Everybody lies.

Some more than others.

Yet, strangely enough, it’s the biggest liar in school who finally pushes Marinette into being honest with Adrien.
Marinette closes her eyes and chokes back the yell threatening to claw out of her throat.


Inner peace.

Rainbows. Puppies. Sunshine. She conjures the mental image of adorable hamsters frolicking in a lush meadow, and clings to it.

But the excited chatter emanating from the other side of the room still reaches her ears, the sound digging in like talons, piercing and scratching, the hurt radiating all the way to her chest. Rose’s excited squeals bleed into Kim’s booming baritone, yet no matter the pitch, they all speak with the same voice.

Tell us more, Lila.

Why?

Why can’t they see the lies?

Hands balling into fists in her lap, Marinette swallows the bitterness.

In. Out.

Inner peace.

The high road is a lonely place to be.

Well. Not entirely lonely.

She opens her eyes, seeking a familiar green. Adrien is not among those huddling around that awful witch of a stupid liar, and neither is Nino, the two of them wrapped up in their own conversation. A mischievous grin curves Adrien’s lips as he leans forward to say something, and Nino half-groans, half-chuckles.

Adrien’s laughter rings out, and Marinette sighs at its perfection.

He must have noticed her scrutiny because his gaze meets hers and his expression softens. Raising his chin toward the group gathered around Lila, he almost imperceptibly rolls his eyes. A secret message meant only for her.

You’re not alone. I see it, too. We’re in this together.

Marinette nods so furiously her pigtails bounce on her shoulder, heart drumming against her chest in a wild and beautiful rhythm. Adrien’s answering smile is warmer than the sunlight streaming in through the window. The world grows a little less radiant when he turns back to face Nino.

This morning, she almost had a conversation with him. Three entire sentences without tripping over her words – or her feet.
There’s intimacy in shared secrets.

And in shared enemies.

Yet as much as she’s longed for the day that Adrien would finally start noticing her, she almost wishes things would go back to the way they used to be.

She wanted to be closer to Adrien, yes. But not at the cost of her friends.

Marinette throws yet another glare at the people eagerly devouring every word spilled from lying lips.

_Inner peace._

_Taking the high road._

It doesn’t feel like the high road. In fact, following Adrien’s advice rather distinctly feels like she’s betraying her principles.

What Lila is doing to people is _wrong_.

No. _Evil._

Where’s the justice in just standing by and watching it happen?

Marinette is supposed to guard people from evil. That’s her duty as a hero. These are her friends, and she’s leaving them to the manipulations of a liar.

And yet…

What can she do when nobody is willing to believe her? When her word holds no worth? When all her attempts to set things right only earn her scorn from the very people she’s trying to protect? Anger bubbles in her belly as humiliating memories flash through her mind.


She shoves the dull hurt away as best as she can. There is no point in dwelling on it.

Adrien is right. Publicly humiliating Lila will solve nothing. Trying that has already backfired spectacularly.

So Marinette will lay low. Be patient. Defense instead of offense. Sooner or later, the ludicrous lies will start unraveling all on their own, and then she’ll be vindicated.

Right?

✧✦✧

“There you are.”

Marinette’s head snaps up, a strangled squeak escaping her at the sight of Adrien’s gentle smile. The air grows thin as he sits down next to her, and she fights not to hyperventilate.
“I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” he says.

“Y-you have?” She clutches her sketchbook to her chest, gripping it so hard her knuckles turn white. Is this a dream? Did she fall asleep during physics class again?

“Yeah, you left the cafeteria in such a hurry.” He pauses, weighing his words. “I was wondering if everything’s okay.”

“Oh! N-no, I’m fust jine. Just fine!” Her cheeks burn with a blush as she stares into gorgeous green eyes filled with concern. For her. “I’m not hungry, that’s all.”

Adrien doesn’t answer right away, pursing his lips as his gaze sweeps over her, sending shivers down her spine and startling the butterflies lying dormant in her belly. Has he ever looked at her like this before? Really looked?

