Behind the Masks

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Summary

Adrien and Marinette discover each other's secrets. You might be surprised how many different ways this could happen. A series of short, standalone reveal fics. Now includes reveals between other characters as well! Cross-posted on FF.

Notes

A collection of oneshots with one criteria: there is an identity reveal in each chapter. Characters, relationships, genre (humor, angst, etc.) and circumstances will vary along the reveal theme. Each chapter will have a note beforehand with a summary of the oneshot and any pertinent warnings.

Quick disclaimer: The earlier chapters of this fic are archive versions on what I've been posting on FF for quite some time. A lot of these were written and posted before Season 2 came out, so they may not be the most recent (or at my current writing quality). I'll be uploading a couple per day until they're all caught up to where I'm at on FF, then posting will continue as normal.
Midnight in Paris

"Behind every mask there is a face, and behind that a story." - Marty Rubin

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Midnight in Paris: Ladybug and Chat Noir share a well-timed kiss in the rain.

Midnight.

It was raining.

The streets were glowing from the reflection of the Paris lights on the wet pavement. Gold and white dots speckled the sidewalks and a soft pattering masked the distant sound of moving cars.

A pair of black leather boots stood directly opposite a pair of red and black polka-dot-clad feet.

On any other night, it would have been just another few moments of banter between Chat Noir and Ladybug, but something was different this time.

Perhaps it was the fresh scent of rain, and perhaps it was the jubilant expressions on their faces. Perhaps it was the adrenaline after having vanquished another foe. But something made the two of them want to linger. Something made them feel like being brave.

"We've been hiding behind our masks for too long," Chat was saying as he adjusted the black umbrella in his grip and made sure it covered his friend. Both he and Ladybug wondered why this scene felt familiar...a blond boy sharing an umbrella with a blue-eyed girl. But neither of them could place where the memory came from.

He brushed a damp curl away from Ladybug's cheek and she blushed.

"I know."

Neither of them had originally wanted to share their secret identity with the other. They thought total anonymity would be healthier for their alter-egos. But after a year of working together, they knew they worked better as a team. And teams failed if there were too many secrets.

As a completely unrelated side note, love also failed if there were too many secrets.

"It's your last chance to change your mind," Chat said, sounding giddily nervous. He was eyeing Ladybug's earrings, which were nearly spotless and chiming in warning. His ring was also flashing. They had mere moments before they changed back. "Are you completely sure about this?"

"I am," Ladybug said confidently. She took Chat's hands in hers. "I mean, I'm just as nervous as you are, but after all we have been through, would knowing really change anything between us?"

"Only for the better," said Chat. He looked into those eyes - blue like the heavens - and knew it was true.

"Good," she replied, stepping closer. The rain was letting up. "Because there's something I want to do."
And suddenly she was leaning in and he wasn't stopping her. It was raining at midnight and they were on a quiet glowing street with seconds ticking away to exposure and they were kissing and it was bliss. With their eyes closed, there was only the sense of silk, a lovely warmth, the smell of rain-on-cement...

They were still kissing when they changed back - there was a flash of energy as their masks fell away. The red and black spots vanished and the black cat ears disappeared.

Neither of them really cared about the name the lips of the other belonged to. Simply being together would have been enough. But they had already decided: no more secrets. It was too late to change their minds anyway, even if they'd wanted to.

They broke apart, eyes still closed.

"Ready?" she whispered, her heart pounding. *I hope it's Adrien.*

"Yeah." *I hope it's Marinette.*

"Open your eyes," she said, and green met blue in a flash of eyelashes.

"I should have known," said Adrien with a quirky smile, silently cheering. "I should have been able to spot you anywhere."

Marinette was startled at first, but she relaxed happily as she looked into those familiar emerald eyes. How could Chat have been anyone else? Deep down, she'd known it was him all along.

She put her arms around his neck and laced her fingers. "Always with the puns," she sighed.

"It's my best character trait." He was grinning from ear to ear.

"I'm glad it's you."

"And I'm glad it's you."

There was an elated pause.

"So...do you think we could try that again?" Adrien asked her shyly.

"Do you even have to ask?"

"Out of courtesy, yes, my lady."

"Then by all means."

Adrien winked.
Deductions

Chapter Summary

Adrien and Marinette add up the evidence and come to surprising conclusions.

Adrien was fairly sure he had figured it out.

He had been observing Marinette for months. This was easy to do now that they were close friends, and even easier due to the fact that Adrien was an insatiably curious individual.

"Curiosity killed the cat," Plagg had joked to him on a few occasions, but Adrien ignored his kwami. He was too motivated to figure out what Marinette was hiding from him. If his hunch was correct, it meant that he was running around Paris with her alter-ego, defending innocent civilians while both of them wore tight spandex costumes...yikes.

Yet he wondered. Could his friend really be Ladybug? There were a lot of similarities.

Adrien got up off his bed and walked to his desk. His father had just bought him a new ergonomic chair that looked somewhat like a torture device, but Adrien hardly noticed. He was too busy thinking.

He pulled out a pad of paper and a pen, and split the page into two columns with two titles.

Proof that Marinette is Ladybug, and Proof that Adrien is simply a wishful thinking idiot.

In the Proof that Marinette is Ladybug column, he brainstormed several notes.

He thought back to their study sessions or when they had spent time lounging on the sofa at her house watching movies. They’d played board games and cooked and walked in the twilight. He had courteously pretended not to notice her parents watching them from a conspicuous hiding place. During his time with her, he had noticed some odd things about Marinette.

First, there was the way she always won at cards. Or video games. Or even waste paper basket tosses. She had insane luck, even compared to a notoriously unlucky person such as himself. He'd always been rather ill-fated, but Plagg had simply made it worse. Yet Adrien had never seen anyone as fortunate as Marinette...except one black and red spotted superheroine.

Second, there was the way Marinette jumped and flinched every time someone said the word Ladybug. Was she responding to it because it was her name? Adrien had done that countless times when someone had mentioned Chat Noir. He knew it was a hard habit to break. Of course, Marinette could simply be a big fan who got excited about anything related to Ladybug. But so was Alya, and even she didn't act the way Marinette did.

Third, she and Ladybug had never really been seen together. Marinette was always mysteriously absent during the Akuma attacks...she always claimed she had been late or had been a victim of entrancement, but as Adrien also lied to cover his own tracks, he realized how glaringly obvious it was how often both of them consistently did it.

He thought about the way Marinette never let anyone get things out of her bag. She'd nearly had
heart failure the last time someone had even tried to touch it. Perhaps she was protecting a kwami hiding inside it? Adrien knew he'd react the same way if someone tried to look in his jacket pocket. He feared someone would find Plagg and realize who he was. He also feared that someone would discover the stockpile of Plagg's atrocious Camembert in that pocket and judge him, but that was beside the point.

Adrien sighed and wrote more down on the paper. The evidence was starting to add up. He found himself rather pleased...if anyone could be his lady, who better than strong, modest, confident Marinette?

Besides, he had zero proof Marinette wasn't Ladybug. He wanted to be right...but there was only one way to be sure. He'd have to get her to reveal her identity, or tell him the truth.

It would require catlike stealth. And charm. Lots of charm.

But in the midst of his plotting, someone came through his open window. Someone wearing black and red with polka-dots. Someone who, come to think of it, looked a lot like Marinette in a mask.

"We need to talk," she said shakily, and crossed the room to where Adrien sat, frozen.

"We do?"

"I have a question and I need you to tell me the absolute truth." She pulled a piece of notebook paper out of - well, Adrien couldn't figure out where from, her suit didn't have pockets - and handed it to him.

"I've made a list and have been trying to do some thinking. And I want you to tell me. Are you Chat Noir?"

Adrien glanced at her list, which was divided into a table like his. *Proof Adrien is Chat Noir*...and then, *Proof I Am Wrong*.

Under the "Proof Adrien is Chat Noir" side, she had written: "Shares a love for puns. Inexplicably smells like cheese – and so does Chat. He even looks like Chat. Is never around when Akumas attack. Has incredibly bad luck (spilled four different water bottles in class within fifteen minutes once), flinches whenever someone mentions Chat, and hates dogs (he even hissed at one once)."

There was nothing in her other column.

Adrien read all of this and was impressed - she was right on all accounts, of course. He was Chat Noir. Had it really been that obvious?

But then he realized that the both of them had just made the exact same deduction in the same way. They'd both reached the same conclusion. They really were made for each other.

He threw back his head and laughed.

"Oh, no! I'm wrong, aren't I?" She blushed scarlet. "I should go."

But Adrien stood up, still laughing. He handed her his own list, and said, "I can't believe you figured it out. We really must think alike too, because I was about to say the exact same thing to you. I'm pretty sure you're Marinette."

She read it, her eyebrows climbing higher and higher. "Okay, but how did you-?"
"So you admit it? You are?" Adrien felt his pulse quicken.

She sighed and gave a small chuckle, and de-transformed. Her red kwami hovered silently at her side, staring at Adrien happily. Marinette just stood there, her face like a ripe tomato under her black hair. "Yeah, it's me."

"So we have been working together this whole time?"

"I guess. No wonder we got along so well. We were already friends," Marinette said. "This is Tikki, by the way."

Adrien opened his jacket and Plagg zoomed out. "Plagg," he gestured. Marinette nodded politely but seemed a bit at a loss of what to say next.

"You know, in my head, this was far less awkward," she said.

"It's only awkward if you make it so," he replied smoothly. He wanted to kiss her or something, but didn't know if that would actually make things worse.

"What do we do now?"

"The same things as before. We fight evil, we exchange witty puns and banter, we go to school like normal people. But this time, we can have each other's backs. All the time, not just while under our masks."

"I like the sound of that," Marinette smiled, looking into Adrien's eyes.

"As do I. Man, I'm so glad we were both right. I thought you were going to bug out when I handed you my list."

Matinette's eyes widened at the pun and she gave him Ladybug's trademark "not-amused" face.

It was the best thing Adrien had seen in his life.

"My lady, I do believe this is the continuation of a beautiful friendship."

"Take your arm off my shoulder. Just because I know who you are doesn't mean you get to be sneaky. I know what you're trying to do." Marinette said calmly, and Adrien let the hand he'd been draping around her shoulders fall down. He thought he'd heard Plagg snicker, but he didn't mind. Marinette's reaction was the same as it always had been, and that was encouraging. It meant things were the same between them.

"Eh, my charms will work on you someday."

Marinette transformed again and leapt onto the windowsill. "Not on your life, Chat," she said with a coy smile. He knew she was just messing with him, and he loved it.

As she took off into the air, he called after her, "Then I guess it's a good thing I have nine!"
Devious

Chapter Summary

Devious: Chat discovers Ladybug's identity, and has a little fun orchestrating a reveal of his own.

Chat Noir was no stranger to intrigue. He fought evil on an almost daily basis. He had a secret double life as a masked vigilante. His father was a very private man with a lot of skeletons in his closet. Chat even found himself dealing with death-defying situations instead of doing his history homework, then lying about it shamelessly. Secrets were his bread-and-butter.

At least they were, until the night he accidentally discovered Ladybug's identity. Then he realized secrets were overrated.

It happened when the two heroes had separated after vanquishing another villain. Ladybug had needed to change back, but Chat still had some time before he'd need to give Plagg a rest. As he watched from a distance, he saw Ladybug cross the bridge and duck into an alley between two buildings. If Chat had been anyone else, he wouldn't have seen her de-transformation. But, as part of his catlike superhero persona, his eyes worked perfectly in the dark.

And what he saw truly startled him: in Ladybug's place stood his friend, Marinette.

The part of Chat Noir that was completely and wholly Adrien was immediately shocked and thrilled. He wanted to go over to her and reveal himself so they'd be on equal ground. But the fraction of him that was influenced by his devious kwami decided that this was the perfect opportunity to have a little fun.

Chat leaped along rooftops, following Marinette as she made her way home. The bakery wasn't far from here. When they were only a few streets away, he swooped down and landed lightly beside her.

"Isn't it dangerous to walk around Paris at night by yourself?" he asked smoothly.

Marinette started, looking panicked. "What?"

"Did I scare you?"

"No, I just thought I was alone. Why are you following me?"

"Because you're alone. It's dangerous. I thought I said this already."

"I'm fine. I can take care of myself."

"I know you can. But I wanted to keep you company until you got back to the bakery."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She narrowed her blue eyes suspiciously.

Chat smiled and said nothing.
"And, for that matter, how do you know where I live?"

Another grin.

"Are you going to answer any of my questions?"

"Yes. This one."

She gave him a glare that was just…so Ladybug…Chat couldn't believe he hadn't figured out her identity sooner. All her mannerisms were the same. He'd just been distracted by the mask. And the spandex. And the murderous villains out to capture their Miraculouses.

"Oh, fine," she said, clutching her bag tighter to her hip. "Walk me home, then."

They walked in silence for a few minutes, Chat trying to figure out what to say. Should he tell her his secret now? Or should he wait? But Marinette interrupted his thoughts.

"So, why are you bothering to follow me? Aren't there thousands of other girls walking home alone tonight, desperately needing the protection of our famous superhero?"

"Yes, probably. But I saw you first."

"But why are you even here? There aren't any villains around. Shouldn't you be off duty? I bet Ladybug's probably on her way home by now."

"Oh, she definitely is." At this, Marinette gave him a strange look and he winked. "I'm actually here because I don't want to go home yet," he finished honestly.

"Really? Why?"

"Because I'll have to sneak into my room without my father noticing. I have a distant relationship with him. He…disapproves of my activities."

"Does he know about…?" she gestured to his mask.

"Definitely not. He got upset when I wanted to go to school instead of having a private tutor. How do you think he'd feel about me being a secret vigilante?" Chat chuckled softly, but Marinette looked sympathetic.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know what you mean. One of my friends has the same issue – he fought really hard to get to go to school instead of being at home the whole time."

"No way." Chat made the sarcasm as exaggerated as possible, but it had no effect on her.

"Yeah. His name is Adrien. Maybe you know him."

"It rings a bell." Chat flicked the bell at his collar for effect. Still no reaction from Marinette. Perhaps he was going to need to be more obvious. "Is he your boyfriend?"

She blushed scarlet. "No…I mean…well…"

"Cat got your tongue?" he asked innocently.

"Oh stop," she said irritably. "It's complicated, that's all."

"How is it complicated? Do you like him?"
"Yes," she said quietly.

"And I assume he likes you?" Chat didn't have to assume. He knew that was true.

"Well...maybe. I don't know. It's hard to read him."

"And if I could prove to you he did?"

She gave him a frightened look. "What?"

"If I could prove he likes you back, do you think that-"

"-what are you going to do? How could you possibly convince-"

"I have ways...my lady."

Marinette looked taken aback, and suddenly suspicious. "Wait..." Finally, she gets it.

They stopped walking.

"I thought you only called Ladybug my lady?"

"Yeah, I know. I do," Chat said meaningfully, raising an eyebrow. They stared at each other for a moment. Marinette seemed to be at a loss for words.

"So you know..."

"I know."

"But how? Who even are you?"

"Who do you think I am, Marinette?"

"If I didn't know better..."

"Yes?" Chat edged closer to her, his face shadowed in the lamp light.

She narrowed her eyes and peered into his face. "Tell me. I'd be embarrassed if I was wrong, especially since you guessed right."

"I didn't have to guess, I accidentally saw you change back. I can see in the dark, remember?"

Marinette frowned. "Just tell me who you are, Chat."

Wordlessly, he became Adrien again – his mask fell away and he stood modestly on the sidewalk in his street clothes. His green eyes flickered up to meet hers, and before Marinette could do anything more than squeak in surprise, he took her hand and brought it to his lips.

"Look at the both of us, finally unmasked. I hope you're not mad, but I figured it was time we knew." Marinette smiled at this, which was a good sign.

At least, it was, until she began to tip backward, looking faint. Adrien caught her in his arms and looked down at her relieved face with a winning smile.

"So, do you want to get dinner sometime?"
Chapter Summary

Trap: The truth about Hawkmoth just might shatter Chat Noir. And if that isn't enough, Ladybug witnesses it all unfold.

Part 1 of 2.

They stood at the start of a long, dark hallway illuminated only by a long string of flickering fluorescent lights. Ladybug wondered if Chat Noir was just as worried as she was. Of all the villains they'd ever faced, none was more formidable than this one. Hawkmoth. The master of many, ensnarer of any. His lair sat at the end of the hall, behind a pair of foreboding steel double doors.

Ladybug tried to calm her sprinting heart. "We're going to have to do this eventually."

Chat looked over at her. "I know," he said quietly.

"Look," she looked down at her feet, "if something happens to me-

"-No, don't say that. We are going to be fine."

"But if he makes either of us-"

"He won't," Chat said sharply.

"How do you know?"

They met eyes, and a silent promise passed between them. *They'd watch over each other. Always, until the end. Whatever that ending might be.*

Before Ladybug knew what she was doing, she started to walk. Chat fell into step at her side.

"What do you think we'll find behind those doors?" he asked.

"Let's find out."

When they reached the doors, they paused, knowing once they were inside there was no turning back. And in that moment, Chat gently took her hand in his. Their fingers interlaced. *We go together."

They each turned a knob and the doors swung open silently. Ladybug had been expecting a dark dungeon of a room, with Hawkmoth standing in a corner, watching some kind of surveillance camera setup. Chat Noir had been expecting a laboratory, with photographs and string attaching things to corkboards, with a caped man babbling at his plans like a maniac.

What neither of them expected was Gabriel Agreste standing in a round, white room, surrounded by iridescent butterflies. He was facing the door with his hands clasped behind his back, as if he had been waiting for them.

"It's about time you showed up," he said, giving them a jagged smile. "I know you were counting on the element of surprise, but I'm afraid you're rather predictable."
Chat Noir stiffened. Ladybug looked over at him, but he was staring at Gabriel with a mixture of fear and disgust.

"It's been you, this whole time? You're Hawkmoth?" she asked, completely shocked. *Poor Adrien, he'd be heartbroken if he knew.*

"Of course."

"You can't win. You know this."

Gabriel gave her a disconcertingly calm look. "I disagree. The mere confession of my identity was enough to distract you from hearing the doors lock behind you. My security system will ensure that the only way you leave is by my personal confirmation. And, as you probably guessed, the only way that will happen is if I receive your Miraculouses. You have my assurance that I'll keep my word. As long as you do as I ask."

"Never," said Chat in a trembling voice. His hand tightened around Ladybug's.

"I figured you would say that. I've taken the liberty of setting up some insurance in case you both proved to be difficult. I'll bet neither of you looked up when you walked in, did you?"

Ladybug's stomach seized. It was too late to do anything – there was a whooshing sound, and a barred cage dropped from its suspension above them. They were trapped like zoo animals on display.

"Don't bother trying to use your powers to escape. My kwami told me...under duress, of course...how to build this cage so that it would be inescapable, even with your considerable abilities."

Chat's hand clutched hers still tighter. Typically Ladybug thought they could get out of any tight corner, any terrible situation. But something felt different this time. Chat was not acting like his usual self. He was not confident or funny or witty. He looked truly scared.

Before either of them could act or say anything, Gabriel gave a mirthless laugh and transformed into Hawkmoth. He moved his hands in an upward motion and two white butterflies froze, controlled.

"These are pure akumas – they won't turn you into villains," he said nonchalantly. "They'll just put you temporarily under my power. They will make you extremely susceptible, and you can carry out my simple order without any...resistance. You'll forgive me, but I find it needless and tedious to physically fight a battle I know I can win with just my mind."

"No!" Chat shouted as the butterflies began to fly to them. "You don't understand! You can't do this!" His face was extremely pale, which made his green eyes stand out even more. He let go of Ladybug's hand.

Hawkmoth didn't react. He simply continued to make the butterflies follow his captives, no matter how much they moved around the cage. Unable to escape, Chat turned his back, curling into a ball and sliding to the floor. Ladybug backed herself against the side of the cage, a thin sheen of sweat on her forehead.

Then a butterfly landed on her shoulder and Ladybug gasped. A strange feeling of passiveness stole through her – it was as if she was awaking from sedation. Her brain understood what was happening, but she couldn't control her actions. She felt Chat go still at her feet and knew he was affected too.

How could they possibly get out of this?
"You will remove your Miraculouses and give them to me." The order echoed in her ears.

Against her will, Ladybug watched as her hands went to her earrings. Chat removed his ring. And then it occurred to her what was about to happen. Filled with fear but unable to fight it, Ladybug knew that without their Miraculouses, their masks would dissolve – and sure enough, she felt a rush of wind and knew she was Marinette again.

And Chat…she didn't know if she could handle knowing who was beneath that façade. Afraid of discovering his identity, she instead focused her eyes on her hand as it stretched out through the bars and handed over her earrings. But as soon as she'd fulfilled her command, the butterfly emerged from her shoulder and flew back to its master. She had command of her body again.

And it was then that she brought her eyes up to where her partner was still curled in on himself in the corner. She couldn't resist her curiosity anymore. She saw blond hair, a blue shirt. A pale arm wrapped around his face. His head rested on his knees. His other arm deposited his ring into a gloved hand, and a butterfly fluttered away from him and out of the cage. As soon as it had gone, he shivered and put both arms around his head.

Hawkmoth smiled as he pocketed their Miraculouses, seemingly uninterested in finding out their identities. He turned his back on them and walked away to admire his prizes. He hit a small button at his desk, causing the cage to lift and the doors to unlock. "You're free to leave," he said coldly, not even turning around. He figured that without their Miraculouses, the two ex-heroes were powerless against him. They were no longer worthy of his attention. And who would believe them if they told anyone he was Hawkmoth? No one would take the word of a mere teenager seriously.

Marinette knelt beside her partner, who hadn't so much as moved.

"Are you okay?" she asked quietly.

"No," was his honest reply. "We need to get our Miraculouses back, before he does something terrible. We need a plan."

"My promise still stands. I'll help you. Until the end. You'd do the same for me."

"But I didn't! If I'd known it was Gabriel Agreste…I should have known. I should have seen-"

"You couldn't have done anything – there was no way you could have known…no matter who you are. You don't have to hide your identity from me."

"You don't understand. Of all people, I should have been the one to see this coming. I'm sorry; I could have prevented all of this."

Marinette put a hand on his shoulder – he was trembling. "Why?"

Slowly, he lifted his face to look at her, momentarily taken aback at seeing her instead of the familiar alter-ego. And she understood why Chat had been so affected by the discovery that Hawkmoth was Gabriel Agreste.

Because she was staring into the distraught face of his son.
Familiar Faces

Chapter Summary

Familiar Faces: A continuation of Chapter 4, Trap.

Marinette was no longer wearing her mask. Hawkmoth had taken her Miraculous, and had robbed Chat of his too. While Hawkmoth was eager to take their powers, he seemed uninterested in their identities, and had gone to the far corner to inspect the Miraculouses.

Chat sat curled on the cement, hiding his face against his knees with his arms wrapped like a protective shell.

Marinette crouched down beside him. "Are you okay?"

"No," was his honest reply. "We need to get our Miraculouses back somehow."

"My promise still stands. I'll help you. Until the end. You'd do the same for me."

"But I didn't, Ladybug! If I'd known Hawkmoth was Gabriel Agreste…I should have known. I should have seen-"

"You couldn't have done anything – there was no way you could have known…no matter who you are, Chat. You don't have to hide from me, you know."

"You don't understand. Of all people, I should have been the one to see this coming. I'm sorry; I could have prevented all of this."

Marinette put a hand on his shoulder – he was trembling. "Why?"

Slowly, he lifted his face to look at her, seeming momentarily taken aback at seeing her instead of the familiar alter-ego. And she understood why Chat had been so affected by the discovery that Hawkmoth was Gabriel Agreste.

Because she was staring into the distraught face of his son.

"Marinette?" he asked. "Is that really you?"

"Oh, Adrien," she said, her voice cracking slightly.

She stared into his eyes, wondering how it was possible that she'd been working alongside her crush all this time. And she pitied him – he'd just discovered his own father was trying to orchestrate a takeover of Paris. Adrien, as Chat, had been waging a war against his own blood without ever realizing it.

And his father stood mere meters away, completely and intentionally oblivious to the fact that Adrien was Chat Noir.

Marinette put her hands on Adrien's. His were ice cold.

"It's going to be okay."
He blinked and stared into her face again, his expression softening. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Because we can still beat Hawkmouth. It's not over."

"I'm not much good to you as Adrien. I just found out my entire life has been a lie – my own father has tried to murder me on multiple occasions. I'm not exactly in the best state of mind. And I can't be a superhero right now, not without my powers."

"And when has that ever stopped you from helping people before?"

"Uh…"

Marinette jogged his memory. "I still have your black umbrella, you know."

"You remember that?" his eyes widened. "It was so long ago."

"I never forget the help of a friend. Can I return the favor?"

Adrien thought for a moment, then shifted slightly and interlocked his fingers with hers. "It hardly seems even – this is so much more of a favor than the gift of a simple umbrella."

"Adrien, don't you see? It was never just a simple umbrella to me."

"Oh."

There was a charged pause.

"So, what do we do?" he finally asked.

"Do you remember the one extraordinary thing your father did when we first walked in here?"

"A few things come to mind, actually," he said dryly.

"Think."

"Well…he wasn't wearing his mask. He knew we'd be taken aback by his revelation of his identity. It disarmed us, and he took advantage of it."

"Exactly. And I think I know how we can get him to drop his guard long enough for me to grab our Miraculouses. Then we can fight him, or escape – he's left no barriers. He's so confident that we can't beat him without our powers. He knows…thinks…he's won. But we can defeat his heart."

"So we don't use force. We do what he did," Adrien said, following. "But what's -" He broke off, understanding. Marinette squeezed his hand encouragingly.

"Oh," he said, his face darkening. "You mean you want me to…"

"It's our best shot, I'm afraid. Distract him, and I'll slip behind unseen. He won't see this coming."

"Marinette…what you're asking…it's going to be really difficult for me. I don't know if I can."

"Do you have a better idea? I don't know what else is there to do. We have a responsibility to Paris to stop your father. That responsibility doesn't vanish with our Miraculouses. Sometimes we have to do the hard thing because it's the right thing. I believe in you. You can't give up."

Adrien tilted his head, looking at Marinette with sad admiration. "You're absolutely right. You're
always right."

She touched his cheek and wiped a tear away. "No. Only when it matters."

"Thank you," he said suddenly.

"What for?"

"Being you. Being Marinette. I'm sorry you had to put up with me as Chat."

She leaned closer to him, tucking her hand under his chin. "Between you and me, I enjoyed every minute. Don't you dare apologize for helping me save Paris. Now get up and help me take Hawkmoth down."

Her conviction seemed to rouse something in Adrien. His eyes sparked and he made to stand up. Together they rose to face Hawkmoth, whose back was still to them as he walked to where a computer was set up in the far left corner. The Miraculouses now lay on the work bench in the far right corner – it would be easy for Marinette to grab them if unnoticed.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Yeah," Adrien breathed, frowning and steeling his expression. He was hiding away his anger and grief, smoothing his features. It was something Chat always did before lunging into battle. Seeing it on Adrien's face made all the memories of what he'd done as Chat flood back to Marinette. He'd always had her back.

Now she'd have his.

"Hawkmoth, tell me something," Adrien said, placing his hands behind his back to hide their shaking and walking forward confidently. "I know your quest has always been to recover our Miraculouses. But do you have any idea how easy it would have been to get mine? You could have had it ages ago. If only you'd been more observant. If only you'd been more of a father."

He spat this last word so viciously that Hawkmoth spun around, startled.

His eyes fell upon his son and he froze.

"Adrien? You're Chat? But…that's impossible…"

While they were locked in an eye-to-eye confrontation, Marinette slipped around the side of the room quietly and reached the work bench where the Miraculouses lay. She took her earrings and put them on, then placed Chat's ring securely in her left fist.

"I refuse to stand by and let you enslave innocent people," Adrien was saying. His father was still standing there, unmoving. "I have resisted you ever since I became Chat Noir, and I will still resist you now. There are no masks between us now. No alter-egos. We see each other for who we are, finally. And yet, I see you as a villain. Not as a father. That is no one's fault but your own.

"You obtained power by force. I didn't ask for mine, I accepted it as a responsibility. I even gave my power to you moments ago, when I thought I had nothing to lose. But now I understand. I could lose Ladybug. I could lose my ability to save our city. I could lose my concept of responsibility. And although I may have already lost your love, I am still your son, and I can still disarm you and fight to win back those things I could still lose. Without weapons, using only the truth."
He smiled bitterly and continued. "It doesn't take powers to feel love and loss, father. It just takes the sight of a familiar face."

*Like the sight of me, Marinette thought with a smile. Or the sight of Adrien, in my case.*

Adrien took a final step forward, making eye contact with Marinette just for a second. She nodded – *I have them* – and he looked away. She made her way slowly back to where he stood and slipped her left hand into his. Hawkmoth didn't even seem to notice Marinette at all. His eyes were still staring, slightly unfocused, at the blond boy who was standing up to him even now, even when he was probably heartbroken and scared.

Marinette felt as Adrien curled his hands surreptitiously around his ring and squeezed her fingers in thanks.

"And despite all your power, Hawkmoth," he said quietly, "you will never control me again."

He dropped Marinette's hand and cleared his throat.

"Plagg," he said in a dangerously calm voice, "claws out."
Of all the things that could bring a warrior like himself to his knees, Chat Noir had always imagined it would be some kind of evil robot, or a supervillain determined to take over the world. In his line of work, he expected defeat but fought to win. Usually he succeeded, and so he'd never experienced what it might be like to lose.

But today was the day that changed all of that. And now that Chat knew what defeat felt like, he would never take victory for granted again.

In his current situation, Chat had never felt more dejected or humiliated. He knew that he could never overcome this on his own. Despite all his amazing abilities, the one he needed now escaped him. Thanks to the catlike instincts that came with his powers, he had found himself in a position that was inescapable without the help of someone who wouldn't judge him. Because…well…

Chat Noir was stuck in a tree.

He was crouching on a branch quite high up, and the view of the park lay far below. He'd launched himself there, unthinking, to avoid another one of Hawkmoth's akumatized villains. He'd been so focused on his evasion techniques that he hadn't really realized where he was. By the time he did, he had become aware that his staff - the only thing that could have allowed him to catapult out of the tree - was lying uselessly on the ground.

He could only watch as Ladybug purified the akuma and began walking around the park, trying to find her partner. The crowd that had gathered to watch the battle was still meandering through the park, taking photos of Ladybug. A few of them had even found Chat's perch and were snapping pictures eagerly.

If he'd been Adrien, it would have been easy to jump or climb down. But something overrode his logic when he was Chat, and for the life of him, he just simply couldn't bring himself to do it.
In about five minutes, his time as Chat would expire and he'd expose his identity to the public. Unless he could get Ladybug to help him down soon, he was trapped in a terrible situation.

Swallowing his pride, he called to her, and she came to stand at the bottom of the tree, shielding her eyes with her hands and staring up at him.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked.

"I'm...uh...stuck."

There was a pause, and Chat heard her giggle. *A Chat stuck in a tree.*

Some of the bystanders laughed and took more pictures. He felt his face flushing with embarrassment.

"Yeah, it's hilarious. Look, this is already humiliating enough. Can you help get me down? I'm running out of time."

Ladybug seemed to understand the urgency, and sobered. "I'll be right up." With seemingly no effort, she swung her yoyo, soared into the air, and landed daintily on the branch beside his.

"Take my hand."

"I thought you'd never ask, my lady."

"Still flirting, even when your identity's on the line. I admire that."

"I know you do."

Chat could have sworn Ladybug almost smiled.

And then a loud beeping noise ruined the moment. "That's my cue," they both said at the same time.

She cast her yoyo into the distance. "Let's go."

With a sharp tug, the two heroes flew from the tree into the sky, landing on a nearby rooftop, away from the public eye.

"That was a close one. Thank you," Chat breathed, finally able to relax. He hadn't realized how tense he'd been until now. His shoulder and leg muscles ached.

"So were you actually stuck?"

"Of course I was. My instincts got the better of me, I guess."

"What would have happened if I'd left without you?" The thought seemed to distress her. "You'd have been exposed to the whole city!"

"I knew you'd be there for me," Chat shrugged. It was true.

"I wish you didn't trust me so much," Ladybug said, suddenly looking downcast.

"Well, I do. And I know you rely on and trust me too, despite the fact that you probably shouldn't. I'm afraid of being in trees, as we both learned today. That is not a good quality to have in a partner, my lady."
"That's not funny-"

But then the unthinkable happened.

They'd been talking for too long. There was a tingling of energy that started at their toes as they began to de-transform. Eyes wide, Ladybug yelled, "Turn around!" and they both spun so they were back to back as they returned to their normal appearances.

And if anyone could have seen that rooftop, they would have found an ordinary couple. A boy and a girl standing in opposite directions looking out at the Paris horizon. It would have meant nothing.

But to Marinette and Adrien, it meant everything.

"What do we do?" asked Adrien. He was staring into the distance, looking for an entrance to the building.

"I-I don't know," Marinette replied. "Without being able to transform, it looks like we're on our own to get out of here. I don't have any food for my kwami, so she can't recharge."

"Neither can mine. We need to get off this roof."

"Preferably without seeing each other, of course. There's a door to a staircase on my side – I'll see if it's open."

She walked over to it and there was a clicking noise, then footsteps coming close again. "It's locked. Maybe even rusted shut." She was standing behind him now, her back almost against his.

"Okay," said Adrien. "There's a small gap on my side between this building and the next roof. We can easily jump across and try that door. It's propped open; I can see it from here."

There was a pause.

"Um…Chat?"

"Yeah?"

"You know how you couldn't get out of that tree?"

"…Yes," he said, not sure where she was going with this.

"Well…when I'm not Ladybug…I'm…well, I'm kind of afraid of heights."

Adrien was so surprised that he burst out laughing. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, it's hilarious. Look, this is already humiliating enough." She purposely used the same words he'd used before, in the park. "I'm serious, Chat. I don't think I can jump."

"It's really not that far," Adrien said encouragingly. "You just have to make a tiny leap. I've seen you do far less, fearlessly."

"I…I can't. I just can't."

"What if we did it together?"

"But…then we'd see each other's identities."
"Well, we could always jump with our eyes closed-"

"No! We are not doing that!"

But Adrien was already laughing again. "I was kidding," he said.

Marinette sighed. "I guess we could jump together...it's our only option."

"Yeah, it is. I mean, unless you'd prefer we sit here forever. Which might be kind of pleasant. We could get to know each other. Bond. Tell stories. Starve to death. So romantic."

"Ugh, I don't need this from you right now."

"You like my sass, you're just afraid to admit it."

Marinette smiled, glad he couldn't see. "Let's get this over with. Should we just turn around, or what?" she said.

"On three." He sounded confident.

"Okay," Marinette said shakily.

"One."

"Two."

"Three."

"You're Ladybug?"

"You're Chat Noir?"

The identical looks of incredulity soon became wide smiles. "I knew it," said Adrien. "I totally knew it."

"You did not, you're just saying that," Marinette said indignantly, crossing her arms. "I did wonder about you of course, but..."

"But what?" Adrien was smiling.

"Well...Chat flirts with me, but you never did. I assumed you didn't like me that way. And if that was true, how could you two be the same person?"

"Is that a trick question? We are the same person."

"Look, I can't think straight until we get off this roof," said Marinette. "Can we just jump already? We can get dinner and talk about all this once I'm firmly on the ground again."

"All right. Take my hand." He held it out to her.

Marinette looked into those green eyes, remembering when she'd said that to Chat a few minutes before. She'd rescued him from embarrassment. Now it was his turn to help her. Somewhere in those eyes, Chat was still there, but this was Adrien. She'd been trusting her crush with her life all this time. And she'd trust him with her secret now too.

His hand was warm - his fingers wrapped around hers with a gentle but strong grip. He smiled, and
said, "Okay, take a step back to prepare. The gap's pretty small - we'll clear it easily. You with me, my lady?"

She gave a small squeak, but it was mostly because he had squeezed her hand - she was still too busy processing everything to feel her fear the way she otherwise would have.

"Now!"

They soared over the gap together, landing easily on the other side.

"How's that for a leap of faith?" asked Adrien.

The next morning at school, Chloe sat in the classroom leafing through the most recent copy of the newspaper. Adrien was surprised, to say the least. Chloe never read the newspaper. He hadn't even been sure she knew how to read a newspaper.

But when he saw the article she was looking at, he finally understood. He took a seat in his normal spot, casually glancing back at the newspaper.

*Chat Noir and Ladybug, Sitting in a Tree! Can You Spell "Kissing"?* read the title, and there was a massive photo of the heroes to accompany it.

Adrien flushed a little, but was glad the article hadn't been worse. All of Paris could have discovered his secret yesterday. Instead, only one person did, and it was the only one that mattered.

As if on cue, Marinette came into the classroom and sat behind him, giving him a subdued smile. "Hi," she said, handing him a box that contained Plagg's favorite Camembert. "This is to say thanks for yesterday."

"Same," he said, quietly passing her a tin full of chocolate chip cookies and gave her a meaningful look.

Marinette hid the cookies in her bag for Tikki and looked around the room, her gaze falling upon Chloe's newspaper. When she saw the article, her cheeks went bright red, and she looked back into Adrien's eyes.

"The paper got it wrong," she said, just loud enough for him to hear.

"I know."

"It wasn't a tree. It was a rooftop."

"Shhh," he whispered, a smile curling up on his lips. "No one needs to know about that kiss but us."

"It'll be our little secret."

"One of two, my lady."
I Chose You (Part 1 of 2)

Chapter Summary

I Chose You: Master Fu has been called many things throughout his career: Warrior, Friend, Healer. While Matchmaker was never one of them, he's surprisingly good at it.

Chapter Notes

This reveal was written just after the Origins Episodes and Volpina came out, and we didn't have Rena Rouge or Queen Bee as characters back then. So keep in mind when I say Volpina and Bumblebee, those are names I chose in 2016, before we knew anything about season 2 or its characters. A couple of the other older reveals I'll post have similar discrepancies in names, so please just keep that in mind. Nevertheless, I hope you'll enjoy the reveal for the ancient relic it is! Thanks!

Master Fu knew she was ready.

He’d been tutoring Marinette for six months, helping her hone her powers and training her to face increasingly challenging foes. If she and Chat Noir were expected to defeat Hawkmoth, they'd need more than their motivation. They'd need Fu's advice, and they'd need each other.

Fu had been tutoring Adrien separately, of course. The heroes' training sessions required very different focus points, and he couldn't teach both of them at the same time. Besides – a joint session might expose their identities, which were a secret.

For now, anyway.

Master Fu had a plan. It had taken six months of training Ladybug and Chat Noir to set it in motion, but luckily he was well equipped to wait. His turtle kwami was an excellent guide in the art of patience.

"Ladybug," Fu said to her one rainy afternoon, just as she was about to leave. She'd been packing her backpack, but stopped and looked up at him.

"I've been thinking, and I believe you're ready for the next step in your training."

"Really? What is it?"

He held out a yellow box to her. "Take it."

She lifted it and gave him a confused look.

"It's a Miraculous," he said. "I do not know if you are aware, but there used to be a time when all of the Miraculouses were in good hands, and all of them worked together. It was a time of peace and prosperity, but sadly, it did not last forever. Warriors become injured, heroes make mistakes, the good can become corrupted. The unity of the Miraculouses has not been achieved for many
centuries. But, in some circumstances, teamwork has done wonders." He nodded at Ladybug. "You and Chat have a special bond. You are stronger as a team than you would be apart. Can you imagine what a third partner, if chosen correctly, could help you both achieve?"

Her eyes widened. "Do you mean-"

"I'd like you to choose the next Bumblebee," he confirmed softly. "Place the box in their bag, and they'll be told by the kwami to come straight to me. We can explain everything to them together. Ladybug, I trust your judgment, and I know that your kind heart and empathetic character will draw you to the perfect person. You're ready for this task."

"But what about Chat? Shouldn't he get to help decide?"

"Chat Noir respects your decision. He will happily accept whomever you choose."

Marinette looked somewhat relieved, but she was still frowning.

"Master, what if I choose wrong? What if I make a mistake and we end up with someone worse than Hawkmoth? I'd never forgive myself."

She tried to give the small box back, but he pushed her hand away, closing her fingers around it. "I understand your trepidation. I chose wrong once, a long time ago. I was foolish and chose someone who had not proven himself worthy. I rushed into it. I assumed that the Miraculous would make him a better man, and I was wrong. You must understand, Ladybug, that a Miraculous does not change who you are. It amplifies your true self. And you should consider it a testament to your character how much good you have done since putting on those earrings. Find someone like you, and you can never go wrong."

He gave her a kind smile, and she weakly returned it. She didn't seem wholly convinced, but her humbleness was one of her best qualities. Her confidence would build. She'd be back with her choice.

And Master Fu had a fairly good idea of who that would be. Things were about to become very interesting.

Marinette couldn't pay attention in class. She kept trying to focus, but she couldn't stop analyzing her classmates. Who should she choose? Perhaps she should pick Nino? Or Alya? They both were kind and smart and eager to help. They weren't afraid of danger or running headlong into the fray to assist people in need.

But then she thought about how Nino wasn't exactly the most responsible person. Even as she surveyed him, he was digging through his backpack for his assignment that was due today. Eventually, he pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper stained with spilled tea.

Mmmmmm, maybe he wouldn't make the best superhero after all.

And Alya was very devoted to the Ladyblog. What if becoming a superhero meant she would use the power only to get exclusive interviews of Ladybug and Chat when they were supposed to be fighting a monster? As much as she loved her best friend, she wasn't sure if Alya was focused enough for the job. And if it didn't turn out well, Marinette didn't want to lose a kindred spirit.

Who should she choose? An adult? No, they'd never believe her.

It would need to be someone she knew well. Someone she could trust as much as she trusted Chat
Noir. Whoever he was.

Marinette knew he'd always be there for her. They moved as one in battle. She protected him, and he had her back. They were close friends and a well suited team. Who could possibly fit with their dynamic?

Her eyes fell on Chloe and she almost laughed. Definitely not.

Not Sabrina.

Not Ivan…

Not Alix, or Juleka…

Her eyes wandered back to the board, and then down to the seat in front of hers.

Adrien sat there, dutifully taking notes. When he noticed Nino's wrinkled brown assignment, he wordlessly slipped his friend an extra piece of paper so he could recopy it. How thoughtful.

Could Adrien be a good choice?

She'd seen him do plenty of admirable things. This was the boy who'd rebelled against homeschooling simply so he could make friends. He'd encouraged Alya to join newspaper to hone her journalism skills for the blog. He'd brought Marinette soup once when she'd been sick, and he'd given her his black umbrella so she hadn't needed to walk in the rain. He'd been thrust into the spotlight as a fashion model, but had never let it get to him. He handled pressure well and kept his cool around irritating people. He was responsible and caring.

Sometimes he was a bit forgetful and he was often late to class, but, then again, so was Marinette.

Would he get along with Chat Noir? They were so different. But Chat was friendly – he hardly ever made enemies. And he was likeable enough that Adrien probably wouldn't feel uncomfortable around him.

Marinette imagined Adrien joining her side in a fight. She could picture it so vividly that it was almost as though it had already happened.

But something still bothered her. She thought about the Miraculous sitting in her purse, and realized she wasn't at all ready to give it away. She wanted to wait a little and do some more discerning. She'd learned to be patient and not rush into things.

When classes were over for the day, she walked home and confined herself to her room. Tikki flew out of her bag. "Did you decide?" she asked hopefully.

Marinette told her what she'd been thinking, but then explained why she felt torn. "Tikki, I like Adrien. How do I know that what I see in him isn't tinted by my crush on him? I'm finding it hard to be objective."

"What if someone else had Adrien's personality? If they acted the way Adrien does but they were a completely different person? Would they still make a good hero?"

"Yes," she said, and meant it. "I've seen him make sacrifices and yet he's always compassionate enough not to mind doing it. I think he'd be a good fit."

"Pun intended?" Tikki chirped.
"What pun?"

"He'd bee a good fit?" her kwami giggled.

"Ah, no! Chat's pun-making must be rubbing off on me." Marinette buried her red face in her hands.

"It's not a bad thing. I know you secretly enjoy them."

"Oh, hush."

The following morning, Marinette slipped the yellow box into Adrien's bag between classes. The day passed with agonizing slowness, and Marinette was all too happy to race out the door at the end of the school day.

She walked quickly along the sidewalk on her way to training. She was so excited to bring Adrien into her world. Even if he never knew she was Ladybug, they'd still get to know each other better and save Paris with Chat Noir. And that made her feel warm inside.

While she walked, it occurred to her to check her bag just in case she'd forgotten something. But as she rummaged, she noticed something at the bottom of it. It was a beautiful brown box that looked strangely like the yellow one she'd given away this morning.

What in the world?

She held it in her hand, and Tikki flew out to examine it. "You should bring that to the Grand Master," she said.

"I know. I wonder how it got there."

"No idea," smiled Tikki, but she didn't sound very convincing. Marinette frowned. Her kwami would definitely have seen if someone had slipped it into her bag. What was she hiding?

When she reached her destination, she pushed open Master Fu's door, knocking lightly.

"Hello, Ladybug," he said.

"Master, I brought something back to you. It doesn't belong to me, but I recognized it when I found it in my purse. It's a Miraculous, but I don't know how it got there." She pulled out the brown box and tried to give it back to him.

"Ah," said Fu, looking somewhat smug. "Thank you for returning it, but I believe it was intended for you."

"What do you mean?"

But before he could answer, Adrien entered the room in a rush, holding a yellow box and looking very confused.

"Master Fu, I think you made a mistake. This isn't mine and I thought you'd want it back. I already gave the other Miraculous to-"

And then he froze, realizing who was in the room. He and Marinette locked eyes, looking startled. Infuriatingly, Master Fu said nothing.
"Wait a minute," Adrien said slowly, his green eyes sweeping between the old man and his classmate. "Marinette, do you know what's going on here?" He then looked down at the brown box in her hand. "You found it!" he remarked, looking pleased.

She just stared at him. What was going on?

"But…" she began. "How do you already know about Miraculouses?"

Adrien frowned. "How do you know about Miraculouses?"

"I…" she trailed off, just now noticing the expression on Master Fu's face. It was as though his favorite television program had just started.

"Finally," he said. "You two can properly meet."

They exchanged a he's crazy look. "But we already know each other, sir," said Adrien, not quite following.

"Adrien, explain why Marinette has a brown box."

"I…slipped it into her bag. I wanted her to hold the next Miraculous. I chose her."

Marinette felt that she was definitely missing something important.

"And Marinette, explain to Adrien why he has the yellow box." Fu's tone was that of a teacher trying to explain something to remedial students.

"I was doing the same thing. I chose you," she said.

"But…" Adrien was still staring at Marinette, thinking hard.

Master Fu helped them along. "Ladybug and Chat Noir were both given the same task. Find someone worthy of a Miraculous. You are who they chose."

And then it dawned on them. Marinette dropped the box she was so surprised. Adrien paled, his palms suddenly sweaty.

"Ladybug," said Fu, walking over and picking up the box for her, "I think it's time you and Adrien had a little Chat."

"You're Ladybug? I was supposed to pick a third hero, and I picked you? What are the odds?" Adrien looked ecstatic.

Marinette tilted her head. "Are you really Chat Noir? I chose…you? After all my deliberating?"

And then both of them turned to Master Fu. "Did you plan this? Did you know we'd pick each other?"

"What can I say? You both are such a good fit. You know what to look for in a partner. You know each other so well that you were able to find them out of millions of people, even though you were not wearing your masks. That is the mark of a true partnership. Your training has gone marvelously, and I am proud to know that Paris is in good hands," he said happily.

But his apprentices were giving each other a look he recognized well. It was the look Ladybug and Chat exchanged before going to fight a villain.
"Well, Chat, I don't know about you, but I'd like a bit more explanation as to how he manipulated us into this," Marinette said. Her eyes had narrowed, but they kept their mirth. "Claws out?"

"I think you're spot on," said Adrien playfully. Marinette turned a lovely shade of rose.

"Please, just ask each other out, already," chuckled Master Fu. "I'm a patient man, but even I have my limits."
Adrien kept telling himself this as he rode to school. He tipped his head until it lay up against the limousine window, letting the cool glass sit against his forehead. The next few days were going to be incredibly difficult, and it was all Master Fu's fault.

How could the Grand Master have entrusted him with a task as monumental as finding the new Volpina? Adrien was a teenager. A superpower-wielding teenager, but still. What made Fu think Adrien had any of the qualifications to pick a partner to join Chat and Ladybug? He could hardly choose what to eat for lunch.

Adrien had already seen what happened when a Miraculous fell into the wrong hands. Hawkmoth constantly caused havoc in Paris, and Ladybug and Chat still hadn't been able to defeat him – having a corrupted Miraculous working against them was hard enough. What if Adrien chose wrong and they had to take down two of them?

"Oh, sorry…uh, it's for…Chinese. Yeah…Chinese. I have to translate it…" Adrien said, pretending to look at his tablet studiously. His bodyguard gave him a dubious look but thankfully didn't press the issue. He never did, which was probably a good thing.

Adrien got to school early.

Once he was safely in his seat in class, he began analyzing everyone he saw. Could the next holder of the Miraculous be sitting in this room? The thought made him uncomfortable. Adrien felt hot and nervous – a choice like this was a lot of pressure. He'd rather take on Jagged Stone's crocodile than face making this selection.
After all, if Adrien was barely able to be Chat Noir, keep it a secret, and not die, how could he thrust that kind of responsibility onto someone else?

He was distracted from his panic as Chloe and Sabrina entered the classroom, frowning and whispering to each other. Nino followed behind them and plunked down into the chair next to Adrien. The front of his shirt was stained with something that looked like the remnants of a cup of earl grey tea.

"Dude," he said in way of greeting.

Adrien lifted his chin in response. "What happened to your shirt?"

"Oh, that…it's actually part of what I was about to tell you. You'll never guess what I just saw."

"What?"

"So, I bought tea from the shop on the corner, and as I was walking into school, I saw Chloe picking on Ivan on the school steps."

"Okay, but that happens all the time. It's what Chloe does, loath as I am to say that."

"But wait, impatient one, there's more," Nino said, putting up a hand. "Because this time Chloe didn't get the last word."

"What does that mean?"

"Marinette. She saw what was happening and told Chloe to pick on someone her own size. Which was funny, you know, because Ivan's so much bigger than Chloe is."

"Yeah, I get it."

"So anyway," Nino continued, attempting to dab at his stained shirt and bag with a napkin, "Chloe turned on Marinette and told her she'd get her suspended or whatever – you know, the usual empty threats. But then Marinette said, 'The only thing in need of a suspension is your attitude. How would you feel if someone treated you the way you just treated Ivan? Ladybug would be disappointed in her biggest fan, wouldn't she?' And then Chloe stormed off, shoved her way through the doors, and left everyone alone. I'm telling you, it was awesome. Marinette's got guts, dude."

Adrien sat thinking for a moment, impressed. He knew this wasn't the first time Marinette had gone out of her way to care for other students. She was brave and stood up for what was right, even when it meant taking risks to stop someone like Chloe. She'd known exactly how to get Chloe to rethink her actions – relying on Chloe's Ladybug obsession – in order to prevent more bullying.

He watched as Marinette finally entered the classroom, gave Chloe an appraising stare, and sat in her seat behind Adrien as though nothing had happened. She probably hadn't given a second thought to the fact that she'd just taken down the school bully just by being herself. Being kind and protective of others was just something she did. This was one instance among hundreds for her.

It made Adrien wonder what Marinette might be capable of if she were facing an akumatized villain. The idea of her being a superhero was so real to Adrien that he wondered whether it was a memory or just his imagination. She might be the perfect choice to be the next Volpina. Could anyone else
As Adrien looked around the room again, he saw the faces of his classmates, and felt sure that Marinette was indeed one of a kind. When his eyes fell on Lila he considered her for a split second, simply because she'd technically been Volpina for a day, even if it was only thanks to an akuma. But then he remembered the circumstances – all the lies she'd told – and figured she probably wasn’t trustworthy enough. Not to mention the fact that Ladybug and Lila did not get along at all. Adrien may be Chat Noir, but that was one cat fight he'd like to avoid at all costs.

But Marinette…

He was very sure she'd be an excellent choice. He imagined her leaping across rooftops with him, side by side, having his back while he had hers, laughing with her and Ladybug after winning another battle. It made his heart thum wildly in his chest. Somehow, choosing Marinette just felt right. He'd let the decision sit for a day, just to be sure, but somehow he just knew…

Adrien turned back to Nino, suddenly remembering something.

"Wait...how does any of this explain why you're covered in tea?"

"Oh yeah! Well, when I said Chloe shoved her way to the doors to get to class…well, she shoved into me. My tea spilled everywhere. I think it got my homework wet too," he said sadly.

Adrien was about to offer Nino a new piece of paper, but their teacher began to talk. So when his friend pulled out his stained, wrinkled, vaguely fragrant travesty of an assignment, Adrien quietly slipped a fresh piece of paper onto the table and gave his friend a smile.

The next morning, after talking things over with Plagg and making absolutely sure Marinette was the right choice, Adrien slipped the ornate brown box containing the Miraculous into Marinette's purse. He tried not to look at what was inside, but he did catch a glimpse of something red. A tomato? Perhaps...but why would she be carrying one around in her bag? Oh well. He didn't think anything more of it.

But then things started to get weird.

It began when he walked out of the building after school and discovered a yellow Miraculous box in his backpack.

He raced to Master Fu, worried something had gone wrong or that somehow the Miraculous had been taken and had ended up in his bag by mistake. But when he burst through the door and saw Marinette already standing there, he got confused.

"Wait a minute…Marinette, do you know what's going on here?" He looked down at the brown box in her hand and said, "You found it!"

Her face was frozen, wide eyed and surprised.

"But…" she began. "How do you know about Miraculouses?"

Adrien frowned. "How do you know about Miraculouses?"

"I…" she trailed off, just now noticing the expression on Master Fu's face.

"Finally," he said. "You two can properly meet."
Adrien realized he'd been right all along. Master Fu really was a crazy old man. Marinette appeared to be thinking the same thing.

But then Master Fu explained it all, slowly and thoroughly. "Ladybug and Chat Noir were given the same task. Find someone worthy of a Miraculous. You are who they chose," he finished dramatically.

Marinette dropped her box. And Adrien thought back to the tomato in her purse. Wait a minute. That hadn't been a tomato. Could that have been a Miraculous? *Ladybug's* Miraculous?

"Ladybug," Fu said, walking over and picking up the box, "I think it's time you and Adrien had a little *Chat*."

Adrien started to laugh. *That sly little...*

After all that worrying, he'd chosen the one person who'd already had a Miraculous. He'd chosen Ladybug. *And Marinette chose me*, he thought happily.

Part of him felt indignant at being tricked, but he also felt reassured. The girl he'd been so impressed with was actually Ladybug all along. Somehow, the fact that his lady was Marinette just made her seem even more extraordinary. He loved her even more. His lady was the champion against akumas, but she was also the defender against the average bully.

"Did you plan this? Did you know we'd pick each other?"

"What can I say? You both are such a good fit. You know what to look for in a partner. You know each other so well that you were able to find them out of millions of people, while not wearing your masks. That is the mark of a true partnership. Your training has gone marvelously, and I am proud to know that Paris is in good hands."

But Marinette was giving Fu a calculating look that Adrien only saw before they went into battle.

"Well, Chat, I don't know about you, but I'd like a bit more explanation as to how he manipulated us into this," she said. Her eyes had narrowed, but they kept their mirth. "Claws out?"

"I think you're *spot* on," said Adrien playfully. She gave him an amused look, and he blushed. He thought about how she smelled like honeysuckle and fresh baked bread, and how her cheeks dimpled when she smiled, and how her eyes looked like the ocean. The deep, swirling waves of the ocean, sparkling and full of life.

He was too lost in Marinette's blue eyes to process what Master Fu said next.

But whatever that crazy old man said was the reason Adrien and Marinette ended up on a date that following Saturday. And as they sat together over dinner and watched Paris live and breathe and shine, it wasn't so hard to believe that they'd chosen each other.

Perhaps Master Fu wasn't that crazy after all.
Red Like Roses

Chapter Summary

Red Like Roses: Ladybug gets injured during a fight, and Chat Noir races to get her to the hospital. Their time is running out, not just for her secret, but also for her life.

Chapter Notes

A quick warning - there are mentions of injuries/blood in this one, but nothing above the T rating. And I do not own the quotes from Hamlet, they belong to Shakespeare.

This was one night Chat Noir would never forget. It was the night of the roses.

It was a lazy summer night, but he was sprinting down the sidewalk. The street was cleared around him to prevent civilians from getting caught in the battle, but he could hear sirens blaring behind him. The lamp lights cast eerie yellow glows onto the sidewalk, but he was seeing in only black and white and red.

They'd just saved the city from another attack, but he was losing Ladybug with every moment he wasn't at her side.

He pushed himself harder, almost wheezing with the effort. The slash on his leg was still bleeding and it took everything he had not to limp, but he kept on running until he found where she lay.

He crumpled to the ground beside her, breathing hard. "Can you hear me?" he asked, touching her cheek gently. "I'm going to get you to the hospital. You're going to be okay, okay?" He said it just as much for himself as it was for her.

His heart leapt as her eyes fluttered open. Even in this current situation, her eyes could still disarm him. They were the kind of blue that swirled like the ocean, constantly making him feel like he was in motion. Like he was falling.

"What happened?" she whispered. She tried to sit up but gasped in pain. Chat put a hand to her shoulder and made her lie back down.

"Don't try to move, you got hurt fighting Knifeblade. Do you remember?"

She nodded slowly, her hand going to her side. Chat knew what was there. He'd seen it all happen. She hadn't been quick enough to dodge the razor. But he couldn't look directly at the wound. It was gruesome. He knew it was bad. Really bad.

Where was that ambulance? His heart was pounding. If they weren't here soon, he was going to have to take matters into his own hands.

Ladybug's eyes started to close again. He tapped her cheeks to wake her up.
"No, my lady! You're going to pull through, just stay awake."

She gave him a sleepy smile. "To sleep, perchance to dream."

"No, no sleeping. Stay with me." Chat's green eyes were wide and alert. He wondered if she could tell he was scared.

She laughed a little, but then stopped, wincing. "It's Hamlet, silly. I have a test tomorrow… on… Hamlet."

"I don't think you're going to be taking any tests anytime soon," he said, getting more and more worried. Usually Ladybug was so careful about her identity. She'd never told him anything like this before. He never knew what her alter-ego was up to.

Some distant, unimportant thought occurred to him. Didn't he have a test on Hamlet tomorrow?

But that thought was swept away almost instantly. He couldn't worry about that now. Ladybug was injured and it was his fault and the ambulance wasn't getting here fast enough. One look at her pale face told him she'd already lost a lot of blood.

"Okay, I'm going to pick you up. We're going to the hospital."

Her eyes widened in fear. "No, I'm about to de-transform!"

Chat took a hesitant look at her side and his heart fell into his stomach. "My lady, right now, your life is more important than any secret. And, right now, it's critically hanging in the balance."

He braced her head and neck against his right shoulder as he sat her up. She gave a sharp gasp as he picked up her legs with his left arm, and tensed as he lifted her up from the ground.

"I'm trying to be gentle, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He couldn't stop saying it. She clung to him with all her might as he dashed through busy streets and nimbly jumped from steps to ledges to balconies to rooftops. He could feel her warm blood running onto his arms – the gravest reminder that their time was running out.

They were nearly there when Ladybug's costume became normal clothes. The mask around her eyes disappeared, and it became very obvious who Chat was holding.

He was so surprised he nearly dropped her. Of all the times to make this sort of discovery, Chat wished it had been one with more kissing and less blood. But he didn't get to pick the story. Sometimes things ended in tragedy. Just like Hamlet.

But he quelled his emotions. He could sort out his own feelings later, once she was getting the help she desperately needed. Because if he didn't make it in time, Marinette, the love of his life, was going to die in his arms.

Chat knew he had only seconds left before he changed back, so he made sure that he was back on solid ground – without his catlike agility, he'd never be able to get down from a balcony or ledge while holding Marinette.

His own disguise expired just as he crossed the street to the hospital and Plagg appeared at his shoulder, drooping and exhausted. Thankfully, his kwami knew better than to say anything – the situation was too serious for him to start cracking jokes.

As he sprinted, Adrien looked down at Marinette, whose eyes were closed again.
"No, stay awake, you can do it," he cried, hardly able to breathe. "Marinette! Don't do this to me."

She opened her eyes to see Adrien, not Chat Noir. Her face contorted with pain. "You were in my dream. You were Chat...am I still dreaming?"

"If only," he said grimly. "We're nearly there, just hold on."

"I...I..."

She seemed to be trying to say something, but one look at her face told him something was terribly wrong. Adrien raced through the sliding doors, shouting *someone please somebody help me please the girl I love is dying*. But as commotion swirled around him and nurses ran in different directions gathering supplies for Marinette, he wondered if maybe he was too late. She was already limp in his arms.

He looked down at her, and her ocean eyes swallowed him up again. She was deathly pale – almost grey. She lifted a bloody hand and touched his cheek.

"You're an angel," she said softly. Adrien blinked, his vision blurring. Her hand slipped back to her side - her strength was giving out. Adrien felt tears drip down his cheeks.

"You can't leave – please, I can't do this without you. Any of it. I need you!"

"Find another Ladybug," she whispered, her head resting against his chest. "Take the earrings..." He felt her pass them into his hand.

"No, no, don't! Marinette! I love you." He said it without thinking, but she responded with, "I love you too," before he even realized what had happened. They shared a sad silence, and then the nurses arrived with a gurney.

"Goodbye," she whispered as they lifted her from his arms. Then her ocean eyes closed and stayed closed.

They told him an hour later that he'd been only moments too late.

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Adrien stayed in the hospital waiting room, alone, for a very long time after she was gone.

The waiting room had been closed to the press and the healthy public to ensure privacy. Through the lamplit glass doors, he could see people holding lit candles and bouquets of roses. They were scattering the petals onto the ground outside the hospital.

The roses were red– so red they looked like blood. And Adrien found himself staring at the petals with a pained expression – he knew they could see inside the hospital but were unable to enter, unable to help. Yet they were dedicatedly holding a night vigil with as many flowers as they could muster. *They* were enduring.

But how could he?

He didn't know where to go from here. The hospital staff had bandaged his wounds, and then they'd told him he could stay in the quiet shelter of the waiting room as long as he needed to. Adrien sat rigidly in the black plastic chair staring at Ladybug's earrings, which lay innocently in his palm. He hadn't changed out of his bloodstained clothes or washed up at all. He could still smell her perfume – honeysuckle – and he could still feel her warm hand on his cheek. He didn't want to wash all that away. Not yet. Once that scent was gone, he'd never catch it again.
His face was still covered with blood and salt water and grime. But underneath all of it, underneath his Chat Noir mask and underneath his very skin, he was just a boy going through the unimaginable. He was a boy with the worst luck. He was a boy covered in blood that wasn't his own. He was the boy with superpowers that still couldn't save his friend. And now he was burdened with another task – he'd have to choose a new Ladybug.

Passing on her earrings was more than just giving someone superpowers – he understood that now. It was about choosing someone who could continue Marinette's legacy. It was putting someone else in danger. It was inviting someone else into the part of his life he'd always guarded.

Adrien and Marinette finally knew the truth about each other, but he was the one who'd be around to work through it all alone. She had gone to sleep - to dream. And he was living in a nightmare.

A teacher had once told him, *The heart is a rose; blossoming with love, withering with loss, but always ready to bloom anew when the time is right.* But at this moment, on the night of roses, Adrien knew nothing would bloom in his heart for a very long time.
Secrets

Chapter Summary

Secrets: Everyone has them. Not everyone keeps them. Only a few react well to their discovery. Where does that leave Adrien and Marinette?

Graduation was just around the corner, and Marinette couldn't have been happier. To her, it meant freedom from schoolwork (at least, until university) and it meant she could spend more time with Adrien.

They'd been dating for some time now, which seemed to satisfy everyone except Chloe. Nino and Alya were particularly excited the first day Adrien and Marinette had shown up to school holding hands and shared a kiss behind the trophy case before splitting up for classes. They'd interrupted the happy couple by running over to them, waving their arms like maniacs, and shouting "FINALLY!"

Then Nino had pulled a small bottle of sparkling cider out of his locker and poured them each a little in paper cups.

"Why do you even have a bottle of cider in your locker?" Adrien and Marinette had both asked, looking bewildered and mildly impressed.

"I've had it forever, dude. I've been waiting for this moment for two years."

"You even have cups!"

Nino had nodded. "My locker is prepared for anything. Alya and I planned this ages ago. We knew you two would get together eventually. You're the perfect match."

Adrien had rolled his eyes, but never argued with that point. He'd just put his arm around Marinette and given her shoulder a squeeze.

And now they were almost done with school. There were only weeks left, and they'd be out of the classroom for good. And Marinette knew what that meant. They'd have to have some serious discussions about the future. They were both staying in Paris for university, but she still worried what would happen to their relationship once they no longer went to the same school.

She decided to bring this up to Adrien as she stood on her rooftop balcony waiting for him to come up. They did this every Friday night: met on her rooftop and stargazed.

Each time, her parents had sent Adrien up with a basket full of fresh baked rolls, some select cheeses, and a blanket so they could stay out without getting cold. They practically forced him to take the food, but Adrien never argued. He actually seemed to enjoy it. Marinette had learned long ago never to send her parents' food away in front of him – if she did, he made puppy dog eyes at whatever concoction they'd prepared and tried to cover up his growling stomach with terrible false coughs. He was too polite to say anything.

When she heard his footsteps coming up the ladder, she turned and saw the top of his head come into view. He was carrying a platter of cookies, slices of bread, and Camembert with two bottles of water.
"Your parents wanted me to tell you there's more food in the kitchen if we want it," he smiled.

"Awesome," she said, blushing in spite of herself. Sometimes it was so easy to forget that they were dating – every time she talked with Adrien he made her feel fluttery and embarrassed, like thousands of ladybugs were swarming along her skin and making it prickle and tickle.

"Look, Marinette, there's something I want to talk with you about, before we start stargazing…” he said, looking down and touching the back of his neck self-consciously.

"Okay," she said quietly. "I was going to say the same thing, actually. But you should go first."

He sat down on one of the cushioned outdoor chairs and picked up a cookie. "Well, I've been thinking a lot lately since we're about to graduate and sort of go separate ways…”

*He's breaking up with me. I knew it.*

She felt like she was falling, and so she hastily sat down just in case she fainted. Perhaps Adrien had noticed her reaction, because he put his hands up to calm her.

"Wait, don't panic, okay – this is going to be a good talk. I'm not breaking up with you," he laughed, as though the idea were ludicrous.

Marinette put a hand to her forehead. "You can't say stuff like 'go our separate ways' and not expect me to freak," she said indignantly.

"Sorry!" Adrien took a bite of food. "What I wanted to ask you is actually the opposite. I *never* want to break up with you. You know that right?"

Marinette paused, joy burning on her skin like sunlight. Was this really happening?

"Okay, well now you do." He shrugged, probably not realizing how important a statement he'd just made. To him, it was so easy. Marinette had wanted to say that for so long but had always been worried he didn't feel the same way.

"I never want to break up either," she whispered, glad she could finally say it.

Her blood rushed through her ears with an echoing roar. She felt like she was at the top of a Ferris wheel – thrilled by the height but safely ensconced in a protective glass compartment. Everything was going to be okay, and the ride there was going to be spectacular.

"I know. I've known for a long time." Adrien grinned, finishing his cookie and grabbing another. "But I think that if we're going to make this work, we can't have any more secrets between us. I think we should tell each other everything."

"What do you mean, *everything?*" Marinette's voice came out sharper than she meant it to.

"Just...everything. I recently came to the realization that I needed to be honest with you about something in my life, and I would hope that maybe you'd do the same, if you have anything to share. I just don't want to put you in the position where you feel like I kept something important from you."

Her eyes widened. "I agree. I don't want to do that to you either, but are you really sure you want to know everything about me? My secrets aren't exactly run of the mill, here."

Adrien fidgeted with his hands. "I'm sure. I don't want to lie to you about anything, even the hard things."
"Nor do I. I hate lies. But this isn’t exactly going to be easy for me. To tell you my secrets, I mean."

"I know. It won’t be easy for me either. That’s why I chose tonight. We’re alone, under a blanket of stars, with smelly cheese and refreshments to enjoy as we contemplate the quiet Paris night. We can take as long as we need."

But Adrien spoke too soon. Just as he finished speaking, a massive yellow lightning bolt struck the pavement just to the right of the bakery. A flying man in a shocking neon yellow suit wearing black sunglasses zoomed past them, cackling and throwing more lightning bolts as he made his way down the avenue.

Marinette gulped and put a hand to the purse hanging at her side, and Adrien hastily grabbed the rest of the Camembert and shoved it into his jacket pocket. "Don't eat it all now, save it in case we need to recharge in the battle," he whispered to Plagg when Marinette wasn't looking.

There was a sudden, loud explosion out of their view that shook the glass windows of the houses all down the street. The couple both jumped to their feet and ran to the edge of the wall to try and see what was happening.

"How am I supposed to get out of this? Paris needs Ladybug, but I need to have some time to discuss things with Adrien. I can't leave him behind just as we're about to have a very complicated conversation, Marinette thought, panicking. Tikki was prodding at the walls of her purse, but she didn't dare open it in front of Adrien. She was all for exposing secrets, but perhaps not this particular one. Not yet. Adrien might not love her as much when he found out that the superhero he admired was actually...just...her. Klutzy, awkward, shy Marinette.

As if Tikki were right beside her, she could almost hear her kwami's voice whispering in her ear. But you're going to have to tell him sometime. If you wait, he'll be mad that you had the opportunity and didn't take it. You should take this as a sign that he's supposed to find out. Follow your heart.

"Ugh, fine," she muttered, narrowing her eyes.

"What did you say?" asked Adrien distractedly. His face was concerned and he was still leaning over the side of the railing to try and see what was going on down the street. His green eyes were lit up with gold as another lightning bolt flashed bright against the chalkboard sky.

"Uh, nothing," Marinette said hastily.

Then another boom, closer this time, sounded from behind them. A man in a dark blue and black costume came flying down the street in pursuit of Lightning. It didn't take a superhero to guess that he was supposed to be Thunder.

Marinette’s eyebrows deepened into a calculating frown. She'd never had to fight two villains before. Of all the times to need to battle, this truly was the worst. But the city couldn't handle one akuma on its own, let alone two, and Chat was no doubt already running bravely into the fray. She couldn't leave him to fight this one alone.

Adrien and Marinette turned back to each other, and at the same time said, "I need to go."

There was a pause, and then they gave each other a frowning smile and both replied, "Wait, really?"

Marinette explained first. "I uh...need to go. Right now. I'm really sorry, I know we were going to have this deep talk and share secrets and everything, but I just remembered...I have this...um...project due tomorrow and I haven't even started working on it and it has to be a tuxedo with green
"Marinette, you finished your last design project yesterday. You just lied to me."

"Well, why do you have to go? It can't be coincidence that we both-

"Photo shoot," Adrien said smoothly.

"No."

"What do you mean, no?" he chuckled, already gathering up his belongings and checking his pockets.

He tried to open the door back to Marinette's room, but it was…locked.

"Marinette, we're trapped up here. Is there another way down? I really need to get to the shoot."

Adrien suddenly looked nervous.

"That's the only door. I suppose you could rappel down the side of the wall where the ivy is," she said, casually. She'd done that before as Ladybug, but he didn't need to know that. "But you won't need to. Today's a Friday. Your photographer's office is closed on Fridays. Now you're lying to me."

Adrien stopped and straightened. His hands lay still at his sides. They stood daring the other to say something first. A flash of yellow and a distant boom passed between them like a knife cutting butter. They both flinched.

"Well, clearly we have some honesty issues," Marinette said finally, placing one hand on her hip and the other on her purse. "Can we work on them after we get back?"

He froze. He was watching her carefully, as if he had just seen her for the first time.

"Oh," he finally said. It was just a little release of air that hovered in the air. His eyes were wide. "Oh my – wow. You're her, aren't you?"

"I'm who? Your girlfriend? I thought that was fairly obvi-"

But Adrien was giving her a look that told her the lie wasn't working this time. He knew. Really knew. She stopped midsentence.

"No," Adrien said, his face splitting into a genuinely happy smile. "You're Ladybug. You just did her pose." His eyes were twinkling.

"What pose?"

Adrien demonstrated. He looked ridiculous, but the similarity came across clearly. Hand on hip. Other hand clutching a purse...where a yoyo would normally be.

"I don't have a pose," she said, but then realized she'd just acknowledged he was right. Oh, just great. Nice going, Marinette.

She let Tikki out of her purse dejectedly. "There's no use denying it now, I guess," she said.

She transformed in front of him and then looked down. "This isn't how I wanted you to find out," she sighed. "I was going to do it slowly. Subtly. I was going to be cool about the whole thing. There were supposed to be cookies and stars and no distractions." She glared in the direction of Thunder and Lightning.
"You're going to die when you see this," he said excitedly. "Don't bug out on me, okay? Just watch."

"What is that supposed to –"

But then Adrien yelled something and suddenly there was a flash of energy and Chat Noir stood in his place.

Adrien.

Chat.

Chat.

Adrien.

Wait…

"So," Chat narrowed his eyes and twirled his staff. "Can we go toast these guys already? I think we have a lot to discuss when we get back."

"I…I…"

He tilted his head toward where the villains were. "Come on, my lady." He extended a hand. She took it with a sigh, and they raced headlong into the action.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" she asked as they ran.

Chat ducked as a lightning bolt soared over his head with a burning smell and an eerie screeching noise. "I could ask you the same question. I mostly did it to keep everyone else safe. And we agreed our identities were precious. I didn't want to tell the wrong people. I even wanted to be sure you were the one before I told you."

"Same. I wanted to tell you for so long, but I just didn't like the idea of my secret coming between us. What if you didn't like me once you found out I was Ladybug?" she said, latching her yoyo onto a distant awning. She swung forward, landing neatly on the sidewalk as Chat pole vaulted to catch up with her.

"I could never feel that way. I think you're incredible. I've thought so since day one. I've admired both you and your alter-ego."

"Chat, I'm not a mind reader," she said, throwing a piece of dislodged concrete at Lightning to distract him.

"Well yeah, but I thought you knew I felt that way."

"We should have just shared our identities from the beginning. It would have been easier," she sighed.

"The timing never felt quite right to tell you I was Chat."

"Oh, and this is better?" Ladybug asked heatedly, gesturing as another lightning bolt slammed into the lamppost in front of her and sent sparks flying.
"Oh, come on, I'm not psychic," Chat yelled back, chucking his staff down the road where Thunder stood with his back to them. "How was I supposed to know these goons would wreck our moment?"

Thunder turned sharply, distracted by the sharp prod he'd just received from the staff. He saw Chat and made the connection. He gave a bellow, and a deafening clap of thunder blew him off his feet.

"Look, I think we both understand the occupational hazards of being superheroes better than anyone," said Ladybug as she swung her yoyo and hit Lightning's arm so his next bolt fired harmlessly into the distance instead of hitting a public bus full of passengers. "But did you really have to pick tonight?"

Chat got up from the ground, wincing. "Oh, I'm sorry, is there another time in your schedule that would work, since you obviously know when every akuma is going to attack?"

"I just would have appreciated a bit more… I don't know," she paused, aiming a well-placed kick at Lightning's stomach as he soared toward her, "warning, maybe? Seeing you transform was a bit jarring."

Lightning slammed to the ground at her feet, clutching his side. She scooped up his sunglasses and snapped them in two. An akuma flew out gratefully and she purified it. Lightning became just an ordinary man in an electrician's uniform.

"Hey, what happened?" he asked, but Ladybug was already soaring through the air, touching down daintily beside Chat.

"Well, it's not like your identity wasn't a surprise for me either, you know," he continued casually, as if they weren't in the middle of a battle. "I feel a bit blindsided that my girlfriend has actually been spending her nights running around with some guy in a skintight leather suit."

"That was you, stupid," she said.

"But we didn't know that," he pointed out. "How would you feel if Chat was some other guy other than Adrien, and you were constantly flirting with both of them, but only dating one? Doesn't that bug you a bit?"

"I guess, but I made it clear to Chat that my relationship in my real life was what came first! He…you…knew! And it goes both ways. You flirted with me and with… well, other me at the same time."

"That's fair, I did…" said Chat, looking at her with new understanding in his eyes. They were the color of emeralds – sparkling and inviting, cheerful and precious. It was so hard to be mad at him when he looked at her like that. "Get down! Thunder's behind you," he added abruptly.

They dropped to the ground as another earth-shattering boom rocked the street. Thunder flew over them and landed on the ground a few buildings away.

"Okay, here's the plan," Ladybug said, straightening and brushing rubble off her suit. Chat stood with her, his cat ears perking up. "We have established that our love lives are really weird and messed up, but it doesn't have to always be this way. You know I love you, and I know you love me. Adrien loves Marinette. Marinette loves Adrien. Our masks don't change anything between us. We're really just faces in the end," she said. "So we are going to take out Thunder over there like the amazing team we are, and then we are going to go back to my rooftop to stargaze and tell each other our secrets. I don't know about you, but I'm sincerely hoping this was the worst revelation we'll have tonight," she finished.
Chat started laughing.

"This isn't supposed to be funny," she frowned.

"Sorry," he snorted, putting a hand to the bridge of his nose. "I just thought you were going to give me this detailed plan on how to get rid of Thunder, and what you said about how we love each other just was…not what I was expecting. It was just…your timing, in the middle of this battle…"

Ladybug rolled her eyes. "You distract, I'll grab his necklace and get the akuma. Like always."

"Like always."

Chat saluted her and leapt into action, racing toward Thunder. "Hey Sound Cloud – seems like you're all scream and no scheme. You want to put your money where your meowth is?"

Ladybug swung behind Thunder, silent and out of sight until it was too late for him to stop her. She grabbed his necklace while he was distracted by Chat's truly terrible puns (his best weapon, by far) and moments later, things were restored to normal and a confused looking radio host lay on the ground where Thunder used to be.

"We must be getting better at this," said Chat happily as he walked back to Ladybug. "We just took down two akumas in record time and didn't even need to use our Cataclysms or Lucky Charms."

"I think we both had a little extra aggression we needed to work off," she smirked. "Our emotions strengthen us. Fist pound?" she suggested, holding out her fist to his.

But Chat, ever the one to surprise, grabbed her hand and pulled her in until she was pressed gently against his chest.

"I think we're past that," he said, his emerald eyes staring into hers with kind intensity. "I told you, no more secrets, my lady, and one of my darkest secrets is that every time we do that ridiculous fist bump, I have always wanted to do this instead."

And then he dipped her against his arms and kissed her under the blanket of stars.

They only broke apart when they realized they had an audience. The men who were once Thunder and Lightning were whistling and clapping in the distance. When they saw Chat Noir staring at them, they stopped, looking sheepish.

"Not one word of this to anyone," Chat said to them. "This is our little secret, okay?" They each gave him an awkward thumbs up.

"Now then, my lady," he said, looking back to her with a wink, "where were we?"
Roll Models

Chapter Summary

Roll Models: Adrien's next modeling job is sure to be a success, according to his father. There are just three problems. One: Adrien hates his outfit. Two: the photographer is a little strange. And three: the shoot has an interesting theme.

Chapter Notes

Right. So...I forgot this one is in first person tense; I was going through a phase at the time. This is the only one I wrote this way, so if first person bothers you, go ahead and skip it. Otherwise, I hope it's still enjoyable!

Don't get me wrong. I don't hate modeling. I grew up on the fashion scene and loved it as a kid. Photo shoots have always been part of my life. I don't get weird around cameras I don't complain often about wearing ridiculous clothes.

But so help me, if I have to put on what my father has laid out for this weekend's shoot...I think I might actually jump into the Seine.

It's not personal. I know he's not trying to be irritating or anything. He has no way of knowing how I feel about this outfit.

But...come on.

It was his idea to have a Miraculous Ladybug and Chat Noir theme for the photo shoot. If I'd known that was the theme before I got here, I would have pretended I was sick or something, but no such luck. I think about the randomly chosen girl my father has bullied into wearing the Ladybug suit. Poor thing. She and I are going to have a very awkward morning.

I stand in my dressing room and stare at what I'm supposed to wear. Plagg floats next to me, contemplating the treacherous clothes hung up on the hook on my closet door. He hasn't said anything yet, which is never a good sign. Usually I can't get him to shut up unless he's eating.

Speaking of which.

I pass him a slice of Camembert from the pocket of my jacket. "I have a feeling you might need this," I say. He takes it gratefully and chews, his green eyes perusing the tragedy at hand. I run my hands through my hair, not caring that it has just been styled within an inch of its life.

"What am I going to do? I'm doomed. People are going to take one look at me in this suit and realize..."

"I know," Plagg says grimly.

"And I can't refuse, or my father will think something's up."
"Well, if you put it on, he's going to figure it out anyway."

"Erghhh." I sigh heavily and flop onto the plushy couch opposite the closet. "I'm dead. Bury me already."

"Maybe no one will notice how much you look like Chat."

"Or maybe everyone will. It's going to be pretty obvious."

There is a knock on the door. It's some assistant. They never open the doors, they just talk through them. I don't understand this. Are they afraid of me?

"Mr. Agreste, two minutes."

Plagg and I exchange a look. I don't really have a way out. Not unless I climb out the window. But that would just make things worse for my sake – my father would flip out if I skipped a shoot.

Although, given the fact that I'm about to put on a leather costume with cat ears, I'm starting to wonder which is worse: a future in which my father is furious with me, or a future in which everyone finds out I'm also Chat Noir.

No turning back now.

I'm wearing the stupid Chat suit and mask. It's surprisingly true to the real one, but I'm not supposed to know that. I casually play with the bell at my collar as though I've never seen it before. It's just to keep up pretenses while I wait on the indoor set. The Ladybug model is running late, so I have to pass the time until she's dressed in her outfit.

Right now it's just me and one of the assistants. My father and the photographer are on their way back from getting coffee. My sincere hope is that no one notices the striking resemblance between Adrien Agreste, model, and Chat Noir, superhero.

Because if someone thinks we look alike, it's not too far a jump to the (correct) conclusion that we are one and the same.

Finally, a door opens and shuts and I can hear footsteps. Moments later, there's a girl standing on the edge of the set holding a red and black polka dot mask and wearing a skintight suit. It takes me only a second to realize that it's my friend, Marinette.

She hasn't noticed me standing here yet. I want to wave or something – I'm actually really pleased. At least it's someone I know, and we can commiserate over how weird my father is.

She's talking to one of the assistants, and they help her put on the mask. She looks just as nervous as I feel.

But then she turns to face me and I back up into one of the lighting pedestals.

Whoa.

She looks just like Ladybug. I didn't really notice until she put on the mask, but…it's uncanny. If I hadn't known it was Marinette standing there, I would have assumed my father had gotten the real Ladybug to model.

Unless…
Part of me pushes away that thought. It's too coincidental. But then the snide Plagg-voice in my head chimes in. *It's already pretty coincidental. Your father unknowingly picked you to model as Chat Noir...*

I tell the voice to shut up.

And then Marinette looks at me, and I can literally see her doing the same sanity check I just did. This costume must be a really good version...she probably thinks I'm the real Chat. I take off my mask, just for a second, and wave her over.

"Hey!" I say, trying to be cool and cover up the fact that the tower behind me is still wobbling slightly.

"Hi," she waves, walking closer. "Hi, Chat."

"So...these are neat costumes."

"Yeah," she says curiously. I'm pretty sure her blue eyes are x-raying me. "Almost as if they're the real deal."

I think I'm going to drown I'm sweating so much. Why does this costume have to be made of tight, non-breathable leather and spandex?

"Right..."

Then, mercifully, Claude emerges from another room. Claude is the photographer – he's brilliant, but very strange. The first time I did a shoot with him after becoming Chat Noir, he shook my hand, *sniffed* me, and announced, "This boy smells of Camembert. He is of noble stock."

I kid you not.

Needless to say, I'm hopeful he'll provide enough of a distraction to offset how much Marinette and I look like the counterparts we're supposed to be channeling. My father walks in behind him, on the phone, not focused on us. Thankfully.

Claude sets up the cameras and checks the set. He hums a little as he moves around. I pretend not to notice as he adjusts the light tower I bumped into.

"Let's put on a show," he finally says, and starts positioning Marinette. Then he moves me to stand beside her in some ridiculous hero pose. *I don't really stand like that, do I?* This is totally humiliating.

"Magnificent. The bug and the cat. Channel the love story we all know is there."

Marinette and I give each other a look. *Love story? What love story?*

"Show your emotions in your eyes. Let me see the *stars* in your eyes." Claude always says this to me during a shoot, but in the five years I've known him I've never figured out what it means. Clearly Marinette thinks it's odd too – her lips are pressed together to keep from laughing. I fight the urge to chuckle.

Unthinking, I whisper, "Don't let him *bug* you. His phrases are actually *claw*some sometimes."

She stiffens suddenly at my puns. I'm sort of offended - they weren't *that* bad.

While Claude is walking back to the camera, Marinette whispers in my ear. "You're really him, aren't you?"
"Who, Adrien? Yeah. My father hasn't cloned me…yet, ha-ha…"

Claude adjusts the camera angle, and Marinette looks at me the way Ladybug sometimes does when I use too many puns. It's the you're annoying look. And I almost forget this is Marinette and not my lady. They even make the same expressions.

Huh.

"You know what I mean," she whispers.

"No…?" I look back at Claude, who's fiddling with something on the lens.

"Yes, you do."

"No…uh…what?"

"You know what."

"No, I'm saying no, n-o. Not k-n-o-w."

"Adrien," she sighs.

"Wait, now I'm confused."

"Please, it's so obvious. You're Chat. The real one. Not just the model."

"You – uh, wait…" I pause. I lower my voice. "You know?"

"Yes," she hisses exasperatedly.

Well then.

I capitulate. "It was the puns, wasn't it?"

"Enough talking, my spandex friends," calls Claude roughly. I realize he's been waiting for us. "I have six other shoots after this. Let's make haste."

I'm momentarily distracted from the cat-astrophe at hand. Spandex friends? Make haste? Who even talks like that anymore?

"Stars in the eyes. I want to see stars in the eyes. One, two, three," he continues. Claude starts snapping photos, occasionally telling one of us to move an arm or leg. I have to tilt my face to Marinette's and move closer, almost as if we're about to kiss.

I'm in full panicking mode now – Marinette just figured out my secret, it looks like we're trying to kiss, and tomorrow these pictures of me dressed like Chat are going to be on the front page.

If she can figure it out, anyone might. I really am doomed.

I think about running away, just hopping out the window in the corner and rappelling down the balcony or something.

But then I smell it. Honeysuckle. And baked bread. And something lemony. In my mind, I picture Ladybug. That's definitely her scent. It's muted because I don't have Chat Noir's super-senses right now, but I'd still know it anywhere.
But how can that be? This is Marinette, not Ladybug.

Although, she does bear a striking resemblance. She has the same eyes...and facial expressions...and there's still smell of baked rolls...

Hold on.

Marinette lives above her parents' bakery. Where they make fresh rolls.

Oh.

OH.

Claude re-positions us so that we're standing closer together now, toes almost touching. "The trees today are soft. Good fortunes are ahead," he mentions vaguely. Marinette makes a tiny snort as he moves back to the camera. I roll my eyes. While he sets up the next shot, I whisper to her.

"Looks like I'm not the only one hiding my identity in plain sight."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yeah, you do, Ladybug."

"It's just a costume."

"Not for you, it isn't. You're really her. You smell the same."

She gasps. Ha. Now it's her turn to panic. "I..."

"What are the odds? You and me...Chat and Ladybug..."

"Talk about serendipity," she sighs, her eyes wide. We're still caught in the almost-kissing pose, frozen.

"Is serendipity a good thing or a bad thing?"

We can hear the click of the camera. Lights flash. She considers me for what feels like an eternity.

"Definitely a good thing, in this case," she says. I can feel her breath on my lips.

"Marinette, are you as worried as I am about people seeing these modelling pictures? People are going to figure it out we're the real deal."

"Yeah, I am. That's why I snuck in early today and messed with the camera so it won't save any of the photos. That's why I was late getting ready. I had to de-transform in the broom closet and pretend I was lost. But these photos will never see the light of day, Claude doesn't seem to notice the resemblance, and frankly, your dad is too busy. We're safe."

My friend...my lady...is a genius.

"You're amazing, you know that?"

She touches my hand and Claude, still snapping photos, nearly has a conniption: "Yes, yes! Work the romance – pretend I'm not here. Keep moving closer...closer...closer!"

I place my hand against her back. She blinks.
We look at each other with new understanding. She smiles a genuine smile - not one sculpted for the camera.

There's a little spark in her eyes that wasn't there before. Is it recognition of me as Chat? Is it curiosity? Or something else? Somehow, I wonder if maybe I've finally realized what Claude meant, because I suddenly see stars in Marinette's eyes.

Perhaps there's method to his madness.
A Rose By Any Other Name

Chapter Summary

A Rose By Any Other Name: Chat asks Ladybug to dinner. There's just one catch: they have to meet up as their normal selves.

Adrien casually stepped out of the shadowy alley, allowing Plagg to swoop back into his hiding place inside his jacket pocket. He peered at the dusty street and shook wet hair out of his eyes. He normally felt cheerful after a fight, but given that he'd just taken an unplanned swim in the Seine, he was not in the best mood.

It was a good thing his father was not very perceptive. Otherwise Adrien would have a hard time explaining why he came home with wet hair when he was only supposed to be buying a loaf of bread from the bakery. This time, he'd probably just say it was raining and hope his father didn't look out the window.

Adrien had just finished an hour as Chat Noir, fighting a horrible octopus with Ladybug. In short, it had been particularly unpleasant. Adrien had never been one for seafood, particularly if it had too many limbs. And now he was sure he'd never eat it again, not after he'd seen the nasty, slimy, sticky side of aquatic life.

He and Ladybug had dispatched the octopus rather easily, but not before one of the flailing tentacles had struck Chat from behind and sent him flying into the river.

But that was just the beginning. The worst part about tonight was that he'd come to an unfortunate realization: cats do not like water very much.

And when he was Chat, Adrien apparently fell into that hydrophobic category.

When he was Adrien Agreste, he had no problem with the river or with any kind of water. He loved swimming. He loved walking in the rain without an umbrella. But as Chat Noir, he was sometimes saddled with inherited instincts he did not particularly appreciate. First it had been when he'd gotten stuck in a tree. Then was the time with that horrible dog…and now this.

He'd made it out of the river by swimming to the side and climbing up the wall, all while coughing and hissing and feeling extremely harassed. He put his irritation aside long enough to capture the Octopus' akuma, and then Ladybug had purified it. She hadn't really seemed to understand the seriousness of his aversion to water – she mainly just thought it was funny. He and Ladybug had parted ways with her still giggling as she swung out of sight.

He'd just rolled his eyes and de-transformed, feeling a pang of pity for the spluttering kwami now floating at his shoulder. Plagg had to be a cat all the time. That meant always hating water. And trees. And dogs. Adrien didn't know how he survived.

As Adrien made his way down the cool evening sidewalk, he still felt more irked than usual. His hair was still dripping and his muscles were tight with anxiety. The irritation would probably take a few hours to subside completely. The leftover cat instincts were distracting, and Adrien was still feeling cranky as he opened the door to the bakery.
A rush of sweet aromas engulfed him and he felt his spirits lift a little. Part of him wished they could bottle the smell of a bakery. It was a unique scent that was difficult to replicate, much like the smell of a bookstore.

Marinette’s parents stood at the counter, waving at him. "Hello, Adrien! The usual, right?"

"Uh, yes please." Adrien wiped some water droplets out of his eyes and eyebrows.

"What happened to you?" Mr. Dupain-Cheng asked him, noticing the wet hair. Adrien's water-frazzled brain panicked for an excuse.

"Oh, uh, it's nothing," he stuttered. "There was another akuma attack with this giant octopus and I was…er…in the splash zone."

"You poor thing! Do you want to go in the bathroom and towel your hair dry?" asked Marinette's mom.

Adrien felt a warm rush of gratitude. "That would actually be great, thank you."

"No problem. Just go up the stairs and to the right. Marinette should be in her room studying if you want to pop your head in and say hi," she said.

"But you should probably dry off first," Mr. Dupain-Cheng added.

"Of course, thank you so much."

"We'll have that bread ready for you when you come back down, Adrien."

"Also some extra croissants for you," winked Mrs. Dupain-Cheng.

Is this what normal parents are like? Adrien wondered as he ascended the stairs. He tried to imagine his father acting like that when Nino came over to hang out. The idea was like picturing Santa Claus skateboarding, or Chloe volunteering at a soup kitchen. Completely ridiculous.

He was about to walk into bathroom, but then he saw the door to Marinette's room standing open across the hall. He was about to call out to her so he didn't scare her, but then he heard the rooftop trapdoor open. A backpack dropped down from the opening, followed by…

Ladybug?

Adrien's brain was still pretty scrambled, but he was relatively sure this was really happening. Why was Ladybug in Marinette's room?

And then he got his answer as she de-transformed. Ladybug wasn’t breaking into Marinette’s room. The room was hers.

Marinette strode over to her desk and crumpled into her chair. Her red kwami trailed behind her and sat down on the desk with a tiny "Whew."

"I know, Tikki. That was exhausting."

She turned to her desk and took out what looked like biology homework. "Do you want something to eat?" she asked.

"Maybe something small," squeaked Tikki. Marinette pulled a tin of cookies from a desk drawer and opened it – her kwami sighed in delight and flew inside.
Adrien didn't even bother going to towel off. He backed away quietly and slipped back down the stairs, his mind short circuiting. Between the discovery that Marinette was Ladybug and his instinct-fried nerves, he wasn't sure he had the wherewithal to talk to her right now. Plus, there was the fact that Marinette always made him slightly nervous. He always said the wrong thing, and he needed time to process this first before confronting her.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, her parents looked up at him hopefully.

"She was pretty busy," he explained hastily. "I didn't want to disrupt her or scare her by going into the bathroom – I'll just let my hair air dry. It's not a big deal."

Perhaps he imagined it, but he thought Marinette's parents actually looked disappointed as they handed him a bag with the loaf of bread tucked safely inside.

"Well, we'll tell her you stopped by," her father said. "She'd be glad to hear it. She thinks you're the best thing since sliced bread."

"Really? Um, thank you!" He gave them a genuine crooked grin and walked back into the night. He felt some of the tension in his muscles loosen – there was a warm fire kindling in his stomach now. Did this mean Marinette liked him?

He walked home with the bag gripped tightly, talking eagerly to Plagg. Now that he knew two secrets about Marinette, it was time for him to return the favor.

The Restaurant of Roses was quietly busy the following Saturday night. It was a small place with straight-backed wrought iron chairs, candles on the polished wood tables, and red and gold wallpaper. The music piping through the speakers was a calm, classical piano rendition of Moon River, and the restaurant smelled like warm olive oil and basil. Water droplets from the rain outside slid down the glass windows and made them glisten.

Marinette sat alone at the table in the corner, her back to the door. In front of her lay a single red rose. She was checking her watch almost constantly, and kept adjusting the red dress she was wearing.

Her parents had made quite a fuss about her mysterious date. She'd told them she was meeting a boy from school, because she couldn't very well explain to them that she was Ladybug and that Chat Noir had asked her to dinner. They'd practically shoved her out the door, spritzing her with perfume and brandishing pearl earrings happily. Marinette loved her parents, but when it came to her dating life, they were a bit too enthusiastic. It would have been endearing in most cases, but she was too nervous tonight. Besides, they probably thought she was meeting Adrien for her date. She didn't have the heart to tell them that wasn't the case.

This was not going to be any ordinary dinner date. She was meeting Chat Noir, of all people. Chat had asked her out during one of their patrols last week, but he'd made it clear that they should meet as their ordinary selves. Without their masks.

"We should each bring one red rose, so we can identify each other," he'd said. "Meet at the Restaurant of Roses?"

And so Marinette sat waiting for Chat. Or, whoever Chat was behind his mask. But she wished he hadn't chosen such a romantic place. It made her feel anxious, and the staff kept glancing over at her, perhaps wondering if she'd been stood up.

Chat was five minutes late already. What if he decided not to show? She swallowed hard, wishing she hadn't thought of that. She looked at her watch again, then turned over her shoulder to look at the
At that moment, Adrien Agreste walked inside. He was wearing a long black raincoat and was busy folding up a black umbrella. When he finished and put it in the umbrella stand, he saw Marinette and walked over to her with a surprised smile.

"Adrien! What are you doing here?" she asked him, standing up from her seat.

"I…well, I actually have a date tonight."

"Oh."

Despite the fact that she was meeting Chat, Marinette felt the smallest twinge of disappointment. If Adrien was meeting a girl here, who was it? Some part of Marinette had somehow hoped that if he ever dated someone, it would be her.

But she felt suddenly terrible for thinking that, because she was sitting here waiting to meet Chat Noir, superhero of Paris, for a date of her own. It was ridiculous to be jealous.

Adrien seemed to sense her disappointment, because he hastily said, "Why are you here?"

"I have a date too. He's not here yet, so I'm just waiting."

"I see. Well, since you're waiting, do you mind if I sit with you for a little?"

Marinette was surprised, but motioned for him to take the chair. "Sure, he's running a bit late, anyway."

"Is he, now?" Adrien murmured softly.

"He'll be here."

"I know."

They stared at each other for a moment, and then Adrien's eyes fell on the rose. "Is that for him?"

"It's how we'll recognize each other."

Adrien looked interested. "Oh, it's a blind date?"

"Yeah."

"So whoever walks in with a red rose is your guy?"

"Yeah."

"How did you guys meet?"

Marinette thought fast. "We met online in a Miraculous Ladybug er…Chat-Room and wanted to, uh, hang out."

Technically, she and Chat had met for the first time when her yoyo had gotten caught around both of them and they'd ended up hanging suspended above the street by the wire line. So…well, technically they had hung out online (or at least, on a line).

Adrien chuckled. "That's interesting." It could have just been Marinette's imagination, but there was
a spark in his eyes that hadn't been there a moment ago. "What's his name?"

"I don't know."

"And you don't know what he looks like?"

"Nope."

"So if he was sitting right here, in front of you, you'd have no idea?" The tiniest smirk crossed Adrien's face.

Marinette nodded.

"You're sure?" He was smiling broadly now.

"Of course I'm sure."

"Interesting."

Adrien reached inside the front of his jacket. At first, Marinette thought he was going to take out his phone. But then he pulled out his own red rose.

Marinette just blinked, so Adrien decided to keep talking. "Look, I must apologize. I had an advantage – I discovered your identity last week after the fight with the octopus. And I wanted to make it up to you by revealing mine. Now we both know each other's secrets. And I hope," he said, handing her his rose, "that you'll let me get to know your heart too."

Adrien was…Chat. But then, his date with the mystery girl was…a date with her after all?

Marinette acted on instinct. She raised her hand, but instead of the slap Adrien probably expected, the hand came to rest gently on his pale cheek.

"Do you really have to ask? Of course I will!"

Adrien took her hand away from his cheek and instead clutched it softly in his own. "Out of courtesy, I figured I should."

"Wow. Just...wow. Was I really that oblivious? I'm so happy it's you, but I honestly did not see this coming at all."

Adrien laughed. "That, my lady, is the point of a blind date."
Caught a Bug

Chapter Summary

Caught a Bug: Marinette/Ladybug finds out first. Idea suggested by Jeprose01.

Ladybug could tell something was wrong with Chat Noir.

He was flushed, and his forehead was beaded with sweat. They'd met on a rooftop for a nightly patrol, but one look at him was enough to make Ladybug want to send him home.

"Why are you here? You should be in bed – you're ill."

Chat looked at her with glazed eyes. "I'm fine. I just have a little cold."

"But-

"I need the fresh air. It'll be good for me," he said between coughs. "I don't want to go home."

"Chat," Ladybug sighed. "You can't run patrol like this."

"Sure I can." Chat twirled his baton, did a backflip, came up on one knee, and kissed Ladybug's hand. "You were saying?"

She rolled her eyes. "That doesn't prove anything. You have no business being out tonight. You shouldn't overexert yourself." Chat, now dizzy, had begun to list to his right and was in danger of toppling over. She put a hand on his shoulder and propped him back up.

"I'd rather be here, sick, with you, than recovering alone at home," he said, standing up on wobbly legs.

Ladybug was beginning to get frustrated. "You're sweet, Chat" she said, "but I'm worried about you. You're going to get yourself killed or something, and it will be my fault. I'll blame myself forever if you die jumping across a rooftop when you can't even keep your balance."

