frantic motion. She could barely process the images, Fox and Volpina fighting, copied in countless different ways. It seemed impossible to process the fights all at once, let alone create them. For a second, she realized just how powerful Hawkmoth had to be, if this was the power he could give someone.

Then, she gritted her teeth, and shook off the daze. Somewhere in that madhouse was the real pair of them, and by hook or by crook, she was going to find them.

She set her yo-yo whirling, and got to work.

--

Nathalie had watched the video a dozen different times. The girl was clearly lying about the specifics. Clearly. And yet, somehow, she’d found out that Ladybug and Chat Noir had a secret accomplice, and told it to the world. Mr. Agreste certainly knew. Everyone knew. It had gotten to the point that she’d turned off her phone unable to handle the idea of it producing any more noise, and now, she was simply staring into space.

Hawkmoth knew she existed, even if he hadn’t matched her face with her name. That alone made her job harder.

Almost as bad, meanwhile, was the fact that Adrien had stolen the grimoire. Not that it was a problem if he knew more about how Miraculouses worked; if it would help to discourage Hawkmoth that his enemies had grown even stronger, then she had no issue with it. The problem was, of course, that Adrien finding out his father’s secret identity was almost as bad as the reverse happening, and discovering that he had a grimoire full of information about Miraculouses was a step in that direction. If he found out, then soon, Ladybug would know, and she had no doubt that within a week, there would be some kind of action taken.

That wasn’t the goal. The best solution would be for Mr. Agreste to simply give up, and move on with his life. If he was brought into an outright conflict, either he would win, and she would be forced into the awkward position of having the ring he needed to complete his goal, which, no matter how she followed from there, would be catastrophic, or he would lose.
If he lost, he would doubtless be incarcerated. She didn’t know what exactly the legal repercussions were for supervillainy, or whether his justification would make any judge more lenient, but she did know that it would deprive Adrien of the only family he had left. It would also mean she would probably never see either of them again.

And… It had barely been a consideration for a long time, but what would happen to her? If Mr. Agreste went to trial, would she be called as a character witness? What would she say? Would he reveal that she’d been complicit in this? Would she be forced to reveal that she’d had the ring? Would that even help? Would that help her? Him?

She didn’t care very much what most of the world thought of her, but she’d been an accessory to supervillainy, even if she’d attempted to sabotage some of it. In the most mundane consideration, her job prospects would be grim. The only people who would even consider her were the criminally trusting, or actual criminals. Certainly, anyone with half a mind would find it troubling how she hadn’t shared his identity with the world. How would she justify that?

Making the situation worse, as if that even meant anything at this point, was how she’d arrived here. She prided herself on being careful, and reserved. She didn’t make choices without a good reason, certainly not important choices. She shouldn’t have ended up anywhere that was even moderately worrying, and yet, somehow, she had ended up here, in a situation that would be best described using profanity, somehow unable to find a way out. The way in had practically been a tightrope, but the way out didn’t even seem to exist.

She was, she knew, miles away from her original concern, which had been her existence being shared with the world, but it seemed like she hadn’t been paying enough attention to her position as a whole.

Nathalie was, to her own dismay, terrified.

She finally managed to return to the present, and for the first time in minutes, actually moved. Her expression had been utterly neutral; anyone who had seen her would doubtless have thought she was contemplating something she had no strong feelings on.

Plagg looked up, and put down the pen.

“I guess you’re back.”

She looked down.

“How did you talk me into this?”

“Talk you into what?”

“Everything.”

“Well,” he said, “I told you about how dangerous wishes are, so you wouldn’t hand me over. I was hoping you’d turn in Hawkmoth, but since you didn’t I was sort of stuck here. Then… I convinced you to save the kid, because you care about him, and honestly, I don’t want to know what you would have done if you hadn’t helped him. Something bad, probably.” He shook his head. “I mean, that’s most of it, right? Oh, and at some point, I’m pretty sure we became friends, but I’m pretty sure that one’s your fault.”

She blinked. “My fault.”

He shrugged. “You gave me cheese.”
“Cheese is the only thing you’re willing to eat.”

“Mhm. I like people who give me food more than the people who don’t. I mean, I probably wouldn’t have liked Gabe even if he had been giving me food, but I’d like him more than if he didn’t.”

“I see.”

“And, as far as how you’ve ended up here? I’m pretty sure that’s just because you’re a… Not that bad person working for someone who is a bad person.”

“A not that bad person?” She repeated.

He shrugged, again. “I mean, I’d put myself in that category, if it helps. I’m mostly here for the cheese and because Tikki yells at me if I don’t help save the world.”

“I see.”

“Well,” he said, “I mean, I also occasionally find things I like that aren’t cheese. It’s not a big list. The point is, you don’t like what he’s doing, but you like him. Questionable, frankly, but I’m not here to tell you how to live your life. You’re conflicted, because obviously you are.”

She stared at him. He didn’t give advice like this when she paid him, so where was this coming from?

“And honestly, I wouldn’t even say this was that bad, if you didn’t have the whole Adrien thing going on. I know a thing or two about bad luck, and caring about two people who are related to each other and hate each other without knowing and being caught in the middle of it is so bad it’s actually impressive, especially when you factor in the whole ‘fate of the city is in the balance,’ thing.”

“And what do you suggest I do about it?”

He looked up at her.

“Die, I guess?” For a second, she didn’t move. “I don’t know, didn’t you have a plan? Wait for Gabe to give up?”

“And if something happens before he can?”

Plagg shrugged. “Pick a side? I’d pick the kid, if I was you.”

--

It seemed impossible. She’d destroyed so many illusions, at least a hundred, by now, of Fox and Volpina fighting, but no matter how many she destroyed, she never found the real ones, and they just kept coming back when she wasn’t looking. She’d even used her lucky charm, a mirror, but even realizing that only the real pair would react to the flash of light, she hadn’t been able to pick them out. It was beyond frustrating, and she knew that in the meantime, Volpina was taking on Fox, and however capable he was, Hawkmoth had always seemed to have a penchant for making his villains stronger physically than either of them individually.

For what felt like the hundredth time, she fought her way to the corner, and disintegrated another image. She practically bellowed in frustration.

“Where are you!” she yelled.
And then, there was the singular, stomach-twisting sensation of a pair of hands on her ears.

She spun, grabbing ahold of one of the arms. The other one pulled away, her earring coming free, but she managed to keep one of Volpina’s arms in place, keep her earring on.

She only held the position for an instant, but it was enough to feel the inimitable sensation of her suit vanishing, and her strength draining away.

Then, from behind Volpina, she saw an orange figure.

She saw Fox diving forward.

She saw Volpina twist around, yanking her hand away, letting go of the earring she hadn't managed to remove.

She saw Volpina slam the palm of her hand forward, knocking Fox away.

She saw Fox land, and straighten up.

She saw Volpina's hand twitch, and something small and red fly upwards.

Fox saw it too, and looked up, reaching out for the earring.

It was the worst choice he could have made.

Volpina’s hand lashed out, and in an instant, before he could even process what had happened, the necklace was off of him.

Ladybug’s eyes widened, as the orange suit disintegrated.

Volpina stopped, seemingly shocked by Adrien’s sudden appearance in front of her.

Ladybug’s wits caught up with her, and she grabbed the chain of Volpina’s own necklace, and pulled.

The chain gave way, and time moved again, suddenly terribly quick.

Volpina disintegrated, leaving behind only Lila, as usual.

Ladybug registered that her suit was vanishing as Adrien gave her a terrified look and quickly handed her the earring (which he had caught successfully).

She put it back in, and felt the almost reassuring sensation of her suit rematerializing.

Whatever else she was going to do, she had to purify the Akuma. So she did.

Then, she was standing in a flower shop, her hands shaking. She picked up the mirror.

She wanted to believe that a cry of Miraculous Ladybug could set this right.

She wanted to believe it.

She had to try.

She closed her eyes, almost a prayer, and then threw the mirror skywards.

“Miraculous Ladybug!”
The light rushed out. The flowers were back in their pots. The building was intact. The Fox Miraculous…

She picked up the necklace from the floor, and breathed a sigh of relief.

--

It was a short trip to get back to Master Fu, and Adrien was glad that Ladybug decided to carry him rather than forcing him to even think about why he wasn’t in a suit right now.

Hawkmoth knew his face. Whatever glamour protected him, he didn’t know if it could survive Hawkmoth directly seeing his face.

He wasn’t the biggest celebrity, but he had the misfortune of having his face be an important part of why people knew him.

They touched down inside the building, and rushed downstairs.

Master Fu was waiting for them, his expression for once not the calm, reserved look they were used to. He looked unabashedly grim.

He gave them a long look, and then, his head sank.

“I don’t know whether you have seen what the rest of Paris saw, but…” he shook his head. “It will have to wait. It can wait. In the meantime, Adrien, you must return the spellbook. I have finished copying the pages.”

“Of course.”

“And the Miraculous as well, please.”

He nodded, and set down the necklace on the low table. Then, picking up the book, he ran.

--

“Well,” said Master Fu, “I believe I made it clear that she could do great damage with her illusions. I have never been this dismayed to discover I was right.”

“Master?” said Marinette.

He pulled out his phone.

“Even though you defeated her, the entirety of Paris saw this.”

The video was a recording of a livestream, someone reacting to a news stream.

‘Ladybug, Secret Villain?’ read the title

“What?”

The video began with footage she had already seen, of Volpina supposedly catching the meteor. Master Fu skipped forward, to new footage. At first it was shakily taken video of Volpina assaulting her into a flower shop, and, sure enough, she was dressed as Antibug. She had expected as much, although her own voice shouting about how Hawkmoth would be victorious was unnaturally distressing.
Then, the blood left her face, as she saw an illusion she hadn’t seen before.

News footage, of a fight between her and Volpina on the rooftops. It wasn’t as bad as the snippet she’d already seen; it was worse.

Nobody knew Volpina had had the power of illusion.

Nobody knew that what the Ladybug in the video was saying wasn’t her. Wasn’t…

She stared, unable to take her eyes away from it.

After a few minutes, Master Fu paused the video.

“This is disastrous,” he said. Then, he sighed. “But possibly not as disastrous as it may at first seem. You have been protecting Paris for almost a year. Many of them will suspect some kind of trick before believing this.”