“You’ve not been hungry a while now, Marinette.”

She shrugs, and tries to summon a smile. Marinette has never been good at hiding her feelings, but she almost feels like she’s pulling it off now, courtesy of his soft and gentle voice. The auditory equivalent of sunshine warms her down to her very fingertips, and she’s eager to grasp the lifeline out of this wretched mood she’s stuck in. Having to listen to Lila’s lies is nauseating enough, but what truly spoiled Marinette’s appetite today was the way Alya kept leaning over to the other table to better hear about the exploits of Lila’s BFF Ladybug.

There’s only so many absent-minded hums a girl a can take. Okay, yeah, she gets it – what Marinette had to say wasn’t that interesting, just dumb small-talk about Clara Nightingale’s new album, but–

She’s just so sick of Alya not listening to her.

“I’m fine,” she says.

“You sure?” Adrien fidgets, all restless energy, jittery in a way that’s nothing like the model’s usual composure. “Because if you’re not, that’s – I mean – I’m not very good at this, but I’ll listen. If you want. You can talk to me.”

Marinette can’t help but burst into laughter, and he startles, staring at her with wide eyes. Instantly, she realizes how insane she must look right now, and somehow that only causes more giggles to leak out of her stupid mouth because hasn’t that ever been the problem?

She can’t. She can’t talk to him. God knows she tried.

“Okay,” he mumbles, pink spreading across his pale cheeks as he pinches his lips together. “Guess that’s a no.”

“No!” Too loud and an octave too high, but the hurt in his gaze finally helps a word break through her giggle fit. “No,” she repeats, at a somewhat sane volume, only to instantly careen back into a higher pitch. “I mean, yes! I – I do want to talk to you. I’ve been – I’ve been meaning to talk to you for a very long time.”

The tension eases from his shoulders. “Oh?”

There’s that gloriously bright smile again and she wants to do nothing but bask in it. Revel in the warmth, study the sweep of his perfect lips, count the happy creases crinkling around his eyes. But staring directly at the sun is ill-advised, so her gaze drops back down to her lap as she tries to
gather all her courage.

Now. Now or never.

“I…” Marinette swallows heavily, her dry tongue scraping like sandpaper. “There’s – I’ve been thinking. About honesty. Honesty’s important. Now more than ever. And I need you to… I want you to hear this from me. Not her.”

Adrien blinks, and tilts his head. “Her…?”

“Lila.” She spits the name with more venom than she means to.

From now on, you and I are at war. You will lose your friends and wind up all alone.

Lila is going for the long game. So, too, must Marinette. For all that her emotions sometimes spur her into thoughtless mistakes, Marinette has a mind for strategy. If she can figure out how to beat supervillains with nothing but a polka-dotted fork, she can certainly figure out how to counter slander.

The possibilities reveal themselves before her eyes, just like they do when she’s wearing red and black, a dizzying game of What if? played in seconds. What if I go here? What if Chat Noir uses his Cataclysm on that? What if we lure the Akuma over there?

What if I just ram my boot right into Lila’s stupid face?

That path leads to being expelled and likely to assault charges, so Marinette reluctantly prunes it from her decision tree. One by one, thinking ten steps ahead, she eliminates the paths that don’t lead where she wants to go, leaving only a few moves open to her.

She had screamed into her pillow when she’d figured out that there’s no way around this one.

Lila has been sweet as sugar this last week, even as she kept spinning her tall tales to the delight of her audience. Marinette is braced for the first strike, but it hasn’t come yet – because Lila is gathering allies. Worming her way deeper into the hearts and minds of their classmates, she aims to make sure that when hostilities finally do escalate, there will be people on her side.

Marinette must do the same. Allies are critical, and she can’t allow any of hers to be alienated. Any cracks in her friendships must be mended immediately, the exposed faultlines guarded ferociously.

She peers at the boy in front of her, this kind, wonderful, oblivious boy.

The boy who’s an exposed faultline. Her weak spot. Sure to be Lila’s target.