Indeed, he was already leaning to the side again. She straightened him and he dutifully ignored it.

"I'll be fine. I need the fresh air," he repeated with a sniffle.

Ladybug frowned. She didn't want to have to do this, but Chat was leaving her no choice. He was so stubborn. It was infuriating. Irritating.

Irresistible.

"Chat, I'm cancelling patrol tonight." She put a hand to his forehead. "You have a fever. You're really hot."

Chat didn't even comment. Typically, if she made the mistake of saying anything like that, Chat would give her a smirk and say, Thank you, bugaboo! And then he'd try to kiss her or something. But not this time.
He must be really sick.

"Okay, I'm going to take care of you."

He gave her a look as though he wanted to argue, but he just sighed. "I don't want to impose."

"Chat, it's okay. Just relax and let me make sure you're not a danger to yourself."

"Yeah…you're right. That backflip isn't agreeing with me anyway – my head's too congested. I – actually, I feel a bit faint."

He started to crumple, but Ladybug caught him with her arms around his shoulders. She could feel him shivering. Chat looked up at her with a flush that might have been partially from embarrassment, and then stood back up on his own. "Sorry."

"I think you should rest. Do you have any friends you could stay with? Or should I just take you home?"

That last question came out as an afterthought. Ladybug never expected Chat to let her take him to his house. It was too personal. It would expose his identity, and Ladybug hedged he'd never agree to that.

Chat proved her right. "Take me to…my friend's. I know Adrien Agreste pretty well. I'm sure he won't mind."

"Will he be awake? I feel weird sneaking into his house in the middle of the night."

"No, he's away until tomorrow. Photo shoot in Cannes."


"You…uh…you did?"

"Um, in passing."

"Oh, I remembered – Adrien told me they were leaving this morning. So that makes sense."

"Ah." Ladybug thought he sounded oddly nervous, but it was probably just because he was sick.

"I didn't realize Adrien was a mutual acquaintance. That's interesting." Chat wiped his forehead and took a shaky breath. "Would you mind if we got going soon? I'm not feeling so hot."

"Sure. And you're positive he won't mind if you crash there?"

"It's fine," he said. "No one will miss me and Adrien won't mind. He leaves the security alarm off in case I need to get in."

"All right. But I don't know why you even ventured out tonight, Chat. You should have just stayed home, no matter how suffocating you think it is."

Ladybug took his hand and soon they were flying across rooftops to Adrien's house. Chat relied on her a little more than usual and his grip on her hand tightened with every jump. When they finally reached Adrien's window, she slid it open silently and the two of them crept into the room.

Everything was silvery gray in color thanks to the moonlight shining through the massive glass windows.
"What about Mr. Agreste? Do you think he'll hear us in here?"

Chat had placed his hands on his knees and was coughing again. "No. We're fine," he managed.

"You should lie down. Here," she said, pushing Chat forward. Instead of getting into the bed like a normal person, Chat flopped face first onto the covers. There was a rush of air as the down comforter took his weight.

"Mmmmmmphh," he said.

"What was that?" she asked, smiling a little as she took the baton from his hand and placed it on the side table.

"Mmmphph."

"It might help if you turn over."

He shook his head and curled up, catlike, into a ball on top of the covers. It was adorable.

"I'm going to get you some water. Does Adrien have cold medicine you could take?" Ladybug asked.

Chat finally raised his head, his hair floating around his head in a statically charged halo. "Um, in the bathroom, second cabinet, third shelf, behind the vitamins. And there's a water glass by the toothpaste."

_That was…specific_, Ladybug thought. How much time did he spend at the Agrestes' to know that much? Maybe they really were good friends. But Adrien didn't have many friends besides the ones Marinette already knew…did that mean someone in her class was actually Chat Noir? Had she really been stumbling around on the fringes of his identity every single day, never realizing it?

But Ladybug didn't want to trouble herself with this now. The first priority was making sure Chat was okay.

When she returned from the bathroom with a glass and some medicine, Chat had closed his eyes. He was making purring sounds and had burrowed himself under the covers with just his cat-earned head poking out.

Ladybug had always seen Chat at his strongest. Perhaps not always at his best, but at least at his most confident. He put on a strong, fearsome persona for his enemies, and was remarkably smooth around her. Seeing him this vulnerable and, frankly, cute was somewhat unexpected. The contrast between the unabashedly flirtatious Chat and this endearing, sick one was startling.

She left the cold medicine and water on the nightstand – making sure to use a coaster – and then prepared a cool, wet cloth to put on his forehead. He opened his eyes as she applied it.

"I'll be back tomorrow to check on you, kitty. Take your medicine," she whispered.

"You're amazing," he said gratefully. "You should go. I don't want you to get sick too." Then he gave a little sneeze and she smiled.

Ladybug strode over to the open window and was just about ready to leap into the cool night when she noticed something odd. Next to the windowsill sat Adrien's phone and wallet.

There was no way he'd leave them if he was going away for the weekend. But then, where was
Adrien? Why had Chat lied?

She turned around and saw he was watching her carefully. She held up the wallet and phone. "Would you like to explain this?"

Chat coughed and took a sip of water. "Do I have to?"

"Unless you'd like to explain to the police that someone kidnapped Adrien, I think you do."

He closed his eyes as if wishing she'd just go away. But then something occurred to Ladybug.

What if Chat was Adrien? It would certainly make sense. How else would Chat have known where to find things on the shelves, or how to get into the Agreste mansion (noted for its intense security)? Why else would he be reluctant to explain?

Come to think of it, they even looked alike.

She was suddenly sure her hypothesis was correct –his deafening silence spoke volumes. She crossed the room and sat on the end of the bed, taking in his frozen features, his careful stillness, his wide eyes.

"You just figured it out, didn't you?" he moaned.

Ladybug didn't know what to say, so she just ruffled his hair and kissed his forehead. "Don't worry, your secret's safe with me, Adrien." The name tasted sweet on her lips.

"Wait, are you going to tell me who you are?"

Ladybug thought for a moment. "I have a feeling you'll figure it out. In a few days, I'm going to be absent from school and you'll notice. I'll be just as sick as you are now come Wednesday."

"You don't know that."

"Oh yes, I do. I catch everything."

"Every little bug?" Chat grinned weakly at his pun.

"Every single one."

"I look forward to it. I mean, not you getting sick, but…"

Ladybug smiled. "I know what you mean. And by the way, I love chicken soup from the deli across from your house. Just in case you were wondering."

Chat nodded, closing his eyes. "Got it."

But there was no response. He opened one eye, and realized he was now alone. Ladybug had gone out the window with ethereal silence.

Wednesday afternoon, Adrien had fully recovered. He stopped by the deli across the street from his house, and carried a white paper bag as he walked the streets of Paris. Any outside observer would have said he looked inexplicably nervous. Finally, he stopped at a familiar bakery and went inside.

He waved hello to Marinette's parents, smoothed his hair, and ascended the stairs.
The Defenestration of Plagg

Chapter Summary

The Defenestration of Plagg: Plagg is fed up with Adrien's lovesick mooning over Ladybug. The result renders Chat unable to change back until he confesses his feelings, one way or another. Idea suggested by amaezing.

Chapter Notes

Originally, this fic was written as a one-month anniversary from the first publishing of this fic. Even though it's 2018 now, feel free to join in the celebration anyway haha. You'll find Ladrien, LadyNoir, a devious Plagg, rooftop romance, and possibly a defenestration (the action of throwing someone or something out of a window).

Three days and twelve minutes.

That was exactly how long Adrien had been stuck as Chat Noir. If he ever got out of this mess, he was going to kill Plagg. He'd already planned it out: he would go to the highest floor of his house and throw his kwami out the window. The Defenestration of Plagg actually had a nice ring to it.

But that would have to wait until Adrien could be himself again.

It had all started when he'd finished a patrol with Ladybug and had just climbed through the window back to the safety of his room. Plagg had been giving him a hard time. "You're totally in love with her, you should just tell her how you feel," he'd said.

"I can't. If I said I had feelings for her, she'd just tell me she didn't feel the same way," he'd protested, feeding Plagg some Camembert.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Even if I'm not sure, it's still a terrible thing to do to her. I can't put her in a position where she feels like she has to reject me."

"Adrien," Plagg had said around a mouthful of cheese, "You're overthinking this. If you just told her the truth about how you felt, she'd probably understand."

"No, she wouldn't. It would mess up our friendship."

"Then you should share identities first, and maybe your feelings will sort themselves out."

"Nope. Not doing that," Adrien had huffed, shrugging into his pajamas. "She'd probably be disappointed that Chat's been me all along."

"It's really annoying to listen to your heartsick drivel all the time, you know. Just get it over with."
Adrien had rolled his eyes in response, which seemed to irritate Plagg even more.

"So help me, Adrien, if I have to hear one more excuse, I'll make sure you're stuck as Chat Noir until you tell her how you feel. Or you kiss her. Either one."

"You wouldn't dare."

His kwami narrowed his eyes. "Try me."

Adrien had called his bluff.

It was a stupid thing to do, in hindsight. Because the next time he transformed into Chat had been exactly three days and twelve minutes ago. Plagg was as ruthless as his word, apparently. And now Adrien was trapped as Chat until he confessed his feelings to Ladybug. That meddlesome kwami.

Right now, people thought Adrien was missing. Gabriel Agreste had issued a statement to the media yesterday, begging for the whereabouts of his son.

When Chat had seen the posters, he'd touched his cat ears absently and sighed. *I know exactly where he is.* Not that it would help.

To make matters worse, Adrien was missing school. The first day, Chat had tried to keep up in lectures by hanging by his tail outside the back window and watching the class progress, but then he'd been sighted and mobbed by the students for pictures and autographs. He was never going to try that again.

Chat wondered if Nino had taken notes for him in biology. They had a test on Friday, and while Adrien was typically well prepared, being trapped in a cat costume certainly put a damper on his studying habits.

He sighed. His reserve was crumbling – he'd resisted telling Ladybug anything so far, but the drawbacks to this were consistently becoming more severe. Plagg was going to get what he wanted, and soon.

Adrien wasn't sure how much longer he could last as Chat. On top of not being able to study or reassure his father he was alive, there were other problems. For one, his fear of water had meant he hadn't taken a shower in three days and twelve minutes. Which was totally disgusting.

And, part of him worried for his kwami – if Adrien stayed as Chat for too long, Plagg might seriously hurt himself. That much exertion would take a toll, and, mad as he was at Plagg, Adrien still cared too much to let that happen.

So he decided to swallow his pride.

That night, he called Ladybug to meet, and waited on a rooftop for her to arrive. When she swung in, she landed with delicate footfalls that mirrored his rapid heartbeat. He noticed she wasn't smiling. Instead of his usual greeting of a pun, he asked, "Are you okay?"

"Not really," she sighed, stowing her yo-yo at her side. "Chat, my friend has been missing for three days and I'm really worried."

"Your friend wouldn't happen to be Adrien Agreste, would it?"

"You heard?"
"In a way," he said cautiously. "His 'missing' posters are up all over Paris."

"Do you think we should do something?"

"How? Do you know where he is?"

"No. Do you?"

Chat blew out a breath. "I haven't seen him." Technically not a lie. "But his disappearance is partially why I wanted to meet."

"Do you want to help me find him?"

"I do, but something tells me it will be easier than you think."

Her blue eyes swelled to twice their normal size, hopeful and gorgeous.

*Ladybug, Adrien's right here,* Chat wanted to say. *It's been me this whole time. I love you.*

But that would definitely not be a good idea. He'd need to be a little more careful. If she thought he was lying, he might end up on the wrong side of her famous "punch bug". Emphasis on the punch.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, I'll get to that, but first, I sort of need your help with something. That's the main reason I called."

She looked confused, but nodded. "What's up?"

"Well…I'm kind of stuck. I can't de-transform."

Her eyes widened in horror. "Seriously? How long have you been stuck as Chat?"

"Three days, six hours, and eight minutes…give or take." He couldn't help but sound sheepish.

"That's insane! What happened? Is something wrong with your Miraculous?" She grabbed his hand and examined the ring. He swallowed hard. She smelled like honey and roses – this was going to be harder than he thought. The scent was intoxicating.

He cleared his throat. "Um, no, more like something's wrong with my kwami. We got into a fight and he won't let me out of this cat suit until I admit he was right about something."

She narrowed her eyes. "Your kwami sounds like a jerk."

"He is." *Hope you can hear that, Plagg.*

"Wait, so what do you have to do to get out of your suit?"

"It's sort of a long story…"

"And it somehow has to do with why Adrien is miss-" she paused for a moment. "Wait a second…" She blinked and took a step closer. Chat realized she was still holding his hand when she gave it a startled squeeze. Her eyes were squinting up at his as though she was thinking very hard. He didn't say anything, just held his breath and watched.

Then her eyes widened again and it was as though she was looking at him in a whole new light.
"Wait…Adrien?"

Well, that was quick.

"Uh…yeah?"

But before he could say anything else, she had grabbed him in a fierce hug. Chat knew ladybugs had a tendency to latch onto warm things and hold on tight – now he could affirm it was true. Her grip was stunningly strong.

"Ladybug? I can't breathe-"

"-Oh, I'm so glad you're all right! Well, I mean probably not, since you've been stuck as Chat for three days, but I'm glad you weren't kidnapped by fashion smugglers or Vogue spies or something! You're not dead! I'm so happy!" She paused, catching her breath. "I mean…I am totally rambling, aren't I?"

Adrien looked down at her open face and nodded, feeling bewildered and lightheaded from lack of air. "You're not mad it's me?"

"Why would I be mad?"

"Well, I lied to you about everything. And…well, I didn't really want to tell you. I thought maybe you'd be…well, disappointed. The 'golden boy of Paris fashion' doesn't necessarily connote 'superhero in spandex'. You know?"

She loosened her grip slightly and buried her head in his chest. Gratefully, he sucked in an electric breath. "Chat, I could never be disappointed in you. Look at how many lives you've saved over the past year. And how many times you've saved me. Paris would be lost without Chat Noir. Paris would be – and currently is – lost without Adrien Agreste."

She was taking this rather well – another secret couldn't hurt. Chat took a deep breath, wrapped his arms around her, and decided to make his confession.

"Ladybug, there's something else. All those times we saved Paris together, even since the very first one, I have wanted to tell you…"

She tilted her face up again to look at him. He'd never noticed how long her eyelashes were. But this was not the time to get distracted. He needed to just say it.

"I'm in love with you."

He expected her grip to slacken and for her to look shocked. But she looked strangely giddy. "I know," she said. "Likewise."

"That's the most beautiful word I've ever heard," he sighed, feeling relieved. But something was still bothering him. He'd done as Plagg had demanded...er, strongly recommended…and yet, he was still Chat. What was his kwami waiting for?

But then it occurred to him. *I'll make sure you're stuck as Chat Noir until you tell her how you feel. Or you kiss her. Either one.*

*Or you kiss her.*

Ah, so that was it. Plagg wanted them to kiss. What a mischievous matchmaker.
Not that Chat was opposed to it, of course. He probably would have done it anyway. But it felt different because Plagg had forced his hand. It made him want to roll his eyes. He was going to feed Plagg spinach for a week for this. No more Camembert.

He touched Ladybug's cheek gently, and there was a spark against his skin as he did so. Her skin blushed like a pink rose, and then Chat kissed her softly, expecting her to break away. But, much like her embrace from before, her kiss was surprisingly enthusiastic.

Chat could feel energy rushing through him as though he was the last piece of a completed circuit. Perhaps it was in his bloodstream, or across his skin? And then he realized that he was himself again. His time as Chat had finally ended.

When he and Ladybug finally separated, they were startled out of reverie to find a dazed and sickly kwami lying next to Adrien's shoe.

"Plagg!"

"He doesn't look so great," Ladybug said, snapping from wonderstruck to concerned in mere seconds. She gathered up the kwami in her polka-dotted hands. "I think he needs professional healing, Adrien."

"Wait, really? That exists?"

She bit her lip. "Yeah, I had to take my kwami, Tikki, there once. I know the way. He's open at all hours for exactly this reason. He doesn't ask too many questions either. We should go."

Plagg gave a pitiful cough and fluttered his eyes to emphasize the point. Feeling pity, Adrien decided defenestration of his kwami could wait.

"All right, yeah. We should go." He scooped Plagg up and put him in his jacket pocket. "We should talk some more once he's taken care of, though. I've been hoping for a moment like that for a long time. I was just too scared to take the risk."

She laughed. "Looks like all you needed was Plagg's intervention, scaredy cat. That kiss...that's what he was waiting for, wasn't it?"

He gave her a sheepish grin, and she ruffled his hair affectionately. "Take my hand. I have a feeling you'll need some help navigating the rooftops without your catlike agility."

"That's not what I'm worried about," Adrien said honestly, gripping her hand in his. "You're a bit disarming, and I don't have my confident façade anymore."

"You never needed one," she winked.

After careful attention at Master Fu's and a week of nursing Plagg back to health, things were getting back to normal. Adrien had resurfaced, claiming he'd been on a secret photo shoot in Prague. His father, unbelievably, hadn't questioned it. He'd still been grounded that whole week, obviously, but that hadn't stopped him from seeing Ladybug.

She still hadn't told him her identity, though. In fact, she seemed to enjoy making it a mystery.

"Once Plagg's healed and you can be Chat again, just come find me with your heightened senses. You already have my scent, kitty." She'd kissed him and then had disappeared out his window like a whisper into the wind.
"Hurry up and get better, already," he'd told Plagg afterward. The kwami smirked. "That good of a kiss, huh?"

"Maybe. But that's none of your business. Besides, I need you to recover so I can throw you out my window," he huffed. "I'm still mad at you."

His kwami made a tiny "Eep!" noise.

Adrien knew in his heart the threat was empty. Plagg just didn't need to know that yet.
A Splash of Color

Chapter Summary

A Splash of Color: Marinette's boyfriend Louis isn't the greatest guy. It's a good thing Chat Noir knows how to teach him a lesson. A Marichat fic with a smidgen of angst.

Chapter Notes

This one is an old favorite - I hope you like it too!

Marinette had had a bad week. She'd failed a pop quiz in history, been late to class twice, tripped three times over the same crack in the sidewalk by her house, fought four akumas in the last three days, and her relationship with her boyfriend, Louis Sinclair, was starting to crumble.

She and Louis had been dating for about six months, and everyone at school had expressed the opinion that they were the perfect couple. Everyone, it seemed, except Adrien. Marinette wondered if he had a crush on her and that he was jealous, but it really wouldn't have made sense. He was dating Lila anyway, and Marinette didn't present much competition.

Not that it mattered. She and Louis were made for each other.

He always knew the best way to make her smile. His eyes were a gorgeous golden brown, and they'd widen and soften when he looked at her. His brown hair flopped goofily across his forehead, sometimes catching in his long eyelashes. He brought her cookies on Sundays and she taught him how to stitch fabric. Her parents adored him and called him a gentleman. He always wore red around her because he knew it was her favorite color. She brought him croissants every Saturday and they played videogames. She always won, and he never got mad. She waited for him every day at school so they could walk to class together and catch up. She wore the gardenia perfume he'd given her on their three month anniversary simply so he'd know she cared. She wore her hair down on all their dates and at no other time. It made him feel special that she made the extra effort with him. He called her Mari, and she let him.

Marinette, until recently, had started wondering whether Louis was the one.

The only problem was that in the past week, Louis had seemed distant. Uncaring, even. He wore blue, not red. He forgot to bring her cookies on Sunday. He didn't meet her at the top step so they could walk into school together, holding hands. He didn't reply to any of her texts or calls. He continually skipped lunch, so Marinette was forced to third wheel with Nino and Alya at various sandwich shops. As much as she loved her friends, the lovebirds simply reminded Marinette of who should have been sitting in the empty seat beside her.

She could tell something was wrong with Louis, but she couldn't figure out what it was.

By Friday afternoon when school let out, Marinette was at her wit's end. Louis hadn't talked to her in nearly four days. What had she done to deserve the silent treatment? She shoved her books from her
locker into her backpack, planning to go upstairs to the library and study until eight, when she was supposed to meet Chat Noir for an evening patrol.

The hallway was nearly empty. The detritus of another day lay spread along the floor: broken pencils, a layer of dust and eraser shavings, ripped pieces of paper, a forgotten textbook, a lost and lonely sock leftover from the daily change into gym clothes. Marinette wanted to curl up and join the clutter of forgotten objects on the floor – she apparently was one of them now. Perhaps Louis had moved on? Perhaps he didn’t want her anymore? The inside of her nose started to sting and her eyes felt hot and red. A tear emerged and dripped down her cheek.

"Marinette," whispered Tikki from the opening in her purse. "Pull yourself together. You should get your studying done. Then tomorrow, go find him and figure out what's going on. You're stronger than this. Don't let some guy make you forget who you are, Ladybug."

"You're right, Tikki," she sighed, wiping her eyes and taking a few breaths. She couldn't sit and mope. She wasn't going to let Louis' dark clouds ruin her day. She was a superheroine even when she wasn't wearing the mask. A rough week shouldn't be enough to ruin her.

She walked into the library on shaky legs, trying to look stronger than she felt in case anyone was there. But she didn't have to worry, the place appeared deserted. She set up her books and tablet at a far table in the corner and started to work on her homework.

But then, she heard a small noise coming from the library office on the other side of the room. The door was closed, but there was definitely someone inside. Then she heard two voices giggling and whispering, and formed a better idea of exactly what was happening in that room.

Rolling her eyes, she stuffed headphones in her ears and got to work. No need to hear people making out when she was trying to study. It was probably two stupid sophomores trying to see what they could get away with. It wasn't worth her time.

But a few minutes later, the door opened, and Marinette realized she'd been wrong. Her stylus fell from her hand and clattered onto her tablet. Her mouth seemed to be stuck in a silent "O", and she suddenly felt the urge to pass out.

Because one of the people walking out of the closet was Louis.

He was wearing the smile of someone with a secret, and was clutching the hand of someone familiar. Someone with long, luxurious brown hair, caramel skin, and hazel eyes. Someone with a fox-like face and a smirk on her lips. Lila.

Marinette sat frozen. She was unable to stop watching. Her boyfriend and her archenemy snuck across the room and left through the heavy oak doors with an indiscreet giggle.

When the doors clicked closed, Marinette was left alone again. The small library seemed like a coffin now; all wood and no air. Darkness descended inside her like someone turning off a light. Marinette's shallow breathing made her feel like she was being buried alive. There were tiny black and white speckles dancing in her eyes, and her whole body felt like it was falling asleep.

"Marinette?" Tikki asked cautiously, flying out of the purse and hovering in front of her. "I think you should go home."

She was probably right. Marinette didn't think she should stay there any longer – if she didn't move she was relatively sure she'd turn to stone in that very spot.

Stiffly, still in shock, she gathered her belongings and began the walk home. The city had taken on a
dusty gray color. The vivid arrangements in the flower shop across the street were muted until all that remained were tans, blacks, and whites. The world in sepia seemed to swallow her whole.

When she finally got home, her parents were gone. They were catering an event at a local hotel tonight and wouldn't be home until late. Marinette was almost relieved. She wasn't sure how she was going to explain what had just happened. She barely understood it herself.

"You're keeping yourself together very well," Tikki said meekly. "I'm impressed."

"I don't think it's hit me yet," she replied honestly. "When it does, I'm going to be an absolute mess."

"I know. I'll be here for you. I'm really sorry, Marinette."

"Thanks."

Marinette reached her room, dropped her backpack to the floor, and flopped to the bed. She stared at the red-painted wall across from her. It used to be filled with pictures of Adrien, but she'd taken them all down ages ago. When she'd met Louis, pining for Adrien seemed unreasonable. Besides, Adrien had always had this unattainable quality in her mind. He was kind, cute, sensitive, strangely sheltered in some ways, brave enough to stand up for what he believed in, and on top of that, he was a world-famous model. Some things were just too good to be true.

Some things were just too good to be true. It occurred to her that Louis now fell into that category. He had cheated on her.

He had cheated on her. His lips had been on Lila's. And he'd enjoyed it.

Marinette snapped.

She ripped the comforters and sheets from her bed until they were a strangled mess on her floor. She threw all her books from her backpack across the room and they made satisfying slams against the carpet. She tore up Louis' little love notes to her. The destructive rage went on and on, all while she replayed the instance of him and Lila together in her head like a broken record.

It explained his absences and neglect. But it didn't explain the reason why he'd chosen Lila over her. Was he just bored? Had she done something wrong? Had Lila simply seduced him? It was possible. Lila clearly had that effect on people. She'd done it to Adrien.

Oh no.

The thought occurred to her. Did Adrien know Lila was cheating on him?

"Tikki, what if-" she began, but she was unable to finish her sentence.

There was a commotion outside. She could hear her neighbors' six dogs barking wildly as though some stray cat had had the misfortune to wander too close to the fence. It happened occasionally. She walked over to her window and opened it all the way. Looking down, she noticed it has started to rain. Along the rain-shined pavement below, she could just make out two dog noses peeking over the fence as they stood on their hind legs. She wondered what had happened to the poor stray cat.

Suddenly, she heard a voice. "Agh, get off me!"

Then, moments later, amidst more barking, "Marinette, look out! Coming through!"

A black blur catapulted over the fence and soared straight for her. Shrieking, she ducked to the
ground as something large flew over her and landed with a crash on her floor.

Marinette pushed herself off the floor and slammed the window shut. When she turned around, she beheld someone familiar lying in a crumpled heap on her carpet, his face resting on her pile of sheets. Apparently the dogs had been all worked up over a stray Chat Noir.

Marinette had had many friendly encounters with Chat Noir before, and this was not the first time he'd ever come into her room through the window. However, it was the first time he'd nearly killed her while doing so.

"Ouch," he moaned.

"Serves you right," she said. suddenly glad for the company. "You nearly decapitated me by launching yourself in here like that – if I hadn't ducked, I'd be dead."

"You're being melodramatic," he said, rolling over onto his back and clutching his chest. "Boy, those dogs really don't like me."

"Well, they don't like cats."

"But-

"Chat, look at yourself. You are a cat."

He looked down in mock surprise. "No way!"

Marinette rolled her eyes. "You nearly smacked right into me, you know."

"I did warn you I was coming up."

"That wasn't a warning," Marinette snorted.

But then she sobered. "What are you doing here, anyway? What's wrong?" she said. Ever since they'd first met, Marinette had made it clear that Chat could count on her as a friend. Every once in a while he came to her for help. Once, it was to pick out a present for his girlfriend. Another time, it was to fix his suit, which had gotten ripped in a fight. What could it be this time?

"Marinette," Chat said, still lying on the floor, "can I tell you something without you getting really upset?"

"Uh, okay." She walked over and sat cross-legged on the floor by his head. His wide green eyes swiveled to meet hers.

"Just please don't kill the messenger, okay?"

"Chat, just tell me." Her heart was pounding. How could this day get any worse?

"Okay. Well, you've helped me out a lot over the past two years. And I want to return the favor. I came to tell you...your boyfriend's cheating on you."

"You...you knew?" She narrowed her eyes.

Chat sat up in surprise. "Wait, you knew? How?"

"I found out just now. I saw Louis kissing Lila in the library when they thought no one was there."
His face fell. "I'm so sorry. That's awful."

"Wait, how did you know Louis was cheating?"

Chat rolled his sore wrists. "I saw them leaving the school holding hands. Just now. And then I came here to make sure you knew. This is information you can't keep from somebody."

"Oh." Marinette felt surprised, and strangely warm. "Well, thank you." He gave her a sad smile.

Suddenly, she remembered was she was going to tell Tikki before Chat had unceremoniously arrived in her bedroom. She gasped, and put a hand to her mouth. "Chat, does Adrien know? He's dating Lila. We have to tell him!"

She stood up, but Chat didn't move. He just continued giving her that sad smile. "Oh, Adrien knows."

"When did he find out?"

"Same time as you. He stayed late for fencing and saw them when they were plotting to go up to the library."

"Poor Adrien."

"Poor you," Chat said, looking up at her. "What Louis did is despicable."

"I know. I feel stupid for being so oblivious."

"So does Adrien."

She gave him a how do you know look, and he amended the statement: "Probably."

"Chat, I don't know what I'm going to do. I thought I might have actually loved him, but this changes things. I don't think he feels the same way. Should I break up with him?"

"Yes."

The answer took her by surprise. "Really? Not even give him a chance to explain?"

"What's to explain? He cheated on you. With someone who is also cheating on her boyfriend. And they both knew what they were doing. You probably saw his face. He knows but he doesn't care, does he?"

Marinette sat down on the edge of her bare bed and looked down. "No, he doesn't." she said quietly. She felt tears start to gather in her eyes again, but pushed them down. I will not cry in front of Chat. She closed her eyes and breathed slowly.

She felt her bed shift as Chat sat down beside her. He put a hand on her shoulder in a surprisingly gentle manner. "It's okay. This is not your fault."

"I just…I fell for him. I fell really hard. I let myself get duped. I just…never thought it would happen to me, you know? I thought Louis and I were made for each other."

She opened her eyes and looked at Chat. He was wearing an expression of such total understanding that it made her wonder if he'd ever been cheated on. It sure seemed that way. His eyes had the same vulnerable, jaded quality to them that she imagined hers now held.
"If you were made for each other, nothing would have been able to come between you. Not even the biggest secret. True love is about understanding. Compassion. Empathy. Sacrifice. Loyalty. Neither Lila nor Louis understands that."

"Wow. That's...really wise."

"Let's just say I know someone who went through the same thing."

"You don't have to lie. I can tell that 'someone' was you, Chat."

He shifted, running his hands through his messy hair. "Fair enough," he sighed.

They sat in crystallized silence for a while. The world still held a sepia tone for Marinette – all color had been leached from her eyes. Was this what a broken heart felt like?

She told Chat this and he chuckled. He took her hand and placed it against his chest above his heart. "Do you feel my heartbeat? How it's sort of struggling?"

"Yeah," Marinette breathed. He was so warm.

"Well, it hurts. Physically hurts. That is what a broken heart feels like to me, at least. I think everyone feels it differently."

She frowned, confused. "So...it must be pretty recent for you, then?"

"Oh yes. Today."

"Wow. What is it about today? Is it 'cheat on each other' day or something?"

"Maybe," said Chat, but he didn't look like he believed it. "Marinette, after you break up with Louis...do you think you would want to meet up with Adrien? I think you both could use the others' company, given that you both are going through the same thing."

"All right." She picked up her phone and held it up for Chat to see. "But first, I'm going to meet Louis and dump him."

Chat's eyes widened and he jumped to his feet. "No! Uh, I mean...don't meet him in person. Just do it on the phone."

"Why?" she narrowed her eyes again and stood up to face him. He looked sheepish. "What did you do?"

"I...may have intercepted him and Lila on their way out of the school once I found out what was going on...and taught him a lesson. He probably won't want...to see you."

Some part of Marinette was horrified at this, but a small corner of her heart felt strangely happy. Chat had defended her honor?

"Taught him a lesson how?"

"I...may have punched him. It's kind of a blur." He looked to his right. He did that around Ladybug when he wasn't telling the whole truth. She pressed him further.

"Chat, how many times did you punch him?"

There was a pause and Chat looked down ashamedly and mumbled into his chest, "I lost count."
"That was totally unnecessary!"

"I didn't hurt him too badly," he put up his hands defensively. "But he'll have a nice black eye. And Lila didn't stick around to defend him or anything. She just booked it. The two of them are over, Marinette."

"I can't believe you did that. I can take care of myself, you know."

But then, some insane crevice of Marinette's brain, the place that was hurt and upset and angry, decided this was hilariously funny. She burst into maniacal giggles, hugging Chat and pressing her cheek against his chest.

"Thank you," she said at last. "I still can't believe you punched him. But…thank you."

Chat glanced down at her with a genuine Cheshire grin, then looked out the window. "Hey, it's raining."

"I know."

"Want to go for a walk before you call Louis?"

"Sure, but we'll need umbrellas."

"I know." He had a strangely nervous expression on his face. "Something tells me you have one. A black one."

Marinette went to get it from her closet, but when she clutched it in her hand, something clicked in her brain. This was Adrien's umbrella, from the first day they'd become friends. But how did Chat know about it?

The only answer didn't make sense to her. It seemed impossible.

When they walked out of the bakery and onto the pavement, they stood under the shelter of the awning as Chat opened the black umbrella. He swung it up over his head, then turned back and held it out to Marinette.

The sudden motion was so familiar, so genuine, so…Adrien. Marinette gasped in recognition, and his eyes crinkled with happiness.

"Hi Mari," he said, as if introducing himself for the first time. "Want to share an umbrella?"

Maybe it was the rain. Maybe it was the fact that she was an emotional wreck. Maybe it was the fact that Chat…Adrien…was so smooth. But Marinette decided to take the umbrella with an accepting smile. She didn't even correct him for calling her Mari. It was…sort of nice.

"I really am surprised, Adrien," she said, looking up at him. "But I can't think of a better alter-ego for you. You make an amazing Chat. It's just such a coincidence…I…well," she paused.

"What?"

"When I said you didn't have to punch Louis…that I could take care of myself…I actually meant it. I'm Ladybug."

Chat stopped walking, and Marinette didn't notice until he was already outside the cover of the umbrella. He stood, dripping in the rain, his muscles tense from the exposure to water. She'd
forgotten cats didn’t like it very much, and rushed back to shelter him again.

"You've got to be kitten me," he said, straight faced.

"Nope. It's true." She opened up her purse and Tikki flew out and gave Chat a meek wave. "Oh, and please, no more puns. I've had to endure them for too long."

"But they're part of my charm!"

"They don't work on Ladybug the way you think they do."

He gave her a sly look. "Are you sure about that?"

Well, no. But Marinette wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Chat tilted his head. "So I've actually been friends with you this whole time that we've been secretly fighting akumas together? That is one small world."

"It really is. It's too bad we had to find out on a day like this. The day everything fell apart." She looked out ahead at the rainy, glossy street. "Things are going to be sepia for me for a while, and your heart's going to be broken for a while. I'm just glad we don't have to heal alone," she said.

"You know, Marinette, the world always needs a little color. I feel like my life gets more vibrant when I'm around you. Do you think…well, do you think that maybe you and I would someday have a chance at something more than friends? More than partners? I don't know if we're made for each other, but I'm willing to try hard enough that Louis becomes a faded part of your past. I'm willing to try if you are. Do you think we could heal our wounds together and see where we end up?"

Marinette couldn't believe her ears. She looked up into his hopeful face, listening to the staccato rhythm of the raindrops against the umbrella.

And she was startled to find, in her sepia world, there was suddenly one splash of color: the emerald green eyes of Chat Noir.
Wait For It

Chapter Summary

Wait For It: Ladybug calls up Chat Noir with an emergency. He rushes to her aid, but what she needs help with isn't exactly what he expected. Idea by amaezing.

Chapter Notes

Glad you guys are enjoying these reveals! Thanks for reading!

Something was keeping Adrien awake. It ate into his sleeping hours with voracious hunger. It left him pacing rooftops at night as Chat Noir instead of resting. He'd started realize something he should have noticed a long time ago, and while it was exhilarating in theory, the reality of it made his heart feel as fragile as glass.

It had all begun the day he and Ladybug had first met. The way she'd swung in, totally capable but modestly unsure of her abilities, had been breathtaking. It also hadn't hurt that she was gorgeous, kind, or funny. Or that she'd smelled like muffins. Or that her eyes had sparkled when she'd looked at him. Or that she'd pretended not to like his puns.

And the more time Chat spent with Ladybug, the increasingly apparent it became. Hidden in her smirks, in their banter, in her trusting hand in his...he'd fallen in love with her.

But this was a secret that needed to remain trapped within him: he'd made a promise a long time ago. He and Ladybug had had a discussion, back when their routine was still rather new, about what would happen if they fell in love with each other.

"We can't tell each other," Ladybug had insisted. "I think our lives outside our masks should take precedence when it comes to love. Our personal, non-hero relationships come before our masks this time. Besides, it'll be impossible to fall in love with each other if we only know each other by our costumes. I'd like to know the true face of the person I love."

Chat, like an idiot, had agreed. And now, two years later, he was stuck with dead-end feelings for a girl in a mask – a love she'd said was impossible.

These were the thoughts that now kept Adrien from falling asleep. It was nearly midnight already. Unable to shake the frustration and fear, he woke Plagg.

"But I need my beauty sleep," his kwami complained when Adrien explained he needed to transform. They argued for a few minutes, but then Adrien got smart and simply stuffed some Camembert into the kwami's mouth. After that, Plagg complied easily.

The night air was tinged with the scent of rain-stained cement. It wasn't raining now, but the freshness coated Chat's lungs as he climbed to the nearest roof and sat on the edge.
He'd only been there for a few minutes before Ladybug called him. Incredibly surprised, he spent a few seconds fumbling for the answer button before he answered.

"Chat, you're awake? I honestly didn't think you'd be around right now."

"Couldn't sleep. Decided to go for a catwalk. What's wrong?"

"How quickly can you get to our meeting spot?"

"For you, an instant. Why?"

"I need help. It's an emergency."

"Meet you there. Should I bring anything?"

"Just yourself."

Chat may or may not have broken a few laws of physics in his hurry to get to their spot in the park. Regardless, he made record time.

They'd started meeting at the park since it was a public landmark of equal distance between their houses. When he arrived, it was deserted and dimly lit. The bench in the far corner was shrouded by trees, leaves bent over with the moisture of the rain. Chat did not sit down – the seat was drenched.

Ladybug arrived not a minute later and tapped him on the shoulder. Chat gave a startled leap and yowled, landing in a fighting stance with his ears twitching anxiously.

"Don't sneak up on me like that. You could have been a murderer for all I knew," he complained reproachfully.

"Sorry!" She put out her hands in earnest apology. "I didn't mean to."

"What's the emergency?" Chat's muscles were still taut and ready to spring.

He was expecting her to launch into a story about how she discovered Hawkmoth's lair in a basement guarded by robots.

Or that there was a gas leak underneath the library.

Or that a new villain was remaking the fashion industry with a strange combination of toothbrushes and teacup pigs.

He was not expecting Ladybug to hand him an ordinary piece of paper and a pen.

"I know it might sound ridiculous," she was saying, "but I want to write someone a letter. I have feelings for this guy I go to school with, and I don't want to wait anymore to share them. The thing is… I sort of need another guy to read it and make sure it doesn't sound idiotic. I couldn't think of anyone I trusted more than you, Chat. Will you help me? Please"

She looked at him with those heaven-colored eyes. Her cheeks looked flushed and warm in the dim orange light. Chat wanted to cup her face in his hands and kiss her.

But then the meaning of her words brought him back to the unpleasant reality. He couldn't kiss Ladybug. She had just told him she was in love with somebody else. And she wanted his help writing the love note.
"Wait, this is the emergency?"

She looked at him sheepishly.

"For all your confidence fighting villains, you can't face your crush?"

"I know." Ladybug hung her head miserably.

"Why? You're incredible!" I love you.

"I'm also very nervous, and this is important to me. That's why it's an emergency. I really need help with what to say. Please. Please help me, Chat."

His heart was in pieces, but he'd have to survive. His lady needed him.

"Okay." Chat said in a wobbly voice, taking the pen and paper. "My lady…not to be rude, but is there a reason the letter has to be written now? Couldn't it wait until tomorrow? Maybe you should sleep on this before you rush into it?"

"Chat, I've wanted to say this for years. And now I'm not afraid to do it anymore. I just realized that tonight. I don't have time to waste." She began to ramble. "Do you realize how short life is? How few days we really get with people we love? Even if it's only a few hours, I want those extra hours with him if there's a chance we could be together sooner. Isn't that the way love is supposed to feel? You want every extra minute, because they're precious and finite? It's not whiling away hours because it's easy or because you're bored. It's snatching at seconds because they're going to be the best seconds of your life."

Completely bewildered, Chat nodded. He was blown away by this statement. He knew Ladybug was smart and eloquent. But this was a whole new level of profundity he was not accustomed to. And her description of love was so thoughtful. It made him wish she was talking about him.

"Okay, yeah, all right. I'll help," he sighed. "But you should write what I dictate. You probably have better handwriting."

"Are you sure?"

"Uh, yes." He wiggled his fingers at her. "I can't really write with claws. It looks like chicken-scratch."

"Fair enough."

They spent forty minutes in the park, testing sentences and carefully crafting a few ink sentences that could very well have been written in the blood from Chat's broken heart. They were the words he had been hoping someday to say to Ladybug, but in cruel irony, he gave them away for her to bestow upon someone else. Chat hoped the guy was worth it, whoever he was. In Ladybug's beautiful cursive, it looked amazing.

The way I feel has been the same since we met – you are intoxicating and admirable. I love being in the sunshine of your world, and hope I never have to leave it. Every day without you is a shadow.

I know it's taken a long time for me to say it, but I don't want to wait anymore: I am in love with you, if you'll have me.

"Don't forget to put his name at the top," Chat reminded her, curious who the mystery guy was. But Ladybug merely smiled coyly. "I won't. But I don't want you to see."
"Worried I'll be jealous?" It was an honest question. Chat didn't think he'd like the answer, but he couldn't resist asking.

"Pshhhh. No."

"We're friends. It's only because personal lives comes before the masks, like we agreed."

He inwardly groaned, but concealed it with a polite shrug.

She was about to fold the letter up, but Chat put his hand on hers. "Wait. Sign it with your name too."

"I will, when I get home. No spoilers for you. Don't you know curiosity killed the cat?" Chat's wince went unseen. Ladybug had no idea how much he was dying inside at the moment. She really was going to kill him and had no idea.

"No, I mean with your Ladybug autograph too," he said with a short, painful chuckle. "That little doodle is your signature, even if he doesn't know it."

She considered him with wide eyes. "Why?"

"Because if you love him the way you described, and he feels the same way, he should know every secret. Even this one." Chat tapped the corner of her eye mask with one finger. The gesture was friendly, but to him it felt intimate.

She looked down at the letter in her hand. "You're right," she said. Moments later, an inky black five-spotted ladybug tattooed the paper in the bottom right corner. Chat gave her a satisfied grin.

"Good luck," he said somewhat awkwardly. "With everything. You know...tomorrow."

"Thank you."

Chat twirled his baton, turning to leave, but a warm hand on his arm stopped him.

"No. Thank you," Ladybug emphasized, leaning in. She definitely smelled like muffins. Chat bemoaned the fact that life was too cruel. "You gave up a lot of time for me tonight. For something that is probably pretty trivial. So thank you. I really appreciate it."

"Anything for you," he said, taking her free hand and kissing it as if it was the last time he could. "My lady."

The next morning at school, Adrien was bleary-eyed and dazed. He'd been staring at the inside of his locker for a solid two minutes, not able to remember what his next class was. Chinese? Biology? History?

The only thing in his mind was the thought of Ladybug, presumably at school somewhere, handing some lucky guy a letter he'd helped write. Why did he have to be so stupid? He should have just told Ladybug the truth, even if it was against their agreement.

He managed to make it to lunch after hours of taking useless notes. And as he sat on the outside steps of the school eating a tasteless sandwich, Marinette took a seat beside him. He looked up, surprised, as she handed him a paper cup of tea from the cart in the school lobby.

"Drink it before it gets cold," she advised. "You look like you could use some caffeine."

"Thanks! Is this-"
"Earl grey with lemon? Yeah."

"Thanks," he said, tilting his head to look at her. "How did you know it was my favorite?"

"You told me once, a while ago," she said with a nervous smile.

Adrien took another sip. "Well, it's really nice of you. Is it that obvious I didn't get much sleep last night?"

"A bit. I watched you try to push open a "pull" door by for about thirty seconds this morning."

They both laughed, and Adrien felt the heaviness in his heart that had been there all morning momentarily lift. Maybe he’d been wrong – maybe his heart wasn't totally shattered. If someone as amazing as Marinette could still make him laugh, maybe there was hope in the world for him after all. She always brightened his day.

Marinette considered him for a moment, seeming as though she was debating internally whether or not to say something. Finally, she seemed to decide to go for it.

"I have something else for you," she said, pulling out a small white envelope with shaking fingers. Adrien set down his tea and took it, an unspoken question in his eyes.

"Just read it. I'd say it aloud, but honestly, you make me nervous."

Adrien made a face. "I make you nervous? Marinette, you're talking to the guy who couldn't open a door this morning. What is this, anyway?" He held up the letter.

"Just read it, please," she said earnestly.

"Okay."

But when he unfolded the little note inside, he at first thought he was dreaming. What he saw couldn't be real. There, in the bottom right corner of the paper. The little ladybug of ink. Five black spots against the cream-colored paper.

It swirled before his eyes like a yin-yang symbol. His brain was tricking him, twisting the vision until it was as knotted as his stomach.

So it had come to this.

Adrien turned to face Marinette. To Ladybug. His expression was a mixture of shock and confusion, and she immediately mistook it for rejection.

"Oh," she said, breathing quickly and standing up. "Right…um, it's fine, I understand, I…I should go."

"No, wait!" he cried. Marinette froze halfway up the steps, her back to him. When she turned her head, he could see a tear on her cheek. She self-consciously wiped it away.

"Marinette," he said, taking the steps two-at-a-time to catch up to her. He stopped one step below hers. "This letter. I…I've seen it before. I helped write it. That's why I panicked. Not because I don't share your feelings. Because I do. I really do. I just wasn't expecting this…I wasn't expecting the letter to be for me. I wasn't even expecting it to come from you. You're Ladybug, the girl I'm in love with. I really did not see this coming…"

She gave him a deer-in-headlights look. He'd probably said too much too fast.
"What do you mean, you helped write it?"

Adrien glanced to the side – they were still alone on the steps. No one would overhear.

"Exactly that. I was there."

She crossed her arms. "How?"

"I think you know," he said quietly, opening his jacket so she could see Plagg hiding in the inside pocket. The kwami gave her a little wave and a bow. _He really was such a ham_, Adrien thought. Marinette hadn't moved, so he kept talking. "All this time, you've been doing things with Chat...you've been doing them with me. You chose me as Adrien. Is it too much of a leap to choose Chat too? Now that we know the faces behind our masks?"

Marinette studied him, a strange spark in her eyes that hadn't been there before. She seemed to slowly be realizing what everything meant.

It was coming together like a puzzle. Chat liked Ladybug. Marinette liked Adrien. Now they both had all the missing pieces: Chat was Adrien, and Ladybug was Marinette.

Adrien waited, feeling flushed. Was she ever going to say anything?

Marinette pushed a strand of hair behind her ears and took a step down so they were at the same level.

"I'm not saying I totally understand this. It's pretty weird, Adrien. And I'm not saying yes to your question, not yet."

Adrien felt his shoulders sag a little. Could she really break his heart again? It seemed so.

"I just don't know what to think right now," she continued. "A rug's been pulled out from under me. The person I'm in love with is simultaneously the person I thought it would be impossible to have feelings for. I had no clue you and Chat were the same person. And now that you know my secret too, it changes everything! How can you be sure you could love me as Marinette?"

Adrien never imagined he'd smile in a situation like this, but for some reason, he was. "Marinette, you don't understand. I've been in love with Ladybug since the first day we met. But not because you were a superhero in a mask. Because you were the kind of person I wanted to be friends with. You have always been someone I admired and appreciated. And that personality doesn't change just because you're not wearing a costume now - you've always been selfless and funny and kind and admirable. So it's very easy for me to say I love you."

"I don't know, Adrien...I need some time to think about this before rushing into anything. I'm sorry. I love you as you, but realizing you're Chat makes things confusing."

"It doesn't have to. It's still me."

"I know. And once I process that, I'll feel better about starting a relationship with you. But I don't want to rush this. You and Chat...You...are too important to me. I don't want to mess anything up between us."

Adrien calmly folded the letter back up and put it in his pocket, then took Marinette's hands in his. They were cold against his. She was clearly nervous and upset, and he felt terrible.

"I understand. I feel the same way," he said softly. "We can go one step at a time."
He remembered the first day he'd become friends with Marinette. He'd given her his umbrella and walked to his car in the chilly rain. He hadn't even shivered the whole ride home. The thought of having his first real friend had kept him warmer than any umbrella could. There was a sense of déjà vu for him as he again looked at Marinette and said, "Friends?"

She gave him a hopeful smile and squeezed his hands. "Friends." She then nodded at his jacket pocket and said, "Don't lose that letter. Just because I need some time to process things doesn't mean those words aren't still true."

Then she left him dazed on the steps as the warning bell for classes began to ring. There was a smell of muffins still in the air. Adrien went back and picked up his tea, holding the warm cup to his palms with a small smile.

"That was unsatisfying," remarked Plagg slyly from inside his jacket pocket.

"Hey, I'm honoring her request."

"I know you are, and I'm proud of you for doing that. But I'd like to know what exactly it is you think you're going to do next. What are you waiting for? What's the plan to win her heart?"

"You know, I think I've already won it," Adrien said thoughtfully. "But I'm going to be patient. I've waited two years for this incredible girl. I can wait a little longer. I don't want to, necessarily," he conceded, glancing at the doors Marinette had just disappeared through. "But she's worth waiting for."
Signatures

Chapter Summary

Signatures: Marinette's class is supposed to design and wear a costume for their project. Her costume choice is a no-brainer, but will someone see through her mask this time? A project fic requested by Chise Sakamoto.

Chapter Notes

As in some of the earlier chapters, the references to Volpina in this chapter are a remnant of a time before Rena Rouge was canon, so I just presumed that would be her name. Thanks for bearing with me through some of the older ones here ;)

Marinette was tired. Her fingers were sore from stitching. Her eyes felt puffy from lack of sleep. Her hair was a sloppy mess.

But her masterpiece was complete. She dropped her hands to her lap and breathed a relieved sigh. "Finished."

She'd spent weeks on this particular assignment, and yet here she was at nearly midnight the day before it was due. It was a good thing she hadn't procrastinated – the design had taken nearly all her time as it was.

For her costume design class project, they'd each been asked to choose one costume to make and wear for the day. They'd be graded on its authenticity and how well it held up during wear. Marinette's choice was bound to earn her a fantastic grade. No one else would be able to match the detail she'd put into it. Of course, she had an unfair advantage. She saw the costume every single day. She wore it every single day. She was going as Ladybug.

And, as tempted as she was to just transform and use that as her costume, she felt she should still put in the effort. It would be tremendously unfair to her classmates if she had the best costume but hadn't put in any work. That was something Chloe would do, but not her.

Marinette sat back in her chair, admiring the suit. It was the perfect shade of red, the black spots had the same diameter as the original ones, and she'd gone the extra mile by even crafting a polka-dotted yoyo to sling over her hip. But the best part was her signature. Marinette always signed her work – it was a symbol of her pride in her accomplishments, but it was also nice to make something that had a little secret hidden inside it. Only she knew where it was – this time, she'd signed the inside of the eye-mask.

"It's perfect," said Tikki, floating at her shoulder. "Your hard work certainly is going to pay off."

"Do you think anyone will recognize me in this?"

"No, most people have a hard time seeing what's right in front of them unless they know what they're
looking for. I think you're safe," her kwami said wisely.

The next morning, Marinette's design class convened with an array of colors and masks and laughter. As she walked to her seat next to Alya, she noticed her friend was dressed as Volpina.

"Did you really have to do *that* for your costume?" she asked, wrinkling her nose as she sat down.

"Only because I knew what yours was going to be," her friend smiled proudly. "I knew it would bug you."

"It does," she admitted. "But you still did a really nice job. How did you get all the details for the outfit?"

"I have a photo of Volpina on my blog from when Lila got akumatized. I may have had some creative license and changed a few things, but the rest of the costume is still the same."

"It looks really good," Marinette said honestly. "I can tell you put a lot of effort into it."

"I did. But probably not as much as you did on yours," Alya said, her eyes sparkling. "You did an incredible job with this costume. It looks just like hers!"

"Thanks! I had some help for the details."

"I knew my Ladyblog would come in handy," Alya celebrated. Marinette smiled, not having the heart to tell her that wasn't where her help had come from.

"So, do you think I could pass as the real Ladybug?" Marinette asked, feeling brave.

Alya tilted her head and considered the costume. "Ehhhh...maybe. The costume, definitely, but honestly *you* don't really look like her."

"Right," Marinette said with a laugh. "This is probably as close as I could get."

She glanced around the room at the other costumes. It was a strange gathering. Nino was dressed as a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle and was talking to Rose, who was wearing an elaborate stone angel costume. Chloe and Sabrina were dressed as matching fairies — their costumes were gauzy and form-fitting, Chloe's with expert tailoring. Marinette knew professional work when she saw it — Chloe had probably commissioned it from some fashion designer instead of doing the design herself.

But then Marinette's gaze fell on the figure that had just walked through the door, and her breath caught in her chest.

She grabbed Alya's arm in excitement. "Alya — what's Chat Noir doing here?"

Her friend gave her a strange look and adjusted her fox mask. "Girl, that's just Adrien. He's in a costume."

Marinette blinked, suddenly embarrassed. But the resemblance was striking — he really did look like Chat. She stared as he sat down beside Nino and gave her a quick wave.

"Nice costume," he said. "You look just like her!"

Marinette shot a glare at Alya, who had just snorted. "Uh, thanks. You too," she stammered. "When you walked in, I actually thought you were Chat."
"Likewise. If you hadn't been right next to Alya, I would have assumed you were the real deal," he said smoothly. But Marinette detected a faint blush under his black mask.

"Wow, thanks!" She turned her head to Alya. "See? He thinks I look like Ladybug."

"Sorry, but I still don't see it," her friend said honestly, and Adrien chuckled.

"Well, I see the resemblance!" called Rose from the back. Juleka gave a thumbs up of agreement. Chloe and Sabrina inspected their nails.

Marinette high-fived Adrien. "We win, four against one, Alya," she said. "We do too look like Ladybug and Chat Noir."

"We still need Nino's opinion," she replied, tapping her boyfriend on the shoulder. "Nino, do you think Marinette and Adrien could be the real Chat and Ladybug?"

Nino scrutinized their costumes for a moment, but then burst out laughing. "You can't be serious. There's no way. You guys have great costumes, but you don't look anything like them. I agree with Alya on this one, dudes."

"Seriously?" Marinette and Adrien said at the same time. Their indignation was met with unapologetic looks.

"How can we see the resemblance but our friends can't?" Marinette asked Adrien. He just shrugged. "Great minds think alike?"

Later that afternoon, something crashed through the window of Marinette's classroom, leaving a jagged hole and shattered glass everywhere. On the street below, an akumatized bear-creature gave a startlingly loud bellow and began try smashing down the doors on the ground level.

At this point, an akuma attack was commonplace, and most students had already started to evacuate the classrooms out of proper protocol. Adrenaline pumping through her veins, Marinette knew she would have to disappear so she could transform.

She ripped off her eye-mask and sprinted for the nearest bathroom. She checked all the stalls were empty, and then cried, "Tikki, spots on!" The costume she was already wearing became an almost identical version. Her eye-mask was replaced with another one, and this time her yoyo wasn't just a prop. She was more than a copycat now. She was Ladybug.

In the chaos, no one saw her exit the bathroom and lunge into action. There were overturned chairs everywhere, and fragments of glass and wood and chipped paint lay on the ground. Students cowered in the hallways as a strange, hulking, bear-like creature finally burst through the main entrance doors one floor below. He raced to the center of the main hallway, picking up discarded books and backpacks, tossing them over his head. Then he found the lockers, and used one paw to knock the metal top off one of the rows.

Ladybug twirled her yoyo, thinking fast. Where was Chat? He was late, as usual. She was going to have to get him a watch.

"Marinette, you should be evacuating!" cried a voice from behind her. She turned and saw Adrien in his Chat Noir costume sprinting down the hallway to catch up to her.

"I'm not Marinette. You should be evacuating too, Adrien, it's not safe here. Let Chat and I take care of it."
He stopped running and gave her a quizzical look. "Uh…I am Chat. Not Adrien. Is it really that hard to tell us apart?"

"A bit, yeah," she said distractedly. "Why did you think I was Marinette?"

"You look just like her. And it was costume day, and she was dressed like you…"

"Wait, do you go to school here?"

"Do you?"

Ladybug hesitated, which probably gave it away. "I knew it," Chat crowed. "I have been wondering that for months. How else could you always get here so fast?"

"Is now really the time? There's a bear down there ripping up the lockers…"

A group of students ran past them in the opposite direction, including Rose. "Marinette, Adrien! Run! Why are you just standing there? Everyone's meeting in the gym for safety!"

He called after them, "I'm not Adrien! Really! I'm not him!"

"Methinks he doth protest too much," Ladybug laughed. "Maybe you are."

He gave her a shocked look. Ladybug dropped her snide expression and seriously looked at him.

"Wait, are you?"

Chat was spared from answering as another bellow came from below. He leapt forward and ran down the stairs, so Ladybug followed. The bear turned around to stare at them and gave a mighty roar, standing up on two legs. She stared up at it, quickly finding a small shark-tooth necklace wrapped around its thick neck.

"Chat, the akuma's in his necklace, but I can't reach right now – he's too tall. Can you distract him so I can get a better angle? Lure him to the lockers – he's looking for something over there. If he starts walking on all fours I can get it easily."

"I'm on it," he said. Wow. Not even a pun. Maybe what she'd said really was bothering him. Was it possible? Could Adrien really be Chat? Ladybug could easily see the resemblance when Adrien was in costume, even if no one else could…

But first, she had an akuma to purify. She waited for Chat to do his part, and once the bear was walking back to the lockers, she followed quietly.

They would have succeeded, but then a piece of tile from the ceiling fell to the floor with a slam behind them and the bear turned around, distracted.

"Ladybug, look out!" cried Chat, and she ducked as a massive paw swung at her face. She somersaulted out of the way and tried to come up with a new plan. She was going to have to trust her exceptional luck at this point. She grabbed a rubber band and a pen from the messy floor, thinking hard and blowing her bangs out of her face.

She scanned the room; an idea was building in the back of her mind. She fashioned the rubber band into a slingshot and aimed a pen not at the bear, but up at the ceiling. At just the right angle, she released it. The pen soared upward, bounced off the ceiling, flew at a pipe exposed on the opposite wall, ricocheted, and bounced against three more objects before flying, unbelievably, straight at the
clasp on the bear's necklace. It hit just hard enough to break the chain and send the necklace tumbling to the floor. Ladybug slid across the tile and caught it in a gloved hand. "Gotcha," she cried jubilantly.

She placed the shark-tooth under her foot and broke it, then watched the akuma flutter out. She flipped open her yoyo and captured it easily. When it had been properly purified, the akuma was released. Things restored back to normal, the scratched and broken lockers sealing over like healed wounds.

"Nicely done," Chat said, patting her on the shoulder. "You really didn't even need me. I'm feline a bit useless."

"While your puns are worthless, you are indispensable," she corrected. "Don't ever forget that."

"You may have to remind me every once in a while. I love it when you say things like that." He gave her a characteristic smile, but underneath he still sounded nervous.

"Chat, we need to talk about earlier. My question-"

But he cut her off with a wink and started to run away. "Gotta go – I have class. Don't you?"

Ladybug raced up the stairs amid the throng of students recessing from the gym back to classes. She bumped directly into Miss Bustier, who regarded her coldly.

"Marinette, you and Adrien both missed roll call in the gym! Have you seen him?"

"Uh, no," she said, too taken aback to identify herself as Ladybug, not Marinette. Worry and something like suspicion started to boil in her stomach. Adrien had been missing? And Chat had been so nervous about being mistaken for Adrien. What if they were the same person? Dare she even think it?

"You need to be more careful during attacks! You seem to be all right, but Adrien could still be out here, injured or worse! What if that had happened to you?"

"I'm sorry," Ladybug apologized, her mind whirring. Her teacher didn't seem to notice the difference between her costume and her real Ladybug suit...this could get tricky. She still needed to search for Adrien and de-transform, but it was too late to correct Miss Bustier now.

"Come along," Bustier replied, essentially frog-marching Ladybug back to the classroom with the other students. She didn't get a chance to explain.

"Sit," her teacher told the class. Ladybug sat awkwardly in Marinette's seat, feeling flushed and terrified. She was going to be found out, she just knew it.

Alya and Nino sat down beside her. They were still too busy making sure the other was okay that they hardly noticed Ladybug sitting there. They obviously assumed she was a costumed Marinette. What Tikki said earlier bounced back into her head: most people have a hard time seeing what's right in front of them unless they know what they're looking for. Her kwami had been right.

Then Adrien…or was it Chat…walked through the door, said something to Miss Bustier, and took his seat in front of Ladybug.

"Which one are you?" she hissed at him.
He cocked an eyebrow. "Which one are you?"

"Marinette," she lied, taking a chance. He looked relieved. "I'm Chat."

His eyes flickered slightly, as if he were lying too. Ladybug narrowed her eyes. "But...then, where's Adrien? Bustier says he's missing."

"He's fine," Chat gestured flippantly. Then his eyes fell on Marinette's desk, and they widened as though he'd just discovered the universe.

"Are you sure?" Marinette asked. "And won't someone ask where Marinette and Adrien are? We're impersonating them!"

"It's only impersonation if you're not who you say you are," he whispered back with a ghost of a grin, his green eyes meeting hers again.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that we both have secrets. You probably know mine already, don't you?"

She gave him a blank expression. What came to mind – Chat and Adrien, the same person – was too ridiculous to be real.

"Okay, maybe not yet," said Chat. "But one thing is certain. You're lying about your identity, Marinette...or should I say, my lady." He picked up Marinette's costume eye-mask from the desk and showed it to her.

She'd completely forgotten about her mask. The one with her signature on the inside. The one now in Chat's hands.

She, as Ladybug, was already wearing a mask yet was pretending to be a mask-less Marinette. She'd just blown her secret.

Chat seemed to find something alarming in her face, because he said quickly, "Calm down, it's okay. No one else is going to find out." He handed her Marinette's mask. "Go de-transform," he whispered kindly. "I'll cover for you."

"Thank you," she managed, her ears roaring and her hands shaking.

When Marinette returned to her seat with her costume secure and her signed mask back on, Alya and Chat were talking and laughing with Nino. She assumed they were probably asking Chat all kinds of superhero questions. She sat down and put her hands flat on her desk.

"Thanks, Chat," she said quietly.

"Uh, no, girl," Alya corrected her. "That's not Chat. It's Adrien. You can tell because he signed his own sleeves." She lifted one of his arms and showed her. A small Adrien was stitched into the hem.

So he'd lied. But if she'd been talking to Adrien this whole time, how had he known to call her my lady? The inevitable conclusion struck her...Chat was Adrien.

Marinette gave him an incredulous and wide-eyed look, but he simply reached out and took her hand.

"Guilty as charged," he said. His hand was warm.
Dress to Confess

Chapter Summary

Dress to Confess: Alya finds out Chat is Adrien, and Nino finds out Ladybug is Marinette. Idea by ColdGoldLazarus.

Chapter Notes

It's time for a switch in perspective. To avoid falling into a main-character focused rut, I had a lot of fun crafting Nino and Alya's relationship. I think maybe "dude" will be their "always."

Contrary to popular belief (namely Chloe), Alya was not an idiot. For example, she knew exactly what was going on in biology. She could easily recite the four stages of mitosis, she was a whiz with dissection, and when they'd extracted DNA from a strawberry, she was the only one who'd gotten it to actually work.

That was because she simply read the instructions. She looked at what she was supposed to do in the textbook or the notes and did it. Apparently some of her classmates (namely Chloe) found that difficult, but as long as there was a roadmap or a plan, Alya usually found her way through any situation.

Yet, as she stood with her hands on hips staring at Adrien's outfit, she realized not everything came with an instruction manual.

There was no roadmap for how to dress your best friend's crush for his first date.

"Is that really what you want to wear?" she asked him, trying to sound neutral.

He looked down uncertainly. "I…uh, I dunno. They're all things she's said I look good in."

"You're wearing swimming trunks and a button down shirt…"

"Do you think she'd be able to tell they're swimming trunks?"

"You know…for a model, you're weirdly helpless when it comes to dressing yourself in something actually fashionable." She motioned for him to try another outfit.

Adrien walked back into his enormous closet and slid the door until it was almost closed. "That's just the problem," he said with a muffled voice as he changed. "Usually my outfit is decided for me – even on days when I don't have a shoot. It's so I keep up the impression of being stylish, or something. You've met my father. And Natalie. My life is micromanaged."

"Your clothes are micromanaged?" Alya wrinkled her nose.

"Clearly. You wouldn't even be here otherwise. My father announced this morning that you had
great taste, which is true. Then he basically demanded I invite you over to help me get ready. I think he wants my date with Marinette to go well as much as I do."

"Still, maybe you should go with something black. It'll accentuate the green in your eyes. She likes that."

He poked his head out from behind the door. "Really?"

"Obviously," Alya said. "She notices it with Chat Noir. And you have the same hair and eye color as him, so it's a reasonable extrapolation."

"Are you using him as a muse for me? That's a-musing…” he said with a smug grin.

"You're lucky I like puns. Marinette would have slapped you."

"She secretly likes them," he smiled, going back into the closet.

While he tried on the next outfit, Alya looked around his room. She'd expected it to be messier, but Adrien was actually very tidy. This was surprising, especially because Alya imagined he'd be a slob like Nino. But he had his books alphabetized. His floors were spotless. And there were three framed photos of Marinette on his desk. Thinking of the photos of Adrien that covered Marinette's walls, Alya chuckled. They really were made for each other.

"This is hopeless," Adrien said as he came out again. He was wearing black pinstripe pants and a horizontally striped black and white shirt.

Alya covered her face in mock horror. "My eyes!" she moaned.

Adrien turned right back around and disappeared into the closet again. "Is it really that bad?" he laughed.

"Maybe you should just wear what you had on earlier. I think we're trying too hard."

"All right then," he chuckled. "Can you hand me my jacket? It's on my bed."

"Sure." Alya crossed the room and picked up the blue jacket. It felt strangely heavy, as if something was in the pocket. She shook it curiously and something black and furry fell to the floor at her feet.

She shrieked and chucked the jacket across the room. Adrien came running out of his closet in jeans and a white shirt, only to find Alya standing on his bed and shuddering at whatever black thing lay on the white carpet.

"It's a rat!" Alya cried, looking disgusted. "It fell out of your pocket. Who knows how long it has been in there!"

It began to move, and Alya squirmed more. She saw it open its green eyes, and then two little ears flicked up on its head. It gave her a strangely human look of disdain. "I'm a cat," it said, and Alya screamed. "It talks?"

"It has a name," the cat said indignantly, soaring up from the floor and floating in the air between Alya and Adrien. She felt her knees wobble, but Adrien didn't seem to be sharing her fear. Instead, he gave an annoyed groan of disbelief.

"What?" the cat said to him, gesturing at Alya with tiny paws. "To be called a rat is the greatest insult. I must defend my pride."
Adrien put a hand to the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. "Plagg," he sighed. "You really blew it this time, didn't you?"

"Hey, Marinette, your phone's ringing. Do you want me to get it since you're busy?"

"Uh...please! I think it's just my reminder that I have a date tonight, so just turn it off. I think it's on my bed."

"Were you worried you'd forget to go because you're studying too hard?" Nino asked snidely.

She shook her head distractedly, holding a giant calculator in her thin hands. Her fingers were busily working away at a particularly nasty equation for her calculus class. Nino got up from his spot on the floor, closing the biology textbook he was reading with relief. He could use a break. Genetics really made no sense to him. He and Marinette had decided to do some last-minute studying since they both had tests tomorrow. She'd only been free today and still agreed to meet, even though it was mere hours before her first date with Adrien. She was already dressed up – Alya had helped her earlier, before going over to help dress Adrien.

Nino was well aware that sometimes it took a village to help people get together – if it hadn't been for his and Alya's help, their friends would still be skirting around each other and admiring from afar. Luckily Alya thought that kind of ignorance was boring. And luckily Adrien always listened to Nino's advice.

The ringing noise was coming from the little pink handbag on Marinette's bed. Nino knew she was very protective of her privacy, and probably wouldn't want him rooting around in her purse. But she wasn't paying attention and the noise was very annoying, so he opened the clasp and peered in. He saw the phone and tapped a button to silence the alarm. But then he saw something else in that bag.

"Uh, Marinette, what exactly is this?" Nino asked, trying to sound braver than he felt. What he saw wasn't making any sense. Marinette sat at her desk, still holding her calculator but now staring at him with an open mouth. Nino started to wonder if he should have just left her purse alone.

"Uh, what's what?"

"Why do you have this um...tomato thing in your purse?"

"Uh...it's a toy. From Japan. Very in demand." She dropped the calculator nervously and it clattered to the floor.

Nino gave her a skeptical look. "I'm not an idiot. This thing's breathing."

Marinette went catatonic.

"I feel like I've seen this before, on Alya's blog...it kind of looks like a ladybug..." Nino started to say, but then the tomato opened its large eyes and stared at him in alarm. He must have woken it up.

He dropped the purse with a yelp and the tomato rolled out onto the floor. "Ouch," it muttered. Marinette was still frozen in place, now eyeing the window as if seriously considering jumping out of it.

The tomato levitated off the ground and rose to his eye level. "Guess there's no point in hiding...I'm Tikki," she said, extending a tiny red and black spotted hand. Nino was ninety percent sure he was hallucinating. "Um," was all he managed to say.
It took a long time to calm Alya down once she figured out what Plagg really was. And who Adrien really was. She was simultaneously fangirling and freaking out that there was a tiny enchanted cat that gave him superpowers.

"I mean, I've been following you and Ladybug for months – I must be an idiot for not realizing it was you this whole time! The blog-"

"No!" Adrien cut her off, looking panicked for the first time. "Leave the blog out of it. Leave Ladybug out of it. This is a massive secret, Alya."

"Does anyone else know?"

"No. Not even Ladybug."

"Does me finding out change things? Would you tell Ladybug now that I know?"

"I don't know…see, no one's supposed to find out. That's the rule. So I don't know how much worse things could get if I keep breaking that rule. I'm afraid to find out."

He shot an angry look at Plagg, who pouted, "Those rules are stupid."

"You're stupid," Adrien muttered.

"I still can't believe it," Alya said, sinking down so she could sit on his bed.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Why? You've saved thousands of lives! You're a hero. Why would you apologize for that?"

"Because I lied to you. I've lied to everyone. I'm even lying to Marinette, and we're supposed to go to dinner in like fifteen minutes. I hate not being honest with people, especially her." Adrien sat beside her. "What am I going to do?"

Alya's phone began to ring, shattering the silence. She glanced at the screen. "It's Nino. I think you should start heading over for your date," she said. "But don't worry. We'll figure this out."

Adrien nodded, looking worried, and slipped into his jacket. Plagg found his place in the jacket pocket, looking dangerously smug.

"You're going to have to slow down, Nino. All I heard was 'tomato' and 'secret,'" Alya said into her phone. She was walking across the sidewalk away from Adrien's mansion. They had parted ways – he went to the restaurant, she was heading home.

Her boyfriend yelled another jumbled up mess of excited sentences into the speaker.

"Dude, I seriously can't understand you," she told him.

She heard him take a deep breath. "Alya, I just discovered a massive secret and you know how terrible I am at keeping my mouth shut and I don't know what to do. If I don't tell someone, I'm going to explode."

"I know what you mean," she said, surprised. "Something similar just happened to me."

"No. I'm talking major news."
"I know! So is this."

"Can I just tell you? Please? Swear you won't tell anyone?"

He sounded so anguished – he really needed to get it off his chest. Alya figured of all the people to tell, she was probably better than most. She could keep secrets. Usually. "Fine. Tell me," she said.

When he finished, Alya had to share her side. It was too big of a coincidence not to too. After it was all over, they shared a moment of phone-static silence, and then Alya spoke. "We need to make a plan to straighten out this weirdness. Until then, we don't tell another soul. Dude?"

"Dude," Nino confirmed, and hung up.

It took about a week for it to fully sink in for both Nino and Alya. Their best friends were superheroes. Their best friends were dating. Their best friends were lying to each other about their identities. With this very strange love square in mind, they'd had devised a few shenanigans to get Marinette and Adrien to figure things out on their own. As Alya had said when they'd gotten the lovebirds to go out in the first place, their ignorance was boring. Nino was convinced that luck was on their side.

On Monday, she and Nino coerced Adrien and Marinette to wear Ladybug and Chat Noir shirts in honor of a bogus "Fan Support Day". The sight of Adrien in a Chat shirt and Marinette in a Ladybug shirt should have been enough to make them realize the other's resemblance, but they remained frustratingly oblivious.

On Tuesday, they kept accidentally calling Adrien **Chat** and Marinette **Ladybug**. Other than seriously irritating them, the name switches had no effect on the couple.

On Wednesday, Nino postulated that Chat really wasn't the best superhero, at least compared to Batman. Alya thought she heard an indignant Plagg mutter, "Stupid bat kwamis take all the fun jobs," but Adrien coughed over it so she couldn't be sure. Marinette defended Chat so strongly that Adrien looked nonplussed and slightly flattered.

On Thursday, Alya bought the four of them friendship bracelets "just because."

"They're a particular brand – once you clip them on, they don't come off again – you have to physically cut them. It's symbolic that friendship lasts forever. Isn't that great?" Adrien and Marinette exchanged looks of confusion and worry as Alya and Nino enthusiastically clipped all the bracelets on. Later that evening, Nino and Marinette talked on the phone. "How am I supposed to conceal this bracelet when I'm Ladybug?" she asked him in distress. "Chat's going to see it and figure out I'm Marinette."

"I think he has his own set of problems to worry about," Nino replied honestly. "He might be too worried trying to conceal things from you."

On Friday afternoon, in the middle of gym class, Ladybug and Chat Noir appeared and defeated a villain covered in metal. During the battle, Ladybug got a small cut on her right cheek. Chat's arms took a few small slices, but otherwise he was fine. He unknowingly left behind his sliced-off friendship bracelet.

On Friday afternoon, Marinette found the friendship bracelet and stared at it all through her history class.

On Friday afternoon, Adrien noticed Marinette had a strangely familiar cut on her right cheek. She
said it was from rubble, but he still stared at her all through history class.

On Saturday morning, Nino confirmed Marinette's suspicions about Adrien. Alya did the same for Adrien. It took a few hours, countless cookies, and three croissants before either of them stopped panicking. "But they're totally different – total opposite personalities," both of them declared. Alya and Nino shut them down with one word each.

Alya to Adrien: "Leadership."

Nino to Marinette: "Puns."

On Sunday night, Marinette and Adrien had another date. She wore red. He wore black.

Nino and Alya sat in a café across the street and watched as their friends shared an ice cream sundae. "Can you tell what they're saying?" he asked.

"I assume it has something to do with a not-so-shocking double confession."

"I just hope we did the right thing," he said, folding his hands on his lap.

"Lies drive people apart," Alya said, taking a sip of her chai. "Even if the truth is unbelievable or confusing, it's always the better alternative. Now their relationship can have a real chance."

"I guess, but man. Talk about complex. I've never even heard of a love square before."

They watched with bated breath as their friends finally stood up from the table and embraced. Adrien cupped the back of Marinette's head gently, and she buried her face in his shoulder. This was a good sign.

"I wish we'd brought popcorn," Alya remarked. "This is better than a soap opera."

"Who knows? Maybe they'll make this whole story into a TV show," joked Nino. "Hidden love, double secrets, valiant heroes, bone-chilling villains, and tiny, cute, magical animals. What's not to love?"

"Wait, does that make us the plucky sidekicks?" she raised an eyebrow.

"Nah. We'll get our own story someday." He picked up his cup and raised it in a toast. "Dude?"

"Dude."
Dear Mom and Dad,

On my sixteenth birthday, I accepted the responsibility of holding a Miraculous. When it was presented to me, there were three stipulations. This was to be expected, since both of you have Miraculouses of your own. You've learned some things in their time as superheroes, so when it was time to bring me into your secret, the rules were issued to protect me. They seemed easy enough:

One, don't reveal your identity unless it's of dire importance.

Two, avoid using your power for selfish gain.

Three, make sure you're always home by dinner.

As you probably know, I have successfully followed these rules to the letter. At least, I did until today. It is now six thirty, and I'm quite a bit late for dinner if we're going by normal time.

But Mom and Dad, I would argue that I'm early. Because of being in 2047 like normal, I took a hit in a battle with the time-traveling villain (Watchman) and ended up in 2016. So I'm early, if you really think about it. But I'm also stuck until I can get the attention of another time-traveling villain.

I'd ask you guys for advice, but by the time you read this letter you've been waiting to open until the evening of May 3, 2047, you won't really be able to write me back. But that's okay because I have a feeling you'll still be able to help me. You probably remember it, actually.

It turns out you guys were just as in love in 2016 as you are now. The only thing is…neither of you know the other has a Miraculous yet. Looks like I have my work cut out for me.

Wish me luck! Please don't ground me.

Love,
Faint moonlight spilled across the dark streets of Paris. Lounging against a brick wall in the shadows stood Chat Noir, but he wasn't alone. There was a girl with him this time.

She had blue eyes and long blond hair flowing freely around her shoulders. She was wearing a skintight suit and mask like theirs, but the colors were pristine white and charcoal black. A feathered cape was clasped at her neck, with small openings near the bottom for her hands. The way it fluttered around her suggested tucked wings.

Her name was Nightwing.

Before this afternoon, Chat had had no idea that a swan kwami even existed, but then Nightwing had appeared in a flash of white light, seemingly from nowhere, right in the middle of their battle with the time-travelling villain, Timekeeper.

Chat and Ladybug had been so distracted by Nightwing's arrival that Timekeeper had escaped for the time being. He left the three masked teens and sought another hiding place to regroup.

They hadn't been able to learn much from Nightwing so far. All she told them was that she was from the future. That she had a Miraculous headband. And that she was fairly certain she knew how to get home.

"Are you sure your plan will work?" he asked her now, shifting his weight as he leaned against the wall. Nightwing ruffled her feathers slightly. "I think so. If I can just find Timekeeper and purposely get hit with his bolt, I'll end up back where I started."

"How do you know you won't end up, I don't know, in like feudal Japan or something instead?" Chat asked. He felt bad for being so sassy, but it had been a long and confusing day, and there was something about Nightwing that felt unsettlingly familiar. He couldn't figure out what it was, and it was making him irritable.

"Because that's how the time-swapping works. It places you in one period in time, and if you get hit again, it puts you back. The technology isn't random. It's merely alternation between the two specific points in a timeline. Even though I was fighting Watchman in the time where I came from, Timekeeper's powers are identical. I'll end up right back home if I can manage to get hit again."

"Who told you that?"

"My dad. He knows all about villains like Timekeeper. You actually kind of remind me of him." Nightwing gave him a smirk, and Chat just wrinkled his nose, feeling uncomfortable. He'd seen someone else make that same smirk. Who was it?

The arrival of Ladybug came as a welcome distraction.

"I'm back," she sighed, holding a small map of Paris. It was wrinkled and covered in lines and dots connected in a circular pattern. "I've plotted the Timekeeper's movements, so I think we can predict where he'll be next. I predict on this corner here," she pointed to the intersection of two streets, "because it's where the Timekeeper's watch repair shop is located. If we can corner him there, we might be able to use Nightwing's plan and get her home."

Nightwing smiled widely at this, looking excited. "Thanks, Ladybug!"

"No problem. But I think it'll be harder than it sounds. Both Chat and I need to recharge our kwamis
before we make our next move. I would imagine you do too. And given that revealing our identities to each other would be unwise, I think we should split up and meet back here in an hour."

Nightwing gave a little snorting noise.

"Something wrong?" Chat asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Uh, no. That's fine."

"Okay then. Meet here in an hour. Don't be late and don't get lost," she turned to stare at Nightwing before setting off down the street again, twirling her yoyo.

"Is she always so bossy?" whispered Nightwing, watching her leave.

Chat twirled his staff thoughtfully. "Only when she's trying to help someone she cares about," he said, and then he disappeared into the blanket of shadows.

Nightwing didn't waste another moment. She detransformed with an excited smile, and her kwami, Zwaan, fluttered at her side. "Head over heels, and he doesn't even know it," Michelle giggled. "Come on, Zwaan, let's catch up with Mom."

Marinette sat alone in a nearby deli, picking at a sandwich. She had slipped the cookie it came with into her purse for Tikki, and was now consulting the nearly empty room with a nervous gaze. Marinette had never liked surprises, and having Nightwing come flying in out of nowhere had severely startled her. She had never really considered the fact that there might be other Miraculouses out there, besides hers, Chat's, and Hawkmoth's. She knew Tikki had been around for centuries, of course, but she'd never considered that there'd be kwamis with new partners in the future. It was a strange thought. What will happen to Tikki after I can't be Ladybug anymore?

This was an abyss of panic Marinette couldn't afford to jump into at the moment, so she shoved the thought aside and ate another bite of her food. When she looked up again, a girl was standing at her table and holding a plate with a sandwich on it. She was wearing a black dress with a white lace collar and a white headband holding back her long blond hair. "Is this seat available?" she asked politely.

Marinette looked around the nearly empty restaurant. There were dozens of empty tables from which to choose, and this girl had to pick the one table that was occupied?

"Uh…" she paused, feeling wary but not wanting to seem rude. "Sure, I guess."

"Thanks!" the girl smiled, plunking into the seat. There was an oatmeal raisin cookie on her plate, and she picked it up, only to drop it under the table.

She bent and emerged a moment later without the cookie. "Shame, I can't reach it. I'll pick it up later," she sighed, not looking particularly disappointed.

Marinette raised an eyebrow. She knew a trick like that when she saw one. She'd done the same to inconspicuously feed Tikki before. It was her signature move. Who was this girl?

"I'm Michelle," said the girl, extending a hand. "You must be Marinette?"

Marinette dropped her sandwich, and it fell back to her plate with a soft thump. "What?"

"I've heard so much about you. It's so nice to meet you," she continued, taking back her unshaken hand. "My parents told me all kinds of stories about you, Ladybug," she said, lowering her voice to a
discreet whisper.

"Uh…no, I'm not; you have the wrong person…" Marinette grabbed for her purse, standing up suddenly. "Look, I have to go. Er, nice to meet you," she said, already halfway to the door.

But just as she was about to open the door, it swung open and Adrien Agreste walked inside. The two of them slammed into each other and tumbled to the ground, muttering "sorry" and "ouch."

"Adrien? What are you doing here?" asked Marinette.

Michelle, still seated at the table, rolled her eyes at the coincidence. The universe had literally thrown the two of them together countless times and they'd never noticed. She stood up, walked over, and offered both of them her hands. "Okay guys. We have a lot to talk about. Come on, let's take a walk."

"Wait, what's going on?" hissed Marinette as they left the deli.

"How do you know Marinette?" Adrien asked Michelle, looking bewildered.

"Do you guys know each other?" Marinette widened her eyes.

"No," said Adrien.

"Yes," said Michelle.

There was a panicked pause. "What?"

Michelle grabbed both their wrists and pulled them into a nearby alley. "You guys seriously need to chill and let me explain."

Their expressions at this were so surprised that Michelle almost laughed. "Wow, this is weird," she admitted. "I've never spoken to you both like that before."

"You haven't spoken to me before, period," said Adrien indignantly. "Who even are you?"

Michelle opened the black leather purse slung over her shoulder, and Zwaan fluttered out. "I'm Nightwing," she said, gesturing to her kwami as proof.

Blue eyes met green in a moment of fear, but then both of them realized something. "Wait, if you're telling us both that you're Nightwing…does that mean that you think we're Ladybug and Chat Noir?" asked Adrien.

Michelle nodded happily. "I don't just think, I know."

"How? We haven't even told each other!" Both of them wore expressions of admiration mixed with disbelief.

"Look, I know this must be kind of a big shock to you both, but we are a bit short on time and honestly I need you guys to work together without secrets. You guys need to understand the seriousness of this situation. Otherwise I can't get back home."

"But…why are you telling us now? Why didn't you tell us you were Nightwing before, so we could have kept this a secret?" Adrien looked exasperated.

"Because there's more to this than your identities," she said. "They can't be a secret anymore."
They both looked outraged at this. "What? Why not?"

"Because my real name is Michelle Agreste."

Marinette was nonplussed. "You're related to Adrien?" But one glance at Adrien's face showed he really was clueless. "What does that have to do with anything?" he asked.

"No, you guys don't get it." Michelle stomped her foot in frustration. "The stakes are higher than you think. I'm related to both of you."

A flock of pigeons flew overhead, peppering the awkward silence with their watery chuckling.

"Wait...hold on...are you saying that you're..." Adrien gulped, looking uncomfortable, "our kid? You're Marinette's...and my...daughter?"

Michelle raised her eyebrows in affirmation and nodded. There was a moment as Adrien and Marinette looked at each other with stricken faces, and then they both burst into laughter.

"You can't be serious."

"There's literally no way."

"Are we being pranked?"

"I'm dying! This is too great."

"Guys, I'm serious," Michelle said, but they didn't respond. "Wow. You both really are useless. I should have listened to Uncle Nino."

This just made them laugh harder. "This is completely ridiculous," she muttered, crossing her arms. "Zwaan, a little help here. Please."

Her kwami regarded her with wise obsidian eyes. "Michelle, give them some time, they'll come to terms with it eventually."

"I don't have time, Zwaan. The Timekeeper's going to be at that watch shop in ten minutes, and I have to be there. I don't want to be stuck here with my parents when they're like this," she gestured. Adrien was facing the wall, leaning against it with his arms over his head, wheezing. Marinette was bent double, tears of laughter streaming down her face. "Look at them. They're total idiots. I'm actually impressed that they were able to raise me into a functioning person."

Marinette suddenly straightened and grabbed Adrien's arm. "Wait, did she say Nino?" They both sobered considerably as they contemplated this. How else could Michelle have known their friend's name?

"So you were serious," Adrien said slowly, putting a hand to his head in wonder.

"Obviously! Why would I make this up? Now that you're aware of the situation, we need a plan for when we go find the Timekeeper."

Her parents looked at each other with new understanding. "I'm not saying I completely understand this," acknowledged Marinette, "but we'll do our best to get you home. I'm sorry we didn't believe you."

"Yeah," added Adrien. "Wow...um, this is...really weird."
"You're telling me," said Michelle, twitching her nose.

"Hey, Adrien does that too!" observed Marinette, looking pleased. "The nose twitching. Chat does it when he's annoyed."

"Good, then you know what it means." Michelle crossed her arms.

"She's just as sassy as you are," Adrien whispered to Marinette.

"Oh, shut up."

Their daughter cleared her throat loudly. "Guys? Can we move on? We have to make a plan."

Dear Mom and Dad,

Thanks for getting me home safe. I'm sorry I had to spoil your secrets in order for it to work.

However, I also wasn't totally honest with you, and wanted to tell you the full truth now that everything's settled.

My parents told me how they figured out each others' identities, and they named me after the girl that made it all happen. So I had a bit more information than I let on. I knew someone named Michelle was supposed to make sure you both knew your identities. I just didn't ever think it would be me. So when I realized what I was supposed to do, I stepped up.

In the end, telling you guys the truth about Ladybug and Chat Noir was just as much about making sure I got home safe as it was about ensuring that I actually end up being born someday. Consequences like that sure can give someone motivation, haha.

Thanks for all your help. I've written you both this letter and hidden it in your pockets. You should keep them so that when I do disappear in 2047, you have reassurance that I'll get back okay.

See you soon!

Love,

Michelle

PS: In the future, they open a store that only sells Camembert right across from Adrien's house. Tell Plagg that – it'll make him happy.

PPS: Please, please, please don't ground me.
Gifts

Chapter Summary

Gifts: In honor of the twentieth chapter, here are twenty times the pair exchanged gifts, with mixed results.

Chapter Notes

So for every tenth chapter, I try to do something fun and different. You'll see in later ones (30, 40, 50, etc.) I try to stick to that. This isn't the standard chapter I typically write, it's more like a list fic. Hope you like it!

1. It all began when Adrien gave Marinette his umbrella.

Enough said.

2. Marinette told Adrien she was his friend.

When he got home, his father thought he had a fever, but he was actually just blushing.

3. Chat presented Ladybug with a bouquet and told her, "My love for you is in full bloom."

She sneezed and told him it was because she was allergic to flower puns.

4. Marinette made Adrien some macarons, but Tikki accidentally ate them, not realizing they were a gift.

But it's the thought that counts, right?

5. Adrien asked the staff at Paris Vogue to autograph a magazine cover for Marinette for her birthday.

She actually fainted when he gave it to her, and when he caught her in his arms, he was so close that he could count the freckles on her nose. There were five.

6. Marinette made Chat a warmer suit for the winter, complete with cat-earmuffs and a gloves that accommodated his claws.

At first, he couldn't figure out how she knew the inner details of his costume so well. She even knew his measurements without having to ask.

7. Chat got home with his new costume to find that Marinette had provided a second, unintentional gift.

There was a name stitched into the hem of the gloves. But it wasn’t his.
8. To return her unintentional favor, Adrien then painted Marinette a little acrylic-and-canvas ladybug to use as a decoration in her room. In the corner, he signed it "Chat."

She didn't notice. When she hung it on her wall, she also missed the note taped to the back that said "Just like you, I always sign my work," with a winky face.

9. Adrien, realizing she was still clueless, decided to be more blatant. For a Christmas present, he got her a Miraculous Ladybug t-shirt, commenting, "You guys have the same gorgeous blue eyes. The color is spot on."

Marinette was too irritated by the pun to truly get the point.

10. For Christmas, Marinette gave Adrien a free pass to the bakery for croissants. For life.

Adrien used it not for the croissants, but as an excuse to see her. After three weeks of amazing days full of laughter and baked goods, they were effectively dating. The croissants didn't have anything to do with it, but Adrien never went hungry again.

11. Marinette made it official when she brought him a fruit basket before school one morning and asked if he agreed that they'd make a great "pear".

Adrien froze in pleasant surprise. "I thought you didn't like puns…"

"I like you, the pun was a necessary evil. So…what say you?"

He said yes, obviously.

12. Chat met Ladybug on the rooftop that night conspicuously eating a pear. He then offered her one.

She remarked on what a coincidence it was: her boyfriend had just gotten a bunch of pears from her as a gift. Chat said, "Wow!" but she missed the sarcasm.

13. Frustrated that Ladybug still didn't realize he knew her secret, Chat decided to buy Ladybug another black umbrella. How much more explicit could he be?

The only thing she said was, "Thank you! I already have one, but will be nice to have an extra!"

When she left, Chat facepalmed. "She'll get it eventually," he told Plagg later that night.

"You just keep telling yourself that," the kwami said snidely.

14. Marinette took the black umbrella Adrien had given her that first day and decorated it with little stitched pears on the fabric. For their first year anniversary, she gave it to him at The Restaurant of Roses.

"I love you," he replied. "I know," she said.

"It's just like in Star Wars!" a familiar voice cried out from a distant table. They turned to see Alya and Nino trying to hide behind menus and watching the date transpire.

They left soon after that - who knew Marinette had such a terrifying stare?

15. For Marinette's birthday, Chat secretly ensured Hawkmoth was too tied up to akumatize
anyone for a whole 24 hours.

Chat literally tied the guy up. But he had way too much fun playing with the yarn…

16. For their graduation gifts, Marinette and Adrien exchanged journals with a letter to each other written in the front. The stipulation was that they'd write down their experiences when they were apart, then mail them to each other to keep in touch.

Marinette was going to fashion school in Germany for a year, and Adrien was going to continue modeling in Paris while studying closer to home. Secretly, both of them started to wonder what horrible things separation could bring. The journals were a great idea, but would it be enough for long-distance to work?

"I'm afraid of leaving," she told Adrien one night, while they stargazed on her rooftop. "I don't want to grow apart from you."

"Then don't," he said simply. "Come work for my father and study in Paris now instead of waiting a year."

As great as it sounded, they both knew it wouldn't work out that way. Marinette still went to Germany.

When she was unpacking at her new apartment, she found the ladybug painting Adrien had made for her and decided to keep it. But when she looked at it closely, she found the signature…but it said "Chat". The note on the back fell off, the tape no longer sticky, and she remembered signing Chat's gloves by accident. She couldn't stop panicking when she realized Chat knew who she was. But then…if Adrien was the one who'd had given her the painting, that meant he was…Chat.

17. In January, the steadily filling journals were shipped for the fifth time. There were pages of notes and letters, and also a few small gifts.

Marinette still hadn't told Adrien she knew his secret. Or that she knew he was aware of hers. She couldn't work up the courage to do it unless it was face to face. It was big news, but somehow, the more she thought about it, the better she felt. The painting of the ladybug hung on her wall, reminding her of her amazing boyfriend and her superhero friend, who by some miraculous coincidence happened to be the same person. But if they were going to straighten out this confluence of identities, it would have to be done when she got back to Paris.

So, she merely pressed Adrien's favorite carnations between the written pages. Adrien sent her some of the drawings from his art class. They were all of her, laughing, smiling, wide-eyed. He signed his work as "Chat" and she knew to look for it this time.

Adrien had also been clipping newspaper articles about the mysterious Ladybug sighted in Germany, but he didn't put those in the journal.

18. Marinette finished school and got a job at Adrien's father's office. When she arrived at the airport in Paris, Adrien was standing there holding a welcome sign with a big smile. "I made you chocolate chip cookies," he said.

She kissed him and gave him a hug that seemed to last eons, and it still didn't feel long enough. "I missed you," she said, taking a bite out of a cookie. "I missed you too, love," he replied, pretending not to notice when she stuffed a cookie into her purse for her kwami.

It was raining, and he opened up the pear umbrella as he walked her to the car. Just like old times.
19. Ladybug and Chat reunited on their favorite rooftop. She brought an entire wheel of Camembert for Plagg, and Chat accepted it, looking oddly nervous.

"Do you know who I am? Under the mask?" he asked. "I've been trying to tell you for years. Subtly. And I realized today that I can't wait anymore. I've had a year without you to think about it, and I think we should talk about our secrets."

"I know who you are," she said quietly. "And I know you know who I am too."

"When did you find out?"

"Germany. I found the signature on the painting when I unpacked it."

"Finally!" he grinned. "Man… I never thought it would take this long. I initially gave you a week, tops."

"Are you okay with this, Chat? Adrien? With… us being well, us?" She shifted her feet nervously.

"I still love you. I actually love you more for it. If that's what you mean. Mari, please tell me that's how you feel too."

It was like someone knocked down a wall between them. She rushed at Chat, her arms flying around his neck and her knees bending as he held her. "Of course it is," she whispered to him. "I was worried this would change things between us, but I still feel the same. Granted, it took a lot of time to figure it all out when I was in Germany, but I think we're going to be okay."

He set her back on her feet gently. "Can I ask you a question?"

She looked at his serious expression, worried about what he was going to say. Was he going to ask her about love? What if he asked her to marry him? What if he had changed his mind and wanted to break up instead? She almost passed out with the worry.

But then he just said, "Do you really hate puns?" with a trademark lopsided grin.

She was so taken aback that she just laughed and kissed him again.

To this day, Adrien still doesn't know if she pretends to hate puns or if she actually detests them.

20. Adrien gave Marinette a ring.

He proposed on their anniversary, at the Restaurant of Roses. He wore a black suit to bring out the green in his eyes, and was too nervous to realize Nino and Alya had stationed themselves at a well-hidden booth to watch. He pretended to drop a fork and got up to retrieve it, then came up on one knee. Her blue eyes were already full of happy tears and she smiled when he asked, "Marinette, my lady, will you marry me?"

She said yes, obviously.
Nine Lives

Chapter Summary

Nine Lives: Chat Noir and Ladybug make a great team, but Chat is hiding something major from her: he has nine lives. So far, his secret hasn’t been a problem; but what happens when he only has one left?

Chapter Notes

Quick warning: this one features some violence/injury and major-character (temporary) death, though nothing above the T rating. It’s not as sad as Chapter 9, though, I promise.

Of the many secrets Chat Noir kept close to his chest, there was one that not even Ladybug knew.

In the first days of becoming a superhero, Chat had become aware that he had nine lives. Over the past two years of fighting akumas with his partner, he’d actually died quite a few times, only to regenerate to full health before anyone noticed.

The first time it happened, he got stabbed with a sword during a fight with a pirate akuma. He thought he was dead for sure, but a moment later, he realized the wound was healing, and the blood covering him was disappearing, siphoned away until he was totally fine. Completely bewildered, he didn’t dare tell anyone, especially Ladybug, about this newfound ability. Plagg had confirmed Adrien’s hunch later, of course: each Chat Noir had nine lives, and now he had eight left.

Since that point, he’d always been able to conceal the fatal hits he took to ensure Ladybug could do her job. She thought her luck was rubbing off on him when he always made it through unscathed, but she was wrong.

Chat had survived three bullets, being crushed by concrete, drowning in the river, and even an accidental poisoning after a particularly nasty fight with a villain whose mere touch was toxic. In all cases, he’d come through, right as rain. His lady was never the wiser, and everything was fine. But Chat only had two lives left, and he had decided to be more careful with when he was going to use them. Eventually, he knew he’d need to confide in Ladybug, and she was going to be furious with him.

As endearing as it was how much she cared for his well-being, Chat honestly feared what Ladybug would do to him if she ever found out how many times he’d died to help her capture akumas. It would probably involve suspending him upside down at the top of a building the. Or making him volunteer to walk dogs (the things hated him). At the very least, she’d probably punch him. Multiple times.

But in his current predicament, he’d give anything to see Ladybug again, even if she was angry. He’d been stupid to keep this a secret from her, because now that it really mattered, she’d never know why he’d disappeared. And by the time Ladybug found him, he might be dead by then.
Six Months Earlier:

Chat lounged confidently under a lamp in the pink twilight, listening for any sounds of distress. He heard a van approaching behind him, but it was already at the curb by the time he spun around. A door slid open, and four men in black masks grabbed him harshly and pulled him into the car. He fought hard; biting, scratching, kicking out, but the men were strong and held his limbs down so that all his attacks were energy intensive but hardly effective. They strapped him to the floor with cords and buckles. Chat went into panic mode, snarling at his captors and straining against the straps, but to no avail. He felt the van start to move, but they blindfolded him before he could figure out where they were going. He finally had the sense to yell "Catacl-" but someone stuffed a rag in his mouth before he could use his destructive power. Chat Noir, victor of Paris, had been rendered useless by four straps and two pieces of cloth – how pathetic. He let his head drop until it hit the floor of the van, screaming and trying to wiggle out of the restraints. But nothing budged.

They took him to a dark, abandoned warehouse. The evening had turned cold during the short drive. Thankfully they hadn't covered his ears, because he heard every time they turned or braked; he was fairly sure they were still in Paris somewhere. He'd also heard the whispering of his kidnappers, and what they said hadn't made him feel any better.

"He's the one, we're sure of it."

"He holds the secret to immortality? He's just a kid."

"A kid that it took four people to take out," the other one reminded him. "He's special."

"The boss said he was the one, so he's the one," said a third.

"How does he know?" asked the second, indignantly.

There was a muffled thumping noise, as if one of the men had punched him. "Because he's the boss, stupid."

"He's been watching the kitty for some time now. He knows the brat can't die," said a new voice, harsher than the others.

Chat squeezed his hands into fists, ignoring his sharp claws. They'd been watching him? How did they know about his nine lives? Did they know his secret identity too? What if they went after his father? Or his friends? Marinette and Nino! A new dose of panic crashed over him like a cold, unforgiving wave. He momentarily slipped under, feeling sweaty and shaky. His breath came in short gasps.

"See – he's freaking out, he knows we're right. We definitely got the right one."

There was a whirring sound, like someone leaning forward in their seat but restrained by a seatbelt. He felt someone yank on his hair – he yelped in pain. "Little kitty," said the harsh voice again, "we're taking you to the boss. And you're going to tell us why you can't die. And if you don't, or if it doesn't work when we take the power from you, we're going to make you wish you could die. Understand?"

Chat could only whimper until the man released his hair, apparently satisfied. If he could, he would have tried to tell them he only had two lives left. But he had a horrible feeling that they wouldn't believe him anyway.
Chat had been chained up by his ankle against the wall, and he was locked in a large steel-barred cage. They’d confiscated his baton, and guarded his cage from sunrise to sunset; he only knew this because he watched the sky change colors from his view of a tiny window on the other side of the warehouse from his cage.

He had no idea how much time had passed. At first, he’d tried to count the days, but he’d lost track after about two weeks. The guards blindfolded him and bound his hands when they left for the night, all so he couldn’t escape or tell what time it was. Each night, he de-transformed, hoping to give Plagg a rest. His kwami was growing increasingly tired and hungry. Although they fed Adrien meager meals, it wasn’t really enough for one person, let alone a person and a voracious magical being.

They were waiting for Chat to weaken and he knew it. By hardly feeding him and preventing him from exercising, they were ensuring he’d be unable to withstand them once they finally interrogated him. And apparently, they thought he was ready today.