“Master,” said Marinette, “I know that you’re right about that, but… There’s more, that you don’t know.”

He looked sharply at her. “What do you mean?”

“Volpina got his Miraculous. For a second. If Hawkmoth can see through his villains’ eyes…” she shook her head, “He might know that Adrien was Fox.”

Master Fu looked down.

“I see. But at least,” he said, reaching over to the necklace, “you recovered the Miraculous.”

He picked it up, and froze.

For a long second, he didn’t move.

“Do you remember where the Akuma was?”

“Of course, it was in the fake necklace she bought to pretend she was the real fox superhero.”

Master Fu was shaking.

--

Lila grinned.

Standing in front of her mirror, she carefully adjusted the foxtail necklace until it fit perfectly with the rest of her outfit.

Volpina would return.

Soon.
Problem 1: Demoralization

Chapter Summary

Hawkmoth has done better than ever, today, but he's still not satisfied. He's got an identity to find, and he still has two Miraculouses to acquire.

Chapter Notes

The way I see it, Hawkmoth has left them with 3 major problems. In this chapter, Marinette goes head to head with the first of them; Volpina's illusions, trying to turn Paris against her.

His plans had been mostly successful. The people of Paris would have their doubts about Ladybug and… possibly not Chat Noir, considering he hadn’t been there to be defamed. Still, Ladybug was the linchpin of their defenses, and if she fell, then Chat Noir wouldn’t be far behind.

And, of course, he had successfully taken the Miraculous of one of his enemies. Sort of. Volpina hadn’t been able to bring him the necklace before being defeated. Still, though, he had successfully removed the necklace, which meant he had seen one of their faces.

Which was where things began to break down. He could remember the face. He knew the face. And yet, for some reason, he couldn’t quite put a name to it. It was maddening.

“Dark wings, fall.”

Gabriel Agreste stood there. His plans had grown unexpectedly complicated, of late. First this ‘Shadow,’ and now ‘Fox.’ Where had they been? Why would his enemies hold back against him? Perhaps to risk fewer Miraculouses, he supposed, but why now? And, more to the point, where had Chat Noir been? And, of course, Shadow, who, if he had to guess, did exist.

Both went missing at once.

Why.

He was beginning to connect something. He didn’t know about Fox, but he’d only ever seen Shadow in relation to Chat Noir. When Antibug had been about to bring the sword down, there had been a Cataclysm from under her feet (At least, with his new information, he had to assume). As a matter of fact, it seemed like every time there had been an inexplicable Cataclysm, it had been when he had been in danger.

Chat Noir had a ring; it even looked like he had the ring. He had the ring, but without most of the powers it should have granted him. He had only gotten part of the strength, and the speed, and even the agility. He had never used a Cataclysm.

Because… The idea slowly seeped into Gabriel’s mind. He was young. The power offered by a
Miraculous was exceptional. Perhaps, it was even so much, that he wanted to reject it, or couldn’t make full use of it. Full use, that was, because he seemingly made some use of it; at least, if he was as young as he looked, it strained plausibility that his abilities were innate.

Of course he wouldn’t want to use Cataclysm. Gabriel wouldn’t have trusted himself with it at that age.

The name Shadow should have made it obvious. It practically was Chat Noir’s shadow; an extension of the ring’s power, in a form he trusted. That was why it had shown up at the perfect moment to save him from Antbug. He didn’t know why Chat Noir hadn’t been there, today, but if he hadn’t, of course his Shadow wouldn’t have.

And… Chat Noir couldn’t make it, apparently. And yet, what a coincidence that his Fox had met an enemy just like herself…

The idea didn’t want to click, but it did with far less work than matching the face. Chat Noir could easily be Fox. In fact, he was sure of it.

So why…?

“Nooro,” he said.

“Yes, Master?”

“Why do I recognize his face?”

“I… I don’t know, Master.”

Useless. What about… “Why do I not recognize his face?”

A hesitation, and then Nooro responded. “Every Miraculous protects its owner from detection. It’s supposed to be difficult to recognize them.”

“And this is why the idea seems insistent on slipping from my mind?”

“Yes, master.”

“And how do I make it stay.”

Nooro shook his head. “It takes time.”

“How long.”

“That… Depends. It’s almost impossible if you don’t know them. And, it’s harder without a Miraculous.”

“And if I do know him?”

Nooro hesitated. “If you know him well, it could only be a few weeks, at most.”

He considered, and then smiled, very slowly. He’d been at this for almost a year, now. A few weeks wouldn’t make much of a difference. That estimate, too, was without even considering that he was an Agreste, and that he might be able to glean something from the grimoire.

Speaking of which, he was quite sure that ‘Fox’ had been using the Miraculous of the same name, but it bore looking at the relevant page again. He had carefully noted the differences between the
ancient holders and the present ones, and he would be quite happy to do the same for this new arrival.

A quick trip back to his atelier, and he had the safe open in seconds.

The grimoire, as always, awaited him, ready for him to make another attempt on its secrets.

Adrien collapsed on his bed. School hadn’t ended more than an hour ago, and yet, somehow, it felt like far longer.

‘Somehow.’ Right. He knew exactly how it felt like so long. Villain attacks had a way of stretching time out, as did potentially catastrophic failure. Having to practically sprint to replace the book had been the icing on the cake. If his phone hadn’t had a built-in clock, he’d have had no idea what time it was.

He’d done it, though. He was pretty sure his father wouldn’t have checked the safe between when he’d taken it and when he’d returned it. He’d gone unnoticed. One stroke of good luck today, he supposed.

What he needed was someone to talk to. Unfortunately, he still wasn’t sure that his father wasn’t reading his texts, and it would probably be a bad idea to leave the house right now, considering he was pretty sure he was supposed to be practicing piano right now, so Marinette wasn’t an option.

He sighed, and looked at the piano. He really couldn’t imagine coaxing anything worthwhile out of it today, but if he wasn’t practicing soon, Nathalie would probably check in and remind him that he was supposed to be.

He couldn’t make Hawkmoth unsee his face. He was already in the pot, and now, it was just a matter of cooking.

Well, however much he wanted to, he couldn’t just lie down and let time pass. Not yet, anyway.

He sat down at the piano bench.

Marinette had thought that losing the Fox miraculous would be her greatest concern. After all, it meant Hawkmoth had a new potential ally, and it was an immediate issue, unlike Adrien’s identity, which would probably take Hawkmoth a few weeks to puzzle through, at least. And yet…

She knew, as soon as she stepped into the school the next morning, what everyone was talking about. She’d seen the footage. Were she not intimately aware of the illusions that had been involved, she’d probably be talking about it, too.

As it stood, she was forced to walk the interminably long (or so it felt) path to her locker.

“…but I didn’t think…”

“…you really think she’d have…”

“…It’s all on camera.”

“…problem; nobody ever questioned…”
“...Ladyblog hasn’t updated since...”

She closed the locker room door behind her.

In here, at least, things were quiet. A few people were retrieving some books from their lockers, but overall, the schoolwide consensus seemed to be that the courtyard was a better place to be.

She tried to open her locker; clockwise, counterclockwise, clockwise.

She pulled the handle, and the only response was a clank.

She’d entered something in wrong, apparently.

Of course, that was nothing new. She’d flipped digits dozens of times by now, and simply bungled the input even more often than that.

The difference was, the times she’d done that, she hadn’t been... like this.

Last night hadn’t been easy, even with Tikki’s encouragement. The comments on the dozens of videos that had come out mere hours after Volpina had done her worst had been... far from friendly. She didn’t have any of her homework done, and the fact that that was the least of her worries somehow made things worse.

Her head knocked weakly against her locker door. Her eyes closed.

Maybe, if she just didn’t move, nobody would come looking for her, and she could get a bit more sleep.

That might be nice. After all, if she was sleeping, she didn’t have to deal with any of this.

She let out a sigh. She could almost imagine doing it. Just lying down.

“Marinette?” there was a hand on her shoulder.

She took in a breath, and looked over, at--

--

Adrien smiled, just a little, as she met his gaze.

“I...” he said, “I only heard about... What she did, this morning.”

“I guess Master Fu sent you away before you could hear about it from him.”

He nodded.

There was a long moment of silence.

“Can’t be fun,” he said, eventually.

She laughed, bitterly. “It’s not. I don’t know what I expected.”

“Well,” he said, “I’ll always be by your side.”

“Until Hawkmoth figures out who you are.”

He laughed.
“You think that would stop me?”

She looked up at him, a smile just barely peeking through. “You think it wouldn’t?”

“Please,” he said, “I’d be calling you in for cleanup in minutes.”

“I think we’ll have to add confidence to the list of things that killed the cat.”

“Well,” he said, walking over to his own locker, “I’m just thinking that if I’ve picked up a fraction of your skill in the past year, Hawkmoth shouldn’t be an issue.”

She felt her face go a bit red, and laughed. “Silly kitty.”

She spun the dial on her locker, and this time, it unlocked properly.

A quick restock later, and she was ready to head up to class, but…

Adrien turned around from grabbing his supplies, and practically jumped to see her behind him.

“What is it?”

“I… Um… I just thought I’d take you up…”

“Take me up?”

“On your offer? The ‘always by your side’ one?”

“Okay,” he said, visibly confused.

She realized what it had sounded like she’d meant.

“I mean! I just, thought it would be nice, since we’re going to the same place, and you’re the only one I know won’t be talking about how you aren’t sure about me, to, to…”

He grinned. “Of course! I’m always ready to provide knight-in-shining-armor services, milady. Just tell me if you need an escort to a ball.”

She laughed again, and he smiled, seemingly pleased with himself.

The walk still felt longer than usual, but that was because some part of her brain was still flabbergasted that she’d managed to successfully suggest doing something with Adrien. Strange how that could be so terrifying when they regularly fought villains, together.

Whatever the case, she certainly hadn’t noticed anybody else talking about yesterday on the way up, so, she supposed, it was ‘mission accomplished.’

She gave him a gentle nod as she sat down, a sort of at-ease.

Alya was staring intently at her phone.

After a few seconds, she looked up at Marinette, and shook her head.

“Something’s wrong.”