Marinette remembers in excruciating detail how she’d felt when she’d been caught in the midst of The Broadcast. The one that had laid bare her innermost sanctum to all of Paris – to Adrien. Never had she ever wanted for him to find out about her love like this. Not from those photographs lining the walls, not from seeing her stupid Adrien shrine, not when it made her look so–

So–

Pathetic.

Which, to be fair. She is. Sometimes. She’s not proud of it, but she – Marinette knows she’s done some awful, embarrassing, not-okay things in her pursuit of Adrien.
Things some of her classmates know about.

Things that Lila might find out.

Things she might tell Adrien, twisting them in the worst way possible to paint Marinette as some deranged fangirl.

That nightmare scenario would be so much worse than the fallout from The Broadcast, and just thinking about it is enough to send Marinette’s anxiety skyrocketing. Yeah, she’s done things that are maybe not all that sane, but that’s not all she is.

She refuses to let Lila turn her into the sum of her lowest moments. That’s not the first impression of her love she wants Adrien to have. Because it is a thing of beauty, this love of hers. A little tarnished, a little cracked around the edges, but beautiful all the same.

And now she just needs to find the words for it.

“‘I–’” Her tongue is as heavy as lead, responding to her brain’s command to do something with little more than lethargic twitches. A garbled noise that sounds rather like a deflating balloon is all that comes out of her mouth.

“Marinette?”

His fingertips brush her shoulder, gentle and reassuring. She dares to steal a peek through her bangs, only to regret it immediately when she is hit with the full force of Adrien’s eyes wide with concern. Such a lovely shade, shining like the most vivid emeralds. The most beautiful green there ever was. Objectively. So green that other hues of green turn even greener with envy, and still, they cannot match–

God, why does he have to be so pretty? It’s distracting!

Another sound of distress escapes and she presses her lips together, squeezing her eyes shut in concentration.

Say it.

Say ‘I love you’.

It’s not that hard!

“Adrien, I…” she somehow chokes out.

“Mari–?”

“I’M IN LOVE WITH YOU!”

He flinches back at her yell, and so does she, shrinking in on herself as he stares at her. His breath catches on a sharp inhale when understanding dawns.

“I’m in – in love. With you.”

There. Finally.

Marinette wants to fist pump the air and sink into the deepest depths of the earth all at once, but there’s no time. So she presses on, words tumbling all over each other as she rushes to make him understand. “Ever since – for a long time now. You – you gave me your umbrella – do you
remember that? – and I just… you were so kind! I mean, you’re always kind, to everyone, that’s why – but that was the first time I really saw…”

She blinks rapidly against the sting in her eyes as she trails off. She’s making a mess of this. None of what she’s saying does justice to this fire pulsing in her chest.

“You fake me meel – make me feel,” she tries again, only to bury her face in her hands when it comes out even worse, her frustrated screech muffled by her cupped palms.

Skin brushes against skin, strong fingers curling around her hands to gently pry them off her face. Adrien lowers their entwined hands but does not let go, his thumb drawing small, reassuring circles.

She stares at the sight, her heart fluttering somewhere in the general vicinity of her throat.

He has nice hands.

But then, everything about him is nice.

“Marinette,” he says, and her gaze snaps up in alarm because that’s–

That’s–

_Pity._

Pity in his voice. Pity in his eyes. Face contorted in that sort of helpless expression that comes with not knowing what to do.

“You’re a wonderful girl. And I’m – I’m really flattered, but…”

Oh god. There’s a _but._

Of course there’s a _but_, how was she ever so deluded as to think that there would ever not be a _but_?

A yawning pit opens in her stomach, first swallowing the butterflies in her belly and then everything else, until all that remains is the searing fire in her chest.

Oh god, he’s still talking. Is he–?

“…any guy would be lucky to have you…”

He _is._

Adrien Agreste is giving her the _It’s not you, it’s me_ speech.

Marinette laughs, breathless and airy, cutting him off.