This time, instead of four guards, there were two that came for him. It was a subtle way of telling Chat he was no longer much of a threat, and it made him furious. They were dressed in all black with ski masks and heavy boots, and one of them was holding a set of keys.

"We are taking you to the boss," one of them announced. "If you try anything funny; if you use your Cataclysm or try to attack us, Alistair here will shock you into oblivion. Got it?"

Alistair held up a thin silver object that made a horrid buzzing sound. "Answer him, kitty," he said in what had become a familiar, harsh voice. In the early days of his kidnapping, he’d resisted Alistair many times. He’d felt the bite of that device on countless occasions and didn’t want to repeat the experience. There was always the fear that Alistair would get carried away and actually electrocute him. If he could conserve his remaining two lives, Chat was going to try. It could be the difference between him getting out alive and him never making it back home.

"Fine," Chat growled, crossing his arms and trying to look braver than he felt. "Nothing funny."

They unlocked his cage, bound his hands, and released the chain from his ankle. He was marched stiffly from his cell, across the warehouse. The building was a maze of towering metal shelves stocked with brown and white cardboard boxes. They led Chat down so many aisles that he couldn't have found a way out on his own even if he tried. He had to hand it to his kidnappers, they were clever. Escaping now would be futile; they'd just catch him again in this labyrinth.

When they reached the end of an aisle, there was an unmarked white door with a battered golden doorknob. They opened it and shoved him inside, Alistair giving him a needless prod with the shock stick for good measure. As the door closed behind him with a sharp click, Chat was bent double, gasping and irate. He turned to face "the boss" at his desk, and met a masked man in a blue suit holding a gun.

"Tell me why you can't die, Chat Noir," he said, "or prepare to taste a bullet. I know you'll bounce back, but do you really want to do this the hard way?"

"I only have nine lives; I'm not immortal," Chat stammered, feeling a swell of anger and fear threaten to drown him. "I've already used seven of them. I have two left. Then, I die for real."

He raised the gun, and Chat panicked into talking more. "You're looking for immortality, but it doesn't exist. My powers don't work like that."
He couldn't remember ever being this scared. It was one thing to die for Ladybug when he knew she'd save the day, even without him. It was quite another to withstand the touch of death knowing it wouldn't be worth it. His dying would only satisfy this man; it wouldn't help him escape. And there were only two more links tethering him to life. What would his father say if he died and stayed dead? Would Marinette cry? What about Ladybug? Would she come to his funeral?

"Why don't I believe you?" said the man in a silky voice. "You could just be telling me that to save yourself from the pain. Actually," he sounded mildly interested, "does it hurt when you die?"

"Yes." The ragged answer forced itself out of him before he could stop it. The pain of being stabbed or crushed or shot was excruciating. It fried his brain; it made it impossible for him to think about anything else. Well, nearly impossible. He could picture Ladybug's smiling face to keep him from losing his mind, at least.

"Well, then. I'll ask you again." There was a click on the gun as he asked very slowly, "How do you come back from the dead?"

"I have nine lives as Chat Noir. Only two remain. I swear it's the truth."

"How can I acquire this regenerative power of yours?" The voice was dangerous now. Chat knew he shouldn't risk being uncooperative or sassy – he narrowed his eyes instead.

"You can't," he said. "I was chosen to be Chat Noir. And there can only be one."

"But I could take your power from you."

Chat gripped the ring on his finger in fear. "That would be ill advised."

"So you admit it's possible," the man said, lifting the gun a little. It sounded like he was smiling, but it was hard to tell with his mask on. Chat cursed himself.

"That's a lovely ring you have there. If I took it from you, would I gain Chat Noir's abilities?"

"No," lied Chat, his ears twitching in desperation. "It would just be a ring."

"Don't. Lie. To. Me," the man said angrily. And then he fired the gun.

There was an explosion in Chat's chest, and he couldn't breathe. He dropped to the floor, feeling the red agony drip from his chest, hot and unstoppable. He tried to think of Ladybug...of his father...of Marinette...of Nino...but his vision eventually went black from the pain. The actual death always felt like he was afloat, drifting along a river on a moonless night. But then life returned a moment later with a thrum of his heart, and he could feel the pressure in his chest disappear as the blood evaporated from the floor and his hands. His wound closed, and the bullet fell to the tiled ground with a chink. Air rushed back into his grateful lungs, only to be expelled in a weak moan of pain.

"Amazing," said the man, leaning over his desk to stare at Chat, who was lying curled up on the floor.

The guards came back in and roughly lifted Chat back to his unsteady feet.

"Take him back to his cell. Maybe the pain will teach him to tell the truth next time. We'll get the truth from him tomorrow. He claims his lives are limited. But we'll see about that when he's come back to his senses."

"Yes sir," said Alistair.
"And this time, blindfold him. Let him think about how much he wants to cooperate. If he has only four of his senses, it will keep him more focused."

Chat sighed in despair as they half-dragged him back to the cell. He had fully recovered by now, but felt emotionally weakened. The next time he died, it would be permanent, regardless of whatever his kidnappers believed. He could die tomorrow if they kept shooting him for no reason. He needed an escape plan. He took one last, desperate look around his cell as Alistair approached with the blindfold. There was a padlock on his door, about equal space in every direction. There a small window at the end of the shelved aisle directly across from the cell, and if he ran straight that way, he might be able to leap along the boxes to get high enough to break through the window.

Doing it blind, however, would be extremely difficult. He was just going to have to hope he'd make it, or die trying. Literally.

After he was blindfolded, the guards tied his arms to his sides, locked him up, and left. He'd have no way to remove the black cloth against his eyes.

"Sorry, Plagg," he sighed, hoping his kwami could hear him. "You won't get much rest tonight. I'm breaking out of here."

Even after about four hours (he guessed) of planning, it was a terrible plan with terrible odds of success and Chat knew it. But he had to try. He was just about to use Cataclysm to break the chain at his ankle when he heard a shattering noise in the direction of the distant window. It sounded like someone was breaking in. His ears perked up.

"Chat Noir," someone said in a carrying, victorious whisper, "get your coat!"

Ladybug was here. Hope that had nearly been snuffed out earlier today now began to burn bright again. With Ladybug, now he would have a chance.

He heard light whooshing motions – he imagined her swinging over the shelves with her yoyo – until there was a light whump as she landed in front of the cage.

"Come to the front of the cell," she said quietly. "I'll take off your blindfold."

He did, and felt gentle fingers at the back of his head, struggling with the tight knot. He almost felt lightheaded with joy – he never thought he'd hear her voice again. "Thanks, Marinette," he sighed as the knot loosened. But her fingers stopped trying to untie it.

"What?"

And then he realized what he'd said. Had he really just called her Marinette? He knew it was Ladybug. But…her voice had sounded so similar…he'd responded instinctively.

"Uh…I…sorry, for a minute you sounded like Marinette."

She finished untwisting the knot and the blindfold drifted to the ground. Suddenly able to see, Chat found himself looking directly at a pair of beautiful blue eyes. Familiar, kind eyes. But this time there was a kind of sadness to them. "I did?"

"Yeah."

She bent down to zip open a satchel at her feet. She pulled out massive bolt-cutters that looked slightly ridiculous against her small frame, but a moment later, the padlock to his cell was shredded
and Chat was almost free. He took a step forward, but the chain on his ankle caught. She opened the door and stepped inside, frowning as she cut him loose.

"Thank you," he told Ladybug. "You're certainly a sight for sore eyes."

"I know, and I'm sorry. I tried calling you weeks ago when you went missing, but every time I did, it either said you were disconnected or just kept ringing."

"They confiscated my baton," he explained as she started to untie his bound arms.

"Look…" she said suddenly, "we have to hurry. The guards are making rounds outside, and we have about five minutes before they find the broken window."

"Okay," he said as the ropes slipped off him. He flexed his arms and rolled his wrists. Ladybug looked up at him, her face worried. And without thinking, Chat pulled her into a tight embrace. She gave a surprised squeak, but he felt her put her arms around him too.

"I missed you," he said. "Thanks for rescuing me," he said.

"We're not out of the woods yet," she sighed, "but I'm really glad you're okay. I thought I'd never see you again."

"Likewise."

"Then let's get out of here," she said. Chat smiled for the first time in ages.

But then they both heard a shout in the distance, and adrenaline kicked in. They ran straight for the broken window, and then Ladybug grabbed his waist and lifted them both into the air with her yoyo. They swung through the window and landed in a tucked roll on the grass outside.

There was a sound of a gunshot, and Chat spun around, looking for its source. Another one sounded, closer this time, and the bullet whizzed dangerously close to his left shoulder.

"Adrien, duck!" cried Ladybug in alarm. He did, instinctively, as another bullet flew overhead.

And then they both froze. Distracted, Chat cocked his head at her. "What did you just call me?"

"I – oh…" she stuttered, looking frazzled. "I wasn't going to say anything. But…I know you're Adrien, Chat."

Another bullet whizzed over their heads, and they began to sprint around the side of the building.

"So the cat's out of the bag?" he punned as he ran. He hadn't made one in weeks! It felt amazing. "How did you know?"

"Give me some credit! Chat and Adrien both go missing on the same day and neither one has been found? It's quite the coincidence. I'm surprised no one else put it together."

"Oh. Right." They took a turn and ran straight into the pair of guards who'd been firing at them. The two of them dispensed with the goons easily, but Chat already felt tired. He hadn't had this much exertion in weeks, and Ladybug frowned at him as they stood over the feebly stirring bodies.

"You okay?"

"Not really," he said between breaths. "I wasn't able to get exercise in that cell."
"No, I meant about the whole secret thing."

"Oh…uh, not really," he repeated. "It's kind of a bombshell for you, I bet. I'm sorry you had to find out that way."

She gave him a strange look. "Why are you sorry? It's a good thing I came to that conclusion, because otherwise I probably wouldn't have found you. I spent my time early on looking for Adrien, not Chat. But then I realized they must have kidnapped you in costume. They wanted you for your powers for some reason. So I tracked your baton signal to this warehouse and scoped it out, and then I came back tonight to break you out."

They began to run again, searching for the front of the warehouse where they could reach the main road.

"Well, thanks," he said sincerely. "You have great timing; I'd probably have been dead by tomorrow."

She stopped running, looking shocked. "What? Why?"

He slowed, turning to face her. "If you hadn't come, I was going to Cataclysm the chains and bust out on my own, blindfolded, or die trying. If I didn't, they were going to kill me tomorrow."

"Why?"

Chat wanted to explain, he really did, but they didn't have time. He could hear more guards coming. "I'll explain once we're safe."

They ran, but Chat knew his legs wouldn't last much longer; he was gasping for breath already. The guards were closing in.

"We can make it," Ladybug said, grabbing his hand. "Just a little further! We can do this – we make a great team. You do your job, I'll do mine, right, Chat?"

But then there was the sound of a gunshot. They both ducked, but turned around to face the oncoming troop of guards as another shot fired treacherously close to Ladybug. These guys weren't the best shots, but guns were dangerous in any hands.

"Not her!" Chat cried. He could hear them readying to fire, all pointing their weapons at Ladybug. He'd only have moments to save her if he did this right.

She seemed to read his mind. "Chat? What are you-"

"My job! Taking one for the team!" he cried. "Take those guys down for me, okay? That's your job."

"Adrien, no!"

But it was too late to change course. He forced himself in front of Ladybug as the guards fired.

Chat's head felt hazy. He was lying on cement, bleeding and drifting from consciousness. He saw a blur of red and black, and heard shouts and slamming noises as the guards dropped to the ground. Ladybug had taken them all out in seconds. She really was incredible.

He blinked dazedly, and suddenly blue eyes were inches from his own. They were full of tears, and for a moment, he was confused. Those were Marinette's eyes. They looked like Ladybug's.
"Hang on, okay, please hang on, you selfless idiot," she was saying. That was definitely Marinette's voice. But why was she crying? And why did she sound so much like Ladybug?

"Marinette?" he said softly, then wished he hadn't spoken. His body seized in all kinds of inventive pain when he took a deep breath.

"Yeah," she breathed. "I'm here; it's going to be okay, Adrien. You're going to be fine." He didn't really believe her.

She picked him up in her arms, his face pressed against her left shoulder, and they started to move quickly. Where was she taking him? But then he noticed she was wearing black and red. Polka dots. Why was Marinette dressed like Ladybug? Was this a hallucination from his pain-clogged brain?

"Ladybug?" he tried again, ignoring the aching in his lungs and chest.

"Don't get confused. We're the same person," she sighed. "Marinette is Ladybug is Marinette. I'm sorry it took this for you to find out. But we can talk about it after we get you to the hospital. You've been shot. You took a bullet for me."

"But," he gasped, but found he couldn't say anything else. Something was tightening his throat, and it took him a few seconds to realize it was pain. His whole body was tensed up, every muscle tight. Some part of him noticed when he de-transformed - he felt the energy, but it was a tickle compared to his wounds. A nearly unconscious Plagg appeared at his side. He looked up, but Ladybug didn't seem surprised to see him without his mask.

So she really did know he was Adrien. And Marinette was Ladybug. He still wasn't sure if this was real or not. But then, he might be imagining things. After all, he'd been shot. He was VERY aware this was real, at least.

But there was one good thing about the situation, however dire it was. He realized, as they entered the hospital, that the pain was a little more manageable this time. He didn't have to picture Ladybug in his head. She was right there, and she was Marinette, and she was safe. If he had to spend his last life on this, he was glad. He'd done his job. He'd protected his lady, to the very end.

"Stay with me, stay with me," she was saying as a swarm of blurred faces swam above him. They must be nurses, he thought. "We're a team, okay?" She sounded desperate. "Come back to me, okay? I can't do this without you."

With the last bit of his strength, he breathed, "Okay."

And as unconsciousness stole over him and he sank into that dark sea, he closed his eyes.

Adrien woke up in a hospital bed. Ladybug was sitting beside him, looking immensely relieved. It took him a moment to fully come out of his sleepy haze. When he did, he vaguely remembered something about Ladybug and Marinette. He wanted to test this.

"Hi, Marinette" he said quietly.

"Hi, Chat" she said. So it was really true, she hadn't corrected him. This was strange. They knew each others' identities.

But then a deep-rooted pain trickled in, and it worsened as he became more aware of it.

"What happened?" he asked, now realizing he was covered in bandages.
"You got shot defending me. And by some miracle, you survived."

He arched an eyebrow in blatant surprise, pleased to find that at least something didn't hurt. "Really?"

"What, did you think you were going to die?"

"Uh...yeah, actually."

Her calm facade had a tiny crack now. "So did I," she confessed, her voice tight. "But this wasn't the first time you've sacrificed yourself for me, was it?"

"When you say sacrificed-"

"I mean dying for me. I'm not an idiot, Adrien. You think I didn't find out about your nine lives? I had plenty of time to...ahem...talk with your kidnappers. They told me everything."

Adrien was honestly relieved he didn't have to tell her the whole story. "Are you mad?"

"Of course I'm mad."

"Oh."

She shifted in her seat a little. "They told me you healed completely after getting shot in the chest before I found you. But why didn't you heal this time?"

"It was my last life. I didn't have any more."

She paled considerably and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, tears rested in the corners. "So you really could have died? Permanently?"

"Yeah," he said, wincing. He'd taken too deep of a breath.

"Why'd you jump in front of me?"

"Because it's my job to protect you. We're a team." He tried to shift on his bed, but drew in a sharp breath - it hurt too much.

Ladybug scowled at him. "Let's get something straight right now. Your job is not to die for me. Your job is to be my partner. And you can't do that if you're dead. Got it?"

He twitched his nose at her. "But-"

"No 'but's' about it. I can't lose you, Chat. You know that, right?" She peered at him seriously, taking his non-IV hand in hers. "We're a good team."

"I know," he capitulated. "I'm sorry. You're right."

"Good. Hurry up and get better, then. Because I have a punch with your name on it for lying to me. And it'd be rude to hurt you when you're still recovering, so I've resolved to wait."

"Glad I have something to look forward to," he said dryly.

"You have two things," she said. "We're going to dinner when you get out of the hospital. We need
to talk about a few things, namely our secrets."

"So..." his brain was starting to feel foggy again. "It's a date?"

He watched her smile slowly as she got up to leave. "Don't get ahead of yourself, Adrien. This one's just as friends."

When she left, he let his head fall back on his pillow. "This one," he said softly.

There was hope for the future, he decided, and he fell asleep content. Who needed nine lives when he had Ladybug?
Cat Naps

Chapter Summary

Cat Naps: An AU fic in which the famous umbrella scene never happened. Marinette still harbors a grudge against Adrien for the gum incident, but that all changes once the drawbacks of being secret heroes catch up to them...namely when they're both sleep deprived and behind on homework.

Being a superhero was hard work. Marinette could hardly stay awake in her history class – her eyes kept burning and her eyelids refused to stay open. She'd gotten about eight hours of sleep in the past week total between running patrols with Chat, fighting actual villains, and doing her homework. Poor Chat was probably in the same boat, whoever he was.

She had only been Ladybug for a week and a half, and getting used to this routine was exhausting. She knew she would have more responsibility, but she never imagined it would be this time consuming. She was barely able to keep up appearances; Alya was probably starting to wonder why she hadn't showered in three days.

Although, technically, Marinette had showered yesterday. That is, if you counted her brief and unintentional swim in the Seine when she'd been battling some kind of mermaid. Which...come to think of it...was really gross. She'd hit a new low.

She made a mental note: showering was now a priority.

Her eyes nearly closed again, and she tried to slide down in her seat to stretch out her legs. She'd read somewhere that was supposed to help you stay awake. It didn't feel like it was working.

In front of her, the new kid seemed to be having a hard time too. He kept propping his chin on his left hand, but his head kept dipping as he fell asleep and he would jerk back awake in time to re-position his jaw in a resting position. It would have been cute if Marinette hadn't been so mad at him.

He'd put gum on her chair – probably some kind of ploy, since he and Chloe were apparently thick as thieves. But she'd honestly hoped he'd be different from most of the rich bullies she'd known. She'd somehow gotten it in her mind that maybe they could have been friends – maybe she could have won him over from Chloe's clutches. But those dreams were dashed early on.

She'd always been the kind of person that believed the best in people until they proved her wrong. And once they gave her reason to change her mind, she extracted herself from their influence very quickly. She went cold turkey on them; it was better to keep negativity out of her life, after all. And the new guy had made it onto her Boycott List very quickly.

"Do you want to share my umbrella?" he had asked her yesterday as they walked out of school into the rain. He pulled out a black umbrella and began struggling to unfurl it.

"No thanks."

"Do you hate me, Marinette?"

She liked the way he said her name, but refused to acknowledge it. She couldn't let him charm her. "I
don't hate you," she sighed.

He looked delighted. "So then-

"But I dislike bullies," she replied. "Regardless of whether they hurt me or someone else. So if that's the kind of person you are, stay away from me." And before he'd had a chance to respond or even finish opening his umbrella, she ran out into the rain, not caring if she got wet. It was better than sharing an umbrella with him.

Now they hardly spoke, but he wasn't exactly staying away from her either. She pretended she didn't have a pen to let him borrow in chemistry, and failed to tell him his shoe was untied last period. She didn't even return his wave when he sat down in front of her for history class. Perhaps she was being needlessly passive aggressive, but she didn't appreciate being the butt of Chloe's jokes, especially when she had minions like the new guy doing the work.

Plus, she didn't want to condone his behavior. No doubt, she wouldn't be his and Chloe's last victim. And, Ladybug or not, she couldn't stand by watching others get hurt. Chloe and the new kid needed to know someone was going to stand up to their antics.

At the end of class, he was asleep at his desk. "Should we poke him or something?" Alya asked, looking amused. Marinette paused, wanting to avoid confrontation with him if she could. "He'll probably wake up on his own when he hears the bell."

And he did; he was seven minutes late leaving for lunch, but when Marinette mentioned this to Alya over their sandwiches, she smirked. "Girl, you're into him and you don't even know it."

"I am not!"

"You're paying far too much attention to someone you declared was dead to you."

"That's not why. I am trying to make sure he doesn't try and collaborate on any more schemes with Chloe. You and I both know the last thing our class needs is another bully. I'm doing it for the good of our classmates."

Alya made a dubious noise, but changed the subject. "You look tired," she said. "You have a secret life I don't know about? Out late at glamorous parties? Crime fighting at night? Or maybe you're working as a secret agent?"

"Ha ha," Marinette cringed. "Just too much homework." Partly true.

"I know. That literature essay was a doozy…"

Marinette stood up in a panic. "I knew I'd forgotten to do something! The essay – I don't have anything written yet!"

"Girl, you need to relax. It's due tomorrow – you've still got time!"

"No, I really don't," she said, thinking of her next patrol with Chat tonight with another pang of panic. She began stuffing her things back in her backpack and began sprinting across the sidewalk back to school. "I'll be in the library! See you later!"

She left a confused Alya in her dust, and proceeded to write three hundred words at one of the library computers with the rest of her lunch period. She was now hungry and exhausted, but having a head start on her work was worth it. At this rate, she'd at least get some sleep tonight.
It was only as she was leaving that she noticed someone asleep at the computer opposite hers. A blond head was resting lightly on an open textbook, and it only took her a moment to realize that it was the new kid. Asleep again? What was wrong with him?

Of course, Marinette knew how he felt – she wanted to curl up on the floor between the discreet and shadowy library shelves and nap for the rest of the day. But she did wonder why he was so tired. Surely it wasn't for the same reason she was. There was no way he was running around in spandex, trying to save the world in his free time with her. He probably just stayed up too late playing videogames or something.

She noticed his computer was also open to a half-written paper. The same paper she was trying to finish. They must both be scrambling to write it.

He looked so pitiful lying there, basically unconscious and about to miss his next class. Marinette considered leaving him there again, but felt strangely guilty. She'd left him to sleep when it was just lunch he was missing, but class was different. It felt like she would be abandoning a pathetic kitten on the side of the road in the rain. And as much as she wanted to, she just couldn't do it to the poor guy. She wasn't that vengeful. If she was, that would make her just as bad as Chloe.

She approached and prodded him on the shoulder with a finger, feeling meek and nervous. He didn't budge.

"Hey," she whispered and poked him again, harder this time. He sniffed a little and twitched his nose, but still slept.

"Hey. Adrien." She finally said his name – the first time she had since the gum incident. She shoved him hard and he finally jolted awake.

In a half-asleep panic, he cried "Cataclysm!" and lunged wildly out of his chair. He grabbed Marinette's arm and held it in hazy contemplation. There was a small pause as his eyes opened fully and he processed the situation. His eyes were still groggy and dreamy, but they widened when he finally saw who he was holding on to.

"Oh," he breathed, letting go of her arm gingerly. "Hi."

Marinette stood there, trying to understand. He'd yelled Cataclysm…Chat's catchphrase to use his destructive power. Was it a coincidence? She wasn't aware anyone knew about that besides Ladybug. So how had the new kid picked it up? It wasn't exactly common vocabulary.

"Hi," she said, her voice guarded. "You were going to sleep through class, so I woke you up."

His green eyes regained a bit of their sparkle and he gathered his things. His expression was kind and grateful. "Thanks, Marinette. You saved me from a nightmare," he said. He even had the audacity to smile at her. "Sorry."

She just stared at him and then left the library without another word. It wasn't until she was already taking notes in her next class that she began to wonder what exactly he'd apologized for. Had it been about the gum? His behavior in general? His grabbing onto her upon being awoken? His very existence? She cursed herself for not asking. Now she'd probably never know.

The library was practically empty after school when she entered. Marinette had told her parents about her forgotten essay, and promised she'd finish it this afternoon. She also told them she'd be home for dinner, but that of course was contingent upon just how difficult Hawkmoth wanted to make her life. Battling anyone tonight would make the difference between an A paper and no paper. She was
already running on fumes, and she knew that after purifying another akuma, her brain would be useless.

She wrote another thousand words with drooping eyelids before she noticed the new kid was typing at the computer on the other side of the table. They were the only ones still there, and their typing made muffled clicking noises that dispelled the characteristic library silence. The monitor obstructed most of Marinette's view except for the top of his blond head, but it sounded like it was slow going on his end; he would type a few words at a time with long pauses in between. He was probably zoning out or falling asleep again.

Once she realized he was sitting there, it was hard not to pay attention to him. If anything, he kept her awake. Adrien was extremely attractive, and his warm demeanor was such that he constantly invited friendship. He seemed starved for conversation, and his emerald eyes gave everyone undivided attention with sharpened enthusiasm. All these things made him a very difficult person to hold a grudge against. In addition to this, Marinette had already encountered him as was sleeping: he'd seemed unassuming and almost sweet. There was now a vulnerable side to him that presented itself in endearing and infuriating detail each time Marinette wanted to tell him off for being an inconsiderate jerk. It was like trying to abandon a fluffy baby rabbit you'd just named.

Distracted by his presence, she wrote a mere two hundred more words that were complete rubbish. And when she finally had the sense to realize they were garbage and delete them, she heard a strange sound. A soft thump had come from the other side of the computer table where the new boy sat. She couldn't see his head anymore, and when she leaned tentatively around the side of her computer screen, she saw that he'd rested the side of his head on his open book again. He was now in a light, uneasy sleep.

Despite how much she wanted to dislike Adrien and take her revenge on him for the gum incident, she would never be cruel enough to let him fail to write a paper when she could have just kept him awake. So she sighed heavily, got up, and shoved him again.

"Hey, wake up!"

Her method was far more successful this time. He flinched and sat up again, rubbing his face. "Thanks, I needed that. I was having another nightmare," he said groggily. "How long was I out this time?"

"A minute or so. I was debating how long to let you sleep."

"Out of the goodness of your heart?"

"No…yes…I don't know, both?"

"I think you have to pick one," he said with a small smile as he rubbed his eyes.

She didn't want to, so she changed the subject. "Why are you so tired?"

"Been busy. And I can't sleep well – I get nightmares. What about you?"

"How did you know-"

"You've got dark circles under your eyes and you almost fell asleep in history this morning."

"You noticed?"

"Of course I noticed. I sit by you."
"I've been busy too. Never seem to get enough time to sleep more than a few hours."

"Why? Are you fighting crime at night or something?" His expression was strangely amused.

"Ha. You're the second person to ask me about crime fighting today. Is that what you do? When you say you're busy? Do you 'fight crime' at night?" Her skepticism was nearing a lethal dose now.

He made a noise in the back of his throat and ran a hand through his hair instead of answering. Then he said, "I want to get to know you better, Mari."

She narrowed her eyes. "Don't call me Mari. You're not my friend."

"Not yet, anyway. I can hope, right?"

She glared at him, and he corrected himself. "Sorry." He looked so sincere. Why did he have to be so charming?

"Why would you want to get to know me anyway? Need more fodder for your next little prank with Chloe?"

"No," he said defensively. "Look, I never got the chance to apologize for the whole seat thing. Chloe put the gum there, actually. I didn't say anything about it at first because she's my friend and I wanted to cling to the only person I knew at this school. I understand what I did was wrong. I didn't want to hurt you, even though I clearly did anyway. So, I'm sorry."

With her tired and scrambled brain, Marinette gave him an awkward "Oh. Um. Thanks, I guess," and went back to her computer. She resumed writing her essay to try and distract herself from truly internalizing his heartfelt apology, and he sighed in a relieved kind of way.

She roused him from dozing three more times in the next half an hour. It was starting to get ridiculous, especially since he just kept apologizing. Marinette was still too tired to come up with witty responses, so she just gave him a blank look each time and said "Okay, thanks."

After another half an hour, her paper was complete. Probably not her best work, but passable. She took a quick break to stretch, planning to read it one more time with fresh eyes before printing it. She walked around the library, went up to the second floor to peer out the windows at the late-afternoon chiaroscuro of Paris, and then returned to the computers. But as she sat down, she realized Adrien's head was back on his desk. His eyes were closed, but he looked far from blissful. It was probably another nightmare. He'd been asleep for longer this time, she could tell. Probably five to ten minutes.

Part of her wanted to do the same; just curl up and sleep with her head on the keyboard. She was so tired. But the compassionate part of her knew she should stay awake, even if it was to repeatedly save Adrien from himself. She rolled her eyes. With him taking cat naps every few minutes – and her having to wake him up and talk with him– he was probably going to get his wish. They would probably become friends after this, she feared.

She stood up irritably, poked him in the shoulder with the back of her pencil, and shouted "Wake up!" in his ear. Perhaps she'd been a little too loud, because he responded with a surprised "Gah!" and promptly fell out of his chair. He probably thought she was attacking her or something. Sprawled on the floor and staring at her with a terrified expression, he swept his arm defensively over his face and shouted in a frantic voice, "Claws out!"

The resulting flash of light startled Marinette so much that she leaped backward with a yelp. Because before her was – well, she knew it was Adrien – but the person she saw was Chat Noir.
There was no mistake. The costume was exactly the same – and the resemblance was so obvious now. He must have been telling the truth the whole time – maybe he really wasn't Chloe's minion after all. Could really just have been a misunderstanding? After all, how could Chat, savior of Paris on a nightly basis, ever want to conspire with Chloe to make other people miserable? Maybe Adrien wasn't such a bad guy…

Seeing her stunned face, Chat looked down at himself with a more awake reserve, and then his head snapped up. "Ah. Crap."

"You're Chat Noir?" she whispered. She was irrationally afraid that if she said it any louder it would make the statement truer somehow.

"Yeah…" he said, looking mortified as he stood to face her. "You were never supposed to find out. No one was. Argh, this is just great. I really have the worst luck."

He de-transformed, and suddenly Adrien was staring at her again, looking angry with himself. Marinette took a tentative step forward, all anger at him long gone. "I'm so sorry – I had no idea… this…was going to happen. I was just trying to keep you awake so you could finish your paper."

"Oh, I'm definitely awake now," he chuckled darkly, smacking his forehead with his palm. "I'm sorry. Thank you for waking me up. I just panicked – I saw somebody standing over me, and lately, my instinct is to go into Chat mode to defend myself. You know?"

"Actually I-"

"Wait, don't answer that. Of course you don't. I'm being inconsiderate again. Man, why is it so hard to talk to you?"

"What-"

"I'm trying to impress you, but it's not going well. First, there was the gum disaster, and now this? And I probably drool in my sleep, don't I? Again, don't answer that."

Adrien started to pace, looking distressed and gesturing wildly with his hands. "I thought you were amazing from day one. But it feels like the universe is conspiring against me or something. I just want to be your friend, Marinette. But you were mad at me for something I didn't do, and you thought I liked tormenting people the way Chloe does. I didn't know how she treated people before I started here-"

"Yeah, well-"

"-and I don't want her to be my only friend here. This whole situation is so new to me. I've always been homeschooled. I've never really-"

"But-"

"-had to make friends before. Plus, I liked you a lot but you made me nervous. You reminded me of Ladybug, a little. You were confident and funny and I thought we'd hit it off. But…well, I don't know how I could expect you to want to be friends now-"

"But-"

"-because I'm kind of an idiot. And the whole Chat Noir thing probably just makes things worse-"

"ADRIEN!" she finally shouted, catching him off guard. "You're making this a bigger deal than it
"I don't hate you," she clarified. "I never have. I just avoided you because I thought you and Chloe were like, a team, or something. She likes to have power over people, and I thought you were helping her make fun of me. I thought I was going to be the first of many victims, so I wanted to stand up to you guys and prevent more bullying. And I realize now I was wrong about you, so I'm sorry for being so rude."

He blinked again, still frozen.

"And now that I know you're Chat Noir, I know you could never hurt people just to make yourself feel better. I mean, look at yourself. You've barely slept or eaten...you're behind on your paper...you've given everything you can - and then some - to be there for Paris and its people. You're making it a better place at your own expense. And I respect you for that."

"So -"

"...And as for the universe thing, you're wrong. It hasn't been conspiring against you in the way you think."

"What is that supposed to mean?" he frowned.

Marinette smiled knowingly. "Well, you were right in that it clearly didn't want us to be friends right away. But that's because it was waiting for the right moment."

"What?"

She smiled and took another step forward. They were standing very close now. "Secrets are a two way street, Adrien. You've only seen one side of the road. I'm about to show you the other." He looked hopelessly confused, but then she said, "Spots on," and understanding crossed his face as she transformed.

"I'm Ladybug," she explained. Adrien's mouth closed, and he looked like he wanted to say something, but decided against it. There was a happiness in his expression, however, that hadn't been there before.

"I don't think either of us saw this coming. But we've been getting to know each other more than you think as Ladybug and Chat Noir. And I know that probably doesn't constitute traditional friendship, but we're halfway there. We just need to bring our non-hero selves up to speed."

He nodded and grinned. "I see where you're going with this. It sounds like we have some catching up to do," he punned cheerfully. "So you really do want to be friends?"

She nodded, knowing that moments ago she would have been too proud to concede anything to Adrien. But a lot had changed since then. He'd gone from zero to hero in her mind. She mentally crossed his name off her Boycott List with a flourish.

"I really do. But first, you have a paper to write. And I'm going to sit here and hit you with my yoyo each time you doze off. Otherwise you'll never finish."

"Right. Um. Thanks," he said, eyeing her yoyo with a mock-fearful expression.

"Of course. What are friends for?"
The next day, Marinette and Adrien turned in their papers with the rest of the class. They smiled and laughed at each other's jokes, and Adrien even made a pun off something she'd said. Alya couldn't believe her eyes.

"What changed your mind about him?" she asked when Marinette sat back down. "Did he hypnotize you?"

"We both were in the library writing our papers yesterday, and I helped him with his after I finished mine. We kind of bonded over it," she said, blushing a little.

Alya raised a sculpted eyebrow. "Must have been some paper."

Marinette merely smiled, exchanging a knowing look with Adrien, who seemed to have overheard the conversation.

"Yeah," she said. "It was."
Grapevine

Chapter Summary

Grapevine: A short fic in which several people discover Adrien's secret. There are two main problems with this: first, Adrien hasn't caught on yet. And second, Marinette's the last to know.

It was autumn in Paris. On a rare day off from school, Chloe decided to have lunch outside to enjoy the last vestiges of warmth before the chilly breath of autumn took over. She took a seat at her adorable outdoor patio table on her personal balcony, setting three glasses of fruit-infused water down with a clink. She then surveyed her two invitees; Sabrina and Adrien. The latter looked extremely confused – he didn't seem to understand why he'd been asked to join her in the first place. With his fingers pressed to his temples, he looked far less than happy to be there.

"Why am I here, Chloe?"

"We're friends. Duh."

"We were friends…but you haven't invited me over in like a year and a half. Besides, you basically kidnapped me so I'd be here today." He frowned into his water glass. Chloe was tempted to jokingly remind him it wasn't poisoned, but he spoke again before she could. "Why the sudden urge to have lunch?"

"Yeah…why is he here?" Sabrina asked, tilting her head at him like he was a stray dog that had just wandered in. "I thought you and I were getting manicures."

"Pshh, we can do manicures anytime. I've called an emergency meeting today to investigate the identities of Chat Noir and Ladybug. With my father's influence, Sabrina's money, and Adrien's insight, I'm sure we can find some answers. I want you both to help me figure out who they are."

"I don't have time for this," Adrien sighed, looking bored. "I have real homework to do, and I've got a photo shoot in an hour. Also, I'd like to see my girlfriend at some point today." He started to stand up, but Chloe put her hands on his shoulders and forced him to sit back down.

"Adrikins, don't be such a downer. Sabrina can do our homework for us, and we already know Marinette will be at your shoot like always – you'll see your precious girlfriend then. But right now, I need you! Alya hired me as a Ladybug and Chat Correspondent for the Ladyblog! And she expects results, so I'm enlisting in your help."

Of course, Alya had hired her rather reluctantly, and only after Chloe had sent her three boxes of chocolates and a brand new camera. But hey, who had to know? The job was hers now, anyway.

"Not to detract from my concern that Alya thought hiring you was a great idea…but why do you need me?" Adrien said irritably.

He was so cute when he was angry. It totally made up for his attitude, in her opinion.

"Because you've been rescued by Ladybug several times," Sabrina explained. You have inside information about her."
"Exactly. I want dirt, and I want it fast," confirmed Chloe.

"Well, I refuse. I've got too much on my plate to deal with…this," he gestured vaguely.

He looked like he was going to say more, but before he could, there was a tremendous rumbling sound down the street. It was probably another akuma attack. Chloe rolled her eyes. This whole supervillain thing was getting old. The last one had nearly crushed her favorite boutique!

Adrien seemed to have perked up. "Uh…I should go before the akuma gets any closer. My father will be wondering if I'm okay." With that, he shoved away from the table and walked back through her suite so quickly that Chloe couldn't even convince him to stay. He was already out the door by the time she'd called out after him.

She leaned over the balcony, watching as Adrien eventually emerged from the doors to her building and ran across the street. But instead of going home, he ducked into a shadowy alley and...

"What's he doing? That alley's a dead end…" she murmured, narrowing her eyes. She took out her phone and zoomed in on the camera, trying to see better. But then, a moment later, there was a sudden flash, and in her surprise, she accidentally took a picture. After the alley was dark again, Chat Noir ran out of that same alley and started sprinting in the direction of the akuma attack. Chloe's eyes widened in interest. When she looked back at the alley, there was no Adrien in sight, but there was nowhere else he could have gone. Unless…she smiled wickedly and checked her camera. Indeed, the photo she'd taken was unbelievable.

"Sabrina, you're not going to believe this."

It had been so easy! Now it made sense why Adrien hadn't wanted to help her unmask Chat Noir. But maybe he'd be more willing to spill the beans on Ladybug if he was properly convinced. A little blackmail never hurt anyone…right?

As soon as her phone pinged with a new email, Alya knew it was from Chloe. She and Marinette had stayed up for hours debating the pros and cons of hiring the blonde for the Ladyblog. While Chloe thought she'd been hired because of the chocolates and the new camera she'd sent, Alya couldn't care less about the bribes.

The only reason Chloe now worked for her was so that she could control whatever crazy theories that girl came up with when it came to Ladybug and Chat Noir. It was an opportunity to babysit loose cannons, Marinette had wisely pointed out.

However, some of Chloe's information was going to be useful. She had an excellent vantage point for spotting akuma attacks from her penthouse and promised to notify Alya each time one occurred. Receiving that kind of heads-up could be the difference between an interview with Ladybug and an interview with nobody.

Maybe Chloe's first report would be somewhat valuable. She'd have to see - she pulled out her phone from under her chair in the cafe, looking across at Nino with a smile.

As she opened the email, she sipped at her coffee absently. She was really only expecting some drivel about Ladybug's favorite tea or something. But when she saw what was in the email, she immediately spit out her coffee all over Nino and nearly dropped her phone into her mug.

"Gross, dude," her boyfriend objected, and began gently dabbing at his face with a napkin. "Sorry," Alya said distractedly, "but you need to see this." She didn't want to say it aloud; they were in a quiet café, and she didn't want to be overheard.
She showed him the photo and caption Chloe had attached – one of Chat Noir running out of a dark alley with a line at the bottom that said *Adrien Agreste is Chat Noir!* in big block letters. There was even a written explanation at the bottom that discussed how Chloe had found out.

After Alya finished reading, she knew the proof was solid…but she and Nino still couldn't accept it.

"I feel like we should've known if our best friend was...you know," Alya said, tucking her phone back in her bag. "I thought we were better friends than that..."

Nino shrugged. "I don't know. I'm pretty oblivious. I've never actually been with him during an akuma attack. He always disappears. There are even times when I haven't noticed he's missing until after it's over..."

Alya frowned. "But why wouldn't he tell us about his secret? I mean, assuming Chloe's accusation is actually true and not like, Photoshop or something."


"How do you know?" she crossed her arms.

"You can't fake that...see how he's halfway wearing Chat clothes and halfway wearing his own? There'd be some small continuity discrepancies in the photo if it was tampered with. This one doesn't have those."

"Hmmm..." Alya frowned. She still wasn't convinced, and was concentrating on finding more concrete proof. Then she thought of something. "Nino, didn't Marinette say something about how when Chat rescued her that one time, he smelled like citrus?"

"Yeah..."

"What cologne does Adrien wear? Is it *Citrine*?"

"Yeah. He got a free bottle after he did an ad for them."

There was a pause, and then both of them sat back in their chairs and said, "Huh."

"I'll call him," said Nino. "I think he has some explaining to do."

"Tell him to let his girlfriend in on the little secret too. I think Marinette would love to know that her boyfriend runs around in a cat costume and jumps of buildings in his free time."

Egad. Alya suddenly felt like she was going to need more coffee.

"Take a quick break, and then we'll come back and do the ones with the Jagged Stone and his guitar. Sound good?" asked the photographer.

"Perfect. Thanks, Claude," said Adrien, feeling relieved. This day had been nonstop, and this was going to be his first chance to actually recuperate.

First, he'd overslept, and then he'd practically been shoved into Chloe's chauffeured car and forced to endure a lunch that involved his ex-friend dancing dangerously close to his secret. Then an akuma attack had thankfully – or not so thankfully – provided him an escape, and he'd left to transform and help Ladybug take the newest of Hawkmoth's minions down. Then, he'd nearly been late for his shoot. But things had turned out all right after all, because Marinette was also late, and Jagged Stone, the star of the promotion Adrien was helping with, had been caught in a traffic jam caused by the..."
Once they'd been able to get started on the photo shoot, things went more smoothly. The point of this job was to promote the joint release of Jagged Stone's new album and Adrien's debut as the album cover model. It was one of the easier sessions he'd done – minimal makeup, just standing there and smiling.

And now, on break, he'd finally have a chance to breathe. Maybe he could even scrounge up some Camembert for Plagg. They usually stocked a fridge for him inside his dressing room.

Marinette was already inside waiting for him when he opened his door.

"Hi," he grinned, feeling himself genuinely relax for the first time all day. They embraced, and she inhaled slowly. "Mmm, you smell like oranges," she murmured.

He chuckled, but then noticed something in Marinette's hair. When they broke apart, he pulled it out with a slight frown. "Is this…rubble?"

She looked at him in blank terror for a bizarre moment, and then excused herself to clean up – "It must have been leftover debris from the akuma attack - I was pretty close to the danger zone. Sorry, it's probably just cement." Perplexed, Adrien watched his door close and realized he was alone.

"Was she acting weird, or was it just me?" he asked Plagg.

"That was definitely strange," the kwami concurred. "Maybe she's hiding a secret from you." He zoomed out of Adrien's backpack in the corner and giving him an expectant look. Ah yes – the Camembert. Adrien crossed the room to the kitchenette.

"Pshh, she is not." Just as he was about to open the fridge, Jagged Stone burst into the room without knocking.

"Adrien, I have your free copy of the album," he declared, holding it up over his head. But then he saw Plagg, who was still levitating in midair…and he saw Adrien, who felt from his red face that he probably looked super guilty.

Stone froze in the doorway, his hand still up in the air and his mouth hanging open. "Is that a cat?" he finally asked, tilting his head to consider the kwami.

"Uh…yes. A rare…flying...cat. It's a...Brazilian breed, I think," Adrien lied shakily. He glanced around the room, feeling uncomfortable and hot. Of course, it didn't help that there was a promotional poster for Chat Noir on the wall behind him. Stone had undoubtedly noticed it. That, paired with Adrien's similar features and the magic floating cat might be enough to blow his secret. Adrien squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for Stone to flip out.

But when nothing earth-shattering happened, he lifted one eyelid timidly, then both. The rock star was standing there with a conspiratorial grin on his face. He nodded from the poster to Plagg to Adrien as if in understanding.

"That's a nice Chat you've got there," he said with a wink. He tossed the CD to a dumbfounded Adrien, who caught it deftly, hardly realizing what his reflexes had done.

After Stone left, Adrien numbly fished a wedge of Camembert out of the fridge and gave it to Plagg. "Could this day get any weirder?"

And then Nino called.
"When you said you had something you wanted to tell me, this wasn't exactly what I had in mind," Marinette said dryly.

She was sitting on the couch across from Chat Noir in Adrien's dressing room, but she sort of felt like she was on a boat. Things were swirling and rocking side to side in her vision, and it was impossible to get a grip. Was this really happening?

Chat shifted in his seat. "Well, what exactly did you have in mind?"

"Something a little more normal…I don't know, like you got new shoes or something. Not…this!" She gestured to his costume.

It was so hard to look at Chat and simultaneously know she was talking to her boyfriend. She couldn't un-see the similarities, but this was very odd news. And she was Ladybug. What was she supposed to do now? Tell him?

"Are you mad at me?" he asked. He looked upset, maybe even ashamed. "I'm really sorry," he groaned. "I wasn't even going to tell you, but Chloe found out and now she has photo proof – she's going to blackmail me into telling her Ladybug's identity."

"What? That's horrible!"

"And I was afraid she'd show the photo to you before I could confess. I wanted you to hear the news from me. This is a secret that would seriously hurt you if someone else told you first."

"Of course it is! And I'm still pretty upset, if that wasn't already obvious."

"I know. Alya said you might be."

"What? Alya knows about you?"

He made a face, as though he knew he'd said something he wasn't supposed to.

"Who else knows, Adrien?"

"Um…well, Chloe told Alya because they were working on the Ladyblog. And Sabrina probably knows if Chloe knows. Oh, and Alya told Nino…"

Marinette made fists and pressed them against the soft leather of the couch. "You mean I'm the last one to find out?" she asked dangerously.

Chat looked sheepish. It was a curious expression on him; it looked out of place. She, as Ladybug, was used to seeing only confidence and brash bravado. Sheepish was more Adrien's style. It was… cute. She couldn't be mad at that face. Wait, no. She couldn't think that. She was still angry.

"I didn't know they knew, Mari. I just found out – Nino called me, so I figured I'd better tell you before things get worse. If my cover's blown, anyone could come after you guys. Hawkmoth could kidnap you because he knows I love you and would do anything to save you-"

Marinette made a little noise in the back of her throat. He'd never said I love you before. It had always sort of been subtext. The romantic part of her that wasn't really mad at Adrien swooned a little. But then the angry side of her got annoyed – is this really the time, Marinette?

"-and if anything happened to you I'd be distraught. At least I can protect you now that you know I'm Chat."
And then the angry part of her took control. She was Ladybug, not some damsel in distress. "Who says I can't protect myself?"

"That's not really what I meant. I just want to be there for you. Protect you because I want to. I know you could take care of yourself. You could probably kill me, actually, if you wanted to~"

"Adrien, don't you understand? This is serious. You've been hiding a huge secret from me! And we're in a relationship! Doesn't that bother you at all?"

"Of course it does!" Adrien said, his voice rising. "You can't honestly think I didn't tell you because I didn't want to. I just wanted you to be safe."

There was a pause. Marinette knew exactly how he felt. She had the same problem, she'd done the exact same things. And she knew it was unfair to keep her own secret from him any longer. Despite how angry she was at the situation, not all of it was Adrien's fault.

"I understand," she said softly. "More than you think I do."

He looked up. "What do you mean?"

She put a hand to his cheek in preemptive apology, then told him.

"This doesn't really make me feel better," Chat said once he'd recovered from the shock. They were still sitting in his private dressing room, but this time he'd taken care to make sure the door was locked. He could pretend everything was fine, but then he kept looking up at the girl in red and black polka dots sitting across from him. Ladybug. Also known as his girlfriend.

"Me either."

"This is super weird. I am really confused. Can we both be mad at each other for doing the exact thing both of us did?"

"I mean…I guess? I'm still mad, but I don't think I'm mad at you anymore. This is just so messed up." Ladybug tugged her ponytails in frustration.

"Yeah, same."

"Should we still date?"

"I don't know…I mean, I want to…"

"So do I."

"But it's still weird."

"Yeah."

"I still can't believe we're…that Chloe was going to…and I wish Alya and Nino didn't know…"

"I know," Ladybug sighed.

"It would be nice to deal with this with more privacy. It's a good thing this isn't a TV show or something. The last thing we need are fangirls."

They both giggled a little at this, but the mirth faded away too quickly. There was a pause while they
both thought, trying to reconcile all their emotions with their overload of information.

"I think we need a distraction while we work this out," Ladybug said after a while. She stood up.

"What did you have in mind?"

She gave him the devious grin he'd only ever seen on Marinette. "We're going to get rid of that photo from Chloe's phone."

"How?"

"As a team. Like always. You protect me, I protect you. Chloe's blackmail is no match for us. She doesn't have superpowers."

"No, indeed, she does not," Chat conceded.

Once they'd planned it out, he sat back, feeling a little more confident. "Is this how we are going to deal with things every time one of us drops a bombshell of earth-shattering news?"

She snorted. "No. I think both of us got off easy. When this is all over, we still need to have a very serious discussion about our secrets. I hope you don't have any more up your sleeves. I know I don't."

"I don't even have sleeves, Mari. This suit is skintight. I'm pawsitive no secrets would fit." He knew going for humor was a risk, but it just felt right.

"That doesn't answer my question," Ladybug scowled. She sounded irritated at first, but the corners of her mouth were pinched. He knew she was trying very hard not to grin.

On the other side of the door, Nino, Alya, and Jagged Stone had their ears pressed worriedly against the wood. "Are they splitting up?" asked Stone, looking uncharacteristically sympathetic. Pulling away with a relieved expression on his face, Nino said, "No, they're going to be just fine. They just need a little time."

"I can hear you guys," came Chat's voice from inside. "I have super-hearing."

"Fangirls and proud," said Alya. "Now go give Chloe a taste of her own medicine."

"On it," came two voices from the other side.
Marinette stood outside her parents' office on the first floor of the bakery. She could see a thin strip of yellow light coming from the bottom of the door, and there were soft voices coming from inside. Her parents were hiring someone new to work at the bakery on weekends, and she was desperate to know who it was going to be. She'd been working the pastry counter at the bakery since she was twelve, and having to share that job with some newcomer made her very nervous. What if it was someone she didn't like?

Marinette had begged her parents to hire someone capable, at least. From the interview, it didn't exactly sound like that was going to happen.

"Do you have any experience with working a cash register?" asked her father.

"Ah, no," said a familiar male voice. Marinette couldn't put a face to it, but it was definitely someone she knew somehow.

"Do you have any experience with baking or the culinary arts?"

"Sadly, no."

"Have you done any work in customer service?"

"In a way, yes," the voice chuckled. "I mean...you know what I do for Paris. I would say that serving customers is one of my specialties."

"Well, with your lack of experience in other areas, we need to ask: why do you want to a job here? I would have thought you had enough on your plate already," she heard her mother ask.

"Well, I am pretty busy, but I want to learn how to work. It's not like I can do what I've been doing forever. I think it would help prepare me for a world when my partner and I are no longer needed."

"Is that day quickly approaching?" asked her father.

"I think so. We're very close to putting an end to the attacks."

Was he some kind of police officer? He sounded rather young for that, Marinette thought. But from the way it sounded, he was not going to do any favors for her if they worked together – with his apparent lack of experience she was going to have to teach him everything. Ugh.

Not wanting to listen any longer, she went back up to her room, muttering angrily to herself. Were her parents trying to torture her? Why did they even need to hire someone new?

When she told Tikki about her concerns, the kwami merely smiled. "Don't worry, Marinette. Your parents just want to cover all the bases at the bakery. You've been busy as Ladybug, and sometimes..."
you've had to leave during your shift. Your parents probably just want to have someone available so 
that when you have to inexplicably run off, someone can run the shop for you."

"Do you think they suspect I'm Ladybug?" she asked, horrified.

"No, but you'll need to be more careful. Especially with a new employee around. Try to be nice to 
him Marinette. It might be hard, but you'll want him on your side the next time you have to leave 
your shift to save Paris."

"Why do you have to be right?" she sighed dramatically, flopping onto her bed.

"It's my job," Tikki said happily.

Her parents hired the mystery guy. On Saturday morning, Marinette tried to wheedle the answer out 
of them when they were seated for breakfast.

"Who is he? Just tell me his name!"

"I want it to be a surprise," her mother said. "You'll love him, don't worry."

"But does he know how to work in a bakery? I don't want to have to teach him everything."

"You'll want to teach him. I guarantee it."

Marinette arched an eyebrow. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"He's charming. You'll be friends before you know it," her dad explained. They had their famous 
matchmaking faces on, which was never a good sign. The last time it happened, she and 
Nathanael had "accidentally" been sent to get groceries at the same time; a poorly concealed ploy for 
hers parents to set her up on a date. But Marinette had accidentally dropped the bottle of milk she'd 
been carrying and it had leaked all over Nathanael's new shoes. Needless to say, the "date" hadn't 
gone very well. To this day, he got all tongue-tied around her; it was probably because he was too 
angry about his ruined footwear.

"Why can't I have normal parents?" she moaned. "Parents who don't try to set me up with their 
employees?"

The Dupain-Chengs merely chuckled. Her father patted Marinette on the back. "We're not trying to 
set you up," he said. "But who knows? You might end up liking each other."

"Fat chance of that," she muttered, but her parents pretended they hadn't heard.

Marinette's shift started an hour later. She tied an apron around her neck and waist and made her way 
behind the counter to start preparing the shop for customers. She turned on the lights in the display 
cases and bent down to adjust some of the shelves. When she straightened up, someone was standing 
directly on the other side of the counter. She jumped back with a yelp of surprise, and then she 
realized who it was.

"Hi," said Chat Noir, giving her a friendly grin.

"You scared me," she said when her heart rate had calmed slightly. "What are you doing here? We're 
not open yet."

"Good, I was worried I was late," Chat sighed, looking relieved. What a strange thing to say, she 
thought.
"What do you need? Most of the pastries are still in the oven, but I could check with my parents to see if we have anything ready yet."

"I'd like an apron, please," he said seriously.

"We have – wait, what?"

"I'd like an apron. Please." The corners of his eyes crinkled with amusement.

"We don't sell those."

Chat rolled his emerald eyes. "I know that. But how am I supposed to do my job if you won't let me put on my apron?"

"Ah," she said mildly, the terrifying realization crashing upon her. "So you're the one my parents hired to-

She broke off, feeling dread descend upon her shoulders. Was she seriously supposed to work with Chat?

He was watching her come to her conclusion with entertained interest, the way a cat might survey a scurrying mouse. "To work in the bakery with you," he finished for her. "Yes. So if I could please have an apron, I'd like to start earning my keep."

"Uh, right, yes. Come back behind the counter. I'll show you where everything is," she stammered, feeling her blood sizzle with nervous electricity in her veins. What had her parents been thinking?

Once Chat was wearing a white apron that looked absolutely ridiculous with his suit, she set to work by showing him how to arrange the freshly made croissants in the display cases. She made a solitary trip back to the kitchen to pick up the loaves of bread. She found her father there kneading dough, and gave him a murderous look on her way out. He waved cheerily and continued his work.

"Did I do a good job?" Chat asked earnestly when she reappeared in the front room. The croissants were stacked in two leaning towers that were slowly succumbing to gravity.

She hastily rearranged one of the towers before it tumbled onto the checkered tile floor. "Not a bad start," she said kindly, "but you should try to put them in circular patterns; that way they all won't fall down when you take one out to sell."

"Got it." He set to work on the other tower, his tongue protruding from the corner of his mouth as he concentrated. When he finished, he gave a dramatic bow. "First lesson learned," he said proudly. "Thanks."

"Congratulations," Marinette said, some of her irritation melting away. It was too hard to feel frustrated when he looked so happy. "And you're welcome."

She taught him how to use the cash register next. He was surprisingly good with remembering what codes to ring up, but he had a habit of accidentally opening the cash drawer before the sale was complete. It would take him by surprise and slam into his stomach as it popped open. The third time it happened, Marinette couldn't help but start laughing. "I'm sorry," she said between fits of giggling, "but you should have seen your face."

He smiled good-naturedly, rubbing the place on his stomach where the drawer had hit him. "What am I doing wrong?"
"Hit subtotal first, and then amount tendered. Not the other way around. When you hit the green button, the register opens that drawer, so only do that after subtotal – then you can expect it to open and you can avoid getting punched in the gut."

Chat gave her a thumbs-up and tried again, this time doing it perfectly. "I think you're ready for the next step," Marinette told him. "You're a fast learner."

"Didn't use to be," he said, following her as she let him to the preparation counter. "Before I became Chat, I didn't know how to do anything for myself. But I guess, when you're learning something so you can help somebody else, it's easier to accept the challenge."

"I know exactly what you mean," Marinette said, but stopped before saying anything more. She'd watched Chat improve so much over the past year since they'd started battling akumas together, and she knew he was right. She'd done the same thing as Ladybug. Having that kind of responsibility was a great motivator for problem-solving.

"So…what's this table for?" he asked.

"This is for wrapping up the orders. Use clear plastic for the baguettes, and the parchment for the shorter loaves. The brown bags are for smaller pastries. Get a box if there are more than three."

She explained the gift-wrapping station to him next, demonstrating how to use the clear plastic boxes for cakes and petit fours. She turned for a moment to make sure he was following along with the tutorial, and found a startling sight. The ribbon dispenser had caught Chat's attention, and he'd somehow managed to get his hands tangled in the curls of blue and red ribbon. The action was so catlike and comical that she burst out laughing.

"I think I know the reason your parents hired me," he said with bravado, holding up his tangled mess. "I amuse you."

"While that may be true," she chuckled, "they also hired you to do work instead of making messes. I think I'll do the wrapping today – you should probably avoid playing with the ribbons."

"I don't know what came over me," he said honestly, eyes wide. "I just really wanted to."

"You're such a cat."

"What was your first clue? The ears or the eyes? I've been told my eyes are quite lovely."

"By whom?"

"Ladybug, of course."

"Ha. In your dreams," Marinette said, taking out a pair of scissors and cutting him free.

"That sounds like something she'd say," admitted Chat.

Marinette was starting to feel more comfortable around him, and elbowed him in the side gently. "Come on. I'm going to show you how to fill macarons."

While she showed him how to put the filling on the center of the macaron shells, something occurred to her.

"Why?" she asked him.
He looked sideways at her. "Why what?"

"Why did you want to work here? Don't you already have a job as Chat Noir? Or even as your alter-ego?"

"Well, I suppose being Chat is a job on its own... but as for my personal life, I come from a family where things are basically done for me; I wanted to learn how to fend for myself. But I decided to work as Chat, not as myself, to prove that I'm not perfect and I'm not a superhero. I'm a person just like everyone else."

"But why now?"

"I've given a lot of thought to what I want to do when I'm not Chat anymore. I'm not going to be in school forever. I might not even stay in Paris forever. I didn't know anything about bakeries, and wanted to try something new; I wanted a new passion. Besides, all I do when I'm not Chat is go to school and work for my father. It's difficult to get any time to think for myself and invest in something new."

"Aren't you worried about the attention? Once people find out you work here on the weekends..."

His brow furrowed with concern. "Will it bother you and your family? I got the impression your parents would welcome the boost in customers."

"It doesn't bother me. I can handle the publicity. My friend Alya runs her own Ladybug blog; I know how this stuff works."

Chat raised an eyebrow. "I was worried you wouldn't like it. I get the impression you're pretty shy."

"Maybe, but I warm up around people who know me really well."

There was a pause as Chat filled the macarons. When he finished a row, he looked up at Marinette, those fluid green eyes surveying her hopefully. "Do you think we could get to that point someday? As friends? I know we know each other already, and I've already saved you a few times, but..."

"Maybe," she said honestly, spooning his batter mixture into dollops on a tray. "We'll be spending a lot of time together; we will definitely get to know each other better."

He gave her a winning smile.

"But first," Marinette continued, "let's focus on the rest of your training. You have flour on your nose, by the way." She brushed it off with her thumb, only realizing afterward how bold that must have looked. Chat was staring at her with an unreadable expression on his face. Was he mad? Uncomfortable?

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, blushing profusely. "That was awkward."

"No, it's okay. It just... tickled. I think I have to sneeze..." he paused, but nothing happened. Marinette was spared from saying anything more when her parents poked their heads in. "Everything going okay?"

Marinette, still red as a rose, nodded mutely and Chat twitched his nose. Satisfied, the Dupain-Chengs left to return to the front room to handle the mid-day rush of customers.

After the door swung shut, Chat seemed to have recovered. He let out an amused snort, and said, "Ladybug's not going to be happy that you de-floured me. She may not know it, but she secretly
"Did it seriously take you that long to come up with a pun that bad?" Marinette scoffed, trying to skim over how uneasy she felt. Chat had no idea Ladybug was standing right in front of him. And was it that obvious how Ladybug felt about Chat? She blushed again.

"It wasn't that bad," Chat said, pretending to be offended.

Still inwardly panicking, Marinette managed to eke out, "Vulgarity does not a pun master make."

"That was profound," remarked Chat blithely as he carefully filled another macaron. "I think I love you."

"Ha. In your dreams," she said again, trying very hard to mean it. She thought she'd only have to put up with his smooth charms as Ladybug. A double dose was almost too much to take.

After three weeks' worth of weekend shifts, Chat was doing very well. He was able to manage any part of the shop with relative skill and without having to ask for Marinette's assistance. She'd trained him well.

Chat also had become rather good at baking cookies. The ones he made rivaled even Mr. Dupain-Cheng's. As they filled cream puffs together that Saturday, Marinette asked him, "What's your secret? How do you always get the cookies just right?"

"I – you'd laugh. It's not important," he shrugged.

"I want to know."

"I…well, I can smell them. I can smell when they're done. Without having to open the oven to check. When you open the oven, the rush of cold air makes them slightly less fluffy and hardens the edges. I know exactly when to pull them out without compromising their integrity."

"You make it sound like a science. Part of me thinks you're just lucky."

"No. On the contrary, actually, I have horrible luck. I just have really good senses when I'm Chat."

"Huh. What happens to your senses when you're not?"

"I couldn't avoid the broad side of a brick wall if I tried," he deadpanned, and then they both cracked up.

"I think you're ready to try making bread then. It's actually a lot easier, but with your sense of smell you can get the crust just right."

While Marinette's parents handled the front room of the shop, Marinette and Chat made their way to the back kitchen. She pulled out the ingredients and showed him how to make dough. They talked amiably and made a batch of cookies while they waited for the dough to rise, and when her example loaf was safely stowed in the oven, she told him to try making his own.

He looked hesitant at first, but did his best. Just as he began massaging the dough, something occurred to Marinette, and she was angry at herself for not noticing sooner. Everything else they'd done allowed Chat to use gloves or utensils to keep his hands out of the food, but this was different. "Pause," she said. "Let me see your paws."

He complied, and she saw they were covered in flour and dough.
"Retract your claws. Otherwise you're just going to shred all of it."

"Oh, right." He did, but before he could continue working, she stopped him again, grabbing his right hand. "Did you wash first? I hardly think using your gloves is sanitary."

"They're not gloves, they're connected to the rest of my suit," he said. "But I'll wash them if it makes you feel better."

"In the interest of not poisoning anyone, I'd say wash your hands. And you should probably take that ring off or it'll get caked with dough. See, look, it already is."

She began sliding it off his finger, but as Chat realized what she was doing, he shouted "NO!" and tried to pull away. But he was too late; the ring came free in Marinette's hand, and as she stared at it, it suddenly looked familiar. There was a paw print on the silver band...she'd just removed Chat's Miraculous.

There was a flash, and Marinette's eyes jerked up before she could stop them. And where Chat had been standing was someone else. A familiar someone else...

"Adrien?" Her mouth fell open. She was completely and totally speechless. There were several waves of surprise channeling through her brain with every realization she came to. First, Adrien was Chat Noir. Second, Adrien was Chat, her partner. Third, the boy she had a huge crush on was also the same guy she trusted with her life on a daily basis.

"What did you do that for?" he asked, looking visibly upset. "You took off my Miraculous!"

"I didn't realize the ring was - you're...Chat? This whole time?"

He closed his eyes and sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I never told you. Are you mad? You're mad, aren't you? Marinette, please say something. I care about you. You're my friend. I don't want you to be angry..." He lifted one eyelid to peek at her.

He looked so earnest and afraid and embarrassed. She rolled the ring between her fingers, hardly daring to believe this ring was the only difference between her crush and her partner.

But how was she going to tell him he wouldn't need to worry? Was she supposed to divulge her secret too? And now he was staring at her, expecting an answer. She had to say something.

"You should wash your hands off before they get sticky," she said stupidly, brushing hair out of her eyes with a flour dusted wrist. "I'll clean off your ring and you can have it back."

He looked oddly disappointed at her reaction and looked down. "My hands are clean. My suit was the only part that was covered in stuff, and it's gone now." When his eyes flickered up to meet hers, they were imploringly sad. "Am I...um...fired or something? Do you want me to leave?"

And Marinette couldn't hold it in anymore. She hugged him.

"Of course not! How can you think you'd have anything to apologize for? I just can't believe it. You're polite and calm as Adrien, and then as Chat you're this pun-making, daring superhero. I just - it's so funny that you're the same person. I had no idea Chat was such a cute nerd at heart." She poked his chest to punctuate this. "You said you wanted to work here so people would see Chat as an approachable person like everyone else. I don't see why that has to change. I don't mind that you never told me. We all have our secrets."

She stepped back and put her hands to her ears, taking off her earrings. Adrien watched, looking
totally bewildered but slightly pleased when she took his hand in hers. Marinette dropped his ring and her Ladybug earrings into his palm and waited for him to make the connection. He stared at the Miraculouses uncomprehendingly for a moment, but then stared into her eyes. She knew he was looking for Ladybug there, and his growing smile meant he'd found her.

They each put on their Miraculouses again, and Adrien became Chat just in case the Dupain-Chengs checked in again. They stood in dumbfounded silence for a long time. No words were necessary as they sorted out the implications of their secrets. Chat's unfinished dough lay rising, forgotten, on the table.

After a while, he stepped forward and raised his hand to Marinette's face. "You have some flour on your cheek," he said kindly, brushing it away with his thumb. "Just a little smudge."

She froze at his touch and their eyes met as a silent understanding passed between them. Then, without preamble, they were suddenly kissing in the flour-dusted bakery, surrounded by the smell of baking bread and the distant whir of the air conditioning. They only halted their whirlwind of emotion when Chat pulled away, looking dazed. "Your bread's done. I can smell it."

"No it isn't," said Marinette.

"Yes, it is-"

"No," she said, giving him a firm look and pulling him closer. "It isn't."

"You're right," he said, finally understanding. "It could use a few more minutes."
Elementary

Chapter Summary

Elementary: Alya, Chloe, and Adrien have a debate to find the biggest Ladybug fan, and Marinette is forced to participate. But what happens when she and Adrien start disclosing information that only Ladybug and Chat Noir know about each other? Idea by Amaezing.

As if chemistry class wasn't going to be fun enough, Marinette was now Chloe's lab partner.

To make matters even worse, by some stroke of luck, Alya had been paired with Adrien. Both Chloe and Marinette looked on in jealousy from across the bench the four of them now were expected to share.

Marinette gave Alya a desperate expression, but her friend simply made an apologetic face and tipped her head toward Nino, who sat with Sabrina in the front of the room. Alya's face said it all: Sorry, girl, but they're assigned. Just be glad you're not Nino's partner. He's hopelessly clumsy. As if to punctuate this point, Nino knocked over a beaker full of deionized water and it smashed to the floor. He ignored Sabrina's glare, looking embarrassed but not entirely surprised. Marinette glanced back to Alya in wordless, reluctant agreement.

"Well," said Adrien cheerfully, "looks like we're going to do some bonding over the next few weeks of labs."

They all put on their safety glasses, trying to ignore the pun while Chloe swooned. "I love it when you make puns. They're hilarious."

Marinette and Alya both pretended to throw up into their beakers when no one was looking.

"Uh…thanks," Adrien said, already distracted with attempting to set up their buret. "Do you need some help?" Alya asked him. "Nah, I'm okay," he said once it was secured in a vertical position. "We should try and do the calculations together though."

Marinette looked at Chloe to do the same, but the blonde was picking at her cuticles and surveying Adrien with falsely disinterested coolness. Who did she think she was fooling? Rolling her eyes, Marinette set up the buret and began calculating the doses for their titration. So much for shared labor, she thought. When she relayed her numbers to Chloe, Adrien perked up, looking pleased. "That's what I got, too. Maybe we're doing something right after all," he laughed. "You must really get chemistry."

She shrugged, feeling her cheeks turn pink. "I think it's interesting."

"Well, I'm glad we have chemistry together," Adrien said. Marinette could have sworn she saw him give her a wink, but before she could question it, he was bent over his notebook again, smiling. Running over the double meaning in her mind, she wondered if she was reading too much into it.

She had the strange feeling Adrien wasn't talking about elements.

Nino dropped another beaker, derailing her train of thought. She looked back at the lab instructions,
but looked back up as she realized Chloe was talking.

"I was totally dreading this class," she simpered. "I hate chemistry. I was secretly hoping we'd have an akuma attack so I could avoid it. It's much more fun to watch Ladybug save the day."

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but I kind of agree with you. I'm a huge Ladybug fan," Alya said, measuring out one of the clear liquids into a small flask. "I take every chance I get to update my blog."

"Please," Chloe scoffed. "Ladybug and I are really close. I don't need some blog to be her biggest fan." A small wrinkle appeared between Adrien's eyebrows as he frowned. "Define close," he challenged.

She stared at him, surprised at his tone. "We talk," she said vaguely. "Can you hand me that pipe thing?"

"You mean pipette?" asked Marinette. Chloe just shrugged dismissively. "Yeah, that. But it's true—I'm totally Ladybug's biggest fan. Her confidant. She saves me on, like, a weekly basis."

Alya and Adrien exchanged a look of skepticism. "Why do you think she has to save you so much?" he asked pointedly.

"Because she likes me and cares for my well-being."

Marinette and Adrien both stifled derisive laughs, and then looked up at each other in surprise.

"If you're Ladybug's confidant, what do you guys even talk about? I'll bet all her secrets are already on the Ladyblog," Alya said defiantly as she poured liquid into their buret. Marinette followed suit, making sure the thin glass tube was secure on its stand between herself and Chloe. She decided to only listen to the conversation, too afraid to contribute. Who knew what could happen? She might accidentally expose herself as Ladybug.

"She told me once that she hates puns," Chloe said.

Adrien snorted, "Everyone knows that."

"Well, did you know that Ladybug is a historical figure? She's been around for centuries," Alya said smugly.

Chloe rolled her eyes. "Of course she hasn't. She told me she was school aged."

"What if she was lying?"

Adrien cleared his throat. "Guys, it's not that big a deal. Let Ladybug and Chat have their secrets. I mean, even I know some."

"Oh really?" Chloe put a hand on her hip. "Tell us, then."

"Ladybug's afraid of heights."

Marinette blinked. *How did he know that? No one knows that except…Chat. But…that would mean…No. That is just not right. There has to be a more logical explanation.*

"That's not true," scoffed Alya. "She runs across rooftops every single day."

"Because she has to," Marinette clarified. "Maybe not because she wants to. Besides, how could she
keep up with Chat if she stayed on the ground? He needs her."

"Ooooh, don't get me started on Chat," sighed Chloe happily.

"I don't suppose you have secrets about him too," Alya snapped.

"Of course I do. How else would I know Chat obviously has a crush on Ladybug? Every time he rescues me, he's obviously looking for her out of the corner of his eye."

Adrien nearly dropped his flask. "It's not that obvious," he protested. He received three surprised stares, mumbled something indistinct, and dropped his pencil on the ground. As he bent to pick it up, Alya narrowed her eyes at Chloe. "Is that all you know?"

"No. Chat likes to hang out in the park when he does patrols."

"Do you know why?" she asked.

Chloe looked down, a nonverbal no. Alya smiled. "It's so that he can watch Ladybug patrol the rooftops. The park has the best vantage point to admire his crush from afar."

Adrien emerged from under the table, spluttering. "How do you know that?"

"Like I said, I care about my blog; it has the most accurate content and the best observations about our famous duo."

Chloe frowned. "That whole park thing just makes Chat seem like a sap."

"He is not a sap," Adrien protested, looking angry. Marinette looked down at her notes for a distraction. This conversation was getting difficult to handle.

"How would you know?" the other girls asked him.

"I happen to be friends with Chat Noir too," he said quietly. "I know things about him and Ladybug that you guys don't know."

They all raised their eyebrows. "Like what?" Marinette finally asked. Adrien and Chat were friends? Chat had never mentioned that to her.

"Well, Chat hates pickles. He's allergic to feathers, like me. He has a small crush on someone at his school, but he really likes Ladybug. He likes to sit on the rooftop of my house because he can see the best view of Paris that way – that's how we know each other. And, yesterday he told me he's had twelve near-death experiences in the past month. Does that sound like a sap to you?"

Chloe muttered something like, "Guess not," as everyone awkwardly turned back to their experiments. Marinette's head was swirling. She knew all those things about Chat already, but for a different reason. They were things Chat had confessed to her…in private, when they were alone at their favorite spot at the top of the Eiffel Tower. No one else could have known, but it was almost as if Adrien had been there…

Nope, no way. It was probably just a coincidence. Maybe Chat told Adrien about it later.

"Okay, well if he has a crush on two girls at once, does that mean he's a huge flirt? Maybe he's just leading Ladybug on. I've seen the way she looks at Chat," Chloe was saying. "She'd be crushed if she found out Chat was a player."

Marinette gasped audibly, and so did Adrien. This time, it was Alya who gave them a puzzled look –
why were they reacting the same way to this news?

"That's not true, Chloe. Chat's not a player," Marinette confessed heatedly. "He said Ladybug was his only love – no matter who she is."

The words were out of her mouth before she could stop herself. What had she done? That was supposed to be a major secret. Chat had told her on top of the tower that same night. In ordinary circumstances, she'd never have told anyone that kind of secret. But…she'd been so angry at what Chloe had implied that she'd lost her head. Although, maybe it was safe to tell in this case, simply to defend his honor.

When she looked up, Alya was looking at her like she'd just won the lottery and Adrien's mouth was hanging open in astonishment. Chloe looked upset at being shown up. "Whatever. Competing for who knows the most about them is stupid anyway." She threw up her hands in frustration and accidentally knocked the buret off its stand. The glassware fell to the tile floor between them with an earth-shattering crash. Nino turned in his seat, looking smug. Marinette knew what he was thinking – at least this destruction of school property wasn't his fault.

"Girls!" cried their teacher, hurrying forward. "Are you all right?"

"I'm injured," Chloe muttered stonily, showing everyone the small cuts on her arms and legs where the glass shards had sliced her exposed skin. The teacher sent her to the nurse immediately, then turned to Marinette. "I'm fine, I think," she said, and the teacher left her alone. Her lab grade would be postponed until she and Chloe could make it up another time, much to her chagrin. There was too little time to start over now.

In the aftermath, the bellicose nature of the group seemed to have subsided slightly. Adrien still had a shell-shocked look on his face, and kept staring at Marinette's eyes like they were the answer to the universe.

Maybe they were, but the last time she'd checked, they were just blue.

She packed up her materials and simply watched as Adrien and Alya completed their experiment, chatting carefully about anything but Ladybug and Chat Noir. After a few minutes, Adrien looked up at Marinette again, this time with concern. "Wait, you're bleeding," he said.

She looked down. A stray shard must have nicked her bare elbow – a thin, bright stream of blood trickled down onto her right wrist. She hadn't even noticed, but now that the injury was acknowledged, she felt the pain for the first time.

"Oh. Ouch."

"I have some band-aids in my locker, but we'd have to go get them…would you rather go to the nurse?"

"No, it's fine. I don't want to make a fuss. I've had worse," she smiled good-naturedly.

"I bet you have," he said as if he knew about all the scrapes and bruises she got as Ladybug. He was still giving her that look…thinking back to their discussion, there was a ghost of a thought blooming in her mind. *Did* he really know? Could he be…

They obtained a pass from the teacher, washed out the cut at the sink in the back of the classroom, and walked slowly to his locker, leaving Alya to clean up the lab bench. She seemed only too happy to let the two of them share a moment alone.
When they got to Adrien's locker, he turned to her and appraised her, sweeping some hair off his forehead. "You know, there is one thing about Ladybug that I found out without Chat's help."

"And what is that?"

"Ladybug smells like oranges and peppermint. It's from her shampoo. And it's always the same."

"Actually, it's ginger, not peppermint," she corrected him before she could stop herself. His eyes looked triumphant. "Aha," he said quietly. "I see…Ladybug."

And just like that, she was exposed. Adrien knew her identity.

There was something mischievous in his expression that made her pause before panicking. She'd only ever seen Chat make a face like that. And sure enough, the thought she'd been suppressing rushed at her like a tidal wave.

*Two can play this game*, she thought. "Fine," she acknowledged. "But as Ladybug, I know quite a lot about Chat that he probably never shared with you," she said.

He cocked his head to the side. "You do?"

"Yeah. He likes the same sandwich shop as you. The one around the corner. Faraday's."

"Interesting."

"I know. He went there with Ladybug once. But it wasn't a date. They were just doing surveillance to prevent the robbery of the bank across the street."

She was testing him now. It hadn't been a bank robbery. It had been a jewel heist.

"Are you sure it was a bank?" The ends of Adrien's mouth were slowly climbing upward into a conspiratorial smile. "I seem to remember it was a jewelry store."

That mission had been so ordinary and uneventful that Chat wouldn't have told anyone about it. It was another run of the mill operation, as far as he and Ladybug were concerned. The only way Adrien would have known the distinction was if he truly was Chat...

The satisfied look on his face assured her she was right. "So you've been Chat all along?"

He nodded and pulled out a bandage for her. "Do you want me to put it on for you? It would be hard to reach on your own."

"Uh, sure," she said, distracted by the normalcy. They'd just revealed their biggest secrets, and he was still trying to bandage her up. This was either a classic Chat move or an oddly affectionate effort from Adrien. Maybe it was both?

She flinched slightly as his warm fingers brushed her skin. "Am I hurting you?" he asked kindly. "No," she whispered.

When he was done patching her up, he said, "I want to know that all this is still pretty weird for me. I never expected we would find out like this, but after things got heated back there, part of me wondered why we were willing to stand up for each other the way we did. It seemed like a pretty big coincidence that you and I knew things only Chat and Ladybug would know."

She nodded, and he continued talking. "I hope you're not mad that I tricked you into revealing anything; if it's any comfort I knew before you confirmed it anyway."
"You did?" she raised her eyebrows.

"Well, yeah - I knew as soon as you told us about my confession to you when we were on the tower. You know, about my feelings for you. But, I mean, I didn't think you'd straight-up tell me you were Ladybug, though. I thought I was going to have to pretend to believe whatever lie you came up with."

Adrien shut his locker again and they started to walk back to class. But then she realized something that made her feel like ice water was being dumped on her head. Ladybug was his self-professed one love. Which meant Chat loved her. And Chat was Adrien…

She stopped walking. "Does this mean that the girl you've been in love with - Ladybug-"

He turned to face her, looking endearingly exasperated. "It's still you, Marinette. And when you were Ladybug, you told me you felt the same way about whoever I was. We talked about this."

"You love…me? But what about your other crush? Someone at school? Who is it?"

He just looked at her and raised his eyebrows in an *I'm looking at her* sort of way, and she blushed scarlet. "Oh."

"Marinette, when I said we had chemistry earlier, I actually meant it," he laughed and walked back to her. He grasped her upper arms gently, making sure to avoid her injured elbow. "It has always been Ladybug, but I think some small part of me liked you because you reminded me of her. Maybe I always subconsciously knew you were the same person."

She wrapped her arms around him tentatively. "And to think we've been bonding together as superheroes all this time." She slipped in a dreaded pun just to make him smile. "If only we'd figured this all out sooner. I can't believe how obvious it should have been. How did we not realize this earlier?"

"It's like your cut," he said, looking at her elbow. "You didn't feel the pain until I told you you were bleeding. Sometimes people don't see what's right in front of them until it's pointed out. It's pretty ionic, if you think about it." he said, leaning close until their noses were almost touching.

She closed her eyes, savoring the moment. This was not at all how she'd assumed chemistry class would go today…but how could she complain?

"Umm...I'm all out of chemistry puns," she whispered to him. "How do you keep coming up with them?"

"Oh, it's elementary, my lady," he whispered.
As Time Goes By

Chapter Summary

As Time Goes By: Chat Noir and Ladybug face a villain who can blur reality with music that manufactures dreams. Stuck in a dream of their own, the duo must try and find a way to wake up and fight back. But if they can't trust their own eyes, how can they trust each other?

The soft piano chords of *As Time Goes By* swept Chat Noir overboard.

The melody was so pleasant, so peaceful, and he no longer had the energy to fight against the akuma's sleep-inducing song. He felt drowsy and calm, and his inner panic at being put to sleep was drowned out by the waves of music coming from Sleepsong's handheld speaker. Of all the villains he'd faced with Ladybug, Chat had never underestimated one this much – he'd assumed they'd be battling some guy who simply made people fall asleep. He'd never imagined that the Sleepsong could get inside their dreams too.

This was his third cycle of falling asleep; he knew the pattern now. Each time, he had a dream that was indistinguishable from reality. He only was able to recognize Sleepsong's manufactured dreams for what they were after he was able to wake up. But he and Ladybug couldn't seem to muster a proper attack; with just the first few notes of *As Time Goes By*, Sleepsong simply put them both to sleep again, neutralizing the threat of an angry pair of superheroes. There, they would dream peacefully for what felt like hours, wake up for only a moment, and then be sedated once more. It was frustrating to feel so helpless.

They had been so sure this would be an easy takedown; the plan was the usual – Chat would distract, Ladybug would fly in from her perch on the nearest rooftop and capture Sleepsong's "soporific speaker". But instead, they'd fallen victims faster than the blink of an eye.

Another dream took shape for Chat now as he crumpled to the pavement and closed his eyes. The scene formed slowly as buttery colors crystallized into details.

This time, he and Ladybug were waltzing in a red and gold ballroom. The lights from the crystal chandelier above were dim and romantic, and little rainbow reflections dappled Ladybug's gorgeous polka-dot dress. They still wore their eyemasks, but now the fabric was made of sequins and feathers, just like the masks at a masquerade ball.

Ladybug ran a hand along his right shoulder as they swayed to Sleepsong's now-quieter music. Chat had started to notice that *As Time Goes By* was always playing during his induced dreams. It was his only way of determining what he saw couldn't be real. By his reasoning, only in true silence could he trust he was awake. At least, that was his theory – it was getting harder and harder to know for sure what being awake felt like anyway.

"It's beautiful here, isn't it?" Ladybug asked, squeezing his arm fondly.

Partially to distract himself from the sappy look he saw in her eyes, and partially because he was allergic to the feathers on his mask, he sneezed. Their dancing feet faltered for a moment with his unexpected movement, but the music didn't stop playing.
"It's beautiful, sure," he said once he'd recovered. "But something's not right," he said. "This is just a dream. It has to be."

"And you dancing with me is also a dream?" she asked, a hint of smile on her lips. She seemed amused at his suggestion. "It's sweet that you think so too. This has been a dream of mine for so long."

"Ladybug, don't you understand? This isn't real." He spun her lightly and her dress swung around her legs.

"Of course it is," she laughed. "I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be than in your arms."

Chat wanted to believe her. It was so tempting. He'd pined for her for so long…and here she was, saying exactly what he wanted to hear. But he found himself observing that her behavior was quite contrary to that of the Ladybug he'd come to know. She would never admit she wanted to be with him, even if it was true.

Ladybug gazed into his eyes, moving closer and closer as they danced. Her warmth was almost hypnotic. He wanted to give in and trust her, to forget about trying to wake up from this blissful dream. But he knew he had to cling to reality. All of this was wrong.

"The real Ladybug would never say that," he said, stepping back. Her arms fell away from their clasp around his shoulders, and she gave him a hurt look that nearly cleaved his heart in two.

Suddenly, the ceilings and floors opened into a black chasm, and Chat felt himself falling as the song increased its volume. The dream was changing.

When he finally tumbled to the ground below, he looked up to find a new Ladybug lying beside him as though she'd just fallen too. She wore her normal polka-dot suit instead of a fluffy dress, and her hair was sprinkled with rubble.

"Are you real?" she asked immediately, taking the words seemingly from Chat's own thoughts. "Are you the real Chat? Not the one Sleepsong creates in my dreams?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing. How do I know you're not just part of my dream?" He looked at her with a grim smile, noting silently that As Time Goes By still played softly somewhere behind him. It confirmed his suspicions. "Actually, Ladybug, I think you're a figment of my dream, just like the others."

"But what if our dreams are overlapping and I'm actually here? It would mean we're both real." She seemed to take comfort in this fact, gripping the yoyo at her side with determination. "Chat, I think we should try to believe that…otherwise we're not going to make it out of this dream. We'll be stuck here forever."

Chat stood up shakily to look at their surroundings. They were in some kind of stadium now, like the kind used for football or mega-concerts. All the seats were empty except for one in the front row on the far side of the field, where Sleepsong sat watching intently.

"How am I supposed to believe that, Ladybug? I can't trust anything I see, especially you," Chat said, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. "Sleepsong thinks you're my weakness."

"Why would he think that?" Ladybug asked, but something in her eyes made Chat think she already knew.

"Because it's true. I have…well, I have feelings for you. You know that."
She looked down modestly, her cheeks pink. "Yeah, I do."

Chat waited for her to profess her love for him like she had in the ballroom, but she didn't this time. "Huh," he said, crossing his arms. "You're still impervious to my charms...maybe you are real. I just wish there was a way to tell for sure."

Ladybug gave him a determined look. "Charming or not, Chat, you have two choices. One: you trust that I'm real and help me defeat Sleepsong, or two: spend forever trapped in your own dreams with what might be a fake version of me. What'll it be?"

"I don't remember you ever having an attitude like this in real life," he said, frowning.

"I have an attitude because our stakes have never been higher before," she snapped. "Besides, I'm definitely more real than that farce you were dancing with earlier."

"You saw that?"

"Of course. I was dancing with my own hilariously bad version of you on the same dance floor. He kept coughing up furballs and giving them to me as 'gifts.'" They both shuddered, and she continued. "I know I'm real. I trust myself, at least. Given how endearingly intransigent you've been, you're probably the real Chat too."

He scoffed and she raised her eyebrows.

"Come on, Chat. What'll it take to make you trust me?"

"Tell me something only the real Ladybug would know – something only she could prove."

"That's a pretty tall order," she scoffed. He arched an eyebrow as if to say, well, do you have a better idea?"

She sighed. "Fine…but then you have to do the same thing for me."

Chat nodded. Ladybug steeled herself, looked straight into his eyes and said, "I'll tell you my real identity. And I'll detransform to prove it."

Without waiting for Chat to squeak out a surprised response, she closed her eyes and told him.

Obviously, he didn't believe her. "Show me...please."

Moments later, Marinette Dupain-Cheng was standing in front of him, looking vulnerable but validated. "Well, Chat? Do you believe me now? It's really me."

"Yeah," he breathed. "I do. I mean, it makes perfect sense. You always disappeared during the attacks – each time, I secretly worried you'd been buried under rubble or something. If only I'd known you'd been at my side the whole time."

"You didn't have to worry about me," she frowned. "I'm good at getting myself out of trouble." But as they both looked back at where Sleepsong still sat watching them, she amended her statement. "Well...most of the time."

"All right," Chat decided. "You've convinced me you're probably real."

"Probably?"

He sighed in exasperation. He could almost hear Plagg's voice in his head – "You guys fight like an
old married couple." Why did that stupid kwami always have to be right?

"Fine, you're real."

"Thank you." And after a slight pause, she grinned. "Now it's your turn."

Marinette didn't believe him either, at first. After he detransformed, she couldn't even manage to tell him how surprised she was. She was too busy stuttering. Gone was the confident Ladybug; in her place was the nerdy, quiet, nervous, adorable girl he already knew so well. He wrapped his arms around her in an attempt to stop her from short circuiting her brain.

"I'm glad we're both real," he sighed into her hair. "I won't go crazy in here if we're together."

"Same," she murmured. After a moment, she took a step back to look at him firmly. "Okay – we need a plan to defeat Sleepsong for good this time. Any suggestions?"

"Anything that doesn't involve sleeping on the job," he punned, and subsequently received a slap upside the head.

"I was serious," Marinette muttered.

After a few moments of thinking, she gasped. "Wait – what if that's it? What if we could destroy his akuma in our dream world? His 'soporific speaker' can't work if we're already asleep. Conceivably, defeating him here should work, since we're in his manufactured dreams. I think we could cleanse the akuma and eliminate this dream state; then we could really wake up!"

"I think it's worth a shot," he said, rolling his shoulders and starting to stretch in preparation to take on the villain. This one felt more personal than the others; he'd be glad to see the end of Sleepsong. He could hear his heartbeat whooshing in his ears, full of anticipation and excitement.

Once they'd devised a plan, the duo transformed again and Ladybug took off to disappear beyond the stadium walls. Chat approached Sleepsong cautiously, marveling at how small the guy was. He couldn't have been more than five years older than Chat. He was short and skinny – in a fistfight, even someone like Adrien could have taken him easily.

"Have you had enough yet? Do you want to wake up?" Sleepsong asked smugly. "Because it's never going to happen. You'll never be able to defeat me. You can't even tell dream from reality anymore. And once you've lost all your memories of real life, I'll take your Miraculous and leave you in the barren wasteland of your own mind."

"See, that's where you're wrong," Chat said, cracking his knuckles menacingly. "Fighting villains who've gotten inside my own head is my dream job. I hope you're ready to retire – I could defeat you in my sleep. And, in fact, I mean to."

For once, he was glad that Ladybug never laughed at his exceptional puns; it would have given away her position. She was silently descending from one of the gigantic fluorescent light poles above Sleepsong's head. By the time Sleepsong had the thought to look up at where Chat was staring, he was too late. Ladybug pounced, tackling the man to the ground. Chat helped her keep the struggling villain flat. Ladybug used her Lucky Charm to obtain strong cables to tie Sleepsong up, and she set to work at once to bind him. Once he was securely restrained, Chat plucked the speaker from his immobile hand and smashed it.

"No! You can't defeat me!" protested Sleepsong, and he struggled violently against the restraints. But his resistance made no difference; in mere moments Ladybug had purified it and stripped the villain
of his powers. The costume melted away to reveal a scrawny kid who looked upset and confused. The dream scenery around them began to erode. The stadium dissolved and the familiar street where the battle had begun replaced it. Chat wanted to kiss the ground – he was so happy to finally be awake.

He turned to Ladybug, and she was right beside him, grinning. "We did it, Chat. We saved everything."

"We did more than that," he said, taking her hands in his. "We saved ourselves too."

"It was practically too easy this time. Sleepsong didn't put up much of a fight."

"That's because this time we caught him by surprise. You're underestimating yourself, as always. I love that you're so modest … but take the time to celebrate what we did today, Bugaboo."

"Ugh, don't call me that," she laughed. "Although you're right, we do make a pretty good pair," she admitted, brushing her bangs out of her eyes. "With or without our masks. Wouldn't you say?"

Chat leaned in close – she smelled like baked bread and honey. He pressed his forehead to hers and closed his eyes. He didn't have to say a word – she already knew.

They stayed like that for a long time – standing close together and reveling in a shared secret. It was only when Ladybug's earrings began to beep that they parted ways.

"See you soon, Bugaboo," Chat called after her.

"Don't call me that," came the response.

"I'll grow on you!"

"Ha, in your dreams!"

"In my dreams, indeed," he said softly to himself as he began to walk home.

He was too happy to notice the faint music playing in the background. Had he been paying closer attention, the tune would have sounded familiar. There could be no mistaking the light, jazzy piano of *As Time Goes By* playing on an infinite loop.
Layers

Chapter Summary

Layers: Onions have layers. Cakes have layers. Who says Marinette can't have layers too? She's more than just the meek Marinette Chloe ridicules, and she decides to prove it...by going punk! Idea by naasibah majal.

They were studying deductive reasoning in Forensics class. Most people recognized the term from Sherlock Holmes, and were eager to try it out. The students were placed into pairs and asked to use deductive reasoning to find out something new about their partner. By some kind of cosmic bad luck, Marinette was paired with Chloe. Alya and Adrien looked on sympathetically, having been placed together with tremendous luck.

Marinette could hear her friends start trying the exercise.

"Okay," began Alya. "Um…well, clearly you're a Chat Noir fan, because you've got a fan-made ring that matches his." She pointed at the silver ring on his finger, and he immediately paled and tucked it out of sight.

Adrien gave a nervous laugh. "Uh, yeah. Right…"

"Where'd you get it?"

"Uh…some crazy old man who owns a shop a few blocks away," he muttered, sounding startled and uncomfortable. Marinette raised her eyebrows. Adrien was a Chat Noir fan?

"Um, Marinette, are you going to keep staring off into space or can we get started?" Chloe interrupted irritably.

"Sorry," she said, whipping her head back around to face her partner.

"I'll go first," Chloe announced, narrowing her eyes with false sweetness. Marinette could only nod and signal for her to proceed.

"Well, you always wear your hair the same teeny pigtails," she started. "It's like you're trying to conjure this innocent little kid vibe – I mean, grow up, we're not in middle school anymore."

Rose chose that moment to lean over and protest, "But Ladybug wears her hair the same way!"

"That's not the same thing," Chloe scoffed, waving her away. "The style actually looks good on a superhero. But on little Marinette here…no, just no. I think that her hair and her ability to wear the most boring clothes on earth are signs that Marinette doesn't care about her appearance. I mean, you're so lucky that you don't have to worry about how you look," she said patronizingly, patting Marinette's shoulder. "Although, I personally don't understand it. You're supposed to be this uber-talented fashion designer," she waved her hands dismissively, "but it's like you use up all your creative energy on your designs and leave nothing for yourself. You're just so plain."

Alya and Adrien both gasped as they heard this, but Chloe plowed on with her monologue.
"It's like you don't want people to notice you – but maybe that's your plan. It obviously works. I mean, Adrien looks right through you. But that's okay," Chloe finished, mistaking Marinette's furious expression for one of ignorance, "some people just aren't meant to be beautiful butterflies."

To punctuate this last point, she flicked her blond hair over her shoulder and failed to notice when it hit Rose in the face. Everyone sitting near Chloe and Marinette turned to look at the pair of them with mouths open in shock. Adrien was clenching his fists so hard that his knuckles were white.

Marinette sat trembling with anger in her seat. She couldn't even think straight – there was no way she could stand up to Chloe now. It was almost easier to fight back when Chloe picked on other people; but when Marinette herself was targeted, she merely pretended the words didn't get to her.

But this time, the vicious words about her appearance kept rising back up to the front of her mind, despite how much she tried to suppress them. The worst part about Chloe's "observations" was that they were based on truth. They were the horrible things Marinette often thought about herself, confirmed aloud by another person. Was this what everyone thought of her? That she was innocent and timid and unworthy of notice? Is that what Adrien thought about her? Did he see those same flaws and agree with them? Is this what he would see from now on? Were her chances of being with him someday totally ruined?

There was a pervasive silence in the classroom; the kind that follows the smash of something expensive falling to the floor. No one said anything, but everyone except Madame Bustier noticed something was terribly wrong.

Without saying a word, she stood up and walked out of the classroom. She didn't even look back when Alya and Adrien called after her, or when Chloe snapped back that she was probably fine.

Marinette ignored Tikki's concerned protests as she gathered her books from her locker and walked out the front doors into the afternoon rain. Classes for the day didn't end for another fifteen minutes, but thankfully no one prevented her from leaving early. She was honestly afraid that if anyone talked to her right now, her façade would break and she'd melt into the dreary streets like sugar into lukewarm tea.

To Marinette, Jagged Stone was more than a musician. He was an artist, a guitarist, a dreamer, a visionary, and a style icon. He understood songs, fashion, and punk rock. He was also an animal rights activist. He'd told her so, after she'd designed his latest album cover. And it made sense – he'd rescued his pet crocodile from poachers (which apparently was a story for another time) – and that explained why he had a pet crocodile in the first place.

Jagged Stone was definitely a famous rock star, but given Marinette's current situation, he was also the only person she wanted to see. She had a feeling he could help her in a way no one else could.

When she divulged what Chloe had said to her, he looked outraged and muttered something very rude about the bully under his breath.

"But why come to me?" he asked softly.

"See…I have this idea," she said, her mouth quirking into a clever smile.

"So…will you help me do it?" she said when she'd finished explaining her suggestion.

He regarded her with an intense, understanding stare, his chin perched on top of his left hand. "Are you sure this is what you want?" he finally asked. "It would be a pretty big change, even for you."
"I'm ready for it," she said. "People need to see there's more to me than what Chloe thinks. And I think the best way to prove that is to confuse them – make them see someone else. It'll still be me underneath, though. And then everyone will finally see that appearances don't matter the way Chloe thinks they do. Personalities hide under layers most of the time anyway. Like disguises."

And Marinette was no stranger to disguises – she wore one every day to protect Paris. She was already used to wearing a mask. One more layer of identity couldn't hurt. Besides, she was proving a point – this wasn't just something she was doing to get back at Chloe.

"Well...if you're positive," Stone said, still looking dubious.

Marinette picked up the scissors and handed them to him. "I am," she said fiercely.

Something about her expression convinced him, because he said, "That's what I was looking for. You've got this icy fire in your eyes."

"Yes," she smiled. "Yes, I do."

No one was quite prepared for what they saw when Marinette walked into school the next day. Gone was her demure wardrobe of pinks and pastels. She no longer wore her hair in pigtails. Instead of the shy, adorable, sometimes stuttering, quiet girl they expected, a complete stranger sat in her seat when classes began.

Marinette's hair was far shorter now, buzzed on the sides with the top tousled in a lazy, devil-may-care sort of way. She wore thick eyeliner to emphasize her blue eyes, and she wore studs along both ears, although her ladybug earrings (a fandom purchase like Adrien's, she told everyone) remained in their usual place.

Alya actually dropped her notebooks in shock when Marinette turned and greeted her with the usual friendly "Hey."

"Girl, what did you do? You look...tough. Kind of scary. But cool." Alya eyed the worn leather jacket and black boots Marinette was sporting.

"I'm proving a point. But don't worry, I didn't do anything permanent. The studs in my ears are fake and my hair was already black anyway," she whispered. She tapped her newly painted black fingernails on the desk and waved to Nino as he walked in. He raised his eyebrows but looked somewhat impressed.

"Dude," was all he said, but the tone was one of honest approval.

"He means you look amazing," Alya translated. "I don't think either of us realized you would do something like this though. You always looked great before. Why get a makeover?"

"I wanted to prove that anyone can be anyone," Marinette said softly. She would have explained more, but at that moment Adrien walked into class. When he saw Marinette's new look, he smiled and promptly tripped over his own foot.

"Whoa," he said once he was safely seated. "I like the makeover, Marinette."

"Thanks," she beamed. "I made most of the clothes myself, and Jagged Stone helped with my hair and makeup. I'm actually thinking of submitting the clothes as part of my design portfolio for our final project."
Alya's mouth fell open – Marinette had just talked to Adrien without stuttering once.

There was actually a reasonable explanation for this. Marinette always felt more confident when she pretended she was someone else around Adrien. When she was Ladybug, there was a layer of fabricated identity that kept her hyperactive nerves at bay around Chat Noir and everyone else in her life. With that same mindset, Punk Marinette was able to hold an intelligent conversation with her crush without looking like an idiot. She inwardly congratulated herself. Step one, complete.

"I wouldn't expect any less," he replied. "Why'd you go for the new look?"

Marinette tilted her head toward Chloe, who'd just walked through the door wearing an irritable expression and glaring at Marinette.

"Whoa," Adrien said softly. "She looks mad. She knows you look good and just doesn't want to admit it."

"Mmmm I don't think that's exactly it," Marinette smiled. "She just doesn't understand."

"Doesn't understand what?"

"Chloe has never been one to comprehend the value of personality. My external disguise perplexes the superficial. But you guys know it's still me under the new look."

She gave Adrien a warm smile and winked. This was the kind of behavior she typically saved for when she was Ladybug and when she was with Chat Noir. But Adrien didn't have to know that. Nevertheless, his reaction was similar to what Chat's had always been; he blushed and turned his green eyes up until they were staring into hers, silently asking if her wink meant what he thought it did.

Later that day, Marinette defended three separate people from Chloe's vicious verbal attacks. She confronted Chloe with her usual wise and poised demeanor, but it looked ten times scarier now. Chloe eventually backed off, but not without lashing out with more insults during their lunch break.

"I see you still followed my advice," she spat, standing three steps above Marinette on the staircase outside the school. "You only changed your appearance because you knew I was right."

"You know, Chloe, there's more to me than just my appearance, which was the point I was trying to prove. I've done things that would shock you," she said, letting the words sit on her tongue and dissolve into the tense air, "so don't pretend you know or understand me or anyone else based on what we let you see. You're just a powerless bully who likes to prey on those you perceive to be weak. As long as you continue to, I'll be here to stop you."

With that, Marinette walked confidently back inside the building. Adrien met her at the end of the nearly empty corridor, leaning against the wall with his hands in his jean pockets.