Marinette blinked.
“You saw what happened yesterday, right?”

Marinette nodded.

“And…?”

“And what?”

Alya knocked her on the shoulder. “Girl! Something weird’s going on! I’ve met Ladybug; trust me, she doesn’t work for Hawkmoth.

“Oh.”

“So…?”

“So what?”

“So what happened yesterday?”

“And what happened to Chat Noir?” Added Nino.

“Exactly! And, and, who was that fox guy? I’m just saying, yesterday was like… It felt like a dream. None of it made any sense.”

Chloe laughed at that.

Alya turned to look at her.

“Of course it didn’t make sense, it was obviously faked.”

Everyone was looking at her now.

She scoffed. “Ridiculous. Ladybug and I are… Well acquainted. Even if Hawkmoth wasn’t trying to kill her, she wouldn’t just start working with him. Only an idiot would believe that.”

Marinette wasn’t quite sure when the room had gone silent, but as Chloe turned away in disgust, pulling out her phone, she realized that nobody was talking. Marinette herself couldn’t quite find words to respond to Chloe Bourgeois actually guessing what was happening correctly.

Alix sighed. “God, I can’t believe believe I’m saying this, but Chloe’s right; It doesn’t make sense.”

“Agreed. Supposedly, Hawkmoth was after their Miraculouses. If Ladybug and Chat Noir worked for him, he would already have them,” said Max.

“And if he was trying to take over the city,” Alya cut back in, “all he had to do was not have Darkblade lose.”

“Exactly,” said Chloe, “I guess being around me stopped you from being complete idiots.”

“Aand the spell’s broken,” said Alix, grinning.

“Chloe actually said something nice!” said Rose, in the back.

“Rose, she still called us idiots,” said Juleka, almost inaudible.

“Yeah, but not total idiots!”
Marinette couldn’t help giggling.

She’d realized, last night, that the average citizen of Paris, no matter how against her they were, couldn’t stop her physically. They could demoralize her, though, and tear her down from the inside out.

But, it looked like Hawkmoth’s plan wasn’t going to work, because she had the good fortune to be in a place that was truly on her side.

Adrien caught sight of her laughing, and gave her an encouraging smile.

Well, that part of Hawkmoth’s plan, anyway. That was only a third of what they were up against, along with Volpina and Adrien’s compromised identity.

Still. She could fight. She would fight.

And if she had a choice in the matter, she would win.
Adrien couldn’t tell whether he should be upset that it had taken this long to tell him, or grateful that Marinette had remembered it at all.

“What do you mean Volpina’s still on the loose?”

“I mean,” said Marinette, “that the necklace we brought back must have been the fake one she bought to trick you with.”

Adrien grimaced. “But how did she manage to swap them?”

“Hm,” said Marinette, nose scrunching slightly. “It was probably when I was purifying the Akuma. Neither of us would have been paying attention to her then.”

“Aren’t the villains usually kind of out of it? When they come back, I mean.”

“I thought so too, but apparently Lila doesn’t care what we think she should be like.”

“Hah! Yeah…” said Adrien. Eventually, he sighed. “How long do you think we have?”

--

It was two weeks later.

School was almost over, and that should have been in their favor.

Should have been, because, despite everything that had gone wrong, the world seemed to love the idea of tormenting them further.

In this case, the extra issue they were up against was the fact that Paris, in the seeming absence of heroes (Or, at least, ones that weren’t suddenly controversial) had spawned new vigilantes.

One vigilante.

A very ineffective vigilante.

A very ineffective vigilante who Adrien had informed her had taken his entire design from a very old series of comics (She’d thought the design was familiar, but the comic in question was bit old for her taste).

The people of Paris looked upon Knight Owl with a collectively dubious eye. On the one hand, he never seemed to improve situations by showing up, but on the other, nobody had accused him of being in cahoots with Hawkmoth. On net, it was unclear whether this put him above or below them.
in standing, a fact that both of them were annoyed by.

Dark Owl’s existence was trouble enough, but the problem was that it was about to get worse, because they knew his secret identity, and they knew that while Principal Damocles refused to leave in the middle of work, as soon as summer hit…

It wouldn’t be good, especially since they had to keep showing up to stop him from making things worse.

And so it was that they were rapidly approaching the end of their school-year, with a burden that they needed to handle now, but no good way of doing it.

The only upside Marinette could find was that it gave her a reliable topic of conversation with Adrien, and she was always running short on those.

--

Adrien was flattened against the seat, in the manner of those who had been crushed by something.

The problem was, he’d been planning to visit Marinette most of the schoolweek. There had been a large gap in Friday, the perfect size for a visit.

*It was practically a date…* Was the thought he had repeatedly tried to stifle. It was extremely clear to Adrien that Marinette tolerated his extremely obvious crush on her, but not much past that.

Unfortunately, there had been a wrinkle. On Wednesday, he had checked his schedule again, just out of the overdeveloped sense of caution being in this house filled him with; his caution had been warranted, as he discovered that the gap in his schedule, only two days away, had been filled.

He had, of course, attempted to appeal the point to his father, but had been summarily shut down, and told to return to his room, and forget about the visit. Adrien had done so, of course; his father had been in the middle of working through his own schedule with Nathalie, and that was a bad time to make further demands on his time than absolutely necessary.

And so, here he was, on the ride home on Friday. At this point, he would have happily taken a villain attack; that at least would let him see Marinette, even if not in the best of circumstances.

Which was, in fact, the reason that when he saw the familiar corner of the street, and the sign above the door, that he simply stared.

“Hm,” said his bodyguard.

“I…” He didn’t want to question this, in case it broke whatever spell had landed him here, but…

“I thought I was supposed to be headed home?” said Adrien. “Did something change?”

“Hm,” he acknowledged, pulling out his phone. A few taps, and he turned to screen to face Adrien.

“Following an unexpected cancellation, Adrien’s 2:45 appointment has been removed from his schedule. The digital itinerary has been updated to reflect the alternate course of action that will be replacing the previous appointment,” he read aloud.

He stared. Who had- the top of the screen informed him that it had been sent by Nathlie. Since when was anything ‘unexpected’ for her?

For a second, he simply stared at the message.
His bodyguard cleared his throat, and after a few short clicks, was on the itinerary.

Adrien stared some more.

His bodyguard pulled back the phone, and replaced it in his pocket.

Well, if he really was here, there was no reason to waste time in the car.

Finally processing his circumstances, he practically leaped out, with barely a look backwards.

As he opened the door, he froze as Marinette’s father looked up at him. He’d told Marinette that he couldn’t make it, so what if-

“Oh!” he said, “good to see you again, Adrien.”

He laughed. “Hello. Is Marinette here?”

The man laughed. “Of course! She’s up in her room, and I’m sure she’ll be pleased as punch to see you.”

“Ah. Thank you.”

“No problem; you’re always welcome here. Matter of fact, if you want…” He reached down and pulled out…

Adrien was extremely lucky that Mr. Dupain was on his side, because he would have been supremely dangerous as an enemy, for the simple fact of what he could make such basic ingredients. If one hand was defeating a villain, and the other was one of Tom Dupain’s chocolate cakes, he would be hard-pressed to make the choice.

“They should all be fine,” he said, poking one of them, “although this one might be a little underdone.”

Adrien reverently took the plate, which was covered with the bits of pastry that hadn’t been display-quality, and looked up.

Tom laughed. “I appreciate a man who can appreciate a loaf in spite of its looks.”

Adrien laughed too. “Thank you, sir.”

“Aww, c’mon, none of that ‘sir’ stuff, you can just call me Mr. Dupain, or even Tom, if you feel like… Ah, but you’re a busy man, and I’m keeping you from what you came here for; well, who you came here for.”

“Right!” he said, slipping past the counter, and making for the stairs at double speed.

--

“Was that Adrien?” asked Sabine, walking in.

He nodded. “Came by to visit Marinette. You know, don’t tell anyone, but I think he really does like her.”

She gently slapped his arm. “Of course he does, dear.”

“Hah! I suppose he’d be a fool not to.”
Marinette had been a bit gloomy. Today had been the day Adrien had been supposed to visit, and he-

There was a knock at the door to the downstairs.

“Yes?” she called.

“Marinette?” came Adrien’s voice, setting the electric thrill of pleasant surprise up her back.

“Adrien?”

“Yeah! Can I come in?”

“Uh… Sure?” She said, a bit uncertainly.

Adrien pushed up the trap door, almost warily.

“Oh.” He said, seeing her.

“I was going to take a nap,” she said, in reference to her pajamas and hair, which was down, at the moment.

“I see,” he said, “I can leave, if you want-

“No!” she said. “No, that’s fine, I just thought you weren’t going to make it, so…”

“I didn’t either, but I guess something happened to my tutor or something, so I could come here.”

“That’s great!” she said, and then, in a rush “I mean, not that something happened to your tutor, but that you were able to come visit, because-“ she froze, and bit back whatever embarrassing reason her tongue would have found. “Because we’ve still got a problem.”

“Right,” he said. “Well then, let the 102nd meeting of the ‘What are we supposed to do about Knight Owl’ association come to order.”

Neither of them moved.

“I think we’re pretty in order,” said Marinette, giggling slightly.

He laughed.

“Right.”

They sat in silence.

“We still have the same problem as ever,” he said.

“We can’t let him keep going like this…”

 “…And we probably can’t force him to stop without making him think we’re villains.”

Adrien’s phone buzzed, and he visibly tensed. He pulled it out, and the tension dropped slightly.

“Looks like Alya’s finally updated.”

“No kidding? She’s been working on that update since Volpina first attacked! She was working on
it when she visited yesterday.”

“Why Ladybug and Chat Noir are Definitely Paris’ Heroes,” read Adrien.

“I can always count on Alya to have our backs,” said Marinette, smiling. Then, she froze.

“You know, I think she might even be able to help us with Dark Owl.”

“What do you mean?”

--

Plagg was eating a wedge of Camembert. She hadn’t given it to him, but that didn’t seem to be stopping him.

She looked down at her phone, and quietly deleted a recent phone call to a tutoring agency.

Something was wrong. She knew it. Mr. Agreste had been acting oddly, recently. He had been, in shifts, smiling too much, and in a dour mood. She didn’t know why, but she was willing to guess that it had something to do with Volpina.