“It’s fine!” Her voice is too shrill even to her own ears, though she can barely hear herself past the thunder of her heartbeat. “You don’t have to explain. It’s fine. I understand! I just wanted you to hear it from me first, not from – well, you know. I wasn’t – I wasn’t hoping for – I’m not that deluded.”

He says nothing, and she’s grateful for that.
“I’m fine,” she says, just as warmth seeps down her cheeks and exposes her for the liar she is.

Chapter End Notes

I know I'm late to the Chameleon salt train, but hey, I still have many unresolved feelings about this whole mess so here we go.

This story is canon-divergent after the events of Chameleon and is going to explore what might have happened if Marinette had truly internalized Adrien's advice. I will do my best to write these characters as intelligent and thoughtful, but for the story to work, they'll have blind spots when it comes to elements established in canon. So Alya uncritically accepts Lila's claims, Marinette tells noone of the bathroom threats, and, of course, Chat and Ladybug do not recognize each other even when there's obvious clues flashing in bright neon lights.

That has its limitations, though, so to make this whole thing logically cohesive, I'll also be making some slight alterations to canon prior to the events of the story. I want Lila to be a smart adversary, and I don't want to rely on having everyone's IQ points drop to the floor to fascilitate that. So everything happened in broad strokes as it did in the show, but we'll just collectively pretend some of her more idiotic claims didn't happen. This means her tinnitus didn't get miraculously cured when it was convenient, and she's also able to keep track of which ear it's meant to be in. There is also one more alteration to the timeline in the season 2 finale that serves to bolster her credibility. You'll see.

Now let's watch the consequences play out.

A very special thanks to EtoilesJaunes, Bluetreeleaves and ZiriO for convincing me that this is a great place to end a chapter.
If looks could kill, Adrien would be splattered in bloody chunks all over the classroom walls.

Sinking deeper into his seat, he does his best to ignore the girl trying to burn a hole into the back of his head. Yet the awareness of it never fades, some primal instinct awoken by the ring around his finger urging him to turn around, unhinge his jaws, and hiss at the threat to his life.

But he’s stronger than his instincts, and he’s aware that Alya’s not really a threat to him, no matter how mean her glare can be.

He tries to stare straight ahead, but it’s impossible to concentrate on Mme. Bustier’s lesson today. Not with the way soft sniffles keep ringing out behind him, sometimes accompanied by a low, comforting murmur. Can the rest of the class hear it? He hopes not. Bad enough that Adrien’s enhanced senses make him an unwitting voyeur to every suppressed sob.

Every too-deep breath she takes makes him flinch, her shuddering exhales scraping his insides like claws.

And it hurts.

Turning down a girl has never hurt before. Not like this.

Adrien is no stranger to rejection. He has learned how to let down starstruck fans with a sympathetic smile and rehearsed platitudes. Wiggling his way out of Chloe’s advances is so routine at this point that it elicits nothing more than mild irritation. Even Kagami only ever left him feeling confused.

But this is Marinette.

Marinette.

Sweet, kind, amazing Marinette.

Who loves him.

And he’s made her cry.

He can’t stop combing through his memories, trying to find the moment everything went wrong. What could he have said differently? What should he have said differently? Is there any combination of words that would have led anywhere but here?

Well, not trailing off into awkward silence when she started crying would have been a start.

But if Adrien hadn’t shut up then and there, he might have grabbed her by the shoulders and yelled to make her understand and that – that would have been even worse.

Marinette called herself deluded. Deluded. Just for hoping he might love her back. Adrien’s not easily driven to anger, but that makes his blood boil. How can she think that?

She’s Marinette.
Smart, driven, relentlessly kind *Marinette*.

Does she not see herself?

Because *he* can see her. He sees her in crisp high definition, his imagination painting a vibrant vision of what would happen if only he could love her back. It’s a dream of being wrapped in warmth and the scent of sweet pastries.

He’s never considered her in this light before – maybe he hadn’t allowed himself to – but now he can’t *stop* thinking about what it’d be like. Like he’s staring down a precipice at his feet, only now realizing he’s been standing on its edge all along.