"That was pretty something," he said. "Did you mean it?"

"What? Of course I did. Someone needs to keep putting Chloe in her place."

"No, I meant the part where you said 'I've done things that would shock you…'"

"Not in the way you'd think," Marinette shrugged and adjusted one of her ear studs. She was thinking about diving off of rooftops, battling gigantic rock monsters, and wearing a skintight suit. Those kinds of things.
"So…not…like…" Adrien wiggled his eyebrows.

"No." Marinette looked bored and somewhat scandalized at the suggestion.

"Then what?"

She faltered, but only for a moment. "I…well, it's private."

"You don't have to tell me," he said, looking earnest. "But I just mean that I understand. I've done things that would surprise people too. The way you mean it."

One of her eyebrows twitched. "Really?"

"Of course. You're not the only one with secrets."

Adrien looked into her blue eyes; the same blue eyes but covered up with new makeup and a new haircut. It was like seeing the real Marinette behind the mask, the one who'd always been there, the steadfast friend. That much at least was evident in his expression, and she was starting to wonder if he had feelings for her…if he felt the same way that she did about him. Feeling emboldened by the kind of day she'd had already, and by her new disguise, she took a risk.

"Adrien, do you…like me?"

He blinked, taken aback. "Of course, you know I do."

"No," she said, blushing in spite of herself. "I mean…do you like me?" Once he understood, Adrien blushed just as red as Marinette.

"How did you know?" he asked quietly.

Marinette's heart was thrumming excitedly in her chest, like a very tiny hummingbird beating its wings.

"I didn't until just now. But I like you too."

His face split into a huge grin. "Really?"

"You mean you didn't know?"

"Well, not really. What Chloe said yesterday kind of made me wonder, but…"

She laughed – how could he not have realized? "I was always stuttering around you. I thought it was obvious based on how awkward and nervous I was when you were trying to talk to me. Do you even know how much it took for me to ask you just now?"

He looked down but kept smiling. "No, but I'm glad you did."

"I'm not going to lie, it feels really weird to have gotten that off my chest," she breathed. "I'm just so happy." She gazed up at him as another idea formed in her head. "Hey, want to try something crazy?"

"What did you have in mind?"

The corner of Marinette's mouth curved upward mischievously.
Witnesses to what happened in that hall during lunch break had a strange story to recount. Some underclassmen saw a punk version of Marinette grab Adrien by the front his shirt and pull him close, and abruptly kiss him.

Before the kiss, some thought they saw Adrien smile in anticipation when he should have looked surprised.

When the couple gently broke apart and headed to their separate class, only a few of the older students saw the aftermath: Adrien walked right into the closed door, then sheepishly pulled it open and disappeared inside, a starstruck expression lingering on his face.

When Chat Noir and Ladybug met for patrol that evening, her expression was nervous. They walked from opposite ends of the dark street to where a solitary lamp gleamed. As they approached each other, the orange light began to illuminate Ladybug's new haircut.

Chat stopped walking so abruptly that his arms flailed as his knees locked into place. He stared rigidly at his partner, having realized the obvious. She couldn't have the same hair as Marinette and not be Marinette. The sheer impossibility of the situation astounded him—and yet, there she was, standing there with two layers of identity that he could now see through. It was as if a curtain had been parted.

She drew closer, and he could see the blue eyes that had pierced his heart that very first day he'd met her. They were definitely Marinette's, he knew that now. They were hidden under her makeup and her Ladybug mask…but the beauty in them was still the same. Looking into them felt like staring up into a cloudless sky. Or the thrilling chill of cold water on a hot day. They were fire and ice in perfect harmony.

He couldn't keep himself from grinning as he stood there like an idiot.

"You like it?" she asked, touching her hair absently. "I thought it was time for a change."

"Like it? I love it. I love your hair. So much. It makes me so happy."

"Um…did you come across a bad batch of catnip today?" she asked, looking weirded out.

"No. I just am really...happy?"

"You okay?" She put a hand to his cheek. "You don't have a fever."

It was like she had no idea what she was doing to him.

He gripped her wrist gently. "I'm perfectly fine. So fine, in fact, that I could probably leap three stories in a single bound. I'm elated."

"Why? Is it really about the hair? I was worried you'd hate it." She looked self-conscious.

It was time to put her out of her oblivious misery. He stepped closer. Their noses were almost touching now. "It's about you. Marinette."

She completely froze. She could have been a statue. Her eyes could have been solid ice.

"What?" she whispered.

"It's you. You're the reason I'm so happy. The hair was a dead giveaway, but only for me. If it had been anyone else, they would never have put together your real identity."
She frowned, looking suspicious. "Wait, who are you? How could you possibly know? Have you been spying."

But she didn't finish her sentence. Chat was already releasing his transformation – his claws disappeared and suddenly Ladybug found Adrien standing in his place, still holding her hand in his.

"Because," was all he said. It was all that was necessary. Ladybug looked shocked, but he could see the ember of pleased recognition underneath it.

She was glad to see him too.

"Was it really the hair that gave me away?" Marinette asked Adrien. They had postponed their patrol for an hour or so in hopes of taking a stroll to talk. Really talk for the first time, now that they had a full plate of information.

"Yeah, at first. But honestly, your eyes were what made me one-hundred percent sure," he said, putting his arm around her. He felt her nuzzle in against him - she wasn't wearing a jacket and was probably cold.

"I'm really sorry – I probably should have given the haircut more thought. I just didn't imagine you'd be someone I already knew."

"Don't be sorry. I'm over the moon about this!"

"Why?" she looked at him strangely. "Our masks were there for a reason. Being responsible for someone else's identity can be a burden. I never wanted to be that to you."

"What do you mean? I'm thrilled about this because of you. I'm the kind of happy where you know you're going to be okay. Not like, 'okay just for now'. Not 'okay for like a week'. I'm talking about being totally okay forever. It's like this ball of light inside me. Like a pearl inside an oyster. My point is, burdens can be beautiful. You're the proof," he finished. He probably sounded stupid.

But when he looked up, her icy eyes had started to melt, leaking down her cheeks. "That was...No one's ever said anything like that to me before," she said, wiping away some of her smudged eyeliner.

He chuckled. "Well...like it or not, Mari, I think I'm in love with you."

She sniffed and gave a watery laugh. "I think I'm in love with you too."

He squeezed her shoulder and she leaned her head against his arm.

"So, should I get a makeover so we match?"

"Don't you dare! You have a modeling job to protect. Not to mention that your father would kill you."

"Pshh, I'd be the king of the Chat-walk if I went punk. You know it."

Later that evening, the city faced a minor threat in the form of Buzzkill, the latest of Hawkmoth's akuma pawns. When Ladybug and Chat Noir arrived on the scene, they took a moment to assess the situation.

"You can't be popular forever, Miss Bourgeois," Buzzkill yelled as she hovered outside Chloe's
"It's time for me to take the spotlight from you! I will have my revenge – you'll never bully me again!"

"This seems to be happening more and more often," Chat said, crossing his arms and frowning. "I have this theory that if Chloe moved away, Hawkmoth wouldn't be able to find anyone upset enough to akumatize. He'd get so bored that he'd eventually stop sending people to take our Miraculouses. And then we'd finally have peace."

Ladybug snorted. "That sounds like a great plan. Too bad that's not going to happen. Chloe's dad is practically the face of Paris. They're not going anywhere."

"Yeah, but still...I can dream."

Suddenly, there was a melodramatic scream from Chloe's room, and she stuck her head out the window and looked down at the superheroes. "Um, don't you guys have a job to do? I need to be saved, here!"

Ladybug looked up at Chloe and then turned to her partner, a reluctant expression on her face. "For once, can we just not?"

"I know you're kidding," Chat laughed as he took out his baton, "but somehow, your haircut makes you seem more serious. If I didn't know you better, I would have believed you."

"Don't worry, I won't let the punk-ness get to my head," she said, twirling her yoyo and preparing to race into action. "It's still me under it all."

"You're right, and I'm finally glad I know who that is. Besides, if nothing else came from today, you taught me something important. You need to be yourself, even if it means doing something a little crazy."

Puzzled, she took a breath to say something. But Chat was quicker. He pulled her in and kissed her before she could get a word out.

When she finally stepped back, looking pleasantly dazed, he winked at her. "Like that," he said, as if it needed explanation.
Some Kind of Heaven

Chapter Summary

Some Kind of Heaven: Idea by Chise Sakamoto. A Blind! Adrien and Deaf! Marinette AU.

Chapter Notes

The parable mentioned in this chapter is credited to Confucius and I did not make it up!

*One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.*

*Onetwothreefour.*

*One two.*

On a humid Sunday evening, Adrien counted the steps up to his room the way he'd done for the past three years. He knew exactly how many steps it took to get everywhere in his house. He had a flawless mental map so he could navigate with ease, and without his cane. It was nice to move without aid in a place he knew so well.

He paused at the top of the stairs and put out his arms. Sure enough, he felt his wooden doorjamb against his hands. He knew the wood was a deep, rich brown color; he'd made his father describe every detail so he could imagine it fully. But somehow knowing and seeing were not the same thing for him anymore.

He walked five more steps and knew he was standing in the middle of his room now. There was a certain cozy feeling that crept up his spine. He could smell the ocean breeze detergent on his clean sheets, and he knew that if he were to extend his left arm completely, he'd find the edge of his mahogany desk.

But something about his room felt different today. It was almost imperceptible, but he could feel it. There was a change in the layout – minor, but enough to change the air flow. It smelled old. Maybe ancient. Like dust and old wood.

He reached out and gripped the desk, walking along it and sliding his hand over the top, feeling for changes. He stopped when his hand unexpectedly bumped against a small box. It wasn't square, it had many more edges. In his head, he pictured black leather – that's what the material felt like. He picked it up, judging its weight. Light, but still solid. It felt like a jewelry box. Like the kind his mother had kept on her dresser before the accident.

He felt for the opening and split the two edges. He felt the lid fold back with supple ease and his suspicions about the leather were confirmed. There was a soft *whoosh* and Adrien felt his hair blow back softly in a strange breeze. He smelled something that was a mixture between old books and pungent cheese. Camembert, if he had to guess.
"Hi," said a soft voice beside his left ear.

Adrien yelled in surprise and threw the box into the air. He heard it land with a muted thud on the floor next to his desk, but he barely registered it. He was too busy stumbling backward. Luckily, the side of his bed broke his fall, and he ended up sitting roughly on the edge of the mattress. He clutched the soft comforter, breathing hard and forming a reference point. Getting disoriented in his own room with an intruder would be most unwise.

"Who said that?" he gasped.

"Hi," the voice said again. It sounded faintly amused. "My name is Plagg."

"Where are you?"

"I'm next to you on the bed." Adrien felt another rush of wind – whoever this was certainly could move quickly.

"Why are you in my room?"

"I came out of the box."

"But…the box is small. How would you fit?"

"I'm small," said the voice. "I'm a kwami."

"What is that? Are you like…my conscience? Or am I losing it? I must be…"

It used to happen a lot after the accident. He had lost so much in the fire: his mother had died, he'd lost his sight, they'd moved to a new mansion that became more cagelike by the day, and his father had become a recluse. Adrien's adjustment had been hard, and there were a lot of nights where he thought he was going to go insane trapped inside his own head. Maybe this time it was making him hallucinate.

Suddenly, he felt something bump against his left pinky. He flinched and moved his hand away. The thing that had bumped him latched on to his thumb. It was small and soft, with pointed ears and a tail. Adrien pictured a tiny kitten, and resisted the urge to pet it.

"I'm not your conscience," Plagg said, sounding bored. "I am a kwami. A black cat kwami. I grant powers of destruction to my chosen partner, and have aided many powerful and illustrious heroes. If you use the ring inside that box, I'll help you transform and become one too. All you have to do is put it on. I'll help guide you."

"I don't…why…why would anyone choose me?"

"You don't remember yesterday? When you tried to go to public school until your father parked on the other side of the street and made you come home?"

"Yeah, but what does that have to do with-"

"Remember when you were waiting to cross to the car…and you put your cane out to keep that old man from stepping into oncoming traffic?"

"I heard the cars coming. And I heard his footsteps long after they should have stopped. What else was I supposed to do?"

"You did something valiant that showed you care about those around you. Rather than retreat into
yourself, you still seek to protect others. Am I wrong?"

Adrien shifted on the bed uncomfortably and avoided answering the question. "I'd feel a lot better if I could see you," he said. "You could be a demon or some kind of illusion. Or a prank from my humorless father. Or a voice in my head, for all I know."

"I'm not. I can prove it. Put on the ring."

"And..." Adrien paused. "Wait. Why would anyone want the power of destruction? Why would someone choose me to have that? That sounds like a catastrophe waiting to happen."

Plagg chuckled. "Already making cat puns. You're perfect for the job."

"That was unintentional. And this is not funny. Find someone else. I'm not the guy you need."

Plagg gave a skeptical hiss. "Adrien, the Master and I have been watching you. You've been blind for what, three years? And yet, you're already winning the battle against your father to let you go to public school. You're already terrorizing him with your daring recklessness – you insist on going out every day, alone, wandering the streets of a giant city in search of the company you can't get at home. And you've already saved lives. That made quite an impression on the Great Master, and on me. You did all that alone. Being a superhero will be easy for you, comparatively. Paris needs someone like you."

"You're insane. Maybe I'm insane. Maybe if I snap out of it, you'll go away – a figment of my imagination."

There was a long pause. Adrien started to wonder if he really had imagined the whole thing, but then he felt a rush of air, and a cold band slid onto his right finger as the kwami flew over his hand. It felt like metal – Adrien pictured silver.

"What did you just do?" he asked the kwami suspiciously. He knew full well the answer to his question, but he couldn't resist expressing his hesitation.

"I put your ring on for you. I think it's the only way you're going to understand what I mean. You can do the whole superhero thing. And you're going to love every moment of it."

"Your ring, Plagg had called it. Adrien's fingers traced the design. It was a paw print – he could feel the cool ridges against his skin. He was nervous and disbelieving, but part of him wondered if this strange little cat was right.

"I suppose trying wouldn't hurt," he sighed, feeling embarrassed for caving. "What do I have to do?"

Five minutes later, Adrien was wearing what felt to him like a tight black suit. He was holding a slim baton that actually, if he thought about it, doubled well as a cane. However, he had a feeling he wouldn't really need it.

Since the accident, Adrien had always prized his sense of hearing – he relied on it most – but the cat ears on his head took it to another level. He could hear his father pacing downstairs. He could hear the heartbeats of people down the block from his house. He could even hear pedestrians on the sidewalk below moving their hands, gesturing as they talked. He knew one was a woman, one was a man. And they were waving their arms amiably, gesturing to the sunlit streets in awe. Tourists.

So, Adrien... was I right, or was I right?
The voice came from inside his head, and it startled him so much that he dropped his baton onto the carpet with a muffled thud. He knew it was Plagg talking to him – the kwami had explained how they'd communicate – but his reflexes got the better of him. He'd never liked it when people surprised him. It was hard not to be startled when someone spoke to you and you had no idea they were there.

He felt for the baton with his foot and picked it back up. Okay, fine, you were right, he said with grudging appreciation. This suit is pretty cool.

There's more than just the suit. Try it out, Plagg encouraged. Even in his head, the creature's voice sounded smug and placid.

Adrien licked his lips and opened his window. The stimulation of his senses went into overpowering detail – he smelled the bread from the bakery three blocks away. He felt minute changes in the air currents the way most people would hear faint music playing.

It was almost out of instinct, the way he got up on his ledge and leaned outward. He felt his muscles tense in anticipation, and he crouched, ready to spring into the night. He could leap from rooftops, right? Just think how the conquerable night might unfold itself before him if he jumped –

At the last moment, he froze, and his body lurched in protest.

Plagg. You nearly got me to jump out a window, you sneaky little kwami...You're actually insane. I can't do this. I'll kill myself.

You're not going to kill yourself, came the response. Was it him, or did Plagg sound bored?

Uh, yes. I will.

Adrien clutched the side of the window tightly, unable to find the courage to leap. But then a bird burst into flight from its perch on the gutter above his head. The fluttering sound startled him so badly that he lost his balance on the precipice and began to plummet to the ground.

PLAGG! I AM DEFINITELY GOING TO DIE-

He screamed and twisted in the air, reaching hopelessly for anything he could latch onto. He did so out of pure fear – he didn't want to end up as a pancake on the pavement below.

But then his ears twitched and he suddenly just knew where he needed to reach. Almost effortlessly, his arm found a rail to a fire escape. He clenched his fingers tightly around it and jerked to a painful stop, feet dangling in the air.

"Ouch," he hissed. Pain flared in his right shoulder. He was hanging by one hand above Paris – one thing he'd never done before. He didn't really do parkour in Paris for obvious reasons.

Told you. I knew you wouldn't die. Plagg sounded smug.

Liar, he retorted.

What, you think you're the first blind Chat Noir I've been paired with?

The thought of that surprised him so much he forgot to argue. You mean there were others before me?

Of course. I know what I'm doing.
Plagg, not to sound petulant or anything, but I just...this does not seem like a good idea. I'm nothing like those other guys. And the thought of being a superhero scares me a lot more than it probably should. It seems like a lot of responsibility and I don't think you should put that much faith in me. What if I fail? What if people get hurt or die because I messed up? I'm sorry, but I can't do this on my own.

You'll have a partner. Her name is Ladybug, and once you two meet, she will be there to help you. Just as you will be there for her.

But what if she's not around? I can't be a superhero by myself. I can't be one, period.

Plagg paused thoughtfully. There is an ancient Chinese parable I came across a long time ago that I think will provide insight for you, Adrien. Would you like to hear it?

Do I have a choice?

Plagg snorted in amusement. No.

Fine, then, he sighed.

All right. Plagg made a self-important sound like he was clearing his throat. There was once a man who wished to know the difference between heaven and hell, as he was about to die. He sought after a wise man who knew the answer. When he asked the wise man to show him heaven and hell, the man guided him to a large house in the country. The house had two large rooms with heavy oak doors. Upon entering the first room, both men saw a large feast prepared on a large circular table, and people sitting at every seat. Each person had giant chopsticks far too long for practical use, and each was attempting to feed themselves. All of them failed to do so, and they were miserable. When the two men went to the second door and went inside, a similar scene greeted them. There was an identical feast on the round table, with the same food and people at every seat. Everyone still had their gigantic chopsticks. And yet, the people seemed content-- they ate their fill, laughed, and told stories. When the men finally left the house and stood in the quiet outdoor twilight, the dying man sputtered, "Why did you show me this? Heaven and hell looked exactly the same, except in heaven, the people were able to eat with those long chopsticks." But the wise man smiled and said, "Do you understand how they were able to do so?" The dying man could only shake his head no. "My dear friend," the wise man chuckled, "in heaven, they feed each other."

There was a moment of silence after Plagg finished his story. Somewhere down below, a bicycle bell rang shrilly and a car honked its horn.

I still don't understand, Adrien finally said. Why did you tell me this?

Adrien, being Chat Noir is like having chopsticks that are too big. It's a terrible burden to you on your own. But this kind of responsibility isn't meant to be shouldered alone. You and Ladybug need to help each other for this to work. You both will struggle, but you will succeed because of your shared guidance. You will be able to "feed" each other with your "chopsticks", in a sense.

Oh, Adrien said, feeling a little overwhelmed. Um, okay then.

And someday, you'll see being Chat Noir as a gift and not a burden. Adrien, trust me. I do know what I'm doing. He paused for a beat. And so, it seems, do you.

Plagg's observation was accurate. Without realizing what he was doing, Adrien had lifted himself up onto the platform of the fire escape and was now climbing up to the roof.

How am I doing this?
Adrien finally found himself along the flat part of the rooftop. He thanked Plagg but still felt shaky. He had a moment to himself to recover and roll his aching shoulder, but then his ears delivered him information he didn't expect. Someone else had landed on the roof behind him with feminine grace, having flown in with a quiet whirring noise. She'd swung from some kind of rope, he guessed, but that made no sense. Why would anyone cross rooftops like a circus performer?

Although, given what he was wearing and what he was doing at the moment, he probably wasn't one to talk.

"I know you're there," he said cautiously, not turning around. "What do you want?"

There was a tense silence, and then he gave in to curiosity. He turned to where the newcomer was standing – it was a girl. She smelled like rain and fresh bread from the bakery. He pictured her about his age, although there was no way of knowing that. He wondered if this was the Ladybug Plagg had mentioned.

She was frozen, unmoving.

"I said, what do you want?" Chat repeated, and the girl finally moved. Her scent was stronger now. She was walking toward him, but she still said nothing. She was moving her hands a lot, but there was no voice.

"Can you hear me? Hello?"

She moved her arms more slowly, as if she were frustrated. Her fingers and palms were flexing and closing in complicated patterns – Chat felt it in the way the air shifted and how she was breathing.

Adrien, interrupted Plagg, she's using sign language.

And he pulled up short, tilting his head and listening. Even though he couldn't see, his eyes still flicked around as if searching for her. He let them drift up to his twitching ears, thinking hard. Plagg was right. Was this girl deaf?

Plagg, do you know sign language?

Yes I do. Do you want me to tell you what she's saying?

Yes. Can you see it? Or do you hear what she's signing, like me?

When we're together, I experience everything the same way you do. But I can still translate.

Please do.

There was a pause, but then Plagg's voice sounded again in his head.

She is asking if you can see what she's saying. She said her name is Ladybug, and that she's going to be your partner.

Do you know who this Ladybug is? Is she like you and I?

She's always Chat Noir's partner. The bond between the two heroes is one of the strongest around. You two were chosen for each other, as has always been the tradition. You're going to be great friends and powerful heroes.
Plagg sighed indignantly. *Just talk to her. Her kwami, Tikki, is going to translate.*

*How do you know any of this?*

*Because I know Tikki, and I know Ladybug. You guys will make this work.*

A blind Chat Noir and a deaf Ladybug? Chat raised a slightly pleased eyebrow. Here goes…

"Hi," he said, his voice piercing the silence. "My name is Chat Noir. I can't see what you're signing, but my kwami is going to translate. I hope yours can translate for you too since you can't hear me."

She signed something, quicker this time.

*You're blind?* Plagg paraphrased, and Chat nodded in response.

"I know this is a weird combination," he said. "I'm really unsure about taking on this kind of responsibility, but I'm up for it if you are."

Then her response came: *You're right, I think we need each other. It's nice to meet you. Partner.*

Even though it was in Plagg's voice, Chat liked the way the word *partner* made warmth swirl in his stomach. "Nice to meet you too, partner," he grinned. He knew she could see that, so he tried to make his smile as big and comforting as possible.

She made a small tinkling sound in the back of her throat, like a giggle, and it sent of fireworks of green and red in Adrien's mind. He tried his hardest to look like he was staring into her eyes. He desperately wanted to know what she was thinking. He was struck by the idea that she could see the green in his eyes, and he never would.

She made the sound again – definitely a laugh of joy. The sound was louder this time, and when his new ears picked it up, the effect was shocking.

There was a sudden explosion of emotion inside his heart that he hadn't felt in years. It was almost like happiness, but not quite. It was more like fulfilment. Something about being Chat Noir and talking with Ladybug just felt *right*. As Chat, he knew where things were without seeing, but Ladybug's voice seemed to make what he saw come to life. Chat Noir's powers gave him a mental view akin to a black and white photograph, but Ladybug…well, Ladybug was the *color*.

He still sensed his surroundings the way he always had – with his ears and nose and movements, but when he was around her, he perceived it in a heightened way. Almost like…

He straightened, feeling elated and slightly overwhelmed. He almost wanted to cry. *Plagg*, he sighed, *when I'm with her, I can...I can see. Not in the traditional way. But I see what you meant earlier. About our bond.*

But the kwami didn't say anything. And before Chat could register what else was happening, Ladybug reached out and grabbed his hand. She gave it a warm squeeze and looped her fingers into his. If this was her version of a visual smile, he could get used to that. This was one thing Plagg wouldn't need to translate: the beginnings of a friendship.

Adrien began his first day of public school the next day. He was assigned to a classroom with his student guide, Nino, who would help him find his way around and take notes. Nino was definitely
something; the first time they met, he shoved his giant headphones over Adrien's ears and said, "Check out this beat, dude. You're about to have a serious musical education experience."

The unorthodox introduction had surprised Adrien at first, but he just went with it. It was nice to have company, and given Nino's thoughtful enthusiasm and excellent taste in music, they'd probably become great friends someday.

His first class was refreshing – it was nice to be surrounded by other people his age. As he made his way to his seat with Nino right behind him, he stumbled on a stair he wasn't expecting. And out of the darkness, he unexpectedly felt a small, strong hand grip his to keep him from falling. It wasn't Nino's – that was for sure. But it felt familiar somehow.

His memory took him back to that moment on the roof when Ladybug had taken his hand. It had felt just like this – warm and gentle, but trembling with hopeful hesitation. He couldn't shake the idea that the hand he was holding now was the very one that belonged to his partner. Without his sight, Adrien had learned to rely on touch and scent. These other senses were critically important to him, and for this reason, he never forgot a handshake. This was definitely her.

He felt his blank eyes search for her face, gleaning nothing. If only he were Chat right now – he'd be more able to understand what was going on. How could she be here?

"Thank you, my lady," he said softly, squeezing her hand. "I appreciate it."

There was no response on her part, but he wasn't expecting one. If this was Ladybug, she wouldn't have heard him anyway. He let go of her hand, and then an unfamiliar girl's voice to his right interrupted.

"Are you okay? Sorry, I should have warned you about the step-"

"Yeah, no, it's okay. I'm Adrien. And this is Nino," he smiled.

"And who are you?" Nino asked the girl.

"I'm Alya. I'm Marinette's translator. She's new this year too."

"Marinette?" So that was her real name. Marinette. It tasted like tart orange and chocolate when he said it aloud.

"Yeah."

"Could you please tell her thanks for catching my fall, and that it was a pleasure to meet her last night? I didn't realize she'd be in my class today. Small world."

Inside, Adrien was glowing. It felt like the sun was going to burst from his eyes and ears with molten gold flames. He was thrilled to be sitting here with Ladybug, basking in the warmth of a secret he now shared with Marinette.

"Sure thing," said Alya.

"I appreciate it," he said kindly, taking his seat beside Marinette. He heard Nino and Alya pull out the chairs at the table in front of them.

Once Alya finished translating, Adrien heard Marinette make a surprised sound midway between a laugh and a gasp. Adrien knew that voice – it still made fireworks go off in his head.
He turned his body to face her, flashing his sightless green eyes and giving her a deliberate wink. She made another amused noise, and then the two were forced into a suspenseful silence as class began. It was agonizing wondering what she thought about their dual identities, but Adrien forced himself to be patient at least until class was over.

Fortunately, he didn’t have to wait that long for his answer. Halfway through the lesson, he felt her slip her hand into his from under the table. She looped her fingers into his and gave a reassuring squeeze, just like last time.

*It seems Plagg's strange chopstick story was spot on,* he thought. *Being with her was definitely some kind of heaven.*
Fashion Faux Paw

Chapter Summary

Fashion Faux Paw: When Adrien and Marinette find themselves targeted by an akumatized villain, Chat and Ladybug take their places at a fashion show to protect them and act as bait. But what happens when the two heroes notice that the other acts a lot like the person they are impersonating? Idea by Wai-Jing Waraugh.

On a dreary Saturday morning, Marinette eagerly sat at the table eating breakfast, watching Adrien Agreste's first on-camera TV interview. She'd been looking forward to it for a whole six months, ever since she'd first been invited to help the Agrestes design the new fall clothing line as part of her fashion design internship.

"I'm pretty excited, but I'm afraid I'll say something stupid on live television," Adrien had confessed one day when they'd both been at the office. Marinette had been hemming his Chat Noir-inspired suit with nervous, shaky fingers. She'd also been holding several small pins between her lips, so she'd been unable to anything encouraging in response.

But she absolutely understood his nerves. Adrien had been in the modeling industry for years, but his father had kept him away from the interview spotlight until now. Mr. Agreste had only allowed Channel Five the rights to interview because Adrien had garnered quite a fan base after he'd modeled Marinette's superhero-themed fall collection pieces in the first magazine ad last month. The popularity of the fashion line was going to skyrocket even higher as soon as people watched his first interview. And, as far as publicity went, this was probably a safer option than letting desperate magazines publish some fake, far-fetched scandal like "Adrien Agreste Actually Is Chat Noir!" or something equally ridiculous.

Marinette couldn't help but notice that as he walked onto the stage now, Adrien looked extremely nervous. She knew he was rather uncomfortable in these situations – he withdrew and seemed almost aloof. She couldn't exactly blame him – having to put up with screaming girls yelling at him all the time was probably exhausting and irritating.

"It's Adrien-freaking-Agreste!" cried out one girl as the camera panned across the front row. She had runny mascara marring her powdered cheeks as she cried. "He's so hot!" yelled another teen, waving a giant poster with his face on it. "He looked at me!" shouted yet another girl, who was clutching a poster of Adrien and wearing a sweat-suit from the Agrestes' newest line of feline-themed athletic wear, called Noir.

Marinette had to admit that capitalizing on the superhero craze in Paris was doing wonders for the fashion world. And the designs was pretty realistic – she'd been sure to even get the Chat Ear headbands just right. And it had been announced yesterday that the Agreste empire was about to start selling Ladybug merchandise under the label Bugaboo as well. While she was admittedly a little pleased at how the designs had turned out, Marinette still thought the cutesy, pet name of the clothing line was a little questionable. It sounded like something Chat would have suggested in an offhand attempt to flirt with her, but Marinette knew the name had actually been Adrien's idea.

The camera slowly turned back on the stage, where Adrien was now sitting stiffly in an ugly yellow armchair and wincing at the catcalls from his fans. Mascara Girl could be heard reciting her phone
"Hey! Adrien freaking Agreste! Call me, my love!"

Thankfully, Madame Mystique of the Channel Five Fashion Forward Team seemed to sense things were getting out of hand and began the interview with a warm introduction, obviously trying to make him feel more at ease. It was very clear that while Adrien was accustomed to the spotlight, he was not accustomed to so much of one. The audience shut up at once, held in rapture by Paris’ beloved teen model.

"Well, Adrien, we already know a lot about your fabulous work in the fashion world. You've held us in rapture for years,” said Mystique in a voice like smooth honey. "But we want to learn more about you – things we've all been dying to ask. Let's start with the first question – something simple to get you warmed up. What's your middle name?"

Adrien seemed to relax a little at the easy question. "Uh… freaking. Apparently." He shot an uncomfortable yet amused look at Mascara Girl and she swooned. The rest of the audience laughed. "But in all seriousness, it's George."

Marinette gagged on her toast. "His middle name is not George," she said aloud, even though she knew she was home alone. It was Jean; he'd told her that once a long time ago. Was he lying then? Or was he lying now? Perhaps everything he was going to say in this interview was false. Come to think of it, that would be a good way to protect his privacy. Marinette shuddered to think what his fans would do to him if they found out anything remotely true.

"What's your favorite food?" Mystique continued.

Adrien paused, probably aware that his fans would probably send him millions of whatever he said. With an almost imperceptible flinch, he said, "I love peanuts."

Marinette rolled her eyes. Adrien hated peanuts. She'd caught him once at the bakery scraping the peanut butter off the top of one of her father's Nutella Checkerboard Delights, which was an obscenity to a girl who'd grown up eating those whenever she'd had a bad day.

"How can you not like peanuts?" she'd demanded, shoving him out the door before her parents saw the defaced pastry.

"I just don't," he'd shrugged, looking sheepish and slightly amused at her flash of temper. "I'm sorry."

Marinette turned back to the interview now with her hand on her forehead, admonishing him aloud. "Why, Adrien? Why would you tell them you love something you hate? Why would you do that to yourself?" No doubt, Mascara Girl was going to try to bury him in trail mix or something. Yuck.

"And what about your personal life? Is there anyone you are seeing? Anyone you'd share those peanuts with?" Mystique raised her eyebrow as if anticipating scandal.

The audience went wild and Adrien flushed scarlet. Disgusted, Marinette shoved away her plate and made to turn off the TV. But then Mystique cooed, "Oooohhh," and edged onto the front of her seat. "He's blushing, ladies! So who is the lucky lady? Is it the breakout designer of Noir and Bugaboo, Miss Marinette Dupain-Cheng?"

There was a horrible pause, and Marinette froze in mortified terror.

Thankfully, Adrien was spared from answering. "No! He loves ME," shrieked a familiar voice from the audience, cutting through the obvious tension like lightning through the dark. Marinette already knew it was Mascara Girl.
Adrien looked simultaneously relieved and affronted. "Uhhh," he stammered, edging backward in his chair as if he could melt into the mint-green wallpaper behind it. "Sorry, but no. I don't even know you."

The rejection hit the poor girl hard, and she swayed on the spot. "I won't forget this cruel refusal," she said, sounding hurt and angry. "You have made a mortal enemy of me. You and Marinette will pay!"

There was a collective, dramatized gasp from the audience that Marinette actually shared, but for more than the obvious reason. She abruptly turned off the TV and jumped to her feet. Although she was scared of being targeted by Mascara Girl, she also knew what those words meant – she'd become rather good at recognizing akuma victims even before Hawkmoth got to them. And picturing Mascara Girl akumatized was far scarier than Marinette's personal problems at the moment.

Typically, the thought of fighting akumas in the rain irritated Marinette. It usually ended up being slippery and dangerous, and her hair was always a mess afterward. In fact, there were very few people for whom Marinette would actually be excited to seek out in such a storm as this. Adrien was one of them. Chat was another. If it had been anyone else today, she'd probably have begrudged them a little.

"Tikki," she said, squaring her shoulders in preparation for the battle, "Spots on!"

Three hours later, Ladybug felt like a total failure. The rescue had been a disaster. Chat hadn't even shown up to help. And, to make matters worse, she'd been unable to isolate and purify the akuma without her partner. The villain, called "Fangirl" had gotten away with a swipe of her Cosplay Mascara, which allowed her to disguise herself as anyone. She'd slipped away with the crowd, and Ladybug had been left to work alone to clear up the damage.

Ladybug ended up having to retrieve Adrien, who had been unceremoniously locked in his dressing room by some incompetent yet well-meaning guards. She escorted him back to safety at his house, taking the private roof route to avoid the public eye.

"I don't know where Chat Noir has been for all of this. It isn't like him to be missing in action," she told a sopping wet Adrien as they said goodbye in the massive front foyer of his mansion. "I'm sorry – but you should probably get some extra protection in case Fangirl decides to show up here."

Adrien gave her a slightly indignant look, as if to say I can take care of myself, but he seemed to think better of it and did not protest. Then a vaguely panicked Natalie burst through the front door, completely soaked by the rain.

"Oh good," she gasped. "You're back. I was worried you'd been lost in the crowd. Hans couldn't find you anywhere. Ladybug, thank you for rescuing him."

"Who is Hans?" Adrien asked, bewildered.

"Your bodyguard. He's been looking after you for five years now."

Adrien looked at her with dawning comprehension. He gave a little "Oh."

"Your father is right after all – you're completely oblivious. No observational skills whatsoever," Natalie sighed, putting a hand to the bridge of her nose.

"It was no trouble to rescue Adrien, ma'am. He just got locked in his dressing room, which is why no one could find him," offered Ladybug, trying to divert the conversation. But Natalie was already
checking her phone, looking frazzled.

"You know, I'd always just called Hans 'Gorilla.' He even responded to it and everything," Adrien muttered, solely for Ladybug's benefit. She fought to divert her snort of laughter into something more like a professional cough.

"Well, I'd better go," she said, turning away and waving goodbye to the two of them. "Glad you're safe, Adrien."

"Thanks for your help!" he smiled. Natalie jerked her head up again and waved distractedly.

"Anytime," said Ladybug. And then she was gone.

After Ladybug left, Adrien put a hand to his temple, thinking hard. "If I lost Gorilla in the chaos back there, that's not good," he told Natalie. "Fangirl is probably going to show up at the fashion show tomorrow when we reveal all the Noir and Bugaboo clothes. And if that's true, you're right, I do need extra protection. I can't exactly blend in with the other models - she'll come straight for me."

Natalie stared at him for a moment, evidently thinking hard about what Adrien had said. But then she broke into a grin. "Perhaps you can get some help. You're friends with Chat Noir, right?"

Adrien nodded mutely.

"Well, what if you convinced Chat Noir to model in the fashion show tomorrow and pretend to be you? You both have similar features, and if Chat wears his costume under your clothes, everyone will think it is part of the new clothing line. No one would guess he's the real Chat, and everyone will think he's you. Then we'll have bait for Fangirl, and the superheroes can take her down without you being in put in danger."

Adrien thought for a moment, tapping his fingers against his lips. "So you're saying we use Chat as bait?"

Natalie nodded.

"I'll have to ask him, but for now I'm in, at least. Oh, and Chat will probably want to bring Ladybug along."

"That would actually work well. She could disguise herself as Marinette and model too, just in case Fangirl goes for her instead. That might actually be for the best – Ladybug and our little designer do look very much alike."

Adrien blinked, never having noticed this before. "Oh," he said, echoing his previous realization that his bodyguard had a name. Perhaps he really was as oblivious as his father thought. This unsettled him.

"Right. Well, I'll have Chat talk to her, then. I think this could work." He stripped off his soaked jacket and hanging it on the coat rack before beginning to climb the stairs to his room.

"Where is your umbrella?" Natalie called after him, having finally noticed he was dripping all over the floor. "The black one?"

"Oh, I gave it to Marinette. That's how I got her to be my friend when we first met."

"What kind of friend?" Natalie asked, and Adrien stopped halfway up the stairs. She always seemed
to know the exact question to make him pause. After he'd narrowly avoided the questions about his love life during his disastrous interview, Adrien didn't know what to say.

After some thought, he smiled and started walking again. "The best kind," he said without turning around. He didn't want Natalie to see him blush again.

The night of the annual Agreste Autumn Fashion Premiere was clear and breezy. Paris was nestled under a chalkboard sky studded with tiny, silent stars. In other words, the atmosphere outside was the perfect juxtaposition of peace against the chaos Ladybug was currently experiencing backstage.

She was wearing her "Marinette" costume: her normal clothes over her Ladybug suit. It was hard not to feel ridiculous wearing a normal shirt over polka-dot spandex as she stood in line, waiting to go in for makeup. It was one thing to design daring outfits; it was quite another to wear them confidently. But Marinette had already agreed months ago that she'd model and couldn't back out now – it was part of her internship contract, and she had to fulfill it. Besides, she was not dressed out of place. Everyone was wearing a hodgepodge of Chat Noir and Ladybug costuming with normal street clothes. It was all part of the mood of the show.

Ladybug sighed as the queue shifted forward slowly. She eventually found herself staring at the food on the nearby snack cart again. She was tantalizingly close to the platter of warm, flaky mini croissants, but she was forbidden to eat anything. One of the attendants kept slapping her hand away every time she tried to reach for one.

"No food until after you go on," she scolded. "It will ruin your clothes if you spill. You have to wait."

Ladybug knew she was right, but she still inwardly groaned. She was so hungry and uncomfortable and nervous. She tried to pass the time observing the models as they dressed in clothes she'd created. It was fascinating to see her ideas come to life, but she couldn't seem to enjoy it the way she normally would. Right now, she was Ladybug pretending to be Marinette. Being two people at once made it hard to feel justly proud of her accomplishments.

She risked another outstretched hand for a bunch of grapes, and received another slap on her knuckles. How did Adrien put up with this all the time? She felt a new kind of sympathy for models – her view of the fashion world had always been in design. She'd had no idea how much work (and caloric sacrifice) went into the show itself until now.

Luckily, Chat Noir was somewhere nearby. She'd finally gotten in touch with him, and he'd said he was going to pose as Adrien for the show. He even asked that she take Marinetee's place tonight. He also apologized for missing the battle with Fangirl. Apparently he'd been unable to get out of some obligation as his alter-ego. We've both been there before, she thought, understanding completely.

And then, as if he'd known she was thinking about him, Chat appeared from behind a cloud of hairspray to Ladybug's left. He approached her in line and nodded, adjusting his Chat Noir/street clothes ensemble. "Hi, Marinette," he said loudly, going with the act. When he was close enough, he addressed her properly. "Haven't seen any sign of Fangirl yet. You look great, by the way. And you smell good - but I don't know if it's your perfume or the hairspray I just got attacked with. But anyway. Dressing like Marinette suits you, my lady."

"Thanks. And same for you – if it wasn't for the eyemask, I'd say you were Adrien."

"These are some outfits," he agreed, looking around at the other models. "Marinette did a great job making them all perfect."
"Tha-Uh…right," she stuttered, catching herself and avoiding saying thank you. It would have been a stupid mistake to reveal her identity that way.

"I wonder how she knew so much about our costumes. It's uncanny. She even knew exactly how fluffy to make the ears." He touched them affectionately.

"Maybe she is just observant," Ladybug said somewhat pointedly, remembering what Natalie had said about Adrien's inability to observe. He and Chat had that in common, it seemed. The Noir and Bugaboo designer only knew that much because she was half of that superhero team, but neither boy would ever know it.

Chat gave her a strange look. "Yeah," he said. His green eyes were scanning her face as if he was trying to read a book in an unfamiliar language.

Ladybug broke his gaze and turned her head to look at a group of passing models wearing matching Bugaboo yoyo purses at their hips. They were lining up to go onstage, the camera flashes from beyond the curtain creating a strobe effect as they walked along. But one of the purse straps was loose – it needed another stitch or it was going to fall off.

"Wait," Ladybug yelped, forgetting all about pretenses and identities. Right now, she needed to be Marinette, pure and simple. She ran up to the models, brandishing the needle and thread she kept inside her front pocket just in case. With a few expert stitches in record time, the purse was repaired and she sent them off to the runway, feeling relieved. When she returned to where Chat was holding her spot in line, he gave her a disbelieving look.

"I didn't realize you knew so much about fashion or sewing. Did Marinette give you a crash course?"

Her frightened look seemed to convince him of something. "You know, you're a lot more like Marinette than I thought, Ladybug," he said softly.

"Maybe I've always been, and you're just now noticing," she said, feeling harassed and angry at herself for almost exposing herself. But, then again, if she hadn't saved that purse, the runway would have seen a failure of an outfit. She, as Marinette, cared too much about the work she'd put into the designs and clothes to let that happen. What else could she have done?

"You're right," Chat sighed as they walked forward a little more. As they moved, he snuck a croissant off the snack table with such grace and ease that it was obvious he'd had practice. "It's just now starting to catch my eye." He split the croissant in half and offered her some. She took it gratefully. She kept sending furtive glances over her shoulder, but by some miracle, the admonitory snack attendant hadn't yet noticed they were eating.

"How did you do that?" she asked, staring at her half of the fluffy bread.

Chat blinked, reminding her so much of Adrien it was startling. She'd seen her friend make that same mildly surprised face often, but when Chat was dressed like him, it was almost creepy how similar the expression became. "Do what?"

"Steal food without her seeing. I've been trying for over half an hour!"

"Oh, it's all about stealth. You don't make eye contact, and you never stop walking – you just skim by and take it smoothly, then turn so your body hides it," he said, grinning wickedly.

"It sounds like you've done this before," she frowned. "Did Adrien teach you that? He'd know – he spends a lot of time doing this modeling stuff."
"Oh. Yeah. Um, sure," Chat said, but it wasn't convincing.

"You know, you're a lot more like him than I thought," Ladybug countered, adjusting her 'Marinette' outfit.

"Maybe you're not the only one who's been oblivious," was his quiet reply. They stared at each other for a moment, and in a flash, the lights and color and pressure of backstage was gone – it was just the two of them, seeing something they'd been neglecting for a long time.

"So. You're actually...Adrien..." she said in a delicate whisper, as if uttering it any louder would end the world.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Marinette," he replied, his lips barely moving but his eyes glimmering merrily.

"I am Ladybug, not Marinette. I don't know what would ever lead you to that ludicrous conclusion," she scoffed airily, taking a bite of the croissant.

"Glad we're on the same page," he chuckled, looking around the room. He seemed to relax even more now that he knew he was in the company of an old friend. The best kind of friend.

"Don't look now," Ladybug muttered, touching his shoulder, "but I do believe we have a Fangirl in our midst at two o'clock."

"Fantastic. Let's make her run away from this runway," Chat said, narrowing his eyes playfully. "Ready, Bugaboo?"

"Anytime, Peanut," she replied cheekily, gripping her yoyo.

"Aw, now that's just mean..."
Rules

Chapter Summary

Rules: 30 things kwamis shouldn't do, as learned from experience.

Chapter Notes

Another list fic for the 30th chapter! Enjoy!

1. Go to the Dark Side.

"I don't care if they have cookies, Tikki..."

2. Take vacations.

"I didn't even know kwamis could get sunburned," Adrien frowned.

"Neither did I," moaned Plagg, who'd beached himself on a washcloth beside Adrien as they listened to the pounding waves. "Remind me to never ever take a trip to the beach again."

"You know, Hawaii actually agrees with most people. You're a sad, sorry exception." Adrien was still trying hard not to laugh.

"Don't let anyone see me like this," begged Plagg. "If anyone sees me with red fur, they'll think I'm a fox kwami. I don't know if I could live with the disgrace."

3. Use their abilities for personal gain.

"You're going to love your Christmas present, Tikki," gushed Marinette. She placed the beautifully wrapped box underneath the tree in the far back where no one could see it.

Tikki remained uncharacteristically silent.

"Tikki?"

"Ohhhhh, I'm sorry, Marinette," she finally cried. "I already know. I can go through solid objects and so I went inside the box and peeked."

"So you already know about the tiny Ladybug spotted earmuffs I made you?" Marinette's expression was a combination of disappointed and amused.

"I know," nodded Tikki. "I'm sorry. I just got so curious."

"I understand. Do you want to put them on right now?"

Tikki nodded, beaming.
Meanwhile, Plagg knew about his gift the day Adrien wrapped it. He was far less subtle than Tikki, however. There was no beating around the bush.

"Thanks for the huge wheel of Camembert," he said casually.

"I haven't gotten you any such thing-"

"There's no need to pretend, Adrien. I am very good at deducing what people give me for Christmas."

"You peeked, didn't you?" he frowned, catching on.

"Of course. It's too tempting to wait an entire four days."

"But you're not supposed to-"

"There are a lot of things people are supposed to do, Adrien. Like stay home and be good and do their homework instead of sneaking out every night in a cat suit to fight criminals. Some rules were meant to be broken."

There was a speechless pause, and then Adrien admitted defeat. "Touché, my friend. Touché."


"Excuse me," called one Hawaiian-shirt-clad tourist from behind Adrien. "Which way to the Louvre?"

Adrien was too busy scanning the area for akumas, so he didn't hear the man, but Plagg did.

"It's four blocks north of here. Look for the giant red-brick building. Can't miss it," he said, in a surprisingly passable imitation of Adrien's voice.

The man gave a friendly salute and disappeared. An hour later, he found himself staring up at a large banner for Pollux's Fine Cheese Shop, lined with luxurious red brick walls. "Must be the wrong north," he muttered to himself.

5. Talk to strangers.

There were only a few times Tikki lost her collected, calm exterior. All of them involved Chloe, but only one resulted in Tikki doing something she'd regret.

The week after school started back up after the winter holidays, the kwami finally cracked. Chloe had just copied Marinette's answers during a test, and had then accused Marinette of cheating. Although this kind of situation had happened many times before, and Marinette had always been able to avoid unjust punishment, Tikki was sick of Chloe's antics. This was the last straw.

Just as Chloe reported the cheating to the teacher, a high-pitched, muffled voice shouted loud enough for the whole room to hear.

"She didn't cheat, you did, you little punk!"

The entire class looked up at the disturbance, looking confused.

Marinette merely blushed and mumbled weakly, "It's just my new phone ringtone...just ignore it...haha..."
As retribution for her antics, Tikki got lumpy oatmeal raisin cookies that night instead of chocolate chip. Marinette still pretended to be mad, but when she thought Tikki wasn't looking, she was grinning and remembering the look on Chloe's face.

Meanwhile, Adrien sat at home, still puzzled at where the mysterious voice had come from. If he hadn't known better, he'd have said it sounded like a kwami. But that was ridiculous. Wasn't it?

He didn't see Plagg floating in the corner, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. The seed had been planted. It was only a matter of time before Marinette's identity would be revealed if Tikki kept losing her temper. Plagg was in it just for the look on Adrien's face when he figured it out.


Adrien came downstairs one morning to find Plagg already inside the refrigerator, sitting beside an empty glass platter. At the sight of his kwami, Adrien blinked in surprise, shut the refrigerator in shock, and then opened it once more. Plagg was still sitting there.

Adrien put a hand to his forehead. "Oh no," he sighed. "I can't believe you ate my art project."

"You mean that wasn't Camembert?" Plagg looked horrified.

"Nope. It was clay - it's for our project in Fine Art. I was refrigerating it until today so I could take it to class."

"How disgusting. I even spread it on some of your fresh bread and everything," moaned Plagg.

"Didn't you notice it tasted different?"

"No, I was just so hungry."

"Should I worry? Do you need to get checked out? Eating clay can't be good for you."

"I'll be fine," Plagg said, a nauseated expression on his face. "I have an iron stomach. But I'm never raiding the fridge at midnight ever again."

"You'd better not. I'd hate to see what would happen if you ate my father's tofu."

7. Hijack their partner's phone to call old friends.

"Tikki," Marinette frowned, looking down at her phone one afternoon. "Why do I have all these voicemails from some American guy? I don't know anyone called Bruce Wayne and I don't speak English, so I don't know what he's saying."

"Oh, I wasn't calling Bruce. I was trying to reach his kwami, Ekkho. He's a bat."

"Eek."

"Was that a pun?" Tikki teased.

"No," said Marinette hastily. "Just don't call him again, and make sure this Bruce guy knows not to call me either. The last thing I need is my parents getting my phone bill and forcing me to explain why I've been talking on long-distance with some random Bat Dude and his magical kwami."

"It's Batman," corrected Tikki with a giggle. "Get it right."

8. Watch bad TV until 3 am.
"I've been around for a very long time. I thought I understood the world. But what I'd really like to know," said Plagg the morning after staying up late to watch reruns on TV, "is why soap operas like *Thornrose* even exist. I mean, after I came down from my horrified spiral after Chad and Fyona broke up, I wanted to jump out a window. I wanted to go into the television and attack the evil Vince for sabotaging the lovebirds' relationship just as Chad was about to get on that ship to go to Mars with the aliens. And - also - why can't Gracia and Felipe just tell each other how they feel? We all know they've been in love since the alligator attack in episode 42, but they can't seem to see it. They're just so oblivious."

He paused after seeing Adrien, who was standing in his closet, paused halfway through buttoning his shirt with a nonplussed expression on his face.

"Adrien," Plagg continued, "Please. I need to know. Why did this show evoke such emotions in me? I'm a cat. A cynical cat kwami with no personal interest in human relationships. And yet. I care."

Adrien blinked and seemed to recover from his shock. He finished dressing and walked back to sit on his bed. "Well, it means you have empathy after all. And, come to think of it, it's a good thing you haven't seen some of the shows *I* watch. There's one with a couple who are both superheroes but their alter-egos are actually in love with each other. And neither of them has any idea that the other has the same double life as them. It's excruciating and fantastic." He lay back on his bed, staring happily up at the poster of Ladybug pasted to his wall.

"Ugh, I never want to see that show," announced Plagg.

"I thought not."

Adrien sneezed at the exact same time that Plagg muttered, "Yeah. I get enough of that sort of drama with you and Ladybug."

"What was that? I didn't hear you."

"Oh. Nothing. Nothing at all."

Plagg stayed silent, but perhaps all those hours watching Thornrose hadn't been wasted after all. He silently hatched a plan to get Adrien and Marinette see sense. He was going to take playing matchmaker to another level.


"We should make a master plan," said Tikki. She and Plagg were hiding under the desks while Adrien and Marinette took dutiful notes in history class.

"Here's my idea. We need to get access to Adrien's computer first," began Plagg, his green eyes glowing with mischief. "But then, we can start communicating with Marinette via email, posing as Adrien until she gets comfortable enough to ask him out."

"It's genius," Tikki admitted. "But what if they figure out what we did?"

"Then they'll be so intoxicated with love that they won't even be mad."

"You've been watching that soap opera again, haven't you?"

"…Maybe."

10. Be allowed near a computer unsupervised.
Tikki stared at the giant GOOGLE letters on the webpage, fascinated. "It tells me everything I want to know about anything, so it has to be magical. But I still don't understand. Where is its Miraculous?"

Meanwhile, Adrien came back from fencing practice to discover that every time he typed "Chat Noir" on his laptop, it autocorrected to "Chat Noir is Adrien Agreste." He then discovered that typing any complete sentence whatsoever resulted in a change to "Plagg Rules!"

He only stopped banging his head against his desk when his father yelled at him from the bottom of the stairs: "Adrien, don't kill too many of those brain cells. You have a math test coming up."

"Oh, it's not the brain cells I'm going to kill," Adrien muttered mutinously under his breath.

11. Sign up for an email.

Plagg's new email account was doing wonders for Adrien's dating life. Whenever Plagg emailed Marinette's mariladybug address with his own (adrikitten), he impersonated Adrien. He confessed that "he" was starting to fall for Marinette, and began asking to meet up for coffee. He didn't feel too bad about doing this, as everything he put in the emails was something Adrien had said about her anyway. Plagg liked to think he was just nudging things along. And, it actually worked. After a week, Marinette finally mustered up the courage to ask Adrien out in person, after Plagg (as Adrien) had prompted her. The lovebirds were studying tomorrow with Nino and Alya, and their first individual date was in two days. Adrien couldn't stop talking about it.

"I don't know what came over her. She seemed so much more comfortable around me; like she and I had been talking long before now. She even knew how I felt about her eyes, Plagg."

"They're heavenly," said Plagg as he rolled his eyes. "Believe me, I know."

12. Use said email to order food from the internet.

"All right. Who ordered six Monster Chocolate Cookies from our rival bakery?" Marinette demanded as she walked back into her room. Nino, Alya, and Adrien were spread out on her floor among various textbooks and tablets and crumpled pieces of paper. All three of them stared at the huge brown bag clutched in her arms, all three of them perplexed. "It wasn't us," Nino said defensively.

"Well then who could it have been? It was ordered online with some bogus email. This so isn't funny. Plus, I had to pay the guy for the delivery and everything. My parents are going to have a cow. They've been competing with the Monster Bakery for ages!"

She still sounded angry, but she passed out the cookies anyway. There was no point in boycotting delicious treats if the damage was already done. She left the extras in the bag and placed it on the floor by the bed. She knew Tikki would find her way to them.

From their hiding places under Marinette's bed, Tikki shoved Plagg. "I told you to order cookies from Marinette's bakery, you putz."

"But Monster Bakery has the bigger chocolate chips. I know you like those."

"Yes, but the point was to give the Dupain-Chengs some business, not their rivals. How could you be so tactless?"

"It's one of my best qualities," he smirked.
"And why order six cookies?" Marinette continued, sounding confused. "There are only four of us."

Adrien glanced at the dark space under Marinette's bed, a stern and guilty expression on his face. Marinette did the same, wondering if her kwami was behind the cookie order. But then their eyes met for a moment too long. Marinette was first to look away.

That night, both their kwamis got lectures about potentially exposing their identities.

Tikki conceded modestly, and took all the blame. She left Plagg out of the story entirely, careful to conceal what she knew about Adrien and Chat Noir. She knew the two of them would find out everything eventually.

Plagg was unabashed. He merely responded with: "Well, that's the way the cookie crumbles." And Adrien almost smiled.


When Marinette got home from her first date with Adrien, she walked back to her room, closed the door, and leaned with her back against the wood. She slid down to the ground with a content sigh, and closed her eyes. She was trying to commit it all to memory.

The white tablecloth at the restaurant.

The rain-glossed glimmer of the Paris streetlamps outside the window.

The red rose he'd presented her with.

The tilted smile he made when she said something funny.

The golden shimmer of the lights she saw every time she tilted her head back to laugh.

The way he made her speechless, and yet he was patient while she stuttered through sentences.

How excited he got talking about videogames, or art, or fashion, or croissants.

How excited he got when she told him he could have food at their bakery anytime, free of charge.

How he'd held her hand when they walked along the evening streets.

How he'd kissed her good night – it was tasteful, just enough to make them wish for more.

"Tikki, I'm in so much trouble," she said, pointing her toes in excitement. "I think I love him and it's only been one date."

"Doesn't look like trouble to me," her kwami reasoned.

"But...what should I do? I don't want to scare him off. What if he finds out how weird I am and runs screaming? Or what if he finds out I'm Ladybug? What if he doesn't treat me the same?"

"Marinette, relax. Adrien doesn't seem like the kind of guy who scares easily. He's probably worrying about the exact same things as you – what if you find out how much of a nerd he is and decide he's not your type anymore?"

"But I wouldn't think that!"
"And it goes both ways! He's still going to think you're great," said Tikki.

"Oh…I never thought about it that way." She paused. "But I still don't know where to go from here. Are we friends, like always? Are we more than that? How much more than that? Should I invite him to go ice skating? Should I rehearse what I say to him so I don't stutter? Should we make things official?"

"You should take it at whatever pace feels right. Maybe invite him over more. Show him your videogame collection. You could play that new one you both liked – ValorVale –and you could totally crush him on Level 3. He'll never see it coming."

Marinette took Tikki's advice and did just that. Adrien didn't see it coming at all – he lost by over a thousand points. And though Marinette probably would have won no matter what, her victory might also have been in part due to Plagg, who disconnected Adrien's controller halfway through the race. The only one convinced it wasn't a technical malfunction later was Tikki, but she didn't complain.

14. Be allowed out on Halloween.

"Sweet, you must be the cake girl," said the guy when he answered the door. Marinette held up the cake – a chocolate masterpiece with tiny skeletons in fondant. She was finishing up the last delivery of the day before heading to Adrien's. To her boyfriend's house. She still couldn't believe it was true. Their relationship wasn't just a dream. It was vivid and real and incredible. Dating him brought out a whole new side of her; she was less nervous around him now. She hardly stuttered. She was more confident in classes, and she'd even let her more mischievous side come out on a few occasions.

Like now, for instance.

"Nice costume, by the way," the guy at the door said, handing her a few bills and some change. Marinette looked down at her normal street clothes with a well-crafted confused expression.

"I'm not wearing a costume," she said, knowing full well that the guy was really talking about Tikki, who was floating conspicuously beside her at eye level.

"Nice try. But that's totally awesome, the way you got that thing to fly. Is it, like, attached with fishing line so it floats?"

"Is what?"

"The floating black and red flying thing next to you."

"Where?"

The guy gave her a slightly startled, perplexed look. He slowly pointed a thick finger at the kwami, who remained silent and wide-eyed beside Marinette.

She glanced around innocently. "I don't see anything. I have no idea what you're talking about."

The guy looked back at Tikki. "But I can see it floating right there..."

"Everyone sees apparitions on Halloween; didn't you know that? It's probably just a ghost."

"Oh. Right." He stood there, still staring.

Marinette regarded him sweetly, then peered over his shoulder into the apartment. "So...where should I set the cake?"
15. Be allowed out during any holiday, for that matter.

A few months into his relationship with Marinette, Adrien found himself wandering down his empty street on the morning of New Year's Eve with Plagg flying beside him. The kwami was in desperate need of fresh air, and the holiday mood made Adrien feel less concerned about all the secrecy. No one was there at the moment to see Plagg anyway, so he let it slide.

Adrien was just returning home from Marinette's. He'd delivered a new video game to her as a present, and on his way out the door, he'd been given all sorts of extra pastries at her parents' insistence. They still held that he was going to starve to death at this rate, and that he needed more food for breakfast every day.

"We can't let Marinette's amazing boyfriend wither away. He's basically part of the family. All that's left is to make it official," they'd insisted, while Marinette hid her flushed face in her hands. She did this every time her parents brought up marriage in front of him. While he was certainly still too young to legitimately consider it, marrying Marinette someday sounded pretty awesome. He didn't think he'd mind it one bit. And that was without even considering the fact that he'd be surrounded by delicious baked goods forever if he did marry her. He'd never get sick of that.

But Adrien knew that even he couldn't eat sixteen chocolate croissants right now, so he decided to distribute them among the apartment tenants across the street from his house. They knew him well - he'd visited all six of them in turn over the past few years when things at his house became interminably boring or stifling. They all used to babysit him when he was a kid.

When Mr. Alin answered the door, Adrien held out the bag of croissants and offered him some. But the man stared in a mixture of horror and disbelief.

"It's happening again," he muttered, pulling at his hair. "I'm seeing more apparitions. No! No!"

"What?"

"There!" the man cried, pointing at Plagg, who was perched on Adrien's shoulder. He'd entirely forgotten that the kwami was not safely stowed in his jacket pocket this time. He felt guilt build in his stomach as Mr. Alin began to panic.

"The ghost is back. I'm being haunted! Get away, get away!"

And then the door slammed in Adrien's stunned face.

"You know, Marinette said something about him freaking out at her when she delivered his cake for Halloween. Apparently he saw some kind of tiny red ghost and panicked."

"Poor Mr. Alin," Plagg sighed seriously, "I think he's losing it."

16. Homework.

"Adrien, since you've been working so hard as Chat Noir, I did your homework for you last night so you could sleep," said Plagg one morning.

Though taken aback, Adrien appreciated the offer.

That was his first mistake.

Later that morning, when comparing answers to the calculus homework before class, Marinette gave Adrien's paper a strange look and started to giggle.
"Um, Adrien, I don't know what kind of math class you've been in for the past six weeks, but where we go to school, the integral of x squared is definitely not 'witchcraft' and the plotted chart is supposed to be a parabola, not a circle with the word 'Camembert' written down the middle. What happened?"

Adrien blushed furiously. "No idea," he said, while satisfying images of chucking Plagg out a window came to mind. "Someone must have messed with my answers as a prank."

"I thought I told Chloe to stop doing that," Marinette muttered, glaring over at the bully.

"Wait, what? This has happened before?"

"No, forget I said anything," she said distractedly. She then pushed her homework onto his desk and pointed at her work. "See, look at mine instead. This is supposed to be a parabola."

He looked at what the answers were supposed to be and furiously redid his work. It was only after he finished that he noticed Marinette's name at the top of her paper had a tiny ladybug drawn in the corner, like a secret kind of signature. Anyone else would have looked right past it without a second glance. In fact, even Adrien wouldn't have thought anything of it, except that it had five spots. Five, in exactly Ladybug's pattern. The bottom two spots were noticeably farther apart than the top two. Not even the Ladyblog ever got that part right, so how could Marinette have?

"Do you put this on top of all your papers?" he asked, pointing at it.

She froze mid-gasp, her eyes fixed at a point on his forehead. "Oh…Y-Yeah. I just r-really lady likebugs. I'm bug. Like. Lady me really. I mean. I. Really like. Ladybugs," she finished, looking frustrated with herself. "Why?"

It wasn't like her to stutter this much. Adrien thought she'd gotten so much better now that she wasn't as nervous around him anymore. So why was she freaking out now? "I was just…curious."

"We should get to class," Marinette said quickly, taking back her homework quickly and walking off without waiting for him like she usually did.

"O…kay," he said, and followed.

On the way back to school after lunch that afternoon, Plagg and Adrien had an important chat.

"Plagg, when was the last time you did mathematics?"

"That's easy. 1290. Although they had some strange methods back then."

"Okay. I am grateful that you did my homework. But you probably shouldn't. Ever, ever again."

"Fine," the kwami conceded. "Then you probably should take another look at your literature essay. I added some critiques of my own."

"Please tell me they don't involve waxing poetic about cheese."

"I'd be lying…"

17. Give away someone's secret identity.

The ladybug drawing still weighed on Adrien's mind the rest of the day. He wanted to think it was just coincidence, but…he had this strange feeling he couldn't shake. He hoped his hunch was wrong, because it would make his dating life pretty complicated and would mean he was completely
oblivious in every sense of the word. And yet…something as tiny as a ladybug doodle got him thinking. Was he really so clawless? Clueless. He meant clueless.

He opened his locker to change for fencing practice and, seeing the room was deserted, decided to ask Plagg about it.

"Plagg," he began in a whisper, "do you know who Ladybug is?"

"Uhhh…she's a superheroine. Kind of tall, with a ladybug suit. Black hair. Blue eyes. Right?"

"Not funny. I mean…do you know who she really is? Behind the mask?"

Plagg said nothing, but his eyes drifted to the right in a suggestive sort of way.

"I'm serious. If I guessed and got it right, would you tell me?"

"I'd be breaking a rule…"

"Well, we both know you don't care about rules. Come on. Is it Marinette? It is, isn't it? Tell me, Plagg!"

And Plagg opened his big mouth.

18. Trick their partner.

"Marinette!" cried Tikki one evening. "There's a bird up on the roof that's hurt its wing. It can't fly - you've got to do something!"

Marinette raced up to the roof through her trapdoor, and was still blinking to adjust her eyes to the darkness when she realized there was no bird. There was, however, a Chat. He was sitting on the ledge as if posing for a photograph, his green eyes brighter than the city lights. Feeling cornered, she tried to go back down the stairs to her room, only to find the trapdoor was latched shut. Tikki had locked her up there with Chat…how sly.

"What are you doing here?"

"I have a question. And also a message from your boyfriend."

"In that order?"

"Yes."

"Okay then." Marinette put her hands in her pockets. "What?"

"First," said Chat, moving closer, "the question." He smiled a little, then asked, "Is it okay that I know you're Ladybug?"

She took a step back, adrenaline racing to the rescue in her veins. She probably could have leaped a few rooftops even without transforming at this rate, but she stayed where she was. Chat would only follow her if she ran.

"How did you know that?"

"My kwami is actually terrible at keeping secrets. I guessed who you were, and he told me I was right. I think your kwami has been helping him facilitate all of this, and they've been plotting to get us to figure everything out for a long time."
"It would make a great love story," murmured Tikki through the floorboards below. "Even Plagg thought so."

"Marinette, you never answered my question," said Chat softly. He took another step closer, so their toes were almost touching. "Is it okay that I know? You can hit me, if you want." But he was smiling broadly, as if he couldn't stop. He looked so…happy about knowing her secret.

"I'm not mad," she sighed. "But I don't get it. Why are you still grinning like that? You don't even look scared. You know I can pack a mean punch. You've complained about it before."

"I'm smiling because I know something else you don't know."

She blinked, feeling lost and overwhelmed.

"The message from your boyfriend. From Adrien. That was the other reason I came here."

"What's the message? Why couldn't he just tell me himself?"

Adrien ignored her questions, and simply put his hands out with his palms facing her. "Take my hands," he said.

"But."

"Shhh. It's part of the message. Pretend I'm Adrien. It shouldn't be too hard."

She frowned and put her hands in his. Their fingers laced together; black gloves against pale skin. She waited, but Chat didn't say anything else. As she opened her mouth to speak, there was a flash of light, and she blinked against the blinding rays.

Suddenly, the hands she was holding were warm and clawless. The face she was staring into was familiar. Doubly familiar. She knew too much about that face. It brought back memories of roses and tablecloths and shimmering lights and videogames and croissants. But now there was…more. Now that face was in her memories in all kinds of new places; on rooftops, drinking in the adventurous air of purifying an akuma, or in front of the Eiffel Tower during their first victory.

Marinette wavered only for a minute before throwing herself into his arms. This was the best message imaginable.

He was her past, and now he could be her future too. When she told him this, he squeezed her tighter and said, "Likewise."

**19. Swap partners.**

Later that night, Adrien and Marinette were all talked out. They'd come to terms with everything, and after some perfunctory kwami scolding, they'd gotten around to some…interesting topics. Midnight eventually found them sitting opposite each other in Marinette's room, a small table between them, while they swapped kwamis and transformed. Just for fun.

"This is pretty cool. But somehow, Cat Lady and Bug Boy just don't have the same ring to them," said Adrien, who was fidgeting with the polka-dotted yoyo attached at his hip.

"You're right. Tikki said doing this was a bad idea...I agree. I don't really feel as comfortable with Plagg. It's like wearing someone else's shoes. I want my own kwami back," said Marinette as she felt the cat ears atop her head.
"I know, but we said we'd give it thirty minutes. Besides, it's pretty cool to see things from a different perspective. And - does this mean I can use Lucky Charm?" he asked, looking excited.

"I guess. But I don't think this is a fair trade. I don't want to destroy anything I touch," she said, looking at her claws.

"Give it a try." Adrien put a box of tissues on the table in front of her.

She stared at them for a moment, but then a crafty expression stole over her face. She raised a hand in eager anticipation, ready to swipe. Adrien realized immediately what she was doing.

"No. No. No. Don't do it."

Marinette grinned happily, and knocked the tissue box off the table anyway.

"I know you think you're cute," Adrien said, placing the tissue box upright on the table again, "but this is going to get annoying really fast."

"But now I understand," she said, sending the box flying off the table again. "You don't really have control over this, do you? It's a cat thing."

"I have more self-restraint than you, apparently. And no, don't look at me like that. I'm not picking that box up anymore. You're just going to knock it over again."

**20. Cook.**

"This is delicious, Tikki," Marinette gushed. She was trying desperately to chew through one of the pancakes her kwami had made for breakfast. Tikki had wanted to celebrate the fact that the Chat was finally out of the bag. Now that their identities were no longer a secret, life was going to get so much easier. And the kwami was over the moon – so much so that she'd pulled out an old recipe from a cookbook and made pancakes as a special treat. They were more like rubber erasers with syrup, but Marinette didn't have the heart to say so. Tikki was in too good of a mood to spoil this, so she just kept quiet and prodded at something black, charred, and smoking slightly on her plate - she assumed it was bacon.

She hoped it was bacon.

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**THREE YEARS LATER**

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**21. Talk about previous partners.**

One morning during her first week of university, Marinette and Tikki got to the subject of previous partners.

"Were you ever paired with anyone famous? Plagg said last night that he was with Humphrey Bogart for a long time."

"Ha. He wishes," scoffed Tikki. "Plagg's a liar."

"Why would he lie?"

"He's jealous. The line of Ladybugs has seen many illustrious women, including Cleopatra. Plagg wanted to be her partner, but she got me instead."
"Wow. Really?"

"He's never quite gotten over the disappointment," Tikki shook her head sadly. "That time, he got stuck with a mummy."

"An actual mummy? Like, a dead one?"

"Don't ask. You don't want to know. When choosing wielders for Miraculouses, the Jade Turtle can sometimes make mistakes...this was one of them."

22. Visit a Butterfly Pavilion with Adrien's dad.

For obvious reasons.

23. Help their partner with a marriage proposal speech.

Marinette knew immediately that Plagg had helped Adrien prepare his proposal speech in front of the Eiffel Tower:

"Eiffel for you right here, all those years ago…"

She said yes, of course, but not without a few facepalms first.

24. Pick out rings.

"Adrien, why can't you use this one?" suggested Plagg, pointing to the Miraculous ring on his finger. "It doesn't get any better than that. Sleek, stylish, and I'm part of the package. Marinette'll love it."

"I think she'd prefer something with diamonds."

"She'd pick a shiny rock over all of this?" Plagg gestured to himself, looking offended. "That's just absurd."

25. Makeup

Marinette sat in a fancy bathrobe, staring at her reflection in the mirror. She was beginning to regret letting Tikki help with her wedding makeup. One glace at the lacy white dress hung in the corner, ready for its debut in two hours, made Marinette very sure that this much eyeliner would clash with her ensemble.

"Tikki, where did you learn to do makeup like this?"

"When I was partnered with Cleopatra. My makeup was all the rage – she clamored for my kohl expertise," Tikki said proudly.

"Perhaps we should do something a little more subtle? I hate to say it, but I look like a raccoon."

"A very pretty, about-to-be-wed raccoon. But you're right, I think I used a bit too much," Tikki said, handing her a washcloth.

26. Abandon their partner.

"It's not like I'm getting married," said Plagg. He was floating in the empty dressing room beside Adrien, looking reluctant and adorned with a tiny red boutonniere. "I don't see why I have to be there."
"Plagg, you have yet to abandon me. Please don't start now. We have a similar relationship to the one Marinette and I have. You and I are partners. It's not 'to death do us part' or anything, but we're still a team and we'll never give up on each other, right? So please just come with me. You don't have to say anything; you can just stay in my pocket."

Plagg hung suspended in the air, looking thoughtful as he considered Adrien's offer. "Will there be Camembert?" he finally asked, his eyes narrowed.

"Obviously," said Adrien. "In all our years together, have you learned nothing about my bribery skills?"

"Oh, all right then."

27. Call Master Fu unless it is an emergency.

Master Fu was most put out to be interrupted by a ringing phone in the middle of his meditation hour, but Tikki sounded desperate enough that he softened immediately. Apparently the ideas of akumas arriving at Adrien and Marinette's wedding had scared her rather badly.

"Plagg and I just want them to enjoy their wedding day without villains ruining the moment," she sighed. "Please, will you and Wayzz be there for protection?"

"I'll be there in ten," he said, and grabbed his coat.

In other completely unrelated news, Jade Turtle made an appearance at Marinette and Adrien's wedding, and it definitely was a memorable one. Not only was he the ringbearer in the ceremony, but he was also the security team. He defeated twelve akumas that day, just so the bride and groom could have some peace.

When he got home, Master Fu rubbed his hands together gleefully. "It was worth it, in the end," he said. "I said it then, I'll say it again, Wayzz. Those two are made for each other."

28. Write fanfiction.

And then Draco Malfoy stepped closer, and gripped Hermione's trembling hand in his. "I don't care what happens to me, as long as you get out of this alive," he whispered.

Tikki paused to take a break from typing. Rubbing her tiny hands together, she cackled evilly at the plot twist she was about to spring on her poor unsuspecting readers.

29. Read fanfiction.

"What's Adrinette? A type of hairspray?" Nooroo squinted as he scrolled down the page.

"That's Aquanet, you fool," muttered a disgruntled Gabriel Agreste from the other side of the room.

30. Run away.

"I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Tikki," said Plagg, his green eyes taking in the mystic neon wonders of London by night.

"When you said you wanted to run away while Adrien and Marinette were on their honeymoon, this isn't exactly what I thought you meant," she replied in a huff. "I never should have agreed to come with you. I thought you just wanted to go down the block to the bakery and eat the insides of all the rolls so that when someone cut them open later, they'd just be hollow shells. That's what we did
when the last Chat and Ladybug got married."

"No, we need to see the world. Travel more. This is our chance!"

"And what happens if our partners need us while we're gone?"

"Oh, come on. It's only three more days. What could possibly go wrong?"
My Lady

Chapter Summary

My Lady: Marinette and Adrien get locked in a closet. With any other couple, this wouldn't be a big deal. But with these two, there's a lot more to be confessed than just their feelings for each other. It's a good thing they've got a certain kitsune plotting for their well-being behind the scenes...Idea by emeraldblossom34.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was written prior to Season 2, so all my references to Volpina equate to who we now know to be Rena Rouge. At the time of writing this, I wanted to predict what an interaction would be like if Master Fu independently gave someone the fox miraculous and she became a hero version of "Volpina". In this fic, her identity is a secret even from Ladybug.

Looking back on it now, I think this story still remains pretty in character now that we know the truth about Rena. Hope you enjoy!

Volpina had been working with Chat Noir and Ladybug for three months now, and was starting to get tired of cleaning up after her two teammates. Not that she detested helping them out. They were great partners. It was just that they were so obviously in love with each other, but they refused to admit it. And their stubbornness was making Volpina's life very difficult.

Right now, the trio had an akuma attack a day, typically right in the middle of Volpina's chemistry class. It was an entire hour out of her day where missed important lectures, transformed into a wicked-awesome fox superhero, and defeated "terrifying" villains like Bubblegum Boy and Ice Scream.

Don't misunderstand. Volpina loved protecting Paris and working with her two partners. But, if she was being honest, the villains were hardly scary. They were a waste of time – mere distractions to preoccupy the superhero trio and stop them from getting to Hawkmoth himself.

Volpina felt her time would be much better spent hunting down the root of the problem, rather than fighting the obnoxious and easily quelled symptoms. Hawkmoth was her White Whale. Her Grendel. Her ultimate hunt.

Her plan was to follow the purified butterfly after Ladybug had cleansed its akuma. It would surely lead them right back to Hawkmoth's lair, and they could make a final takedown. But right now, with Chat and Ladybug's refusal to confess their feelings or their identities, following Hawkmoth's servant was impossible. Instead of following the glowing white butterfly, Chat and Ladybug always scampered off to detransform in private to avoid telling their true love who they really were. By the time they could feed their kwamis and make it back to the scene, the butterfly would be long gone.

Volpina was a clever hunter and an excellent planner, but her talents were currently underutilized.
This was partly because she was the one who had to stick around after Chat and Ladybug bolted. They were so afraid of exposing their identities that they always left Volpina, who hardly ever had to use her superpower, to take the newly-freed akuma victim home and talk to the press.

*Yes, I know I speak for both my partners when I say the three of us are thrilled to be Paris' defenders. We'll be here as long as it takes to finally capture Hawkmoth and clip his wings for good.*

*Our hearts go out to the families of Jean and Patrice, the latest akuma victims. We wish them a full emotional recovery, and want to remind everyone that being akumatized is nothing to be ashamed of.*

She had the speeches down pat, but all she really wanted was Hawkmoth pinned under her paw.

Today's akuma defeat was no exception to the pattern. Chat and Ladybug disappeared like grasshoppers jumping into the long grass. Sick of being deserted, Volpina gave the newscasters the slip and decided to hang around for a few more minutes on the nearest roof instead. Every building had been put right by Ladybug's magic. No one had died, there were no injuries. A pure white butterfly cruised away, floating with the air currents until it was little more than a speck of light against the cloudless sky. All was right again, but Volpina considered the day wasted if they were no closer to finding Hawkmoth.

She could chase the butterfly herself. It had occurred to her several times, and she was sorely tempted. But, while Volpina was a huntress and heroine, she was first and foremost a loyal friend. She would never be foolish enough to think she could do this alone. She needed Chat and Ladybug and valued their trust. She wanted them to come with her. She just needed a plan to make it happen. Her partners needed to just tell each other the truth already so they could get on with things and stop worrying about tiptoeing around each other. Once that happened, they could follow the butterfly without having to make a secret-preserving pit stop. Of course, all of this was easier said than done.

And then, without warning, Volpina saw something that changed *everything*. From her vantage point on the roof, she had a clear view of two shadowy alleys across the street, each separated by a tall brick building. In one alley stood Chat Noir. In the other stood Ladybug.

Heart hammering, Volpina dropped down and peered over the side of the building, wondering if she was about to see her partners detransform. With the wind tickling her pointed ears and the scent of secrets on the air, she felt like a live wire. If she knew the faces behind those masks, she could set them up! She could make them confess their identities and they'd think it was their own idea.

She was far too curious to look away. She had to know who they were. Besides, when fate handed you an answer to your problem, you didn't just say no.

Sure enough, there were two flashes of light, and then, standing there with kwamis fluttering at their sides, were Adrien Agreste and Marinette Dupain-Cheng.

Volpina almost fell of the roof in shock. She was angry at herself for not having seen it earlier – it made so much sense! She extended her claws and dug into the wall to make sure she didn't go plummeting to the ground.

"I *so* did not see that coming," she said aloud, startling some of the pigeons who were perched on the fire escape to her right. They rustled nervously, ready to take wing.

Her mind was reeling, reconciling the truth with what she was seeing now. But she knew exactly how Adrien and Marinette felt about each other. If they discovered each other's identities, it wouldn't change a thing for Chat and Ladybug.
"This might be easier than I thought," Volpina exclaimed, and this was the last straw for the pigeons. They burst into flight, cawing fearfully. She regarded the birds with a watchful predator's eye, but now she had her sights set on another prize. She narrowed her green eyes and smiled. "I think I can pull this off, and with no transformation required. Oh, this is going to be good."

The field trip to the planetarium out in the countryside was shaping up to be the most boring class in the history of the world. Even Marinette, who had initially been excited to learn about the stars and planets, had begun wishing they didn't have to be there for another three hours. The teachers had greatly misjudged the amount of time it would take to look at the solitary giant telescope and have a tour of the three-story building. And, to add insult to injury, the trip was during the day, which limited their stargazing opportunities.

"At least if we'd gone at night it might have been somewhat romantic," Alya sighed, slipping her hand into Nino's. Adrien nodded in agreement, his eyes surreptitiously on Marinette. The four of them were at a loss as to how to avoid boredom until the bus came to bring them back to school. Now that the sights had mostly been seen, almost the whole class was pretending to look interested in planet dioramas but really checking their phones for any new Ladybug or Chat Noir updates.

Sadly, the Ladyblog hadn't updated nearly as frequently since August. It seemed Alya had been rather busy lately. "I'm just so far behind on homework. This school year is way more challenging than last. Chemistry is killing me. Otherwise, believe me, I'd be out there 24/7 with a videocamera," she explained.

The elderly planetarium curator, Madame Abeille, was sitting in the corner of the room, staring at the students with a sour expression and twisting her pen in her hands. She had nothing more to offer the students as the tour had ended fifteen minutes ago, but she seemed disappointed in the lack of interest the students were showing.

Everyone was advised to walk around the planetarium once more, in case they had missed something. However, the tour had already been fairly extensive; Madame Abeille had even shown them the janitorial closets on each floor, for all the good that would have done them. Nino and Alya were the only ones that had exchanged a conspiratorial glance at this information.

Adrien had just rolled his eyes. "Lovebirds," he'd whispered for Marinette's benefit.

"Let's just walk around, dudes," Nino said. "I don't like the way that lady's looking at me."

"Yeah, let's go," Alya agreed, and the two of them pushed Marinette and Adrien forward ahead of them. They meandered along the third floor for a while before they passed a janitor's closet. It stood open, with a single glowing lightbulb hanging from the grungy ceiling.

"Now!" cried Alya. And without warning, she and Nino pushed their friends into the closet.

Marinette fell forward with a yelp of surprise and slammed into Adrien. They both tumbled to the cement together, unable to get their balance. Marinette heard the door slam shut and lock behind her, sealing her in the tiny room with the pungent, lemony cleaning supplies and... **him**.

It was easily a few seconds before she realized she was lying on Adrien's chest. Her nose was mere millimeters from his, and his green eyes were wide with panic. She forgot how to breathe.

"Uh. Hi," said Adrien in a quiet, amused voice. "Um...would you mind getting off my chest? I can't really breathe."

"Oh! Sorry!" Her voice sounded so much higher than usual. She rolled off of him and crouched on
the sticky cement floor, her face burning. Her foot accidentally nudged a broom and sent it falling to the ground, where it began a comical continuation of knocking down other objects. Adrien narrowly avoided being crushed by a vacuum that tipped over inches from his face. Marinette put her face in her hands.

Adrien got up and started pounding on the door. He wrenched at the bronze knob but it didn't give. "Nino! Alya! Let us out. This isn't funny!"

"No way," Alya's muffled voice said from the other side of the door. "You guys need to have some time alone. Talk about things. You have plenty of time. Besides, this door locks automatically. Nino and I will have to go get the keys from Madame Abeille's office to unlock it. So we'll let you out when we get back, okay?"

Marinette looked up at Adrien through her fingers – he looked angry and appeared to be speechless. Alya, having heard no response, said to Nino, "Okay, come on. Let's go get the keys."

It wasn't until their friends' footsteps had faded away that Marinette finally spoke. "Sorry," she said. "About the broom. And the mop. And the vacuum. And that pail of water. I didn't mean to get your shoes wet."

Adrien gave her a genuine smile and sat with his back against the wall opposite her. "It's fine. Don't worry about it."

They sat in silence for a few more minutes. Marinette was partially dying with the ecstasy of being alone with Adrien, but she was also mortified at the circumstances. What was Alya thinking?

Adrien began picking at his shoelaces. "Why would they lock us in here?" he finally asked, looking up at her. "What's the point? Nino knows how I feel about - um... I mean, Alya already knows we're friends..."

"She…ah…” Marinette knew exactly why. Alya loved to play matchmaker. She wanted Marinette to be with Adrien, and liked to thrust the two of them into these kinds of situations. It was a chance for Marinette a chance to confess her feelings to Adrien. And while she should have felt grateful, right now nerves ate away at every rational thought she had. How could she answer this question without telling Adrien she liked him? It would probably come out as a garbled mess.

"What? What is it?" Adrien looked interested. Marinette felt her face burning again. She felt dizzy – perhaps the smell of lemon cleaner was starting to get to her. It almost made her feel more bold. She spoke quickly and without thinking, before she could scare herself into second guessing anything.

"S-she wants to set us up. She knows I...um...I like you. A lot."

The sentence dropped into the silence like a grenade. Marinette ducked, ready for the blast of rejection.

Instead, Adrien started laughing. "I know," he said. "I know."

"Y-you…you know?" Marinette felt herself short-circuiting. Why was this funny? How could he know? Had she been that obvious?

Okay, yeah…she'd been that obvious.

"Of course!" Adrien exclaimed, looking relieved and exasperated. "Marinette, I've been trying to ask you out for ages. I really like you. I have ever since we met. But every time I worked up the courage to ask you to do something with me, we got interrupted before I could do it. Like, last week. In
chemistry. Right before I was going to see if you wanted to go to the new release of that new LimeWarrior videogame, we had an akuma attack across the street, and I got whisked away to the evacuation site. I looked there, but I couldn't find you."

Marinette made a small noise in the back of her throat.

Adrien continued, not hearing her. "And then, yesterday, when I was going to invite you to lunch, you got that paper back from Madame Bustier and wanted to go to her office hours to talk about your grade. Honestly, I swear, I've been trying for weeks to get something going with us. But the timing just was never right. Besides, even though it probably doesn't seem like it, you make me really nervous."

She raised a stunned eyebrow and met his emerald eyes. "I do not…"

Adrien picked up the fallen vacuum and gestured to the mess of cleaning supplies at his feet. "Uh...yeah...you do. Not all of this was your fault. I get crazy clumsy around you. I'm surprised you've never noticed before."

She snorted in disbelief, unable to form actual words. Her brain was still stuck, like gears jammed on the one part of the conversation she still couldn't reconcile. I really like you too, he'd said.

Adrien was still talking. "I thought that might have been why you were so shy around me. I thought maybe you knew how I felt and you didn't want to make it worse, so you backed off. I know you're really social and outspoken. I notice it. Just never when you're around me. So I just sort of… figured…”

He trailed off. There was screaming coming from somewhere down the hall. At first, Marinette thought it was Alya, returning to let them out of the locked closet. But the sound was too high pitched and nefarious to be coming from their friend. It sounded like…an akuma. A voice became distinguishable, as if magically amplified.

"Students should respect the learning process! Kids these days – disrespectful and easily bored, even when a magnificent telescope is in their midst! I, Comet Curse, will make you all see sense!"

Some of the students were yelling in fear. They could hear people sprinting down the halls and past their locked door.

"Madame Abeille," they both said at the same time.

Marinette knew the implications of this. The planetarium was so far from Paris that there was no guarantee Volpina and Chat Noir could make it in time to save everyone. It was up to Ladybug… who was currently trapped in a closet with her crush with no legitimate means of escape. Even if she was transformed, she doubted she could break down the door on her own. And Adrien…well…he probably wouldn't want to help her if he found out her secret. It would be like a betrayal. The worst kind of lie. Paris' famous superheroine is just…plain old Mari, who knocks over brooms and mops and can't form real sentences.

Adrien also seemed to be wrestling with a huge moral dilemma, because his face was pinched around his nose and his eyes kept darting between Marinette and the door. Every time someone shrieked, he flinched a little. Finally, he seemed to have had enough and jumped to his feet. Marinette did the same.

"Marinette," he cried, reaching for the door and pushing with all his might. "Can you help me break this down? We have to help them!"
But nothing worked against that door. They both gave up, failures, with bruised shoulders and no way out of their predicament. Marinette heard another set of screams start up, followed by what might have been explosions. All right, enough messing around. You just have to do it. Don't look back. Don't think about what he'll do when he sees. Saving these people is your responsibility, no matter what. Transform!

"Tik-" she started to say, but Adrien cut her off.

"All right, enough," he said, seemingly to himself. He looked up at Marinette, eyes pleading. "Okay. Just…don't hate me."

He yelled something, and there was a bright flash – and then Marinette backed up into the wall again, dumbstruck.

"I've got to go save these people," said Chat Noir, almost apologetically. "Please, please don't hate me, Princess. I can explain, but it has to be later!"

Marinette tried to stammer something out, but it caught in her throat and she swallowed instead. She opened her bag and Tikki flew out, but this went unnoticed by Chat. By Adrien, she corrected herself.

He was no longer facing her; he instead yelled "Cataclysm!" and placed a hand to the door, which exploded into tiny fragments of wood. The splintering sound shot Marinette's brain back up to normal speed, and she muttered, "Tikki, spots on!"

Chat made to run out through the opening, but a hand caught his wrist and pulled him back. "You're not going anywhere without me," grinned Ladybug.

Chat faltered for only a moment when he realized who she was, and he nearly tripped over the doorframe. But then he seemed to regain his confidence, and stared back at her in utter amazement. "Aw, come on, My Lady. I thought you were already perfect…and then you do something like this. It's unfair for you not to share any awesomeness with the rest of us mere mortals, Mari."

Ladybug blushed, but this was no time for swooning and she knew it. "We can talk about everything later. Let's find Volpina first, and then get rid of this akuma."

Volpina was already on the scene when they reached the main atrium. Comet Curse floated toward the ceiling and was wearing a fancy black and white dress that matched the perfect constellation mural on the domed ceiling.

"More victims for me to ensnare? Lovely!" she cackled.

"Your villainous days are done," cried Ladybug. She began to twirl her yoyo in a dangerously calm fashion.

"Let's make this quick," Chat said to Volpina. "I already had to use Cataclysm and I don't have much time left until I have to go MIA for a little while."

Their fox partner raised her eyebrows but didn't ask. Instead she said, "You look like you've just had the surprise of your life."

"We both have," said Ladybug, her eyes still on Comet Curse. "But we'll talk about it after we blast this villain out of the sky."
Chat took his cue. He took out his staff and launched himself onto the nearest ledge for a better angle. Ladybug followed with a zip from her yoyo, and crouched effortlessly on the opposite ledge. Volpina leapt expertly at their foe in a headlong attack, leaving her two partners to come in from the side.

Comet Curse was no match for them. Between a strong rap on her shoulder from Chat's baton, a smooth kick to her stomach from Volpina's foot, and a sudden inability to move her arms courtesy of Ladybug's yoyo string, Madame Abeille was incapacitated almost immediately. The group landed in a heap on the white tile floor. Ladybug deftly swiped the villain's pen and crushed it with her foot. The tainted butterfly rose out of it like smoke from fire and she purified it instantly.

Volpina eyed the white butterfly hungrily as Ladybug finished restoring everything to normal, but turned her attention back to her partners, remembering her loyalties.

"Nicely done," she said to the pair. "That was only two minutes. A new record."

"It's always easier when we're a team," said Chat as he stowed his baton again.

"I'm actually surprised you made it here so fast," Ladybug said to Volpina. "This is pretty far away from Paris, and we hadn't even called you yet."

"I was already in the area," she said, touching her fox necklace Miraculous. It shimmered in the afternoon light, a golden kind of beauty that mirrored Volpina's own. "Don't ask too many questions now. You wouldn't want to find out my identity." Her tone was almost playful now.

"Well…actually," Chat said, "Ladybug and I discovered each others' identities this afternoon."

Volpina didn't look surprised. She twitched her tail and smiled. "It's about time. Is that what you were both doing in the closet?" Her green eyes flashed mischievously, as if she knew exactly what they'd talked about in there.

"It was," admitted Ladybug.

"Yeah. But I swear. We didn't planet." The girls both grimaced at the pun. But in that moment, something occurred to Ladybug. She felt she knew Volpina rather well. They'd been working together for months now. The girl was clever, smart, and furtive. She always had a plan for everything, and she never failed when she put her mind to something. Looking at her was like seeing a long-lost friend after many years; familiar, but there were definite mysteries. Ladybug could never really be sure what Volpina knew, who she was, or what she was planning.

"You didn't have something to do with it, did you?" Chat asked, voicing her very suspicions aloud.

Volpina laughed. "Even if I did, that's my secret to keep. And, in case you're curious, I'm a vault," she said, and turned to leave. "I've gotta go. Some friends are waiting for me. Until next time, guys."

And then she was gone in a shimmer of sunlight as the front glass doors closed behind her.

"I don't think we'll ever figure out who Volpina really is," said Adrien later when they boarded the bus to go back to school. They still smelled like dusty lemons, and they complained to Alya and Nino about this every few minutes. Their friends had found Marinette and Adrien waiting for them, fuming (or at least pretending to), inside the closet after the attack was over. "She's too clever. Too guarded. She has too many tricks up her sleeve to let her identity slip. She'd have to do it
intentionally…"

Marinette sat beside Adrien in the window seat, close enough that their knees touched. He was holding her hand gently, and she noticed for the first time his Miraculous ring stood out on his finger. It was cold against her skin, but she didn't mind. It was just something to get used to – like the fact that her crush was Chat Noir.

"You're right," she said. "I doubt we'll ever know. But we've had enough secrets for one day, right?"

He nodded. "I don't regret anything though."

"Neither do I."

Alya and Nino, who were sitting right in front of them, chose this moment to pop their heads up over the seats. "What are you two lovebirds talking about?" Alya asked.

"Nothing that concerns you," Marinette said playfully. "But we can elevate the PDA if you'd prefer that."

Adrien's eyes widened – he knew Marinette was kidding, but it still surprised him. Nino let out a bark of laughter, and Alya leaned forward with a giggle, her gold necklace swinging down over the seat. Marinette thought she caught a glimpse of something brown and orange on the charm, but Alya tucked it away under her shirt collar before she could be sure.

"Say what you will. Tricking you two into that closet was a great idea," Alya said, then the two of them turned around to face the front.

Adrien put his head on Marinette's shoulder. "I agree, My Lady," he whispered.

"So do I, my Chat," she whispered in his ear. "So do I."

Chat had always called Ladybug "My Lady." She'd never really liked the nickname before - it was too endearing a term for just a partner. But now, as she sat next to Adrien on the bus, the more she thought about it, the more she liked it after all.

After being called his Lady for a long time...she was glad to say that now she really was.
Bee Mine

Chapter Summary

Bee Mine: When Chloe has to take up the mantle as a superhero, she discovers far more than she ever wanted to know about her new partners. QueenBee!Chloe, with a twist. Idea by Kiracles.

Chapter Notes

Again, this chapter was written prior to Season 2, so all my references to Queen Bee are estimations, not intended to be canon compliant, but I think they still capture a redemption we hope to see in Chloe.

Chloe was fuming. She sat across from her unexpected guest with crossed arms, feeling targeted and confused. Even her favorite tea tasted bland in this guy's judgmental company.

He'd just told her something that had to be untrue. Apparently her way of communicating with her fellow students was the number one cause for all akuma attacks in Paris.

As if. She only said things to joke, never anything seriously offensive. Perhaps no one really got Chloe's sense of humor. They all should have known that she had a very sarcastic wit and a critical eye.

It wasn't her fault that everyone took things so seriously. It wasn't her fault Kim had asked her out in the most embarrassing way possible. It wasn't her fault that clumsy Marinette was always on her bad side. It wasn't her fault Nino wore too much orange. It wasn't her fault that Alya's blog had several typos.

But just because she pointed these things out, she was the bad guy?

Of course, Chloe was very vocal about her innocence in the whole situation. She even pointed out to her guest that she herself had been akumatized before. She was a mere victim.

But Master Fu apparently didn't see things that way.

"I'm going to make you a deal, my dear," he said calmly. He poured her a second cup of tea even though her butler was right there and could easily have done it. "You will right the wrongs you have caused..." he paused and then amended, "and may still cause."

Chloe sipped her tea. Who did this random guy think he was? He'd shown up today, out of the blue. The staff shouldn't have even let him in, but he lied and told them he was one of her teachers. Please! As if a man wearing a shirt like that could ever pass for a respectable professor.

He'd tricked Chloe into having tea with him, and she couldn't refuse - her security team had insisted he was harmless and refused to remove him from the premises. They seemed to have taken a liking
to him, which Chloe simply couldn't comprehend. There'd been a twinkle in Master Fu's eye when he'd sat down across from her at the small table in her room. In hindsight, it should have been her first clue that this wasn't going to be any ordinary meeting.

She'd thought this was going to be some sort of "I can tutor you in particle physics" consultation made at Daddy's insistence. But then he'd mentioned Miraculouses and Chat Noir and Ladybug, as if he knew them personally. And then, he'd mentioned...well, that everything was somehow her fault and that she had to fix it. Maybe he was a tiny bit right. But it was still totally rude.

She set her cup down with a clatter and arched a perfectly sculpted eyebrow.

Master Fu took this as a sign to continue. "You will learn respect, teamwork, and kindness in way of community service. Perhaps cleaning up after the people you have caused to be akumatized will be punishment enough to keep you from causing so much hurt in the future. You may, in the end, even learn something valuable."

"So you want me to, like, pick up trash on the side of the road after an attack?" She remained unimpressed. "Absolutely not. I refuse. I just got a new manicure. See? Cute little stars." She waved them in his face, but he seemed to not understand the true value of great shellac.

"Ah, Chloe, when I said service, that wasn't exactly what I had in mind. I was thinking more along the lines of becoming Ladybug and Chat Noir's protégé. To see the direct consequences of your actions and remedy them. Who better to help clear the city of akumas than the very person who drew most of the evil into Paris in the first place?"

Master Fu looked very pleased with himself. Chloe really really wanted to insult every bit him from balding head to scuffed toe, then send him packing. But...working with Ladybug...it was a very tempting perk to the job.

Not wanting to seem too eager, she scoffed, "You actually want me to be some little sidekick and run around in spandex? I don't think so."

"I am offering you responsibility that many would argue you should not have," said Fu, his face turning stony. "This is an offer you are unlikely to receive from anyone else. There will be rules, of course. You won't be able to use that kind of power for personal gain. But it's a second chance to make something of yourself that doesn't result in terrorizing your classmates." He looked up at her, his wise old eyes twinkling again. "I believe you can be so much more than this, Chloe. Don't you?"

Chloe crossed her arms.

Master Fu frowned, looking disappointed. "I must remind you that if you refuse to help, I will remove you from Paris until Hawkmoth has been neutralized. And I promise you, where you end up will not have its own butler. Nor will it be situated right on the pulse of the fashion community. It will be sparse, lonely living for you. But I will have to. Poor Chat Noir and Ladybug need a break from all the akumas you keep creating, and personally, I'd like to see them do something other than pummel another poor sap in a ridiculous outfit once in a while. Like go on a date or something. You understand."

Chloe glanced around her room. The fear of having to leave all her pictures of Adrien and her fluffy bed and her butler was becoming very real. What would she do without the help? Who would iron her clothes or cook for her or keep her company when Sabrina was busy doing her homework? It was definitely enough to make her reconsider.

"When do I get to stop being their little worker bee?" she asked cautiously.
"Once Hawkmoth is defeated. However long that takes. Unless you take to the wings rather well and wish to stay." He leaned back in his chair, looking satisfied and hopeful.

Chloe considered her options one final time. She really wanted to work with Ladybug. She gave a labored, reluctant sigh. "All right. Fine. What do I have to do?"

Master Fu's jovial air returned as though it had never left. He gave a grin that seemed to take up his whole face and then jauntily placed a small yellow box on the table next to the teapot. "I thought you'd never ask."

"And you're who exactly?" asked Chat Noir. He was eying Queen Bee's costume with apprehension and skepticism as they sat waiting for Ladybug to show up for patrol. Queen Bee had only found him thanks to the Ladyblog's religious postings on the heroes' whereabouts.

"And, how do I know you're not just another villain? I fell for the whole 'new hero' bit once already with Volpina," he continued, his face lit by the lavender sunset.

Queen Bee rolled her eyes. "I have a real Miraculous. It's my comb. It's called a Honey Comb. Cute, right?" She pointed to it with a daintily gloved hand. "And honestly, I'm only here because Master Fu is making me."

She explained it was a punishment, and Chat looked interested.

"Wow," he sighed. "You know Master Fu? Ladybug and I just met him for the first time a few weeks ago. He likes to stay out of the spotlight. But he's pretty great, isn't he?"

She clicked her tongue against her teeth. "Tacky clothes, wacky sense of humor, annoying fixation on justice…yeah. Totally great."

Chat narrowed his eyes as if this offended him for some reason, but why would it? Was she being rude again? It was so hard to tell!

"Why is he making you help us anyway?" he asked.

"I can't say." She picked a blond hair off her black and yellow striped suit. "It'll expose my identity."

"Give me one good reason we should trust you. We can't let just anyone watch our backs. And we don't know you."