She’d heard about Volpina, or, as she was normally called ‘Lila Rossi.’ The last few times she’d shown up to help Ladybug and Chat Noir, she’d spotted an orange blur as the villain disintegrated.

That in particular, that she only moved when the villain was defeated, was the most worrying part.

Mr. Agreste seemed to have implied that she worked for him, in some strange way. So why was it that she hadn’t worked for him? She was waiting for something, which meant that Hawkmoth was, too.

The problem was, what?

It didn’t matter. She couldn’t ask Mr. Agreste without making herself unduly suspect, and she would be hard-pressed to learn the truth without it.

She would just have to be generally ready.

She silently pulled a wedge of cheese out of Plagg’s tiny hands.

“You weren’t supposed to have the first two,” she said to his affronted expression.

“Should is more a guideline,” he said.

She blinked slowly at him.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, as she put the cheese back in the drawer, “I get it.”

“Good,” she said. “Have you considered that you might have trouble controlling your own destructive power because you eat too much?”

“Pfft, no,” said Plagg. “Tikki’s… Not actually any better, but Nooroo can’t control it either, and he’s real reserved.”

“And what happens if Nooroo uses his abilities personally.”

“Oof,” said Plagg, “It’s fun for about five minutes, and then whoever he did it to keels over and
dies.”

He looked at her. “I’m not kidding. Nooroo is, on a sprint, let’s say, the most dangerous of all of us.”

“Speaking as the kwami who destroys cities,” said Nathalie, and then, “And, for that matter, ends paleontological epochs.”

Plagg nodded. “He did it once. Trust me, you don’t need to worry about it.”

…

They’d gotten back home, which was a strange thing to call it, seeing as Nathalie spent more time at work than she spent here, on a given day.

“Whaat is it?” he asked.

She turned to look at him, not bothering to conceal that she was tired. Plagg knew, anyway, who would he tell?

“You want me to guess?” he said, “I can guess.”

“Something’s coming,” she said.

“Ah,” he said. “Like what.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“Uh huh. What do you know about it.”

“Nothing.”

“Ah. You’re worrying about a problem you know nothing about, and have no way to solve,” he said, “I’ve come up with a word for that.”

She didn’t move.

“It’s called being stupid,” he said.

“I see.”

“The cure,” he said, pressing on her collarbone, “is to not worry about it when you can’t do anything about it.” She could barely feel it.

“So go to bed,” he said. “Trust me, I’m basically a cat, and one of the things about being basically a cat is that you know how much sleep is worth.”

He pressed harder. She didn’t move.

“It’s worth a lot,” he said.

She sighed.

“So go to bed.”

She groaned. He was right, unfortunately. She couldn’t solve anything, and she wouldn’t help anything by staying up.
She stood up, and hung her jacket on the corner of her bed, even though, by all rights, it should have gone in her closet.

Nathalie had never gone in for sleeping clothes, but tonight, and tonight, she had found herself so bone-tired, and the breeze from the window was so warm that she simply laid down on top of the bed, and waited for sleep to find her.

Minutes passed, and she didn’t sleep.

Eventually, she decided that maybe, she would be better off to fight through, and try to-

“No,” said Plagg from her nightstand, as she began to sit up.

“If I can’t sleep…”

“Nope,” he said, “You’re going to sleep—” he pressed a paw onto her collarbone again, “—if I have to stay here all night. You can be worried again tomorrow, whatever. Hell, maybe it’s even necessary, and you’ve inherited some of that famous catlike intuition. Either way, you are sleeping now.”

“Cats aren’t known for their intuition,” she mumbled, lying back down.

“Like hell they’re not,” he said, pressing his whole body down like the world’s tiniest weight. “Tomorrow’s going to be a big day, and you’re going to be ready for it if it’s the last thing I do.”

She sighed, and gave up.

By all rights, he couldn’t stop her from doing anything.

By all rights.

By all…

--

Her breathing slowed to a crawl.

Plagg grinned, in the pitch darkness.

*Now was his chance to take that Camembert he’d been…*

*Been…*

*This really was comfortable. Honestly, better than a heating vent.*

…

*He could get more cheese tomorrow.*
Chapter Summary

Ladybug and Chat Noir fight Dark Owl.

Chapter Notes

You are not prepared.

“A man trying to be the hero that Paris deserves, cruelly mistreated by those who claim to hold his best interests. Perhaps it is time he learns what true power is. Fly away, my little Akuma, and show him.”

Hawkmoth grinned. This was a promising start; the new villain had a ready-made design, and, for want of a better term, something to grow into. The basis of Knight Owl was auspicious as well; Knight Owl had been known for being able to take on enemies with superpowers, though he himself didn’t have any.

Imagine what he could do with enhanced strength and agility.

He would even have a sidekick, or, more accurately, backup.

Better still, night was falling, and-

The Akuma made contact.

--

They had failed in the worst possible way. Not only had they not satisfied ‘Knight Owl’s’ desire to be a hero, they had revealed his identity, and humiliated him on live television.

Cardboard Girl had been an absolute failure.

“At least school’s almost out. Maybe he can stay home until things blow over?” said Marinette, more to reassure herself than for Tikki’s benefit. Alix had asked her to sew a patch onto one of her shirts, and Marinette was trying to steady her nerves with the few minutes of distraction it allowed.

Tikki nodded reassuringly. “You were trying to do something good,” she said. “Sometimes plans just don’t work out like you want them to.”

“I know that. I know that, but the news was mocking him for almost half an hour!” She sighed, “I just hope they can’t dig anything else up about it.”

Her phone buzzed.

It was Adrien.
Check the news, now.

She frowned, and opened a new tab on her computer.

-still waiting for a response from Ladybug or Chat Noir. It’s unclear whether either of them is aware of-

“Threats?” said Marinette.

“Dark Owl?” said Tikki.

The screen had changed to an image of a darkened room.

“Ladybug. Chat Noir,” came a sinister voice, “your time in this city has been marked by little more than the constant threat of villains. You have proven yourselves dangerous and untrustworthy. So, from now on, I shall be the only hero that this city needs, and to do this, you will hand over your Miraculous to me.”

“He can’t think we’ll just—” began Marinette

“Or else I will be forced to drop this bus of animals, which I have hung from the Eiffel tower.”

The image switched, for a moment, and sure enough, there was a bus full of animals hung from the Eiffel tower.

“I know how much you cherish the false impression the public holds of you. If you truly wish to maintain it, you will hand over your Miraculouses, and save these animals. And, should you wish to tamper with the bus, be aware that I have rigged liquid nitrogen tanks to the base of the Eiffel tower, set to blow and collapse the tower at the slightest sign of trouble, and a detonator, if you attempt to cross me! You have until midnight to hand over your Miraculouses. Follow the owl in the sky.”

The screen returned to the news broadcast, but Marinette wasn’t paying attention anymore.

Wow, quite a broadcast, she sent back to Adrien.

Yup, came the response.

“Alright,” she said to Tikki, “It looks like I’ve got a job to do. Are you ready?”

“Of course!”

“Okay, then! Spots on!”

--

Adrien was staring out of his window, already suited up. He hadn’t asked her to pick him up, but by now, they’d done this often enough that he didn’t have to.

She landed in his window, with her classic, determined expression.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

The careful arm around her shoulder was practically second nature at this point, as they flew through the air.
“We can’t give him our Miraculouses,” said Ladybug.

“I don’t even have one to give him,” he said.

“Right.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

“We’ll just have to sneak up on him. We know where he is. Even if he’s waiting for us, he shouldn’t be able to look everywhere at once.”

“Right.”

Ladybug shuddered.

“What?”

“Just… I was thinking we’d have an advantage because we knew our enemy. It’s what we thought when… When Volpina attacked.”

“I know. We’ll just have to do it better this time. This time, we won’t waste time trying to get information out of him.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

They touched down just outside of the stadium, where a flare of light was rising into the sky.

There were no cars parked outside, and yet the lights were on inside.

This was the place.

“I’m thinking we go in from above?” said Ladybug.

Chat Noir nodded, and up they went.

Perched on the edge of the wall, where there was just enough space to stand, they stared down at the field.

Sure enough, there was Dark Owl, waiting on a balcony, almost directly across from them.

Chat Noir looked down.

“You know, it really doesn’t hurt anything if he catches me. I can go in as a decoy? You sneak up from behind.”

“Good idea,” said Ladybug, “I’m guessing the Akuma’s somewhere in his toolbelt. Maybe one of the gadgets. Keep your eyes peeled, and look out for the detonator.” and set off, around the edge of the stadium.

Well then. It was time for some of that classic Agreste charm.

Actually, make that classic Adrien charm.

Or, really, Chat Noir charm.

Chat Noirm.
Chat Noir had gotten good at distracting villains. It was one of the talents she maintained he was far better at than her, and one of the fewer that he admitted to.

As she snuck, she saw him give Dark Owl a jaunty wave.

“Hello!” he called across the stadium.

“Chat Noir!” called the villain. “I see you have arrived. But where is your partner?”

“Oh she had a date. She’ll be here in an hour or so.”

She rolled her eyes.

“I see, and your Shadow?”

“That’s a bit harder to call,” he said, “But really, that’s not why we’re here, is it? You want my ring, you can go ahead and take it!”

She was in position. She was lining up the shot.

Rapid footsteps behind her.

She spun, already swinging lashing out with her yo-yo.

The yo-yo wrapped around Volpina’s flute.

Volpina pulled. Ladybug pulled.

For a second, nothing happened.

Ladybug grinned, and jumped, backwards.

She saw Volpina’s panicked expression as she fell out of sight.

The wire scratched against the roof, and she felt Volpina lose her balance, and then felt the yo-yo pull free.

She managed to land on her feet and pulled the yo-yo back, with Volpina’s flute wrapped in it.

“Aha!” said Dark Owl, from closer than she would have liked.

She spun.

“Finished with your supposed date, then,” he said, “Or was there never one to begin with? Either way, it doesn’t matter. You’ve made your answer clear. I will give you one last chance to surrender your Miraculouses without being responsible for the deaths of all those poor animals.”

He held the detonator out, almost mockingly.

Volpina landed behind her, and she turned, trying to keep them both in sight at once.