It would only take a single step.

A single step toward her, and he’d be falling.

But he won’t. He can’t.

His heart isn’t his to give. It belongs to his Lady.

That’s why he choked on his words and even now is at a loss of what to say. Because Adrien knows rejection. Intimately. No matter what form it takes, whether it’s an evening spent dining alone or a roll of his Lady’s eyes, it always adds up to the same poison whispering in his mind.

*Why am I not good enough?*

So while Adrien can think of all the ways Marinette is amazing, how is he supposed to *tell* her that in a way she’ll believe over that whisper? What good are words compared to action?

He dares to chance a glance behind him, only to be met with the fury of Alya’s glare. His gaze quickly snaps back to the blackboard, hands balling into fists.

It’s not fair.

Why is he the bad guy here? He can’t help how he feels any more than Marinette.

Grinding his teeth in frustration, he glowers at the clock, willing the lesson to pass faster.

✧✦✧

Mere seconds after the bell rings, Marinette is already out of the door. Alya is not far behind, stuffing loose papers into her bag as she breaks into a sprint to catch up.

Adrien moves to follow as well, but a hand closes around his wrist to keep him where he is.

“Dude,” Nino says with a small shake of his head. “Give her some space.”

“But I need to fix this!” He hasn’t yet quite worked out *how*, but he needs to do *something*, and he needs to do it *now*.

“You can’t, man. Not your lane.”
“But I’m the one who—“

“Exactly.” Nino’s eyes are filled with sympathy, even as his voice is uncharacteristically firm. “Are you planning to run after her to kiss her senseless?”

Heat rises to Adrien’s cheeks. “N-no!”

“Then you’re the last person she wants to see right now.” Nino sighs. “Just… let her rebuild her composure, alright? Think of what she needs to feel better right now, not what you need.”

Adrien crumbles back into his seat, whispering dejectedly, “But what if she gets Akumatized because of me…?”

“Then Ladybug and Chat Noir will save the day like they always do,” Nino says. “Seriously, if you run after them now, I’m pretty sure my girlfriend will murder you. And then I’d have to clean up all the blood and help her hide the body. I’d really rather not.”

Adrien laughs shakily. “Guess I’ll do my best not to inconvenience you with my untimely demise.”

“Much appreciated, dude.” Nino’s shoulder bumps against Adrien’s in quiet comfort.

✧✦✧

The air tastes like rain tonight, storm clouds gathering above and blotting out the stars.

Chat Noir soars through the night sky, his eyes closed in bliss. For the length of a heartbeat, there is nothing but the roar of the wind in his ears, his body floating, weightless. Then the last of his momentum runs out, and gravity starts pulling him down.

He twirls his baton as it retracts, then fastens it to his hips in one smooth motion. The ground is rushing closer, but he’s not worried – cats always land on their feet, after all.

His boots hit the ground running, and it feels like the most natural thing in the world for his hands to follow. Thinking about the logistics involved in running on all fours always makes him stumble, the muscle memory derailing when his brain points out that this shouldn’t be physiologically possible. So thought flees whenever he does this, and Chat Noir likes it that way.

There’s serenity in giving himself to instinct, overactive thoughts quieting down until there’s nothing but the sheer joy of movement. With worries left behind in that suffocating mansion, Chat Noir is truly free.

But not today.

Today he cannot outrun the memory of blue eyes filling with tears.

So he runs faster, only to snarl when he realizes where instinct has guided him.

Claws rake through roof shingles as he skitters to a sudden halt, and Chat Noir stares at the balcony ahead of him. There’s no one there, but he knows who’s on the other side of those walls.

No.
No, brain, stop it.

He shoos the terrible idea away. What would he even say? Don’t mind me, just your friendly neighborhood cat, dropping in to be your shoulder to cry on. Yes, I know we barely know each other. What do you mean this is ‘breaking and entering’?