There was a pause as Queen Bee and Chat Noir stared out at the twilight horizon, waiting to see Ladybug's silhouette swing toward them.

"You shouldn't trust me," she finally sighed. "I'm only here because I got bribed into it with the chance to meet you and Ladybug. Mostly Ladybug, though, no offense. Although, I'd still love both your autographs."

He laughed slightly at that.

"No, seriously," Queen Bee said, holding out a piece of paper and a pen. "Please, can you?"

He signed it automatically, as if he'd done it for years. Come to think of it, he probably had. She tucked the paper back into the hidden pocket on the arm of her suit. "Thanks," she smiled, and he gave her a lukewarm, uncomfortable grin.

"Anyway," she continued. "As I was saying. Chat, I'm no hero. Not really. I haven't earned
 anything. Master Fu said I can't even use the Queen Bee's powers unless I'm helping you two stop an akuma. They won't work unless we're a team. So I kind of can't help much. But I'm here, aren't I? I showed up. Clearly some part of me wants to pursue self-betterment. Or city-betterment. Or whatever."

The resulting silence was like still water that neither of them wanted to disturb. She was astounded at all she'd admitted to Chat. He was one of her role models! Perhaps she just felt like she needed to be totally honest with him. She didn't want him or Ladybug to depend on her and end up getting killed because she couldn't follow through. In all honesty, though she'd never say so, even she didn't trust herself all that much. She wasn't great at saving herself from heartache. Otherwise she'd never be in this atrocious yellow Queen Bee suit in the first place.

Chat nodded slowly, his face unreadable, but then his ears perked up as Ladybug's distant form came into view between two shadowy buildings. In a fit of panic at meeting her idol, Queen Bee grabbed Chat's hand tightly.

"Promise you won't tell Ladybug what I just said? I don't want her to think I'm horrible. I don't even know why I told you all that. It just feels like I already know you. Like we're friends. Like I could tell you anything or ask for help."

"I want to believe we might be able to trust you someday, if not now," he said softly. "But you'll have to prove yourself to My Lady regardless of what I say to her. Assuming she thinks you're okay, we could even try and guide you to being a better superhero. Apparently Master Fu thinks we could probably use the extra help." He turned to her, and concluded, "I'll keep quiet and help you get on the hero's path if that's what you want."

"Thank you," she said, meaning it. It had been a long time since she'd thanked anyone, really. She wasn't sure how she felt about it. "What do you want in return?"

He blinked at her, those large green eyes misty with confusion. "What?"

"What do you want in exchange for helping me?"

"Nothing? It's just a favor. I want to help."

This was practically unheard of. Chloe'd grown up watching her father work, and every deal he made was always something for something. She'd been raised to believe people didn't do things out of the pure goodness of their hearts. She wasn't sure any hearts were good to begin with.

Then how do you explain Chat Noir and Ladybug? They're pretty kindhearted. They don't get much out of the whole arrangement, said a little voice in her head.

They get famous, she said, but she knew it was a weak argument.

"That's ridiculous. You can't not want anything," Queen Bee put her hands on her hips. "I could help you get together with Ladybug. I could recommend a manicurist for those claws. Or I could introduce you to a celebrity. Have you met Jagged Stone? Or what about Adrien Agreste? He's an old friend. You'd like meeting him, I think. You have the same hair."

Chat looked nonplussed. He shook his head wordlessly.

"Puh-lease," Queen Bee sighed. "I have to do something. I don't like this 'favor' thing. I'm used to transactions."

He just blinked at her.
She clarified. "I'm going to set you and Ladybug up. I've seen the way you look at her."

Chat looked hesitant, but Queen Bee continued anyway.

"We can pretend we like each other. She'll get jealous and decide she likes you back. Then we'll 'break up' and she's all yours. No harm done. I don't like you that way anyway. You're not really my type. I'm more of an Adrien person, honestly. Just let me help you and we'll call it even."

Chat raised an eyebrow but didn't argue. "Would you really do that?"

"Duh," she said, putting her arm around him as Ladybug landed daintily on the rooftop. "Introduce me to your future wife, won't you?"

Three weeks later, Queen Bee and Chat Noir's romance was the talk of Paris. Everyone was abuzz with news on the most recent Miraculous hero, and the swarming paparazzi wanted to know what Ladybug thought of the whole affair. She'd kept to herself mostly, but anyone in Queen Bee's position could tell she was definitely jealous.

Queen Bee congratulated herself. The jealousy plan was going to work. Her two greatest friends (they were friends by now, surely) were going to end up together in no time.

They'd just finished taking down another akuma, this one obsessed with football. Inwardly, she didn't understand why that would akumatize anyone. Why would somebody care about football when there was fashion?

Nevertheless, it was the first fight she'd had where she'd actually felt like part of the team. Her wings felt a little stronger, her stings were a little more powerful, and her two partners had seemingly accepted her. Loath as she was to admit it, she kind of liked helping out. It was nice to feel needed and included. To have a purpose. To care about something important.

She'd even taken a stray shot from a football-themed Confetti Gun just a few minutes ago so that Ladybug wouldn't get hurt. It was almost instinctual. If she'd been thinking clearly, she probably would have just jumped out of the way to save herself.

She had begun to notice how many punches Chat Noir took so that she and Ladybug could keep fighting. It was surprising how much he cared about everything. About fighting evil, or saving an innocent victim, or protecting his partners. Maybe all that caring was starting to rub off on her.

Ladybug and Chat Noir stood beside her now at the center of the lobby of an old brick apartment building, breathing heavily as the purified akuma floated out the glass double doors.

"Nice job, guys," she said. Chat patted her on the shoulder affectionately, and Ladybug looked away as if she was avoiding staring into bright sunlight. Queen Bee glanced at Chat, eyes full of a silent message. It was time to set him free to be with Ladybug. If they waited any longer she'd probably find someone else in an effort to make Chat jealous, and that would make a mess far too annoying to untangle.

Chat nodded in agreement and mouthed, Tonight. Then, there was the urgent sound of three beeping Miraculouses, and they scattered, seeking places to hide and detransform. Ladybug was the first up the stairs, and Queen Bee followed a few seconds later, heart pounding. She wrenched open a door on the left side of the narrow hall and slammed it shut behind her. She heard a small gasp from behind her, and she whirled around.

Ladybug stood there, looking panicked. "Not here! I'm in here!"
"Gah, sorry!" But before Queen Bee could turn and leave, there were two bright flashes of light, and their disguises fell, leaving two girls staring in horrified silence.

Chloe wished she could say the reveal had gone well. But she'd be lying. She sat in her room, staring at her decorative corkboard while swaddled in her comfiest blankets and moping. Her face still stung from when Marinette had slapped her across the face.

She wasn't used to being yelled at. Marinette had been so angry and disappointed. From Ladybug's point of view, Queen Bee had stolen Chat Noir away, had lied about her reason for helping them, and had posed as a superhero when most of the akumas were her fault anyway. Then, Marinette had waxed poetic on how much Chloe mistreated everyone around her.

Overall, the experience was almost like being lectured by her father.

Wasn't Chloe supposed to be the one doing most of the stinging? If this was what it felt like, maybe she had been less kind to people than she'd thought. All those "jokes" maybe had had more barb to them than she'd known.

Chloe concluded she'd probably had deserved the slap then.

She hadn't bothered to explain herself. Telling Marinette about making Ladybug jealous or being Queen Bee as a punishment would have just sounded like she was making excuses. And there likely wasn't much of a reputation to save anyway.

Chloe felt miserable. Had she completely blown everything, just as she was starting to feel like being Queen Bee might actually be a good thing?

No doubt Ladybug wouldn't want to see her anymore, so she probably wouldn't even be welcome at patrols or battles. They didn't really need someone like Queen Bee after all.

She removed the Honey Comb from her hair with a resigned sigh and placed it back in the yellow box. She just didn't fit in with the good guys. Master Fu would just have to understand that.

She stared tearfully up at the paper pinned to her corkboard. It was Chat Noir's signature. She hadn't really looked all that closely at the scrawl, but she noticed something odd. There was no "C" or "N" distinguishable. Chat had written someone else's name.

He'd signed it Adrien Agreste.

A few years ago, Adrien had told Chloe about how he signed autographs on autopilot by now. He hardly even noticed what he was writing, since he'd written his name so many times. That story came back to her now as her blankets pooled on the floor and she snatched the autograph from the wall.

Chat probably hadn't even realized he'd signed his real name, not his hero name.

Autopilot.

But if Adrien was Chat Noir…that would mean Marinette was…his crush? And she liked Adrien back, though he didn't know it.

The love square unfolded behind her eyes and she put a hand on her desk to steady herself.

Some ruthless part of her swam to the surface of her mind. Chloe, you like Adrien. He's yours. You can't just let Marinette have him just because she's Ladybug. Besides, the girl slapped you today! Not
exactly girlfriend material for Adrien, is she? You know both their identities now. You can make sure that Adrien ends up with you, not her. All's fair in love and war, right?

She really wanted to take that advice.

But she thought back to that feeling of acceptance and belonging she'd had when she'd been Queen Bee. Chat and Ladybug really were great friends, and she'd already stung Marinette...uh...Ladybug enough. Besides, she saw the way Marinette and Adrien looked at each other with and without their masks.

That was the kind of love Chloe had never really seen in real life before. She didn't want to ruin it. She'd already ruined enough.

She'd read somewhere that queen bee stingers actually have two purposes. It can be used to sting other queens to ensure they alone have the throne, and it can also be used to lay eggs. It brings life and death with the queen's choice.

What was Chloe going to choose? She could get rid of Marinette's competition for Adrien in a heartbeat. One sting. Fatal to the power couple's relationship. She kind of wanted to.

But there was another option...

Chloe stared at the yellow box, then took out her Honey Comb once more. She transformed and called Chat Noir.

"Hive," he answered. "I mean hi."

"Nice pun."

"At least someone appreciates them."

"We need to talk," she said.

One week later, Adrien received an anonymous letter with a date and a time printed in black and gold script. He was told to go to a nearby café and wear something nice. At the bottom a note said: *Tell her your secret. You won't be disappointed.*

Adrien arrived ten minutes early to inspect the area with Gorilla in case it was some sort of nefarious trap. After one near-kidnapping two years ago after a fashion show, a model like him could never be too careful. His bodyguard finally deemed the area safe and retreated to the car to read a newspaper. Adrien sat inside by the window, adjusting his collar and unable to keep his curious eyes off the door.

After a few agonizing minutes of waiting, Marinette appeared outside the window wearing a red dress and squinting at a letter that looked exactly like Adrien's. She looked at the coffee shop, back to the letter, then squared her shoulders and walked inside.

"I got a letter too," Adrien said when she sat down at his table. "Someone wanted us to meet up, I guess."

"Who?"

"No idea."

"Does yours have a little note about telling your secrets too?"
"Yep."

There was an exposed pause.

"I say we do it on the count of three," said Adrien finally, starting to wonder if "secret" really meant what he thought it meant.

"One…two…three…" he counted, then said, "I'm Chat Noir." At the same time, Marinette said "I'm Ladybug."

What he heard must have been a hallucination. But the last word – Ladybug – was far too specific to be a mistake.

"What?" they both said. "Really?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Marinette saw something yellow and black on the other side of the window. Adrien was too surprised at the reveal, so he didn't notice Queen Bee making her way casually down the sidewalk. The heroine turned to look into the coffee shop, gave a kind of respectful salute in Marinette's direction, and disappeared from view. Marinette felt a strange wave of admiration and gratefulness toward Chloe. Apparently there was a first time for everything.

"I never thought I'd see the day," she murmured quietly, staring out the window.

"Me either," said Adrien, staring at Marinette.
Mis-givings

Chapter Summary

Mis-givings: Marinette mixes up her holiday gifts for Chat Noir and Adrien, and they try to rhyme their way out of the ensuing confusion.

Chapter Notes

A small Christmas poem.

Once upon a Christmas clear
Marinette was full of cheer.
Her gifts were wrapped tight
For her exchange tonight.
First was a meeting with her crush
Who'd be getting a red hat, fluffy and plush.
Then was a rendezvous with Chat Noir,
To give him new gloves as they sat under the stars.
The gloves should keep him warm, with holes for claws
To help him maintain a good use of his paws.
But one mistake did Marinette make;
The gifts were unlabeled, and much was at stake.
She delivered the wrong gift to Adrien,
Creating a crisis that might not have been.
That afternoon in his room, Adrien opened his gift
And immediately felt his life make a large shift.
The soft, claw-conscious black and green gloves
Were from the Ladybug he so dearly loved,
For who else would even think to design
A gift he needed with fabric so fine?
But Marinette had delivered it, he thought in confusion.
Then the implications came at him in fusion.
"Oh no, Plagg," he frowned and exclaimed,
"She knows Chat Noir's my other name!"
Adrien dropped the gloves in surprise,
His careful secret crumbling before his eyes.
"If she knows I'm Chat," he said with worry,
"I must have given it away! I should hurry
To see who else may have been told.
To Hawkmoth, my name would be good as gold."
"Relax," countered Plagg, "Marinette wouldn't tell."
"Maybe not, but I still don't feel very well."
Adrien picked up the gift one more time,
But something jarred his brain from rhyme -

Does this mean Marinette is Ladybug?

That evening in front of the Eiffel Tower
Ladybug waited at the top of the hour,
Clutching the wrapped gift she thought was for Chat
When actually it was Adrien's hat.
When Chat finally arrived, he spoke first.
He said, "Hi, Marinette," and she feared the worst.
"I got the nice gloves," he pressed on
- Ladybug's brain capacity was gone -
"I do have one question; how did you know?
I tried to never let my identity show.
I've wanted you to know Adrien was beyond my mask
And really, all you had to do was ask.
I'm glad that you know, thanks for being so brave
About sharing a secret you probably wanted to save."
Ladybug stood, staring at the ground,
Her pumping heart the only sound
In her ears as she panicked,
Her gaze turned quite manic.
She'd finally realized her giant mistake
But had to play on – there were no escapes to make.
"I didn't mean to give you those gloves," she began.
"I promise that wasn't my overall plan.
I accidentally mixed up both of the gifts.
I really, really, really hope you're not miffed."
Her terror then even larger grew
Because this meant that Chat…Adrien…already KNEW
Marinette and Ladybug were one and the same,
And she had only herself to blame.
He thought she'd given the gloves with intent
Of blurring identities until it all meant
That this Christmas they'd each finally surmise
Who was under the masked disguise.
Ladybug knew her own secret was out,
And Adrien was Chat without any doubt.
But what more was there to lose by going along?
The two of them knew together was how they belonged.
"I won't say I always knew it was you,"
Ladybug finally, quietly continued,
"But your similar smile should have been my first hint."
He grinned in return – he smelled like peppermint.
"Same here," Chat replied, "My spirits lift
Each time I realize you are the true gift."

He leaned in and gave her an affectionate wink,

"Merry Christmas," he said, and Ladybug turned pink.

He bent softly and gave her soft cheek a kiss,

Then Marinette boldly blushed. "Chat...you missed."
In a distant kingdom, there once lived a girl named Marinette. She was a talented seamstress who lived in a tiny attic above a bakery, all while working for the king's official fashion designer, Gabriel Agreste. His son, Adrien, worked as her model, patiently sporting clothes she designed.

Marinette and Adrien hardly talked at first, and when they did, it was in the soft murmurings of people who were not quite yet friends. During every fitting, he'd stand effortlessly still as she hemmed cloth and tried to avoid sticking him with pins. Each time she asked him to move or change his stance, he'd always respond, "Of course, My Lady."

Adrien began to say this more often, the longer he and Marinette were acquainted.

"Adrien, hand me that pincushion," she'd say.

"Of course, My Lady."

Then, after a few months of watching him sit alone in the kitchen so as not to disturb Marinette's meal at the dining table, "Adrien, have dinner with me. You don't have to eat by yourself."

"Of course, My Lady."

After about a year: "Adrien, will you be my date to the Fashion Forum at the palace?"

"Of course, My Lady."

One evening, while Marinette stitched up a loose pocket with abnormally shaking fingers, she decided to put her nerves at ease and just ask already. Adrien stood very close, obediently unmoving and probably oblivious to how much she could feel his warmth on her skin. Marinette steeled herself. "Adrien, do you love me?"

The answer was prompt and wonderful. "Of course, My Lady."

It was followed by a smiling silence filled only by the crackling of the fire.

"Well, aren't you going to ask if I love you?" she said, sounding far more bold than she felt.

He already knew she did. All the little things she asked him – they were her way of saying I love
you and they both knew it. So Adrien looked at her with those clear green eyes and said, "There's no need."

The villagers could never spot one without the other after that night. Wherever Adrien went, Marinette followed – to any wardrobe fittings or any commission consultations. And, on one occasion, the bakers who lived below Marinette's tiny attic quarters spotted a moonlight rendezvous. Adrien perched himself dangerously on her wrought iron balcony, having climbed up the ivy-clad walls to reach her. They shared a kiss in the shadows, a kiss the bakers would later describe as the most passionate, alive, and pure they had ever beheld.

Soon afterward, Marinette's Fall Collection became very popular with the king and his court. Although she was the creator of the clothes, the king insisted that Gabriel Agreste and his son be the ones to showcase the designs, since he was mistrustful of strangers like Marinette. There had been a rash of frauds in his court in the past, of spies from jealous foreign monarchs who desired to get their hands on the cleverest clothing of the day and smuggle some government secrets out on the way. But the Agrestes had always been considered reputable, and so the king valued their opinions above all others. Therefore, Adrien alone was sent to the court on a two-month contract to display the new styles and take commission orders.

He left for the palace on a crisp autumn morning amid the fire of the changing leaves. Marinette, who was to stay behind, walked him to the gate where Gabriel Agreste waited with two handsome horses. She put a hand to Adrien's cheek when they stopped to say their final goodbyes.

"Come back soon," she said. "And be safe – bandits patrol those roads."

"I will. And even if I don't return timely, know this. I will always come for you, whenever you need me. No matter where I am." He brushed a tear from her cheek then turned to face the road.

"I love you," she called after him.

"Of course, My Lady," he grinned.

A week later, news came to the village that Adrien and Gabriel never made it to the palace. They had been attacked on the road by a masked man called Chat Noir. All that remained of them were some bloodstained garments buried in the gravel a mere three miles away from the palace gates. They both were assumed dead, for Chat Noir shared no mercy with his victims. No one caught by him had ever returned home.

Marinette was shattered by grief. She neither slept nor ate, and remained confined to her attic even despite the bakers' attempts to lure her out with freshly made croissants. She might have withered away into nothing, were it not for the strange events that occurred three weeks into her downward spiral.

The king, having let the proper mourning period pass, still demanded Marinette's designs. As she was the only remaining person who knew their innermost stitching, she was summoned against her will to the palace. She was to stay until the court was outfitted with the finest garb. In addition, she was to be escorted there and back by Vizzini, the head of the royal guard. This was supposedly for her protection against Chat Noir and other unsavory characters, but it was also to ensure she was not going to smuggle any state or style-related secrets in or out of the castle.

Her nerve-wracking journey to the palace took place under the care of Vizzini and his two servants, Nino and Fu. They spoke to Vizzini exclusively in rhymes, which irritated him to no end and amused Marinette enough to make the exodus tolerable. She learned that Nino and Fu were forced
into Vizzini's service by some kind of contract, for they opposed Vizzini at every turn yet could take no deliberate action against him.

Every shadow on the road to the castle scrambled Marinette's wits. She kept imagining a cat-eared man with a knife jumping out from every concealed hiding place, ready to slit her throat. When they passed the side of the road where Adrien had last been seen, Marinette let tears fall upon her red satin gown, even though she knew it would ruin the fabric.

When she arrived at the palace safely, she was immediately put to work. She hardly had a moment's peace between sketching and sewing and hemming and presenting. But she didn't mind – in fact, she welcomed the opportunity to stay busy. It kept her from dwelling on Adrien. It made her feel like she had a purpose, even though she knew that, without him, she'd never fully live again.

Marinette was shocked when a year had passed. It was as if she had blinked and suddenly she was the royal seamstress and designer. She had her own room at the palace, Nino and Fu had become close confidants, and she'd even managed to attract the eye of the king's son, Prince Ali. Although he wasn't really her type and she'd never dream of being interested in him, it was nice to have someone to talk to. Besides, the other nobles were all middle-aged, obsessed with wealth and power, and strangely interested in forcing her into mundane and horrible discussions about taxes.

Nino and Fu had also started training her in sword-play and acrobatics in their free time. Nino was a renowned swordsman who'd once defeated a man by withstanding multiple stab wounds and his unique ability to fight with either hand.

Fu was more of a mystery. He came from one of the distant kingdoms as a history adviser to the king, but was transferred into a bodyguard role once it was discovered that he was wonderful at hand-to-hand combat and gymnastics. Marinette would never have guessed it, for he was rather old and seemingly fragile. Yet he enthusiastically taught her how to do all kinds of flips and tumbles. He even showed her how to rappel up and down the castle walls and swing from rooftops using nothing but an ordinary yoyo. Apparently this was a skill few before Marinette had ever mastered, but Fu proclaimed Marinette was "blessed with luck" and said she had a natural knack for it.

Upon reflection of her past year, much had changed, but Marinette still felt bruised. Not physically, although her training was often demanding. It was just…something still wasn't right inside her heart.

She missed Adrien, and she harbored resentment toward Chat Noir. It was not a desire for plain old revenge. Sure, she wanted to find the criminal who'd murdered her true love and put him to justice, but she didn't want to kill him.

She just wanted to know why. Why had he done it? Did he have a vendetta against the kingdom? Was it a personal attack on the Agrestes? Was he simply bored? Was it a case of wrong place, wrong time?

There were too many unanswered questions, and Marinette became restless. She couldn't continue to be complacent while Adrien's murderer ran free. What if the same thing happened to someone else? Chat Noir had been relatively tame this year - only a few disappearances - but who could say how long that would last? Anyone could be next.

Fu and Nino were the ones who helped her most, in the end. They gave her the training to match her motivation. Within mere weeks she was donning a slim suit and mask she'd made herself from leftover red and black spotted cloth. She used her yoyo to sneak out of the castle at night and hunt Chat Noir. Along the way, she began calling herself Ladybug and saving innocent villagers Chat happened to come across on his prowl.
His movements were erratic and, strangely, non-violent. She only ever saw him just as he was leaping over a fence or scaling a wall. She never caught him, though they exchanged useless banter a few times. Chat Noir seemed to know she'd follow him anywhere. In fact, it felt as though he were leading her on a wild goose chase on purpose, never harming a soul while she followed behind. His glowing green eyes always shone with mirth at her frustration.

While her Ladybug excursions prevented more murders and disappearances, Marinette was starting to think that hunting Chat Noir by night wasn't going to be enough anymore. If she was going to get anything out of him and maybe even stop him for good, she'd need to be Ladybug by day. Not just by night. But that would only happen if she could leave the palace and her job as the court fashion mogul.

Marinette made her official request to return home that next week, but the king rejected it immediately. Why should she leave, he argued, when the fashions changed so quickly that her expertise would always be needed? She should consider the palace her home, he further insisted. Prince Ali would gladly make her feel more welcome. He'd even expressed his interest in marrying her. The king even asked her what date she wanted for the wedding.

At these words, Marinette had been so stunned that she immediately refused the proposal. The king had been severely offended by her reaction, and sent her from the throne room. She'd last seen him whispering with Vizzini, which was never a good sign.

That evening, Marinette sat in the sculpted gardens that overlooked the rest of the kingdom. A tiny ladybug crawled across the stone bench beside her. She stared at it for a long time before it flicked open its shell to reveal wings and flew into the oblivion of a darkening sky.

She still wasn't sure how she'd gone into the royal chambers with the intent of leaving forever, yet had emerged with not only a permanent position but also a marriage proposal. This was not at all what she wanted, and as she contemplated her options, she gazed longingly at the far retaining wall that separated the palace from the village itself. It shocked her how easy it would be to scale it and escape all this, to live forever as Ladybug and never return. It was so simple - just like that, she had a plan.

When she went to find Nino and Fu to say goodbye, they were sparring with blunt swords at the far end of the gardens. After hearing her out, they obstinately refused to let her go alone.

"What if Chat Noir attacks you? Even as Ladybug, you're not entirely safe outside these walls. We can protect you. It'll be easy for us to leave – we'll give old Vizzini the slip. I do it all the time," Nino said, crossing his arms.

Marinette raised her eyebrows.

"He's got a girl in the neighboring village," Fu said wisely. "Her name is Alya."

Nino blushed, looking sheepish. "She's worth sneaking out for. I can slip out unnoticed in less than three minutes. I've gotten lots of practice – don't worry, Marinette. We'll help you."

"Thanks," she sighed. "But I can get out of the palace on my own. And I know how to protect myself now," she said, pulling her yoyo from her satchel and twirling it expertly. "You guys don't need to risk getting caught because of me."

Nino and Fu exchanged a look as if to say, How adorable; she actually thinks she can convince us to let her go by herself.
Marinette scrunched her eyebrows in defeat. "Nothing I say is going to keep you two behind, is it?"

"Nothing," said Fu, his wise old eyes sparkling. "We leave at dawn."

Marinette slept soundly that night. Her knapsack was packed with her Ladybug suit right at the top. She could easily put it on in the morning to hide her identity during their planned escape. She'd meet Nino and Fu in the gardens to scale the wall, and they'd be wearing disguises of their own.

But, just past two in the morning, Marinette woke to the icy edge of a dagger against her throat.

The first thing she saw was Vizzini standing over her, his face eager and distorted in the light of his lone candle. "These rooms are soundproof, my dear," he cackled. "Do you know what that means?"

She shook her head, mute with terror.

"It means no one will hear you scream."

She expected him to kill her right there – she shut her eyes in anticipation, thinking only that she'd see Adrien once more – but Vizzini merely kept the dagger against her skin as he called for Nino and Fu. Her two friends emerged reluctantly from behind the doorway, their expressions mutinous. As they took Vizzini's orders and bound her hands and feet in rough rope, their hands were gentle and apologetic. She was glad they were here - it meant she might still have a chance of escape if they were still on her side.

"You're going to fetch a pretty price for me, my dear," Vizzini said as they led her quietly out of the castle to the courtyard. She was still in her pink dressing gown and slippers, and though she wished someone would notice her kidnapping and save her, a very tiny part of her was glad no one was there to glimpse her while she was dressed like this. And no one did; the only living things in the courtyard now were the four horses tethered to the outer gate.

"We're taking you to a far away kingdom in the mountains," Vizzini explained. "Their king wants your fashion designs and will do anything to get them. I intend to profit from that." He licked his lips. "Get on the horse."

Marinette obeyed, her thoughts wandering hopelessly to her yoyo, which remained in her satchel upstairs in her room. If only she could get out of this mess. Fu and Nino were bound by their contract not to interfere on pain of death, and she couldn't ask that of them.

Instead, she ran through any failsafes in her head as they made their way quickly onto the main road. Surely someone would notice she was missing. Even the king and prince would be furious at her disappearance. They'd send search parties...

...Unless they'd planned this with Vizzini.

Marinette thought back to how she'd rejected the marriage proposal. Perhaps this was the king's idea. Maybe he'd wanted to get rid of her before any rumors spread of her refusal to marry Prince Ali. Before she could damage the royal family's golden reputation.

Either way, something told Marinette she wasn't going to make it to the mountains. She didn't like the hungry look in Vizzini's eyes – this was no kidnapping. This was her orchestrated murder. Her savvy sewing skills wouldn't save her now.

The sun hadn't even peeked out from under the horizon yet when the horses began to get nervous.
"Fu, calm the horses down," Vizzini barked.

"Should I start with the black one or the brown?" he rhymed.

They all saw Vizzini's eye twitch. "Just do as I ask."

"It's an easy task," said Nino.

The horses became increasingly restless, and Vizzini growled, "Enough with the rhyming, I mean it."

And from behind them, a new, coldly amused voice said, "Does anybody want a peanut?"

Marinette was so startled she accidentally pulled her reigns too hard. Her mare bucked beneath her and she flew off, tumbling painfully into the dirt as the horse galloped back down the road. But Marinette hardly felt her scrapes and cuts, for she was too busy gaping at who had spoken.

Standing in the middle of the road was Chat Noir.

She'd never seen him this close before. He was handsome in a menacing, distant way. He was not warm or friendly. He was the kind of hardened beautiful that reminded Marinette of the glint of sun on her sharpest sewing needle. His eyes blazed green, framed by a black mask. He wore false cat ears in his blond hair, and his suit and false tail were both made of the finest black leather. Even in her panic and pain, Marinette recognized quality work when she saw it. Chat also carried a satchel similar to her own, and she could see it was packed full to bursting. Perhaps that was where he kept the murder weapon that had taken Adrien's life.

As Marinette evaluated him, Chat Noir met her eyes. He quietly swung a silver baton in his right hand, and it went from right to left like an ominous pendulum. His face was set with controlled anger, his jaw tight and unmoving.

"Release the princess," he said slowly, his eyes never leaving her face. **I am no princess,** she thought, confused.

"I shall not," said Vizzini, moving swiftly on his horse until he was close enough to grab Marinette tightly by her arm and hoist her onto his horse. "She's staying with me. Nino," he ordered, "stay behind to keep him from following us. Fu, come with me."

And with that, Vizzini, Fu, and Marinette took off at breakneck speed.

Chat and Nino were left standing in the billowing dust.

The cloud lodged itself stubbornly in both their lungs, and each broke into a crippling coughing fit. It was only after a few minutes that Nino realized, with horror, that his opponent had recovered first. He sank to his knees, anticipating his inevitable death at Chat's hand.

But it didn't come.

"You're not…going to…kill me?" he wheezed.

"Hardly," grinned Chat. "We haven't even fought yet, and you're still unable to defend yourself. It would be unsportsmanlike."

"Murder...is also unsportsmanlike," Nino pointed out between coughs.

"True," Chat said pleasantly, sitting down on the road beside him. "Let me know when you're ready
and we can begin."

"You are a very strange villain."

"I want the chance to fight someone like you. I've heard your skills are the best in the world, and I'd sooner destroy a stained glass window than kill a master swordsman."

Nino didn't answer. He simply got to his feet and raised his sword. "I'm ready now," he said slowly.

"Excellent." Chat stood and lifted his baton in similar fashion. He even wore a genuine smile on his face. "Let's begin."

Vizzini only stopped when he realized Chat Noir had caught up to them. Nino must be dead, Marinette thought with a sudden pang of sadness. But how could he have fallen? She'd been sure his swordplay would be enough to overtake their feline foe.

"Still he gains? Fu, get rid of him, now!" Vizzini demanded.

"Yes sir, but how?" Even under pressure, Fu still made it a rhyme. Ordinarily, Marinette would have smiled, but the current situation was too grave.

"I don't care," snapped Vizzini. "Finish him your way. Whatever that is. Stay put. I'll take the lady with me."

Marinette exchanged a look of fear with Fu, but Vizzini had already urged the horse onward. She could only look on in despair, wondering if Fu would survive Chat's persistent pursuit.

She and Vizzini rode for what felt like an entire hour with no sign of anyone following. They finally arrived at an abandoned castle complete with tall turrets and a humongous moat, where they dismounted and tethered the horses at the far side of the decaying drawbridge.

"Don't even think about jumping in," Vizzini smirked nastily as they walked across the creaking wood. He must have caught Marinette eyeing the moat as a potential means of escape. "It's infested with crocodiles. You'd be dead before you bobbed back up to the surface for air."

By the time they'd finished picking their way along the least rotted planks, Marinette looked back to see Chat Noir standing by their horses on the other side of the drawbridge. Her heart plummeted as she thought of Fu. Kind, wise old Fu. She hoped with all her might he wasn't dead, but she knew he probably was.

"He's found us already? Inconceivable," muttered a red-faced Vizzini. "Come on, up to the towers. See if he dares to follow across that moat."

They both already knew Chat would. He'd killed two men just to get this far. Crocodiles wouldn't keep him at bay.

They waited for his inevitable arrival in the tallest tower, sitting on the dusty stone floor in the sole patch of sunlight streaming through the window. Vizzini put his dagger against Marinette's neck again, just close enough to prick her skin painfully.

When Chat sauntered into the room, his face was still stony and cold, but he stopped when he saw Marinette's position.

"Ah, so you do care for her," chuckled Vizzini with an impressive amount of bravado. "Take one
more step and I'll kill her. It'd be easy."

"Don't," said Chat, taking one more step, but Vizzini pressed the blade harder. Marinette hissed as she felt him draw blood. The sound brought Chat Noir to his senses and he froze.

"Good kitty." Vizzini sounded satisfied.

"Release her. I won't ask again."

"Not a chance. However…I'd be willing to fight you for her."

"That would be unfair," said Chat good-naturedly. "I'd win."

"Not in this fight. I'm one of the few geniuses in this kingdom. My intelligence is beyond compare, especially when your puny brain is concerned. Thereby I challenge you to a battle of intellect. I know I have an obvious advantage, so to give you a little bit of a start, I'll even let you pick the game."

"Very well," Chat said. "I accept, as long as you remove that dagger from the lady's neck. Blood isn't really a good color on her, although I must say, she looks amazing in red when it's paired with black spots." Here, he unmistakably winked at her.

Marinette scowled, thinking hard. Where had he seen her in anything like that? The only time she wore spots was when she was…Ladybug…

But how could he know her secret identity?

She would have worried more about this, but there wasn't time now. Chat and Vizzini had already begun their game, seating themselves across from each other on the floor.

Chat pulled two small objects wrapped in white cloth from his pocket. Once he removed the cloth, it became clear he was holding two small wedges of cheese.

"Both of these," he began, "are Camembert. One has been laced with Miraculous, an odorless, tasteless poison. The other is innocuous. If you eat the wrong one, you'll die."

Vizzini scoffed. "Please. This is too easy."

"I'm not finished. This is a game of wits. This is my first move." Chat placed one slice of cheese in front of each of them and then said, "Did I just give you the poison? Or did I give it to myself? Now it's your move. Choose one, and I'll eat the other. Together, we'll figure out who is right…and who is dead."

Marinette closed her eyes and plugged her ears. She wasn't rooting for either of them, but she didn't want to see anyone die. She thought of Fu and Nino, their images stained with blood in her imagination. Would this horrible day never end? At this point, she almost wished they'd just kill her already.

Almost.

Some part of her, the Ladybug part of her, perhaps, wanted to fight. She scanned her mental map of the castle room, straining to think of anything that could be used against these two men. Besides dust bunnies and rotting wooden furniture, there was nothing else.

Of course, Vizzini had his dagger and Chat had his baton. But any attempt to steal one would invoke
the wrath of the other.

She risked a peek and found they were both still talking. Chat almost looked bored. But then Marinette spied Chat's knapsack a few feet away from where she sat. She inched over slowly, unnoticed by either of them, and peered inside.

The contents inside were shockingly familiar – this was her knapsack. The one she'd packed last night – ages ago – with her Ladybug costume and yoyo right on top. Adding this to her list of unexplained mysteries, she grabbed the yoyo and mask and tucked them into the pocket of her dressing gown. She then huddled her head against her knees and blocked out all sound, as she knew one of the two men was surely going to die soon.

Granted, she could start fighting now...but, horrible and shrewd as it was, she'd rather face one opponent than two. If Chat or Vizzini died in this game of wits, her escape would be quite a lot easier.

After a few minutes was startled from her thoughts by the distinct, muted thump of someone falling to the floor. She cracked open one fearful eye to see what had happened. To her horror, Vizzini lay slumped and unmoving, his face grotesquely frozen mid-laugh.

"How...?" she breathed, still staring at the body.

"They were both poisoned," Chat said. He seemed to think she had been paying attention to their game. "I've built up a tolerance to Miraculous over the past year – I figured it would come in handy." He stood and walked over to claim his prize.

She regarded him bitterly. "You can kill me now. Just go on. Do it. Everyone I've ever loved has died at your hands. At least now I'll see them again."

He held out a hand as if to help her to her feet and she promptly ignored it. He let it drop back to his side and began to pace in front of her.

"Everyone you've ever loved, princess? That's quite a long list. And it's an incorrect statement. I haven't killed Prince Ali. Yet, anyway."

It took a moment for Marinette to understand what he was saying. "I don't love the prince. And I'm not a princess."

"No? I heard you two were betrothed. That would make you a princess, or at least a princess-to-be." Chat looked down at her with a frosty expression. "Seems a bit soon for you to be getting married, you know, after Adrien."

Marinette felt her bones ignite in anger. She was roasting from the inside – her blood was boiling, her skin was steaming.

Her face must have betrayed her emotions because he raised his eyebrows and continued talking. "Oh yes, princess. I remember him. He died well, if you must know. No sniveling. He actually put up a rather good fight. Knew his way around a sword – his father taught him to fence with both his right and left hands. And when I found him and his father on that road, he didn't lie down and take his fate. Do you want to know what he said?"

There was a pause. Marinette's throat had closed up, but Chat took her silence as a yes.

"All he said was please. Please. That's why I remember him. He didn't try to buy me off with
money, though I know he had quite a lot. He said he had to live. There was someone out there worth living for. I assume he was talking about you, although he must have been wrong, for you are not worthy of such praise."

"Stop. Stop it," Marinette choked out. "Please, just tell me. Why did you kill him?"

Chat's eyes narrowed. "I killed him because he was there. Nothing more. It wasn't for his money, or some sort of ulterior motive. It was a case of predator and prey. Simple. Easy. It was nothing special."

Marinette felt a hot tear slice through the dirt on her cheek. "But he was special to me."

"When I cornered him, Adrien didn't grovel," Chat continued as if he hadn't heard her. "He just started talking about you. The love Adrien described to me was so pure, so wonderful, that I nearly wanted to spare him. But, in the end, I was right not to have – that love doesn't exist. Take you for example. You exchanged Adrien for a besotted, weakling prince and his money. There isn't a gutter fit for you," he snarled.

Marinette was at a loss. If only he could see all the bleeding going on inside her heart – there was so much internal damage from his words. If it were physical injury, she'd be dead. But her skin remained cruelly perfect, betraying her in its impassive concealment of her pain.

Chat extended his pacing until he was circling her. "Tell me this. Did you even miss him when they told you he was dead? Or did you wait a full five minutes before moving in with Ali and his rich, royal family?" His voice was as treacherous as a knife's blade.

"I died that day!" Marinette cried, standing up immediately to look him in the eye.

He stopped pacing, and a strange expression came over his face. It looked like he was thinking: finally, she's standing up for herself. Over his shoulder, Marinette noticed there was a large glass window. A plot began to form in her mind.

"I loved Adrien with my whole being. When he died, I vowed I would never love again, and I have kept that vow. How can you possibly know what it was like to pick up the pieces after he was gone? You are a monster. In fact, you can die too, for all I care!"

With a blast of courage, she ran straight at him and placed her hands against his shoulders. She gave a massive shove and his back hit the glass window, which shattered instantly. As he tumbled out of the tower window, he didn't cry out. He instead focused his intense, surprised green eyes on her and said his last.

"Of course, My Lady."

A horrible dread gripped Marinette. She froze, her memory overloading with all the times Adrien had said that to her. It was his way of saying I love you, she'd always known that. Her beautiful, light haired, green eyed, kind-hearted, clever…

And in that moment, she realized she'd just thrown Adrien out a window to his death.

"My Adrien – what have I done?" She raked her hands through her hair, but then she remembered what was in her pocket.

Chat Noir was about six feet from the ground when something like tiny rope caught him by the ankle and stopped him in midair. He dangled upside down, spinning wildly, and then he felt himself being hoisted back up toward the tower. Marinette had realized the truth, then. He grinned. They both had
always had a flair for the dramatic, he thought. He'd returned to her as an ersatz villain to see if she was still true to him. She'd thrown him out a window. All was fair in love and war, apparently.

When Marinette finally succeeded in pulling him back into the tower room, they both took a moment to catch their breath. Adrien removed his eyemask, finally able to be himself again. They were both covered in tiny cuts from the broken glass, and he had a red welt on his ankle from where Marinette's yoyo had saved his life.

"You're quite handy with that thing," he said after a while. "Thank you. I suppose the fact that I'm not in the moat right now means you're happy to see me?"

Marinette was already embracing him before he realized what she was doing. She pressed her face into his chest. "You're alive – I could fly!"

He bent and nestled his nose into the crook of her neck, basking in her lemony scent. It had been too long since he'd been able to smell it properly. "Don't your remember? I said I would always come for you, no matter what. I had to follow and keep you safe, even if this was the only way."

He stood straight again, eyeing the small cut where Vizzini's knife had pressed against her throat. "Does it hurt?" he asked, touching it gently. "I can bandage it for you once we're out of here."

She stilled in his arms and he drew back a little, gazing into those blue eyes. They swallowed him in their magnetic depths.

"I'm fine, for now," Marinette sighed. But then her eyes wandered back to Vizzini's body and they widened. She'd finally realized he was truly dead. "You – you killed him. And you killed…Nino, and Fu…"

"No. Nino and Fu are fine. I defeated them quite easily, though I'd never kill them. In fact, the only life I've ever taken was Vizzini's."

She stared at him.

"Can you live with that?" he asked.

Marinette nodded slowly. "But…if you're Chat Noir…what happened that night you disappeared? Why would you fake your death? Why did you torment me so – telling me I was unfit for the gutter, and all of that – mocking me over Prince Ali?"

He looked down, and there was a blush of shame on his face. "I genuinely thought you'd moved on after I heard about the engagement last night. I was on the roof, eavesdropping, when Ali brought it up to the king in private. The way he talked about you was...difficult to hear. He said he loved you, and it was so soon after I'd left. I started to wonder if maybe you had never really loved me at all. Can you forgive me for my doubt and my selfishness?"

"Adrien, don't apologize. I understand. Besides, I was never engaged to Prince Ali anyway – after you, no one ever compared."

He smiled modestly. "It was so hard for me to stay away from you, to pretend I was a murderer. But you must understand – when I left you a year ago to ride to the palace, my father tried to have me killed. He hired a mercenary called Chat Noir to ambush us on the road, to make it look like an accident and leave my father alive. You see...my father had been spying for foreign kingdoms this whole time, under the codename Hawkmoth. When he discovered you and I were in love, he thought we might jeopardize his fashion monopoly. Your designs were better than his. He knew it, too. And if the king liked your work better, my father would lose his cushy job and his steady feed of
information for the spy network. He'd lose his income, his safety, and his pride. The other kingdoms would try to snuff him out once he became useless to them. In the end, he probably thought that if I were out of the picture, you'd never design again and he'd keep his reign.

"When Chat Noir arrived to kill me, my father fled into the woods. He didn't stay to watch, the coward. But that was to my advantage. When I told you earlier about how I only said please, that wasn't a lie. All of that was true. Except that instead of killing me, the mercenary let me live. He said my words had changed his heart, and then gave me his discarded cat ears and mask. After he disappeared into the night to tell the village I was dead, I took up the mantle of Chat Noir, stole into the forest, and found my father. I told him the deed was done, but that if he didn't leave the kingdom forever, I'd tell everyone how he'd plotted to kill his own son."

"And that worked?"

He smiled dangerously. "Well, I was very persuasive. I make quite a terrifying Chat Noir, I've been told."

She grinned back. "And a handsome one."

He laughed. "Anyway, for the past year, I have trained and successfully dismantled my father's spy network for good. I knew we'd only be safe once they were all gone. Vizzini was the last spy I was going to blackmail into exile. But things went a little differently once I found out you'd been kidnapped. I snuck into the palace, grabbed your satchel from your room, and raced to follow you. I figured you'd want your bag, and I knew you probably wouldn't be able to return and fetch it, even if we got rid of Vizzini."

Marinette put a hand to Adrien's cheek. "Thank you. I'm sorry. For everything."

"I'm not. Not in the end," he smiled. "Look how things turned out. Not even death can stop true love."

They stayed in an embrace for a long time, timing their breathing so they inhaled in harmony. Adrien stood so still he might have been a statue, which Marinette attributed to years of practice as her model. It was the little things like this that she had missed most about him.

Finally, after a while, Adrien stepped back and let his hands drop. "We should go. You need rest and some bandages for that cut."

Marinette nodded in understanding, but she frowned. "Where will we run? The king probably orchestrated all of this to have me killed after I rejected Ali's proposal. I can't go back. There's probably a price on my head."

"That is a fair point, My Lady. And it probably wouldn't do to go back with me at your side. On a good day, I'm supposed to be dead. On a bad day, I'm thought to be a serial killer. However...I have a plan."

"What kind of plan?"

"Well, it involves your Ladybug mask, my mask, Nino, Fu, and four valiant steeds."

"Excellent." She took his hand and led him out of the battered tower. "That reminds me. How did you know I was Ladybug?"

"Marinette, there was no question. I know you. I know how strong you are – how determined you
are to get answers. I once watched you stay up all night trying to figure out what kind of stitch to use on silk – and that was just research on clothes. When it came to love, who else would have been motivated, driven, or courageous enough to follow Chat Noir around at night with only a yoyo as a weapon? I mean, I thought you were already perfect. But even when I was masquerading as a killer, I still met my match in you."

"Just for that," Marinette said, pausing on the stairs and turning to face him, "I must say. I love you. You know I do."

He chuckled. "Of course, My Lady."

When they stepped outside the abandoned castle and faced the drawbridge, they saw Nino and Fu waiting with four horses on the other side. They waved enthusiastically, alive and well. She turned to Adrien, and they put on their masks together.

"What do you say, My Lady? Four outlaws, two epic disguises, and one everlasting love?"

"I say yes. My only question – where will we go?"

"Well," Adrien said silkily, offering his arm so they could stroll across the treacherous planks together, "I've heard Paris is lovely this time of year."
Chapter Summary

Baker's Mania: Alya points out that Marinette is one of two people in her class who have yet to be akumatized. Concerned that her friends will use process of elimination to figure out who Ladybug is, Marinette makes plans to stage her own akuma attack, with...mixed results. Idea by Wai-Jing Waraugh.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was late November, and while most students were more focused on final exams, Marinette was in a panic over something else entirely. Namely, she was one of two people left in her class that had not yet been akumatized.

This had come to her attention last week, when Alya and Nino had begun a collage for their school project. It featured each of the members of their class in their akumatized forms. The point was to demonstrate that being used by a supervillain was something that no one should be ashamed of. Normal, even. Well…normal for Paris.

But in the process of creating the collage, Alya had pulled Marinette aside one afternoon, and said, "Girl, I don't have an akuma costume for you in the collage…haven't you been akumatized yet?"

To which Marinette had responded with a strained, "Um no, I guess not."

Her friend had seemed impressed, if a little skeptical. "Wow, I guess it's just down to you and Adrien. I'll just draw you guys in normal clothes, then. But I guess this is good, right? It means you're purer of heart than the rest of us. Or," Alya laughed with subtle curiosity in her eyes, "maybe you're Ladybug and Chat Noir."

"As if," Marinette had scoffed, while in her head panic flushed her system with adrenaline and the stale taste of copper.

If she didn't get akumatized soon, her secret might be exposed. Alya was definitely clever enough to figure it out, and if it ended up on the Ladyblog, it would be a disaster. Even the thought of being revealed to the world made Marinette sick.

She wandered around her classes for two weeks in a kind of fear-induced funk that not even Tikki could help her shake entirely. Luckily, an idea came to her late one night and Marinette stayed up until three in the morning crafting the details.

She was going to facilitate her own akuma attack, don a false costume of her own design, and dissuade her class from coming to the increasingly obvious, albeit true, conclusion that she was Ladybug. Of course, it sounded far simpler than it was…but she'd been at every akumatization ever documented, and she knew how to play a villain. She'd be able to pull it off.

Useless identity-obscuring mask? Check.

Ridiculous heavy makeup? Check.
Cool lightning effects (courtesy of the tech and pyrotechnics experts who'd arranged Jagged Stone's last rock show)? Check.

Conspicuous object for Ladybug to break to release her "akuma"? Check.

Wicked awesome, one-of-a-kind clothes? Check.

Of course, anyone who knew Marinette's secret identity probably could spot a giant hole in her plan. If she herself was Ladybug, how would Ladybug "defeat" her and cleanse the akuma?

But even that was planned out. Marinette was actually rather proud of herself for thinking of her solution. All she needed was to make her way to the small teachers' office at the front of the classroom. She could slip inside, secretly transform into Ladybug, break the rolling pin, and emerge having defeated Marinette, who would be conveniently hiding to save herself the embarrassment of facing her classmates after being akumatized.

The plan would work as long Chat Noir didn't spoil things. If he arrived before she got herself into that small office, she'd have a hard time explaining any of it to him without revealing her identity. But the only way he'd get there early was if he actually went to her school, which was pretty much impossible.

The day of her planned akumatization arrived with a brutal, cold rain that soaked anyone who wasn't protected by an umbrella. On a soggy, gloomy morning like this, everyone would be inside, bored enough to pay full attention to her antics.

Marinette was not nervous, which surprised her. It felt like another performance – something she was already used to. Being Ladybug was a performance in itself. She was a different version of herself, with enough personal distance to dissuade the crippling social anxiety she sometimes felt as Marinette. It was almost with excitement that she snuck into the bathroom before her first class, did her makeup in a stall with her tiny compact mirror, and slipped into her brand new akuma costume. When she emerged from the stall, Marinette was barely recognizable.

In her place stood her "akumatized" alter-ego, Baker's Mania. She wore her father's fluffy white hat, her face was white as though she'd been covered in flour, and she had tied a white apron around her waist.

Marinette had decided early in her planning that if she was going to be akumatized, it would have to be believable. She planned to say she'd worked too many hours at her parent's bakery and needed a day off, and those feelings had dwelled inside her for too long. Now she'd take out her aggression at school, equipped with a wooden rolling pin Chat Noir could easily target as a hiding place for the akuma. She checked to make sure Jagged Stone's lightning effects still worked at the click of a small button on her wrist, and then she knew she was ready.

She burst from the bathroom, brandishing her rolling pin. "Out of my way," she yelled. Students still in the corridors parted immediately, shrieking and running to the safety of the nearest classrooms. Marinette smiled. Perhaps this was going to be kind of fun.

Adrien heard the commotion down the hall and immediately raced toward it. Everyone else was running the other way, but his priorities were a little different than the average kid. His own safety could wait if there was an akuma on the loose.

He ducked around a corner when he heard the screams growing louder. Students stampeded past him
like wildebeests fleeing a lion. When they'd all cleared the way, a girl dressed in white came into view at the edge of the hallway. She held a rolling pin in one hand, and with the other, she let off an intimidating crackle of lightning.

"My name is Baker's Mania," she cried, "and I declare that no one should have to work again. I will set everyone free of their duties as teachers and students – you'll all be under my rule instead!" She gave a cackle and proceeded to storm down the hallway, lightning flying out of her palm.

That was when Adrien decided transforming might be a good idea.

He moved back out of sight, pressed his back to the wall, and coaxed Plagg from his shirt pocket. Moments later, Chat Noir stood in his place, still silently waiting for the villain to approach. His ears swiveled to catch any and all movement. Chat was hoping Ladybug would show up before he made the first move; he preferred teamwork to solo takedowns. But she still wasn't here, and the clicks of the girl's boots on the linoleum floor were growing steadily louder. If Baker's Mania got any closer, she'd see him and he'd have to fight her alone.

But then, the footsteps stopped short of his corner and went in a new direction. When he ventured a quick glance out into the hallway, she was gone, Chat realized she must have gone into a classroom, and there was only one it could have been. *His.* He pictured Nino, Alya, and Marinette cowering under desks and wondering where he was.

"Sorry, My Lady," he muttered to thin air, as if Ladybug could hear him. "I can't wait for you any longer. Join me in progress, I guess."

*She can't hear you*, Plagg's voice sounded in his head.

"Well, I think she can. She's always close. She's right here," he said, patting his heart. He could practically feel Plagg rolling his eyes and gagging at the romance. Sometimes he did this just to make his kwami uncomfortable. But that didn't mean it wasn't also true.

He twirled his baton in his hand, then crept to the classroom and peered around the open doorway. No one noticed; Baker's Mania still held the classroom in captive rapture.

"I spent too long enslaved in the bakery," she was saying. "I'm here to liberate you all – under the rule of Baker's Mania, everyone will finally have the life they deserve! One touch with my rolling pin and you'll be under my control. Does anyone dare challenge me?" she cried. No one moved.

She let off more bright sparks of lightning and they bounced harmlessly against the ceiling.

Still determined to make an impression, Baker's Mania stepped closer to the class and swung the rolling pin. The front row ducked in anticipation. Overall, it would have been a terrifying scene… until the rolling pin flew out of her hand and hit the opposite wall with a comical *smack*.

Chat Noir almost wanted to laugh - this villain was trying so hard to be terrifying. She'd done exactly zero harm, besides simply scaring people and perhaps damaging some drywall. Even her lightning seemed carefully controlled to be a visual distraction rather than a weapon. But why?

Instead of charging in as he normally would, Chat's curiosity got the better of him. He leaned inconspicuously against the doorway, crossed his arms, and simply watched. He wasn't even sure this was Hawkmoth's handiwork. True, most of the akumatized victims were rather incompetent anyway, but this was different. Baker's Mania seemed to be a self-made antagonist. She had the class under control for now, but no one had been transformed into a croissant or minion anything. They were just an audience to a act.
But...why would anyone pretend to be akumatized? It made no sense.

Chat's logic circled backward again. The akuma just had to be real, he thought. Hawkmoth must have been low on options for victims today or something.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Marinette's seat was empty. She'd never miss class if she could help it. They had a quiz today.

Chat looked back at Baker's Mania, and something about her made him stand up a little straighter. She had the same black hair, the same blue eyes...and the more he thought about it, Marinette did work in her parent's bakery...which would explain the costume. That meant Baker's Mania was...

Marinette?

So she'd finally been akumatized.

Chat had been expecting it for a long time. Nearly everyone in their class had been used by Hawkmoth at some point, with the exception of Marinette and...well, him.

Now Adrien was the only person left. This hadn't occurred to him until this point, but now worry began to climb up from his stomach into his throat. Once Alya's collage was complete, he'd really stand out in his normal clothes. He'd be an anomaly, and that often started rumors.

And what would you do to keep everyone from figuring out your secret? Plagg asked wisely.

Chat didn't have to answer his kwami – the answer was obvious. He'd stage his own akuma attack to get everyone off his back.

Wait a moment...

In a flash, the arrival of Baker's Mania made perfect sense. If he was right, and he really did not want to be right, then Marinette was faking an akuma attack for a very specific reason.

Plagg, he thought, could Marinette be Ladybug?

His kwami hesitated for a bit too long. Maybe. Maybe not.

If she is, I don't know what I'm going to do.

Yes, you do. Don't kid yourself.

Plagg, I don't think you understand. If I'm right, this changes everything.

It doesn't have to.

How is it that you can be so infuriatingly uncomplicated?

Adrien, I live for two things: the balance of the universe and the succulence of cheese. There's nothing to complicate those matters. Not even pretty girls. You'd be much better off just getting over your fears and being happy. You like Ladybug. You like Marinette. If they're one and the same, it makes things easier, not harder.

Plagg made a good point. But as Chat stared with wide green eyes at Baker's Mania, his path forward lay before him with terrifying simplicity.

There was one way to find out for sure if he was right. If she was wearing Ladybug's earrings, she
was the real deal. And Chat Noir was probably the only one who knew what to look for: five spots in a specific pattern. All the fan-made earrings people bought online neglected the center spot. If the center spot was there...Baker's Mania was Marinette, and Marinette was Ladybug. Which either meant Adrien's life would become even more incredible, or it would be over.

There was no use waiting any longer. If he didn't act now, Chat would change his mind. He left the sanctuary of the doorway, rolled across the floor, and at once posed in a crouched stance at the feet of Baker's Mania. Upon seeing him, her face did nothing to hide her panic.

One glance at her earrings revealed the truth, and it almost kept Chat from getting back up again. His adrenaline turned against him, freezing his muscles and locking his face into an expression of wonder.

Baker's Mania looked down at him and said with tremulous bravado, "You're no match for me. I must free those enslaved by work, even the superheroes! Give me your Miraculous!"

One glance at the rest of the class waiting eagerly for him to vanquish the threat jolted Chat back into action. He couldn't uncover Ladybug's secret in front of everyone - he needed to do something.

"Never," Chat declared, playing along. He swung his baton lightly and knocked the rolling pin from her hands. "Ladybug will have to purify your akuma, of course, but I can handle you until she arrives. You and me, one on one." He tilted his head toward the office. "Miss Mania, let's say we move this to a more private venue and let this class get back to learning geometry?"

Puzzled relief flooded Marinette's eyes, but her face remained a villain's mask.

Taking that as a yes, Chat swept her into his arms until her arms were pinned to her sides. Thankfully, Marinette had the forethought to pretend to struggle. It was lucky she wasn't putting up a real fight, for something about holding Marinette – Ladybug – made Chat feel slightly weaker than normal. If she'd really wanted to escape, he'd be swooning too much to actually keep her restrained.

He carried her into the office and closed the door behind them. Once they were alone, he whispered, "I know you're Marinette. I'm here to help you, but to get out of this, we'll have to make noises like we are fighting so no one gets suspicious."

She looked confused but nodded in understanding, then picked up a stapler and threw it at the adjacent wall with a yell. On the other side of the door, the class cheered at the smashing sound. Chat nodded in approval.

"What," he continued, "were you thinking? You could have blown your cover to everyone. You took a huge risk, Ladybug."

"I-who? What? I'm not...I'm not Ladybug..."

Even as she said this, it was easier to see Ladybug's mannerisms in Marinette. She took a step back and pushed a strand of hair behind her ear like she always did when she was nervous. Even her fingers were shaking, as they typically did when she was flushed with adrenaline.

He just stared at her, waiting for her to drop the act. He crossed his arms, and finally, she cracked.

"Fine. How did you know? How long have you-"

"Today," he said. "Why else would you stage an obviously fake akuma attack, other than to keep your friends from suspecting you are Ladybug? I would have done the same. In fact, I probably
should still do that."

"Was it obvious the attack was fake?" She put a hand to her forehead in concern.

Chat paused before answering to pick up the desk chair and ram it against the door. "Take that, Baker's Mania! There's no way you'll win this fight. All your ideas are a little half-baked if you ask me," he shouted.

Then, he turned back to face Marinette and said in a near-whisper, "No, it wasn't that obvious. I just know what to look for. And Ladybug hadn't shown up, which wasn't like her."

"I had a plan," she interrupted. "I was going to make them chase me into this office; then I'd break the rolling pin, transform, and pretend I'd vanquished myself as Ladybug. You just arrived too early."

"Oh, and you had complete control over that situation before I got here?" Chat raised his eyebrows. "You were about as frightening as a puppy. The class wasn't scared, they were confused."

"You're angry," she noted, her eyes widening. "Is it because you know who I am now, or because I tried to stage my own akuma attack?"

"Neither. Both." He spun in a circle, pressing his fingers to his temples. "I-I'm not...angry. I don't know. I'm not saying I don't care who you are when you're not Ladybug. Because I do. But I'm just...worried because I care about you and you almost ruined things for yourself. If you thought your cover was going to be blown, why didn't you ask me to help you? I could have been in on it from the beginning, instead of finding out this way. Don't you trust me by now?"

Marinette held up a finger and said, "Hold on." She threw a cup full of pencils to the floor, loudly boasting, "You're no match for my lightning, Chat Noir!"

The skittering sound of rolling pencils made the class clap and shout encouragements to the feline hero, who cupped his hands around his mouth and replied, "We'll see about that! I've been told my personality is electric!"

When he turned back to Marinette, she soberly answered his question. "I do trust you, Chat, but I didn't want you to have to know my identity. It's stupid, but I really do care what everyone thinks of me. What you think of me. If you knew I was Marinette, I was worried you'd think I wasn't the confident, cool person you've always known. This shy, awkward side of me isn't one I'm that proud of."

"How can you say that? You share so many of Ladybug's amazing traits just by being yourself. You're clever, excellent in high-pressure situations like this one, and so kind and understanding. In fact, I'm shocked no one figured it out sooner. I can't believe I didn't. You've been fluttering around me this whole time, yet I never saw more than I was expecting to see. My vision was clouded."

He would have kept talking, but Marinette seemed to have stopped listening. She was distracted, with her eyes focused on his costume. She put out a hand, but instead of patting his shoulder like he hoped she would, she poked one finger into the leather and frowned.

"What?" he asked.

"You're dry," she frowned. "It's raining outside. If you'd arrived here from somewhere else, you would have been using your baton to travel and you wouldn't have had an umbrella. You would have been soaked, but your hair isn't even wet. So that means you were already inside the building. You go to my school."
Chat closed his eyes. Always the eye for detail, that Ladybug. She'd was about to figure him out.

It was only fair. A secret for a secret.

"I must know you..." she mused. "I do, don't I?"

She stepped a little closer, and suddenly the office felt very quiet and very small. Chat's eyes flew back open, and he barely breathed under her deductive scrutiny.

"There's really only one person who looks enough like you," she murmured. "And he hasn't been akumatized yet either. We're the only ones left..."

When she finally figured it out, her mouth made a perfect "o" and she stepped back again.

"This whole time? You've been Adrien, this whole time?"

"Yes."

Her lips made a fine, pressed line.

Now it was Chat's turn to say, "You're angry. Aren't you." It wasn't a question. It was an observation.

She held up a conspiratorial "wait a second" finger again and smashed a crystal paperweight onto the floor. The sound of breaking glass prompted Chat to say loudly, "Ladybug! Took you long enough to break through the right window. At yeast you're here now! Help me defeat Baker's Mania!"

"Neither of you scrawny heroes can defeat me!" Marinette cried dramatically. She picked up a clipboard and threw it at the door. It clattered to the floor and the class fell silent, waiting for the final showdown with bated breath. Marinette did not disappoint. "Oh no, not my rolling pin!" she yelped, slamming it onto the floor so it broke in two.

As the class gave muffled whoops of celebration, the two heroes faced each other, expressions becoming serious again.

"I'm...not angry at you," Marinette whispered. "I'm...embarrassed we had to find out this way. I'm embarrassed you didn't get someone better than me."

"I have the best partner around. Who are you kidding?" he smiled.

They could have kept talking for hours, but knew they didn't have the time to discuss it here and now. They were keeping the class waiting too long. It was time to end this akuma disaster.

"Thank you," Marinette sighed, staring down at her shoes. "Look. I think we should wait and talk about this in depth later, when we're actually alone. Right now, I need to clear my name, and fast. We, ah, have an audience still, and I'd like our meaningful discussion to not be this rushed. Can we bookmark this?"

"Yeah, you're right," sighed Chat. "Are we good, though? You and me?"

"We're good." She picked up the broken rolling pin and faced the door. "Okay, let's do this. Tikki, spots on!"
Hawkmoth sat forward in his chair and paused the TV, completely bemused.

"Nooroo, did I sleepwalk last night and akumatize someone without realizing it? Again?"

"N-no," stuttered the kwami.

"Then how can we explain Marinette Dupain-Cheng, who was just akumatized and defeated by Ladybug and Chat Noir? I didn't sanction this!"

After a few minutes of deep thought and staring at Marinette's frozen frame on the TV screen, the most likely explanation unfolded before him, and he began to smile.

"How interesting. Baking evidently isn't Ms. Dupain-Cheng's only extracurricular activity. Her Miraculous is as good as mine."

A week later, Adrien was finally akumatized. As a villain called Model Behavior, he sought to destroy half the wardrobe department at his father's office the night before a show. He was protesting the restrictive outfits and demanding more comfortable fabrics.

Luckily, Ladybug arrived just in time to defeat Model Behavior singlehandedly and save the priceless clothes. Chat Noir arrived late and proceeded to shelter Adrien from the publicity.

No one noticed anything out of the ordinary about the attack. But, then again, no one saw Adrien and Marinette do a knuckle-bump in the alley behind the Agreste mansion afterward either.

"Pound it," they said in unison.

"Our identities are safe for now," Adrien smiled. "I appreciate your help in planning my akuma attack, My Lady."

"Anytime," said Marinette, blushing pink. "I agree – it's nice to not have to worry as much about being discovered. Our alibis are foolproof - how could anyone be in two places at once? No one knows what we did or who we really are."

A small distance away, in a dark, circular room, Hawkmoth watched the two of them on his screen with narrowed eyes.

"Oh, but I do, Ladybug. I do."

Chapter End Notes

I received a lot of requests for a sequel to this chapter when I first published it, so I wrote an expansion of it in 2018 to resolve the cliffhanger. I'll mention in the notes when we get there, but don't worry, this isn't the last word!

Update: See Chapter 51: Two Faced for the expansion to this chapter.
Save the Last Dance for Me

Chapter Summary

Save the Last Dance for Me: A Ballroom Dance AU in which Ladybug and Chat Noir are the headliners for the Miraculous Dance Club, and Hawkmoth leads a rival dance company called Papillon. When Hawkmoth stages a coup, the gloves - and masks - start coming off. It's time for Chat and his Lady to face the music.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I am not a ballroom dancer, and I apologize if anything I've written is incorrect. I've done my best, but I'm no expert.

The best part about Friday nights was the Miraculous Dance Club behind the old antiques shop. Anyone who knew anything about ballroom dance was there religiously, dressed in the finest costumes and dusted generously with glitter. The attendees brought their energy, their stretched muscles, and their best shoes. Some brought friends, and others brought their favorite pens in hopes of getting autographs from Ladybug and Chat Noir, the famous Miraculous dancers.

Somehow, being in that chandelier-lit building washed all the problems of the world away. No one was in bad spirits; the air had a purifying quality to it that cleared away anger and distress. Foes became friends, even if just for a little while.

In fact, there was rarely an instant of drama within those walls - a fine feat considering the primary club attendees were teenagers. Perhaps this was because of the magic of Miraculous, although many scoffed that magic was only a figment of television.

Regardless of the origin, there was something about the atmosphere - beyond the hairspray particulates and polished wood floors - that made the place irresistible. Many speculated it was the handsome DJ, Nino, who always played the perfect beats. Some even thought it was the elusive blogger, FoxyWifi, who showed up every Friday night to write about Miraculous, but no one could put a face to her name. A few simply liked dressing up and finding a cute partner for the evening.

However, most agreed that the main reason people kept showing up to the Miraculous Dance Club was the primary dancing couple: Ladybug and Chat Noir. No one knew who they really were thanks to tasteful masks at the insistence of Grand Master Fu, but if people did, these two would have never had a moment's peace from their adoring fans. Those masks were probably lifesavers now, but they were contentious at first. No one, not even Ladybug and Chat themselves had expected to need them. Ladybug herself certainly hadn't wanted to wear one.

In fact, their first day training at Miraculous, when Fu told them to show up in masks to hide their identities, Ladybug had been irritated. One look at Chat, on the other hand, told Fu he was already head-over-heels for his partner; he'd do whatever Fu wanted in order to spend more time with her.

"I can't dance with someone I don't trust," Ladybug protested, oblivious to how much Chat was
blushing. "I need to see his face."

Chat pulled his eye mask lower so it nearly covered his nose. "I agree, but my identity is complicated - what if you don't want to dance with me once you know my name? Maybe we should wait. Maybe Master Fu is right."

Fu replied, "The mask is a training exercise. All the new dancers use them at first."

"None of the other dancers wear them," Ladybug pointed out.

"We haven't had new company dancers in a long time," Fu answered. "The mask is a device to protect you from your audience and your partner while you're training. That's the great thing about Miraculous - you can grow and improve without the pressure of others. You can be yourself. It preserves a boundary between what you do and who you are."

At this, she conceded. "When do we get to take them off and tell each other who we are?"

"I don't think it'll take that long for one of us to figure out the other person's identity," Chat said thoughtfully. "I think I'll be pretty motivated to figure it out, at least. If that happens, is that okay?"

Fu smiled. "Careful not to get too curious. You'll know when the timing is right. Things like this have a way of sorting themselves out."

The sorting out was taking a long time, but the past two years hadn't been without a few close calls. Luckily, FoxyWifi was the only outsider to come close to exposing them. She discovered Ladybug's school textbook during a dance fundraiser at the museum, deducing her age and what school she went to. But the rest of that lead was shut down after the Grand Master Fu made an impassioned plea at a press conference, insisting his star performers remain anonymous.

When asked about it in a FoxyWifi blog interview, he said, "I do not teach ballroom dance for the public to speculate on the dancers themselves - I teach it to help the dancers be a conduit for a greater art. With power comes responsibility and pressure, which is easier for these two to handle without everyone knowing their names."

But that wasn't the only reason. Grand Master Fu also kept Ladybug and Chat Noir, the jewels of his club, under wraps because of Papillon, the rival dance studio across town. Its dancers, called The Akumas, constantly sought to upend Miraculous' long history of heroic performances and flocking crowds.

In the world of dance, he who had the best dancers held the key to power - and Gabriel Agreste, owner of Papillon, hoped to one day become master of all Paris. He was already so close. In addition to the Akumas, his son Adrien could definitely give Chat Noir a run for his money on the competition scene. But, somehow, Adrien was too…distracted to ever truly devote the practice time it would take to destroy Miraculous in competition.

So, months ago, Gabriel had taken matters into his own hands. Under the stage persona of Hawkmoth, he began investigating Miraculous in hopes of recruiting Chat Noir and Ladybug for his own studio.

Accomplishing a takeover would be easier if he had them on his side. If he could steal their talent from Miraculous through blackmail, the game could be won. People would respect Papillon, and the club-goers who wanted some of the magic of ballroom to rub off on them would surely follow Chat and Ladybug anywhere.

Hawkmoth could almost hear the applause. He was getting impatient. Tonight he would need to
focus on the prize. If he could embarrass them into leaving Miraculous, they'd be his for the taking.

He called another practice for his Akumas. They had a lot of work to do.

That night, the Akumas from Papillon's competitive ballroom company slipped into the crowd to watch Ladybug and Chat perform. They dispersed and mingled for an hour, grabbing half-moon goblets full of sparkling water, adjusting their costumes, and partnering up to join the sway of the music. The elevated stage at the front of the ballroom was lit with warm yellow spotlights, and the air smelled like freshly ironed shirts and the tang of hairspray. Ladybug and Chat Noir were dancing a lively set of routines, dressed in black and red costumes and wearing their signature masks.

Everything was going smoothly until they began a lovely foxtrot. At least, it would have been lovely if they'd been able to finish it.

Halfway through the dance, the Akumas stormed the stage.

DJ Nino stopped the music and removed his orange headphones, looking intrigued but irritated that his mix hadn't been fully appreciated. FoxyWifi raised her phone to get a better angle for her live-stream. The other dancers in the club silenced, the adrenaline souring in the air. The magic of Miraculous seemed suddenly...threatened.

The Akumas finished lining up on the stage facing Ladybug and Chat Noir, then paired up and threatened to steal the show. Nino, taking advantage of the silence, set up a beat on loop and shouted into the microphone, "Dance off!" The audience roared in agreement, chanting "Dance off! Dance off! Dance off!"

A fast-paced swing began to play, and everyone took up their partners. Chat looked nervous to be facing down six pairs of intimidating and menacing dancers, but Ladybug touched his face lightly with her red gloved hand and turned him back to face her. Focusing on each other, looking only into each other's vulnerable eyes, they began to move.

Fu watched it all from the second floor balcony; he had never been so impressed with their composure and improvisation. Clearly the audience felt the same way – they went wild with every lift, turn, and stunt the pair performed. After a few songs played, a few of the Akumas left the stage - some got tired, some got annoyed that Chat and Ladybug hadn't given up yet. But when all the Akumas finally made their exit and a new challenging pair ascended to the stage, Chat faltered for a moment. Everyone knew why.

This new couple featured Hawkmoth himself. The most famous and ruthless dancer of Papillon approached, straightened his tie, and smiled icily behind his white winged mask.

Fu gripped the wood railing of the balcony. He knew all of Hawkmoth's tricks - the man was always up to no good. At the 2015 Stoneheart Invitational Competition, Hawkmoth had secretly paid a famous dancer named Ivan to join Papillon, thereby completely destroying any chances of Miraculous winning. Thanks to Ivan's skills, the Akumas won in every event that year except the one Chat and Ladybug competed in, and they'd almost won that one too. Hawkmoth had smiled smugly during the entire award ceremony, and Fu had never forgotten that face.

Knowing they were about to compete against Hawkmoth himself made even Fu nervous, and, understandably, Chat Noir panicked. When a smooth piano tune began to trickle in from the speakers, he stumbled through a few steps, missed the change in tempo, and almost lost his grip on Ladybug as he spun her with a flare of her polka-dotted skirt.
The club started to boo, and Fu thought Miraculous might suffer a loss against Papillon right then and there. But then Ladybug grabbed Chat's hand with a steely, inspiring determination, and he recovered himself.

In fact, he recovered so well that he did something unimaginable.

As he pulled Ladybug back from a turn and she spun into his arms, he pressed his hand to her lower back, dipped her backward, and kissed her.

Passionately, on stage, in front of everyone. He'd never done that before.

And though Fu saw her shoulders tense up in surprise at first, the rest of her eventually relaxed into the embrace, and she kissed him back.

Passionately, on stage, in front of everyone. She'd never done that before either.

Needless to say, that kind of interaction between the two partners was a kind of power greater than anything Hawkmoth and his partner had to offer. Chat and Ladybug won by a landslide of audience applause.

Fu crossed his arms proudly. Miraculous was back to business as usual, it would seem.

Backstage that night, however, Ladybug and Chat Noir fought in the dressing room, surrounded by orb-bordered mirrors that reflected their false faces.

"How could you use romance to win? That wasn't fair," Ladybug said, yanking bobby pins from her two pigtails.

Her partner paused in the middle of taking off his narrow black tie to chuckle. "We were literally competing against the king of cheating, and we were losing. Of course I didn't play fair."

"No," she'd said softly, watching him in the mirror. "I meant it wasn't fair to us. Did you mean it at all, or was that kiss just for the audience?"

Chat turned slowly to face her. "How can you even ask that?" His voice was oddly quiet. "I thought you knew."

"Knew what?"

"I've loved you for years. That kiss was real. Effective, yes. But real."

"No, you haven't loved me. You've loved your masked dance partner, who's just a character I created to perform. You don't even know my real name. How can you love someone without seeing their true face?"

"What do names matter? We've gotten on fine without them until now."

"Until you kissed me, that is."

"You can still love someone if you don't know their name."

"I know that, but it shouldn't be true!"

They both paused, realizing what she'd said. Of course! Chat thought. She just said the kiss hadn't been fair to us – she asked if I'd meant it at all. She has feelings for me too!
It was suddenly very warm in the dressing room. "You know," he began, shrugging out of his suit jacket, "I don't think you're actually mad I kissed you. I think you're just surprised you enjoyed it."

It was Ladybug's turn to splutter. "N-no way. What makes you think that?"

"Because your mask can't hide everything. I could see the way you were smiling when I opened my eyes again. And your eyes were still closed. You were…savoring it, same as me."

"You…you don't know anything. I was acting." She turned back to face the mirror and removed her gloves.

"No," he said, all trace of satisfaction gone from his face. He wasn't kidding around anymore. "You weren't. You can't act, and we both know it. I know you're the exact same person on that stage as you are in real life."

"I…"

Chat stood very still. "Ladybug, do you love me too?"

"I…"

He approached until she was barely an inch away from him. He could feel her exhaling slowly; she was trying not to freak out.

He'd make it easier for her, he decided. Go for the humor. He took a few steps back to give her space. "Why wouldn't you love me? We're made for each other. You're lucky, I'm charming. You're beautiful, I'm cute. You kissed me, I kissed you. I know you, Ladybug. Just say it – say you do." He was smiling – his voice was light. He could have been half-joking, if she wanted to take it that way.

Ladybug frowned. She seemed to have lost the ability to form words. She glanced around for something to throw, and finally settled for a bobby pin. She chucked one at him, and it bounced pointlessly off his forehead.

Apparently she was not taking it that way.

His green eyes sparked with amusement, but he kept his grin in check, waiting to see if she'd yell at him. She didn't, so he continued.

"It's okay if you do. Love me, I mean. Falling in love with a guy in a cat mask doesn't mean it doesn't count. Just say it."

"Just," Ladybug finally said. "Give me a minute." She closed her eyes and stayed quiet for easily three sets of eight-counts. Not that Chat noticed, or anything.

"I'm sorry. I just hate admitting I was wrong about needing to see your face to dance with you. To…love you," she finally said, her eyes still closed. "Even part of me still thinks this can only work if we take off our masks."

"I can do that."

Her eyes flew open to reveal that deep blue. "But…I don't know if I can. I'm so used to having a mask on around you that I don't know who to be without it," she said slowly. "I might need some time."

"I'll help you. What are partners for?" he asked, then held out his arm. Ladybug took it.
"Next rehearsal. Can we agree? We'll do it then?"

"Whenever," he said.

"I'm sorry about the bobby pin, by the way."

Chat gave her a sly look. "Will you kiss it and make it better?"

"Don't push it. I have more where that one came from."

At their next rehearsal, Chat Noir counted to eight over and over under his breath as he and Ladybug ran through their dance for next Friday night. For this slower number, she was pressed blissfully close to him, and his hand was resting gently on her waist. Master Fu stood in the empty shadows beyond the bright glow of the stage lights, watching them mark the routine without doing all the lifts and jumps. Once done full-out for the actual performance, the routine would be beautiful.

Ladybug flourished in her partner's arms. She held herself carefully poised when it was her turn to show off in the piece, but Chat seemed to be able to get her to dance more fluidly when they were dancing this close together.

Chat was always an emotive dancer - his expression never failed to match the tone of the music. But with each romantic swell of the violin coming from Chat's portable iPod speakers, he looked at Ladybug like she was the music. Sometimes during important performances he'd put on a show for the audience, but not always. The love on his face right now was real.

Today, Ladybug reciprocated the look on his face, a rare phenomenon Fu only saw when she forgot she was in rehearsal and felt like she was alone with Chat. Moving contrary to the choreography, she touched his cheek with one hand, gently pushing her fingers under his black mask as if to ask if she could remove it. Everything, even the music seemed to swoon in anticipation.

Chat stopped dancing and Ladybug clung to him, her skirt still swaying as if oblivious to her frozen stance.

It was time for their masks to come off, and all three of them knew it at the same time.

"Ready?" the two dancers whispered to each other. Fu clasped his hands together in silent delight.

When they finally stood, faces exposed for the first time, the first thing Adrien did was blush. The first thing Marinette did was smile.

And the first thing Fu did was give them a standing ovation.
Forget Me Not

Chapter Summary

Forget Me Not: In which the magic of Miraculous literally makes it impossible for Chat and Ladybug to remember their partner's identity, should they ever discover it. In which Ladybug and Chat Noir decide to test this magic for loopholes. In which these purposeful reveals are constantly forgotten by them, but not by the fandom...

Chapter Notes

This is one of the sillier ones, written for Valentine's Day a few years back. Hope you like it!

The magic of Miraculous is wise, complex, and benevolent.

Sometimes, however, there are rules to that magic. Ladybug and Chat Noir are both subject to such rules, with both good and bad consequences.

The day Marinette met with Master Fu to return a very valuable book about Miraculouses, she received a crash course in these rules. Most of them were simple enough: a Miraculous cannot be refused, it cannot be destroyed, and the bond between the item and its kwami is unbreakable.

However, there was one that stood out to Marinette. According to the book, the magic protected Miraculous owners from each other: it was impossible for Chat to discover her identity and remember it. She would still have to conceal her identity from everyone else, but if Chat accidentally found out, he'd forget what he knew within twenty seconds. The same was true for her: if she happened to find out who Chat was, she'd forget it almost immediately. At the time, she'd liked this clause – it was a bit of insurance that hers – and her partner's – curiosity would never have lasting consequences. When she talked about this rule with Chat, he'd agreed.

But after six months of knowing this magic was in place, it began to torture both of them. How many times had there been a reveal and they'd forgotten it? Had they ever even needed their memories to be altered? There was no way to know. And then, even more terrible, what if they wanted to reveal themselves to each other, but couldn't? There didn't seem to be a way around the magic.

Chat and Ladybug decided, after much deliberation, to attempt to find a loophole. It was time for them to know everything about each other, and they were worried the protection of their identities was eventually going to do more harm than good. They had nothing to lose. Unless you counted their memories.

They attempted everything they could manage without tipping off others to their secrets. They even made a list of what they'd already tried at first, but then they both lost their lists, and then they forgot they'd made the lists. They made the lists again, and then the cycle repeated.

As of now, they still have no solution – they have not remembered a single reveal, only that they
want to share their identities, and that they should keep trying.

Fu knows of their plans, of course, and while he discourages their actions, the whole thing still is rather funny. He collects their lists as they "lose" them, and locks them away in his shop, afraid someone else might happen upon them.

And so, from the hidden archives of Ladybug and Chat Noir's attempted reveals, we present the following.

1. Two Truths And A Lie

"Two truths and a lie. You first," said Ladybug, sitting across from Chat Noir on the brown leather sofa. They each propped their backs against an armrest, and their feet almost touched at the center cushion.

"Do you want me to start with something small to build up to this, or should we just go for the identities right away?"

"Just go for it. It'll be a miracle if we remember it anyway."

After a pause, Chat gave her a cunning grin and said, "Okay, then. One: I'm actually Chloe Bourgeois. Two: I'm actually Adrien Agreste. Three: I love you."

This was not at all what Ladybug was expecting. "That's not fair," she said. "You're supposed to only pick one lie. You obviously can't be Chloe," she began, and Chat agreed immediately. "However," she continued, "I know for a fact you neither love me nor are Adrien Agreste."

Chat shifted uncomfortably on the couch. "I only told you one lie."

Ladybug blinked. "You can't have. They can't both be true."

"Well, they are, so…"

"Well, then that would mean you're Adrien and you love…" She trailed off, a grin spreading across her face. "No way."

"And now you believe me," Chat smiled. "Let's see if you can hang on to this awesome realization for longer than a few seconds. I'm timing you."

"Right, okay, good," Ladybug nodded. She grabbed Chat's hand and squeezed it. "I'm really sorry," she said. "I would never have guessed. I hope I remember, because I feel the same and I wish I had time to, well, really tell you…"

"I know."

Ladybug blinked. "What were we talking about?"

"Aaaaand it's gone," Chat sighed, stopping his timer. "Couldn't hurt to try."

"I really thought I'd remember that time."

"Me too."

"So…is it my turn then?" she asked. "Or do you want to tell me more about how you loooove me?"
"You remember that part?" Chat looked shocked. "Man, I was hoping that would get wiped too."

"Yes, well...I think I only forget things pertaining directly to us finding out our names. We'll probably forget we played two truths and a lie too, once we're finished. But knowing you love me makes it a little more interesting. I love you too, whoever you are." She smiled and playfully punched his shoulder. "Should I tell you my two truths and a lie, then?"

"Yeah, sure."

Needless to say, Chat didn't remember either.

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2. Names Are Hard

"I think we need to be as obvious as possible," Chat declared one evening when they met at the Eiffel Tower. "We should just tell each other. Maybe play two truths and a lie."

"But we tried that already, I think. I don't know. I can't find my list. I just have this feeling." Ladybug gazed out at the horizon, trying to remember.

"Okay, so should we write down are names and switch papers? Maybe it'll work if it's not spoken out loud."

"Yeah, let's try that. Here, I have some in my bag from earlier – I had to take votes for student government and I have extra ballots," she said.

They wrote their names down on paper scraps and traded.

"Well, this is awkward," said Ladybug immediately. There was no time to waste. "I knew you loved me already, but now you know I have a huge crush on you. Well...on Adrien. Who is you. I mean, you are he. I mean him. Umm..."

"Marinette! Of course! Now I understand! You only stutter around Adrien, but it's because you like him. I mean me-self. Myself. I mean me."

Ladybug pointed at him, eyes wide. "You just did it too!"

"We're really a mess, aren't we?" said Chat.

"Pretty much."

Somehow, when they looked down, the scraps of paper they'd been holding were gone. "Do you remember what we were doing?" Chat asked.

"Nope."

"I just remember one thing."

"What?"

"You loooooove me." He nudged her with his elbow.

"Oh, shut up."

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3. Puns:
"Okay," said Ladybug. "I have an idea." They were sitting on the edge of a rooftop watching the sunrise.

"Do tell," said Chat, swinging his legs.

"Well, I know you're really good at puns. So maybe you should make puns to literally everyone you meet this week, and if you make them to me when I'm not Ladybug, I'll know it's you. Maybe when we're not wearing our costumes and it's just some harmless puns, the magic won't work."

"What if I'm not the only person who makes puns? How will you know for sure it's me?"

"Yours are very distinctive," Ladybug said with a grin. "They're just so...bad."

"Just for that, I'll take you up on your offer. I'll be as punny as can be. You'll actually regret asking me to do this."

"The sacrifices we make for love," she sighed dramatically, then yelled up at the sky, "I just want to know Chat's real name, is that so hard?"

Later that day:

"You were spot on, Marinette."

"What?" Her head jerked up in surprise.

"Whoa, don't bug out. I just have your statistics quiz," Adrien said innocently as he held up a stack of papers. "Congratulations, you aced it."

"Oh, uh, thanks," she sighed, relaxing.

"No problem. I'm glad you're doing so grade in this class. Being in class with you is really a plus."

Adrien winked at her.

Then it struck Marinette - Adrien had to be Chat. Literally no one else made puns that terrible.

"Adrien," she said curtly, and he bent closer to her desk so they could whisper. "I know you're Chat," she said.

Adrien clicked the timer on his watch. "That was quick, I was expecting to have to do this all day. So you're Ladybug. Wow. I can totally see it. Did the puns make it obvious who I was?"

"Yes. I guessed purrfectly." Not even Marinette was above making puns now. It was the only way to talk to him at this point.

"Cat's out of the bag now." Adrien leaned even closer. She could feel his whisper on her cheek.

"You're really milking this aren't you?"

"It's a-mew-sing. But I didn't start this pun war, you did."

"You're barely keeping up. Put your money where your meowth is."

At this, they both blinked - their time was up.

"What?" asked Adrien. He leaned back at once, perplexed at why his face had been so close to hers.
"Did you say something? Did you just make a pun?"
"I don't know," Marinette blushed. "Um, thanks for my quiz."

"No problem."

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4. Lucky Charm

Chat and Ladybug always dreaded Valentine's Day. Too many people got akumatized, and it was always impossible to get any peace and quiet. This year was no different. The only upside was that Ladybug and Chat divided and conquered in order to neutralize all the akumatized victims. Chat would lure all of the villains to one location, where Ladybug would pounce and purify their akumas. This had the unfortunate drawback of Chat needing to use Cataclysm frequently to distract and entrap his prey. While Ladybug purified, he'd sneak off to detransform and feed Plagg.

During the last wave of akuma swarms, Ladybug found herself singlehandedly facing no fewer than twelve villains, all of whom were cleverly trapped by Chat in a makeshift crater made from rubble from previous battles. He'd used up his Cataclysm, so he'd gone off to feed his kwami before he could return to help finish them off. The circular walls were too big for the villains to climb, but this didn't stop them from hurling weapons and enchantments at Ladybug.

"We don't believe true love exists," they shouted. "There's no proof Valentine's Day is important at all – down with romance! Down with Ladybug and Chat Noir! Down with Miraculouses!"

Thankfully, this late in the day, all the publicists had left. They'd either grown bored with covering all the fighting on live TV, been akumatized, or fled from the fury of the akuma swarm. No one was paying attention to the seemingly infinite battles anymore, not even Alya.

The absence of cameras and spectators was a relief, especially when an akuma attack was degrading quickly into a riotous, glorified protest for people with superpowers.

Ladybug was nearly at her wits end trying to keep them occupied until Chat could return from feeding his kwami and help her destroy them. She managed to break a few of the easier objects by hurling her yoyo at high speeds, then cleansing the subsequent fleeing akumas, but the trickier ones still remained. Most of those objects were guarded by rock candy spikes or gigantic cupids with deadly bows and arrows.

When almost twenty minutes had passed and the villains had started climbing on top of each other to scale the rubble wall, Ladybug began to worry. In desperation, she called, "Lucky Charm!" and waited for some kind of red polka-dotted object to fall from the sky.

What landed in her outstretched arms was none other than Adrien Agreste, who was holding what looked like a tiny black cat in one hand and a slice of Camembert in the other. He looked extremely confused.

She stared at him in complete bewilderment. "What am I supposed to do with this?" she asked aloud.

"How did I get here?" He paused as his green eyes found Ladybug's. As he gained awareness of what was going on, he glanced down at the cat and blushed until his face was nearly the color of her suit.

She followed his gaze. "Is that…a kwami?" she asked.

"Ah..."

Ladybug glanced back at Adrien, clearly about to make the connection between his two identities,
but was interrupted when one of the akumatized villains, Candy Crush, hurled a candy heart the size of a truck straight at her head. She ducked, still holding Adrien, and the heart zoomed by with the sound of an airplane passing overhead. A cloud of dust kicked up where it landed with a thunderous boom.

There had to be a solution that would get rid of all the villains once and for all. Somehow, Adrien was supposed to be her lucky charm…but how? She glanced around in near panic.

She needn't have worried, though. Her vision supplied her with polka-dot shaded puzzle pieces of information, just like it always did. Actually, just one puzzle piece. As she stared at Adrien, dots illuminated…well, his lips.

"No, no way," she said. But she knew she had no choice in the matter. Not when giant candy hearts threatened to flatten innocent civilians. And innocent superheroes. She had to do it. For the greater good of Paris. Yeah.

"No way what?" Adrien said, looking curious. "Did you figure out who I am?"

"Yes, and I'm kind of freaking out about that. Because what I have to do next is something I've wanted to do for a really long time."

"What?"

"Just…okay." She bent and whispered in his ear. "My name is Marinette Dupain-Cheng. I've had a crush on you ever since we met, and now that you know who I am, I apologize in advance for what I'm about to do," she said.

And then she kissed him.

The effect was instantaneous. At the sight of the two of them kissing, the villains simultaneously dropped various items and crushed them, releasing the akumas within them. The sight of love like that on Valentine's Day was enough to melt their hearts and dissuade them from following Hawkmoth's orders.

Ladybug ended the kiss with a dazed, yet slightly impressed expression on her face. She set Adrien down, where he swayed a little on his feet. Then, their time ran out and only the ghosts of forgotten names remained.

While she purified the akumas, repaired the damage, and escorted the victims away, Adrien transformed back into Chat and sat down on a nearby bench. He was still reeling - I just kissed Ladybug.

When she returned and they were finally, wholly alone, he stood up to face her.

"You missed it," she said. "I kissed Adrien." Her earrings began their warning beep.

Chat decided to take a chance. "Actually, you kissed me."

"But then," she began, and then she frowned. "I kissed…You're Adrien?" Her earrings beeped again, more urgently.

"Yeah."

"I'd have to see that to believe it."
Adrien obliged immediately. Ladybug sat down on the bench, and her earrings protested – the beep seemed to scream *run!*

But she ignored it and let the transformation expire. Then, as if they weren’t superheroes desperately in need of food and a good wash, Marinette and Adrien sat down on the bench, dumbfounded.

"Well, this is a small world," said Adrien. It was a grand understatement.

"Too bad we're probably going to forget this. I kind of liked kissing you."

"Right back at you. You know, we have time – we could try it again," he said, smiling. "Maybe if we keep kissing past our time limit, we'll remember."

And so they did. It was just as marvelous the second time, and it was definitely longer than their time limit.

"Wait, wasn't I just talking to Chat?" Marinette asked when they broke apart. "How did I end up..."

He nodded slowly. "And I thought I was just talking to Ladybug."

They both narrowed their eyes, realizing the obvious.

"We forgot again, didn't we? This whole reveal thing is getting kind of old, Chat," said Marinette. She’s Ladybug, Adrien had to remind himself. It felt like he’d already known that, somehow. How many times had he found out and forgotten?

He laughed. "You know, we may forget again, but I think if we tried kissing again, it might jog our memory."

"Let's try it. An experiment?"

"The best kind."
Chapter Summary

Home: A Cinderella AU...kind of. There's the usual cast of characters, but anything where Chloe's the fairy godmother is bound to be a bit out of the ordinary.

When Adrien's father grounded him, it wasn't exactly a surprise.

He'd been caught sneaking out his bedroom window, and got in more trouble when he didn't say where he was going. Even without Adrien confessing he was Chat Noir and that he usually snuck out to hunt akumas and see his girlfriend, he was in very hot water with his father. He was majorly grounded. Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets Dursley-style grounded. Every single window had been sealed shut by professionals hired by Nathalie, and the doors were patrolled carefully by his ape-like bodyguard. Anything substantial enough to break the window glass was confiscated. Meals were served to Adrien in his room.

Had it been any other night, Adrien wouldn't have minded a little quality alone time at home. He'd forgotten how much time he used to spend in his room back when he'd been homeschooled. Even just the rock wall and the videogames had kept him occupied for hours. Most guys would dream for a room like his.

But that was before Adrien had made friends at school. That was before he had responsibilities as Chat Noir. And it was also before Chat had started dating Marinette. Asking her out on a date had been an impulsive decision. It had sort of just…slipped out one afternoon, after she'd helped him get out of a tree. He still got stuck in them all the time when he was Chat. She'd said yes, and since then, they'd been secretly dating.

Tonight was their six month anniversary. It was also her birthday.

She was hosting a masquerade party in a nearby hotel ballroom, and Chat had promised to be there. They were planning to announce their relationship publicly after they cut the cake. And at midnight, once everyone had gone, Chat was planning on telling her his identity. Given their previous conversations, she seemed more open to it now. It had taken some time for both of them to feel comfortable with the idea of him sharing it, but the time finally felt right. It would be awesome to share his secret with somebody. With her.

But he was going to miss it all because he was locked in a mansion with his father. If there was an opposite of a wingman, Gabriel Agreste was probably it.

"Plagg, are there any exits we didn't check yet?" Adrien asked. "Is there any possible way I can sneak out? Mari's going to be so disappointed if I'm not there. What if she gets angry with me? What if someone goes to her party dressed as Chat and she thinks he's me, and then they fall in love instead? What if she breaks up with me?" He ran both hands through his hair in nervous fear.

"Quit flipping out," Plagg said, popping another wedge of Camembert into his mouth. "We've still got the attic."

"What?"
"Your room has a secret entrance to the attic. The attic has roof access. Roof means freedom."

"We have an attic?"

The kwami blinked as if realizing he'd said something he shouldn't have. "No."

"Plagg."

"Any chance you forget I said anything?"

"Not anymore! Not when I know it's the only way I get to see Marinette."

"We can't go that way – I don't know what I was thinking. Forget it."

"Come on! I've been ungracefully and dangerously jumping out my window in full view of my neighbors, when I could have used a private, safe exit through the attic. You kept this a secret?"

"Yes," Plagg answered. He seemed worried. That was…new. "For good reason."

"Why am I not supposed to know about this magical exit? Are there critters living in the attic or something? I'm not afraid of rats. Frankly, you shouldn't be either."

Plagg ignored this. "There's no persuading you not to go?"

"Nope."

"Fine…I'm probably time you saw it anyway," Plagg sighed in capitulation. "We'll have to be quick in our escape. And you better hope it is empty when we go up there."

"Why?"

Plagg didn't say anything; he didn't have to. Once Adrien climbed up his rock wall one-handed, moved one of the ceiling tiles, and ascended the hidden ladder, he discovered for himself.

The attic looked like some kind of lair. It was circular and spacious, with soft blue twilight coming from the glass ceiling. It was unfurnished, but for a chair in the middle of the room, and lots of small white fluttering things circling it.

It took Adrien a moment, but he realized they were butterflies. And not just any butterflies.

The final piece of the puzzle clicked when he realized the chair wasn't empty. Plagg gasped and dove into Adrien's jacket pocket.

"Dad?" he said before he could stop himself.

The man who turned to look at him couldn't be his father. And yet it was. He saw the same nose, the same eyes, the same expression of silent, tortured anger. This man even jumped to his feet at the sight of Adrien, and there was something more than shock at the sight of a stranger in his eyes. There was familial recognition there.

He'd responded to the word dad.

Which meant Adrien's father was Hawkmoth.

Adrien tried to back out of the room, but Hawkmoth was too quick for him. He crossed the room and gently grabbed his son's arm.
"Adrien, this isn't what it looks like," his father said.

Adrien was so shocked he blurted, "It's exactly what it looks like. You're my enemy, the enemy of Paris…you're Hawkmoth!"

"Your enemy?"

Adrenaline fogged Adrien's mind, and he transformed before he even realized he had said the words.

He stood there, as Chat Noir, staring down his father with those unnatural green eyes. "Yes," he confirmed, feeling the dread creep into his stomach. Perhaps he was going to regret this reveal.

No, not perhaps. He was definitely going to regret this reveal.

His father's eyes narrowed. He wasn't smiling. He wasn't looking at Chat the way he looked at his son. This was a colder, more calculating glare. It felt like Adrien was looking into the face of an impending storm while holding a lightning rod.

They stood staring at each other in a game of chicken where both of them waited for the other to throw the first punch.

And then the doorbell rang.

Father and son froze, their eyes torn away from each other's faces. They both knew Nathalie had the night off. One of them was going to have to answer the door.

"This isn't over," said Chat, detransforming. Hawkmoth detransformed too, and Adrien flinched at the sight of his father's unmasked face. His last hope that his father wasn't a villain evaporated in that moment.

They took the other attic entrance, which led down a rickety staircase into his father's office through an entrance concealed by a portrait of Adrien's mother. Adrien couldn't help but think she wouldn't have approved of its use.

Adrien peered into his jacket pocket at Plagg and gave him a murderous look. "You lied to me. You are going to explain everything when we get back. And I mean everything," he whispered. He couldn't stop thinking about how obvious this all was, and how he'd been too stupid to see it. And Plagg had known all along.

They walked stiffly, with Gabriel easily ten steps ahead the whole time. They were both trying to dissociate from the events that had just occurred. They both knew the importance of keeping up appearances in front of company. Masks again.

When the door swung open, Chloe stood there, tapping an impatient stiletto against the marble patio. She was wearing a black and yellow chiffon dress with a matching purse dangling from her bony arm.

At the sight of her, Adrien was so happy to see someone who could defuse the tension that he probably could have kissed her. And that was something he never would have thought was possible – most of the time the thought of kissing Chloe was just gross.

His relief must have shown on his face, because Chloe brightened considerably and gave him a mega-watt smile.

"Are you ready, or what? The party starts in, like, twenty minutes. We're going to be late!"
"You were invited to Marinette's party?" Adrien asked before he could check his surprise.

"She invited the whole class. Come on, get your stuff. Are you seriously wearing that?"

Adrien looked down at his suit. "What's wrong with this?"

"Um, everything. You don't even have a mask. Don't worry, I brought you a better outfit so we can match for the masquerade."

"He's grounded," interrupted Gabriel. He looked so out of touch with what was happening that Adrien would have laughed…if his stomach wasn't currently trying to eat itself.

"Oh, please let him go with me, Mr. Agreste. He's my date."

"I'm not-" Adrien began, but figured it would be best not to argue until later.

"-You wouldn't let a girl go to a party alone without a handsome date, would you?" Chloe continued. "Besides, we're wearing your designs – it's free advertising."

She gave him the puppy dog eyes Adrien had only ever seen her use on her father when she wanted something.

Miraculously, Gabriel cleared his throat and turned to his son. "All right, fine. You can go to this party, but you must return home by midnight. No later, understand?"

Adrien couldn't believe it. He released a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "Absolutely. Thanks, father. I'll watch the time like a hawk."

There was a seriously awkward pause, but Chloe plowed through it, unaware. "Great, thanks! Come on, Adrikins. We're going to be late. You still need to change into your new suit, but you can do that in the limo – there's a privacy screen, don't worry."

"I – thanks, Chloe." He followed her to the car, not believing his luck. "Seriously, thank you."

"Anytime. I love a good party, even if it's Marinette's." Chloe checked her phone again and fired off a few texts, probably to Sabrina.

"Especially if it's Marinette's," Adrien murmured.

He never thought he'd see the day when he'd be thrilled to be leaving his house to go on a date (a fake date) with Chloe. But if it meant he could get out of that villain fortress and see his actual girlfriend, he'd take it.

He was so pleased that he even put on the black suit and cat mask Chloe thrust into his arms.

"I modeled yours after Chat Noir," she said when he'd emerged from behind the privacy screen. He fought the urge to roll his eyes.

When they got to the party, music was blaring from the speakers and most of the guests had already shown up.

After a few minutes, Adrien spotted Marinette – she had her back turned to the door and hadn't seen him come in.

"I'll be right back, I'm not feeling well all of a sudden," said Adrien, and he left Chloe with a group
of squealing girls in bedazzled masks.