“Ah, and I see you’ve met my partner,” he said.
Ladybug looked at him sidelong. “And you’re about to meet mine.”

“Wh—” he said, as Chat Noir’s baton was suddenly around his neck.

He turned, trying to knock him off, but instead, he overbalanced, falling on his back, onto Chat Noir.

The detonator went skittering away.

Ladybug didn’t waste time, immediately diving after it, only to let out a gasp as her stomach was suddenly yanked by a rope, wrapped around it.

She was inches away. She reached out, and slapped her hand down onto it.

A massive boot hit her hand, and the detonator flew out of it, out of the stands, down to the field. It was heading for a large metal shipping crate down on the field.

But if his boot had been there-

She spun as a huge fist came down, and vaulted, still horizontal, over the edge railing, tumbling downwards.

Then, she was spinning, as the rope, presumably a grapping hook, came undone.

With a feat of reflexes that was impressive even for a superhero, she caught the end of rope, and practically bounced down into the lower stands.

Chat Noir was up there, still, fighting two people at once, she needed to-

“Cover me!” he called, vaulting over the railing.

She lashed out as Dark Owl tried to get an angle to fire something at him, probably another shot from his grappling hook gun. He pulled back, and Chat Noir…

Chat Noir caught a single hand on the edge of the balcony to slow his fall, and dropped at least 15 feet, straight down.

It didn’t even seem to faze him, and Ladybug found herself once more impressed at her partner’s abilities even without a Miraculous.

A few more lashes got him to her position, and she retreated after him.

He leaped over the other railing, onto the crate, and she followed him.

“Looks like your plan failed!” she called.

“Ladybug,” said Chat Noir, “It won’t stop.”

“Whose plan failed?” said Dark Owl, “Albert!” he called, and the floor dropped out from underneath them.

They landed, a bit ungracefully, but intact, on the bottom of the container. The opening above them closed.

“Foolish of you to fall for the detonator,” came Dark Owl’s voice from a speaker somewhere in the container. “A true hero, such as me, would never endanger innocent animals. You risked everything for a mere hologram.”

“Now, it’s time for you to truly give me your Miraculouses, and this time, the stakes will be a bit more personal.”

There was a hiss, and the container began to fill with something white.

“Whipped Cream is too thick to breathe,” said Dark Owl.

“And too thin to swim in,” said Chat Noir, clearly angry. “That was never even Knight Owl! That was The Buffoon!”

“And a wise hero learns from his enemies! Now. Place your Miraculouses into the box.”

Chat Noir rolled his eyes. Then, remembering his circumstances, his head dropped.

“We’re not done for yet,” said Ladybug. “Lucky Charm!”

Into her hand, dropped…

“I think that’s actually the one where this exact thing happened,” said Chat Noir, looking over her shoulder.

She flipped forward, hoping to find the solution, as the whipped cream was above her knees.

“Knight Owl’s butler broke him out?”

“Sparrow was incapacitated because of what happened in the previous issue,” said Chat Noir, “or he probably would have done it.”

“Right, but-

“No! Stop it!” came Dark Owl’s voice.

There was a strange sound, almost like paper crumpling, and then, light came flooding into the crate. Standing outside was a pitch-black figure with a black energy burning in its hand.

“Angel!” they said in unison.

A solemn nod, as Angel stepped back, flicking her hand, putting out the cataclysm.

They clambered out, lower halves still covered in whipped cream.

“Well then,” said Dark Owl, “The mysterious Shadow shows itself. The fight can begin in earnest.”

“Got it,” muttered Ladybug. “The fight can end in earnest. I know where the Akuma is. He was talking to Albert, right? His butler?”

“Right?”

“And where is Dark Owl's butler when he's out fighting crime?”

“In his base, keeping an eye on things!” said Chat Noir.

“I have to get to the school.”
“Got it.”

Dark Owl landed, and Ladybug set off.

Chat Noir and Angel started forward, ready to stop him from following, but before they could, Volpina stepped between them.

“I don’t think so,” she said, as Dark Owl started after Ladybug.

“Now tell me,” she said, “am I right in thinking that this is a *rematch*?”

Adrien tensed, but kept his composure. He would have to count on Ladybug to handle this one herself. As for Volpina, they could take her, and *this* time, she wouldn’t win.

“I see,” she said, “well then, let’s have a bit of fun, then.”

Ladybug flew across the city, as fast as her superhuman abilities would carry her.

She had, of course, some conception of alternate universes. Even while she hadn’t read quite as many comics as Adrien had, she knew the idea from there, not even mentioning the fact that it was a fairly common trope in science fiction. She had even heard of the Butterfly Effect.

In another universe, she made it to the window mere seconds ahead of Dark Owl.

In another universe, she used the comic to set off a chain reaction of events to break the computer and release the Akuma.

In another universe, Volpina hadn’t gotten her hands on the Fox Miraculous.

In another universe, Volpina hadn’t returned for this fight.

In another universe, Volpina hadn’t distracted Chat Noir.

In another universe, Chat Noir had bought her precious seconds.

In another universe, there wasn’t the sudden shock of a villain slamming into her back as she flew across the city.

In another universe, she had lost an earring.

In another universe, she had only lost *one* earring.

In another universe.

But not this one.
Problem 3: Identity

Chapter Summary

The defeat was catastrophic, but there is more still to come, as Hawkmoth presses his advantage.

Chapter Notes

Fun fact, I wrote this before the previous chapter. In fact, I wrote it days ago, back when I first had the idea for Volpina to steal the necklace.

After everything Hawkmoth had thrown at them, Chat Noir found it almost a relief to take on Volpina. She talked a big game, but she wasn’t being powered by Hawkmoth like all of his previous enemies.

And so it was that, after a few minutes of intense combat, Volpina vanished into an illusion.

He had known, on some level, that the Fox Miraculous gave that power, but he hadn’t used it himself.

He stared after where she’d been.

“I think she’s gone,” he said, sighing.

Then, without warning, she burst forth from the mirage, and her hand was on his, and his ring…

She pulled away, a triumphant look on her face, and then…

“What?”

He slipped out a hand and grabbed at the necklace.

She caught his hand, but couldn’t catch Angel’s.

Lila Rossi reappeared, and stepped away from him.

“I, ah…” she said, “Where am I? I don’t remember how I got here!”

Adrien stared at her, unimpressed. He shook his head.

“Give me back my ring.”

She looked down at the ring, as if she’d never seen it.

“Oh! Sure, yes, take it!”

He slipped it back on his finger.
Angel looked down at the necklace, and then silently handed it over.

He nodded, and put it in his pocket.

“You’d better go check on Ladybug,” he said, and she nodded, but as she turned to leave…

Dark Owl slammed down onto the turf in front of them.

“Haha!” he said, straightening up. “It’s over. I have taken Ladybug’s earrings. And now you-

A shadow crossed his face, the same one that always appeared when Hawkmoth spoke to his villains.

“What? No, you can’t-

Dark Owl dissolved, and suddenly, it was Mr. Damocles standing in the middle of the field, clearly bewildered.

Chat Noir felt much the same.

He looked at Angel, and she…

She was stepping away, in the almost terrified way of someone who can’t quite believe what they’re seeing.

She looked at him, and steadied herself.

A few short nods, and then she spoke, whispered, really.

“Find your partner. I have to go.”

“What, you can’t just leave her-

Shadow was gone.

Chat Noir needed to be gone, too.

He sprinted off on the way to the school, hoping that on the way, Ladybug would find him, and explain that she’d managed to purify the Akuma.

She didn’t.

Instead, what he found was Marinette, sitting in the warm, summer darkness.

She was on her knees.

He placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Hey.”

She didn’t respond.

“Marinette?”

Still no response.

“C’mon Marinette, you’re in the middle of the road.”
She sniffed. “Yeah. I guess I am.”

“Come on,” he said, looping an arm under her shoulder, “let’s at least get to the sidewalk.”

She nodded, and, leaning heavily on him, as if deeply wounded, she staggered to a bench.

They sat in silence, for a while.

“You know,” she said, “I never really thought we’d lose.”

“I know,” he said. “Me neither… At least… At least he doesn’t have the ring.”

She nodded.

“And… I got the necklace back.”

“That’s… That’s good.”

“We can talk to Master Fu in the morning,” said Adrien. “For now, you need to sleep.”

She nodded, gently, and seemed about to lie down.

“No, no, come on, Marinette. If you sleep out here, your parents are going to get worried.”

She pursed her lips, and then slowly nodded.

She stood up, barely seeming willing to move. But move she did.

Adrien was glad that, if nothing else, they were near her house.

The door was locked, and Marinette fished in her pockets, eventually pulling out a key.

“I’ll come by tomorrow morning,” said Adrien.

“Sure,” she said. “I’ll be here. Waiting.”

She started up the stairs.

“Marinette?” he said.

She turned.

“He doesn’t have the ring yet. It’s not over.”

She managed a weak smile, clearly not believing herself as she spoke.

“I know.”

She turned again, and he wanted to do something, or say something, *anything*.

And then she was up the stairs, out of sight, and he was simply standing there, slowly realizing that he was wearing a black catsuit in the middle of an empty bakery.

He fiddled with the door handle, finding the lock that would let him leave while still locking after him.

Then, he was off, into the night, back to his bed.
Gabriel Agreste had waited. He had held back, because he had been waiting for one final piece to fall into place.

Volpina had been willing to work with him, on the condition that she be allowed to publicly ‘defeat’ him afterwards. Frankly, that would have worked to his advantage, since it would get him truly out of the public eye. Volpina hadn’t been an issue.

Ladybug and Chat Noir, despite his hopes, had survived the bad press they’d gotten, but that was to be expected. If their resilience in combat was anything to go by, they didn’t give up easily. Fine.

The only issue had been Chat Noir.

Chat Noir was stubbornly resilient to his attempts to learn his identity.

He’d tried. Over, and over, and over, but maybe because he’d only seen the face for a second, or maybe because it was through his Akuma’s eyes and not his own, it just didn’t add up. It was especially maddening, because he’d become certain that he knew Chat Noir.

And then, a few days ago, it had clicked.

He didn’t know how he’d missed it.

It didn’t matter how he’d missed it. He had the perfect opportunity. The ring, in easy reach.