It’s not like he’ll be any better at finding words to comfort her when wearing cat ears. Chat Noir can do what Adrien can only dream of, but this is beyond both of them. Objectively hilarious they might be, but not even his puns will be able to coax laughter from her tonight.

And even if he could somehow get her to open up, it would be under false pretenses. He’d have to pretend to be some other version of himself. A Chat Noir who didn’t have front row seats to her heart being shattered, who can listen to her talk about her unrequited love without guilt stabbing his guts.

And as the last week with Lila has made abundantly clear, Marinette hates liars.

Would hate him.

Maybe already does.

Chat turns away, his belt-tail lashing violently. He thought he knew rejection, but like the world’s worst onion, even more layers of suck are revealing themselves now. Being rejected hurts, he’s known that for a long time. But he’s never truly experienced what it means to reject someone he cares for.

He hates this.

Hates it so much.

And he tries not to dwell on what it means that father is never moved to more than minor annoyance when he rebuffs Adrien’s bids for attention.

Screams cut through the night and his thoughts. Chat surges to his feet. An Akuma?

His breath catches, gaze darting back to the empty balcony. An Akuma here.

“No, no, no!” With a fervent whisper on his lips, he breaks into a run, leaping from roof to roof. The scream quiets down until there is nothing but suffocating silence. Too suffocating to be natural.

And then he sees them.

They turn to him as one, only the faint glint of reflected moonlight giving away their movement. Even with his superior night vision, their translucent bodies are barely visible in the dark. People made of crystal...?

His breath fogs, cold nipping at his exposed skin.

No, made of ice.

“Here, kitty, kitty.” The voice is scarcely above a whisper, yet as sharp and biting as frost.

Chat’s breath catches and his grip on his staff tightens as a pale Akuma emerges from the darkness. Tall and regal, she is clad in a silken dress so long it trails behind her, black hair swaying in a non-existent breeze.
Black hair.

Coincidence.

*Please let it be coincidence.*

“You’re hurting. I can feel it.” Her lips are motionless as she speaks, face hidden behind a frozen mask that seamlessly transitions into a crown of ice. “And I can make it stop. Come join us. No pain can touch a frozen heart.”

She presses her fingertips to her lips as if readying herself to blow him a kiss, and Chat knows, he *knows* that he needs to move out of the way of whatever attack she’s preparing. Yet he can’t stop staring, frantic gaze raking over the Akuma’s face in search of familiarity, some sign that it’s not *her*, that this isn’t his fault, that she’s safe at home and he won’t have to fight–

A red heel slams into the icy mask, shattering it.

“Chat, move!”

His Lady’s voice pulls him back into the moment. At once, he jumps to the side to evade the beam of light headed his way. It sails past him, cobblestone turning to ice in its path.

The Akuma stumbles back, deep cracks fanning across her face. Ladybug does not hesitate to press her advantage, whirling into another kick aimed at the Akuma’s chest, sending her flying.

Air rushes out of his lungs in a sharp exhale, and he finds his tongue, lips quirking into a relieved grin. “*Ice* to see you, my Lady.”

She answers with a weary sigh, eyes never leaving their target. “I think it’s in her necklace.”

Chat frowns at her brusque tone just as movement stirs around them, the Akuma’s frozen victims moving in on them. He twirls his baton, extending its reach, just as Ladybug dashes forward.

“Keep them away!” she yells.

Jumping between Ladybug and the advancing horde feels like the most natural thing in the world. She already has a plan, and he needs to trust it. Icy hands reach for him, but he dodges and weaves, ramming his staff into the Akuma’s minions to push them back. Thankfully they’re few in number – a quick count reveals nine in total – so that must mean they got lucky in catching the Akuma early, before it could build an army.

Meaning it must have been created nearby.

The sound of shattering ice rings out behind him, and he bites his lip, trying his best to ignore it. He fails. Angling his head, he tries to catch a glimpse of what’s happening.

Then he wishes he hadn’t.

Ladybug is fierce tonight, delivering punishing blows with pinpoint precision, yoyo string wrapped around the Akuma’s throat. On any other day he would have admired that ferocity, but now his heart rams against his chest in protest.