After a long search for privacy, Adrien eventually was able to transform in the shadows of a deserted hallway. When he re-entered the party as Chat Noir, lots of people screamed and tried to rush at him, but there was only one person he wanted to see. There was only one person who could make everything right side up when it felt so backwards.

He found her at the back of the room.

She was the only one not wearing a mask, and her exposed eyes widened in delight when she saw him approaching. Alya and Nino conspicuously excused themselves to "um...make sure the cake spelled Marinette's name right."

When Chat and Marinette were at last alone, he smiled for the first time all night.

A story spread around that Adrien had been at the party for a little while, but had left early complaining of a headache. Chloe didn't need to take him home anymore, so she left early with a gaggle of girls, promising a sleepover.

Relieved, Chat stayed by Marinette's side for the rest of the night, simply because he could. Because she wanted him to.

The cake was a delicious chocolate with strawberry filling. Nino's music was the perfect soundtrack to a night Chat was worried he might never have again. Every song, every dance, every word he exchanged with Marinette was fleeting and blissful.

Their announcement that they were dating went smoothly. Even Chloe seemed kind of impressed, though she tried to hide it with a well-timed sneeze. Marinette kissed him after, as he'd predicted. It felt like they were living a fairy-tale.

The party was over far too quickly. Nino's playlist, which usually felt never-ending, closed with one last remix and then he disconnected his equipment. In the resultant silence, people took off their masks, slid off their high heels, and trickled slowly out, saying their goodbyes to Marinette and Chat.

The thought of leaving now left a bad taste in his mouth. And he only had ten minutes until midnight. He'd need at least three to hop the rooftops to get home.

Seven minutes left of heaven, and then he might never see Mari again. If he wasn't dead, he was definitely grounded for eternity.

He and Mari were the only ones left in the dark ballroom now – they were sitting at the center of the wooden dance floor, and the swirling disco lights hadn't been turned off by the custodians yet. It felt like they were in their own little solar system.

Chat decided he needed to tell her the truth. It was what he'd planned, and he might never get another opportunity. When there was a lull in their conversation, he removed his hand from hers and tugged off his ring.

The transformation fell, and Plagg beached himself on the wood floor, looking exhausted. Adrien was still wearing Chloe's mask, but he smiled earnestly at Marinette. "I know we talked about it," he began, "and I think it's time you know who I am."

Marinette's blue eyes widened. "I agree! Um...sorry," she laughed. "I'm just nervous."

"So am I!" Adrien grinned wider, ready to untie his mask. "I guess I should just go for it. The truth
is, I'm-

His phone reminder gave a cruel chime. He had two minutes until he had to leave. He was about to try telling her again, but then he saw something at the far end of the room.

His father was standing in the doorway to the ballroom. He didn't move or say anything, but the message was clear. *I'm enforcing your time limit.* Marinette didn't notice him – her back was to the door.

Adrien couldn't bring himself to pour out his secret to Marinette with his father standing right there. Instead, he came up with a last-minute plan.

He pressed his paw-print ring into Marinette's hand. "I can't explain right now, I have to go. But this ring only fits me. If you don't see me for a while, find Ladybug and tell her you have this. She'll help you look for me. Do whatever it takes. Please. Find me."

His fearful eyes met hers, trying to wordlessly convey the dire circumstances he was about to face with his father. With Hawkmoth. If Mari had his ring, it would stay out of the clutches of Hawkmoth. And that meant more to Adrien than his ability to defend himself. Besides, Plagg could do with some time off from hero duty. Maybe Marinette would be nice to him while Adrien got over his anger. If Adrien survived this.

Marinette stared at him, her eyes darkening a shade. They turned steely with purpose. If Adrien hadn't been so distracted, he'd have thought she looked a lot like Ladybug.

He kissed her one last time and left far before he wanted to. His father wasn't standing in the doorway anymore – he was probably waiting outside. Sure enough, when Adrien reached the front doors, he saw the black car idling in front of the hotel.

He slid into the backseat and held his breath.

Adrien didn't show up to school the next day. Apparently he'd gone home sick from the party, but Marinette was skeptical of this rumor. Adrien hadn't even said hi to her last night, which Marinette found highly unusual. They were good friends, and he would have said goodbye before leaving, no matter how sick he was. Kind, even at his own expense. That was his way. She suspected something else was wrong.

She grilled Alya for details, but the blogger had none to report. "All anyone can talk about is you and Chat Noir," she said. "I'm glad everyone knows now – it's been so hard not reporting anything on the Ladyblog. Nino was worried he would let something slip too. Neither of us is any good at keeping secrets."

Marinette thought about Chat's ring. He'd given it to her as a way to find him. If it only fit him, she'd have to try the ring on all the guys who were at her party. That left only five: Nino, Adrien, Max, Nathanael, and Kim.

Nino actually was terrible at keeping secrets. There was no way he was Chat Noir. Marinette ruled him out at once.

She cornered Max and Kim separately throughout the day, unashamed in her pursuit. She tried the ring on both them with no luck. When they gave her bewildered, somewhat violated looks, she merely said, "It's for my next design – I'm making some rings and need a size to go off of."

By process of elimination, all answers pointed to either Nathanael or Adrien. The fact that Adrien
was missing made things more suspicious, so Marinette decided to try him first. She didn't want to bother Nathanael unless it was necessary – he seemed a bit down after she'd announced she was dating Chat last night.

Besides…Adrien's suspicious absence did raise a red flag.

After school, Marinette rang the doorbell of the Agreste residence. Nathalie answered the door, looking surprised.

"Marinette – did you have plans with Adrien this afternoon? It wasn't on his calendar."

"I need to speak to him, please," she said.

Nathalie looked uncomfortable. "He and his father have been upstairs in the office all day – I had the chef bring the meals to the door. I think they're working on a new project. It must be a big one – I heard a lot of shouting. It's all quiet now, though. I don't know if you should disturb them."

"I must. Please, it's important." She gave Nathalie her winning, Ladybug-waving-to-crowds smile, and thankfully it was enough. Marinette found herself being led into the immaculate sitting room, where she sat on a stiff white sofa and stared at the vase of orchids on the table.

"I'll get Adrien for you – please try and make your visit brief."

Marinette waited a few minutes, listening to the muffled sound of voices upstairs. It felt odd to think they were all talking about her. She peeked into her purse to make sure Tikki was ready for action, should it be required. She didn't want to tell Adrien she was Ladybug, but it might become necessary if he ended up being Chat. A secret for a secret. It was probably time, anyway.

She wondered why Chat had looked so worried before. At her party, he'd been constantly looking over his shoulder, as if expecting a villain to come out of the shadows, swinging a sword. Perhaps something was bothering him? As Ladybug, she felt like she should already know what it was. But Chat would tell her in his own time, she imagined.

That is, if she could find him. He was isolated without his ring – unable to help her, unable to contact her. She couldn't even call him to see how he was doing. What if he was in trouble? Was that why he'd asked her to look for him?

She missed his voice. His warmth. The withdrawal from him, if only for a day, was still enough to unsettle her. She desperately wanted Adrien to be Chat…but the ring was the only way to tell.

When Adrien came into the room, Marinette stood up at once. He looked terrible. He was wearing sweatpants and a tee shirt – fashion sacrilege. His hair hadn't been combed, and there were dark patches under his eyes.

"Have you been awake all night?" she asked, taken aback at his disheveled appearance. "What happened?"

"It's a long story," he said, brushing the question aside with a sweep of his hand. He crumpled into a white armchair. "What's up?"

Marinette sat down again. "I have a weird request. I…need you to try on this ring."

There was a flash of something in his eyes that might have been triumph. "Okay."

He held out his hand obediently.
"No questions?" she asked as she pulled Chat's ring from her purse.

"Too tired."

She took his hand, trying hard not to read more into the gesture. Adrien was her friend. He was her very adorable, tired friend…who had nice hands. They were warm.

He was her friend her friend her…

The ring slipped onto his finger effortlessly.

...her boyfriend. Partner. Chat was…

"Adrien?" she gasped. "I found you…you're-"

"Yeah," he smiled, but his eyes were too sad. "I was."

"Was?" She had so many other questions, but his use of past tense derailed them. What did he mean, was?

"I can't be Chat Noir anymore. I gave you the ring because I knew you'd find me, but the Miraculous isn't safe here now. I have to return it. But the Miraculous isn't safe here now. I have to return it. I just wanted to…well, I wanted to see you first. You deserve the full truth. I knew you'd come looking for me, and you'd know if anything bad happened to me. You're my good luck charm. And now that you're here…I wanted to ask you something." He closed his eyes for a long moment and breathed, then opened them again. "Marinette, do you think you'll still want to be my girlfriend if I'm not…if I can't be Chat Noir?"

"I don't care if you're Chat or not," Marinette frowned. "I care that we still feel the same way about each other. My feelings haven't changed. But why are you giving up? That's not something I thought Chat Noir would ever do!"

Adrien looked relieved at her answer, but his eyes were still dark. "I don't have a choice."

"What do you mean? What happened? Adrien, people are counting on you to be their hero – what about Ladybug? Or Paris?"

"Marinette, stop." he interrupted. His voice was sharp and ragged. "I can't because…my father is Hawkmoth."

She sat up straighter, shocked. "Whoa, what?"

"Yeah," said Adrien, rubbing his eyes. "That's about where I was last night. Needless to say, I can't have a Miraculous if my own father is trying to steal it. And he knows I'm Chat – I kind of gave it away. There's no way I can protect my ring from him."

"Adrien, not to be blunt or anything, but how are you um…alive right now?"

"My father and I have been too busy arguing. In all honesty, I think we would have really fought if Chloe hadn't come to the door like some fairy godmother, ready to take me to your party as her 'date'. She probabaly saved my life."

He continued to explain all that had transpired – the attic, Hawkmoth, the doorbell, and the party. Marinette's heart was racing so fast she could barely hear him talking. She was too busy wondering how she'd get out of this. If she was Ladybug, did that mean Hawkmoth was still after her Miraculous too? What if she had to fight her boyfriend's dad? He was sitting one floor above them
right now!

"By the time I got back that night, my father and I had calmed down a little and we decided to talk first," Adrien was saying. "It went on for hours. We yelled a lot. I was glad I didn't have my ring – that kept him from trying to take it. And, we eventually realized fighting each other with our powers would have been useless anyway. Neither of us could bring ourselves to hurt each other. We just couldn't do it."

Marinette was speechless.

"It's been a rough night," Adrien sighed, rolling his ring against his palm. "A disaster, even. It's put everyone in danger. I still haven't been able to convince my father not to continue pursuing the Miraculouses. He still wants the power it will bring him. And he won't tell me why. If he doesn't give up on that desire, Ladybug won't be safe. And personally, I don't think I have what it takes to protect her."

"Why would you say something like that?"

"Well, Plagg knew my father was Hawkmoth and never told me. He's known since my first day as Chat. And what does that say about why I was chosen? Does that mean I was picked to be Chat Noir only because I live with my own archenemy? Was it out of convenience? How do I know that I have actually earned this responsibility?"

Adrien paused and looked directly into her eyes, his face flushed with emotion. "I can't be sure that I'm good enough."

Marinette stood up again, towering over her boyfriend with a fury she hadn't realized she'd been holding in. "Adrien, I -" she began, but stopped. Her eyes drifted up to the ceiling, silently wondering if Hawkmoth was listening. She walked around the coffee table until she was right in front of Adrien, and bent to whisper in his ear.

"I'm going to get you out of here," she said, "but we have to pretend to fight and break up."

"What's the point?" he whispered back. "I can't just run away, and I can't fight my dad! I can't protect you, or Ladybug. Or me. I'm not Chat Noir anymore – a worthy Chat would have seen my father for who he really is. I'm just not good enough and we both know it."

Marinette put her hand to his cheek – she wanted to slap him but couldn't bring herself to. "Don't you dare say that. Don't you dare. You're the best partner Ladybug could ask for, and sometimes she feels like she doesn't deserve you. Don't ever think you don't matter, Adrien. You were chosen for a reason, and you can't give up now. Ladybug needs you!"

She could feel his soft exhale against her neck as he whispered, "How could you know that?"

"She…told me." Marinette stared at her shoes, hoping the lie was enough.

"She told someone how she feels about me?" The shock in his voice was obvious even though he was talking as quietly as possible. "You're lying. She would never do that. Ladybug doesn't share things with just anyone. She won't even share stuff like that with me."

"Who says I'm just anyone?" She flicked her eyes up to meet his.

Adrien stared back in surprise and hissed, "What? What does that mean?"

Marinette steeled herself. No turning back now – Chat needed more than just Mari now. If revealing
herself was what it took to get him back on his feet to face Hawkmoth, she'd do it. She closed her eyes and murmured in his ear.

"I'm Ladybug."

Adrien stopped breathing – she felt it. She couldn't wait for him to say anything in response, there was no time. "We can talk about it later after I help you escape. Right now, we need to fake our breakup. Put on your ring, hide your hands in your pockets, and then wait for me. I'm getting you out of here."

Gabriel Agreste was standing at the top of the staircase, listening to the conversation between Adrien and Marinette. At first, he'd had to strain his ears, but the voices grew steadily louder.

"I can't be sure that I'm good enough," Adrien was saying heatedly. There was a horribly long pause, and then Marinette started yelling.

"If you're going to suggest you were chosen simply because of your father, I won't hear it! If you're going to give up, maybe you're not the Chat everyone is rooting for. You don't deserve their admiration. I can't be in a relationship with someone who doesn't believe enough in his strengths to save himself. Call me when you figure things out. Until then, I can't watch this. Goodbye, Adrien."

After the front door slammed shut, Gabriel retreated from the edge of the stairs silently and returned to his desk, thinking. If Adrien had lost his best friend…his girlfriend…he'd be vulnerable. Impressionable. Hurt.

The perfect combination for an akuma to help steer his son in the right direction. Surely Adrien knew where Ladybug was – who Ladybug was. All it would take was some control, and under Hawkmoth's wing, Adrien would be handing over the ring and the earrings in no time.

He paged Nathalie; there was no time to lose.

"I need to see Adrien upstairs at once."

Adrien slouched back into the office, looking worse than ever. He seemed deflated and his skin was tinged with green. His hands were tucked in the pockets of his sweatpants, and he poured himself into one of Gabriel's antique wooden chairs.

The office had gorgeous white and gold wallpaper, with polished dark wood accents and peacock-feather pens. A massive desk held a sleek computer monitor and a few organized files on different design projects.

There was a window behind the desk that showed the star-studded black canvas of Paris at night. Gabriel turned his back to it and instead stared at his son.

"She broke up with you?" he asked, as if he didn't know.

Adrien nodded but didn't meet his eyes. "I don't think she's coming back."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Perhaps we should both get some sleep."

Adrien shook his head. "I don't trust you enough to actually believe you'll sleep. What if you try to
akumatize me?"

He was clever. Gabriel felt a surge of pride – his son would make an excellent pawn. "How can I earn your trust?"

"You can't, don't you see that? We're broken, you and me. You wouldn't want my trust anyway. It's not nearly as useful as my obedience."

Gabriel narrowed his eyes. He took a breath to make a retort…but then, something came smashing through the window behind him.

He couldn't turn around fast enough, and felt someone solid tackle him to the ground in a blur of pain and sharp glass shards. He caught a flash of black and red spots that could only be Ladybug's outfit, and felt her grab the brooch Miraculous clasped at his neck.

"NO!" he cried, but he wasn't fast or strong enough to struggle through this much pain. She'd probably cracked one of his ribs.

"Plagg, claws out! It's time to leave," cried Adrien from somewhere to his left. Gabriel scrabbled to his feet desperately. Everything throbbed.

He faced his two opponents with an exasperated expression. "How does she always save you?" he asked.

Chat and Ladybug looked at each other and grinned. Then she swung her yoyo and the end looped around a tree branch in the distance. Chat looped one arm around her waist, and raised his other in a kind of salute.

"Without your Miraculous, you're no longer a threat," he said. "But if you're as smart as I think you are, father, you won't come looking for it."

And then, like a whisper into a gust of wind, they were gone.

"More croissants?" Marinette's mother's voice called from downstairs. After taking one look at Adrien's hopeful face, Marinette called out, "Yes please!"

After a moment, Adrien said, "I'm so glad I'm not trapped in that castle anymore. I like this much better. Your room smells like cookies and you're allowed both window and roof escape access."

"Palaces are always overrated." Marinette said, resting her head on his shoulder.

"I couldn't agree more."

"What are we going to do with this Miraculous?" she asked, holding Hawkmoth's brooch in her hands as if it was a bomb.

"Nothing, for a long time, I hope. I never want to see another butterfly again," Adrien said. He put his arm around Marinette and sighed. "Thanks for rescuing me, princess."

"Of course. You made a very handsome – and formidable – prince in distress, you know."

"I know."

"We both make pretty good heroes, I guess."
"Not all the time, but sometimes," he said.

"We were pretty good heroes today," she amended.

"I can live with that," he said.

The croissants were still warm when Mrs. Dupain-Cheng brought them up to Marinette's room, and they ate them on the roof in the summer evening breeze. Watching the city lights glisten with Mari at his side, Adrien wasn't sure if everything going to be okay again, but he felt in this moment like he was finally home.
Chapter Summary

April Showers: A coffee shop AU, sort of. Ladybug and Chat Noir are fanfiction writers working on a collaborative piece. Marinette and Adrien don't know each other, aside from the interactions they have at the local café. But things are about to change. Sometimes all it takes is a little rain.

Chapter Notes

This one comes with a small clarification; this was originally written as an April Fools fic, so don't be deterred by the first bit; it's still part of the story. Thanks!

During first Hogsmeade weekend, Remus Lupin seemed rather tired. To anyone who didn't know him, he appeared bored, maybe even antisocial.

But to his three best friends who knew him best, this was normal.

"Full moon is next weekend. Don't torture yourself yet," said Sirius. They were sitting at a table in the back of the Three Broomsticks pub. "You've got a full seven days to enjoy still."

"Go on," added James. "Have some butterbeer."

Peter said nothing but looked sympathetic.

"I can't help being tired," Remus said defensively, but after seeing James' raised eyebrow, he took a sip from his mug anyway.

"What does that mean?" asked Sirius.

"It means the week before, I'm always low on energy."

"We know how to fix that," said James, giving Sirius a meaningful look.

"What did you do?" Remus narrowed his eyes.

No one answered, but Sirius pulled a library book from his bag and put it on the table. This action aroused more suspicion than anything his friends could have said. Sirius was the last person anyone expected to be carrying around a book. It would have meant he'd had to go into the library and check it out. Remus knew the guy hated books.

His expression must have given away his thoughts, because Peter spoke up. "We have a suggestion that might make you feel a little more…energized." He pointed to the book title.

It said Animagi – Studies and Practices in Pursuit of the Noble Art of Shapeshifting.
"But we already studied animagi in Defense Against the Dark Arts," he protested. "Why would I want to read this? It'll make me fall asleep."

"You're not going to read it," said James. "We are. We're going to become animagi. We can accompany you on your, ah, excursions once a month."

"Why?" Remus spluttered. "This is ludicrous. You guys should be doing normal stuff, not trying to do complicated magic so you can watch me at my worst. I'm a monster, what part of that don't you understand?"

"You're not a monster. And we're doing this anyway, so don't try to stop us," said Sirius, and Peter nodded in agreement.

"I-" Remus was touched, but the logistics of it all seemed fuzzy to him. How were they going to pull this off? They obviously couldn't register as animagi – it would raise too many questions that might uncover his own secret.

"You mean you guys are actually, properly serious? I can't convince you not to do it? It's wildly illegal and dangerous."

"We know. We don't care. You're our friend. Friends are worth anything. Besides, normal is overrated," said James, patting Remus on the back. "Don't forget that."

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Happy April Fools Day! No, this fic has not suddenly become a Harry Potter story. I'm sorry, I just couldn't resist. Now on to the actual story. :)

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It was raining outside, but Marinette didn't notice. She was engrossed, typing on her computer so quickly that it felt like her fingertips were trying to take off in flight. She was curled in an armchair at the back of a cozy coffee shop, writing at top speed. She was trying to finish a chapter in the next few minutes before she had to leave for her shift at the bakery.

For some strange reason, this month had been full of large orders – three weddings, two funerals, and four parties thrown by Chloe, to name only a few. This meant Marinette had taken double shifts and sometimes worked so often that she barely had time to wash the flour out of her hair before it was time to go back to the kitchen to get it dirty all over again. She was happy to help out her parents, but it unfortunately left her with just a few hours to do her homework, sleep, write, and buy coffee to help her power through.

The stolen hour between the end of school and her evening bakery shift had always been spent in sequestered, caffeinated solitude at the back of Coffee Cat, the nearest café to her house. Despite the fact that the title was a pun, she found herself drawn here. The atmosphere was quiet and welcoming. And, of course, it didn't hurt that the barista was extremely good looking. He had to be a part-time model or something.

But lately, with her extra hours, Marinette had had far too much to do to gaze at him. Now that she was so busy, she hardly had any time to herself to read, let alone write – and she needed to make this time count. Sure, she noticed his dazzling smile and tripped over her words when ordering (every single time!), but once ensconced in her corner at the back of the shop where she couldn't see him, she focused her mind again.

This hour was hers. She could do whatever she wanted, be whoever she wanted to be. And with it, she did wonderful things. Marinette had a secret that nobody knew about, and it required a large
amount of time spent alone, hiding out in a coffee shop. When she walked through the glass door and was buffeted by the velvety smell of coffee grounds, it was like she transformed into a whole other person – she was no longer timid and socially awkward.

She became her brave and daring online writing persona. She became Ladybug.

The fanfiction world was just as real to her as her own, but in this world of words and headcanons and ships, she was different. She was a writing wizard, typing chapters with reckless abandon and more courage than she'd ever exhibit offline. Her writing was usually well received; it had even attracted the attention of the mysterious and suave Chat Noir.

Everyone who wrote fanfiction knew Chat Noir. He wrote for mainly anime and manga fandoms, and was widely regarded as one of the foremost writers in that genre. When he read fics, he favored Marauder-era Harry Potter ones like Marinette's. He left flirty compliments after reading each of her chapters (If you were an animagus, Ladybug, you'd still be cute as a bug. Nice work with the fight scene, by the way!), and gallantly defended her against trolls like Hawkmoth. She'd begun defending Chat in turn, when Hawkmoth's wrath turned to him instead.

The two of them together were unstoppable.

However unconventional their relationship was, Marinette honestly enjoyed the thought of having made a virtual friend in Chat Noir. They talked so much via online messaging that they'd even decided to co-write their own crossover story. During their tandem writing sessions, even though he was just a tiny, black cat icon in the top right corner of their private Google Doc, writing with him was more intimate than she'd ever imagined. They were alone with a blank page, baring their vulnerabilities in order to create something out of nothing.

Ordinarily, writing with Chat would have intimidated her, but when she was Ladybug, she felt more up to that challenge.

Unfortunately, the crossover had been put on hold while the bakery was going through its apparent pastry order crisis, and Marinette had been shocked to find how much she missed him. She even missed his puns, even though she would sneak in and delete them from their story each time he slipped them in. She wondered if they'd ever meet in real life, and then almost laughed into her latte. He was probably just some weird dude who had no actual interest in an offline conversation.

For now, they were friends, partners even. And that was all it would ever be, unless she miraculously met him somehow.

Her timer went off, and she sighed. Time to go. She pulled her hair into two neat ponytails and packed up her laptop. She finished off her coffee, placed the cup back in its saucer, and took it back up to the counter.

The barista considered her thoughtfully. "Not to pry, or anything, but did you make that?" His eyes were on her laptop case, which was embroidered with a cute red cartoon character named Tikki. The name was stitched in black around it.

"Yeah, I did, actually."

"It's amazing."

"Thank you."

"Hold on," he said. He bent under the counter and pulled out his own laptop and case. There was a similar cartoon from the same show on his, this one a tiny cat called Plagg. It looked fan-made. "I
bought it online – I'm nowhere near talented enough to make one. I didn't realize you were into the show too!"

"Same to you," she said. She was sticking to simple sentences to avoid massively embarrassing herself.

"So. What's your story?" he asked, stowing his laptop again. He seemed strangely determined to make conversation.

"Uh…I don't usually s-share my work," she stammered.

"Not what you're writing," he smiled, taking her cup and saucer off the counter and putting it in the wash bin. "Well. That too. Maybe someday. But I meant you. You've come in here every day for the past few months, but you leave after only an hour, after talking to no one and typing so hard I think seismometers for the general region are picking it up."

"You've been watching me?"

"You're the only one in here around this time. And it's hard not to notice someone with such a great laptop case. You have no idea how long it took me to ask you about it. Addressing fandoms in real life makes me weirdly nervous. But yeah – what's your story?"

He put his hands on the counter, smiling directly at her. The smile was too much. Marinette suddenly found she couldn't look at him directly – he was too bright. He was like the rising sun: he took up her whole vision and coloring everything in intense colors…and he was hot. Really, really hot.

"I-I work at a bakery. My shift starts an hour after school gets out. I use this time to come here and write."

"A bakery? That's awesome! Do you make the pastries and stuff?"

Marinette was trying not to be rude, but couldn't really see why he was suddenly interested in her. "Sorry, but um…why do you…"

"Why do I want to know?"

"Yeah."

"I like to get to know our customers. You're a regular, we're the same age, and I'm a writer too. I'm curious, I guess. I like to learn about other people. Their stories are just as interesting as the ones in books."

"I understand that," she said, staring at the black countertop. "I do that too. I analyze people in public places and fit them into stories."

Some of Ladybug was starting to trickle into Marinette's system, maybe because of the adrenaline. She forced herself to look up at him.

"Your turn. What's your story?"

"I'm a writer. And a barista at Coffee Cat when I'm not being homeschooled."

"What do you write?"

He blushed. "Fanfiction. But I do write, like, normal stuff too. I'm working on a novel."
Marinette didn't say anything. She was afraid to admit she wrote it too – what if he wanted to read it? Worse, what if he already had? A horrifying image of him as Chat Noir made her hands clammy.

Mistaking her silence for judgment, he continued quickly, "And I model, but I'm trying my hardest to get out of it."

Aha, she thought. He was a model. People with his face don't just walk around and not model.

"Get out of it?"

"Yeah. It's kind of a family business, but it's not what I want to do."

"What do you want to do?"

"Right now? I'd like to ask you to dinner to hear more about you, but as we both have to work right now, I'll ask another time."

She blinked, not sure if she'd just hallucinated this. Did he ask her out? "Oh! Um, okay."

They stared at each other for a second, and then Marinette hugged her laptop tighter to her chest. "I should get going."

He darted out from behind the counter. "Wait, take this."

He grabbed an umbrella and unfurled it (indoors!), then handed it to her. "It's raining, and you don't have one," he said, responding to her silent question.

"That's unlucky," she said, responding to the umbrella.

"I get the feeling you're lucky. We'll cancel each other out."

She frowned at him. "Lucky?"

"It isn't about what happens to you, it's who you meet." He winked. "I'm Adrien. It's nice to finally meet you."

"M-Marinette," she said, and fumbled to shake his hand. She nearly dropped the umbrella, and then it collapsed on her head. "Nice to meet you too," she said, her voice muffled.

She heard him laugh, and she didn't stick around to embarrass herself any further. She was halfway down the street when everything caught up to her. It occurred to her that Adrien was very, very smooth. Perhaps just as smooth as Chat Noir.

Later that week, Marinette could feel the stress eating away at her brain. She was a first class space-cadet when she didn't get enough sleep, and it was starting to show. She'd frosted a dozen cupcakes before realizing they needed to be gluten-free. And she'd given Alya's mom the wrong cake – they'd had to make an exchange across town when Marinette was already running late for school. By the time her hour at Coffee Cat came, she was exhausted.

She was just proud that the one thing she remembered was to bring back Adrien's umbrella. It was probably the only thing she'd accomplish today. Writing was going to be uphill all the way. Normally she looked forward to it, but today she was already falling asleep. None of it was going to come out right. Maybe she should just focus on the coffee. And Adrien.

"Name?" At this point, Adrien asked her just to be perfunctory. He said he liked the way it sounded,
and he liked saying it when her coffee was ready.

She always said "Marinette", and he always smiled a little, like he was trying to keep his enjoyment a secret.

Today shouldn't have been different, but Marinette's brain was not cooperating. Her head was jammed full of jelly donut recipes and plot development for her characters and her next writing session with Chat Noir and the messages online she needed to respond to, and -

"Ladybug."

It slipped out before her bleary, weary mind could realize she'd said the wrong name.

This was a horrendous mistake, but Marinette couldn't take it back. At first she thought Adrien wouldn't notice, but instead his eyes lit up in recognition.

"You read her work?" he gasped softly. "I love her fics. She's so awesome!" He seemed to realize what he was saying and straightened, then put out his hands defensively. "Sorry, if you have no idea what I'm talking about, I just really have never met someone else who likes fanfiction in person before. You do know about Ladybug, right?" He was already making her coffee, and looked up to see if she was going to answer.

Marinette nodded, realized what she was doing, and stopped. Say something to change the subject, her brain was prompting. Anything would be good, except confirming that you're Ladybug.

Adrien was watching her carefully, as if worried he'd said too much. He narrowed his eyes in mock suspicion. "Haha, maybe you are Ladybug!" He paused, expecting her to laugh. His green eyes seemed to take up all of her vision.

Say something! Otherwise he's going to think he's right. Marinette thought. Well, he would be right, but he can't know that! Just say something. Any words that come to mind. Anything…

"Yeah."

Anything but that. Her mind went berserk. You just confirmed everything. Not even with sarcasm! You just ruined-

"You are?" Adrien's eyes widened in shock. Then he smiled. "Actually, it makes sense. So I'm right?"

Marinette closed her eyes tight, her flustered hands waving manically. "No, I mean, well, yes, um..."

"Right, so you're Ladybug."

"I'm – well, I – no, yes, I don't know-" WHY was her brain malfunctioning?

"I feel like if you were Ladybug you'd probably know," he said, but he was smiling. "Don't worry, I could have figured it out anyway. I have seen you writing like a madwoman over there, and as soon as you leave, there's always a new chapter from Ladybug posted. I get the notifications. It made me wonder."

She could feel herself blushing. Her face probably looked like a roasted tomato. She probably could have heated her own coffee simply by putting it up against her burning cheeks.

"Okay, fine, yeah, I'm her." She let the secret rush out of her, and it cost a lot less than she thought it
would. The world hadn't ended simply because someone knew she wrote fanfic. It had been
ludicrous, she thought now, to think it would have. And Adrien wasn't backing away in horror.

"I'm honored." He handed her a warm mug – the latte art this time was a ladybug. How could he be
so smooth at a time like this? Perhaps it was easier to make fancy insect art on coffee when you
weren't embarrassed and you were extremely attractive. Perhaps he knows what he's doing to me
and is just enjoying it, she wondered.

She fumbled for change, but he pushed her hand away. She almost fainted.

"It's on me," he said. "I'm thrilled to meet a fanfic legend."

She couldn't say anything more. She took the mug, blushed harder than she thought was possible,
and murmured a quiet thank you.

She sat in her seat, embarrassed, staring at a blank page for her entire hour.

When she was ready to leave, she mumbled a goodbye to Adrien and pushed open the door. It was
raining again. She was getting ready to run home with her jacket over her head when she felt a hand
on her shoulder. She turned to find Adrien standing there, holding the black umbrella and staring at
her with something more than happiness. It was like he was trying to be brave about something.

"It's raining, and you don't have one," he said, echoing their previous encounter in the rain. He
opened it and held it between them.

"B-but-"

"I've been staring at you all afternoon, trying to get the courage to do this, and I feel like now's a
good time given what I learned about you today." He lifted his arm from her shoulder and held it out
to shake hers again. "I'm Chat Noir. It's nice to finally meet you in person, Ladybug."

Thankfully, the umbrella didn't collapse on her head this time. Instead, Adrien – Chat – sneezed.
He'd accidentally inhaled some of the flour still in Marinette's hair from this morning's shift.

It was her turn to laugh, and Adrien joined in. He seemed just as relieved as she was to have
something to laugh about. Before they knew it, most of the weirdness was gone. This moment felt
comfortable. Marinette felt like their budding friendship was protected, somehow, and not just from
the raindrops.

The next time Chat Noir and Ladybug were supposed to meet to work on their crossover, they
decided to do it in person. They sat on opposite sides of a wooden table at Coffee Cat, but they didn't
get much writing done. There was so much to talk about. So much to understand. They sipped coffee
and stared at each other, not quite sure how everything was going to go on from here. This wasn't a
typical boy-meets-girl story. They were both people with stories and aliases of their own. It was the
good kind of complicated, but it was still complicated.

"Do you think this crossover is going to work out?"

"I think so. We have it all storyboarded."

"No, I meant our crossover. From digital to personal."

She considered him carefully. "I don't see why not."
"We just need to blend our two worlds into one."

She laughed. "That doesn't sound normal."

"Normal is overrated."

"Hey! You stole that from my Marauders fic. You can't do that."

"Watch me."

She laughed.

"I think this could be a great friendship," Adrien sighed, relaxing in his chair. He picked up his coffee cup. "Cheers?"

She grinned and tapped her cup against his. "Cheers."
Scripts

Chapter Summary

Scripts: Sometimes, there isn't a script for the way life should go. Nothing follows the way anyone thinks it will. In those free, unwritten moments, improvisation becomes necessary. In those seconds where anything could happen, something wonderful often does. Three instances of unplanned moments and reveals, each a story suggestion made by a fellow reader.

Chapter Notes

This chapter, while not a true list fic like I normally do for round numbers, is still sort of a list. I have done three mini-stories with one common thread: going off-script. Hope you enjoy - thank you for reading and reviewing, as always. :)

1. Marinette and Adrien are (forcibly) cast as Ladybug and Chat Noir in their school musical.

Idea by DedeTC.

"I'm telling you, with that wig on, Marinette looks an awful lot like Ladybug," Nino said. He adjusted his suspenders to make sure they didn't fly off again in the middle of the dance number. This had happened last week in the middle of "Miraculous", the first big song, and no one wanted a repeat of that. People had needed to dive out of Nino's way to avoid injury.

"It's not a wig. And, she probably should look like Ladybug, seeing as she's is playing her. We should hope she looks the part," Adrien shrugged as he pulled on his gloves. He'd been irritable these last few weeks, but Nino couldn't understand why. His best friend had the lead in the school musical, a new piece written entirely by students. Participation was compulsory for their Arts and Humanities credits.

Cast roles were assigned based on involvement in previous musicals. Thanks to Adrien's fantastic performance as Tom Sawyer last year before he'd quit theater to study fencing, he'd been plucked from the bliss of the chorus and shoved into a spotlight. Nino felt bad for the guy – maybe he didn't want the role since he'd hung up his song and dance hat. But it didn't explain why he was so cranky all the time. Being Chat Noir in the musical came with some perks. Namely, he got to serenade Ladybug in a lovely balcony scene, and he'd get to meet the real Chat Noir after opening night. All of the cast members would get to meet their characters after the show. Nino didn't know how the school was going to make that happen, but it was pretty cool.

Marinette had been cast as Ladybug simply because people had seen her do insane yoyo tricks at talent shows and knew she was excellent at gymnastics. Nino had never realized she was that good. It made him seriously wonder how she'd even acquired yoyo and gymnastic skills in the first place.

Adrien put on his leather belt and tail with an expression of dread and loathing. "All right, let's get this over with.
"Why are you so reluctant to be in this musical? Are you too cool for this?" Nino decided being straightforward was the best approach here. The dude was clearly struggling with something.

"I'm fine with being in the musical; I just don't want to play the lead."

"Is it because you don't like singing in front of people?"

"No."

"You hate the costume?"

"No."

"You hate Marinette?"

"Of course not."

"Then why?"

Adrien sighed and put his wrists to his forehead. "I…uh…don't like Chat Noir."

"What?" Nino was starting to think this entire conversation was a bad idea. "You love Chat Noir."

Adrien gave him a weird, almost paranoid look from between his arms. "When have I ever said that?"

"Whenever you're around Marinette. She loves Chat. She's said so. And you've agreed, and that's how you guys can talk without her stuttering all over the place. It's something you've had in common for a long time. Unless, of course, you were lying and only said it because you like Marinette."

"Hold up, Marinette loves Chat?"

"Not the point – did you lie to her and just say you liked him too so the two of you would have something to talk about?"

"Nino, I would never lie to Marinette."

There was a pause. "Well," Adrien amended, "except about one thing."

Nino had no idea what that was supposed to mean, but he didn't have time to ask. The director was calling everyone to their places.

Rehearsal was extremely eventful, in Nino's opinion. When the akumatized girl named Dream Catcher, played by Rose, was supposed to come onstage and ruin everyone's lives before Chat and Ladybug came to save the day, tragedy struck.

Instead of Rose entering, a real villain smashed through the door of the auditorium behind the last row of seats. He proclaimed his name was Standing NO-vation and demanding a refund on his ticket to The Phantom of the Opera. As if to punctuate this, a vicious swirl of ticket stubs and popcorn swept into the theater and began to pelt everyone onstage. One kernel nearly got Nino right between the eyes, and he sustained four papercuts.

This was not in the script. Nino did not sign up for this. And from Adrien's expression, he felt the exact same way.

"Aw, come on. An akuma attack? Why does it have to be right now?" Adrien cried in frustration.
"Refunds do not wait for anyone! I demand compensation for that abysmal performance!" retorted Standing NO-vation.

"You have the wrong theater, dude!" Nino yelled back. He thought Adrien would yell out some kind of pun, but there was no reply. That was when he realized his friend was no longer at his side. He was instead sprinting downstage with a hand on his baton. Marinette was following closely behind.

They'd gotten so into their roles as Chat Noir and Ladybug that they took on the guy without hesitation.

Well, nearly without hesitation. There was a brief, odd moment when Marinette and Adrien paused at the edge of the stage, each ready to leap off and chase Standing NO-vation out. They gave each other a look Nino could only describe as perplexed. It was like they were both thinking, "Wait, you're going after him too?"

And then they both leaped into fray anyway, holding costume baton and yoyo alike in vigilant defense.

"Don't follow me! It's not safe. I have to go, I have no choice," he thought he heard Adrien yell over his shoulder.

"No way! I'm coming with you. It's not safe for you," insisted Marinette, keeping up behind him.

Nino thought they could give the real Chat and Ladybug a run for their money. They really were well cast, despite how Adrien felt about his role. If this was what the rehearsals were like, the performances could be spectacular!

But then Nino stopped admiring their acting skills – he realized his friends were not, in fact, superheroes. They could very easily get hurt if they charged ahead like this.

"Stop!" he yelled, but neither of them listened. This was getting ridiculous.

Standing NO-vation saw them running toward him and quickly backpedaled, exiting the theater building at a quick run. Marinette and Adrien, instead of stopping, kept right on running after him! What were they thinking?

Nino could do nothing but wait for his friends to return and hope they hadn't been imprisoned behind the glass at Will Call or something.

They must have passed off the problem to the real Chat and Ladybug though, because in a few minutes, they both returned unharmed.

"The villain's gone," Adrien announced. "We, uh, saw Chat Noir and Ladybug take care of it."

"Yeah, we did," said Marinette, a little too quickly. She played with her yoyo to avoid making eye contact.

"Yep. Those heroes were totally on it. We saw it all happen."

"Yeah, totally. We saw everything."

Nino thought it was weird how much they were blushing – it was like they'd shared some kind of embarrassing moment. When they approached, Adrien had his arm around Marinette – he must have really gotten into character. His fake Chat ring looked different somehow. Darker. The paw prints were glowing green. They hadn't been glowing before.
Marinette gave Adrien a weird more-than-friends look and smiled. He returned it, blushing more.

"Am I missing something?" Nino asked, staring at the two of them.

They exchanged a knowing look. "I won't tell if you won't," she said to Adrien.

"Yep," Nino concluded. "I'm definitely missing something here."

2. Adrien and Marinette's parents know everything. They finally decide their children would be better off together than apart and attempt to set them up. But things never go according to plan, as they are about to find out. Idea by Pinoy Gamer.

Tom and Sabine were perfectly well aware that their daughter Marinette had a secret. They'd protected her for years, always silently harboring their knowledge that she was Ladybug. It wasn't hard to feign surprise when Marinette stumbled in at all hours either drenched from the rain or covered in dirt. It wasn't hard to pretend they had literally no clue she was saving Paris on a daily basis. They were prepared for this: they kept fully stocked first aid kits, worked with Tikki to install GPS tracking to make sure she never went missing, and somehow always "forgot" to set the burglar alarm at night so she could sneak out the window.

It was, however, hard to discuss this with Marinette, especially after they discovered the identity of her partner, Chat Noir.

In the most awkward of circumstances, Chat Noir happened to be Adrien Agreste, her school classmate and her longtime crush. This revelation was not one they'd discovered on their own, but one told to them by Gabriel Agreste himself, who showed up at the bakery doorstep, umbrella-less in the soaking rain and in such disarray he was hardly recognizable.

"My son is Chat Noir. I just saw Adrien's ring. And then I realized it wasn't just a ring, it was the ring. Chat Noir's Miraculous. I, uh, heard from an anonymous source that you keep Marinette safe when she's Ladybug. Can you do the same for Adrien? Please?"

"Who told you about us?"

"The school's parent council is a place full of dangerous knowledge. I have my ways of using it to my advantage, even when delving only through rumors and hints," he said darkly, then refused elaborate any more. "So, will you help me protect my son? Please?"

Tom and Sabine exchanged glances, both of them raising one eyebrow.

"Fine," they said. "But at a price. We want you to help us set Adrien up with Marinette. They'd be good influences on each other. We're not just a protection service, Gabriel."

"Of course, you're also parents."

"That too. But I was going to say," added Sabine with a sly grin, "we are also matchmakers."

The parents tried on many occasions to set up Adrien and Marinette. The Dupain-Chengs used the information they gathered about Chat Noir and Ladybug to ease the way, but it soon became obvious that facilitating a reveal or at least a date between the two of them was very difficult. Akumas, Hawkmoth, school projects, musicals, wayward kwamis, and even the universe kept getting in the way.

They made thirty nine separate attempts before resorting to desperate tactics.
"I wrote a bunch of reveal fanfics and posted them online. Maybe Adrien or Marinette will see them?" said Tom one morning while he and Sabine had coffee at the kitchen table. Gabriel joined them via Skype and sat at the third place-setting on the table, staring through the tablet at them.

"No, that'll never work, it's too obvious," scoffed Gabriel.

Sabine said, "I even had Gabriel put Marinette in his fashion show as a designer, and Adrien was her model. Still nothing."

"Have you ever thought it just wasn't meant to be?" asked Sabine.

"No," said both men.

"Maybe we should."

"I don't think that's the answer," said Tom. "I feel like we're so close. We can't give up. There must be something else we can plan."

"We should just tell Marinette we know she's Ladybug, and then tell her Adrien is Chat. If they really do like each other, they'll go on a date without further prompting. It seems like the only option left to me," sighed Sabine.

"What do you mean, Adrien is Chat Noir?" asked a familiar voice from behind them. Marinette was frozen in the doorway with Adrien behind standing behind her, like a deer paralyzed by headlights. They both stared at the Dupain-Chengs for a moment, and then turned slowly to stare at each other. They frowned and then turned back to the parents.

"That can't be right. You guys must be kidding," Marinette said.

Then Adrien noticed his father's presence on the screen of the tablet. "Hold on. Is this a normal thing? You guys Skype with my dad in the mornings? Or is this only happening because I'm not home right now? I had to leave early to pick up the chemistry book I left here yesterday; did he wait to call you guys until I was gone so it'd be a secret? I see how it is. While the cat is away, the mice play."

The parents didn't answer.

"They're not even denying it, it must be true. They really are Skype buddies," said Marinette, awed.

"I guess," said Adrien. He tucked his chemistry bag in his satchel and considered her. "We still good though, Bugaboo? With knowing about each other and everything?"

"Yeah," she said. "I thought I'd be more surprised, but in all honesty, I'm more concerned that our parents knew about us this whole time and never said anything. And now that they have told us, they're…frozen. Why aren't they responding? It's been like a full minute."

"I know. Weird. I'm shocked they knew our secrets at all. We've been so careful…"

"Oh well. We should go, or we'll be late. Come on, kitty."

They left the three speechless parents, descending to the bakery in hopes of a croissant they might share.

At the kitchen table, Tom was the first to snap out of it. "Was it really that easy?"

Gabriel blinked. "Apparently."
Sabine narrowed her eyes. "Was that a pun? A-parent-ly?"

Gabriel looked horrified. "My son's puns are contagious. It's starting already!"

3. Adrien and Marinette are paired up for a chemistry assignment, but they learn a bit more than they bargain for. Their homework questions said nothing about what to do if your lab partner is also your...partner. Idea by BornWithDragonWings.

"What's the difference between ionic and covalent bonds?" read Marinette. She turned the page of the textbook, looking to see if that was the end of the question. They were four textbook questions away from finishing their Chemistry pre-lab for the night, and Adrien had to be home by ten. If they hadn't been assigned partners, Adrien wouldn't be sitting in her room at all. She'd had a panic attack right before he'd shown up for the first time, when she'd realized all her photos of him were still lovingly taped to her wall. With Tikki's help she'd managed to hide them all, but she was still a nervous, stuttering mess by the time he'd arrived.

Marinette found it was easier to talk to Adrien when she was focused on homework. If she read from the textbook, or only spoke while writing out chemical equations on her notepad, it was easier to seem normal. But now that they were nearing the end of the assignment, she was starting to worry again. What would happen when they ran out of stuff to do? What would they talk about? There was just a big, gaping black hole there. A void, lurking and waiting to swallow the last of Marinette's reserve. She would dissolve into a mumbling puddle as soon as they had to talk about anything beyond homework.

Had all her crushes been this bad? She tried to remember, but her only other crushes were from when she was little. Those stood out only as being daydreams from afar with the luxury of no communication necessary. If it was only inside her head, it was easy to deal with. She could script out scenarios of how things would go if they ever met. Her seven-year-old brain was not creative:

"I like you."

"I like you too."

"Yay."

"Let's go to the playground and we can sit on the swings and hold hands."

"Okay."

But things were different now. She was much older. This was a real crush on a person Marinette actually wanted to meet and talk to and hang out with like a normal human. She was nervous around Adrien simply because it seemed like he knew things about her without having to ask. As if he understood her thoughts; as if he could figure her out. And if that was true, he might find out she liked him. Or, if she made herself too obvious, he could suspect it and turn her down. It was better if Marinette just didn't say a word. Then, the probability of her saying something stupid or even remotely pick-up-line-ish would be zero.

Marinette liked the certainty of that zero.

"Covalent bonds share an electron, ionic ones don't," said Adrien. He underlined the passage in his textbook with his pencil and jotted it down. "Is that what you got?"

"Yeah. Next question?"
"Okay."

"Balance the following equation, and explain the chemical process occurring in a short paragraph."

They both considered the equation and then happened to look up at the same time. Marinette couldn't remember the last time she'd made eye contact with Adrien. But she remembered why she always avoided it. It made her heart rate jump up to dangerous levels. Even now, the adrenaline made her shaking hands deceptively steady.

But in that moment, she came up with a solution: if she could pretend she was looking into Chat Noir's eyes, her heart rate slowed a little.

"This equation doesn't need to be balanced," said Adrien. "It already is."

"Really?"

"Well yeah. It's an ionic bond between sodium and chlorine – NaCl, salt, and it's dissociating with the aid of water. They've got plus one and minus one ions."

"Okay."

"Kind of like Ladybug and Chat Noir, if you think about it."

He'd lost her there. "What?" She put down her pencil. If she pretended he was Chat, it was easier to talk to him. Why hadn't she thought of this before? They even smelled the same, like cinnamon. Must be a popular brand of cologne. Or shampoo.

"I don't know, maybe I'm just tired and it's starting to get to my brain, but it kind of makes sense. They're both very good together – they bond strongly even though they're two opposites. He's unlucky, she's not. And then when they're not being superheroes, they dissociate and go back to being themselves. Like the equation, the only thing Chat and Ladybug need to be superheroes is each other."

Marinette stared open mouthed at Adrien. "That was…"

"Weird?"

"I was going to say beautiful."

"Oh. Thanks." The pink rising in his cheeks was unmistakable. He was blushing?

"Let's answer the question before we forget," Marinette said, putting her head down, grateful for something to do. Even if she wasn't actually Ladybug, that was still a really cool way to look at her relationship with Chat Noir. She wondered if he felt the same way. What would Adrien say if he ever found out he'd been studying with Ladybug this whole time?

Two more questions remained, and then they ran out of scripted dialogue. She tried not to dwell on that thought.

"Name three noble gases. Describe their reactions to other elements."

Marinette had the answer ready. "Helium, Neon, Radon."

Then she and Adrien said at the same time, "They're inert."

He laughed. "We're so good at this. They should make a chemistry award for us."
"It's just homework, I don't think they do that."

"It's a pre-lab, it's got to count for something."

"It counts for a grade. And maybe a fancy title. If it's a pre-lab, could we call ourselves pre-chemists?"

"I don't know."

"Last question?"

"Yeah."

Marinette read aloud. "True or false: water is non-polar. Explain your answer and draw a diagram to support it."

They both said, "False."

They both said, "Jinx. Jinx again."

"We have to stop doing this," giggled Marinette.

"Great minds think alike?" suggested Adrien.

"We just aced this pre-lab. I think we can definitely call ourselves pre-chemists."

"Agreed."

They both extended a fist and met knuckles in midair. "Pound it!"

"Jinx again."

"Yeah, we have to stop doing this."

They both wrote up the final question – the silence was only interrupted by pencils scratching.

Suddenly, Adrien stopped writing and inhaled sharply. Marinette looked up at him slowly, realizing the silence meant he wanted her attention. They were out of chemistry questions. Nothing more could be gleaned from the textbook. Marinette was on her own for conversation. She couldn't breathe.

Pretend he's Chat. They both have green eyes, just imagine he's your silly parter who you talk to all the time. Like Chat, Adrien's just a normal guy with feelings and weaknesses of his own. Just a really, really, really nice guy…

Adrien murmured, "Did we just…?" He looked afraid to finish the sentence.

Marinette blinked and looked down at her hand, which was still closed in a fist for their knuckle bump. They had…

No one else could "Pound it!" with her so easily – so willingly – without hesitation. In pretending Adrien was Chat Noir so they could talk, had she accidentally made it come true?

"Yeah we did…you…you're…Chat Noir? Aren't you?"

Adrien blinked and started stammering. "I-I should go. U-um I will see you in class tomo-m-tmoon-
toomorrwos…um…thanks for having me." He shoved all his things into his satchel and raced down the stairs at top speed.

Marinette raced after him without a second thought, but he was already gone by the time she got downstairs. It was dark in the bakery, and the windows were shut and shuttered. She couldn't see if he was still out there, or if he'd already run two blocks on the way to his house. The Gorilla was supposed to pick him up at nine thirty, but it was only nine now. He must have really not wanted to stay. Had the mutual discovery been that awful?

She decided to check and see if she could catch him – they *needed* to talk about this. If not for the sake of their friendship, for the sake of their partnership. She was about to push open the main door when someone on the other side knocked timidly.

Marinette opened it at once and peeked out onto the Paris streets sprinkled with yellow lamplight and raindrops. Adrien was standing just outside, grinning sheepishly.

He took a prepared breath as though he was ready to give some kind of apology, but just his return was enough for her. Before he could say anything, she ran out onto the street and wrapped her arms around him. He smelled like cinnamon, like Chat, like her partner, like trust.

She was about to say something, to apologize, or explain, but as if sensing this, Adrien put his arms around her too. "I'm not worried, if you're not worried," he said quietly. "We've got a strong bond."
Shine

Chapter Summary

Shine: Something weird happens to Miraculous holders during eclipses, and it puts their identities in jeopardy. Despite being warned, Marinette and Adrien wind up finding this out the experiential way. This story is based on @illustraice's stunning sun and moon spirit AU on tumblr, though I have taken a few liberties. Thanks to Anhilare for the suggestion.

Chapter Notes

In regards to the eclipse discussed in this story, I am by no means an expert on them. From what I found out, there was one happening last August and it was visible around sunset in France. That's what I've incorporated into this story, and apologize in advance if that's at all incorrect.

The sun and moon were always partners.

Each revolution on their circular orbits brought them back together, and in those times when they crossed paths, it was said they became one: complements of a whole, light and dark, warm and cool. When they had to separate again, they left only with the hope of another encounter, and a semblance of the other's ethereal glow.

Much like the sun and moon, Adrien and Marinette orbited each other. They both remained ignorant of their counterpart's identity for a long time, but those days were numbered, starting with a warm Saturday in August, when Master Fu decided to warn the heroes about the upcoming total solar eclipse.

Chat Noir and Ladybug sat on the loveseat in his tiny office, which was so cramped that neither of them could move without accidentally jamming an elbow or a knee into their partner's side. Master Fu was a small man and the size of his quarters never seemed to bother him, but Chat Noir and Ladybug were far taller, ganglier, and more uncomfortable.

They were pressed close on the couch, facing Fu's desk, and Chat could feel Ladybug breathing. His skin tickled with each rise and fall of her chest and shoulders. She smelled like fresh pastries and coffee, and it was making it hard for Chat to think about much else. But he stared forward at Fu, pretending to have total focus on what the man was saying.

"The eclipse next week is an event you must not take lightly. During those few minutes when the sun and moon overlap, your kwamis will temporarily lose their power. You will not be able to transform, and if you are already transformed, the disguise will drop and your true identities will be exposed. I urge you to find somewhere danger-free, preferably isolated, where you can wait until the eclipse has passed. You will know the progress of the eclipse because symbols of the sun and moon will appear on your palms – one on each hand – when it starts. This is a way to warn any Miraculous holder of the danger. When the marks disappear, you can return to life as normal. I am telling you
this because it will help you maintain your secrets and will protect you from harm."

"We understand," they said.

"Go," Fu dismissed them, "I've kept you at training too long today."

Chat and Ladybug stood up awkwardly, and it was a tangle of limbs and lots of "Oh sorry" and "Here, go ahead" before they could exit. In times like this, Chat sometimes thought Fu secretly was plotting to make him and Ladybug eventually fall in love. It would explain all the scenarios where he and his partner were forced into close quarters during "training." Chat was already sold on this. The only person left to convince that they were perfect for each other was Ladybug.

On the way back home that afternoon, Chat could still smell her on him. It was like a handprint on his shoulder his body remembered long after the touch had ceased. His mind wandered to his recurring daydream where he and Ladybug would be baking together, making croissants and macarons and perfect loaves of bread. She'd put flour on his nose and laugh when it made him sneeze. He'd write "I love Chat" in flour on her back when she wasn't paying attention.

He fantasized about this a lot more than he cared to admit. Ladybug always left traces on him. Her scent provoked his imagination until he found himself blushing. She always made him feel more collected, more real, and more affectionate. She dulled the inner flames that threatened to consume him and instead helped him shine.

When he actually thought about it, Adrien was surrounded by simmering activity constantly. Models like him were in the spotlight often, and he was used to the glare of famous designers, the heat of the lights during photo shoots, and the glimmer of fashion shows. He was used to the icy, rigid interns rocketing around him like comets, streaking by him wearing panicked expressions and pressing bottles of Perrier into his hands during breaks.

His life was a stream of color and intensity. He thrived on sunrises and warm air and stepping out of cool shadows into the sunlight. His days were jam packed, from the moment the sky turned pink to the minute he couldn't read without turning on a lamp at night. His life was ruled by the light. At first, he enjoyed the warmth of it. But with time, and with loneliness, it began to sear him.

At first, Chloe had understood this better than anyone. She herself was no stranger to public attention and the burning rays of judging gazes. This was how they'd become friends; they'd commiserated on the harsh brightness of their lives. At first, it had been enough to find solace in each other. But as they grew older, that began to change. Adrien retreated into himself after his mother died. Chloe's less endearing personality traits exploded outward to compensate for his lack of participation. The imbalance killed their friendship and they became distant.

Despite no longer being homeschooled and having made a few good friends, Adrien still was prone to bouts of loneliness, and what kept him from totally succumbing to that shadow was his preciously guarded secret. It was so secret, in fact, that even the prying paparazzi could not uncover it. Chat Noir's costume was black for a reason, after all.

Adrien savored the few coveted hours when he did not have to be a famous model. He could instead be Chat Noir, a loyal and romantic nerd who saved the world with Ladybug. That was as close to his real personality as he'd ever get – most of his fashion icon façade was crafted and shaped by other people. Ladybug, though she probably had no idea, was the only one who knew what Adrien was really like.

When they spent time together, it was never for very long; he felt like he was always chasing and never quite reaching her. But even though those days were limited and unpredictable, each one was a
miracle. When he was with her, darting around deserted street corners and flying through the city air, it was like he could turn off the flames inside him. He could finally have some peace.

He couldn't help but think that if he and Ladybug ever could really be in love, they would be very different people. They would be happier and kinder. They would be one.

Marinette was Adrien's direct opposite. In the hours when he was fast asleep, Marinette was already working. She consistently started her days at three in the morning, and though rising early was never easy for her, she forced herself to because it was her job. The night was the best time for baking, as her parents always said. Before the world rose to take on the day, someone had to feed them.

As a result, she was bustling and busy in the night hours, exhausted and faded by mid-day, and asleep by early evening. Her life was solitary, and when she was done after a long day of baking, school, and fighting akumas, she drifted off to sleep by lying on her silk bedspread and pretending she was floating at sea. Pulled along by the tides, calmed by the soft whispers of wind, and anchored by memories of Adrien's smile the day he'd handed her that umbrella.

The aquatic dark suited her, and for a while it had seemed that was all she'd ever know. But that was before she'd met Chat Noir.

He brought out the best in her. As Ladybug, she was stronger, louder, warmer…just…more. He encouraged her. His warmth rubbed off on her; she shone a little brighter as his counterpart. And in return, she seemed to calm him down, make him more relaxed and patient. The balance brought their relationship to life.

When she returned from her treasured adventures with him, it was like wading back into a pool after taking a tanning break in the sun. Her body remembered the temperature of the water from the last swim, but somehow it felt colder than before. She wondered what it would be like to never leave his side, to never feel the retreat of his warmth again. Could their orbits ever be anything more? The thought of that thrilling collision made her skin prickle. Maybe someday, she assured herself, they would know.

On the day of the eclipse, Marinette was a bundle of nerves. In class, she stared at her hands as if the marks had already appeared. Alya asked about it, and Marinette had only been able to stammer something about how she'd tried a new moisturizer and wanted to know if it was working.

Alya looked skeptical but didn't push the issue. "You're acting weird," was all she said.

Adrien turned around in his seat and looked up at them. His eyes always disarmed her; they were the color of sunlight on green leaves. "It's the eclipse," he said with a blazing grin.

Marinette almost fell out of her chair, her chest tight. Did he know? How?

"It makes people crazy," he continued, tracing his finger in a circle near his temple to illustrate. Nino and Alya cracked up.

She let out a breath that had been trapped in her lungs, relieved. He was just joking around.

Her nerves didn't subside though. They ramped up with each passing hour. She was practically trembling with the anxiety and anticipation by the end of the day.

The eclipse was set to begin just before sunset, but Marinette couldn't go home and hide in her room. Her teachers had decided to treat the eclipse as an extra credit assignment; everyone had stayed late to watch. She'd need to leave somehow and avoid arousing suspicion…
When Adrien noticed and asked if she was okay, she lied, "Sorry, I've got a chill. I think I might be getting sick."

"Do you want my jacket? I was going to take it off. I'm actually feeling rather warm."

Marinette nearly swooned at the thought of wearing his jacket – it probably smelled like him…like peppermint and cut grass – but was spared an answer by an intercom announcement from their principal.

"Students, the total solar eclipse will begin in a few minutes. Please make sure you follow teacher instructions, wear your sunglasses, and prepare to witness something amazing! We don't have the best visibility here since the sun is about to set, but hey, an eclipse is an eclipse. However, be careful not to look directly at it, as it will damage your eyes. Solar eclipses are particularly dangerous, because the sun always has that chance of coming out from behind the moon and surprising you before you have the chance to look away…"

If Marinette didn't make her escape now, she risked exposure in front of her classmates. If they suspected she was Ladybug at all, they'd be even more suspicious if they saw the sun and moon marks that were bound to appear on her hands any minute now. It was time to leave.

She excused herself by saying she needed the nurse, but went the opposite direction, and instead turned left and walked until she found an empty, windowless classroom. She closed the door behind her, shut off the lights, and sat down in the dark against the opposite wall. She stretched her feet out in front of her. Her hands clenched nervously in her lap, and after a few moments, the symbols began to appear.

The sun on her right hand was a faint gold and green color at the center of her palm. It shone under her skin, and when she flipped her hand over, she still saw it shining through the other side. It was weird, but beautiful. Her hand felt warm, as if sunlight was pouring from it, growing brighter by the second.

The moon on her left hand was outlined in red and violet, but a cool, soothing white rippled at its center. It was like she was holding it under running water.

A strange sense of lethargy fell over her muscles; she felt as though she couldn't call upon Tikki right now, even if she wanted to. They were disconnected, somehow. Fu had been exactly right about the eclipse. It was a good thing she was alone.

The door to the classroom opened.

Marinette was so startled she threw her glowing hands up to her face instead of hiding them. Through parted fingers, she saw Adrien enter the room. He kept his back to her, peering through the small window in the middle of the door to make sure he hadn't been followed. He pressed his right hand flat against the wood to close the door with a click, and what Marinette saw made her let out a huge, involuntary gasp.

Adrien clearly thought the room had been empty, because he jumped at the noise and whirled around to face her.

"Marinette, you scared me to death! What are you doing in-"

When they made eye contact, he froze. Marinette let her hands fall and stared at him. He stepped forward slowly, his eyes darting from her hands to his own.

The same marks glowed under his skin.
If Adrien was a Miraculous holder, it was very easy to deduce which one he was.

"Of all the classrooms in the world, you had to walk into mine," she murmured. She hadn't expected him to hear her – she'd said it so quietly – and perhaps that was how she was able to refrain from stuttering. Or maybe this was a new level of terror and astonishment where speech was possible at previously unseen levels.

But Adrien chuckled. "Well, I guess we better stick together until this is all over. No turning back now." He sat down across from her on the white tile floor, so that their shoes were nearly touching. Marinette self-consciously pulled her feet in and hugged her bent knees. Adrien still scooted closer, the first rays of a smile threatening to take over his face. Even though the only light in the shadowy classroom came from their hands, he shone.

"I can't believe this, I really can't," he said. "I'm so happy!"

"I can't believe it either." She took a deep breath and tried out his name experimentally. "Chat Noir."

"My Lady." He ducked his head in modest greeting, but his eyes remained on her, as if he was afraid he'd lose her if he looked away. "It feels weird to call you that. But you are."

"I never imagined you'd flirt with me." The words rose unbidden from her lips. What was wrong with her? "The way Chat always did, I mean. I didn't think you were...capable of something like that with someone like me. I've always liked you as Adrien, but you were so intimidating...I figured I'd just have a crush on you from afar. Wait for you to notice me someday, when I finally got up the courage to act normal around you. And to think, I've been pushing you away as Ladybug." She ran her hands through her hair.

Stop talking, Marinette!

"The irony," he grinned. "At least now we know."

"So, you really did, um, like me?"

"Do you really think I'm intimidating?"

She blushed in answer. There was an embarrassed pause.

"Yes, by the way," he said.

"What?"

"I still do like you. So much."

She blinked and fidgeted with her shoelaces. "I liked you too."

"Past tense," he observed. A tiny crease between his eyebrows started to form as he searched her face for an explanation.

She looked down again at her hands, hating what she was about to say. The marks were glowing brighter than ever – she wondered if the eclipse was at its peak.

"It's just...how can we know for sure what we feel? What if that hidden side behind Ladybug's mask isn't something you like about me? Or what if you're so different from Chat that nothing works right? I don't want to discover that later and have our friendship be ruined. I want to be preemptive. Please understand I want us to be happy, and I know this is unfair. But now we each know a huge secret! How can we go on unless we aren't together? Our relationship worked best when we chased each other and knew nothing. We should stick to what we know."
Adrien didn't answer. He looked disappointed, and the sight of his downturned mouth almost broke her. If her heart were made of bone and not blood and muscle, it would have snapped under the strain.

It hadn't been easy to get that off her chest, but she couldn't fling herself at him without caution. As much as she wanted to be in his arms and be his…there was too much at stake. Paris was relying on Ladybug and Chat Noir to be what they'd always been: heroes. No one cared if they were anything more than that; they just needed to do their jobs. Paris probably didn't care about their love lives anyway.

Not to mention the thought of kissing Chat Noir after all those times she'd kept him at a distance felt downright wrong.

"Before you decide anything," Adrien replied calmly, "can I try something with you?"

She tensed, worried he was going to bend forward and press his lips to hers. As much as she wanted it, she wasn't ready. She hoped she wouldn't have to turn him away – she might not survive that.

Adrien remained still and waited for her response. No kiss. She relaxed, if only a little.

"O-okay?"

"I think if we truly connected, things might make more sense. Take my hands?" Adrien held his out, fingers slightly apart, as if to give her a double high-five. She held up her own the same way, but they were visibly shaking.

They touched palms, interlacing their fingers. The sun on her right hand met the moon on his left. Two tiny eclipses linked them together, their arms completing a circuit. Marinette felt a strange kind of electricity pulsing through her veins. She wondered if this is what touching Adrien would always be like, or if it was some weird side effect of the eclipse. But he was clearly having the same experience – his eyes were wide and he trembled just as much as she did.

In that moment where sun and moon overlapped, Marinette stared at him with new understanding. Somehow, being connected to him brought things into focus. He was her partner. Chat had always been there for her; he'd been as loyal and predictable as a sunrise. Even as Adrien, he'd been her shelter and her friend. He'd held out an umbrella to her. He'd been there to catch her when she fell. He was here for her now, even as she fell for him. He was her other half.

Adrien wasn't a two-faced liar or a mystery, she realized. Neither was she. They weren't chasing each other, they were dancing. And this was the part in their orbiting routine where they finally knew everything, when the dance was more about emotion than movement.

The important part wasn't the secret itself. It was what they would do now that they knew. They had a chance to make this work in their favor.

Adrien was the first to let go, and it surprised her. His arms bent gently, and his fingers took a long time to retreat from hers. It was as if he didn't want to be without her, but knew he must.

"Adrien, I was wrong," she whispered, before he had the chance to say anything.

"Wrong about what?"

"About how this shouldn't change anything. We'd be missing an opportunity to be better – closer – than we've ever been."
Unable to resist, Adrien seized her hands again. "Really?" The symbols were finally starting to fade now. "You mean we do belong together?"

Marinette slowly smiled and leaned closer to him. "Yes. But we have a lot to still figure out. There's no need to rush into anything."

His eyes crinkled. "What changed your mind?"

"I realized we're better together than apart. We kind of...bonded. I wasn't like, mooning over my star crossed love or anything. I just feel like I understand you better. Like knowing your secret isn't something insurmountable."

He squeezed her hands in excitement. "A moon pun! I knew you'd come around."

She shook her head. "Unintentional."

"I'll take it."

"Don't get used to it." There was another quiet moment before she added, "We can't be together immediately, you know."

"What? How long will it take, my lady? I'm willing to wait, but I'm also mortal. And impatient."

"When's the next eclipse?"

He laughed when he realized she was joking. "Now there's the Ladybug I know!"

"In all seriousness, though, I think we just need some time to get used to all of this."

"We have time for that, Mari. You know me better than anyone, and you have for a while, even if it doesn't feel that way to you right now. You know I'll wait."

She leaned forward and touched her forehead to his. "Okay."

"Okay."

Their electric universe lasted exactly three more minutes before footsteps outside in the hall marred their silence.

In a jolt, Marinette remembered where they were supposed to be. She pulled her head back and glanced around. "Our class is probably wondering where we are. We should go before they come looking."

She stood and helped Adrien up. They finally dropped their hands, the marks totally gone now. The darkness of the room rushed at them all at once; their features were little more than silhouettes. A small part of her noticed the buzzing feeling in her veins still hadn't subsided, but Marinette wasn't complaining.

"We can't go back in at the same time." She shuffled her feet and blushed. "They'll think we met up on purpose and...um...you know."

"Good point. I'll go in first. Give me a minute head start."

Adrien was supposed to move, but he didn't seem able or willing. He was fidgeting with the hem of his shirt.
"Seriously, go," she giggled. She wasn't sure she'd get used to his intense gaze or the flutter of his pulse against her cool skin.

"Will I see you again?" he asked urgently.

She sighed. "Of course, silly cat. It's only going to be a minute and then we'll both be back in class."

"I mean...like this."

She was glad it was too dark for him to see her blush. "Yes."

"Promise?"

"As long as there's a sun in the sky and a moon to follow," she said. "I promise."

She still could feel his presence after he left her in the quiet classroom. She was in uncharted waters now, sailing on past what she knew. It might take a while to get accustomed to their secrets, but together, they were magic. That would never change; the eclipse had shown them that.

The waters of love and friendship were sometimes rough to sail, she knew. But the imprints on her knuckles left from his fingertips reminded her she wouldn't be sailing alone.
On a summer morning a week before her wedding, Marinette finally went to the Agreste Fashion headquarters to pick up her dress. It was a Gabriel Agreste original, and it was the only one of its kind. Now that it was tailored, it would fit her perfectly, she'd been reassured, and she couldn't help but admit it really was the most beautiful dress she'd ever seen. When she'd tried it on at her fitting, both Alya and her mother had cried at the sight of it.

"Do you think he'll like this one?" Marinette had asked them, holding her black hair off to the side with one hand and scrutinizing her reflection. "It's not too much?"

"He'll love it," Mrs. Dupain-Cheng murmured, then gave a watery chuckle. "I'm so happy for you both, you know."

"Girl, I know you're a superstar fashion designer now and it would be easy to make a gorgeous dress yourself, but honestly I think it would be hard to outdo this one," Alya had added.

At the first design consultation, when Mr. Agreste had asked her why she didn't want to make her own dress, Marinette had replied, "Some things are always better when someone else does them. I trust you completely with my dress and wouldn't want anyone else to make it." And that had settled the matter.

Marinette approached the counter now, where a prim-looking blond woman was sitting at the checkout desk. The woman seemed to have been expecting her, for she asked, "Are you Miss Dupain-Cheng?"

"I am, but not for much longer," she said with a smile. It was still hard to believe, but now it was starting to feel real. She'd be married in one week, and she couldn't be happier.

"Let me page Monsieur Agreste," the woman trilled. "He wanted to personally show you the final piece. You're a very lucky young lady to have such a wonderful dress."

In a few short moments, Gabriel Agreste emerged from a door at the other end of the room. He was wearing a smooth navy suit and a striped red tie, and holding a black garment bag with two elegant fingers. He was thinner and paler now than he had been when Marinette had first met him years ago, but the corners of his mouth spent a little less time turned downward. He had faced a rocky few
years, but Marinette liked to think he was finally doing a little better now. Even if it wasn't totally true.

"Mademoiselle." He addressed her formally, though his eyes lingered on hers with unspoken friendliness. "It's finally ready. It was truly a pleasure to design for you. If I might have a word?"

She nodded; there was so much that needed to be said, but she had hoped to do it in private. The woman at the desk thankfully seemed to realize this, and left to straighten things on the mannequins at the front windows.

"Thank you," Marinette said to him when they were alone. He hung the garment bag on the rack and unzipped it to reveal the finished dress. Lace covered the shoulders and climbed just up to the base of the neck, and a pearl-beaded body cinched in at the waist. At the hips, the dress spread outward with layers of tulle, and more pearls constellated along it, catching the light with a subtle shimmer.

"It's exquisite," she marveled, and he bent his head modestly.

She continued, "I know it must have been difficult to do this for me. But your design is perfect. I particularly enjoyed the ladybug symbol you made with the pearls on the clasp at the back of the neck."

"If you remember, I was surprised you requested a nod to Ladybug in your design; I wondered if any of my staff would connect the, ah, dots. But your identity remains a secret; take comfort in that."

It had been three years since Marinette had told him her secret. While the circumstances were painful to recall, the aftermath did bring an unexpected blessing. She and Mr. Agreste had become rather close, with him acting in part as almost a second father, and with her acting as his fashion protégé. Although Marinette now had her own boutique across town, Gabriel Agreste was still as good as her family. Their relationship brought them both fashion connections abound, a strange friendliness she'd never expected, and of course, a wedding dress.

"I will, thank you," she replied. "Did you send in your RSVP for the wedding already? I didn't see it come in."

He looked suddenly pained and uncomfortable, and sought to hide his face by zipping up the garment bag. "I wondered how...your fiancé...would feel if I were there. We are not close, and I genuinely thought you wouldn't want me there. I thought it would cause more pain than joy, particularly on what should be a happy day for you. I know what people will think if I come."

Her heart sank, but she knew he did have a point. "I understand. Well, we'll still hold a place for you if you decide otherwise. You're always welcome, you know."

Somehow, over her years getting to know Mr. Agreste better, she'd found herself becoming an intermediary between him and the rest of the world. While he was a stubborn and severe man, his actions could always be interpreted and translated into something more understandable with the right words. At Paris Fashion Week parties and charity functions, she softened his withdrawn nature and sharp remarks. She bridged his relationships.

She'd become rather good at mending more than just poorly stitched clothes – she hoped she was healing the parts of him that had been broken. She thought the wedding would be a good step in that continual process, but in the end it was up to him to make that final call.

"I appreciate it," Mr. Agreste blinked, then handed her the dress gingerly. The blonde magically appeared back at the register, ready to ring her up. But before Marinette could reach for her wallet,
Mr. Agreste put up a staying hand.

"It is a gift," he said to them both. "Please consider this my wedding present to you."

Marinette protested, but it was no use. Mr. Agreste put a kind hand on her shoulder, handed her the dress, and ushered her out the glass door. She caught a glimpse of his rarest smile – the kind he really meant – before he walked away, leaving her beaming on the sidewalk with the hanger of the garment bag digging into her left palm.

The day of the wedding, Marinette might as well have been Hawkmoth for how many butterflies lurked in her stomach. She had sought a few moments alone in her dressing room, ushering Alya and the other bridesmaids out to take photos. Her hair and makeup were done and she had just put on the dress. If she hadn't known it was herself looking out at her from the mirror, she would have said it was a fairy princess. Tikki fluttered beside her, gushing with excitement.

"You look stunning, Marinette."

"Thanks," she blushed. "I never thought today would happen. You know?"

Her kwami nodded seriously. "I do. Especially after what happened three years ago-"

"We don't have to talk about that now," Marinette said, an slight edge in her voice.

"We haven't talked about it at all. Are you sure you don't want to? Before you go through with-"

"Stop." Her voice was brittle, on the verge of cracking. "Please. Not today. Besides, they already did my makeup. I'm wearing mascara. They won't have time to redo it."

"All right." Tikki busied herself with the platter of snacks on the coffee table behind Marinette. "No cookies?" She sounded disappointed.

"You know I'd never let you down. I have some for you in my purse."

Marinette scanned the room for her bag, but realized she'd left it in the other room when they'd done her hair. She walked out to retrieve it, but when she came back and shut the door behind her, the room wasn't empty anymore.

Sitting in an armchair facing the door was Chat Noir, and his face upon seeing her in her dress snapped to a mixture of shock and awe. Marinette dropped her bag with a tiny squeak.

"Hey," he blinked, finally getting a hold of himself and picking up her bag for her.

"You're not supposed to be in here," she hissed in shock, taking her purse from him and setting it on the vanity. "It is bad luck to see a bride in her dress before the wedding."

"Somehow I don't think I count," he grinned. "And you look lovely, by the way."

"I – thank you," she muttered, frowning. "Why are you here? I thought we agreed you wouldn't visit me anymore, not since-"

"Today is a special occasion."

"I know, but why are you...here?"

"To say congratulations. And…" he trailed off, as if realizing what he had to say was going to be
difficult.

Marinette raised her eyebrows. "And?"

He stared at the lace on her neck, not meeting her eyes. "And to finally tell you the truth about everything."

"Now?" she asked, incredulous. "I'm getting married in an hour. If you have major bombshells, can't they wait?"

"I'm afraid not," he said with a grim smile. "Because I want you to know them before you get married. I don't want you saying 'I do' without a full plate of information. You'd never forgive me if I didn't tell you now."


Chat looked down at his hands, which he'd rested against his knees.

"First," he began, "you should know that I never intended things to go this way. You were supposed to know who I was a long time ago."

"You had every opportunity to tell me your identity if you wanted to," Marinette interrupted. "And then you vanished. I've spent three years wondering why you have only visited me on random days for just a few minutes when I'm alone. I don't understand why you never stay and never explain where you've gone. I am angry that you've disappeared and left us. People are looking for you. Ladybug looked for you."

They'd talked about this before. Chat had covered this same topic with Ladybug during his first and only visit to their spot at the Eiffel Tower two years ago. He'd told her not to expect him back. He'd left her to save Paris alone. Obviously, Ladybug hadn't taken that well. While Marinette never showed her full anger toward Chat as herself, she'd made it perfectly clear as her alter ego. She still remembered with pleasure how his cheek had slammed against her knuckles.

"I know," he said, clearly trying to be patient. "But I had a good reason for disappearing. I never told you why because it would reveal who I was. I wasn't sure either of us was ready for that. You weren't in a good place to hear what I had to say. You had enough going on."

"You mean with Adrien?"

There was a terrible silence. The only sound was the air conditioner whirring.

"Yes. After he – well, I didn't think showing up with my information was the best idea. The timing was bad."

"Well the timing is worse now! Did you ever think that maybe I don't care anymore what you have to say? What if I've moved on?"

"That's not -" he protested. "It's...more than me just trying to get the last word. Regardless of what you think of me, you still deserve the truth."

"But what if I have moved on?" she insisted.

"I know you haven't," he whispered.

"Oh?" Her eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms.
He clearly hadn't meant to say this aloud. His eyes darted about as if he were cornered. "I – well. You haven't moved on, because if you had, I wouldn't be here."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Chat put his face in his hands and moaned. "Why does it have to be this difficult?"

"You're the one making it difficult."

"Please hear me out. I'm going to start over. At the beginning." He stood and began to pace around the small room.

Marinette maintained her position in front of the door, watching him. He really hadn't changed much. His blond hair still fell carelessly in front of his face, his eyes were still the emeralds she remembered, and he was still lean and muscular. He was too thin; she'd always thought that. His face was as pale and angelic as ever; though now it held a distressed frown she'd never seen there before.

"Marinette, I'm going to tell you who I am."

"Stop saying what you're going to do and just do it. Quit drawing this out. You're making me nervous. You're lucky I'm hearing you out at all – this is my wedding day, and you were not invited for a reason. Shall I jog your memory? You abandoned Paris. Me. Ladybug. Everyone. We needed you more than ever, and you left."

He stopped for a moment to look at her, hurt flashing across his face, but then the frown was back and he resumed pacing. "When I tell you who I am, you'll know my name. You'll recognize it. I'm telling you this because it's going to surprise you. It may even upset you. You might want to sit down."

"I'm not going to sit down, it'll ruin my dress," she protested, but she compromised by walking to the vanity and resting her hands on the back of the chair. "Go on, just spit it out."

He looked at the floor and stopped walking. He seemed to steel himself. "I'm Adrien Agreste."

"No, you're not." The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. "That's a lie."

"I wouldn't lie about this."

"But Adrien's-"

"I know he – I – am. But think about it, you know it's true. We are the same."

Marinette forced herself not to sink to her knees. She felt wobbly and possibly drunk. The room was spinning at weird angles.

"No, you can't be."

"Marinette, I disappeared three years ago. The thing with Adrien was in that same time frame. We even look alike. And we have the same ring on our hand. A Miraculous." He held it out to show her. "Think about it. We're the same."

Marinette refused to accept this. It was completely ridiculous. Surely he knew that.

There was a knock at the door. Chat threw himself to the ground behind a floral love-seat, but the door thankfully remained closed. Marinette tried to answer in as normal a voice as possible.
"Yes?"

"Marinette," Alya called happily, "we're starting in thirty minutes. Nathaniel and the rest of the guys just got here, so we're going to keep him on the other side of the building make sure he doesn't see you in your dress until the big moment. But, just in case, you might want to stay in there. We'll be down the hall if you need anything! We want you to have your privacy, but we'll come get you in about ten or fifteen. Okay, hon?"

"Okay, thanks," she said, her throat dry.

Chat waited until Alya's footsteps faded away, then rose sheepishly from behind the sofa, his hair stuck up with static. "Nathaniel." He didn't look surprised.

"I'm marrying him."

His eyes were guarded, glassy. "I know. If...if it couldn't have been me, I'm glad you chose him."

There was a pause and he patted down his hair uncomfortably. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you, Marinette. If things could have been different...if I hadn't..." he trailed off, his expression so lonely and so...

Adrien.

It really was true, she realized. She could see Adrien in Chat for the first time – the kind smile, the same steady eyes, the way he stood with straight posture but a slight forward lean, as if ready to spring into action at any moment. No one else fit the profile as perfectly.

And once she knew it, she realized how much she'd missed them both. It had been so long since she'd seen him standing before her, looking at her like that. Like he wanted her, like he was wishing for her. That was the last expression she'd seen on Adrien's face three years ago, back when he'd dropped her off after their anniversary date and then had sped off in that ill-fated limo.

"You're...you're really him."

He nodded.

Before she knew what she was doing, she was in his arms. She didn't remember rushing toward him, no longer caring about her dress.

He buried his face in her hair. "I missed you too."

She breathed in, but his scent of leather and peppermint was noticeably absent.

And that was when she finally understood.

The normalcy of him holding her splintered.

"If you're Adrien," she said slowly, "then you're...dead."

"Yes." His voice was suddenly vulnerable. Apologetic. He stepped back so he could look her in the eyes, still holding her arms in his.

"Then how can you be here? As Chat?" she whispered.

"I'm not really here." He closed his eyes as if steeling himself, then opened them and continued. "I'm just a memory, Marinette. I only ever came back to talk to you when you were missing me. I felt pulled to you, drawn to where you were, and just like that, there I was. That's how I knew you weren't over me when I showed up today. And even though it has happened with both you and
Ladybug, somehow, you've wanted me around more than she has. She must not miss me as much as I thought she would. The last thing she said to me was, ah, unrepeatable. And then she punched me in the face."

For the first time, she was filled with regret. She knew she had to put him out of his misery.

It was finally to admit that she was Ladybug. That she missed him so achingly much that everything else felt dull and numb. That she'd made herself as busy as possible to ignore the pain. In the moments when she was Ladybug, she purposely took on as many akumas as possible in order to occupy her mind. That was why, when Chat Noir entered her thoughts, it was when she was Marinette, staring at the Paris lights on her rooftop, the one place she never had to pretend everything was fine.

All other times, she put on a show that she was healed and better, when in reality, she was collapsing inwards and had just stopped complaining about it. There were only two people who could always break through that façade, who knew how to bandage the interior wounds. One was Nathaniel, who called her his "lucky bug" and brushed the tears from her cheeks. And the other was Chat, who somehow always caught her when she fell, even after he was gone for good.

"I think I can explain that," she said, then turned her back to him. "Can you check to make sure my clasp on the back of my dress is fastened?"

Chat frowned at the bizarre non-sequitur. "What?"

"Please just check?"

"Okay." He walked over and stood close enough that the hairs on her neck stood up. His fingers were gentle against her skin as he touched the ladybug clasp and sucked in a sharp breath.

"No." It ripped from his lungs as if he had been punched. He'd recognized it immediately, as she'd known he would. Only Chat would know the real design when he saw it.

She turned and pointed to her Ladybug earrings to confirm the spot pattern was the same. "Yes."

He staggered back, completely white and speechless.

"When you died, I used my time as Ladybug to stay as busy as possible. I used fighting akumas as my armor against you. If I started missing you, I pushed myself to forget it, though on some days, like the year anniversary of your car accident, on our anniversary, it was impossible to keep you out. That's why I never talked to you as Ladybug. That's why you only ever found me when I was Marinette. It was when I could be myself, be alone, and truly miss you the way you deserved."

She looked up at the ceiling to keep her tears from escaping. When she finally gathered herself enough look at him again, she realized he was crying too.

"Oh," he breathed, but the small word carried so much more.

"I do miss you. As Ladybug and as myself. Every day, without fail."

"I'm so sorry. I should have been here for you, and if I could fix the pain I've caused, I would. You need to know that."

"It's…it's okay. It's not your fault."

"I'm sorry we had to find all this out on your wedding day," he confessed, horrified. "But know I
wouldn't have come if you hadn't really needed me."

Tikki had been right after all, it seemed. Perhaps avoidance of the pain wasn't really healing.

"So this visit," she murmured. "Is…"

"Closure," he said, taking her hands in his cool fingers. "And a goodbye. You're not going to need me much now. You may always be My Lady, but you're not mine anymore. Nathaniel has that honor now."

"But can you forgive me? For moving on?"

He raised one hand to her chin. "There's nothing to forgive. I know you love him, and I want you to be loved the way he seems to love you."

"I...loved you too, you know."

Chat smiled, but it wasn't his trademark impish grin. It was the smile Adrien gave her that first day, when he'd handed her his umbrella. "Marinette, you've got a lot ahead of you. Can you go into that wedding, look Nathaniel in the eye, and honestly promise him your heart forever? Can you do that, knowing what you know now? Do you still want to do that?"

"I – yes. I do." And she knew it was the truth. Her heart was unfettered. Perhaps a little damaged. A few pieces were chipped off – Adrien had taken those long ago. But she knew she wouldn't hold anything back from Nathaniel now. She was entirely his.

Perhaps that was Adrien's gift to her all along - he was setting her free at last.

"That's what I was hoping you'd say." He kissed her hands, then let go of her and stepped back. He wiped the tears from his face with one gloved hand and walked to the far wall. She watched, frozen, as he parted the curtains.

"Goodbye, Marinette."

He had already climbed halfway out the window before she called, "Wait!"

He paused, feet poised ridiculously in midair. She almost laughed.

"Did you ever visit your father?"

A guilty expression crossed his face. "Yes, when he thinks of me," he said. "But I never say anything. I just watch from the shadows."

"Maybe you should talk to him. He misses you too."

"I don't think it would help. It might just bring him more pain. Especially since he doesn't know I'm Chat. It was hard enough to tell you..."

"Your visits worked with me, though," she pointed out. "This helped. And he already knows I'm Ladybug. I told him after you died, in case he ever needed me. I've been watching over him."

He tilted his head. "Fair."

"I think even he deserves some closure," she said. "Don't we all?"

"That's a very good point."
"Yes, well, I've always been very wise," she said, and they both laughed.

"Will I see you again?" she asked.

"Perhaps," he raised an eyebrow mysteriously. "You know where to find me."

"The Eiffel Tower?"

"No," he said with amusement, and pointed instead at her heart. "I'm in there. Come on, Spots, I thought you said you were wise."

She blinked in surprise, ready to say something more, but he was gone.

When Marinette and Nathaniel arrived home from their honeymoon in Italy, he threw their suitcases aside and lifted her up into his arms. He insisted upon carrying her over the threshold into their red brick apartment. She protested and giggled as he trod across the creaking wood floors and spun in a circle at the center of the room. She clung to his shoulders for dear life, dizzy with happiness.

"Don't laugh at tradition," he said, though he was laughing himself. "It's for good luck!"

"We don't need it! I'm lucky enough for the both of us."

"I beg to differ," he argued, finally setting her down. "Lucky people are not as clumsy as you are, bug. I saw how many times you tripped over the suitcases just today alone."

"Once."

He regarded her with extreme skepticism.

"Fine, four times."

"I rest my case." He spread his hands in victory.

"Hey, I was lucky enough to marry you. That counts for something."

"Well, I can't argue with that," he admitted, and she kissed his cheek.

By the time they had unpacked and toasted their homecoming with champagne on the wrought iron balcony, the sun had tucked itself behind a pink and violet horizon. While Nathaniel washed the glasses, Marinette took the empty suitcases into the guest bedroom, only to find that while they'd been away, her parents had moved all their wedding gifts into it. The small room was full to bursting. She wedged the suitcases into the remaining space as best she could, and was about to close the door when she noticed something odd. Resting atop the large pile of gifts and boxes was a black umbrella.

She picked it up and found a small note dangling from the handle. It read in typed letters, "For rainy days and new memories. Wishing you a happy marriage and luck abound. Love, Chat Noir." There was a handwritten postscript at the bottom that scrawled, "For best results, don't open inside."

She chuckled quietly, wondering he was listening from the shadows, and affectionately tucked the umbrella back in its place.

"Thanks, Adrien," she whispered, placing a hand over her heart.

Chapter End Notes
This chapter was also written before Luka as a character was introduced, so Nathaniel was the logical choice for a pairing at the time. With Season 2 behind us now, if I'd written this more recently, perhaps the pairing would have been different. Who knows?

Also, I'm sorry this one was so sad. I have a cool detective one coming up next so hopefully that will boost the mood again. Thanks for reading!
Crime and Pun-ishment

Chapter Summary

Crime and Pun-ishment: A Detective AU. By day, Marinette works as her alter-ego, a masked detective named Ladybug. Her mission is to track down Adrien Agreste, who has been missing for eight years. Her case partner, Chat Noir, thinks he can help her with that.

The clients who walked into the Lucky Bug detective agency typically weren't having the best day. So when a very attractive, smiling man entered the office through the glimmering glass door, everyone noticed. Alya, the PR head who sat closest to the door, was the first to notify Ladybug, the owner of the agency. From behind the closed door to Ladybug's private office, a message popped up on the computer screen.

ALYA: A beautiful man just walked in. Do you have a secret fiancé we don't know about?

This was followed by two more messages from the agency's forensic analysts.

NINO: Who's your new boyfriend? :D

MYLENE: Do we have a new client? Or are we being robbed? He's wearing a cat mask. Looks like Zorro.

And finally, Ladybug's receptionist, who guarded the rickety staircase that led to the second floor private offices, rang in.

CHLOE: A guy just asked to see you. No appointment. If I were in your shoes, I'd let him up. Even if his case is a dead end, he's drop dead gorgeous.

CHLOE: Even though he's wearing a cat mask. I just know. I've dated enough hot guys to know these things.

Ladybug typed a response to Chloe.

LADYBUG: Hmmm. Sounds like Chat Noir.

CHLOE: You know this hottie?

LADYBUG: Maybe. ;) I'm curious as to why he's here. Send him up.

CHLOE: Curiosity killed the cat, you know…if you let him up, I don't get to keep looking at him. Don't ruin this for me.

LADYBUG: Chloe…this is your job.

There was a pause, and Alya interrupted.

ALYA: I expect details later, LB.
There was a knock on the door.

Ladybug adjusted her spotted red mask and called, "Come in!"

She had always thought of Chat as a good friend. They'd worked a few cases together in the past, having started their agencies around the same time. But they had only ever worked from his office at Chaos Cat Agency ("The Claws of the Law", according to the slogan on the door), so he'd never come to her office before.

She thought she'd get used to his striking appearance, but it seemed that was impossible. Even in disguise, his green eyes were still vulnerable and kind. His muscles remained defined even under a black suit and green tie, and he had a crooked grin that nothing seemed to shake.

But something was different this time – he was fidgety. Excited. She scrutinized him; the way one hand was clutching a file folder with a slick black pen clipped to the side, the way the cat-eye mask clung to his chiseled cheekbones, and the way he waltzed to the black armchair opposite her desk and sat down. The file suggested I have news, the mask told her I have a secret, and the cheekbones, well…

She wished she could see his whole face, or that she knew who he really was. Detectives often wore masks to protect themselves from being targeted by the killers they hunted. Ladybug had spent the last five years hunting down red-handed psychos and whodunit husbands, and in her line of work, she was grateful for the anonymity. She couldn't begrudge him that same protection.

"What can I do for you, Chat? You seem…happy."

"I have something you're going to want."

She rolled her eyes. "Is this another pickup line? I thought we talked about this already. No more."

"No, not a pickup line." He held out the file to her with a gloved hand. She took it, and he continued, "I know you're a machine at closing cases. I've loved working with you in the past. We make good partners. But…I also know about the one case you haven't solved, and thought I could be of some assistance."

Ladybug blinked. "What? How did you – that's personal! Why would-"

"I have information that might change your suspect list. And if what I know intrigues you enough, I was hoping we could work the case together."

"If you're referring to the Adrien Agreste disappearance-"

He raised an eyebrow. "I am."

"-that case is off limits." She set the file on the desk and crossed her arms.

His eyes narrowed. "Is it now?"

"Look, I've already been down that road. I'm not putting myself through that again. Adrien and his father had a fight, and then Adrien vanished. As much as I would love to link his disappearance to the Hawkmoth serial killings, there isn't evidence to support it. He was eighteen, far too young to be in the age range of Hawkmoth's victims. And if there was a…body-" she grimaced, "we would have found it by now. The searches were comprehensive, and it's been eight years."
"That may have been true before," Chat interrupted, "but we can link him to Hawkmoth now."

"What do you mean?"

He flicked open the file folder he'd brought and spread out three photos. Two were time stamped yesterday. Both were blurry, taken at night without a flash. One was of a spray painted Hawkmoth symbol – a purple moth outline inside a circle – on a brick wall, and the shadow of a man with a familiar profile. The other showed a pair of one-of-a-kind Agreste Fashion shoes under an open black car door.

"These," he said, "are photos of Gabriel Agreste entering and exiting Springtrap Alley the night of the most recent Hawkmoth murder, before the police showed up."

"Springtrap Alley?"

"It's the site of the most recent murder. Grisly. Involved a jaguar stolen from the zoo."

They both shuddered.

"That symbol could just be copycat graffiti," Ladybug shrugged. "Plus, why would Gabriel be there anyway? He wouldn't dare get blood on those shoes, and how could he have known where the murder was going to be?"

Chat bent closer to the photo and tapped the corner, where Gabriel's shoe had a smudge on the heel in the same violet paint. "See that? He painted the symbol himself. Recently. And if Hawkmoth's other killings are any indication, that symbol is nearly impossible to forge. All the details are the same here. I even had a criminal graphologist double check. Gabriel knows Hawkmoth's signature. Either he's a phenomenal forger, or he's the real killer."

Ladybug frowned. "Where did you get these photos?"

"These photos were taken by one of the witnesses living in the building across the street from the alley. I have a cop friend who has access to the evidence. She made me copies."

"Please don't tell me this cop friend is Lila."

He grinned.

Ladybug recoiled in disgust. "And she gave you crime scene photos? I ought to tell her superior."

"They just had a double kidnapping and three other murders; Ivan has enough to deal with right now. Leave him out of this."

"Are you friends with all the cops?"

"Playing poker makes everyone friends, Ladybug."

She poked at the photos. "Back on topic. You're sure these are genuine?"

"Very."

"And they're definitely of Gabriel Agreste?"

"Yep. And if that's Gabriel, he's also Hawkmoth."

She sat back, horrified.
Chat lifted his eyebrows. "Told you it was a game changer."

"If he's Hawkmoth," Ladybug murmured, her heart sinking, "he probably killed his son. Maybe Adrien found out the truth and was going to expose him, but didn't escape in time."

"Or," Chat countered, "he did escape with the truth and went into hiding to bide his time."

"If that's the case, where is he? Why hasn't he come back to expose Hawkmoth? What's he waiting for?"

"Perhaps two very good detectives. Or the right evidence." He gestured to the photos. "I've been looking for evidence like this for a while now, and this is a huge windfall. What do you say, do we have a case?" He was smiling broadly at her, waiting for her to say yes. Something about him always made her say yes.

Ladybug blew out a breath. "All right."

He grabbed her hand and squeezed it. His hand was surprisingly warm under his gloves. He closed the file, pushed it toward her, and stood up to leave.

Ladybug stood up too. "Wait. Can I ask you a question?"

He nodded.

"Why would you bring this case to me? How did you know I couldn't solve it the first time? Or that I even tried at all?"

She was surprised to find he had an answer.

Chat sat forward in his chair. "Because I watched you investigate a lot, back when I was setting up my agency. I studied you for tips on how to improve my own detective work."

Now this was interesting. "You followed me?"

"You're easy to...ah...spot in that costume."

Not another pun.

"Did you ever suspect Adrien's father?"

Chat Noir tilted his head forward. "Always, but I could never prove it. I also didn't think I could do it on my own. But if we worked together, maybe we could take Hawkmoth down once and for all."

Ladybug sat back in her chair, adjusting her face mask again. "Well then," she sighed. "I sincerely hope Gabriel didn't kill his own son. Let's find the truth."

"Pawsome." Chat strode to the door. "I'll be in touch. Oh, and My Lady, be careful," he warned. "This could get dangerous."

"I'm always careful."

"I know. But just for the record, as a detective, I may catch the bad guys, but I keep the good guys alive too. That includes you."

"You don't have to," she said. "I appreciate the gesture, but I can take care of myself."
"I'm sure you can." He bent his head and some of his hair fell into his eyes. "But something about your charm seems to bring out the guardian in me. I still promise to protect you, though I hope you never need it, My Lady."

She blinked. Did he just call her charming?

"Thank you," she stammered, but he was already gone.

When Ladybug walked out of the office that afternoon, she had hardly made it down the stairs when her employees accosted her with questions. It was all she could do to give them the details of the new case without getting interrupted again with requests for information on the guy himself. By the time everyone was up to speed, it was much too late to go investigate any cases without getting chased out by someone in their slippers.

Ladybug was the last to leave the agency; closing up shop for the night and flicking off the lights. Only when she was a block away from her apartment did she slip into the shadows and remove her mask.

She changed clothes in the lobby bathroom of the fancy hotel on the corner, and finished off the costume change by sprinkling some flour from a plastic bag onto her clothes and hair.

In an instant, she was no longer a detective. She was Marinette, who told everyone she worked two jobs: selling and designing clothes at a charming boutique in the mornings, then baking pastries in the afternoons. With this lie, she was protected from the vengeful criminals who hunted her alter ego. She took one last look in the mirror and hurried another two blocks west to her apartment; if she was out any later, she’d be keeping her roommate awake. Alya always waited for her to get home; she said it was dangerous to walk around Paris alone at night and insisted she would only go to bed when Marinette finally walked through the door. It would have been pointless to argue.

Even though the two of them actually spent every day working together at the agency, Alya didn't know that and she never would. She would never dream that her best friend was also…kind of her boss. Marinette intended to keep it that way.

She swung the apartment door open and stepped into the hallway to remove her raincoat. She then made her way into the living room, rolling up the sleeves of her red sweater in the forgiving warmth. Her joy at being home was suddenly derailed when she realized someone was sitting in her armchair, and it wasn't Alya.

She approached until she finally caught a good glimpse of him, and then froze. Chat Noir was sitting there, looking nervous and clutching a mug of tea. Meanwhile, Alya sat on the couch opposite him, practically drooling.

Marinette bit back a surprised "Chat?" as she quickly remembered she was no longer Ladybug. As far as Chat knew, he'd never met her before. She would just have to play dumb.

"Hi. Who's this?" she asked kindly.

Alya looked up in excitement, and Chat shot out of the chair, looking startled. Was he…blushing?

"Sorry. Hi, you must be Marinette. I'm Chat Noir. I'm a detective." He held out a gloved hand and she shook it, trying to look charmed. That was how most girls acted around him, right? If Alya was any indication, then yes.

"Hi," she squeaked. "What's going on? Is something wrong?"
"Chat came in to the agency today," Alya said, standing to join them at the same eye level. "He and Ladybug are going to find Adrien. I gave him our address on his way out so he could stop by."

"Oh? Why?"

Chat was still shaking Marinette's hand. She wished he would stop. He didn't, though, and instead just launched into his explanation. "Well, I know you and Adrien were close before his disappearance, and didn't want it to be a surprise to you that we were reopening the investigation."

"He was my boyfriend," she said pointedly, and he finally let go of her hand with a look of embarrassment. He blushed even more. Maybe it wasn't Alya who was making him act weird. Maybe it was her. But why?

He cleared his throat. "Uh, I also was hoping that you could stop by Chaos Cat Agency at some point; I'd love to know if you have any information we can use to find him." Then, he produced a business card from thin air and passed it to her. "Here's my number. Call me tomorrow and we'll set up a date. Uh, I mean, a meeting."

"Oh, okay. Thanks. Here's my number? A date?" She frowned, wondering what was up with him. He was never this…awkward. Usually he was debonair and smooth. She'd never known him to blush.

Alya was watching their interaction as though she was watching Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet meet in real life. Like she wanted them to fall in love or something. The thought of being in love with Chat was…interesting, Marinette had to admit, but her heart was still reserved.