He’d realized, then, that all he had to do was take the earrings, and the ring would be his with ease.

After all, Adrien didn’t know his identity.

He had let Dark Owl sink into nonexistence. There was little use in trying to maintain him, especially since if they defeated him, the butterfly Miraculous would be unusable until the Akuma had been properly purified. He wanted his Miraculous usable, without fiddling around.

And now, all he had to do was take the ring, and, if he did this properly, Adrien wouldn’t realize what was happening until he’d already passed it over.

So not tonight. Tonight, Adrien would be suspicious; broken down.

Tomorrow, he’d be in a different state, one where things might not look like an attempt on the ring.

It would be perfect.

Besides, who was to say when Adrien would return home, tonight.

…

In the morning, he rose early, and put on his best suit.

“Nathalie,” he called, “I need you to do something.”

--

Adrien walked silently into his father’s atelier, followed by Nathalie.

His father looked up from his desk, a real, proper smile on his face for once.
“Father?” said Adrien, not quite comprehending the expression. After what had happened to Ladybug, smiling didn’t even seem like a real option.

They couldn’t purify Akumas anymore. What could they even do if... He pushed the thought down. Dark Owl seemed to have served his purpose for Hawkmoth, and wasn’t actively terrorizing Paris anymore.

“Adrien,” said his father, “may I borrow your ring?”

Borrow the ring, what was he talking about?

It was then that he noticed, next to the workstation, a pair of small, red... Earrings.

He felt a familiar sensation, of an idea slipping out of his head, as quickly as it could manage. Today, though, the thought left a sinking, sick feeling in his stomach.

“Why?” He managed.

The smile dropped, slightly, from his father’s face.

“I simply need to borrow it for a short time.”

“What?”

“Adrien,” he said, sharply, “this is not a request. Give me your ring.”

The ring was fake, why did he care if his father took it?

Because... The thought stuck, for an instant. It wasn’t about the ring. The problem was why. Why his father wanted it. The answer finally slammed into his head, with all the subtlety of a car crash.

“Because... Because giving it to you is exactly what I’ve been avoiding since the beginning,” he said.

What little remained of the smile vanished properly, now.

“Adrien,” he said, “Give me the ring.”

“No.” It didn’t matter that the ring was fake, now. It didn’t matter that if he handed it over, Hawkmoth would be no closer to his goals. All that mattered was who he was facing.

“Adrien,” said his father. “I need the ring. You know what it can do, when paired with the earrings, don’t you?” said his father.

He wanted to say he didn’t care, that a wish didn’t matter to him. He wanted to rush forward, take back the earrings. He wanted to do something.

All he could do, though, was repeat his earlier question.

“Why?”

And then, his father looked at him, an expression Adrien hadn’t seen in months on his face, one that managed to be terribly sad and grimly determined at the same time, but both muted under his reserved demeanor.

“You should know, by now, that the Ladybug and Black Cat Miraculouses can be combined. If
used properly, the will grant a wish.”

He nodded, silently.

“I have been trying to recover your mother. For the past two years, that has been my only real goal.”

Adrien didn’t think he’d understood what letting words ‘sink in’ had meant, until that moment. It felt as if, with each passing second, a weight was settling in his stomach.

His mother. She could come back.

She could come back, if he could just get his hands on the ring.

“But what about the price?”

“I will pay it.”

He wanted to believe that, but…

“If you want to bring her back, you’d have to put someone in her place.”

“Then it would be a price that I have paid of my own free will, rather than one caused by my own arrogance.”

Adrien shook his head. “And who would you replace her with?”

“It doesn’t matter. She would be back. She would be safe.”

“And she’d hate what you’d done to bring her back.” he said.

“A price I am willing to pay.”

He stared. Then, feeling a leaden weight in his chest, said, “I can’t let you do this.”

--

“Do you intend to fight me?” said Mr. Agreste.

“I don’t want to,” said Adrien. “But I will, if it’s that or give you the ring.”

Mr. Agreste gave his son an appraising look. “I see.” He sighed. “You know I don’t want to do this. But, I won’t insult you by trying to.” He paused, and nodded, slowly. “Very well. If you truly leave me no other choice, I will take the ring by force. Dark wings, rise.”

“Now,” said Hawkmoth, “I will at least let you transform.”

“Would it help?” Said Adrien, bringing his arms up, ready to fight.

“No. Even with your Shadow helping you, I doubt you would stand a chance. Now, I am sorry for what I am about to do, Adrien. I truly am. I hope, though, that you will someday forgive me.”

He brought up the cane, and stared at the top of it, where Nathalie knew the sword was hidden. He didn’t draw the sword, but stepped forward.

--

“Sir!” came Nathalie’s voice, suddenly cutting through the tension.
He stopped, and looked at her.

“I wouldn’t recommend that,” she said.

He gave her a look. “I believe I pay you for taking on the role of assistant?”

“Yes sir.”

“Then why would you have any control over what I choose to do, and how I conduct my personal affairs?”

He could see her bristle slightly at that.

“I have never attempted to control you, sir,” she said, “but you’ve made it clear that you value my advice.”

“And what possible advice could you have for these circumstances?”

“Do not fight Adrien.”

He looked at her.

“His ring is not real. Defeating him will neither offer you satisfaction nor any progress towards your goal.”

“Really,” he said, something in his mind bending from the weight of a thought that wasn’t quite completing itself, “And how would you know that?”

“I know that his ring is not real, because mine is.” She pulled up the chain that was hanging into her suit jacket, revealing a small silver ring. Eyes still locked on him, she began to remove it from the chain.

The thought clicked into place remarkably quickly. “You betrayed me.”

“No sir.”

“Then what do you call this?”

“Saving you. And him.”

“Really. And how do you rationalize this into ‘saving’ me.”

“A friend of mine is an expert on what happens when a person is given the unlimited power of a wish. I have enough evidence to satisfy me that it would end poorly.”

“And you should know that it doesn’t matter. I don’t have a choice.”

“Then neither do I, sir. I had hoped that you would give up, eventually.”

He sighed. “I don’t want to fight you, Nathalie.”

“The feeling is mutual, sir, but if you threaten Adrien, you have left me with no choice. Claws out.”
**The Black Cat**

Chapter Summary

Imagine it; the fight for the fate of Paris and Ladybug can't make it. Chat Noir can't make it either.

Chapter Notes

I had the second half of the last chapter written before I wrote the one before it. I had this one finished by then. Just had to run over some things.

Or, shall we say run *through* some things.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He was good. Of course he was. She’d been watching him since the beginning, and she’d *seen* him studying; if he was going to make villains, they had to know how to fight. If they had to know, *he* had to know. It came as no surprise that he knew how to fight for himself.

He’d fought longer than her, but she could feel something every time the baton blocked a strike from the cane. She could feel fire in every move she made, and he didn’t have it.

His Miraculous hadn’t been created for the sole purpose of destruction. His hadn’t.

Still, it was close, so close that she never felt her victory was certain.

He got in a swipe across her face that she was sure would leave a bruise. It probably would have cracked something, had she not been transformed. But she *was* transformed.

She jabbed the baton into his ribs, and he let out an angry, pained groan.

Pained, but not really hurt. Only enraged.

She didn’t know when the workstation overturned. She didn’t hear his phone fall to the floor with a crack. She didn’t notice as one incautious step left fractures across the surface of the table in the middle of the room.

She didn’t see as everything Gabriel Agreste used in his work was broken, everything he had cared about.

And she didn’t see…

--

He was outmatched, and he knew it. His enemy had a stronger Miraculous than he did, and fought with an inhuman strength.
Inhuman was the word for it. Pitch-black, faceless, voiceless, seemingly more machine than organic.

It felt as if he’d come face to face with a robot, merciless, and single-minded.

He’d never fought anything like this. She was too close. Too fast, too strong, too *everything*. He couldn’t keep up, he couldn’t keep up, he couldn’t-

He didn’t even realize he’d done it.

They froze there, neither one quite believing it.

He looked down, and seeing confirmation that he hadn’t just mistaken himself, he stepped back.

The blade slipped out of her stomach.

He couldn’t see blood. He could have imagined that nothing had happened, that he hadn’t just-

She staggered backwards, and gasped in a breath.

Her breathing, normally so calm and measured, was ragged. There was a crackle, like lightning, and then her suit had what could only be called a *crack*; it ran up from where the blade had pierced her, and up her face. He could make out one eye, wide open, and her jaw slightly ajar.

“Nathalie,” he said, not bothering to hide his fear. He managed to gather the words. “Nathalie, please. Give up. There may still be time.”

She looked down, and heaved out a breath, ragged, in what could almost have been an imitation of a chuckle.

“I…” she swallowed, and the crack split, another branch going off towards the back of her head. “I. Can’t do that, sir. Not unless… Unless you give up, too.”

His face screwed up. He wanted to. He wanted to say *‘Dark Wings, Fall,’* and be done with things.

“You know I can’t.”

“You have to, sir,” she said.

“Give me the ring, Nathalie.”

The suit was disintegrating around her, now. Most of the left half of her face was visible, but she was still visibly holding on.

“C—” she shook her head, eyes shutting, and mumbled something.

“What?”

“I,” she said, barely any substance in the sound, “I said.” She swallowed again, and looked up at him.

“Cataclysm.”

The palm of her hand slammed into his chest, and he felt an impossible sensation. He had never been electrocuted, but it must have been something like this, jagged edges of an energy that he could *feel* the shape of were suddenly branched out through his body.
He staggered back, not quite understanding what had happened, and then, it felt like a grenade had exploded at his chest, and he practically flew backwards.

The last thing he saw was Nathalie, now almost fully turned back, falling to her knees, and a tiny glimmer in the air in front of her, as the Butterfly Miraculous fell to the ground.

Then, there was a white-hot flash as he hit the wall, and everything was black.

--

As everything went silent, Adrien stepped away from the wall, where he had fallen back, during the fighting.

Everything had been a blur, literally and metaphorically. He hadn’t been able to muster the thought that he should fight. Even if he had, he wouldn’t have known where to begin.

And now… Father. Nathalie. Both of them…

He looked down at Nathalie as he stepped past, eyes wide and mouth agape.