*Stop.*

*Don’t hurt her.*
Turning his face away from the sight, he swipes his baton in an uppercut. It’s going to be fine. Just fine. It’s not like this is the first time they’ve fought one of his friends, and he knows the sooner they defeat her, the better. She won’t even remember.

And yet…

The thought of hurting Marinette any more than he already has makes him nauseous.

Ice cold fingers close around his ankle and he startles, futilely kicking his leg. He cries out as he’s pulled to the ground, the other minions joining in to pile atop of him, their stone-hard bodies not moving a centimeter as he pushes at them. He gasps for breath as his limbs grow numb with cold, and he can’t, *he can’t breathe—*

“Gotcha.”

His partner’s voice echoes through the night, and just like that, the bodies atop of him grow as still as ice statues. Chat wastes no time in wiggling out of the pile, breathing heavily as he scrambles away on all fours. His frantic gaze searches his surroundings, landing on his Lady just in time to spot a white butterfly fluttering away from her yo-yo.

His gaze automatically locks onto the woman curled up next to her.

And he can’t help but laugh in relief.

*It’s not Marinette.*

Ladybug frowns in his direction, and he quickly stifles the noise, bounding toward her with a spring in his steps. Giddy relief has him sweeping into a bow as he winks at her. “*Ice* work as always, my Lady!”

“You’ve already used that one, silly kitty,” she says softly, her fingertips brushing his cheek – the one that hit the ground hard in the melee, and is no doubt developing a bruise. “Are you okay?”

Chat looks at her with wounded eyes. “Well, I *was*, but then you cast as-purr-sions on my pun repertoire.”

She taps his chin. “You *are* getting rather derivative, minou.”

He clutches his heart as if struck, stumbling backward. “And the a-paw-ling assault upon my purrson continues!”

Ladybug’s lips quirk into a crooked smile. “You poor thing. Let me heal your wounds from this vicious attack.” She holds up a polka-dotted compact mirror for him to see, then throws it into the air. “Miraculous Ladybug.”

Chat’s ears twitch at the familiar words and his brows furrow. The invocation of her creation magic carries none of its usual exuberance, Ladybug saying the words quietly as if only to herself. Above them, the sky lights up with a bright swarm of ladybugs, magic spilling forth to heal the damage all around them.

The ice statues turn back into people, and beside them, the black-haired woman stirs. Ladybug crouches down beside her, scooping up a now-mended necklace and offering it to the woman.

“I believe this is yours.”
The woman’s eyes widen as she stares at Ladybug. Comprehension dawns along with horror. “L-Ladybug?! Oh my god, was I Akumatized?”

“Happens to the best of us,” Ladybug says gently as she takes the woman’s hand, lowering the necklace’s pendant into her palm before entwining their fingers and squeezing. “It’s going to be okay.”

“I…” The woman swallows heavily, blinking back sudden tears as she stares down at the hand clutching the jewelry. “Tonight was supposed to be our anniversary…”

Ladybug’s expression is so soft, and Chat Noir cannot help but stare. For all that he adores his warrior goddess, it’s in these quiet moments that his heart most struggles to keep up its steady rhythm. Every sharp edge melts away when she comforts Akuma victims, her commanding voice dropping to a soothing murmur.

And then her earrings beeps, startling both of them. Ladybug smiles ruefully. “I’m afraid that this is my cue to leave. Are you going to be okay, mademoiselle?”

The woman sniffs, wiping her sleeve along her nose with a nod. “Yeah. Yeah. I’ve cried enough over him.”

“Isn’t that a mood,” Ladybug mutters and gets to her feet.

Chat startles when he realizes she’s about to leave. “Wait!”

The love of his life pauses, looking at him expectantly. Stay, he wants to say. Please stay. But Ladybug never stays long after a battle, and not only because of the pressure of their limited transformation time. Unlike him, she only ever transforms for duty, not for fun.