Alya knew this. Neither of them was great at dating. Alya had been with Nino for so long that she didn't know the first thing about modern dating. Marinette was so emotionally closed off after what happened to Adrien that she hadn't even gone out for so much as a coffee with anyone new. She'd had offers and flirtations lobbed at her for years, of course, but she only knew this because Alya had told her so after the fact. For all intents and purposes, she was oblivious.

After one look at Marinette's confused face, Alya sent Chat on his way. "Well, it was great to meet you," she said, steering him to the door. Over his shoulder, she wiggled her eyebrows at Marinette as if to say, He's totally your type!

In response, she rolled her eyes.

When Alya had closed the door and locked it with a click, Marinette finally relaxed. She pocketed Chat's card without even looking at it. She already knew his number by heart.

Marinette dialed Chat the next day while walking to work. It was weird to be dialing him as someone else for once, but she didn't think it could go wrong as long as she kept up pretenses. She was wrong.

He picked up the phone with a smooth "How's it going, Ladybug?"

She stopped in her tracks in the middle of the crowded sidewalk, and was buffeted by people holding grocery bags and briefcases.

"This isn't Ladybug. It's Marinette. Don't you have caller ID?"

There was a pause on the other line that lasted almost a minute. Marinette started to wonder if he'd hung up, until his voice startled her so much she almost dropped her phone into a puddle.
"Oh," he said, sounding frantic. "Uh, okay. Right. Marinette. *Marinette.*" There was another pause and he gave a high pitched laugh that sounded anything but carefree. What was wrong with him?

"You wanted me to schedule some time to meet with you about Adrien?"

"Right, right…right. Right." He then muttered something unintelligible.

Was he having a stroke? "Are you okay?"

"Fine. Great. Spectacular!" he said, a little too loudly. "How does tomorrow, my office, at five sound? After you're done with work?"

"How do you know when I get off work?"

Another long pause. "I'm a detective."

"Oooookay then. See you tomorrow." She hung up, gave her phone a befuddled look, and set up the meeting in her calendar. She made her way calmly to work, and had an exceedingly normal day of interviews, phone calls, and stakeouts at the Agreste mansion.

Meanwhile, Chat Noir didn't leave his office all day, and was overheard by his staff shouting "It's impossible!", "Crap!", and "YAAAAAAASSSSS!" at random moments. There were also slamming noises, occasional dancing footsteps, and frequent, uncontrollable, panicked laughter.

The staff at Chaos Cat was well accustomed to Chat's strange ways and were paid to ignore it. They did not investigate further.

The following day, Marinette arrived precisely at five at the Chaos Cat Agency. The place was practically deserted, except for the eccentric receptionist, who insisted his name was Plagg "with two 'g's'."

Plagg led her up to the third floor, down a long white hallway, past an empty full-size kitchen and lounge, to a closed wooden door. Marinette knocked on it gently, then turned to ask Plagg where everyone was, but he was already gone.

The door opened slowly, and Chat stood there, looking rather disheveled in a wrinkled black suit, but calmer than he'd sounded on the phone.

"Hi, Marinette," he said. "Come in." He walked back to his desk and sat, wringing his hands.

The place was a wreck. A glass vase was broken in the far corner and its flowers were beached on the carpet around a water stain. Papers littered the wood floor, and two of the client chairs were overturned. She righted one of them and sat down.

Behind Chat's head was a massive chalkboard covered in writing. Pictures of Gabriel and Adrien Agreste were taped to it, with white arrows drawn to other photos. Marinette recognized herself, Ladybug, Alya, and even Nino. Coffee-stained newspaper articles were taped up beside them, illustrating the entire story of Adrien's disappearance and the Hawkmoth murders.

"What questions did you have for me?" she asked, not sure where they should start.

He didn't meet her eyes and focused on the flour she'd applied to her hair and black sweater just for the occasion. She even was wearing a cinnamon bun fragrance to cultivate the impression she'd just come from the bakery. As she watched his face, he looked inexplicably upset.
"You don't really work in a bakery, do you?" he asked.

She didn't answer. Her heart rate began to pulse in her ears.

"Do you?" he pressed.

"What kind of question is that?" she finally retorted.

"The kind of question I need the answer to. Be honest with me. You don't work in a bakery."

She crossed her arms tightly. "I don't see how that question is relevant to Adrien's disappearance." Perhaps it would be harder to hide her secrets than she'd thought. Was he on to her? What did he know? How did he find out?

Chat shook his head and decided to change the subject. "Okay, different question. If I could tell you I found Adrien, would you want to see him?"

"You found."

"I said if," he interrupted.

"Then it depends. If he's not dead, I want to see him. But if he's dead, I don't…want to see…that."

"Nor should you want to," he agreed. "If he was alive, and had been in hiding for eight years, trying to prove his father guilty, as I told Ladybug he might have done, would you be angry he never contacted you?"

Marinette shifted in her seat. "Is that true? That he's here in Paris, just hiding?"

He cleared his throat. "Hypothetically."

"Okay. Hypothetically. It depends. If he had good reason for avoiding me, I could understand that."

"So if I took you to see Adrien, right now, you'd be happy to see him? You wouldn't, ah, kill him, or anything?"

"Of course not!" She frowned. "But would he want to see me?"

"He would rather die than not see you." She raised her eyebrows, and he added, "Hypothetically."

"Why are you asking me this? I thought the whole point of this meeting was to find him. It sounds like you already have."

"Well, um. Finding him might…ah…may be easier than I thought. And harder."

"Look, can you just explain what's going on? I'm not a mind reader."

"No, you're right," Chat said, then stood from his desk. "I just…I need to figure out how to say this."

Marinette watched him rove around the room at a stiff pace. Finally, he started talking as he paced. His voice was trembling.

"When you called me to set up the meeting…No, here, I'll start at the beginning. Do you know how my phone system works?"

She shook her head.
"Well, I have two phones. I have the client line for appointments and scheduling, and that goes through Plagg. And then I have a line reserved for Ladybug. I wanted to ensure that if she called, it went directly to me. I didn't want people in my office to know we worked together unless it was relevant; I didn't want either of us to put the other in danger during a particularly bad case. If criminals knew we worked together, they'd try to use one of us to hurt the other. So I wanted to avoid that. That's why I always insisted we meet at my office, so I could control the environment. As you probably noticed, my staff leaves when I need privacy." He gestured to the door.

Then, his green eyes narrowed as he finally looked her in the eye. "When you called to schedule this meeting with me, you used Ladybug's hotline. Not the client number I gave you."

Oh no. "I can explain-" No, she couldn't.

He kept talking. "I thought perhaps it was because Alya works at the agency and might have somehow given it to you, but I ruled that out for two reasons. First, why would you need the number from her if you had my card? And second, I heard your voice. Really heard it for the first time. I might not have put it together if I hadn't been expecting Ladybug and heard Marinette; if I hadn't realized that voice was the same for both people. So, in summary, I know for a fact that you do not work at a bakery or a boutique. You, Marinette, are Ladybug."

He finished, his cheeks looking flushed. He sat back down at his desk and waited for her to say something. Anything.

"So that's why you were weird on the phone…” she said quietly. There was no point denying her identity now.

"Yes," he said, sitting back. "But it wasn't the only reason."

"What do you mean?"

He switched subjects again without warning, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the desk. "You wanted to find Adrien, and I wanted your help. What you need to understand is, well, the fact that you're Ladybug changes everything."

"How does it change anything? Adrien's still missing. Or dead."

"No," Chat said patiently. "He isn't."

Marinette picked up her bag and stood. "Okay. Look, I don't know what kind of mind game this is, but I don't have to sit here and have you be all cryptic. My boyfriend could be lying in a ditch somewhere. Are you going to help me, or not?"

Chat Noir stood, his face wiping blank. "All right, look. Adrien isn't dead. And he isn't missing. I know where he is."

"Then what are we waiting for, let's go get him!" She was halfway out the door before she realized he hadn't moved. Sensing something was wrong, she let go of the cold doorknob and turned slowly. He was just standing there with a peculiarly affectionate expression on his face.

"Come on, Chat, aren't we going to go?"

"We don't have to," he murmured. "Adrien's right here."

Marinette scanned the room as she approached the desk again, sure she would have noticed Adrien hiding in the small, messy space. But then her eyes dragged themselves back to Chat's face, and she
understood.

"You? This whole time, it's been you?"

He had been here the whole time! Flaunting himself in front of her, probably enjoying messing with her while she thought he was dead!

Without even thinking about it, she leaned across the desk and smacked his arm. "You let me think you were dead? What's wrong with you?"

"Ouch!" he jumped back, holding his arm and looking at her in betrayal.

"Oh my - I'm so sorry - it was totally a reflex!" She covered her mouth, horrified. "Are you okay?"

He nodded, his lips trembling, but not out of distress. He was trying hard not to laugh. "Maybe you could kiss it? To make it feel better?"

In that moment, it was as if they'd crossed the span of eight years with one exchange; as if nothing had changed. They were still themselves, after all. They still knew each other, still loved each other, after everything. She gave a small snort, which set off a chain reaction. Soon they were both wiping tears of laughter from their eyes.

Once they'd regained some composure, her tears of laughter turned to actual tears. Marinette tried to stop crying, but she kept looking at Chat and picturing him without the disguise, and now it was easy to see Adrien there. She hadn't seen his face in eight years, and yet she'd been looking at him the whole time, never even seeing him. She felt guilty. Horrible. What kind of girlfriend did that make her?

This was made worse by the fact that Chat was crying too. Because he'd missed her. Her face crumpled, and she stood there, arms dangling awkwardly at her sides, as tears dripped down her face.

"I – I missed you," she sniffed, and felt like it was such a pitiful, understated thing to say after eight years apart. But what else could she say? Now she knew he'd been hiding in plain sight, helping her with the Hawkmoth case on purpose so he could come back for real. And he'd even gotten tongue-tied when he'd visited her apartment because he couldn't pretend he didn't love her.

Her eyes shut as more tears made their escape, and before she could open them again, she heard Chat – Adrien – move from behind the desk. In seconds, his arms were around her, and it was like coming home. She tucked her head between his neck and chest and hugged him back.

"I missed you too," he whispered.

"I am so glad you're okay! I'm even more glad you're not dead! But I definitely want to get a hold of your father and cut off -"

"We'll have time for that," he chuckled. "But let's not ruin this moment. I've been dreaming about this for so long."

"Compared to your imagination, how do we measure up?"

"There's nothing as good as the real thing."

He bent so his chin rested against the top of her head. She could feel him breathing. "Hey," he said after a moment,"are you wearing some kind of perfume? You smell like…a bakery. I know the flour
was for show…but you really went all out, didn't you?"

She sighed. "Yeah."

"You smell really good."

"Like cinnamon buns?"

"Yeah, it kind of makes me want one."

"Me too, honestly."

"Should we go get some? We can eat them and plot the official take-down of my murderous father. Because once we do that, I can go back to being Adrien full time."

"That sounds amazing."

"Where do they even sell them? Is there a shop nearby?"

"Actually, Adrien, I may not work in a bakery, but I do still have my father's best recipe. I also noticed you have a kitchen here. Why don't we bake our own? It can be a date."

"A real one?"

She stepped back so she could see him fully. He stood still as her hands crept up to his mask and removed it. "Of course. There's nothing as good as the real thing."
Chapter Summary

It's the Great Pumpkin, Nino Lahiffe: Nino hosts a Halloween Party every year, but Adrien is always conspicuously absent and gives the worst excuses for missing. Determined to get to the bottom of this mystery, Nino hatches a plan. It comes with some unintended consequences, and more secrets than he bargained for. Trick or treat! Special thanks to WrathofNyx for sparking some of the ideas for excuses in this fic, and to VenRaider for suggesting a Halloween theme.

Chapter Notes

This one was originally written for Halloween, but, hey, it's never too early to start celebrating. Enjoy!

Late October fell as quickly as the leaves, and Nino couldn't have been happier. This was his favorite time of year because, every autumn, Nino planned his annual Halloween party.

In the past, he'd created fancy paper invitations with pumpkin shaped confetti tucked into the envelopes. But with the advent of better technology and more complaints about the confetti than he'd originally anticipated, his invite was now an online affair. This allowed him to announce the party with awesome animations and zero paper waste. This year, he went for the dancing skeletons and opted for no virtual confetti. These were dangerous times; he couldn't bear causing an akuma attack if someone got angry over a festive digital glitter bomb.

The only problem with Nino's Halloween party was that Adrien had always been invited, but had never come. Nino was determined to end this streak; it was part of his continued effort to expose Adrien to as much fun as possible. But, in his experience, it is hard to make someone have fun if they are not even present for all the awesomeness.

It was his assumption that Mr. Agreste was to blame, even if Adrien never admitted it. After the Bubbler incident a few years ago, there had always been something tense between Adrien's dad and Nino. It made sense, then, that Adrien wouldn't be allowed to attend any bash if his crazy DJ friend was the host.

But Adrien had never confirmed this theory. He'd always come up with his own reasons for missing the party. After four years, Nino had heard all kinds of excuses, and all of them were crap. Adrien sought not to throw his father under the bus, which Nino respected and admired, but the guy needed to work on his lying if he didn't want to tell the truth and just say his father was a helicopter dad.

This year, Nino added his friend's name to the attendee list anyway, but he wasn't holding out much hope that his friend would get it. He'd have to get the news to him some other way. He had a system by now:

1. Send out the invitations.

2. Keep an eye on the invitations.
2. Come up with a reason to correct the invitations and re-send, just in case Mr. Agreste deleted the first one.
3. Invite Adrien in person at school.
4. Devise codenames for text correspondence about the party. Nino is Linus. Adrien is Great Pumpkin.
5. Remind Adrien to tell his father the party has been moved from the 31st to the 30th.
6. Wait for Mr. Agreste to tell Adrien he can't go on the 30th. Laugh because he never said Adrien couldn't come on the 31st.
7. Adrien later will text Nino: "Linus, the plan has worked. Great Pumpkin plans to come."
8. The day of the party, Nino will wait all night for the Great Pumpkin to show up, and he never does.
9. Nino will change Adrien's name in his phone to "Pumpkin Head", and change the contact photo to a pumpkin.
10. He will feel guilty and change everything back to normal.
11. At three in the morning on November 1st, Adrien will text Nino an apology. It will contain a stupid excuse with lots of typos, presumably because he's had his phone confiscated as punishment for attempting to sneak out to the party. He is probably risking punishment by sneaking a message to his friend while his dad's asleep.
12. Nino will respond, "Next year, man. Next year."
13. Repeat cycle after 350 days.

But this year was going to be different, Nino could feel it. He sent the invitations with a satisfied click, checking off the first item on his list.

A few days later, Adrien approached Nino at their lockers before school.

"Hey." He had to say it twice, because Nino had his headphones on the first time.

Nino ripped the headphones off and raised his eyebrows. "What's up, my dude?" He scanned Adrien's face, but the usual "Great Pumpkin Is In!" excitement was not there. In fact, his friend looked exhausted. His eyes were darker green than usual, he was pale, and his normally perfect posture was replaced with a slouch. It was like he was a different person. Nino was so surprised that it took him a moment to tune in to what Adrien was saying.

"I wanted to thank you for inviting me, but I don't know if I can make it this year. Ordinarily I'd be on board, but I'm grounded through Halloween. I'm not supposed to leave my room except for school and photo shoots."

"Again? What did you do?"

Adrien ducked his head. "Snuck out again. But I'll let you know if things change, and I'm really sorry. I figured I'd tell you early on; I didn't want you to get your hopes up. It's not fair to tell you I'm in if I'm not."

"Yeah, all right," Nino sighed. "I'm just getting tired of the excuses."

Adrien looked hurt. "I'm sorry," he stammered. "Seriously, I just have really bad luck with timing this time of year. It's always been that way. Something about Halloween messes with my life."

Right. His dad. Nino felt sour regret immediately rise in his throat. "I know. I'm sorry I said anything at all. I get it."

"Thanks for understanding," Adrien said, biting his lip. "I should probably get going, I have a
Chinese test in a few minutes."

"Yeah. Cool, see you." Nino tried to sound more sincere than he felt.

That day, he couldn't stop thinking about all the previous times he'd hosted this Halloween party and Adrien had skipped out. Remembering all those excuses made him wonder what the real problem with his friend was. Because there was no way everything Adrien had told him over the last four years was true.

Adrien's Excuses: A Summary, with Pass/Fail Ratings

1. **Halloween 2013 – Akuma Attack.**

If Nino remembered correctly, it was a vampire akuma, and lots of people were late to the party because of it. Ladybug had had to get rid of the vampire on her own; Chat Noir had been mysteriously absent.

The fact Adrien said he couldn't make it almost was believable, if it wasn't for the fact that Nino watched the coverage at the party. The akuma situation was resolved early enough that Adrien probably could have made it if he'd been home. If he was grounded, he'd snuck out. But to where, if not Nino's bash?

Fail.

2. **Halloween 2014 – His cat was sick.**

He doesn't have a cat. Unless it's a really well-kept secret.

Fail.

3. **Halloween 2015 – No Costume.**

This was the year Nino switched to online invitations, and didn't realize Adrien hadn't seen his. His father had likely deleted it without reading it. By the time Nino finally mentioned he hadn't received the RSVP from Adrien, it was the day before. Adrien promised he'd go if he could find a good costume. His apology text at three in the morning mentioned he wasn't able to.

Face value: Pass.

Under scrutiny: Fail. Adrien Agreste, fashion poster child with access to any clothes he desires, can't find a decent Halloween costume on short notice? Sure, okay.

4. **Halloween 2016 – Traffic.**

According to Adrien, traffic was murder.

Really.

Hard fail.

5. **This Year** – At this point, Nino was expecting it would be either an **escaped zoo animal** or something just as bogus. Unless he got to the bottom of Adrien's real reason. Because the main thing that nagged at Nino was…well, what if Mr. Agreste wasn't the problem? What if Adrien just really didn't want to come and was too afraid to say so? That would be worse. Much worse.
By Halloween night, it was clear Adrien wasn't going to come. But Nino got ready for the party with one eye on the front door anyway. Once everyone else arrived, he set up the first round of snacks and hosted the costume contest as if nothing was wrong.

Over time, the mingling guests broke out into their regular groups. Chloe and Lila went to stand in the corner with Sabrina. They were all wearing princess crowns and daintily sipping Zombie Punch (orange ice cream and lemonade, which made for a sort of disgusting brain-freeze). Alya, as was the tradition, wore her Ladybug costume so she could match Nino, who was dressed as Chat Noir. Marinette showed up in something tasteful, handmade, and obscure. This time it was Mary Poppins, complete with a black umbrella, a giant purse, and flowers tucked into her glossy black hair. She and Alya sat on bar stools near the kitchen door, waiting for Nino to circle back to them after finalizing the decorations and music.

In front of them, in the tiny living room, Nathaniel, Ivan, and Alix were playing a cutthroat game of Spider Scrabble. It was just like regular Scrabble, except all the words had to be Halloween themed. The three of them were currently arguing over whether or not "akumatize" was an acceptable word to play. As all three of them were dressed as their akumatized counterparts, this was apparently a very big deal to them.

If Adrien were here, he would have been able to pacify them. He had a way with people that Nino was too colloquial to replicate. Adrien was formal and polite. Nino was neither. Most of the time, he liked that about himself, but sometimes it made interactions with people rather hard. When he was nervous, he ended up spouting "yo" and "dude" until people at least partially understood what he was trying to say.

Nino checked one last time on the music, and then stepped out of the DJ booth he'd constructed in the small alcove between the living room and the main hallway. One quick glance at the partying peeps confirmed Adrien still hadn't come.

In that moment, Nino was done being disappointed. This year, he'd do anything it would take to get Adrien here. He was done letting Mr. Agreste run his friend's life. He adjusted his Chat Noir ears, thinking hard.

When he explained his disappointment to Alya, she rolled her eyes. "You can't keep doing this to yourself. So what if he can't come? Adrien hangs out with you all the time. What makes tonight so special?"

"I don't know. It just bugs me that he never comes! And I have to believe he's going to show up, even when I know better. I'm just a hopeful person. I can't help it."

"That's kind of adorable. But also sort of sad. Does this mean you're going to watch the door all night and ignore everyone you invited? You went to all this trouble to plan a great party. You should enjoy it."

"I'm sure Adrien wouldn't lie about being grounded," Marinette added.

"Come on, we all know the real reason he never shows. His dad doesn't want us to be friends." Nino crossed his arms. "Well, I'm sick of it. I'm going over there right now to rescue Adrien. Are you dudes coming with me?"

Alya and Marinette exchanged a look.

He sighed. "Guys, I promise, I'm not going to go all Bubbler on him again. It's just, he's my best friend and he should be here. Mari, if you held a party every year and Alya never came to it,
wouldn't you be upset too?"

"Well, I guess, but-

"No more buts! Get your butts off those seats and grab your coats. We're going to save Adrien."

The girls didn't argue. Once Nino became invested in something, nothing would turn him away from his pursuit.

Nino raised his voice to call to Mylene, who was watching Ivan play Scrabble and eating a Franken-cookie. "Mylene, you're in charge until we get back. No one gets akumatized over a board game, no one touches my DJ booth, and no one burns the place down. Got it?"

"Got it!"

The Agreste mansion was lit up against the dark sky, but it somehow made the place look even less inviting. It was as though the light would expose the flaws of the guests, instead of kindly ushering the unsavory into the inherent shadows.

Nino straightened his cat ears and led them to the far corner of the gated square enclosing the mansion. Obscured by the grove of trees planted there, they'd be safe from the security cameras. He knew the flaws in the system; this wasn't the first time he'd helped Adrien sneak out.

"What if we get caught smuggling Adrien out and Mr. Agreste punishes him?" Marinette worried.

"Or, what if he isn't actually grounded, and he gets grounded because of us?" Alya asked, adjusting her Ladybug mask.

"Relax. As long as we stick to the plan, it'll work. Adrien always leaves his window open. We climb up the fire escape, go through the window, grab him, and run back the way we came."

Alya gave a skeptical huff. "And what, are we just going to hop the giant fence?"

"Uh, yeah. Pretty much," said Nino.

She scowled in response.

Marinette, to his surprise, didn't look at all deterred. In fact, she was already scaling the fence before he and Alya could even start.

"Where did you learn parkour?" he demanded.

Marinette just gave him a secretive wink and hoisted herself nimbly over the top. She landed gracefully on the other side.

"All right, babe," Nino turned to his girlfriend and offered his hand. "Here, I'll boost you up."

They spent a couple minutes lifting, wobbling, toppling, and having to start over. "Great job," observed Marinette. "Seeing you two do this is like watching the real Ladybug and Chat Noir. You're naturals."

"Hey," protested Nino, "I've done this before. I'm just used to using a ladder. Which, I realized a few minutes ago, I forgot back at my place."

"Yeah, and I don't want to ruin my costume. I know you spent hours making this for me, Mari."
"I'm just giving you guys a hard time. Here, I can help," Marinette grinned, and in no time was back over the fence. She held out her hands, and Alya nestled her foot between them. She gently lifted her up, and Nino followed after. Finally, they were all on the other side.

"Thanks, girl," Alya said. "You could definitely give LB a run for her money with your gymnastic skills."

Marinette said a modest "Thanks," and closed her hands around the handles of her Mary Poppins-style oversize purse.

Nino cleared his throat. "We'd better get going. They're bound to notice something's up if we linger here too long."

The lights from Adrien's room beckoned, and they ascended the fire escape stairs one by one.

Things got weird when they reached Adrien's room. Nino made it through the open window first, propping the screen against the wall and helping the girls through. He was careful not to make too much noise, guiding everyone through the vast bedroom with the slightest of footsteps against the vacuumed carpet. As they scanned the dimly lit room for signs of life, it became increasingly clear the place was empty.

"Ugh, we do not have time for this," Nino complained. "I can't believe he left. Where could he possibly have gone? He said he was grounded!"

Behind him, Marinette gave a squeal of surprise. He and Alya whirled, only to find Marinette was staring at Adrien's bed. Nestled atop the cloudlike duvet was a black cat, and it did not look amused.

"He looks mad. Is he, like, a guard-kitty?" Alya couldn't help but giggle a little. The cat tilted his head at her, offended.

Nino inched closer, and the cat backed up on the bed. Its whiskers twitched in agitation and it gave a low meow.

Marinette's face turned sympathetic. "Poor thing, I think we're scaring him."

The cat hissed at him and glared with flashing green eyes.

"He looks mad. Is he, like, a guard-kitty?" Alya couldn't help but giggle a little. The cat tilted his head at her, offended.

Nino inched closer, and the cat backed up on the bed. Its whiskers twitched in agitation and it gave a low meow.

Marinette's face turned sympathetic. "Poor thing, I think we're scaring him."

The cat turned to her, eyes widening as if in recognition. It buried itself under the covers, out of sight. Alya laughed.

Suddenly, a door slammed on the floor below and footsteps began to climb upward toward them. Nino was instantly reminded of the stakes of the situation. Since Adrien wasn't here, this put a wrinkle in their plan. Nino made a split-second decision. They needed to get out of here. Adrien had a lot of explaining to do. And Nino now had some leverage.

"Okay guys, change of plan. We're taking the cat back to my place. Adrien has to come get it and explain what's going on."

"What?" both girls exclaimed.

"We're taking the cat. Let's go."
Alya held out a staying hand. "Hold up. How are we supposed to get the cat over the fence? We can't hold him and climb at the same time. Plus, we'd be stealing his cat. That's like starting a war. You can't steal somebody's pet."

"You can't lie to your best friends," Nino countered. "I want Adrien to come clean. I know he'll do it in exchange for the cat."

There was an unstable silence. Marinette's blue eyes were wide with discomfort and Alya put her hands on her hips in frustration. The cat poked his head out from the duvet, one ear lopsided.

Nino again made the decision. "Put him in your purse, Marinette."

"Me? Why?"

"You're Mary Poppins, don't you have, like, an infinite bag or something?"

"No! He's not going in my bag!" Her voice was pinched, worried.

"Come on, Mari, do it. You don't have anything precious in there, do you?" She didn't answer, so Nino continued to convince her. "It won't be for long."

She sighed as if agreeing to give up a limb. "Ugh, fine. But if he gets cramped in there, or starts trying to escape, I'm letting him out. This doesn't feel right to me."

It took several minutes to wrestle the cat into Marinette's bag. He put up quite a fight, but in the end, as soon as Marinette looked him in the eye and told him everything was going to be fine, he relaxed enough that they were able to lower him into the depths of the purse.

He didn't even squirm as they descended the creaky stairs of the fire escape, and remained silent as they climbed in a lurching fashion over the fence. Nino was impressed. Adrien had trained the little guy well. He felt a twinge of guilt at abducting the cat, but he quelled it by reminding himself that his best friend had lied to him. On multiple occasions.

At least the part about him having a cat was true.

The party was slowing down when they returned. Mylene had successfully kept everyone civil, and the only akumas there were mere costumes. The Scrabble board was significantly fuller, and Nino’s mix was repeating track two when they walked in the door. Adrien hadn't shown, and since it was nearly ten by now, it was clear he wasn't going to.

Nino, Alya, and Marinette set up the poor cat in the kitchen with a bowl of milk and a blanket. Cats liked milk, right?

The cat leaped away from them at the first opportunity, casting a fearful, shuddering glance back at Marinette's bag. It curled in on itself in the corner, cast a disdainful look at the bowl of milk, and stared at them in a pointed dismissal. Alya and Nino backed up at once, but Marinette took one last moment to approach and run a soothing hand over his fur. At this, the cat's expression softened, but it was tinged with a haunted look behind its eyes.

Nino wondered if the voyage in the Mary Poppins purse really had been traumatic for the poor little dude.

They left the cat alone once it was clear he wasn't going to run away. The door to the kitchen was promptly shut, leaving him alone and safe. Nino and Alya made their way back to talk to the guests,
but Marinette lingered near the kitchen door, every once in a while pressing her ear against the door or popping it ajar and peering through the crack.

The rest of the party went swimmingly, with Nathaniel emerging victorious from the Scrabble game. The music playlists got switched out so Mylene and Ivan could dance to the Monster Mash, and Alya stuck by Nino's side with her hand in his.

Chloe, Sabrina, and Lila left shortly after eleven. Nino's parents got back from the mayor's Halloween party around eleven thirty. Nino warned them about the cat in the kitchen, which they took surprisingly well. They didn't even linger downstairs during the party, which Nino greatly appreciated. Once again, he was grateful his parents were so chill; if he'd gotten someone like Mr. Agreste for a dad, he would have been miserable.

Eventually, the other guests left and only Marinette and Alya remained. They were spending the night so the three of them could go to breakfast together in the morning, as was their tradition. After two puffy orange sleeping bags were unfurled on the living room floor for the girls, Nino checked on the cat one more time, only to find he was asleep atop the blue blanket. He took a photo of it and sent it to Adrien with the words: *Come over tomorrow to pick up your cat – we need to talk about why you lied to me.*

With that, he turned out the lights, ascended the stairs to his room, set up his ambient sounds playlist, and fell asleep.

The ambient sounds in Nino's room, coupled with the fact that Alya was a heavy sleeper, positively ensured that when a loud slamming noise issued from the kitchen, Marinette was the only one who woke up.

She shot out of her sleeping bag, the last vestiges of exhaustion disintegrating into adrenaline. She used her phone flashlight to forge a path to the kitchen. A rectangle of orange glowed under the door, and she was fairly sure they hadn't left the light on when they'd fallen asleep.

She checked the time on her phone. 3:14 in the morning. Yikes. What was that little cat up to?

She opened the door slowly, the bright room burning in her dark-adjusted eyes for a moment. Blinking through the pain, her vision cleared. The trouble was, what she saw had to be a dream. There was no way this was actually happening.

Because it was literally impossible that:

1. Adrien Agreste
2. was lying on the floor
3. in a t-shirt and basketball shorts (a fashion crime!)
4. with his eyes closed
5. clutching his forehead with one hand
6. moaning "ouch"
7. as if he'd run into the door.

She blinked again, rubbing one eye and tucking her phone into the pocket of her Cutie Pi math
pajamas. The image stayed the same. This was real.

"Where's the cat?" she asked stupidly, her voice soft and sleepy.

Adrien's eyes shot open, and this at once answered her question. Instead of his normal eyes, they were bright green and slit pupilled, like…

He saw Marinette and clenched his eyes shut again. He opened them half way, blinked a few more times, and then looked back up at her, his eyes now normal and human.

"You…?" she whispered, closing the door behind her and kneeling beside him. "You're…"

Adrien seemed disoriented. He sat up slowly, and scrambled backward on his hands and elbows, bare feet flat against the cold tile floor. His eyes darted around, as if he was finally taking in the scene for the first time. Still dazed, Marinette wondered if his cat eyes had made it hard for him to see very well – it would explain why he'd run into the door. That must have been the sound that had woken her up.

"Where am I?" he asked, finally, looking at her as if for the first time. "Marinette?"

"Y-you're at Nino's," she mumbled. The name seemed to trigger something in Adrien's brain, and his face turned from perplexed to horrified.

"I remember now," he muttered. He sounded more like himself now. "Did you guys, um, sneak into my room?"

"Yeah."

"And you…put me…" he closed his eyes in embarrassment, "in your purse?"

So he had been the cat all along. In hindsight, it kind of made sense, but even though Marinette's life was odd, this was still the weirdest thing she'd ever experienced. How did something like that even…

"Uhhh, yes."

His eyes opened again, fastening on hers with an almost tangible intensity. "Who else knows? Besides you?"

"That you uh, spent some time as an actual, literal cat tonight?" That was a sentence she thought she'd never say.

He nodded and ran his hands through his messy hair in distress.

"Just me. Everyone else is asleep. They still think the cat just belongs to you. But Nino's pretty mad you lied about where you were going to be. He's hurt; he thinks you're avoiding him on purpose because you don't want to be his friend or something."

Adrien looked reassured, then wounded. "He said that?"

"Not in so many words. But it's easy to read his expressions. I know that's how he feels."

"Well it's not true. This," he gestured to his state of disarray, "is the real reason. But who would ever believe that?"

"Adrien, I've seen a lot of stuff, and even I'm having a hard time believing this. Why – how – what
"Cat? It's a long story." He propped himself up against a kitchen cabinet, wrapped his arms around himself, and shivered.

"Hold on." Marinette stood up and promptly left the kitchen, but came back a few moments later with her sleeping bag and a plate of Franken-cookies. She handed both to Adrien, who looked up with surprised gratitude.

"I have time," she said, and sat down opposite him.

"Okay," Adrien sighed, and he slid into the sleeping bag, zipping it all the way up to get warm. "I mean, it would be hard to keep any of this from you now anyway. You saw way more than I wanted anyone to, ever. But it would be nice to have someone in on the secret. Especially you."

"Why especially me?"

His expression turned ashamed. "Because you're not the only one who saw something they shouldn't have tonight," he said. "I know you're Ladybug, Marinette."

She saw spots in her vision, and not the cute ladybug kind. "What?" she said faintly.

"I met Tikki when I was in your purse. She speaks cat really well, actually. She kind of had to tell me everything; she was trying to keep me from flipping out and getting us all caught."

That explained why he'd been so calm in her purse on their way out of the Agreste mansion.

"Adrien, I'm so sorry, but you can't tell anyone, it's a really huge deal," she squeaked.

Back when she’d thought he was just a cat, she hadn't put up too much of a fight at Nino's suggestion to put him in the purse. If an animal saw Tikki, it wouldn't matter. What was he going to do, say something? And now, knowing it had been Adrien…that made things way worse. He could say something, if he wanted to.

Adrien put up his hands. "Believe me, I won't tell anyone. It's a secret you need kept, and I'm happy to. Besides, you have enough on me for years of blackmail if I ever did tell. Not many people can say they put me in their handbag or happened to catch me in a compromising position."

"Um, thanks. I'd never tell anyone about you either. Just so you know." She paused. "But…how did you end up like this in the first place?"

His face fell, and he took a few moments to eat a Franken-cookie, buying time. "That's the part of the story you're going to like even less than me knowing your secret."

"Why?"

"Because, um. Don't freak out. But I'm Chat Noir."

Marinette stared. All the evidence was there, getting strung together in her mind. The cat, the magic, his unexplained absences during akuma attacks, his love of puns, those gorgeous green eyes…

It took her a minute to realize Adrien was still talking.

"…four years ago, when I put on the ring. And everything was fine, until Plagg, my kwami, told me there was one side effect to being Chat. Every Halloween, for a few hours in the evening, the Miraculous messes with me. I become a cat. I think it has something to do with a tiny scratch on my
ring – it's always been there. But I think it damaged the powers very slightly, so that, for one night a year, the magic goes berserk.

"So every Halloween, I began to realize, the effects would make it impossible for me to do anything. The first time, I totally panicked. I didn't understand what was happening at first, and I ended up hiding under the bed all night. Over time, I got more used to it. I'd tell my dad I was going to be at the Halloween party, and then I'd sit alone in my room. I never actually went to the party, though. I mean, how could I go? But I didn't know how to tell Nino what was happening, so I just came up with excuses. All of them were rooted in truth of course, but never the real truth.

"The most frustrating part was at three in the morning after Halloween, down to the minute, I'd start to become myself again. And I'd text him an apology, even before my eyes and hands were all the way back to normal. He probably thought I was sneaking a text because my father took my phone, but in reality I just couldn't see straight, and I had to hold it with my…paws. I actually had to use my nose sometimes."

Marinette couldn't help but giggle a little at this.

Adrien laughed too, but his face was flushed. "Ugh, it's so embarrassing."

"I'm really sorry that happened to you. Why didn't you tell me, though? I mean, why didn't you tell me when I was Ladybug? I might have been able to help you."

"I almost did, so many times! But I was worried about what you'd think of me. And in later years, I wondered if maybe you'd think I was irresponsible for never telling you. I, well, I kind of have a crush on you. Which you probably already knew."

"On Ladybug."

"You. Yes."

She felt her blushing face betray her and sought to change the subject.

"You've got to tell Nino."

"What? No way." He shook his head, hair flying everywhere.

"I think he deserves to know. He has this weird obsession with making sure you live a complete life. He thinks your dad keeps you from having enough fun. He was willing to risk getting caught just to make sure you did something fun tonight, Adrien. He's a good friend. And he knows you've been lying to him. So just tell him the truth."

Adrien took a deep breath and stretched. He arched his back against the cabinet. "Maybe. But not right now."

"Well, you're still going to have to explain why you're here and the cat isn't."

Clearly this hadn't occurred to him. He clutched the sleeping bag tighter around himself. "Marinette, I can't do this with him until I'm ready. And I am not ready right now. Can you… um, can you maybe… please take me home? And tell him the cat escaped? I'll figure out a way to tell him soon."

Marinette held his gaze. He seemed cornered, the same kind of scared he'd been when they'd found him in his room earlier. He looked willing to either hiss or hide, and she wasn't sure which would be weirder right now.
"All right," she said, standing. "But we're taking the Ladybug rooftop shortcut. It's faster and less obvious, and you don't want to have to explain what you're doing walking with a girl at three in the morning if anyone sees us."

Adrien looked so happy he might cry. He got out of the sleeping back and stood shakily until they were standing very close to each other. "Thanks," he said.

She hugged him. It just seemed like the right thing to do. At least, it did, until a low rumbling noise made her jump back.

Adrien was bright red.

She had to ask. "Did you just purr?"

"I guess I'm not totally myself yet," was all he managed.

They both hid their smiles.

"Come on, kitty, let's get you home."

The next night, Adrien finally told Nino about the Halloween curse and Chat Noir. It took him all day to work up the courage to confess it all, but Nino wasn't even mad – he was too relieved that he and his friend were still on good terms. Adrien had enough distance from the whole cat situation by then to actually think it was funny. And it really was. Nino laughed for like ten minutes. Adrien seemed worried he was going to pass out or hurt himself or something.

But the cat debacle certainly explained the list of terrible excuses. And the part that totally made Nino's night was when Adrien explained them all:

1. **Halloween 2013 – Akuma Attack.**

It definitely was a vampire akuma, and lots of people were late to the party because of it. Ladybug had had to get rid of the vampire on her own; Chat Noir had been mysteriously absent because he was a cat at the time. He was incapable of transporting himself to the party, even after the akuma was vanquished. He was too busy cowering under the bed.

2. **Halloween 2014 – His cat was sick.**

Plagg suggested that Adrien eat camembert to stave off the transformation, thinking it would be a cure. It tasted disgusting, and it didn't work. Even as a cat, the cheese was so foul that he became very ill. One he was human again, he spent the rest of the night cleaning it up while Plagg laughed.

3. **Halloween 2015 – No Costume.**

This was the year Nino switched to online invitations. Adrien saw it, but let Nino believe his father had deleted it. By the time Nino finally mentioned he hadn't received the RSVP from Adrien, it was (conveniently) the day before. Adrien promised he'd go if he could find a good costume.

In reality, his costume was a little too good. No one would have recognized him. But it came with an unfortunate drawback: he couldn't tell anyone who he was supposed to be. He could only meow.

All the fashion in the world wouldn't have helped him anyway. Nothing would have fit, with the exception of pet costumes. And Adrien had too much pride for that.

Traffic was murder.

Adrien decided to attempt to go to the party anyway, even if it was just to sit outside in the bushes. He missed his friends and felt bad for cancelling again, even though he had a great reason. But he only made it out of his house and into the street before he was nearly run over by a gigantic truck. He was back in his room as quickly as his little legs could carry him – that is to say, it took him thirty minutes to climb up all the fire escape stairs again. He was sore for a week.

5. This Year – Escaped Animal

Nino had been close with the escaped zoo animal guess. But the real reason was far better than any fake excuse.

Some friendships last forever because they are forged through the magic of spending time together. And some friendships, Nino decided, are forged through actual magic. And, as he updated Adrien's contact photo in his phone to the picture of the cat sleeping on a blue blanket, he decided he wouldn't have it any other way.
Mistletoe

Chapter Summary

Mistletoe: Adrien is spending Christmas with Marinette and her family. Marinette has no idea her parents have orchestrated this. If she knew, she might have objected to the mistletoe her parents hid throughout the house.

Chapter Notes

This is another seasonal one - sorry, I'm about a month late for it to be in time for Christmas, but hopefully it's still fun to read. I posted this one on tumblr a while ago, so if you came across it there it may be familiar. Thanks for reading!

Adrien had begun to dread Christmas.

It was a constant reminder that his mother was gone, and while most of his friends traveled with their families, he was now locked at home with almost nothing to do. This plus the horrible Santa debacle last year had given the holiday somewhat of a shroud of darkness.

Without his mother to brighten the mood, holidays at the Agreste house were sparse. Nobody had decorated; Nathalie was on vacation, Gorilla was too clumsy to handle the fragile crystal ornaments Adrien's father prized, and Adrien himself had been in such a funk that he hadn't really left his room.

He hadn't even seen his father in at least a week. They kept missing each other at mealtimes, both assuming the other had already eaten. They hadn't done anything together since school break had started, as his father was too busy preparing for a trip to Milan for Designer Week that would extend from Christmas Eve through the New Year. Adrien was not attending, thankfully. However, this meant he'd be spending his holiday in Paris without any family, and he wasn't trusted to be in the giant Agreste house alone.

Unfortunately, Chloe was shopping in Prague, Nino was on a ski trip with his parents, and Alya was visiting her grandparents, so Adrien wouldn't be able to stay with them. He'd instead be spending Christmas at Marinette's house. And he was somewhat apprehensive about it. It wasn't that Adrien wasn't excited to spend Christmas with Marinette. It wasn't that at all. It came down to three things.

First, it just wasn't home.

Second, on the midnight of Christmas Eve, Chat Noir and Ladybug were planning to deliver gifts to a local children's hospital. They'd done it last year in secret, their anonymous way of helping out Santa after the akuma disaster. And this year, they'd decided to meet at the hospital and do it again. If Adrien was staying with the Dupain-Chengs, he was very worried about how he was going to sneak out without them noticing and blowing his secret.

Finally, something about Marinette made him rather nervous in a way he couldn't explain. It was beyond the normal fear of her discovering he was Chat Noir. It was more like a strange ache, as if he
missed her even when they were together.

Adrien still hadn't come to terms with what it could mean, and there wasn't really anyone he could broach the matter with. Not even Plagg. His kwami proved unhelpful in most relationship matters, often comparing girls to cheeses in some complex metaphor Adrien didn't really understand.

He also considered discussing the matter with his father, right up until the ride to the airport on the evening of the twenty-fourth, but every scenario in his mind involved his father whipping off his sunglasses, turning around in his leather seat, and giving Adrien "The Look". The "Adrien, please" look. The look when his father was busy, or on the phone, or generally irritable. So, in other words, it was his only facial expression.

As the car glided to the airport in silence, Adrien thought back to the untainted Christmas celebrations of the past, before his father had become this ice cold workaholic. Before, when Adrien's mother had still been with them, they went ice skating in the park. They made cocoa with tiny marshmallows, decorated a gigantic tree in the living room, and invited family from the south to stay with them. His mother's loud, raucous relatives from Montpellier filled the mansion with yapping and laughter and running footsteps that Adrien and his father could never match now that it was just the two of them. He imagined his cousin Felix would be shocked to see what changes had come in the past two years. Adrien wasn't even sure he'd have recognized himself; a secret superhero, a lonely model, a depressed teenager, a Christmas-dreading humbug.

He waved to his father when they pulled up to the passenger drop-off, and neither of them said a word. There was a brief exchange of curt nods, and then Mr. Agreste disappeared behind the glossy sliding doors. No one said "Merry Christmas" or even goodbye. Adrien looked up, fighting his stinging eyes as they pulled away in the purring car.

The ride back from the airport was blissfully quiet. Gorilla was driving a little more recklessly now that Mr. Agreste was gone, perhaps because the bodyguard knew it would cheer Adrien up. They swung around curves a little tighter and braked faster, and Adrien couldn't help but enjoy the careening feeling of apparent weightlessness before the seatbelt snapped against his ribs. It was a taste of freedom.

They arrived at Marinette's house before Adrien was emotionally ready. He hadn't prepared himself for what he might expect from their hospitality. Would they make him sing carols? Did they even celebrate Christmas? Would his gifts for them be enough? And then, there was the matter of sneaking out…

Gorilla helped him get his duffel bag out of the trunk, and then got back in the car with a gruff "Merry Christmas, kid." Adrien would be on his own from here on out.

There was no answer when he rang the bell. Adrien supposed they were just closing the bakery, so they might not have heard it ring. He tried again, and this time a shadow appeared behind the shaded glass door. It swung open to reveal Marinette, who was in a Santa Hat and her apron, holding a vase full of poinsettias. She had a dusting of flour across her right cheek, and her hair was in messy pigtails.

She was looking behind her, yelling, "Maman, are we expecting someone?"

Then, she whipped her head back to see him standing there, and her face turned from curiosity to shock. The vase dropped from her hand and shattered onto the tile floor.

In the hour that followed, it became apparent to Adrien that Marinette's parents were a bit stranger
than he'd originally thought. It seemed they hadn't told Marinette he would be staying with them. As they cleaned up the broken glass and rescued the soggy poinsettias, they played it off as though they'd forgotten to tell her, but Adrien wasn't so sure. They didn't seem all that sorry. Given how nervous Marinette was acting, perhaps they hadn't told her for a reason, although he couldn't imagine what it could be.

He was shown to a small, windowless guest bedroom they'd prepared for him down the hall from Marinette's room. There was a little basket full of soap and towels, a few fashion magazines on the bedside table, and freshly pressed sheets. He left his bags and turned to leave. But, on his way out of the room, he noticed a little sprig of mistletoe pinned atop the doorjamb. Adrien frowned, perplexed. Hopefully that bit was just a joke. They surely didn't plan to make him and Marinette kiss, did they? Not that the thought of kissing her was altogether unpleasant. He actually might enjoy it if it ever happened...it was just, well, he hadn't really signed up for that.

Feeling a little more uncomfortable, he descended the spiral stairs to find everyone gathered in the small living room around a three foot tall tree bedecked with gold tinsel and tiny croissant ornaments. Marinette was sitting on one of the sofas. She had washed the flour off her cheek, and there was a small bandage on her ankle from where the shards of the vase had nicked it. Although she kept the Santa hat on, the apron had been removed, and she was tugging at her green sweater as if worried it was the wrong thing to be wearing. Adrien, however, thought she looked rather nice.

Her parents sat together on the other sofa, so Adrien sat beside Marinette, suddenly aware of everyone looking at him.

"Thanks for letting me stay with you," he said. "I hope I'm not imposing on your Christmas too much."

"Not at all," Mr. Dupain-Cheng reassured him. "It's a pleasure. Right, Marinette?"

She gave a small squeak of agreement and turned very red.

"We even made you a stocking," said Mrs. Dupain-Cheng, and she pulled out a wrapped box seemingly from midair. "We want you to join us as though you're family. From the way Marinette talks about you-"

"-Maman!" Marinette protested.

Mrs. Dupain-Cheng didn't look admonished; she merely smiled and handed Adrien the box without finishing her sentence. Perplexed, Adrien opened it to find a green stocking with Adrien written in loopy calligraphy. Three matching ones were pinned to the mantle in the corner.

For a moment, all the fear and sadness that had been plaguing him melted away. This was the first time he'd been welcomed into a family since his own had collapsed in shambles. He hadn't had this sense of inclusion or belonging in a long time. It almost overwhelmed him, and he blinked too many times before responding.

"Thank you."

The Dupain-Chengs politely ignored the emotion in his voice.

Marinette stood and took the stocking from the box without a word. He watched as she pinned it beside hers, and when she sat back down, she didn't look him in the eye. It looked like she was trying to remember how to breathe.

"Now," continued Marinette's mother, "we don't know if you have any special traditions, but we
figured we could have dinner and then sit up on the roof with some cocoa. Is there anything in particular you like to do on Christmas Eve?"

There used to be. He remembered making snow angels outside in the courtyard with Felix and his mom, then running back inside, shedding layers of snow gear until they emerged, red-cheeked and shivering, to drink hot mulled cider. He remembered decorating cookies with his father, getting more frosting on his hands than on the cookies themselves, and how his father hadn't scolded him for making a mess. He remembered his mother and father sharing a moonlight stroll through the park while he lingered behind, scattering "reindeer food" for Santa's steeds. He remembered his mother calling, "Adrien, come look at the snowmen. Doesn't this one look like your dad?"

He remembered his father laughing.

He hoped the pain didn't show on his face as he said, "No, we don't do anything special."

Marinette looked at him sharply, and it was as if her blue eyes saw right through his lie. She seemed to know he couldn't answer with the truth. The memories of past Christmases were still too precious; it would be impossible to retrace the tracks of those traditions without his mother. It was better to guard them for now.

"Well, let's get dinner going, then," announced Mr. Dupain-Cheng. "We hope you're hungry."

Adrien decided midway through dinner that Marinette's family was far more wonderful than he'd originally thought. The mere presence of food seemed to get rid of every ounce of their awkwardness. This was their element. They never had a dull moment in conversation, and there was a warmth exuded that was more than just the light of the fire crackling behind them.

By the time they finished serving the turkey, Marinette started acting more like herself. She and her father argued about the best way to bake bread, and insisted Adrien be the judge, offering samples of two different rolls from the bread basket. Adrien pronounced them equally good, and Mrs. Dupain-Cheng awarded him with an extra scoop of caramelized walnuts from the dish at her end of the table. Jokes were made about Marinette's ridiculous Santa Hat until Adrien found a second one lying on the counter. He put it on in solidarity, and proclaimed, "You shall not insult our fashionable hats, common plebians," with his best Gabriel Agreste impersonation. Soon, everyone was roaring with laughter, Marinette's father even wiping tears from his eyes.

Coming from the stark modeling diets he was used to, this was a feast of epic proportions. And, coming from the silent mansion he was used to, this was a dinner of joyous proportions. He couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed this hard, or eaten enough, or been so happy. He wondered if Marinette had moments like this every day. He imagined growing up with parents like hers, and he suddenly understood why he admired her so much. Marinette and her parents treated love like it was abundant and meant to be shared.

His father, on the other hand, treated love like something to be sequestered; protected. He couldn't bear to lose anything again, not after losing Adrien's mother.

Adrien knew which one he preferred.

He helped with the dishes whiles Marinette and her mother made hot cocoa in a stovetop pan with real chocolate and cream.

As soon as there was talk of migrating up to the roof to look at the stars, Marinette dropped the stirring spoon and all color left her face.
"I forgot to do something, one second," she cried, and dashed from the room. Her parents exchanged a knowing look.

Adrien busied himself with drying a gravy boat for a few minutes, until he felt comfortable enough to ask, "Where did she go?"

"The only entrance to the roof is through her room," explained Mrs. Dupain-Cheng. "She wants to ah...tidy up first."

Adrien shrugged. "It's not a big deal, really, it's fine if it's messy or whatever-"

"It is to her," said her father. "What you think matters to her more than you probably imagine it does."

"She cares," added her mother, "because she likes y-"

"-I'm back," announced Marinette, who skidded back into the room, very out of breath. There was a brief silence, and based on the expression on her face, she quickly ascertained they'd been talking about her.

Adrien felt his cheeks begin to burn. Did Marinette like him? As more than a friend? Was that what her mother was about to say? It certainly explained why she was so tongue tied around him. It also explained the mistletoe. And why her parents hadn't told her he was coming. They hadn't wanted to make her too nervous before he even arrived. It was a clever plan, if Adrien was correct in his deduction.

Thankfully, the cocoa started to bubble over and served as enough of a distraction that everyone recovered from the uncomfortable pause. Normalcy was restored for the most part, although Adrien was now conscious of every look he shared with Marinette, wondering if he had been ignoring her feelings without even realizing it. He'd always been more focused on her eyes and their pretty blueness, and not what her eyes might have been trying to tell him.

The aching feeling in his chest started up again, and Adrien stated to wonder if maybe it was more than missing her. Maybe he liked her too.

It was windy and cold on the roof, but blankets and cushions had been set up on the chairs, which were positioned around a small open fire pit.

Her parents had been right: only entrance to the roof was through Marinette's trapdoor. To Adrien's dismay, it was the only way he was going to be able to escape tonight to meet Ladybug. He hoped Marinette wasn't a light sleeper.

Clutching mugs of cocoa overflowing with marshmallows, everyone sat around the fire, and Marinette stoked the flames, stirring sparks upward like tiny fireflies. Adrien found it was harder to look her in the eyes now without blushing. He hoped the glow of the fire masked it well enough.

A few errant snowflakes had started to fall around them, and their breaths spiraled out before them in complicated mists. Children cheered on the snow from below as they were ushered home by bundled-up parents. Even in the observant silence of Christmas Eve, Adrien couldn't believe the peace he felt up here. For once, he was aware that the silence didn't need to be filled; it was just an appreciation of everyone's company. It was unlike the pervasive absence of words that pressed upon him at home with his father. He always felt like he had to say something every once in a while to remind his father he was still there. Not so with the Dupain-Chengs.
The tip of his nose was starting to feel icy and numb when Marinette's parents declared themselves too cold to stay any longer. They retreated, with plotting glances, back downstairs to prepare for bed. Marinette and Adrien were left alone on the roof, and he wasn't sure whether or not the change in dynamics was a good thing. Were they supposed to stay? Were they going to talk? Should he wait for her to say something, or should he start conversation first?

He did a quick scan of the area. When his eyes fell on the back of her chair, he knew he had to speak up.

"Marinette, I don't know if you're aware, but there's some mistletoe pinned to the back of your chair."

She turned beet red and rolled her eyes. By now, she was surprisingly coherent; not a stutter in sight. "Ugh, not another one! I noticed some in my room already; I can't believe they put it up here too. My parents are depraved. I'm really sorry about that. They seem to think they can set us up."

Adrien didn't really know what to say. Everything that came to mind was either too soppy or too awkward. Eventually he went with: "Well, they're not exactly wrong. They got us alone up here with mistletoe everywhere. It's romantic with all the snow and the cocoa and the present company."

She flushed so red she matched her Santa hat, but didn't say anything. Instead, she switched off the tiny fire, which shrunk into the embers. In that moment, it occurred to Adrien he might have to make the first move. She wasn't going to.

"Whatever your parents are doing...it's working," he clarified. "I do like you, Marinette."

She blinked, and he set his empty cocoa mug down on the floor just for something to do. His hands tingled in the absence of the fire.

"I..." she trailed off, then stood up abruptly, eyes panicked. Her blanket pooled around her ankles. "I have to go."

"Marinette-"

She was already through the trapdoor. Adrien followed, casting off his blanket without a second thought. He'd just massively messed things up. Had he been wrong? Maybe she didn't like him after all?

He climbed back down into her room, shutting the trapdoor behind him. Mistletoe swung cheerfully from the latch, and he fought the urge to roll his eyes. Had they put it everywhere?

Her back was to him when he reached the bottom of the ladder. She heard him approach but didn't turn around. Instead, she rambled, "Adrien, I have something early tomorrow and I can't reschedule it and I didn't know you were going to be here so I couldn't cancel it so I have to go now, so could you please leave?"

"L-leave?" he stammered. He wondered if she meant for him to pack his bags. "Your house?"

"My room."

"Oh, um, okay."

And just like that, he found himself in the hallway, her door shut in his face. Mistletoe was strung around her doorjamb like ivy.
"I'm sorry," he said to the door, but there was no answer.

He turned and went back to his room, fully aware of the hateful mistletoe hanging over the entrance in mockery.

At 11:50 that night, he stepped out into the hallway as Chat Noir. It was dark and quiet; he hoped to the heavens that Marinette was asleep. He dreaded making this escape after what had happened between them, but there wasn't another way. He couldn't let down Ladybug. He couldn't let down all those kids.

He had debated for half an hour when he should transform. If he went to the trapdoor as Chat Noir, it was another layer of secrecy, but if she was awake that wouldn't do much good. She'd wonder why Chat Noir was in her house in the first place, and his cover would be as good as blown. However, if he went in as Adrien, if she was awake, she might think he was visiting for a totally different, romantically driven reason, and it would be almost impossible to explain that he wasn't. She might even beat him up if she caught him in there...so he very much wanted to avoid that.

He'd eventually decided to transform before leaving his room. But when he arrived at her door, he had second thoughts.

While he stood in front of it, debating silently and feeling sweat bead on the back of his neck, the unthinkable happened. The door swung open, and Ladybug stood there, holding a toothbrush and toothpaste in one hand, as if she was about to walk to the bathroom.

They both screamed.

Marinette's parents must have been heavy sleepers, because neither one of them so much as stirred. Both Chat and Ladybug stood frozen, waiting to hear footsteps approaching, but none came. They were alone.

"Ladybug?" he hissed, not wanting to risk shouting. His mind was doing backflips trying to reconcile the scenario. What was she doing here? Could she have somehow discovered he was Chat and then decided to meet him here, of all places? But then, how would she know about Marinette's trapdoor entrance from the roof? And, come to think of it -

"Where's Marinette?" he asked, peering over her shoulder at the pink room. All the lamps were on, and the bed was empty.

Ladybug was still frozen, her mouth in a perfect "O".

Chat waved a hand in front of her face, and she didn't even flinch. "Have you gone catatonic?"

That seemed to awaken her somewhat. "This is not the time for puns!" She put her hands to her face, covering her eyes. "Chat, what are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same. But you still need to answer my first question. Where is Marinette?"

Ladybug dropped her hands, her expression now troubled. "I...I think you'd better come in. There's no point hiding it now...Marinette...well...she's right here. She's me."

Chat started laughing. He just couldn't help it. It was such a coincidence. This reveal might be the best thing to ever happen to them. He'd left thinking Marinette hated him...but now there was hope. With the barriers of secrecy coming down, their friendship really wasn't that complicated after all. They each knew more about each other than they thought.
Perplexed, Ladybug shut the door and spun to face him again. "Why are you laughing? Where's Adrien? Did we wake him up?"

"Oh, trust me, he's awake now."

Her eyes narrowed, and then she finally made the connection.

"You're...you're him, aren't you." It wasn't a question.

"Claws in," he told Plagg, and that settled it. He was Adrien again.

Ladybug's face slowly turned the color of her suit. He patiently sat down in her desk chair, waiting for her to say something. Anything.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That I freaked out."

"As Marinette, with the vase? Or on the roof? Or just now, as Ladybug, with all the screaming? There's been a lot of freaking out tonight. You might need to be a little more specific."

"On the roof. I just wasn't expecting you to tell me..."

"That I like you?"

"Obviously. I imagined every scenario where I was honest about how I felt, but in all of them, I just assumed you never felt the same way. I didn't know how to handle hearing what my heart wanted to hear. I didn't think it was really happening; I spent months trying to impress you, to tell you the truth, and just never could. And now that you know Ladybug is actually just me...that I'm just so terribly awkward around you...I'm sorry you had to find out I'm not this perfect superhero. I'll understand if you don't feel that way anymore."

Adrien took a deep breath and sighed. "I still feel the same."

She looked almost exasperated now. "Why?"

"Not to change the subject, but are you going to take off your mask?"

"It's easier to talk to you if I have it on. Then I don't stutter." She sat down on the bed, fidgeting with the comforter. Adrien rolled forward in the chair so they were closer.

"So you do have feelings for me? I make you nervous?"

"Yes!"

"Then I'm the one who should be sorry! I had no idea, and if I did, I would have been more considerate. I felt terrible about what happened on the roof; I was worried I'd damaged our friendship by trying to make it something more. But you need to understand something. You don't have to impress me, Marinette. You already have! I spent one night with your family and it was the best night I've had in a long time. You helped me have a great Christmas that I would otherwise have spent alone. I saw how happy you are, and how much love you have to share with those who are important to you. I understand now why you make such a good Ladybug. Because you're still you. The mask can't give those children in the hospital a good Christmas. But your love for others can! So don't you dare apologize to me for being yourself. Because that would be like apologizing for the things that made me like you so much in the first place. You need to know that I am extremely fond of you."
At some point during his speech, he'd stood up. He didn't remember doing it. Ladybug stared up at him with round blue eyes. He stared right back.

She nodded slowly, then stood and walked over to him, eyes brimming with tears. Was she going to cry? Why? That wasn't supposed to happen-

In the span of a second, they were standing inches apart, and Adrien hardly dared to breathe. Ladybug whispered, "Spots off," and her mask dissolved. Then her arms wrapped themselves around him, and she buried her face in his chest.

"Did you mean it?" she asked, muffled. "All of it?"

"Of course I did."

"Well," she said, lifting her head again, her eyes still a little watery. "Adrien. Chat Noir. I am extremely fond of you too."

In the moments that followed, neither of them could really find the motivation to exit the embrace. They knew they'd have to leave eventually, but for a few precious seconds, Adrien and Marinette found themselves looking up. They were positioned underneath her trapdoor, and sure enough, right above them, was a little sprig of-

"Mistletoe," Marinette whispered.

"You know what we have to do now," said Adrien.

"Yes, well, if we must," she giggled.

And so they kissed.

When the urgency of their mission resurfaced to their minds, they finally broke apart, blushing. "We really should go," Marinette said reluctantly. "But I am glad you're staying with us all week, Adrien. My parents put mistletoe pretty much everywhere. It would be a shame if they did all that work for nothing."

"I like the way you think, My Lady," he said, and they donned their masks again. As she led the way up the ladder to the trapdoor, he noticed her smiling at him.

"What?"

"Merry Christmas, Chat Noir," she whispered, then tugged open the trapdoor. Snowflakes fell down like glitter onto her hair.

Chat caught one on his tongue and made a silent wish for more nights like this one.

"Merry Christmas, Ladybug."
Liar, Liar

Chapter Summary

Liar, Liar: To get out of taking Chloe to a dance, Adrien tells his friends he's dating Ladybug. There's just one thing he didn't count on...Marinette has the power to make his lie come true. Kind of a fake dating AU.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was written before Glaciator and WereRat (so there are no S3 spoilers in this one), but oddly this fic has some things in common with those episodes. This is unintentional. Also, there is some ChloeNath in this chapter, hope you like it!

Adrien didn't have a date to the winter formal.

It was tradition for the girls to ask the guys, and Nino was on a mission to set Adrien up. He was convinced that finding a date for a famous model wasn't going to be that hard. But Adrien had quietly turned down the five girls who had already been sent his way. Nino brought this up as they sat on the front steps after school on Friday waiting for Adrien's limousine, and he wasn't happy.

"I don't get it, why won't you take one of them?"

Adrien shaded his eyes from the setting sun. He could see Alya and Marinette sitting a few feet below them on the steps. "I don't know. I just want the right partner."

"What's wrong with just taking someone to have a good time?"

"I want to go with the right person. And if I can't find them, it's fine. I don't mind going alone."

"I don't know, man. From what Alya's told me, some girls might take issue with that," Nino said, raising an eyebrow. "You're...how do I put this...you're the Fitzwilliam Darcy to everyone's Elizabeth Bennet. You're good looking, rich, secretive, kind, and unattainable. If you go alone you'll start a riot of people saying it's unfair of you to keep all that awesomeness to yourself."

There was a brief confused pause before Adrien decided to accept this strange comparison without question. "Just...quit telling girls to ask me to formal; I don't like having to turn them down."

"You don't have to turn them down."

"Nino..." Adrien complained.

His friend let out a frustrated sigh. "Ugh, what are we going to do with you?"

Their conversation was interrupted by Chloe, who waltzed down the steps and sat down in between them. There wasn't really room, so both boys had to scoot over on the step to accommodate her.
"Hi, A-dreamy. Sup, Nino."

"Hi, Chloe," they responded in monotone. She was wearing expensive perfume, which Adrien had come to learn always preceded trouble.

This time was no different. Chloe wasted no time. "Adrien, do you want to go to the winter formal with me?"

Below them, he saw Alya and Marinette perk up. They were listening. Sweat began to bead under the collar of his shirt. He looked over Chloe's bony shoulder at Nino, asking with his eyes: Did you put her up to this? Nino shook his head frantically.

Adrien turned his attention back to Chloe. "Uh, look, I'm sorry, but I don't think so."

"Why not?" Her demeanor soured, and Adrien felt himself gulping for air. He hated rejections-he didn't know how to do them properly. He usually lied to fans when they asked him out. "I have a girlfriend," he'd say, and then he'd run away before they could ask questions or remember all the fan magazines reported he was single. It probably wouldn't work as well with someone he knew, but it was worth a shot.

"I have a girlfriend," he tried, and behind Chloe, he saw Nino facepalm. Below them, he saw Marinette frown and exchange a glance with Alya. Her stricken expression stirred something in his stomach.

"Who is this girlfriend? How come no one knows about her?" Chloe demanded, gripping her striped purse as if preparing to whack him with it.

"Uhhhhhhhhhhhh-"

"You're lying, aren't you?"

"No, Chloe, it's true...I uh...well, she's very private."

"Oh, really?" Her expression was murderous.

Nino's repeated facepalming didn't have to tell Adrien this conversation was taking an epic nosedive. He made a last attempt, abandoning all pretense of believability.

"Yes. Because...I'm dating Ladybug."

Alya and Marinette turned around in their seats to gape at him. Nino slammed his hand against his forehead so hard that he might have given himself a concussion. Chloe looked heartbroken. Nathanael, who was descending the stairs behind them when he heard the news, dropped his case of pens and brushes in surprise. The case cracked open, and the utensils rolled down the steps to cascade against Chloe's back. She grabbed the brushes irritably and held them up. Nathanael took them without a word as he walked down the stairs, their fingers brushing in the exchange. He didn't stick around to hear the rest of this new gossip.

Chloe lined Adrien back up in her crosshairs, brimming with questions. "Ladybug?" she demanded.

Mercifully, the limousine pulled to a stop at the curb, and Adrien beat a hasty retreat before anything else could make this lie worse. He slammed the car door shut behind him and leaned his head against the cold window.

"I'm such a coward," he moaned. Gorilla just flipped the turn signal and didn't say anything.
Adrien watched his friends' perplexed faces as the car pulled away, but then he saw the strangest thing. Marinette, who before had looked somewhat crushed at the news he was dating someone was now...smiling.

That night, Chat Noir and Ladybug battled a store clerk-turned-akuma for two hours. They traipsed through all five floors of a gigantic department store, and by the end, there were scattered pearls and beads from broken necklaces on the floor, decapitated mannequins, and heaps of clothes. Each of the heroes had made a mess of their costumes. Chat had the remains of an anti-theft ink explosion device leaking from his shoulder like blood. Ladybug was covered in feathers from a burst down pillow, and they were stuck in her hair. Allergic as ever, Chat sneezed uncontrollably until his partner lifted her yoyo to the sky and declared, "Miraculous Ladybug!"

It worked its magic as always, setting right overturned shoe racks and repairing broken glass. Even their costumes were reset to their normal states and Chat could breathe easy again. Once the mess had been cleaned up and everything set back to normal, he decided it was time for some damage control of his own.

He waited until they retreated from the crowded store to the far corner of the third floor, where they could each take a private dressing room and detransform.

"Hey, Ladybug, there's something you should know," he said, as they each entered a stall and slid the locks shut.

"Yeah?"

"I heard a rumor you're dating Adrien Agreste, and didn't want that to take you by surprise."

"You're sweet, kitty, but I've got this covered. Adrien and I talked about it and we have decided it's fine if people know we're together."

Chat slid down against the wall. She talked to Adrien? But Adrien is me. And that definitely did NOT happen. But then why would she cover for me and tell Chat Noir she's dating me? How could she even know, if in the one who started the rumor? It's not even on the Ladyblog yet!

_Did I make this happen with my mind?_

Apparently the silence was noted by Ladybug, because she said, "Chat, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, just surprised. So the rumor is true?"

"Yes. I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier, it was pretty…uh…sudden. I hope you're not mad."

"No, not mad..."

"Maybe this is good for us. I know you flirt with me a lot for fun, but I don't know how Adrien will feel about us being that way around each other," she said, as their miraculouses beeped in alarm. They both had one minute.

Even though Chat knew it was his own fault, her words still stung more than he thought they would. But he couldn't tell Ladybug the flirting wasn't just for fun. It was real. He was always real with her. In that moment, he made another decision that would most likely be questionable in hindsight. Two could play this game. If she was going to lie, he'd lie more.

"Oh, I already have a girlfriend. Her name is Chloe. Her dad's the mayor."
There was absolute silence in the other stall. A flash of light told him she was no longer Ladybug.

"Do you know her?" he asked as his own costume disappeared. He shoved a piece of Camembert into Plagg's mouth before the kwami could say anything sassy. "I mean, other than when we have rescued her before."

The response was icy. "Oh, I know Chloe. I'm surprised at you, Chat, I didn't think you were into the prissy drama queen type."

Clearly he'd miscalculated something. She sounded mad. She wasn't supposed to be mad, just surprised.

"There's more to her than meets the eye," he said defensively. Chloe may be mean sometimes, but she was still his friend.

"I sure hope so. Get someone who deserves you, Chat." She left the stall and slammed the door behind her.

Plagg swallowed the last of his cheese and remarked dryly, "Well...that went well."

That evening, as Marinette walked home, she tried to un-weave the tangled web her love life had become. She fed Tikki a cookie from her purse, and took the long way home to puzzle this out.

According to Adrien, Ladybug was his girlfriend. As Ladybug, she knew that was untrue.

How had Chat heard about their fake relationship? She'd asked Alya not to post it to the Ladyblog. News couldn't spread that fast without the most trusted Ladybug channel to give it a boost of plausibility. Perhaps he'd been there, listening to Adrien, as Marinette had been. Did that mean they knew each other in real life? It was possible. She'd have to come back to that.

Why did she tell Chat the rumor about her and Adrien was true? She wished she hadn't been so impulsive. There was no good reason for her to do it other than because she could. That wasn't like her at all. Hot shame simmered on her cheeks.

But this wasn't even the worst part.

She hadn't been expecting to hear Chat's confession that Chloe was his girlfriend. She couldn't imagine a worse pairing, but why would Chat lie? Unless he knew she was lying…

The news had made her feel jealous, which she wasn't sure she understood.

Unbidden, a thought rose to the surface. Maybe Chat was Adrien. Then this lie would have backfired spectacularly on both of them, but it would at least be fixable. As nice as that would be, it was impossible. She laughed off the ridiculous notion, more concerned with the cringe-worthy thought of Chat and Chloe on a date.

This distracted her for several minutes, until she found herself approaching Chloe's father's hotel. In front of the gilded front doors, Nathanael sat with his back to her outside on the stone bench, and sitting next to him was none other than Chloe herself.

Keen to listen in, Marinette immediately sought cover behind a large hedge positioned near the bench. Maybe Chloe would say something about Chat. Part of her was appalled at her invasion of their privacy; what did it matter to her who Chat dated? Why did she care? She shouldn't. Right?
Chloe pulled a paintbrush out of her pocket and gave it to Nathanael. There was a tenderness in the gesture, and Marinette would never have believed it if she hadn't seen it herself.

"You left before I could give this back to you. It must have fallen out when you dropped all your supplies on the steps after school," Chloe explained.

"Thanks." After a moment, Nathanael added, "Did you really call me just to make me come all the way here so you could give this to me yourself? You could have sent it with one of your hotel servant minions. Or given it to me at school on Monday. Or loaded it into a crossbow and shot me with it. Any or all of those would be a believable character move for you."

There was a pause, and Chloe blinked shyly.

"Well, actually, it's...because...I..."

She leaned forward, as if to kiss him. Nathanael, bewildered but pleased, leaned in too. Marinette couldn't believe her eyes. Was she cheating on Chat with Nathanael?

But then Chloe pulled back, her face twisted into a smirk. "Loser, I can't believe you fell for that!"

He frowned, hurt. Marinette clenched her fists in outrage, but then the unbelievable happened. Nathanael shook his head in disappointment and replied, "Chloe, you're a terrible liar. If you're too nervous to kiss me, all you had to do was say so. Because I'm not afraid to kiss you first."

And he leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. Chloe, instead of reeling backward, froze for a moment, her eyes bugging, and then let them slowly close. She leaned forward and kissed him back.

Marinette was rooted to the spot, hands clapped over her mouth.

When the two of them broke apart, Chloe regarded him with shocked elation. "Don't think this changes anything, I still hate you."

Nathanael picked up her hand and kissed it. "Sure you do," he said sweetly. "But you've also met your match. If I haven't won your heart yet, I will, Chloe. Pick out your dress for winter formal; you're my date."

Chloe gave him an entranced smile, as if she couldn't help herself. "Okay," she murmured. Then, she snapped herself out of it and tried to sound like her normal, irritable self. "Ugh, fine. Whatever. If I even show up."

Nathanael beamed and stood to leave.

Marinette, feeling much like a blindfolded raccoon trying to run through six lanes of traffic, fled the hedge and sprinted back the way she came. She didn't stop until she was back in her room, sweaty and out of breath.

"What just happened? What, what, WHAT?" She collapsed onto her bed.

"I don't think I can answer that," said Tikki, floating out of her bag and brushing a few cookie crumbs from the side of her mouth. "I couldn't see anything in that bag."

"I can't believe this. Chloe is either cheating on Chat, or Chat lied and they aren't dating. But why would he lie?"

"You could ask him."
"You're right. And I will."

Seconds later, Ladybug called Chat. By some miracle, he picked up at once. "My Lady?"

"Chloe's cheating on you," she blurted. She stared at the fluffy throw pillow she was shredding in her nervous hands as she talked. "I just saw her kissing Nathanael. I told you she wasn't good for you and now, do you see? Who do you want me to beat up? Or whose do you want me to beat up first? That's a better question."

Instead of distraught weeping, as she expected for something this big, Chat laughed uncomfortably.

"I guess that's me caught in a lie, then."

"You mean you're not dating Chloe?"

"Exactly. I lied. Please don't beat anyone up for my honor, although I appreciate that you'd do that for me. I'd do it for you."

She threw the pillow and it made a satisfying smack against the wall. "Why? Why lie to me?"

There was a profound pause, as if Chat was doing some soul searching. Eventually, he sighed. "Because it would be unfair to tell you that I still have feelings for you if you are interested in someone else. Instead, I made up a girlfriend to make you jealous because I still want you. I'm not sure that was the better decision, in the end."

"Oh." She wasn't expecting him to be so blunt.

"Yeah. But our friendship means more to me. I realize that now. I want to fix this."

"I feel the same way, Chat. I'm sorry I hurt you."

"I'm sorry I hurt you too. And I'm sorry for doing it again just now by telling you how I really feel. But it's the truth, and sometimes that's better."

"The truth is better..." she mused, then jolted upright. "Uh, Chat, I need to go talk to Adrien. Right now. Talk to you later!"

She hung up before Chat could say, "See you sooner than you think. Plagg, claws in."

The only times Adrien ever used his balcony, he jumped off of it to leap into the night as Chat Noir. But tonight marked the first time he planned to use it to break up with a fake girlfriend.

It was the right thing to do. He didn't want Ladybug to have to pretend they were dating, and things had gotten out of hand far too quickly when he'd said Chat was dating Chloe. He hadn't realized how much it had hurt Ladybug, and awkwardness didn't suit them. They were a team, and they were better than this.

However, true to her good heart, she beat him to the punch and broke up with him first.

Ladybug's feet hadn't even fully touched the cement floor before she declared, "Adrien, I can't be your fake girlfriend."

He pretended to be surprised. "You knew?"

"I know you told people we were a couple, and I went along with it because I thought it might be
funny for a while, but it backfired for reasons I won't really go into, and I need to ask you not to keep telling people we are a couple."

"Oh," he said, relieved. "That's what I was going to say too. It was a bad idea. I panicked and lied to avoid hurting someone's feelings, and it was a terrible decision. I didn't realize how many people were going to get hurt. You, me, Chat, Marinette, Chloe…"

"I'm starting to think Chloe will be fine. I saw her kissing Nathanael."

Adrien again had to pretend to be surprised. "What? That's shocking. Shocking!"

"But thank you for trying to make things right."

"It's the least I can do. This got complicated very quickly."

"Yeah, it did." Ladybug fidgeted with the string of her yoyo for a moment. "Um, not to make this more uncomfortable, but I need you to know…I have to tell Chat we talked. He thinks I'm dating you, and it upset him. Apparently he heard the rumor, told me about it, and I confirmed it as a joke. But I ended up making a mess of our friendship and have to fix this."

"No, yeah, I get it. I want to fix it too."

She started to spin her yoyo, a sign she was ready to take off again. "Well, I don't know why you chose me as your fake girlfriend, but I'm flattered. I'm sure whoever you end up dating will be a lucky girl."

"I'm still holding out hope someday it might be you."

She laughed and hopped onto the balcony ledge. "You sound like Chat."

Adrien had already made two very bad decisions today, and he figured he may as well make it three. He might regret it later, but sometimes the truth really was better. "That's because I am Chat Noir. There was no rumor. Chat knew because I knew."

He stepped onto the ledge beside her and held out his hand to show her his ring.

From the look on her face, he'd miscalculated again. She looked mutinous. Why?

Before he could register what was happening, she'd taken his hand in hers and pulled them both down from the ledge to the safety of the balcony again. They stood mere inches apart, noses almost touching.

"How could you tell me who you are? You know we're supposed to keep our identities a secret," she hissed. He noted she was still holding his hand.

"The truth is better. I don't want what happened to us today to happen again because we were too afraid to tell the truth. You know who I am. You know I have feelings for you, but you also know I value your friendship more. Your decision about your own identity is still yours alone. But now you have some more context. Which, given your reactions to Chat dating Chloe and me dating you, might be necessary if you have feelings for me too."

"Oh, shut up, Adrien, you know I already do!" she said, and pressed her lips to his. Adrien didn't have time to protest, and he didn't want to.

After a while, Adrien and Ladybug sat out on the balcony, facing each other in wrought iron patio
chairs. Most of their time together was spent in shocked silence or in a daze.

"I can't believe we kissed," he murmured after a while. "Are we going to talk about this?"

"I'd apologize, but I'm not really that sorry," Ladybug blushed.

"I mean, same."

"But now I feel guilty because you were honest with me and I still need to be honest with you. The reason I kissed you has a lot to do with finding out you're Chat Noir."

He shifted in his seat. "What do you mean?"

"Well, we know each other. You know me when I'm not Ladybug."

"Oh?"

"And all this time, I had no idea. And then when I found out you are Chat, it occurred to me that we've been making this so much harder for ourselves. You need to know who I am now. Because I think you'll find things are far less complicated than we thought."

"Okay," Adrien blinked, not sure if he was following. "So tell me."

"I'm. I'm. I'm...Marinette."

Adrien jumped out of his chair at once. "I KNEW IT! Agh! I'm so happy!"

"You knew!?"

"Well, no," he blushed, and sat back down. "But I'm kind of relieved. If I could have picked anyone to be Ladybug, it probably would be you."

She looked down modestly. "So you're not disappointed?"

"Why on Earth would I be?"

"I don't know. It's hard to figure out how you feel about people. I didn't know if you liked me at all. I watched you turn down all those girls who asked you to the winter formal, and didn't dare try my luck at asking you, because I wanted to be your friend first and didn't want a rejection – or even an acceptance – to change that."

"That's a tragedy," Adrien said. "Because if you'd asked, I probably would have said yes. I was only looking for the right partner, and it turns out she was right in front of me the whole time. It doesn't have to be romantic, but clearly we've demonstrated that's not going to be an issue for us."

"Are you saying you'd say yes if I asked you?" Ladybug's eyes were wide.

"Of course, Marinette!"

And just like that, Adrien had a date to the winter formal. Nino was going to be mad he missed the action, but sometimes the truth is stranger than fiction.
Bittersweet

Chapter Summary

Bittersweet: There's a huge difference between falling in love and literally falling. Too bad Adrien is about to experience both in one day. Idea for an ultimatum suggested by Elithemiar, though I've added a Valentine's Day spin.

Chapter Notes

This is a tad early for Valentine's Day this year, but it was written last year to celebrate the holiday. I also put this one on tumblr so you may recognize it if you read that version earlier. Thanks so much for reading these oneshots, it's a pleasure to write them for you. Enjoy!

As Adrien fell from the top of the Eiffel Tower, he was suddenly reminded of a time, years before, when his mother had made chocolates for Valentine's Day.

He could still remember the sweet smell of sugar and the sun streaming through the kitchen windows as she poured the molten chocolate into molds, making sure each of them was perfectly sized. When they were ready, she stacked the heart-shaped candies in a box, one by one, with delicate care. Even the slightest nudge would cause the pattern of chocolates to wobble and fall. She arranged them into a gorgeous rendition of the Eiffel Tower, and clapped her hands in satisfaction when it was finished.

Adrien admired the design all afternoon, forbidden to touch it until his father came home. However, he was allowed to stand on a stool and gaze down at the aromatic morsels. Things were going fine until Adrien, in an effort to get a full bird's eye view of the design, rose onto his toes and leaned forward. He leaned just barely too far, and one foot slipped off the stool. In a last effort to regain his compromised balance, he reached for the counter, missed, and nudged the box of chocolates instead. He and the confectionary tower fell in seemingly slow-motion to the wood floor, and then it was all over with a slam and a flash of red. As he lay on the floor, he heard his mother's hurried footsteps coming to save him. But he was so shocked by the fall that he couldn't move; he could only stare at the shards of broken chocolates and the dented box that were strewn beside him. His mother wasn't angry at his mistake; in fact, she sat on the floor with him and ate a few of the chipped pieces of chocolate. She pressed one piece into his hand, urging him to try it. To savor what was left, to make something good come out of disaster. It was delicious chocolate, but to Adrien, it was bittersweet with shame.

He never forgot how awful it felt to see that kind of destruction and know it was his own fault.

But now, as he fell through the air toward his own destruction, it occurred to him that he'd never learned his lesson.

As Adrien plummeted downward, he looked up, shocked he could reminisce about chocolate at a time like this. He was nearly horizontal, body parallel to the lamplit ground, and almost certainly
about to die. The darkening indigo sky above him yielded no stars; the only lights were the car beams and illuminated windows of a world teeming with life below.

Someone above him shrieked, "No!"

The sound split the misty air like a bullet through water – all the urgency was there, but to Adrien, it was muted.

He saw a blurred silhouette rush to the edge of the tower after him. He saw a distant, feminine face. It was familiar, but he was already too far away to tell who it was. All he could see was a faint expression of horror on her face. As he tried to yell out to her, he felt the hooks of gravity pull him further and faster downward. His lungs compressed in panic, and he couldn't even take in enough air to scream; he felt only feel rushing air and his desperate pulse as he fell faster and faster. The girl vanished into the sky far above him, until all he saw was black.

In the hours leading up to his fall, Adrien could only be described as bored. It was late afternoon, and it was still too early to go to Alya's Valentine's Day party, so he sat in one of the coffee shops, tried to read a book, and ended up watching the couples kissing at the register to get free lattes.

It wasn't the most exciting way to spend the afternoon, and it was actually starting to hurt him a little, the more he thought about how much he wanted to have a date of his own. But the person he wanted to spend Valentine's Day with was Ladybug, and if he saw her at all today, there was no possibility of it being romantic. She had been very clear to him when he'd talked to her as Chat. They were friends, and friends only. For a while, that had been enough. But Adrien couldn't deny that lately he felt something more for his partner, even if Ladybug didn't appear to feel the same way. She giggled when he flirted with her, but never took it seriously. Adrien suspected there was someone else on her mind, but she was so secretive that it was hard to tell.

After almost an hour of sitting in the café, part of him was almost daring an akuma to strike and make his very single Valentine's Day at least a little interesting. He needed something to do. Wallowing didn't suit him.

He didn't have to wait long. Within minutes, smoke erupted from a building across the street. Adrien had abandoned his coffee and was out the door before most people even heard the fire alarms go off. He was masked and ready to fight within seconds, reveling in the freedom of finally taking action as Chat Noir. He felt like he was properly living.

He didn't know at the time that this akuma was going to show him just how close to death he could get.

When Chat and Ladybug arrived at the scene of the fire, a giant wearing a chef's hat and clothes stood in the middle of the street, towering high above the chimney-studded buildings. One of the corner apartments was crumbling, bricks caving into a gaping, flaming crater in one of the walls. The giant chef, with two hands glowing like hot coals, shot fire from his palms down the alleys. People screamed, cars smashed into each other, and pedestrians took off on foot, hobbling out of the way.

"Arrr! I am Chef Mischief!" the giant was bellowing. "You can't fire me! I built this restaurant! So now, I will burn everything I can get my hands on! Who's fired now?"

"Finally, somebody who appreciates wordplay just as much as I do," Chat remarked. Ladybug just rolled her eyes.

He could feel acrid smoke start to make his eyes water. It was time for them to take this guy down.
He twirled his baton, feeling adrenaline pulse through him. "Ready, my lady?"

"Always."

"All right! Flame on!"

She just stared at him. He tried to explain.

"You know, like 'game on'…but instead it's 'flame'…you know what, never mind. Let's just go."

It was Ladybug who came up with the idea to lead Chef Mischief out of harm's way. They shot projectiles at him – benches, lamp posts, bicycles, and the like. Nothing did any damage. Chat lured him away from the neighborhoods and over the flat green of the park. The chef left muddy footsteps in his heavy, lurching wake.

"What's your problem?" Chat called to him as he used his staff to poke the villain in the forehead. Chef Mischief blinked irritably, not noticing Ladybug closing in from behind him as she swung between buildings. Chat kept talking. "Why can't you leave people alone? There's no need to get so hot tempered."

The provocation was necessary. It was how Chat distracted the akumatized. They liked to talk about themselves, and that was a weakness Hawkmoth had never managed to get around. It worked to Chat's advantage most of the time.

This was not one of those times.

The giant chef lifted a flaming hand to swat at the air in frustration, but Ladybug had chosen that exact moment to swing out on her yoyo. She collided with his hand, and the force sent her soaring backward in a painfully high arc. Her arms swung limply, and that was Chat's clue she wasn't conscious anymore.

In that moment, he forgot all else. He abandoned the giant and darted after Ladybug. It was a mad dash, but he was able to intercept her before she plummeted to the cement sidewalk below. Seeking higher ground where they could recuperate, Chat took her to the Eiffel Tower. It was the closest landmark with a good vantage point, and it was a place they knew well. Somehow their akuma showdowns tended to take place here more often than they'd ever planned. But it was lucky this was the case; if they were going to defeat this akuma, they'd need every advantage.

Between the metal scaffold bars near the top of the tower, he set her down on one of the flat ledges. It was a good thing neither of them were afraid of heights. He patted Ladybug's cheeks and checked for injuries. He spent a few minutes muttering, "Wake up, My Lady!" and "Please be okay…"

And then she finally stirred, hissing with pain. When she regained the most of her awareness, she looked at him with those wide eyes he never had been able to withstand. "Thanks for saving me back there. I definitely would have crashed if you hadn't caught me. I blacked out halfway through the air."

"Of course. That's what I'm here for. How do you feel?"

"Icky, but I can manage. We have work to do. Where are we?"

"Eiffel Tower."

"Again?" She sat up slowly, careful not to provoke any undetected injuries.
"I know, right? I don't know how we always end up here. Can you stand?"

Her eyes narrowed as she mentally assessed her state. "I think so."

"Here, I'll help you." He lifted her to her feet, bracing her with one hand on her back and the other laced through her hand. She wobbled a little at first, but slowly straightened into an almost normal position. In the long evening shadows of the tower beams, neither of them noticed the other was blushing.

"Thanks. I feel a little better already," she said, and Chat let go.

There was a loud crash nearby, and both of them turned on the ledge to see Chef Mischief plodding forward, straight through a line of parked cars. His footsteps left behind mere automobile mulch. He was quickly approaching the tower. They would have mere seconds to make their move.

"How did he sneak up on us this fast? He's a giant!" Chat complained.

There was probably an answer to that, but it involved acknowledging feelings neither one of them could face at the moment. They left the question unanswered. Ladybug began to twirl her yoyo, thinking of a plan. Her eyes caught on his pristine white hat – every other part of his costume was covered with soot and singe.

"His hat. I think that's what we need to aim for."

"You think that's where the akuma is?" Chat's green eyes slid to hers.

"I'm positive. Can you-"

"One distraction, coming right up."

Chat pounced into the fray. He dodged shots of flame and somersaulted through the smoky air, landing on Chef Mischief's nose. Irked by the intrusion, Chef batted at his face, bellowing when his burning hands made contact. Chat, of course, had already leaped out of the way, and now stood on the chef's massive shoulder. Eyes watering from the pain, Chef Mischief searched for Chat, finding him just barely too late, for Chat jumped again, this time onto the villain's head.

He dislodged the hat, and, with perfect timing, he heard the zipperring noise of Ladybug's yoyo string as it hooked around the hat. But before either of them could destroy it, Chef Mischief put a smoldering hand to the hat, forcing it back into place. The fabric withstood the fire as if by magic, a further confirmation that within it lay Ladybug's prize.

Both she and Chat were forced to duck out of the way and regroup, weaving between swipes and thrown flaming projectiles, thinking fast. Ladybug evidently decided it was high time to up the game.

"Lucky Charm!" she exclaimed, and from the heavens descended a polka-dot umbrella.

"Are we expecting a chance of showers in the forecast? All I see are clouds of smoke," called Chat as he spun his baton in a circle, fending off a few crumbling pieces of rubble Chef Mischief had sent his way.

"Ha…ha…ha. Let me think…I need to get up to that hat, but he won't let us get close. I'm going to have to quietly sneak up there somehow. Can you keep him busy while I come up with a plan? When I raise my hand, join me and destroy the hat with your Cataclysm. Got it?"

Ladybug had that calculating look she got whenever she was searching for clues as to how to use
this object. After she scanned her surroundings for a moment, she lifted her chin in triumph, clutched
the umbrella tightly, and swung on her yoyo as high up as she could on the tower. When she had
enough distance, she dove out of the air, adjusting her aim until she stood on a collision course with
Chef Mischief's hat.

Chat jabbed the chef in the legs with his staff and yelled out puns, watching as Ladybug waited until
the last minute, then opened the umbrella. Her descent slowed immediately, and she floated silently
downward until she landed unnoticed atop the hat. Slowly and deliberately, she raised her hand in
signal.

Chat wasted no time in joining her at the top, and before Chef Mischief could follow his quick
movements, he shouted "Cataclysm" and destroyed the hat in one swipe. From the dissolving shreds,
an akuma fluttered out.

"Oh, no you don't," muttered Ladybug, and she captured the tiny butterfly, preserving it in her yoyo
until the evil magic ebbed away.

Once the now-purified akuma was released into the evening breeze, Chat came to the realization that
they were still standing on Chef Mischief's head. A place that was about to dissolve without
Hawkmoth's magic.

"My lady, we need to get out of here. I say we make for the tower."

"Good call," she said, and they both set off as Chef Mischief was returned to his normal size. From
their new position high up on the Eiffel Tower ledge, overlooking a still smoking trail of destruction
through Paris, Ladybug tossed up her yoyo, declaring "Miraculous Ladybug!"

The charred sidewalks, crushed cars, and destroyed buildings repaired instantly. Relieved at their
success, Ladybug and Chat sat down with their legs dangling off the edge, savoring a job well done.

After their perfunctory fist-bump, they sat for a moment in silence, admiring the city at their feet,
watching the sun set beyond the building-studded horizon. The reflections on the glass turned the
whole city a rosy pink, and even though both of them had mere minutes until they de-transformed,
Chat and Ladybug couldn't help but be enchanted.

It was times like this that dodging death on a nearly daily basis was worth it. They made a good
team, and they knew where to find the little infinite seconds where they could be heroes without
emergency.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Chat," Ladybug said after a minute. "I didn't get to say so earlier."

"Happy Valentine's Day," he said, leaning back against one of the scaffold braces. "Doing anything
fun?"

"I have a party later."

"Do you...have a date?"

"No. The guy I like doesn't know I like him, and I'm too nervous to ask him out."

So there was somebody else. "Ah."

"What about you? Do you have a date?"

"As much of a cat-ch as I am, sadly no, I will be going to my party tonight alone."
"You deserve someone awesome, just so you know," she said. Her eyes were full and bright, like little stars. She genuinely meant it.

"So do you." It was all he could manage.

The first Miraculous de-transformation warnings came all too quickly, but for the first time, neither one of them moved.

"I don't want to leave," admitted Chat first. "I'm procrastinating."

"Neither do I," Ladybug said, although she looked surprised at herself. "But I don't know why. Maybe I'm just tired."

"You've earned that right. Are you still feeling okay? You didn't get hit too hard?"

"No, I don't believe so. I should be fine. But thanks, Chat. You saved me."

"Anytime. We save each other, it's what we do."

A few seconds of silence elapsed. The roar of cars and city life broke like waves against their ears.

"We really should go," Ladybug sighed, and then she did the unthinkable. She put her head on Chat's shoulder. It was perfectly welcome, but this made Chat want to move even less.

"Yeah, we should," he murmured, not at all meaning it.

The urgent beeps returned, and the sunset deepened to a blood red. Chat could feel the warmth of her cheek against him.

Finally, Ladybug stood. "I don't want to leave yet, Chat, but I should at least hide. Our secrets are still secrets." There was a final beep, and a flash as she walked behind one of the pillars.

Adrien called, "Don't worry, I won't look." The warmth on his shoulder remained, as if she was still there.

As he gazed out at the horizon, he heard her unclip a bag, and the distinct munching sound of a kwami eating its fill. If Chat had to guess, it was probably a cookie. Then, at the sudden thought of feeding his own kwami, fear doused his rosy haze like spilled ink.

He hadn't brought any Camembert for Plagg this time.

What an idiot he was! He was about to detransform, with no way to get off this tower unless Ladybug could take him home. But if she did, she'd discover his identity. It was unavoidable.

He cursed himself. If he hadn't been too eager to savor his few minutes of peace with her, he could have gotten off this tower and kept his secret intact. What had he squandered those minutes watching the sunset for? Was it worth this? He hoped it would be, because he had no other choice.

"Ladybug, wait. I just realized, I don't have food for my kwami-" he began, standing up and turning to where she was hiding, but then his transformation fell away.

The flash disoriented him, and that was when he realized the heel of his right foot was too close to the edge. His balance was off-kilter. Only slightly, but it was enough. There was a terrible moment when he felt the arch of his foot waver between thin air and rickety metal, where he still had hope he could lean forward and save himself from falling.
But then gravity proved stronger than his will, and with a strangled gasp, he tipped backward and fell.

Adrien tried to savor his last heartbeats. He saw no outcome where he came through unscathed; Ladybug probably couldn't transform in time to come after him, her kwami had only started to replenish her energy.

And yet, perhaps he was imagining things, but he thought he saw someone hurtling through the sky above him, gaining on him steadily.

The face was blank and maskless, but as she drew closer, she was completely recognizable. In all the scenarios Adrien had imagined, it shocked him to realize not one had involved Marinette being Ladybug. And yet, it had to be the truth. There she was, following him through the sky, a tiny red kwami circling her.

"Tikki," she shouted, her face screwed up in desperate concentration, "spots on!"

And as Adrien watched, captivated, Marinette stretched out her left arm toward his. Starting at her fingertips, the familiar spots of Ladybug's suit began to cover her skin. All the while, she drew closer and closer to him.

Their hands finally met with a jolt, and before the mask had finished appearing around her wide eyes, Ladybug grabbed Adrien in one swift, strong pull. With her other hand, she lassoed a nearby chimney with her yoyo. They swung up sharply to the left, and within seconds their feet met the gravel of a flat rooftop. Adrien collapsed immediately, and Ladybug's arm slipped out from around his waist. He lay gasping for air on his right side; still unsure if this was actually real. When he looked up, he noticed Ladybug kneeling on the gravel beside him.

"Spots off, Tikki," she murmured. Marinette's kwami appeared at her side, slumped and exhausted.

"That's the fastest I've ever eaten," Tikki declared. "Definitely worth it. But now, I think I need a nap." Marinette opened her bag obligingly, and Tikki flew inside. When the kwami was out of sight, Marinette's eyes flicked back to Adrien's face.

"Thank you. So much," he said. He tried to say it as one sentence, but he was trembling so badly from the shock that he could barely speak at all. He felt the shivers roll up and down his body. His fingers twitched uncontrollably.

Ladybug's eyebrows pinched together, her mouth crumpled, and then, without warning, her arms were around him, hauling him into a seated position with his legs stretched out before him. She had buried her face in his blue shirt and was hugging him. His shaking arms were pinned to his sides, and after a while his shivers slowed to tremors.

"You almost died, you idiot," she said after a minute. Her voice was thick, as if she was crying. "I was so worried I wouldn't get to you in time."

"I certainly learned my lesson," he whispered. He bent his head to rest across her shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"Don't ever do that to me again. I'll buy your kwami all the food in the world and make you carry it in a giant purse at all times if I have to. Just. Don't die. Or even think about dying. I can't lose you," she said fiercely. "I know I don't always show you the kind of affection you show me, but I would never be able to handle it if something happened to you. I love you, Chat. Adrien. Whoever you are. It doesn't matter. I care about the people I love, and I'd do anything for them, no matter what. I feel
that way about you."

Bewildered and still full of adrenaline, Adrien just blinked. "T-thank you. I feel the same for you. I always have. I'll always be here. I don't plan on going anywhere anytime soon. I've had enough adrenaline for a lifetime. And," he laughed, "You know, I always thought I'd be the one to sweep you off your feet, my lady. But you beat me to it."

She let go of him slowly and helped him stand up. She brushed gravel off his clothes and gave him a watery smile. "Well, I know cats are supposed to always land on their feet, but I don't encourage testing that theory. Okay?"

"Okay." There was a pause. Adrien sought to fill it. "So...you're really Ladybug. It makes perfect sense. I really am an idiot, you were right in front of me the whole time and I never noticed."

"It takes one to know one. I don't know how I didn't realize you were Chat Noir sooner. It's sort of embarrassing." She looked away.

"Well, now we know. I'm pleased, to tell you the truth."

"I'm sorry you had to find out that way. I had a whole reveal planned out for when we were older. There was going to be confetti, and a little Miraculous anniversary cake I was going to bake, and candles..." she trailed off, wiping the leftover tears from her face.

"We still could do all those things."

"I think we still have a lot to talk about. I...I can't believe you're Chat." She ran her hands through her hair. "I'm thrilled, of course, but this makes our dynamic a little more interesting. This might go down easier with some cake."

"My thoughts exactly."

She brightened a little. "Then let's do it. Next week? That'll give us some time to adjust. I'm not ready to celebrate yet. I'm still reeling from the fact that you almost died."

"I got really lucky," he sighed. "Thank you. Seriously."

"You're welcome."

Adrien checked his watch - it was almost time to go to the party. "I guess we both should probably go to Alya's. I assume you're still going?"

Marinette frowned. "Yeah...I almost forgot about that. She'll know something's up if we don't go. Do...do you want to just go together? It makes more sense this way."

"I'm okay with that," Adrien smiled. "As friends, I assume?"

"Well," she blushed, "I already told you I love you tonight. I think maybe we're more than friends at this point."

"Best friends?"

"Maybe a little more than that." The implied meaning was clear. They both shuffled their feet awkwardly. Adrien said, "We can cover that over cake as well."

"Good call," she agreed, relieved. "But at least for tonight...let's just be the other's Valentine. Is that
okay?"

"It's perfect."

At Alya's party that night, Adrien and Marinette were more reserved than usual, sitting together on a bench by the dessert table. All around them, people danced to music and exchanged handmade Valentine cards.

Adrien picked up a chocolate from his plate and bit into it, marveling at Marinette as she swayed to the music and smiled at him. He may have learned his lesson, he thought as he savored the chocolate, but there was something to be said about the hopeful aftertaste of the bittersweet.
Gorgeous

Chapter Summary

Gorgeous: After a stolen kiss with Adrien goes horribly wrong, Marinette finds herself banished from Paris for a year, wondering if Adrien ever really loved her. Luckily, her new friend Tikki has some plans for how Marinette can reinvent herself. A year later, fashion icon Ladybug steps off the plane in Paris, ready to start a new job with her mysterious assistant, Chat Noir. But there's something familiar about Chat, and she can't quite put a finger on it. A No-Miraculous AU.

Not even a week after the most awkward and horrific encounter of her life, Marinette found herself shoehorned into a tiny coach seat on the red-eye flight from Paris to New York City. As everyone around her slept, she sat awake, tormented by all that had occurred to put her here.

The experience was traumatic, to say the least. Any efforts to distract her from the embarrassment did nothing. Looking out the plane window into the black void did not help. Observing the other passengers with stowed briefcases and lapsed, dozing mouths did not help. Imagining all the fun shenanigans she would get up to in New York during her year abroad did not help. Thinking about Adrien Agreste definitely did not help.

Her mind always circled back to her catastrophic exodus, and the real reason she'd left Paris. At this juncture, the story was that she was going to New York City to study fashion for the next year. But if anyone found out how she'd really gotten into the prestigious Plagg DuCouver Institute, she might as well stay in New York forever and never come back.

There had been three steps to her admission process.