Her jacket was dark, and the shirt beneath it was red. It was as if it had been designed to bleed on. The clothes weren’t even damaged, and if it weren’t for the spreading dark patch…

Her eyes, already halfway glazed over, flicked up to him as he passed, and the corners of her lips twitched up, and she almost seemed to chuckle. Then, she turned to back to look at his father.

His father, once again in his civilian attire. If his tie had still been on, he could have just been sleeping.

Instead, though, there was a handprint scorched, printed into his chest, except for one spot, a tiny, round patch that seemed untouched.

He took a breath, and focused. Then, bending down, he picked up the Miraculous. It was uncomfortably hot in his hand, but he closed it into his fist.

Something crackled behind him.

He steeled himself, and turned.

At first, nothing seemed different, but as he stepped closer to Nathalie, he saw what had changed.

There was a tiny figure in front of her.

“No, no, no no no,” it muttered, head turning, taking in her expression.

“Hh,” said Nathalie, managing a smile as she stared down at it.

“Don’t ‘Hh,’ me,” said the kwami; it had to be a kwami, “you’re the one who took a sword to the stomach.”


“Yeah? Clearly you missed the bit where you’re supposed to make it out, you idiot.”

Nathalie laughed, body swaying with the motion.
“Well,” said the kwami, voice burning with an almost savage intensity, “I’ve got a friend who is **going** to help you.”

Nathalie’s laugh faded into nothing, as her eyes closed.

There was a second of silence, as the kwami looked down, tiny fists clenching.

“Kid,” he said, “**Adrien.**”

“Y- yeah?”

“I need you to get the earrings.”

Adrien looked over to the desk, where there was still that same glimmer of red that had earlier told him what he needed to know about his father.

“**Quickly.**”

Adrien stepped over to the desk, and grabbed the earrings.

There was a flare of red as Tikki appeared.

“Tikki,” said Plagg, not even looking up, visibly shaking, “I’ve got something I need you to help me move.”

Tikki looked around the room, staring at the state of things. “What is it?”

He jerked his head at Nathalie, who was bowed over, now.

Tikki flitted over, and looked at her. She gasped.

“Plagg, she’s-

“Not. Yet.”

“You want me to move the damage? Where?”

“**Me.**”

“Plagg, if you do that-

“I **know.** I’ve seen you do it. I’ve seen you do it for **worse** than this. I’ve been there every time. I don’t **care.**”

A silence. “I’ll miss you Plagg.”

“Ha. I’ll miss you too, Sugarcube.”

“How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that?”

“Downsides of being immortal,” he said, grinning even as he looked down. “It’s always at least one more time. Now, let’s get this over with.”

Tikki nodded.

They both placed a hand on Nathalie, and for a second, it looked like nothing was happening. Then, he saw the gentle glow from each of them.
There was a flash, and they were both knocked away.

Silence, for a second, and then Nathalie convulsed, gasping in pain.

She looked up, as Plagg drifted unsteadily back towards her.

“Alright,” he said, and Adrien would swear he was smoking, “listen. I don’t have long before I’ve got to go. It’s been fun, yeah? Just, um, got a bit of debt to pay. Gonna be fine, just…” he crackled and one of his ears turned to dust. “Probably gonna be, what would you say, Tikki?”

“Years,” said Tikki, voice disturbingly quiet and solemn, “It felt like… 8, 9, maybe more.”

“Yeah, what she said,” said Plagg. “Heh. Well. See you in 8 years, hopefully.”

“What do you—” said Nathalie, and then, seeming to grasp something, she nodded, and, taking a breath, she smiled, a proper smile, one Adrien had never seen from her before, “I’ll be waiting.”

“Hah!” said Plagg, visibly disintegrating, “So you can smile. Don’t worry, time’s gonna fly when you don’t have keep worrying about me stealing your cheese. Speaking of, age me a wheel while I’m out, alright?”

Nathalie nodded, and then, leaving only the ghost of a laugh in the air, Plagg was gone.

The room went quiet.

“He will be back,” said Tikki, “It should have been a lethal wound, but a kwami can’t be killed. There’s a price for every wish, and… We can’t heal something like that without a wish.”

“But,” she said, voice suddenly determined again, “There’s nothing we can do to make him come back sooner. The best we can do is make sure that when he comes back, he doesn’t come back to a mess.”

Nathalie closed her eyes, and then, nodding, opened them again.

“Which means,” said Tikki, now looking out the window, where summer sunlight was streaming in, “we need to make sure all the Miraculouses are accounted for.”

“I have the Fox Miraculous,” said Adrien, “I just picked up the Butterfly miraculous, and… You.”

Tikki nodded. “Good. Angel has the Black Cat.”

“Please, call me Nathalie.”

Tikki seemed surprised, and then smiled, “Of course! That’s all of them…” She paused, and sighed. “All of them we’ve seen, anyway.”

“If you mean the Peafowl Miraculous,” said Nathalie, “he has it as well.”

Tikki jerked to look at her. “Where!?”

Nathalie staggered to her feet, dusting off her clothes. She nodded at the painting behind the now overturned workstation.

Faster than seemed possible, Tikki had already pulled the painting away, and pulled the safe open.

She gasped, and slipped up to the fan of peacock feathers that Adrien had seen the last time he’d
opened the safe.

“Duusu?” She said.

She seemed to listen, ear up to the feathers, and then nodded, slowly.

She turned away, and began drifting back towards them.

Seeing them looking at her, she gave them a smile.

“Duusu is in a bit of trouble,” she said, “but nothing I haven’t seen before. Once we can get her some help, she’ll be fine.”

“You know how to repair a Miraculous?” asked Nathalie.

Tikki nodded. “Not… Not a kwami, but a Miraculous.”

“I see.”

Tikki nodded, slowly, and then-

“What happened to Marinette?”

“I think she’s at home. She was… She wasn’t happy. I think she’d be happy to have you tell her what happened.”

“I see,” said Tikki, seeming to consider something. “If you want, we could go tell her together.” She looked down at the earrings. “I have enough energy for a short trip, if you remember to turn back quickly.”

“I can do that,” said Adrien, reaching for the earrings, and then… “My ears aren’t pierced.”

Tikki laughed. “Alright, we can walk, then. I suppose you’ve had bad luck with Miraculouses anyway. You know the way to her house, don’t you?”

“In my sleep.”

“Good. Then let’s get going!”

Adrien turned to leave, and…

Nathalie was standing over his father’s unconscious body.

“Nathalie?”

She turned.

“Are you okay?”

“Of course,” she said, face now familiarly expressionless. “They took the wound. My jacket is stained, but I doubt that matters.”

“I know,” he said. “I mean the rest of it. You just fought Father, and I guess… You cared a lot about Plagg, and, he’s gone, now, and… Everything.”

“Hm,” she said, turning back to look at his father. “I will be fine. Now, I believe you have somewhere to be.”
Adrien left.

She stared down at Mr. Agreste’s limp body. Even as she watched, he let out a minute groan.

“I doubt you’re going to forgive me,” she said, looking down at him, “but I stand by my choices, as I am sure you will stand by yours.” A long pause. “I imagine you’ll be imprisoned. If they let me, I’ll be sure to visit you. Perhaps it will relieve the boredom. For both of us.”

For a second, she kept looking, as if waiting for a response.

One wouldn’t be coming, she realized.

Then there was no use waiting around. She pulled out her phone.

I will require testimonials from Ladybug and Chat Noir, likely within the hour.

She clicked send.

She waited a few seconds, and a response arrived.

got it

Now. How would she say this?

She dialed.

“Emergency services.” Came the voice on the other end of the line.

“I will require medical services for what is likely a concussion, and police.”

“Of course, ma’am. Location and nature of emergency?”

“Agreste Manor, and defeat of a supervillain.”

…

“What?”

Chapter End Notes

It's looking like this story's going to end on chapter 30.
After The Fall of Hawkmoth

Chapter Summary

Hawkmoth is defeated, but the world goes on.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sabine Cheng stood in the bakery. Business had been slack today, and she could guess why. That ‘Dark Owl,’ who had threatened the animals last night had never been accounted for. Well, he had been, assuming that the general consensus, that Mr. Damocles (Marinette’s principal of all people) had been the one transformed, but then again, he hadn’t been.

Mr. Damocles, in an interview, had explained that he’d come back to himself in the middle of the stadium, with Chat Noir, the mysterious man known as ‘Shadow’, and a young student of his, by the name of Lila. He’d had no idea how he’d gotten there.

He’d also said that Shadow had run off shortly afterwards, and Chat Noir had followed after him.

Ladybug had been nowhere to be seen.

So… What had stopped the villain? Where had Ladybug been?

It was worrying, especially to the part of Paris (including her) who still trusted Ladybug. Wasn’t Ladybug needed to stop what had happened with Stoneheart? Something had happened, and from what Damocles had said, it hadn’t been good.

She didn’t doubt that Marinette had heard about it, and that was why she still wasn’t up this morning.

If working hadn’t held some promise of comfort simply from its familiarity, Sabine doubted she’d have been up either.

Of course, business had been exceptionally slack today. Normally, she got a few people on Saturdays in to try something new, or pick something up for a party.

Nobody seemed interested today.

Maybe that was why she’d been so pleased to hear the bell ringing.

“Good morning!” she said, the cheery tone embedded into her psyche by years behind this counter.

Adrien smiled, and she saw that it was genuine.

“Do you mind if I talk to Marinette?”

She looked at him appraisingly. She nodded. “She’s still in bed. I can get her for you, though.”

“Of course!” he said, “Please let her know that I found her earrings.”

“Oh, did she lose them?”
He nodded. “She was kind of upset about it. She’ll definitely be happy to have them back.”

“Hmm,” said Sabine, “she would be. She’s worn them every day for the past year. I could take them up to her if you like?”

He shook his head, still smiling. “I’d prefer to give them to her in person.

“Tom,” called Sabine, “Marinette has a visitor, could you watch the counter for a second?”

“Of course, honey! Just got the sweet buns in!”

--

Adrien stood, and waited, as Tom Dupain stood at the counter, apron covered in flour.

“You know, you’re only our third visitor today,” he said.

“Really?”

He nodded. “After last night, I guess people aren’t in a pastry mood.”