First: The greatest fashion mogul of Paris walked in on Marinette kissing his son, Adrien, in the garden after a gala at the Agreste mansion.

Second: When Gabriel assessed the situation, he decided to "get rid of her" – his words.

Third: This meant he would send her to school in New York. It was in the Agreste family’s best interest. Shipping Marinette off to a prestigious fashion institute would be the best way to ensure Adrien didn't break off his very public, very fake relationship with Chloe Bourgeois. That relationship was a mutual agreement between fashion royalty and the mayor that those in power would stay in power.

Nobody wanted Marinette getting in the mix, tearing apart a match designed for maximum influence, and ruining public relations. Even if that hadn't been her intention at all.

When Marinette had been forcibly escorted from the Agreste mansion by a hulking, ape-like bodyguard, Adrien hadn't come running after her. Perhaps he hadn't cared. Or, perhaps he had been too stunned that she had kissed him.

To be fair, she hadn't given him any warning. Marinette had just, well, lost her mind for a few minutes when they were alone, and before she could exert her usual self-control, her lips were pressed against his and his shoulders had seized up in surprise.
The kiss was something he would never have expected from her. They'd been friends for five years, starting from the time they went to school together; Marinette had later been the seamstress at Agreste Fashion, working as an intern and helping dress the models, including Adrien, for the fashion shows. She'd always pined for Adrien from afar, too shy to ask out the popular, gorgeous, kindhearted guy who was the only model she worked with who had ever thanked her for her work.

She'd learned all kinds of things about Adrien's life; people tended to forget she was there, and she had become accustomed to fading into the background to listen to the whispers of gossip. For example, she'd learned the relationship between Adrien and Chloe was only for the press and neither of them actually had feelings for each other. In fact, he and Chloe had a secret agreement that they were not, in fact, in a relationship at all. Chloe had assured him he could pursue anyone he wanted to, as long as it was with the utmost secrecy. But he never had.

Not everything about Adrien was that major of a secret, though. Sometimes little, innocuous things slipped in and became part of Marinette's daily world at no choice of her own. She knew what kind of coffee he liked, what music he listened to, and that he visited cats at the animal shelter when he was feeling sad.

She'd always thought they'd be perfect for each other.

But after that kiss and his lack of reaction, Marinette had begun to doubt this. Adrien knew now that she loved him, and he either didn't care or didn't feel the same way. She might never know which.

If he'd wanted to be with her, he could have called, or run after her that day. If he'd wanted her to stay in Paris, he could have persuaded his father not to tell Marinette's parents she'd been accepted on full scholarship to a fashion school owned by Adrien's uncle, Plagg DuCouer.

This was the worst thing the Agrestes could have done; her parents, thrilled at the opportunity they assumed she'd been awarded on merit, accepted immediately on Marinette's behalf. It was too late to get out of going abroad without appearing ungrateful, or having to explain the humiliating truth that would only disappoint.

Adrien could have prevented all of this; his father likely would have listened to him.

If Adrien had cared at all about Marinette, she wouldn't be sitting on a plane now, missing him, and mourning the death of any future where they ended up together.

Her first full day in New York was miserable, from the very moment she began unpacking. The dorm room she was to share with her roommate on the French immersion floor was tiny, very white, and smelled like Chanel perfume. Her roommate had clearly already been living here for days, and was, from the clean right angles and meticulously arranged furniture, a veritable neat-freak.

Half the closet was already full of expensive designer clothes, and her roommate had claimed the bed on the right side with a shimmering black bedspread. It looked like a miniaturized palace, and Marinette immediately worried her rumpled, mismatched things weren't going to fit in with this mystery princess. She surveyed the wrinkled clothes that had languished in her humid, tightly packed suitcase for at least fifteen hours with despair. She grabbed the nicest looking ones and walked over to hang them up in the closet. Within two steps, however, she tripped on the white shag rug her roommate had placed on the floor. She tumbled onto the carpet, throwing her arms out to brace her fall. The clothes fluttered down around her like butterflies in a breeze.

At that moment, of course, her roommate walked in. "What are you doing on the floor?" a girl asked in French.
That was one good thing about living on the French immersion floor. Marinette could understand everyone. She knew enough English, of course, but on a day like this, in her frazzled state, it likely would have abandoned her in her hour of need. She cursed inwardly. What a way to make a first impression. Marinette wanted to sit up, but a wave of desperate futility washed over her, exacerbated by jetlag, and she couldn't find it within herself to move even a pinky.

"I tripped on the rug," she said stupidly, "and I just sort of fell over, and decided that with the way this day has been going, I should probably just stay here on the ground."

The girl laughed and walked around the rug so she and Marinette could see each other. She had black hair that fell to her shoulders in voluminous ringlets, and freckles that rimmed her nose and eyes. She held out a beautifully manicured hand and regarded Marinette with amusement.

"Let me help you up. With that attitude, you won't last a week here. It's tough here at DuCouer, but it doesn't have to be miserable. What's your name?"

"Marinette." She took the offered hand and unsteadily hoisted herself to her feet. "Thanks. And you are?"

"Tikki, your roommate. Do you want to unpack your stuff and then I'll give you a tour? It'll take your mind off your bad day. It seems like you need it." She said all of this very excitedly, and very fast. Clearly Tikki was a people person.

"Um, okay."

"No, no 'um' around here. You declare your decisions." Tikki gave her a stern glare, waiting for an agreement.

"Yeah. Okay."

"Better, we will work on that. Confidence comes with time."

After a tour of the sprawling urban campus, they stopped for boba teas and sat under the shade of a canvas umbrella, watching all kinds of people pass by on the sidewalk.

"So tell me about your woes," said Tikki. "Tripping on that rug was obviously the least of your problems. Who is the boy?"

Marinette conveniently choked on a tapioca ball at that precise moment. Tikki, who was already feeling more and more like her older sister, whacked her on the back a few times until her airway was clear again.

"W-what?" she finally managed. "What boy? How did you know that?"

Tikki gave her an "oh please" look. "There's always somebody," she sighed.

"It's a long story."

"Classes don't start for another week, hon. We have time."

"But it's embarrassing…"

"The best kind!" Tikki exclaimed, her eyebrows arcing in interest. "I bet it involves a model."

Marinette nodded, feeling oddly encouraged by her roommate's enthusiasm.
"Ah! I must know. Spill."

So Marinette did.

After the first month of classes, Tikki had developed a pattern of nudging Marinette out of their dorm room to partake in all kinds of activities: choir auditions, herb garden care 101, a telethon for the Dumb Friends League, fashion seminars on suspenders, a haberdashery workshop, and even a martial arts class. The pretense was to improve Marinette's English, but it was also to distract her from thinking about Adrien.

And it was working.

One Saturday afternoon, while they sat in their room with their sketchbooks open, Marinette asked Tikki how she always knew what to do.

Tikki smiled. "Let me tell you something. I was like you once; I moved to this city last year and immediately became a nervous, depressed mess. But staying busy and talking to other people in your field can be a panacea. You will find your strengths. Don't worry, we will send you back to Paris in a year, ready to rock everyone's world. You have a great chance to reinvent yourself and stick it to Gabriel Agreste."

Marinette sat back in her chair. "That hadn't even occurred to me. I hadn't thought about what I was going to do when I went back..."

"Yes, well. You've got to go back, but you get to decide who you're going to be when you arrive. If you still want to go after Adrien, that's up to you, but you could set your sights on more." She took a sip of her coffee and set her mug back down on her desk. Then her dark eyes flicked back to Marinette, holding an intensity that hadn't been there before. "All you need is the drive to go after what you want. And maybe a little luck."

In that moment, an idea for a design dropped into Marinette's head. Ladybugs, she thought. For luck.

Tikki dragged her to a "Find Your Fashion Pen-Pal" event hosted by Plagg DuCouer's faculty that October.

Encouraged by her professors and her roommate, Marinette sat down at a glossy monitor and filled out an online application with the username Ladybug. She listed her background, language preferences, interests, talents, and skills, and uploaded some examples of her work for a digital portfolio. Based on a quick personality test at the end of the application, a match was generated to another student or someone in the industry who could act as a mentor or study partner.


Ladybug and Chat Noir's communication started almost immediately; it seemed they were both a little starved for company, and as all Marinette's classes were taught in English, it was nice to have a conversation in French.

At first, their messages were cautious, rarely straying from discussions about their favorite designs and designers. But as Chat Noir began to look through her designs, the conversations picked up.

"You have beautiful ideas," he said one night. "I love everything in your portfolio, particularly the bowler hat and the polka dot mask."
"Thank you! But why don't you have any pictures of your work uploaded? Your portfolio is empty, so I can't return the compliment."

The response: "Tragically, my work is in modeling, and all my work would instantly reveal my identity. I have a feeling one quick internet search on anything I upload would lead you straight to my name. The point of this relationship is anonymous mutual mentorship, yes?"

She responded with a reluctant "Yes."

"I'm sorry. I wish I could share my handsomeness with you, my Lady. One look at my face would send you swooning. I would inspire you to create even more amazing ladybug-themed designs. Perhaps you'd branch out and even design a Chat Noir line."

"Chat, I know very well people can misrepresent their attractiveness on the internet. How could I possibly believe you're as handsome as you say without proof?"

She wondered if this last part was going a bit too far. Was she…flirting with Chat Noir? It seemed soon after Adrien, and yet, part of her was feeling rather reckless. She sent the message before she could take it back.

The response was quick. "My Lady, you have me in stitches. That was quite a good comeback."

Marinette squinted at the screen for a minute. "Was that…a sewing pun? Stitches?"

"Yes, would you like some more?"

She laughed in spite of herself. "No, thank you. Let's get back to discussing designs, shall we?"

"Of course. This pen-pal experience is better ah…suited…for that kind of talk anyway."

"Chat…" she giggled.

"Fine, fine. One day you will appreciate them. Mark my words!"

"If we should ever meet in person, I give you license to make a pun, and I won't roll my eyes in protest."

"Really?"

"Of course! Because what are the chances of that?"

"Well, if you come back to Paris after this year, very likely, I would say. I'll even meet you for coffee then, if you want. My beautiful model face and all. We can finally know our true identities. I know that, for now, you'll have to trust me when I tell you I am gorgeous. But if we meet, my code word for you to know it's me will be Gorgeous."

Marinette's fingers hovered over the keys, twitching as she tried to think of a good response. She settled for:

"Hm, I'll think about it. But aren't you a little worried about what I'll look like? I've made no such claims as to my appearance. To you, I might be a modest, homely peasant. My Ladybug designs may outshine me."

"My Lady, remember this: you won my heart, not your designs or your presumably beautiful face. Someone who can create the things you do is someone extraordinary and I have to meet the extraordinaries of the world."
"Thank you. Those are very nice words," she said. "I hope you mean them."

The response was quick. "I do. And. Just so you know: my waxing on about my appearance is just a way for me to hide my insecurities behind this Chat Noir persona I've created. It's just me joking around. But you make me feel like I don't have to worry about what you'll think of me; you make me better, Ladybug. I hope you'll find me as great as I find you."

Even if the words were a lie, she thought as she turned off her computer for the night, they were the kindest things she'd heard in a long time. Maybe Marinette wasn't as worthless as Gabriel Agreste had made her feel. She may have been banished to this place rather than being accepted on merit, but she could make the most of her time here. If people like Chat existed who loved her work, perhaps how that work came to be wouldn't matter in the end. Maybe her life could turn around after all.

The weeks began to fly by. Marinette spent most weekends designing, and the walls of their dorm room became decorated with fabric scraps, drawings, and photographs of desired styles. The poster of Adrien she'd hung up at the beginning of the year was slowly encroached upon by these new decorations, until all that remained visible were his captivating green eyes. Marinette hadn't forgotten about him, but she was making more plans. Her Ladybug fashion line was coming together nicely, and if she succeeded, it would become her greatest accomplishment.

Tikki fully encouraged this revolution of identity; even making suggestions for new designs.

"I'm feeling earrings," she said one morning, as she got ready for class. "You should make Ladybug earrings."

"For me? Or for the line?" Marinette asked from her cross-legged position on her bed, nose in a book on stitching by Plagg DuCouer. Chat had recommended it as part of his wealth of knowledge about the industry in Paris; apparently his family knew the DuCouers personally, but he became evasive when she asked more questions as to how that could be. This led her to wonder what other secrets he was hiding.

"For you," confirmed Tikki. "It can be your signature look. When you put them on, you're no longer Marinette; you're Ladybug. The embodiment of your designs."

Marinette put the book down slowly, contemplating. "You're a genius, Tikki," she said after a moment.

"I know."

The earrings took a few weeks to finish. And by the time she had finished making them, her applications for jobs had already yielded the most promising of results; she'd been offered a design job at Miraculous, a Paris boutique. One of the perks of the job was that she could hire her own assistant. And the best part was that, apparently, her Ladybug theme was what had clinched the deal.

"When we saw those earrings you made," confessed Fu, the boutique owner, "we knew you were the one we'd been looking for."

Marinette was floating, and couldn't wait to tell Chat the good news. When she showed the earring design and her job offer letter to him later, she said, "I couldn't have done it without your help!"

He sent her a cheerful emoticon. "We make a good team, Ladybug. Congratulations."

"Do you like the earrings? They're one of a kind. This will be my code word to you – if you see me
wearing these earrings when we meet, then you'll know I'm Ladybug."

His response was a series of exclamation points, followed by, "They're exquisite. And, I couldn't help but notice you said when we meet, not if!"

She couldn't help but smile. "It's a date."

He typed, "A calendar date? Or a date date?"

"No! No! A normal…platonic…calendar date."

The relief was almost audible in his message. "Oh, okay, good. Because that whole situation is…complicated."

She rolled her eyes in sympathy. "Ugh, I totally understand what that's like."

To which he'd responded, "Wait, you mean your love life is a mess too?"

She figured she might as well be honest. She confessed, "The last time I kissed someone, it upended my life. I'd like to save that kind of upheaval for special occasions from now on, because it's taking a while to put my heart back together."

Shocked at her impulsiveness, Marinette bit her lip. Was that too personal to share with Chat, who was essentially a stranger?

She soon realized there was no need to fear, for Chat dove in immediately. "I'm sorry to hear that. Things haven't been smooth for me either. I broke up with my fake girlfriend a few days before you and I got paired."

"Fake dating?" Marinette raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, not my idea. I hated it. I'm glad it's over. Sometimes models have to do it for publicity but it's stupid."

"That must have been rough. Was the 'breakup' bad?"

"Not at all," Chat said. "It needed to happen. It was kind of 'arranged.' Neither of us is disappointed; I think she's already dating some painter."

"I see," she assured him, even though she really didn't. Fake dating must be a thing in fashion circles, if both Adrien and Chat had had similar experiences. She'd never understand this world she lived in.

She saw that Chat had just sent another message: "To make matters worse, I fell for this awesome girl last summer. We kissed once and she left before I could say goodbye. In order to keep up the fake dating pretense, my father all but ensured I never see her again. That's actually why I joined this mentor website in the first place; I was looking for her because she's in fashion school at one of the Plagg locations and this pen-pal thing is kind of a hub."

"Don't you know which location she's at?"

"No."

That wasn't good. There were locations for Plagg DuCouer Institutes all over the world. Looking for one person would be like finding a needle in a haystack. Marinette grimaced. "What are the odds you'd even find your mystery girl on here though? They can't be high, and I'm pretty sure this girl isn't me. Sorry, just being realistic."
"No, you're right, I even did the math and it's like a 1% chance. At this point, I'm trying to move on. Honestly, talking to you has been helping."

Marinette sighed, "I'm sorry. And I'm glad? Talking to you has been helpful too. Maybe we'll help each other heal. We can stitch up more than clothes."

"Yeah."

The melancholic silence dripped between them like a leaky faucet.

It was probably time to change the subject, and as she set her fingers on the keyboard, she decided now was as good a time as ever to bring up something she'd been musing on ever since she'd been offered the job at Miraculous.

"Chat, this might sound crazy and off topic, but – do you want to be my assistant?"

She didn't have to wait long for a response.

"I'd be paw-sitively thrilled to be your assistant! I'll have to make sure it's cool with the modeling side of things, but I could do at least part-time."

"Great! I'll send Fu your contact info so he can get in touch. He said he trusted me to choose a partner, but it might be good to have you guys talk too."

"You're the best, Ladybug."

"Thanks! I think you're awesome too."

"You missed a perfect opportunity to say paw-some…I'm disappointed."

"How…punfortunate…" she typed, fighting a smile. Chat had been right; puns really were starting to grow on her.

By graduation, Marinette had presented her designs for her final portfolio to a panel that included all the founders of the institute, including Plagg DuCouer himself, who made his rounds to all the global school locations for final evaluations. Marinette found that the faint resemblance between Adrien and his uncle didn't startle her as much as it would have a year ago. Adrien no longer controlled her thoughts in the same way. He might still be part of her, somewhere, but thinking of him no longer made her a nervous wreck. Fashion and her classes may have had something to do with it, but she also had Chat Noir to thank. When she confessed this to Tikki later, her roommate assured her this was a good thing.

"That way, if you still feel something if...when...you see Adrien again, you'll know it's because you want to feel that way, not because you're expecting to feel it."

This seemed like solid advice.

Marinette was looking forward to starting her job back in Paris. It was a dream-come-true, but it was also going to be a huge change. She'd be back living with her parents, hanging out with her friends, and she'd finally get to work with Chat Noir.

Her exchanges with Chat remained the highlight of her days. They'd even made plans to meet next week when she arrived. Given all they'd shared over the past year and how well they seemed to get along, she wasn't even nervous for what it would be like to finally meet him.
Marinette was sure they'd be good friends. Perhaps too sure. Even from their very first encounter, she couldn't shake the feeling they had met before, and the more they talked, the inkling did not go away. But that would have been impossible. It _was_ impossible.

It was raining when Marinette arrived in Paris. She was not masquerading as Ladybug today – the mask would likely have scared airport security – but she still wore some Ladybug designs, complete with the earrings Tikki had requested she make. She had on a close fitting red suit she'd designed herself, under a limited edition black trench coat from Plagg's own fashion line, Paon. In the pocket of her coat was a small ring with a paw print on it; a gift for Chat Noir when they finally met. Her hair hung past her shoulders in a shiny, straight curtain; she'd ditched the twin ponytails months ago in favor of a more flattering hairstyle.

She stepped out onto the platform, rolling her suitcase behind her. She peered out onto the road, searching for her ride while being careful not to venture out from under the awning. She hadn't packed an umbrella in her suitcase, and didn't want the moisture to ruin her clothes. This was a big day; she was all nerves, and she needed to feel confident in her outfit.

The reason for her nerves was simple. In a short, abrupt email she'd received yesterday from Gabriel Agreste himself, he'd said he would be dispatching someone would pick her up from the airport and take her home. Marinette suspected this was less of a favor to her and more of a reconnaissance operation, to see what kind of person was returning to Paris after a year abroad. Was she still a threat to Adrien and Chloe's relationship? That would be the real question Gabriel would want to get answers to.

Marinette knew to expect this. The trouble was she had no idea what the answer to Gabriel's question would be. She had a feeling that her aims would only surface when she was staring into the eyes of Adrien himself. But in the meantime, she had to give Gabriel the impression she was not in a compliant mood. It was none of his business who she dated, and she wouldn't give him any ammunition of that sort.

If he was expecting the Marinette he'd shipped off a year ago, he was in for a rude awakening.

The problem that arose for her when she stepped onto the platform was that she didn't know who to look for. Gabriel could have sent anybody. How was she to know who it could be? And what if she was wrong? What if she went off with a total stranger, and ended up in danger? She had a small tube of mace in her pocket, but hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Suddenly, a black umbrella unfurled above her head. She turned, startled, and found herself face to face with him.

Adrien Agreste.

She resisted the urge to reach for the mace.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, her eyes locked on his. She couldn't seem to look away, and not all of it was from the terror of being snuck up on. Those eyes could still captivate her, after all this time.

"I – I'm here to pick you up from the airport," he said, taking a wary step back. He cleared his throat. "Unless you'd rather take a taxi?"

"I'm honestly considering it."

"I – look, I know you're unhappy with me, and you have every right to be, but-"
"Unhappy? I'm furious. Your father sent you here on purpose, to see what I would do. He did this to hurt me on purpose! That's psychotic, you know that?"

She started to march away, no destination in mind, but her suitcase was heavy and she didn't get very far. Adrien didn't move after her though. He just said, almost too quietly to hear, "My father didn't send me. I asked to come."

Marinette still didn't turn around and kept marching. "You wanted to see how far I've fallen since the last time we saw each other. I understand." She looked up to the ceiling, keeping any and all tears back. By now, Adrien had started to follow her, keeping a modest distance.

"No, that's not it at all. I came here to apologize."

"It's a bit late," she scoffed, finally turning around to face him, her suitcase grinding against the cement in protest at the sharp movement. "You had an entire year to contact me. You didn't. Message, or rather, the absence of message, well received."

Adrien put his hands in his suit pockets. He was wearing a black suit – how had she only just realized? Did he dress up for this?

"My father made me delete your number and sever any contact with you. He didn't even tell me what city you were in. He wanted to make sure Chloe and I stayed together because, at the time, it's what he thought was best for me. He was worried I'd fall for you and have to back out of our arrangements with the Bourgeois family."

"Well, he needn't have bothered, as you clearly have no feelings for me. He had nothing to worry about."

"No, Marinette…no." Adrien folded up the umbrella. He'd astutely realized she wouldn't be going anywhere with him anytime soon. "He had every cause to worry because that's exactly what happened. I did fall for you; I'd fallen for you long before you ever kissed me, but after that I finally knew you felt the same. And even after he sent you away, I broke it off with Chloe. We both knew it wouldn't ever work, and everything my father feared happened regardless."

"Hold up," Marinette said, taking a step back. "You fell for me? You broke up with Chloe? Why didn't you tell me any of this?"

"I couldn't. I told you already. That's why I asked to pick you up today so we could talk about it. Just know; I did try to find you. I joined message boards, looked through the Plagg website, did everything I could to get at least a phone number or an email address, but I had no such luck."

Marinette made a noise in the back of her throat that might have been a scoff.

Adrien gazed at her imploringly. "Please, just let me take you home and we can talk about this. I'm here to make amends only. Even though you won my heart ages ago, I'm not here with the aim to win yours. If you don't want me here, tell me and I'll go. No questions asked."

Marinette couldn't speak. Nothing Adrien was saying made any sense. She wished Tikki was with her to translate all this mess into something understandable. Adrien liked her? After all of this?

Although, what reason would he have to lie? If this was true, his father was likely furious with him. Declaring he loved Marinette wouldn't gain Adrien anything. In fact, he had far more to lose.

Still, Marinette felt her pride get the better of her. What was she supposed to do, say okay and get into his limo and live happily ever after? Adrien and his father were responsible for a lot of the pain
she'd experienced this year, if not all of it. She wasn't going to make this easy for him, absolutely not. Perhaps it would just be better if they both moved on. Didn't see each other again. Avoided more potential pain.

She pinched her nose, trying to hold back tears that persisted upon rising to the surface.

"Please just go. I'll have my assistant pick me up instead."

With that, she drew her phone from her bag and typed a message to Chat Noir: "Can you pick me up from the airport? I'm sorry, my ride fell through. I'm not in disguise, just a warning. If you can come, we'll have to meet sooner than we planned."

When she looked up, Adrien had gone.

She fidgeted for a few moments, wondering how long it would be before Chat could even make his way to the airport. It could be at least an hour. She wondered if she should just get a taxi if he didn't respond right away.

She walked to the corner where the awning wrapped around the left side of the airport. Her eyes fell almost immediately on a familiar figure in the distance: Adrien. She watched as he jogged to the other side of the street to where, sure enough, a rain-speckled black limousine idled. Even with the umbrella, it looked like the rain had soaked him through; it was falling more intensely now. She watched as he wiped raindrops from under his eyes.

Were they raindrops?

For a brief moment, Marinette regretted sending him away; she thought about calling out to him, but then Adrien opened the limo door, collapsed the umbrella, and got in. Marinette turned away and walked back the way she'd come.

She found that, to her utmost surprise, warm raindrops had found a way onto her face too. But when her phone chimed – a message from Chat – she hastily wiped them away.

The message read: "I'm already at the airport; you caught me in quite the coincidence. I'll pick you up under the first Air France Banner."

The icon below this first message showed Chat was still typing. Marinette squinted, held in suspense. When the second message finally popped up, her eyebrows lifted, and she raised a hand to her earrings.

Adrien had barely fastened his seatbelt in the limo when his phone chimed. He read the message and gasped. It didn't take him long to put everything together.

He stared up at the ceiling for a moment, dumbfounded and embarrassed, and then blushed. He looked back at his phone and fired off two quick replies before he could change his mind. He then exited the limo again (his bodyguard remained unfazed at both his outburst and his erratic behavior) and reopened the umbrella. He ran back to the platform with newfound purpose, keeping the last message he'd sent fresh in his mind.

*When you see me, I won't be in disguise either. But you'll know me by my codeword. I'll look for your earrings, I presume.*

The truth was unbelievable to him. Ladybug had to be Marinette. It all made sense; the messages were too well timed for this to be a coincidence.
This whole time, he'd been looking for Marinette online, posing as Chat Noir. He'd found her in Ladybug, and it was frankly shocking to him that he'd never realized this. How could the one person he'd been searching for be in front of him for an entire year and he still hadn't noticed? He'd been drinking in all her gorgeous words, her designs, her creations. He'd even reciprocated her flirtations…and he hadn't even known.

The resulting emotions flooding him were a mix of terror and elation. He had to tell her; he had to. He'd already made the mistake of hesitating once, when she'd given him that unforgettable kiss. He wasn't planning on making it a second time.

When he saw Marinette, her back was to him under the Air France banner. The awning didn't extend that far, so she stood in the rain, typing a quick response then sliding her phone into her pocket. Then, she lifted her chin and let the rain soak into her hair, making it curl slightly at the ends. Adrien approached, quietly, holding the umbrella aloft, summoning the courage to do what he must. By some miracle, perhaps things weren't as hopeless as he'd thought. Never in a million years did he think something like this would ever be possible; yet here he was, waiting to tell Ladybug…Marinette…that he was her Chat Noir.

That he'd been there the whole time, just by another name.

That he still meant every word of everything he'd said, and he still meant every apology he had yet to make.

When he was close enough that he could have reached out and touched her shoulder, he stopped. His phone chimed with Ladybug's response, and Marinette whirled, her hair fluttering and exposing her Ladybug earrings. The final proof; now Adrien was one hundred percent sure. It was her.

He held out an umbrella to her, the way he'd done back when they were in school all those years ago. "Hi, Ladybug," he said quietly, "It looks like I'm your ride after all."

She regarded him blankly for a moment, then touched her earrings. Then she frowned, and in the horrible silence raindrops beat against the umbrella above their heads.

"What's the code word?" she asked, her voice unsteady. She looked like she was debating whether to kiss him or storm off.

"Gorgeous."

A war of emotions played out on Marinette's face. "Yes, you really are," she said, almost to herself.

"Thank you."

"No! No! I mean…I…I meant that you really are Chat Noir. Not that you're gorgeous. Well, you are, but that's not what I…"

They both flushed, and Adrien couldn't help but crack a small smile. Marinette returned it, but her eyes remained wary.

"So this whole time, when you said you looked for me…"

"It turns out I found you and we've been talking all along."

Marinette stepped a little closer so she was fully underneath the umbrella. "Did you mean everything you told me as Chat?"
"Of course."

"And you meant everything you said to me before I sent you away just now? About falling for me?"

"Why would I lie about that? Marinette, you don't realize what effect you had on me. You can't just kiss someone like you did at that party and then leave for a year. I had no idea what happened to you; my father refused to tell me anything. We've had some strongly worded discussions about that since then, by the way. But I haven't stopped thinking about you. The whole time you were gone."

"I can't believe this is happening." Marinette put her hands to her temples. "You're Chat Noir. I flirted with you for a whole year. We talked for a whole year. And I had no idea."

"You were flirting with me? I hoped you were but sometimes it was hard to tell…"

She blushed an even darker shade of pink. "I…I'm sorry I yelled at you before."

"I deserved it." He twirled the umbrella thoughtfully, sending raindrops flying.

"Not really. I think this was a case where having too many secrets hurt us."

"Agreed. But I'm sorry too, Marinette."

"But if you're Chat…you're my new assistant."


She smiled, and for the first time it reached into her eyes, thawing some of the icy blue. "No, you're not fired. As long as you still want to-"

"I would like nothing better."

"In that case," she said, fumbling in her pocket for something. "I have something for you."

She dug around in her coat pocket and pulled out the mace.

Adrien eyed it worriedly. "Uhhh…please tell me it isn't pepper spray."

"No! Sorry! See, this is the problem with small pockets…" She pulled out a paw-printed ring and put the tube back. "I just had to take it out to get to this. The ring is for you. It's part of the new Chat Noir line. Now you'll match my earrings."

"Thank you. Is it one of a kind?" he asked.

She gently reached for his free hand and placed the ring on his palm. She closed his fingers around it, and didn't let go. Their eyes met.

"As much as you are," she said, and she meant every word.
Marinette's Waltz

Chapter Summary

Marinette's Waltz: Marinette knows Luka isn't Chat Noir. Luka knows Marinette is Ladybug. And Adrien knows nothing. At least, not yet.

Chapter Notes

Spoilers for ML season 2, specifically Captain Hardrock. Also this one has some Lukanette, but don't jump to any conclusions yet. :)

The very first time Marinette and Luka met, she had the strangest inkling he wasn't the right one for her. This seemed ridiculous, because she was attracted to him, but she couldn't shake the feeling that Luka would never completely win her heart's allegiance. But as she remained a neophyte in the matters of love, she assumed she couldn't possibly know these things without at least testing the waters. So she ignored her strange premonition and did her best to win Luka's heart anyway.

She couldn't help but be entranced by him. His smile was intoxicating, and he seemed to notice her talents where most only noticed her flaws. Even during their first encounter, he played music that she hadn't known had been inside her until it threatened to supplant her heartbeat. She liked the way his eyes became animated when he talked about his favorite artists, and she loved his calm, generous spirit.

Initially, she never thought they would officially date – it seemed like the plot of a fairy tale and not something realistic. She would have been just fine flirting with him and casually pining for him, as was typically her way. Yet, after a few days of working up the courage, he asked her out, and she couldn't have been more thrilled. Over the next few months, their relationship was a continuation of a song; sometimes Marinette would forget it was playing in the background until she was with Luka again, and then the strings would swell and she'd notice – acutely – just how happy she was. She woke up each morning reassured that it would be another day in which she was loved, and that she also loved.

On the weekends, she ventured down to his boat, and he taught her how to play guitar in the insular, creaky main cabin below deck. The water made the boat sway rhythmically, and Marinette was never able to determine if it was the rocking that made her dizzy, or Luka himself. He sat behind her on the couch, wrapping his arms around her and positioning her fingers on the strings. Then he cued her to strum by placing a small, gentle kiss against the back of her neck.

Needless to say, she wasn't getting any better at guitar.

Given that Luka was a year older than she was, they were not in the same classes, and she really only saw him outside of school. This turned out to be an advantage, because most of her weekdays were spent doing homework, baking with her parents, babysitting with Alya, or secretly saving Paris from akumas. It was easier to provide cover stories for where she was during the attacks when she didn't have to sneak away from him. He always believed whatever story she told him when he asked...
if she'd made it through the most recent battle unscathed. He had no reason not to.

There was, however, some part of her that wondered if he suspected she was Ladybug after the incident with Captain Hardrock. He'd covered for her so they wouldn't get caught escaping, but then she'd disappeared from the boat to transform and save the day. He must have noticed she was missing. Part of her hoped he did indeed know her secret, so that she wouldn't have to tell him if their relationship became more serious. But if he remained clueless, she was going to keep it that way as long as possible. She couldn't justify revealing her identity to Luka when, of all people who should find out, it should be Chat Noir first.

She knew for a fact that Luka wasn't Chat Noir. Those two had been seen together on the boat during the Captain Hardrock debacle, and nobody could be in two places at once. As even more proof, Luka wasn't nearly good enough with his words to fire off puns the way Chat did. The masks may hide Ladybug and Chat Noir's identities, but it did nothing to hide their personalities. By this logic, Luka was in no way a portrait of her nerdy, punny partner. Plus, Luka was an excellent musician and even a talented singer (though he was shy about this), and Marinette knew from unfortunate personal experience that Chat Noir couldn't sing a note. At least, not well.

Marinette resolved to keep up pretenses about her secret for as long as possible. She wasn't planning on her identity being an issue between her and Luka, but, in reality, that was the start of the whole collapse.

She didn't know if or how things would end between them.

But Luka did.

Luka knew exactly who Ladybug was. It was obvious to him, but he wasn't shocked no one else had ever figured out that Marinette was the only reasonable choice. Luka had always been aware his brain worked differently than most. He didn't live in the realm of words and lies; he instead heard things as music and his brain translated it into emotions. When he concentrated, or spent enough time with someone, he could hear their personal melody.

Everyone had their own unique frequency, their own tune.

Except for Ladybug and Marinette. The way he felt around both of them, the way they made his heart stir, was completely identical. The music that made up Marinette was the exact same as Ladybug's.

That first day, when he'd met both of them, was when he knew. Marinette was Ladybug. At first, this hadn't bothered Luka at all. In fact, he'd been thrilled.

But then Adrien joined the band.

In hindsight, it had been a bad idea to invite him to join for the music festival. Not because their music suffered – quite the opposite. Adrien was so good on keyboard that Luka had no reason not to invite him to join permanently.

That had sealed his and Marinette's fates.

Three months later, at the band's first concert since the music festival, Luka first realized something was wrong. Marinette was there in the front, waving two glow-sticks and dancing to the music, and everyone in the band was playing exactly the way they'd practiced. For the first time, Luka felt in-sync with everyone, even Adrien. In a band, that took time when you added new members. But it seemed they'd finally gotten there.
After a few songs, however, something started to feel off. He looked between Adrien and Marinette, both of whom were staring at each other as though they’d never seen each other before. Neither of them realized they were doing it, and in a moment, they looked away. With the moment gone, Marinette was back to staring at Luka with affection. He strained to act like everything was fine.

That night, he put on his headphones and turned the volume up louder than usual, trying to keep his mind full of noise to distract him from what he'd noticed. It didn't work.

At practice the next day, Luka tested his theory and sat by Adrien. He hadn't ever taken the time to concentrate on his friend's melody before; it hadn't been necessary. But when he did, he heard a slightly melancholy piano, playing a waltz. Luka was more of a Jagged Stone fan, and waltzes were never really his style. When writing songs, he heard his masterpieces in guitar and bass only. Never piano. So when he heard this new song, he knew for sure it wasn't coming from his own mind. It was coming from Adrien's heart.

Luka had heard it one other time: the day he'd met Chat Noir. It had been faint because Luka had been distracted by Ladybug, but he still remembered it.

And while his brain supplied him with the obvious explanation, Luka sincerely wanted to ignore the possibility that his new keyboard player was actually his girlfriend's superhero partner. Because based on the look Adrien and Marinette had shared at the concert, their hearts called out to each other even if neither one had realized it yet. Luka made a noise in the back of his throat. How star-crossed could you get?

The universe was a cosmically weird place; he knew this better than anyone, as it was absolutely not normal to be able to read people as bits of music instead of as words and body language. As much as he wanted to resist what the universe was telling him, Luka knew what he heard; he was never wrong. He just didn't want to face the truth it yet.

Playing his guitar as loud as he could worked for a little while, and the resulting headache he had that night actually extended the period in which he could focus on something other than his growing dread. But when it subsided and he awoke the next morning to the calm swaying of the ship, he knew he couldn't avoid things any longer.

The fact that Adrien was Chat Noir wasn't even the worst part of this whole fiasco. The piano music Luka heard was one part of a duet. And Luka knew whose heart contained the other half, the harmony. He knew it well, because he'd played it for Marinette the day they'd first met.

It hadn't occurred to him that day, but Marinette's music was not a standalone song. But, of all the melodies in the world, the only one Luka could not hear was that of his own heart. So, then, how was he to know that his wavelength didn't match hers? Luka hadn't then, but he realized it now.

Marinette was made for somebody. It just wasn't him.

Luka cornered Adrien the following week after band practice.

"We need to talk," he said, trying not to sound threatening. He tended to become rather intense and abrupt when nervous.

Adrien looked bewildered but assented.

They sat down on the ship railing, feet swinging above the river water. Luka twitched a guitar pick between his fingers, unable to stop fidgeting. He'd had a lot of coffee to try and amp himself up for this conversation, but the caffeine consumption had backfired and now he was just cold and jittery.
He took a deep breath.

"I know you're Chat Noir," he said bluntly.

Adrien's eyes widened in horror, and he gasped, "Shhh! Not so loud. I mean...what? I'm not Chat Noir. Pfft. Ridiculous."

"You don't have to worry; no one can hear us over here. I'm not going to tell anyone your secret."

Adrien regarded him with suspicion, his green eyes narrowing. "How do you know who I am? Who told you?"

"Nobody. No one else knows – look, it doesn't matter. I also know who Ladybug is. And...here's the thing. I need you to at least try to figure it out. I'm not going to tell you who she is. I'm only confessing this because she's closer than you think, and if you love her the way I think you do, you're going to need my help winning her heart."

Adrien just gazed at him, silent and slack-jawed.

"Aren't you supposed to be somewhat of a wordsmith? You have a reputation for being pretty good at puns. And right now, you're just staring at me. Like a gaping fish."

Adrien blinked. "Uhhhhh. Sorry, my brain's on overload. You know Ladybug's identity?"

"Yes," Luka said. This conversation was far more painful than he expected. He'd known it was going to be like stabbing himself, but even so, he'd still underestimated. "And I'm willing to help you two find each other, if you want."

"Why – why would you do that?"

"It's not because I want to, believe me. Think of it as a deed for the greater good. For music and its...posterity."

Adrien looked at him as though he'd just announced he was a unicorn. "I didn't understand any of that."

"You wouldn't. Just know, this is going to be extremely difficult for me, and I only am going to do this if you're all in. Are you all in?"

Adrien twisted the Miraculous ring around his finger, gazing down at the water in thought. "I'm all in," he said. "Thank you for helping me. I really need it. I've loved Ladybug from day one." Me too, Luka thought, but he didn't dare say it. He let Adrien continue. "Does Ladybug know who I am?"

"No. We're pretty close, but I'd never tell her this. That's your job."

"Okay...so what do we have to do?"

"Well, first, I have to break up with Marinette," he sighed. "From there, I have a feeling things will fall into place. The rest is on you. Never give up on Ladybug, and treat her well. Okay?"

Adrien frowned. "What does Marinette have to do with this?"

"Nothing," he lied, swinging his legs back over onto the deck and walking away. He couldn't talk anymore. He was busy thinking about his next steps. He recalled his and Marinette's kiss after their dinner date last night. It was probably the last one they'd ever have, now that he thought about it. He didn't want to think about it. Tonight's date was going to be an unhappy one for him.
However, he had learned unhappiness was part of life, as much as the ebb of the tide. And Luka knew deep down this was the right thing to do; for as much as it hurt him, seeing Marinette happy with Adrien was far more important. Maybe he'd play a song at their wedding someday, he thought, letting the most outlandish thoughts take over. But the more he thought about the overlapping melodies of his two friends, it didn't seem all that far-fetched at all.

The breakup wasn't as bad as Luka expected. It turned out, they both knew things weren't working the way they should have. After he said his piece, Marinette confessed she'd started to worry they weren't quite right for each other, though she couldn't place why. They parted on mutually good terms, with the promise of seeing each other still fairly regularly. Luka knew they would as long as Adrien was still part of the band. At least this way he'd still be able to hear her melody, even if he couldn't want it the way he used to.

Music is still music, even when it isn't yours.

He told her to call Adrien immediately. He didn't tell her why, but he imagined the two of them would find their path eventually. That wasn't in his hands anymore, but he had hope. He just hoped it wouldn't take too long. Giving Marinette up had been difficult, but seeing something good come out of it would be worth it, assuming they didn't move at a glacial pace. Perhaps he'd give them a little nudge, just in case. He decided to text Marinette, "Oh, also. Ask Adrien about his ring." That ought to get some conversation flowing.

He returned to his cabin on the boat and shut the door; he resisted the urge to pick up his guitar. Somehow, a song wasn't what he needed right now. He instead pulled out a piece of paper and an empty glass bottle. It was time for him to write. Or, at least, to try. He still had something to say, and maybe words, however clumsy, would be better this time.

When you love something, you're supposed to let it go and see if it comes back to you; like a yoyo. But in my case, what I love is music, and it doesn't return to you in the same way you give it out. You hear its echo, you hear what people think of it. But once you strum and send the chords out into the world, they find their way to other people or attenuate, and they never come back the way you created them.

Sometimes the music is better once it's not yours anymore. The song can take on new meaning, new life, it can be remade by other people, changed to different keys, even remixed.

What I'm trying to say is that there is so much potential for you, Marinette, and Adrien can give you that. If our song ends so that yours and Adrien's can begin, I want that and I hope you'll find you do too.

Love,

Luka

He rolled up the piece of paper, slid it into the empty glass bottle, and corked it tightly. Then, he ascended to the orange sunset-lit deck, and hurled his message into the Seine. When it finally floated out of sight, he noticed that, of all things in the serendipitous world, Marinette and Adrien were standing on the opposite side of the river. Luka watched them, all the while disliking the universe more and more.

There was a moment where Adrien and Marinette stood stiffly, facing each other, and then he showed her his ring. She tucked her hair behind her ears, and Adrien lifted a hand to touch one of her earrings. There was a pause then, of charged understanding, and then she put her arms around
him in a giant hug. Adrien buried his head in her hair.

From this distance, Luka couldn't hear any conversation, but Marinette's Waltz sang in his mind. "Well, that was fast," he muttered to himself. Perhaps they hadn't needed a push at all. Hearts are funny that way.

Ten years later, mail arrived for Luka at his apartment in London. He ascended the stairs from the mail room to the fourth floor, glancing at the bills, grinning when he saw the checks from his most recent gigs, and finally shuffling to the last, smaller envelope. He noted the Parisian return address with interest, and stopped mid-stair when he realized who it was from.

After a moment of shock, he snapped back into action. He rushed to his room, fumbling with the key in his hurry. He called every piano tutor in a fifteen mile radius, and bought a keyboard that very day. He had work to do.

The night of the wedding, tents were constructed along a portion of the Seine, near where Luka had grown up on his boat. He set up his instruments near the stage, trying to stay invisible in the background. But when the happy couple arrived, he couldn't help but smile and greet them warmly.

Marinette was wearing a wedding dress with tiny pearl ladybugs embroidered along the waist. Adrien was wearing a tuxedo with a green tie that matched his eyes and also called to mind his alter-ego. They were holding hands, displaying their matching wedding bands.

Luka was somewhat surprised to find that, after all these years, he wasn't jealous or pained. They were happy, and he had played a small role in that happiness. It was all he could ask for.

The dancing was the best part of the wedding celebration, by far. Luka played any and every song requested, and even did a few mash-ups with Nino as the DJ, but then came the time for him to pull out all the stops. Luka had brought his own wedding gift for the bride and groom.

It was a song – specifically a waltz – that he knew as well as his own heartbeat. It had taken him months to learn how to play piano, but he'd done it. He'd brought a recording of the piece on a memory stick in a small blue envelope, and had tucked it among the other wedding gifts in the reception hall.

But the live version was what he really wanted to give them. As soon as he started to play, he watched as Ladybug and Chat Noir...Marinette and Adrien...encircled each other at the center of the dance floor, close enough to be one.

*If music be the food of love, play on,* Luka thought with a smile as the husband and wife kissed. Behind him, a glass bottle with a piece of paper inside slid along the obsidian water, urged on by the current into the glimmering city darkness.
Chapter Summary

Between the Lines: Throughout the years, we've seen Ladybug and Chat Noir's reveals from many different angles and perspectives. But very rarely are they shown from the perspective of the media; it's just as much about what's unsaid as what is said. To celebrate 50 chapters, here are 50 actual news article headlines published since the rise of Chat Noir and Ladybug.

Chapter Notes

It's a bit shorter than usual, but I hope it is still a fun read for you. Minor season 2 spoilers apply. Thanks for reading!

1. Who is Hawkmoth? Former akuma victims speculate.
2. "Spots On": What exactly is a Miraculous? Ladybug explains to Nadja Chamack.
3. Heroes, they're just like us! Chat Noir caught sneezing while feeding pigeons on Rue Vivienne.
4. Is Chat Noir allergic to pigeons? Allergy experts debate.
5. There's a 70% probability that Chat Noir is allergic to feathers! See page 12 for infographic.
6. Could you be Chat Noir? Of the 25% of Parisian men allergic to feathers, one of them is a superhero! Take our quiz to see if it's you?
7. Statues of Paris Heroes Unveiled! Ladybug is late to the party…
8. Seeing double? Chat Noir has a copycat – watch our live coverage of the akuma attack at the Louvre.
9. How old is Ladybug? Wildest estimate is 500 years!
10. Twelve akumas you can be for Halloween. Number 4 is a literal shocker!
11. Hawkmoth sighted near the Agreste Mansion. Could he be Gabriel Agreste?
12. Media wrongly assumes Gabriel Agreste is Hawkmoth, says Daily Chronicle editor in a written apology.
13. Media is always wrong, says Gabriel Agreste in a paradoxical public statement.
14. Quiz – Which akuma costume best represents you based on your astrological sign?
15. Local designer prodigy chosen for illustrious student program hosted by the Agreste Foundation.
16. Wunderkind Marinette Dupain-Cheng speaks about her selection as one of the Agreste Foundation’s new Fashion Scholars: "It's a dream come true!"

17. Fashion Scholar portfolio exhibition taking place this Saturday – buy your tickets early!

18. Tragedy strikes at Fashion Scholars exhibition; a jealous akuma kidnaps Marinette Dupain-Cheng.

19. Chat Noir saves the day! Marinette Dupain-Cheng rescued within hours of her kidnapping, and carried home in the gentle arms of our famous feline friend.

20. But Where Was Ladybug? Public demands an explanation for superheroine's absence during most recent akuma attack. They do not receive one.

21. Chat Noir overheard muttering to himself while scaling a tree in the park: "I know Ladybug's identity."

22. Chat Noir and Ladybug deny the veracity of the previously published headline. "Us? Know each other's identities? Psh… Pssshhh," says Chat in an articulate dismissal. Ladybug adds, "But if we had found out recently, we would be working to come to terms with it. Definitely."

23. Conspiracy theorists turn to a simple solution: could Marinette Dupain-Cheng be Ladybug?


25. Adrien Agreste: Model Citizen or Masked Vigilante? Runway models speculate.

26. Fu for Thought: Local tea shop owner experiments with new ingredients and legendary recipes. See our Food Corner on page 16 for more details.

27. Society Pages: Chloe Bourgeois celebrates her birthday in a smashing soiree, complete with attendance by her best friend, Adrien Agreste. The best part? He didn't bring a plus-one!

28. Are Adrien and Chloe and item? Don't get your hopes up, it's just for publicity.

29. Heartbroken: Chloe Bourgeois sighted throwing Adrien's ring into the Seine. He dove in after it!

30. Adrien speaks out: "It's not an engagement ring, this is just a huge misunderstanding."

31. What Does Chloe Know?

32. Caught on camera: Ladybug and Chat Noir seen on rooftop with Chloe Bourgeois. When questioned, Bourgeois replied only with, "I signed a non-disclosure agreement, I can't tell you anything, so get out of my face, you gremlins."

33. Ladybug injured in most recent akuma fight – condition is stable and improving. Chat Noir remains at her bedside through the ordeal. If the fights are getting more dangerous, does our famous duo need some help?

34. The Heroes Parade this summer won't be featuring Hawkmoth merchandise, and here's why…

35. Chat Noir and Ladybug seen holding hands at the Heroes Parade! Are they a couple?

36. Adrien Agreste has a girlfriend, reports Runway Gossip, and the two lovebirds met for a romantic dinner last night for Valentine's Day. We all saw it coming, but it's nice to have
confirmation that he is officially dating Miss Marinette Dupain-Cheng! What a lucky girl.

37. The Ladyblog is taking a hiatus – lead author Alya Cesaire is doing some secret undercover work, but she won't say what or where.

38. Things are changing in Paris: three new heroes have been spotted leaping along the skyline. But can we trust them?

39. Here's everything you need to know about the foxy heroine who calls herself Rena Rouge.

40. Queen Bee, Carapace, and Rena Rouge to host charity ball this winter – look for your complimentary invitation in your inbox.

41. With five superheroes on the map, are we any closer to vanquishing Hawkmoth? Statistical analysis shows a tentative yes.

42. Hawkmoth crashes the Winter Charity Ball, but Paris' heroes are making sure he crashes and burns – developing story, keep refreshing for more updates.

43. WE WON! Paris' heroes have driven akumas away forever; Hawkmoth has been defeated.

44. Ladybug and Chat Noir present a replica of Hawkmoth's Miraculous to Mayor Bourgeois at an award ceremony in their honor. But where's the real one? And why won't Chat Noir or Ladybug reveal Hawkmoth's true identity to the public?

45. Chat Noir's Mysterious Radio Silence: what happens to a hero in the wake of defeating a villain?

46. Gabriel Agreste brought in for questioning after anonymous tip suggests he could be Hawkmoth.

47. It's All True: Hawkmoth is Gabriel Agreste. Spokespersons for the family have declined interviews. Ladybug and Queen Bee make frequent visits to the Agreste Mansion as Gabriel Agreste is escorted to his sentencing hearing.

48. Adrien and Marinette: the reclusive couple with megawatt star power – what's next for them after the deep wounds left by Adrien's father?

49. Chat Noir and Ladybug: What's next for them now that peace has been restored? We may never know, but their privacy is well deserved. We'll miss you two!

50. Announcement: After five years, much has changed, but the best things have stayed the same. With this sentiment, Marinette Dupain-Cheng and Adrien Agreste are pleased to announce their engagement. They have scheduled a June wedding where they will celebrate their miraculous relationship along with their families and their long-time friends, Chloe Bourgeois, Alya Cesaire (former Ladyblog founder), and her husband, Nino Lahiffe. The newly engaged couple could not be happier, and would like to personally thank Ladybug and Chat Noir for helping them realize they were made for each other.
Two Faced

Chapter Summary

Two Faced: When a secret about Gabriel Agreste's son comes to light, Gabriel thinks perhaps he and Adrien can help each other out for the common good. Unfortunately, his idea of father-son bonding comes with a side of blackmail. Spoiler warning for Season 2.

Chapter Notes

If you remember Chapter 35 (Baker's Mania), this fic is sort of an expansion to that one. You probably don't need to have read that one to enjoy this one, but should sort of fit with the same storyline. It's hard with ones like this, because they can so easily turn into full length fics if I'm not careful, so I've done my best to keep it at oneshot material...for now.

Also, an important announcement: As of this chapter, Behind the Masks has expanded its scope to include more than just Adrien/Marinette reveals. In light of Season 2/3, there are a lot of reveal scenarios yet to be explored, and I intend to write as many permutations of them as I can. If there are any reveals between characters you'd like to see, say the word and I'll do my best.

When Adrien's father summoned him home from school early one Friday afternoon, he assumed it was for a photo shoot. The modeling side of his life had been demanding lately, and he wouldn't have been surprised if he'd walked in the door only to turn right back around and go to some glamorous destination. Actually, he half expected a limousine to be waiting outside on the driveway, idling, while inside on the leather seats, Natalie straightened a garment bag, planted a bottle of water in an ice bucket, and folded clean socks for him.

But Adrien was wrong. So wrong, in fact, that the following conversation would change his entire understanding of what he could expect from his father.

When he walked inside the palatial house, his footsteps echoed on the cold tile, announcing his presence. His father was waiting at the top of the stairs, wearing a black suit with red accents that made him closely resemble a vampire. The collar was so high it drew level with his pointed chin.

"Dad, what are you wearing? You look ridiculous."

His father pinched the bridge of his nose. "I told Lotte I'd wear some pieces from her Halloween themed collection if she'd get Agreste Fashion into the next issue of Fashion Walk Weekly. It's horrible, really. But worth it for the press."

"You look like a vampire."

"Thank you, Adrien. I am aware."
"So why am I here? Is it another shoot? I had a test in Chinese that I'll have to make up now."

"It's not a shoot." His father smiled. With the insane clothes, Adrien half expected to see fangs, but all he saw were perfectly human teeth.

"Then what?"

"Adrien, I think we need to have a rather serious discussion." He was still smiling though, which made Adrien even more confused.

"If it's serious, why do you look so happy?"

Adrien's father motioned for Adrien to ascend the stairs and follow him. "There's something I wish to show you," he announced, then began to walk in the direction of his second floor study.

Plagg poked his head out of Adrien's shirt pocket and the two of them exchanged a bewildered look. There was nothing to do but follow.

When Adrien arrived in the study, his father was already waiting at the desk, so he sat down on the opposite side. As he sank into the uncomfortable ceremonial chair, it squeaked under his weight, as if it hadn't been used before. Maybe nobody had used it before.

"Adrien," his father began, "I know who you are."

Was this a joke? He was missing a Chinese test for this?

"I'd be pretty worried if you didn't…" Adrien managed. "Seeing as I'm your son."

"No, no," his father shook his head, finally looking irritated. Adrien was sort of relieved to see the more serious, severe side of his father again. It was always odd when his father had jovial moments, as they were rare and somewhat disturbing. "I know who you are."

"Glad we cleared that up," Adrien deadpanned.

His father grinned again, looking almost joyful. "No, Adrien. I know about your secret identity."

Adrien nearly choked on his response. "What?"

"I know you're Chat Noir."

There was a tense pause, and then his father did the most uncharacteristic thing Adrien had ever experienced. He extracted a small ornate box from his desk drawer, and held it out to Adrien. "Have a caramel."

Adrien blinked, stunned. He had never known his father to consume caramels, ever. He often said that candy was the "blight upon good dental hygiene". Yes. His father actually said things like this.

"Dad, have you lost your mind?"

"Far from it," he said, proffering the caramels more insistently. Adrien took one, and when his father bent to put the box back in the drawer, he chucked the sweet over his shoulder.

"To put it plainly," his father resumed, "I know you're Chat Noir and I couldn't be happier."

There was a moment where Adrien hesitated. His response to this statement was critical. Should he confirm it? Deny it? Ask how he knew and subtly imply it was true? Panic and leave? He wished
he'd actually eaten the caramel now so he could pretend to choke on it in order to stall for time.

Finally, he decided honesty would be best, especially since his father seemed to be in such a good mood. "How do you know about that?"

"It wasn't hard. If you remember the incident last week where you were akumatized, I figured out very quickly that the akumatization was not, in fact, genuine. It was easy to see that you facilitated your own attack to eliminate some of the suspicion that you were Chat Noir. It worked for most people, but it didn't convince me. In fact, it led me to the opposite conclusion, and I am thrilled."

Adrien shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "And. Um. Why would you be thrilled about that?"

His father adjusted the insanely high collar of his suit. "Because it means there is far less I will have to explain to you about the current situation."

"What situation?"

"Adrien, given that you are Chat Noir, you know about kwamis. And since that is the case, I thought you might also like to meet mine. This is Nooroo." A pale butterfly kwami peeked out from the chest pocket of his father's ridiculous suitcoat, and waved a tiny hand. The gesture was so halfhearted it seemed that he didn't like this situation any more than Adrien did.

Adrien sat, dumbfounded, as the picture suddenly became very clear. Not only did his father know about his Miraculous, he also had his own.

That, coupled with the butterfly brooch clasped at the neck of that ridiculous outfit, was enough to make Adrien finally understand.

His father was-

"Hawkmoth. You're Hawkmoth." It didn't come out in the form of a question, but it was one. Adrien saw little grainy spots in his vision, and his pulse doubled its pace. He was going to pass out.

"Yes," his father said. "So you can see why I'm so pleased; now that I know you're Chat Noir, I don't have to akumatize anyone, I can just ask you for your Miraculous like a civilized person."

And then something clicked into place. So this was how his father knew Adrien's secret. Of course, in retrospect, it made sense. The only person who would know without a doubt that Adrien's fake akumatization wasn't the real deal was Hawkmoth; obviously! How had he been so short sighted not to realize this?

Ladybug had discovered his identity when Chat Noir hadn't shown up to defeat him during his fake akuma attack; it had led to a mutual reveal that he was still reeling from. Until today, he'd thought that was the last of the fallout from his akumatization stunt. He could not have been more wrong. Apparently his actions had a more lasting impact than he'd realized. And then, another horrible thought occurred to him.

"Do you know about Ladybug? Her identity?" he gasped. If his father had set his sights on her Miraculous, Adrien didn't care what he had to do, he'd protect her first. Who cared what happened to him; in the end, she mattered more.

"No. I only know about you. However; I would very much like to know who she is. And now that I have Chat Noir sitting right in front of me, it saves me a whole lot of time and effort to just ask you."

"I don't know," he lied. "Even if I did, I would never tell you. I…I just can't believe this." Adrien
stood, and the stupid chair toppled to the ground behind him, legs up like some dead bug. "You're a
monster." His own father was terrorizing Paris, hunting its heroes. And for what? "Why do you even
want our Miraculouses? What's the point?"

His father smiled calmly, a startling reaction, especially given Adrien's obvious state of rage and fear.
"That, Adrien, is why I wanted to have this discussion. I think, once you hear my explanation, some
things might be clearer to you. So if you could please sit down and not overreact, I would appreciate
it."

"You know what I would appreciate? Dad? If you could just not be Hawkmoth and not blackmail
me into compromising Ladybug."

His father had the audacity to roll his eyes. "Oh, Adrien, please don't be dramatic. That's my job."

"And, apparently, my job is to defeat you." He could actually feel his blood simmering, and his pulse
clamored in his ears.

"Would you really come after me now that you know who I am?"

Adrien leveled a stare and growled, "Without any hesitation."

"Well, then. Just be patient and hear me out. You really should know why I seek your Miraculouses
in the first place before you attempt to kill me with that ridiculous stick Chat Noir carries around."

"It's a staff," he corrected automatically, then remembered he was still angry. "You know what?
Fine. Explain yourself. It won't change anything."

"Let's agree to disagree for now. Sit down, Adrien."

Adrien sat and crossed his arms. The chair squeaked.

"Thank you. Now. Are you aware of what power is granted to the one who reunites the
Miraculouses of Ladybug and Chat Noir?"

Yes. "No."

"They are able to harness the powers of creation and destruction in such a way that one's true heart's
desire can be achieved. If you had this kind of power, what would you do with it? Actually, don't
answer that. I presume your answer would be some variant of me getting my comeuppance for
attacking Paris in the guise of a costumed butterfly man. And judging from your expression, I'm
correct. Regardless, Adrien, my point is that my pursuit of this power has one aim, and it is one I am
doing for your sake. Can't you understand that?"

"Oddly enough, no."

His father fidgeted with the butterfly brooch at his vampire collar again. "I want to use it to bring
back your mother."

Adrien, who had already opened his mouth to make some sort of retort, was taken completely by
surprise by this response. "What?"

"I want to bring her back to life. You clearly need her in your life, and frankly, I do too. Losing her
was hard on both of us, and judging from the position we find ourselves in today, our relationship
with each other is clearly poor enough that I didn't notice you were Chat Noir for two whole years,
and you had no idea I was Hawkmoth. Neither of us noticed anything was different, and
that's concerning. When I found out the truth about your double life, I had to come to terms with the fact that I am either oblivious or a poor parent. And I can't help but feel that if your mother were still alive, we wouldn't be in this situation in the first place. Face it, Adrien, we need your mother. And if you help me, we'll have something we can finally bond over, and we can work together. The way it should be."

Adrien sat back in his chair, stricken. It had never occurred to him that it would ever be possible to see his mother again. And some deep part of him, not having tasted the possibility, was suddenly aware of the acute hunger for it to be a reality. That need to see her again had always been lurking, but he'd buried it under school, friends, fencing, piano, modeling, and even being Chat Noir. But now it was stretching out its wings, soaring upward into the forefront of his mind. He imagined running across rooftops with his father, soaring into the night, laughing together, having a relationship with him that didn't feel forced or distant. And at the end of it all, he'd have a whole family again. He wanted to help his father achieve this. He understood, finally.

He took a few moments to give it some thought, and convened silently with Plagg, who was still lurking in his shirt pocket. When he felt like he had a plan, he lifted his head.

His father was watching him with an expression of mixed compassion and hunger. "Well?" he asked. "What do you think? Will you help me get Ladybug's miraculous? For your mother? For us?"

Adrien nodded. "Yes. I will."

Marinette spent the slower, sleepier part of the evening on her balcony in her pajamas, watching the stars. On some days, the light pollution was bad enough that she could only make out a few. But tonight was clearer than most, and she could see more stars than usual. Tikki floated at her side, humming and nibbling on the remains of a chocolate chip cookie. Marinette felt at peace tonight; things were going well. She was finally coming to terms with the fact that Adrien was Chat Noir, and that he knew she was Ladybug. The reveal had been a bit of a shock for both of them, but in the end, Marinette was grateful. Her feelings for Adrien were clearer now. It had been a bit embarrassing to discover that, while she'd been resisting Chat's advances only to pursue Adrien, they were the same person, but she was working through that. From how often they met up to talk now that their identities weren't a secret, a real possibility remained for the two of them to maintain their friendship or pursue something more.

It was with this hope still in her mind that she turned her head to suddenly find Chat Noir crouching on the railing to her right. His costume blended in so well with the dark sky that she hadn't noticed him sitting there, and so, like any reasonable person would, she screamed. Tikki, on reflex, dropped her cookie and rushed to hide. However, halfway through her swan dive into Marinette's pajama pocket, she realized the pointlessness of the gesture and returned to her normal position, hovering slightly above Marinette's right ear.

Marinette's scream attracted the attention of some tourists below, but Chat leaped from the railing onto the balcony floor before they could spot him. Marinette, now the only visible one, waved cheerily and called down to them, "I just love Paris, don't you?"

They gave her an unenthusiastic thumbs-up and hurried down the block. Marinette turned to lean against the railing, her heart hammering. "Adrien, you can't sneak up on me like that. My parents are going to think I've been murdered and they'll try to bludgeon you with a rolling pin. Your good looks won't save you."

To her surprise, he didn't laugh. "I don't think anything will save me at this point, My Lady."
"What do you mean?"

He hesitated a second too long, then waxed into dramatic soliloquy. "You've captured my heart and I'm forever yours. I may never recover from the arrows you've slung into my heart."

"That's sweet," she smiled, "but I don't think that is what you came here to say. What's bothering you?"

"Nothing."

"Surely not my arrows. I'm more of a yoyo person, you know." It was weird making references to her double life as Ladybug with him. It was so strange to finally be allowed to be open with Chat about her true self. Months ago, she'd dreamed of nights like this, where they could be themselves without secrets. But now that it was here, it was so much better than she'd imagined.

They were far better friends than they used to be. This wasn't the first time he'd surprised her on the balcony like this, and she'd snuck over to his place a fair few times. During their hangout sessions, she learned how to better read his expressions, and he learned how not to make her nervous. By now, she could even tell when something was eating away at Chat's normally buoyant attitude, no matter how hard he tried to hide it. Take tonight, for instance. The way he tapped his fingers against his baton, the way he blinked more than usual, and the way he avoided her eyes.

"Well, I had a discussion with my father this afternoon," he began.

"Was that why you got pulled out of class? Alya is gonna be mad, she bet Nino five euro they were flying you to Japan to be in a commercial. I assume that didn't happen. You're clearly not in Japan."

"I have some news."

"I don't like your tone, this sounds bad, Chat. Is it bad?"

"Well, you're not going to like it."

Marinette gulped. "Is he okay? Are you okay? You're not dying, are you?"

"No."

She wasn't sure which of her questions he had just answered, but Chat elaborated before she could clarify.

"Marinette, we have a problem. My father knows I'm Chat Noir."

She gripped the wrought iron railing of the balcony. Even on a moderately warm September evening like this, the cold metal burned her skin like ice.

"What? How?"

"When I faked being akumatized. Apparently you weren't the only one who got more information than they bargained for that day. But that's not even the most upsetting part, Marinette. There's something else."

"What?"

He chewed his lip. "My dad is Hawkmoth."

Tikki gave a huge gasp and dove into Marinette's pajama pocket. There was a jagged pause, and
after some thought, Marinette immediately rejected the idea. "That's impossible, we saw your father get akumatized."

"It is possible. Somehow he managed it. Mari, he had a kwami. He had a Miraculous."

"How - could this happen?" she asked, the sentence broken with shocked pauses. She let go of the rail and made for one of the deck chairs before her knees gave out. Chat sat down across from her, watching her with kind caution.

"Yeah," he sighed heavily. "I know. The alarm in your face right now and the dread in your eyes is exactly how I probably looked at the time. Fast forward through denial, rage, and bargaining, and stop at numb acceptance. That's about where I'm at now. Give it five hours to sort of sink in."

"Oh, Adrien. This is so, so bad. Does he know…does he know about me?"

"No. Not yet. But he wants me to tell him."

Her eyes bulged, but he continued before she could interrupt.

"Don't worry, I lied and said we didn't know each others' identities. But my father wants me to fix that."

"You're not going to tell him, right?"

"Of course not!" There was the smallest snarl in his voice, and now he sounded more like Chat during a battle than he did Adrien. "I never even considered it. I just told him I would so he'd let me leave. If I'd refused, he probably would have akumatized me and forced me to trick you into revealing yourself. Which I wanted to avoid. Besides, I didn't want to get into a fight to the death with my dad while we're both wearing animal costumes. My life's already so weird."

"Okay. So what was in it for you if you exposed my identity? What did he promise you?"

He stared pointedly at the ground, his voice regressing back into a quiet murmur. "My mom."

There was a mournful silence, and she blinked at him. "Why didn't you say yes for real? You could have your mom back; that must mean everything to you. We know uniting the Miraculouses would grant that kind of power; it could totally happen. That's not something you should dismiss easily."

He lifted his head and narrowed his eyes in surprise. "Do you really think I would sell you out for that?"

"No, that's not what I meant. I was more thinking about how this must have been really difficult for you to tell me. Especially since you're not going to act on something, when I know you probably wish you could."

It seemed like Chat had been prepared to argue; he gaped at her in what might have been admiration. "I – that's. Really mature of you. Thanks."

"Your trust, and everything you've sacrificed, Chat…I just…it means everything to me, especially now that we know how high the stakes are. But. Are you doing okay? Like, truthfully? Do you want to stay here tonight? My parents honestly would be thrilled. They love you. Like, I don't think you understand, they love you."

"I'm okay," he assured her, placing a hand on her knee. She stared at it as he continued, "Thank you. I'd better get going, actually, but I appreciate the offer to stay. The thing is my dad will notice if I'm
gone for too long. It's odd. For some reason, he was worried I'd sneak out and tell Ladybug everything."

"Good thing you didn't do just that," she said seriously.

"Yep." He stood to leave. "But don't worry. I'm too sneaky. He'll never find out." The statement fell flat on the dusky air. Marinette didn't have to remind him that they'd once thought the same about concealing their identities. Situations could change from docile to dangerous in a matter of seconds. They both knew overconfidence was a fickle game.

Chat twirled his baton and walked to the edge of the balcony, and was just about to vault over the railing when Marinette called after him. He turned his head sharply, his hair floating around his head like a halo.

"Chat, thank you for telling me. We'll figure something out. Hawkmoth can't succeed." She walked closer and held out her hand.

He took it. "Yeah. I'm going to need your help to stop him, now that I've been compromised."

"I'll do anything, you know that. He's caused too much damage to be allowed to continue on his warpath."

"I know. Paris has been nearly destroyed so many times. Think about all those people…"

"That's not what I meant. He's caused too much damage to you. You deserve better."

He looked meaningfully into her blue eyes and smiled; not a sad smile and not a modeling smile, but a genuine one. "I already have it, My Lady." After giving her hand a gentle squeeze, he let go and leaped off the roof, disappearing from sight.

Once he was gone, she returned to her chair and collapsed into it, thinking hard. Tikki emerged from her pocket and hovered close by, letting her think in silence. As Ladybug and Chat Noir, Marinette and Adrien had saved countless victims from Hawkmoth. But this time was different; personal.

"Hawkmoth doesn't know what's coming. I'm going to do whatever I can to stop that madman. He messed with the wrong bug," she declared after a minute.

"Agreed," Tikki trilled. "Do you any plans in that superheroine brain of yours?"

She set her jaw. Nobody was going to hurt her partner. Not on her watch. They'd been through too much together. He'd saved her so many times; more than he probably knew. Now it was time to save him.

"Plenty," she said. "Let's get started."
Shell Shoked

Chapter Summary

Shell Shoked: Nino is just trying to make it through finals week at university. But when someone from his past turns up with a request for his help, he takes up the mantle of Carapace again. He has no way of knowing that the lies protecting his identity are about to unravel. But hey, at least he's not the only one. College AU, Ninalya.

Chapter Notes

Season 2 spoilers apply!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nino blinked out of a study-frazzled haze. Someone had just set a steaming cup of coffee in front of him. He looked up, bewildered, to find himself staring straight into the face of a long-lost friend.

"This isn't mine," he whispered.

"I know," said Alya. "But you've been staring at this chemistry textbook for so long that I was worried your eyes were going to burst into flames. So, here you go."

"I can't pay for this," he objected. "Please take it back."

"It's on the house."

"This isn't a house, it's a library. You can't just do that."

"Okay, it's on me. Happy?"

Nino frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"Studying," she answered, tucking her hands into the pockets of her puffy orange coat. He only just realized she hadn't taken it off. "Look, please just take the coffee; I went to a lot of trouble to sneak it past the front desk and it'll be humiliating to have to bring it back out. And it's getting cold."

Nino lifted the cup in a toast of grateful acquiescence, then paused, suddenly suspicious. "Did you put anything in this?"

She scoffed. "It's just coffee. Honestly, I'm not going to poison you. I just felt bad for you. You look like you've been here for hours."

"Why are you being nice to me?" He narrowed his eyes. "Wait, have you been watching me?"

"I believe the term is studying," Alya corrected. "And only long enough to get up the courage to come over here. Though I was genuinely worried you were going to die without caffeine." She pointed at his textbook. "You're in O-Chem, it was bound to happen eventually. Professor Marron is
brutal.”

Unsettled, Nino put the cup back on the wooden table. "I…uh…thought you never wanted to see me again," he prompted. "After…you know."

For the first time, Alya's composure cracked a little. The daring façade gave way to a little bit of vulnerability, and they met eyes. Within a moment, however, the mask was back on. "That was a long time ago. And…well, I was hoping you'd want to meet up to talk about it. The coffee is a peace offering."

He raised an eyebrow. "A peace offering."

Alya huffed in annoyance and swung herself into the chair across from him. She looked at him with her brows furrowed, the way she used to when they were deciding where to get dinner or see a movie. Earnest and focused, with amusement waiting for an opportunity to take control of her expression. He remembered what it had been like back when she'd looked at him like this a lot. When he was her boyfriend. Those days were long gone now; they both knew it.

A strand of dark hair fell into her face. She tucked it behind her ear immediately and straightened her glasses. "Okay, fine. I need your help."

"After everything we went through, you're asking me for help? Me? I thought you hated me."

"I don't…" she sighed, "hate you. I just think we have some unresolved issues."

"Unresolved-? Ugh. We're doing this now? Fine." Nino pressed his palms against his bleary eyes, and removed them in a defensive gesture. "The fact that I stood by Adrien is not my fault. I am his best friend."

"And I am hers," Alya hissed. "Marinette was crushed when he joined Hawkmoth's side. I was there for her. I thought you would be too, but you chose them."

"Hawkmoth is Adrien's father, of course he joined that side. And what do you think would have happened if I'd shut him out? He wouldn't have survived a month on his own, let alone escape his father to end up here. I helped Adrien find peace and redemption here, you cannot ignore that."

"I know," she looked down at her lap. "But it still hurt. Can you blame me for being angry? It felt like you chose Adrien over me and Marinette. We're his friends too, but what Adrien did under Hawkmoth's reign was bad, Nino. We couldn't be complicit."

"So I was just supposed to watch my friend suffer until Ladybug and Chat Noir showed up to take care of everything?"

"They're gone, Alya. They abandoned Paris and left Rena Rouge and m – Carapace – to apprehend Hawkmoth alone."

"That has nothing to do with you; you should have trusted Rena and Carapace to help and left it to them instead."

"Well, I didn't."

This definitely wasn't the time to tell Alya that Nino was Carapace. He hadn't had much faith in himself to take Chat's place when he'd been asked. But he'd done his best. In hindsight, perhaps he should have had more faith in Rena Rouge; his lack of confidence in their teamwork had probably hurt her.
But at the time, how could he have trusted her enough? It took years to build a partnership like Chat and Ladybug’s. Carapace and Rena had met only a few times, and had quickly fallen into a kind of rivalry. Each of them wanted to be the first to keep their Miraculous, instead of having to return it to Ladybug at the end of a fight. It wasn’t a status thing or a power thing. Rather, being allowed to keep a Miraculous was proof they were helpful enough to be trusted.

But after all that, Ladybug and Chat Noir let them keep their Miraculouses on the same night anyway. Being Carapace and Rena Rouge became more of a responsibility than a rivalry; a final gift from Ladybug and Chat Noir, bestowed on the fateful last night anyone ever saw them. Afterward, it was like Ladybug and Chat had vanished into the dust, leaving two new heroes to defend the city. And new wasn't always better. They never came close to measuring up, and Nino knew it.

Without the famous duo to chase after, Hawkmoth eventually declined into an easy target, one they would have been able to defeat easily had they been there. But all Paris had was Carapace and Rena. In the final fight against Hawkmoth, they'd barely made it out alive. Nino traced the scar on his left arm; three inches long, peppered with dots where the stitches used to be. He wore long sleeves now, not only to mask the Miraculous bracelet he still wore on his wrist, but also to hide his wounds.

Sometimes Nino wondered what had happened to Rena. She'd survived, obviously, but he still hoped she was okay now. They hadn't reunited after the battle; there was something that still felt unfinished all these years later. Maybe they'd reunite someday.

"I know you didn't," Alya frowned, as if she knew Nino's mind had been wandering. She glared at him over the rims of her glasses. "You don't have faith in people when you should."

He wanted to argue, but it was true. After the defeat of Hawkmoth, something between Nino and Alya had shifted. They argued more. Nino wondered if it was his fault. Being Carapace had already been difficult, but lying to Alya and keeping his hero identity a secret was too much. Alya finally was the one to say it wasn't working, and Nino agreed, but this only made her angrier. So you won’t fight for us? You don't think we'll make it? she shouted at him the night they broke up. I promise this, Nino. I never want to see you again.

Until today.

"Good," he replied, twirling his pencil between his fingers. "So why come to me now and ask me to have faith in you? What kind of help do you seriously think I can provide? It must have been a lot for you to come to me of all people. Why can't you ask Marinette? What do you want?"

Where had all this anger come from? Nino felt guilty immediately, but it was too late now. He hadn't realized how much emotion he'd suppressed. It was then that he realized they were still in the library. Students with hollow faces and dark circles under their eyes were starting to stare. A few pointedly adjusted their headphones and glared at him. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Why come to me?"

Alya's lips pressed together, and then she stood up, the chair screeching behind her.

"Because Marinette's missing, you idiot."

She had already stormed off by the time the words processed in Nino’s sleep deprived brain. He blinked, noticing the cup of coffee again. When he took an experimental sip, it was delicious, but stone cold.

He'd missed his chance.

He didn't want to miss any more.
Maybe it wasn't too late to catch up to Alya. He shoved everything into his satchel, pitched the coffee, and raced out of the library. He tried to scan the surroundings for which way she'd gone, but it was unexpectedly dark outside, and his eyes were useless until they adjusted. Alya was right, he'd been in there a long time.

Finally, he caught sight of her coat glinting underneath a radius of yellow lamplight. The colors and shadows turned her hair to caramel and void. Sweet destruction by beauty. He'd missed that.

"Alya, wait!" he yelled, and bumbled his way down the steep library steps until he was in front of her. She had her arms crossed in impatience, but she couldn't hide her smile.

"Took you long enough," she said. "I was walking extra slow on purpose."

"Yes. Well. Thanks. Marinette's missing?" he asked, slightly out of breath.

She nodded. "I haven't seen her since yesterday. She has a final tomorrow morning. She left to study and I haven't seen her since. I'm worried. I've called her fifteen times and still nothing. I walked all over campus looking for her, but no luck. Then I saw you…and…well, I figured you might be able to help. You know her; you might know where she could be. So I bought you a coffee."

"Disappearing is kind of her thing," Nino said, remembering times when if someone wasn't looking, Marinette would just evaporate into smoke and return later, mildly confused and tongue tied. Everyone was used to it. "Why are you worried? What's different this time?"

"Because this time, Adrien's missing too."

"He is?"

"He's not answering his phone."

"I feel like I would have noticed if my roommate was missing."

"Nino, judging by the bags under your eyes, when was the last time you were even in your room? It's gotta be a few days. Have you been sleeping in the library again?"

"In the history section," he mumbled, flushing. He was surprised she remembered this habit of his. He'd only done it a few times back when he was dating her. Sometimes, when there'd been a school project due and he'd pulled an all-nighter, he got to school early, and for forty five minutes, took a nap in the quiet library, before the first bell rang. Always under the history section.

She shook her head. "Well, do you know where he is right now?"

He wracked his brain. "No…" Then it occurred to him. "Wait. You called Adrien before me?"

She shuffled foot-to-foot. "Yeah. I really tried not to bring you into this."

"Why? Because you don't like me or because we're exes?"

"Kind of neither? I thought it would hurt too much," she said, the words rushed. It sounded like she was trying to get them out before she changed her mind.

"I can handle it. I'm here, aren't I?"

"No," she looked down, her face shadowed under the light. "I thought it would hurt me."

Nino genuinely didn't know what to say. Something inside his chest softened a little bit, the ice wall
around his heart thawing. He wasn't sure if his expression conveyed that, but when Alya looked up, she saw his face and started rambling again.

"It doesn't matter anymore. Look. Um. Well, anyway, Adrien's gone, and I don't know what to do, and I need your help. Between the two of us, we can cover more ground."

"Where do you want to start?"

"I checked all the buildings. I checked our room twice, and our neighbors set up an alarm so if she gets back to our place we'll know. I think we need to start thinking outside the box. Where would she go? Where would Adrien go? Would they be together?"

"I didn't think they still talked," he remarked, pacing to regain some warmth in his toes. It was cold out here.

"They had just started talking again. I'm surprised he didn't tell you. They met for tea last week at that boba place. She came back really excited about how well it went."

No memory of Adrien discussing this with Nino came to mind. Of course, they'd both been busy so they hadn't had much time to discuss developments like this.

He inhaled sharply. "What if this has something to do with Hawkmoth? He was released from prison last month. Do you think he'd come after Adrien?"

"It's a possibility."

Nino grimaced. "I thought he'd agreed to stay out of things. At least, that's what Adrien always told me. What if he was wrong? Could this be a kidnapping? Maybe Marinette just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

They both frowned. The air outside suddenly felt much icier.

"What do we do?" Alya asked. Her eyes were wide.

"If only we had Rena Rouge and Carapace to come and save the day." If Nino had not been so worried, this might have been a dig at their earlier argument, but right now he was totally serious. "They could probably find them like that." He snapped his fingers for effect.

An odd expression that crossed Alya's face. Perhaps epiphany?

"Nino, you're a genius."

He stared. "What?"

"That's exactly what we need to do." There was sharp determination in her voice now. She uncrossed her arms and started unzipping her coat.

"Alya, where exactly are we going to find Rena Rouge? It's not like she goes to school with us. What are you doing? It's freezing! Don't take off your coat."

"No. What I mean is that Rena Rouge is right here." She stepped closer to him, until there was hardly any room between them. A foxtail necklace, a familiar one, hung around her neck, where it glittered in the dim light. "She's me."

Nino took a step back, shocked. "Why – why would you tell me that? Alya! That's supposed to be a secret! Oh my – you're...you're...I was dating you the whole time and you...I...didn't – oh my g-"
"Nino, shut up! I have to tell you if this is going to work. Our friends are in danger and this might be the only way to save them. I can't do it on my own, but as Rena, and with you watching my back, I think we can do this!"

"No-no-no-no-no," Nino was chanting now and pacing the circumference of their circle of light. He closed his eyes, pressed his hands against his temples. When he looked up, she'd already transformed. Rena Rouge was standing right in front of him. There was no doubt, this was actually happening.

"Aaaaah-" he started to scream, but she smacked him lightly on the shoulder with her baton. He shut up at once.

"You need to pull yourself together."

"Sorry." Nino stared at her for a moment and then started to laugh. It sounded weird to him, like a deranged giggle, but he couldn't stop himself. All of a sudden, this was hilarious, and his brain was supplying him with a lot of puns to describe the situation. He selected a favorite and started to roll up his sleeves. "Alya. You're not the only one with something up their sleeve."

By now, both his scar and his bracelet were exposed. Proof of his identity. His Miraculous. Rena's eyes went huge, and she grabbed his arm to examine the scar first. She traced it with a gloved hand, and goosebumps prickled on his skin, betraying his emotions. He didn't wrestle out of her grip, but instead let her realize who he was. She eyed the Miraculous and froze, his arm still cradled in her hand.

"It was you the whole time?" she asked quietly. "You're Carapace? You're my partner?"

He nodded. "I'm sorry for not believing in you when I should have. Maybe things would have ended up differently if we'd known about all this earlier. But I wonder if maybe we fell apart-"

"-because we were coping with trauma and lying to each other about it?" she finished. There were tears glistening like stars on her face now.

"Yeah. That."

Nino stepped closer to her again. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too."

There was a pause, and then Rena threw her arms around him. He staggered backward from the force of it, but felt the remains of the wall around his heart melt. He wrapped his arms around her waist, inhaling her perfume. Jasmine. It brought back memories like a slideshow through his head: Alya stealing his beanies, running to catch the train together, getting ice cream and watching the water rush by them on the banks of the Seine, lending her an earbud to share his newest beat, her sitting on the floor beside him in the library while he read to her from the encyclopedia using funny accents…

He missed her, even when she was as close to him as she was now. He missed her even while they were actually embracing.

He didn't realize he'd said this part out loud until he felt her kiss his cheek and whisper, "I missed you too."

And though Nino never wanted to pull away, he thought again of Marinette and Adrien. "Alya, we need to go; we need to find them. We can talk this out later; we can't let Hawkmoth get away with
anything."

She nodded and pulled back. "You should probably make use of that Miraculous. It's been a while, but I think we can still be a team. Once we find them, though," she said, a watery smile creeping back into place, "we need to have a long talk. No more unresolved issues."

"Dude, yeah. I look forward to it," he assured her, and meant it.

After three hours of searching most of the town and all of the campus yet finding nothing, they returned to the library. They gave Trixx and Wayzz a rest and detransformed, for it would draw a lot of attention to enter the building in costume. They weren't nearly famous enough for everyone to know who they were, but they'd be enough of a distraction to prevent everyone from studying, and that wasn't a very heroic thing to do during finals week.

"Well, it seems like we revealed our identities for nothing," Alya mourned as they stood in line for coffee at the cart in the front of the library. "I'm starting to think Hawkmoth got the best of us this time. But it's weird, it feels like he would have left a trail for us to come find them. A ransom or a self-aggrandizing announcement or something. He's never been subtle."

"We can't lose hope; we'll find them. After we get some more caffeine." Nino was practically sleepwalking at this point. He'd have to spend another night dozing underneath the volumes on Winston Churchill after all this was over. At least no one ever came up to the third floor; he'd be undisturbed.

Wait a second.

"Alya, when you said you checked the library, did you check the secret study room on the third floor? The one no one knows about? The one with the couch?"

Her head whipped toward him, hair flying. "What secret study room?"

"Didn't think so. That's the one place on campus we haven't checked."

Wordlessly, they abandoned their spot in line and raced up the stairs. Nino's heart was pounding, and beads of sweat formed above his eyebrows the way they always did when he was stressed.

When they reached the third floor, it was silent and empty. No one was in sight, and Nino was grateful they wouldn't have an audience if they had to battle Hawkmoth in a library. That was the kind of thing that went viral, which Nino was keen to avoid.

He led them down a hall lined with bookshelves, past the history section, to a secluded corner where, tucked away, was a closed study room door. He and Alya exchanged a preparatory glance before she twisted the knob and pulled the door open.

What they saw inside was so bewildering that for a moment, Nino thought his sleep deprivation had escalated in severity to the point of hallucination. There was no sign of Hawkmoth. In fact, there was no sign of danger at all.

Inside, Marinette and Adrien were seated on a lumpy couch set up as seating for a small table. Books and calculators and spreadsheets and mannequins and fabric covered every visible surface. They both were asleep, snuggled against each other, with Marinette's head resting on Adrien's shoulder. His arm was wrapped around her, and there was a colored pencil dangling precariously from her limp hand. It was as if they'd succumbed to a study-frazzled sleep, only to drift away as they dreamed.
It was the cutest thing Nino had ever seen.

He felt Alya's warm hand take his and squeeze. When he looked at her, she was beaming. She motioned with her head for them to leave quietly, and shut the door again.

They made their way back down the stairs of the library, each setting an alarm on their phones to wake Marinette and Adrien up in an hour. This situation was too cute to ruin by barging in without good cause. They could rest a little longer.

Over coffee, Alya and Nino talked about the past, and talked about the future. And while he gazed into her eyes, astounded at the night's events, he was grateful to Chat Noir and Ladybug, wherever they were. They'd brought Alya and Nino together as Carapace and Rena Rouge, and that was a gift with lasting reach. They’d probably never know, but if Nino got the chance to thank them someday, he would.

Chapter End Notes

And with that, we're all caught up to "live" postings, rather than archived ones. Updates from now on may not be as quick, but I do have some more chapters planned and they'll be posted soon, don't worry. Thanks so much for reading, I can't wait to share more stories with you!
Magnetized

Chapter Summary

Season 3 spoilers for Oblivio apply.

Magnetized: After the events of Oblivio, something about Chat Noir and Ladybug's kiss forged a bond that draws them together, despite their memory loss. Meanwhile, the universe seems insistent that Marinette and Adrien reunite, but this has some drawbacks. Namely, they can't seem to stop holding hands.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay! I wrote and rewrote like 3 versions of this chapter, and didn't ever feel like it was the right story. Then, I sat down and wrote this all in one night, and I like it better. Writing's funny like that, isn't it? Anyway, to quote Stefon from SNL, this chapter has everything: compulsory hand holding, identity reveals, absolute fluff, mentions of fake dating, and quantum theory metaphors.

Since it's been so long, I wanted to get back to the roots of Behind the Masks, so this is a clear cut Adrien and Marinette reveal. Hopefully this chapter is worth your awfully long wait - I'm hoping to have a better posting schedule now that things aren't as crazy. Thanks for reading! I'll be back with more oneshots soon!

At school the day after Oblivio, Adrien is cramming books into his locker when it happens. There’s a tingle against his right palm, like wind passing across his skin. Bewildered, he looks around, wondering if maybe it’s a draft from one of the windows, but none of them are open. Nobody else seems to have had the curious sensation, because the hallway is bustling with students going about their normal routines. It’s a normal Wednesday for everyone else. But yesterday wasn’t normal for Adrien.

Yesterday, he kissed Ladybug, and can’t for the life of him figure out how it happened.

He does one more glance around, and the tingling intensifies into a distinct warmth. As if someone is holding his hand. He nearly drops his book bag and glances over his shoulder again, wondering if this is some kind of medical emergency. Is this a symptom for something? Maybe he should have paid more attention in anatomy.

Then he notices Marinette. She has her locker door open, so he can’t see her face, but she is opening and closing her left hand, as if she’s having the same problem. Adrien finishes unloading his books, grabs his math notes, and wanders over to her. She closes her locker door at that very moment, and suddenly they’re face to face. Her eyes widen and she jumps back, arms flailing. A few students around them duck to avoid getting hit.

“Agh! You scared me! How long have you been standing there?”
He can't help but smile. “Sorry! Not long, I literally just walked up.”

“Oh. Hi?”

“Hi.” He’s never really noticed before, but Marinette’s eyes are really, really blue. Like the ocean. Peaceful, deep, mysterious. A riptide, pulling him in.

“D-Did you…need something?”

He blinks, startled. “Oh right.” Now that he thinks about it, it feels weird to ask if something’s wrong with her hand. “Uh, never mind.”

They stare at each other awkwardly for a moment, before Adrien’s hand moves of its own volition. It seems Marinette’s does the same thing, because the hands meet mid-distance between them and interlock fingers. They both stare in horror; they’re holding hands.

Never mind how right it feels to be connected to her (which…why is Adrien even thinking that?), this should not be happening. What is going on?

Adrien wrestles his hand away, which is harder than he expected. It’s like pulling two strong magnets apart. He feels strangely disappointed when he’s finally able to get free, though this thought is quickly surpassed by the fact that he is completely mortified. “I…I am so sorry. I have no idea what just happened.”

“Me either,” Marinette says faintly. “We should…um…go to class.”

“Yeah.”

They part eagerly, and Adrien doesn’t have to look in the reflection of the glass door to his classroom to know his face is beet red. And the worst thing? The curious sensation of someone holding his hand is still there. And it’s getting worse.

By lunchtime, his hand feels heavy, as if it’s expending a lot of energy resisting some magnetic pull. Without meaning to, he finds himself in line at a café he never goes to. He hardly ever goes off campus for lunch. Nathalie insists on him bringing carefully curated, nutritionist-specified food and eating in the courtyard outside the school where he can get fresh air. But apparently Adrien disregarded this rule today; his lunch is still in his locker. The scary thing is he doesn’t remember walking over here. Or making the decision to leave in the first place.

In front of him in line is none other than Marinette. She looks just as bemused to find herself here, and the crease between her brows only deepens when she notices him behind her.

“Adrien, this is going to sound really weird, but I don’t remember how I got here. Did we come in together?”

Bewildered, Adrien shakes his head no. “But I don’t remember choosing to come to this place either. It’s like I was-”

They both finish, “-drawn here.”

He looks down and his hand is laced tightly with hers again. When did that happen?

Marinette is horrified. “What is going on? What is up with this? Is this you being funny?”

“No, I thought it might have been you? I think something odd is going on here.”
Adrien has to admit, under any other circumstances, it would be kind of nice to be holding hands with her, going out to lunch, sitting with her and just talking.

What is happening to him?

“I can’t seem to get my hand free,” Marinette says. She is clearly trying to sound casual since this is a busy public place. But Adrien can tell she’s freaking out as much as he is. It’s like their hands are stuck together. He tries to move his hand away, but to no avail.

“Me either.”

“What do we do?” She stares at him with wide eyes. He’s never noticed before, but her lashes are long enough to cast shadows on her cheeks when she blinks.

“I have no idea. Maybe we should try again? Maybe we need to think about separating? Maybe it’s a mind thing?”

Nothing works. By the end of lunch, neither of them has eaten, and they’ve had to walk all the way back to school with their hands still clasped. They’re both at a loss. Adrien flashes a panicked look at Plagg when the kwami pokes his head out of his jacket pocket, and Plagg shakes his head, worry pinching his tiny whiskers.

They obviously can’t go back like this. For one thing, they’re not even in the same classes, and for another, everyone’s going to think they’re a couple.

This, on top of the photo of Chat Noir kissing Ladybug yesterday that surfaced on the Ladyblog, is going to make Adrien’s life completely impossible.

“This way,” Marinette pulls him over where they are concealed by the bushes on the side of the school entrance. She seems to know exactly what he’s thinking. “We can’t go in there like this. Let’s think this through.”

“I know. There has to be an explanation. Do you have any idea why our hands would, um…”

“Decide to permanently attach themselves to each other? No.”

“Me either. Have you done anything weird in the last twenty-four hours that would cause this? Interacted with any magical beings? Become akumatized? Angered any wizards?”

“No,” she says, but she answers too quickly.

Adrien narrows his eyes. “You’re lying.”

She groans. “No I’m not.”

“Yes you are. What happened?”

“I got hit by Oblivio yesterday, while I was on the field trip,” she says, but her eyes dart nervously around. Is this another lie?

“So did I. What would Oblivio have to do with any of this?”

“I have no idea.”

She stares at him, her lips twisted as if she’s conflicted.
“What?” he asks.

“What if we can’t fix it? What if we’re stuck holding hands like, forever?”

“Well,” he begins sarcastically, "we could probably pass it off as we’re dating for a little while. That could buy us some time until we can get married. Or we could probably just move and change our names and live in disgraced infamy until they invent a surgery that can separate hands that insist upon being held.” Adrien isn’t sure where this side of him is coming from. He usually reserves this punchy attitude for Chat Noir, but the stress is starting to get to him. He can’t restrain the sass for much longer.

Instead of looking irritated, Marinette just gapes. “Dating?” That seems to be the only part she heard.

“What? People would believe it. We could pull it off.” He’s still half-kidding, but now that he thinks about it, it doesn’t seem that terrible. It might be kind of fun. Marinette is cool.

“You’d…you’d do that? Pretend to date me?”

“Well…yeah, sure. It’s probably a more reasonable explanation than magic,” he says, squeezing her hand.

She blushes furiously. “You shouldn’t have to do that.”

“What? Why? Anyone would be lucky to fake date you. Or real date you,” he adds as an afterthought. “If I didn’t have a crush on someone else, I’d totally date you.”

She blinks, and those eyelash shadows are back. How come Adrien keeps noticing them? He never used to see stuff like that with Marinette before. He only noticed details like that on Ladybug until… until today.

“Who do you have a crush on?” she demands quietly, “Is it Kagami?”

“I…no. Kagami? Really?”

She is looking at her shoes. “Yeah?”

“No. We’re friends. But no. I…I have a crush on Ladybug.” The words are out of his mouth before he can stop them. He’s going to regret bringing this up. This is edging dangerously close into revealing “I’m Chat Noir” territory.

She jerks her head up sharply, eyes pinned to his with new intensity. “Ladybug?”

“Yeah. She’s…a lot like you actually. Smart and brave and really kind. I used to wonder if you were Ladybug. It would make a lot of sense, you’re both kind of amazing.”

“Adrien,” she says, her voice quivering, “you can’t say stuff like that to me.”

“What? Why? It’s a compliment.”

The period bell rings. They’re officially late for class, but Adrien doesn’t care. They have bigger things to focus on right now.

Marinette steels herself. “Because…I like you. I’ve liked you for a long time. And when you talk like that, it sounds like you like me back? I don’t know, maybe I’m not saying this right? But it’s hard to hear you say those things and then be reminded you have a crush on someone else.”
He freezes, finally understanding. “Oh…”

“And knowing you like Ladybug…well, it changes some things.”

“What things?”

He tries to pull his hand away from hers, to test if maybe whatever weird magic is holding them together has worn off. They’re still stuck fast. This probably isn’t the best time to talk about crushes in case it gets awkward…but apparently they’re doing it.

She squirms a little, as if deciding what to say. “Adrien, if I was Ladybug, would you still like her?”

“Definitely. I might like her more, actually. I already called you our Everyday Ladybug and I still mean it. It’d be a small world if you were the real one too.”

“And if Ladybug was me, would you be disappointed?”

“What? No, never. Wait, why are you asking me this? Is this hypothetical?”

“Sure.”

“It doesn’t really feel hypothetical. Are you Ladybug?” He’s kind of joking, but not totally.

She licks her lips nervously. “See, this is what I was afraid of.”

“What do you mean?”

He can feel her fingers tapping against his knuckles, thinking hard.

“I was afraid of you thinking I’m Ladybug. I mean. Never mind. First, I think I know someone who can help us. He’s a friend of Ladybug’s, so he’ll know what kind of weird magic is making our hands do whatever this is.”

“Okay. Can we go there? Now?”

“Yeah. But I…need to explain something first. Because this puts him…and me…in a weird position. I don’t know how to explain to you how I know about him, because everything will sound like a lie. So, you should know the truth.”

“What truth? Does he not talk to anyone except Ladybug and you?”

“He only talks to Ladybug. It protects his identity.”

“So…how do you know him? Why will he agree to see us?”

She takes a deep breath. “Well,” she begins.

He knows immediately where this is going, and his mind gets there before his heart rate does. “Wait, are you actually Ladybug?” He’s full on panicking now.

She casts her eyes down, and the sun gleams off her hair in a halo. “I was trying to avoid a situation like this. I didn’t want to have to tell you, but if it gets us out of this mess, then so be it. Yeah. I’m Ladybug.”

“This is awesome news,” Adrien exclaims. “Are you serious? Please tell me this is real.”
“It’s real,” she frowns. “Why are you happy about this? I shouldn’t have even told you, but I’m desperate here. Are you disappointed it’s me?”

“No, Marinette, this is fantastic. It makes so much sense that you’re Ladybug. But that’s not the only reason. It also explains why we’re stuck together like this! How did I miss this? Why didn’t I see it before?” He lifts his free hand to his head, the pieces falling into place so quickly it’s overwhelming.

“Adrien, slow down, what’s going on? What do you know?”

“We’re stuck together because you’re Ladybug—”


“And I’m Chat Noir.”

She takes a step back, reeling. She squints at him as if expecting him to say, “Just kidding.” When he doesn’t, her eyes go wide and her mouth drops open. “Oh my, you’re serious.”

Adrien continues, “I think it’s because of the kiss yesterday. The one Alya caught on camera. Remember? We were holding hands.”

“We…you and me…Ladybug and Chat Noir…we kissed. I kissed you,” she says foggily, as if it doesn’t seem real. “I kissed you. I kissed you.” She giggles, suddenly, delighted by this. Adrien feels the same way. He’s very conscious of the fact that her hand feels warm in his, and how near to each other they’re standing. He can smell her lily shampoo. He is even close enough to admire the soft slope of her nose. It’s making him dizzy.

He fights to maintain some reason. “Yeah. And our hands were together, just like this. I suspect that when your Miraculous Ladybug magic reverted everything back to normal and we forgot about the kiss, we forgot about the circumstances Oblivio put us in too. But some part of us still remembered.”

She gasps. “Our hands have been trying to reconnect since that moment; they’re trying to restore the balance in the universe, because—”

“-We’re supposed to be together. And for a moment, we were.”

“Wow,” she announces weakly. Adrien stares down at their hands. The position is so familiar. No wonder it felt so right. They’ve done this before. Like muscle memory, they didn’t have to think about it. They were made for each other, and fell back into place as naturally as gravity.

Which was great and everything – perfect, even – except for one thing.

“Wait, so if that’s all true,” Marinette muses, “how do we get unstuck? Can we do it without getting Master Fu’s help? What is the universe waiting for?”

“I have some ideas, My Lady.”

“It’s so weird to hear you calling me that.”

“ Weird…bad?”

“No…weird good. I think. Definitely good. You said you had ideas?”

“Well, just one. If that doesn’t work, we need to go see your friend.”
He waits for her to get it, because spelling it out might take some of the magic out of this moment. Behind the fragrant juniper bushes, when they’re in their own world, newly awash in their mutual revelation.

She catches on. “I see. We could try to recreate what we were doing last time.”

“Are you okay with this?” He leans in.

“Yeah,” she whispers, half-smiling. Like she’s surprised herself in her own enthusiasm. “Are you?”

“Yeah.” It’s barely a word, more of a breath against her skin.

By now, their noses are nearly touching. Adrien definitely would never have guessed this was how his day was going to go. But in that infinite moment before they kiss, a million thoughts go through his mind. Of Marinette. Of Ladybug. Of physics, and spooky action at a distance, and forces of attraction, and magic. Of yesterday’s memories on the tip of his tongue that he can’t quite recall. Of lily shampoo and ocean eyes.

When their lips meet, there is an overwhelming sense of purpose and electricity. Adrien can’t find it in himself to breathe, so he goes a little light headed. Their hands remain clasped for a moment, but then come apart. Surprised, Adrien pulls back too early.

“We’re free,” he says stupidly. He just kissed Marinette. He just kissed Ladybug. And remembered it this time. He feels amazing.

He and Marinette examine their hands, and without having to say a word, press them back together. After all, it’s one thing to hold hands when it is through compulsory magic. It’s another thing to choose it willingly. Marinette moves closer to him and they kiss again. They’re already late, so they might as well make the most of it.

When they make their way back to their classes, they willingly face the shame of walking into their full classrooms. Ignoring the curious stares, Adrien picks up his pencil to start his Chinese quiz, but his mind is still back on that kiss. His other hand tingles again, and he thinks of her.

In chemistry class, Marinette looks down at her hand and smiles.

They may not have their memories back from Oblivio’s attack, but that’s okay. There’s plenty of time to make new ones, and they both feel that today is off to a pretty good start.

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