“Well that’s a shame.”

They looked up, at the sound of Marinette’s voice shouting from above.

After a second, Sabine came back down.

She gave him a pleasantly confused expression.

“I didn’t know she cared about them that much. She’ll be right down.”

“Sentimental value?” he said, scratching the back of his neck. “Plus, I doubt she expected me to have them. She lost them pretty recently, and it didn’t seem like we’d be seeing them again any time soon.”

“Huh,” said Tom, “were they a gift from you?”

He laughed. “No, unfortunately. They’re antiques. She helped an old man, and he thought it would be an even trade.”

“Really? She never mentioned it.”

He shrugged. “Marinette helps a lot of people, but I think she prefers to let her actions speak for themselves.”

“That sounds like her, alright,” said Tom.

“Doing good stealthily,” said Sabine, nodding.

There was a thumping, as Marinette gracelessly stumbled down the stairs, landing in a heap at the bottom.

“You got her- them?”

Adrien reached out a hand, and she pulled herself up.

He smiled. “Of course.”
“How?”

He laughed, and then, sighed. “Kind of a long story. It’s been… A long morning, to say the least. Learned a lot of new things. How about this; it’s warm outside, and I don’t feel like being inside. How about I explain everything while we walk?”

“How about I explain everything while we walk?”

“Of course! Ah, but I don’t have shoes on.

“Your sandals are right by the door, sweetie.”

“Oh, right!”

“Upsides of not being the neatest person around,” said Tom, glancing at his wife. She looked back, mock-offended.

Marinette slipped on the sandals.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

They opened the door, and walked outside.

Marinette grinned, as a tiny red shape flitted out of Adrien’s shirt.

“How about this; it’s warm outside, and I don’t feel like being inside. How about I explain everything while we walk?”

“Of course! Ah, but I don’t have shoes on.

“Your sandals are right by the door, sweetie.”

“Oh, right!”

“Upsides of not being the neatest person around,” said Tom, glancing at his wife. She looked back, mock-offended.

Marinette slipped on the sandals.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

They opened the door, and walked outside.

Marinette grinned, as a tiny red shape flitted out of Adrien’s shirt.

“Hello, Marinette!”

--

Dude.

? 

Did something happen with Adrien and Marinette?

What do you mean?

Adrien’s been getting really blushy around marinette.

Like, more than usual.

!!!

Since when does he get blushy around her?

Pretty sure dude’s got a crush on her.

!!!!!

Okay?

What does that mean?

She has a crush on him!

Oh
Sick

How long?

A while, I think.

At least a month.

!!!!!!!!!!

And you’re saying it’s happening more?

Pretty sure.

Oh

Oh

Oh yes

What?

She’s been getting all cagey about it.

And I texted her while you were talking.

She’s getting really twitchy about it.

You think they’re actually together?

I think so.

Or, like, soon, anyway.

Sick!

That’s been your project for the school year, right?

Yup.

Mmmm

Torn

I want to poke her some more

But also, she’d be uncomfortable

Thoughts?

Probably don’t poke her? lol

But I want to poke her.

Dude, no
If it’s soon, you can ask her about it then, right?

But soon isn’t now

Soon is like, in a couple days.

I’d bet sooner.

How much?

I dunno, what do you want?

--

It did not take a few days. Nor, less than a few days.

It took the entire summer a solid month of the school year, and no less than 3 separate renegotiations of Alya and Nino’s bet for them to walk out of the school to the sight of Marinette and Adrien kissing in the rain, as a discarded umbrella lay beside them on the ground, leaving both of them to get soaked.

There had been a full 10 seconds of silence.

Alya had sighed, and handed Nino a slip of paper, which he opened, and grinned at.

“Really?” he said, grinning in what was practically an imitation of Alya’s devilish grin.

“If you tell anyone,” she said, pressing a finger to his lips, “you will regret it.”

“You know you’re going to have to say it out loud.”

“Not right now.”

“Later.”

She rolled her eyes, and turned back to her friends.

They were staring at the two of them, both a deep red. They were still holding each other, though.

“Well,” said Alya. “It’s about time.”

--

About time.

It had been about time for years.

10 years.

She had visited Mr. Agreste many times, of course. He was stoically accepting his sentence, which he was almost a third of the way through, now. He’d be properly old by the time he was out. They said he could have been on a path to early release, with his good behavior and quiet involvement in some of the activities prison life had presented him with, had he not stood by his actions. He regretted the side-effects, but believed his goal had been honorable.

They also said he was good for the prison, in the same way that the mafia reduces petty crime. He
wasn’t worth the trouble of getting in a fight with, and everyone owed him something by now. It seemed the Butterfly Miraculous had taught him something; Exchanges, generosity, and getting other people to do his dirty work.

Adrien had even been willing to visit him, recently, and he’d left, if not happy, not unhappy, and certainly contemplative.

At this point, Nathalie wasn’t sure why she was still in the mansion. It was so big, and it wasn’t hers. Not really.

Although, Mr. Agreste had made it clear that she was in charge, in his absence, and to her surprise, his will had been respected. She certainly didn’t mind; it gave her something to do during her 4 years of house arrest for being an accessory to supervillainy.

Doubtless the charge would have been worse, had Adrien not testified on her behalf.

In a manner of speaking, she did own the building.

And, of course, Adrien still insisted that she was practically his mother and/or aunt anyway, and since he didn’t have a mother to do it, someone had to be a grandrelative to his children on their father’s behalf.

He had made it clear that this meant spoiling them rotten.

She’d raised an eyebrow at that, and he’d sighed.

“I suppose,” he’d said, “that’s not going to happen. I don’t know, I guess you can leave the spoiling them to Marinette’s parents. They’re definitely never going to go hungry.” He’d laughed, and she’d nodded.

“They certainly won’t.”

“How about this, you can practice by spoiling the hamster.”

Her hair was beginning to go grey (silver, Adrien had suggested). But the world hadn’t overpowered her yet, and she prided herself on being able to stare down just about anyone. She’d stared death in the face and... Well, it had had sand thrown in its eyes, she supposed.

Still, death had blinked first, and she had the scar to prove it.

...

She was sitting at her desk, writing a schedule; her own schedule. It still felt strange to be the author of her own plans, but she did it, gladly.

They were launching a new line, soon. She could never tell if they were really any good, but Marinette insisted this one was even better than usual, so that was fine by Nathalie.

The launch date was next Wednesday, so on Tuesday-

Her pen snapped in her hand.

Black ink spread across the schedule, dirtying the work of 20 minutes.

She blinked, and then sighed. It had been an old pen, perhaps there had been some kind of-
Crack.

She looked down at her hand. It looked like a black glove, on the finger where she wore the ring.

She rubbed her forefinger and thumb together, and felt a familiar texture. Good grip, like some kind of rubber.

She flexed her hand.

Another crack. The black material was up her arm, now, the gap between it and her shirt sleeve rippling like a mirage.

There were footsteps outside, and another crack.

“Nathalie?” asked Adrien, walking in. “What’s… Oh.”

She smiled at him.

“Marinette!” he called. “Could you tell Tikki to come down here?”

Another crack, and the mask slipped over her face, as blank and expressionless as she remembered it.

Then, she was standing there, fully transformed.

She looked down, and saw a single hole over the scar in her stomach. It sealed over.

She straightened her back, and stretched out.

“Claws in,” she said, and the suit disintegrated around her.

“Ten thousand years,” said Plagg.

He looked up at her carefully unimpressed expression.

“Sure felt like ten thousand, anyway,” he said. “I don’t know how Tikki does that… Well… I guess I do, but seriously, I was underestimating how boring it gets to basically just lie there in excruciating pain.”

“Plagg!” came Tikki’s voice.

He turned.

“Hey hey!” he said, “How ya’ been, Sugarcube.”

“How many-

“At least one more time,” he said, grinning.

She laughed. “I missed you, Plagg.”

“Heh. I…” he groaned, “Don’t make me…” he took a breath, and couldn’t seem to help a smile. “I… I missed you guys, too.”

“Aw man,” he said, “ten years, though. I think we’ve got some catching up to do.”

“We certainly do,” said Nathalie.
“Hah! You’re still up and kicking, I guess.”

“Did you think I wouldn’t be?”

“Nah. Actually, I didn’t expect you to look that old!”

“Haven’t you heard that it’s rude to comment on people’s ages?”

He shrugged. “I’m millions of years old. I’m allowed. Possibly billions, now that I think about it.”

“Ah…” he said, seeming to relax in midair. “Tell you what. I’m sure your tiny human life has been really boring without me, and I’d love to hear all the boring details, and I’ve got, like, a lot of people I need to talk to, like, y’know, Nooroo, Duusu… But first, I’ve got some really important business to deal with.”

“Oh?”

“Did you actually age me a wheel of cheese while I was gone?”

“Of course.”

“Then let’s start there.”

-The End

Chapter End Notes

2 months.
I just spent 2 months of my life on an AU prompt that was purposefully designed to be bad.
No regrets.

For this final set of notes, I’d like to offer some writer commentary:
1st: I remember, when I started this, I was expecting to end it after Stoneheart. His ring would have been waiting for him there. Nathalie taking Plagg was simply an afterthought designed to prolong the story.
2nd: Relatedly, I didn't expect Nathalie and Plagg to be this important to the story, nor this satisfying to write. Honestly, of all the things this story offered, I think I'll miss writing them the most.
3rd: I only really had an ending in mind starting during Volpina's attack. I just remember walking around my room, thinking it would be great to have something serious happen.
4th: And, of course, this goes hand in hand with the fact that this was meant to be almost crack, but it ended up legitimate, by the end.

Now, finally:
I would like to thank all of you who made it here for wading through 70k words. You are the reason why this story is my highest rated by practically every measure AO3 offers, and the reason that I've been able to keep writing. Your comments have given me life, and the energy I need to not get bogged down by the length, from the people who are just screaming and keymashing, to the people with detailed commentaries on the
chapter, to the one of you (you know who you are) who always leaves the same 9 hearts in a square (seriously, it's not the most exciting comment, but it's there every time, and I appreciate that). It was always a relief, after I'd posted a chapter that felt like it hadn't come out quite right, to have somebody leave a friendly comment.

So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you all.

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