Stolen moments like these are all he has of her.

But he can’t say that, so he sticks out a balled fist. “Pound it?”

There’s that faint smile again, not her real smile, and she presses her knuckles to his. “Pound it.”

She turns to leave, and he trails behind her, intent on savoring this a little while longer. “You know, I don’t think your miracle cure worked today.”

“Wait, what?” She slows her steps to crane her neck, peering intently at the Akuma victims shaking off their daze.

Chat theatrically clutches his chest. “See, I’m still wounded from my Lady cruelly mocking me and my amazing wordplay.”

She huffs out a begrudging half-laugh. “However shall you survive?”

“It’s a good thing my heart has grown resilient to your abuse of it.”

It’s meant to be a light-hearted joke, yet Ladybug’s faint smile dies instantly, her steps coming to a sudden halt.

Wait.

No.

I didn’t mean that.
She stares at him, a strangely vulnerable expression on her face, and he stares back, a horrible realization sinking into his gut. Oh god. Oh no.

The awkward silence is only broken when her earrings beep once more. Just like that, Ladybug’s face becomes blank and she turns away, absently twirling her yoyo’s string.

“I should go.”

“Wait! Don’t–”

“Not today, Chaton,” she says in a low, broken voice. “I can’t do this today.”

“No, please, wait, I need to–” Desperation claws at his voice, the words rushing out of him in one breath.

“My timer’s about to run out.”

“Please, I’m sorry, I need to talk to you! My Lady, please.”

She pauses. He’s not sure why, but she does. Her analytical gaze sweeps over him, and it feels like being dissected in a fraction of a second. Her jaw churns with some emotion he can’t read, and then she exhales a resigned breath.

“Fine. I need to feed my kwami.” She jerks her chin up to indicate a nearby roof. “Meet you there.”

✧✦✧

Chat paces back and forth on the roof, tail lashing, trying to arrange his thoughts into something coherent. How could he have not seen this? He’s always prided himself on protecting her from hurt…

She touches down mere feet behind him, her footfalls as soft as a whisper.

“I’m here, Chat.”

He nearly jumps out of his skin at the sound of her voice, and whirls around to face her. She sounds tired. So very tired. Her eyes are dim and puffy, red mask obscuring the worst of it.

How had he not seen this? Instantly, he regrets cajoling her into doing this now.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, the sound around them dimming as his cat ears fold back in distress.

Ladybug hesitates, then steps closer. “For what? What’s wrong, minou?”

“I messed up. I…” He takes a deep breath and nearly chokes on the words. Just once, he wants to say it without the theatrics, without hiding behind the show he puts on. But sincerity is hard. He doesn’t know how to do this. Roses and candlelight say it better than he ever could, but now it’s just him. “Ladybug, I think you’re the most amazing girl I’ve ever met. I consider myself fortunate that you’re the one fate chose to be my partner because there’s no one by whose side I’d rather fight. And–“

Her gaze is growing cold, posture stiffening, as if she’s bracing herself for a blow.
Because she is.

“–and I’m sorry if I’ve ever made you uncomfortable.” He swallows heavily just as her eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

*Rejection hurts.* On both sides. He vowed to protect her, but all this time he’s been hurting her.

Assuming she cares for him at all. If not, then he’s been annoying her, and then… well, then it’s all been for nothing anyway, hasn’t it?

*Say it.*

*Just once, say it properly.*

“I love you.” His smile is brittle and self-conscious. “That hasn’t changed. But… I understand you don’t feel the same way. So I’m… I’m going to stop hurting us both by constantly bringing up the question when I already know the answer. I’m sorry if I came off as pushy. Your friendship is the most important thing in the world to me, and I’m done putting a strain on it.”

His Lady stares at him, and he shifts his weight from one foot to the other, vaguely aware that his belt is flailing behind him.

“So, uh, yeah,” he says, rather lamely, when her scrutiny grows excruciating. “That’s – that’s all I wanted to say. And you don’t have to say anything back, so I’m just – just gonna go now…”

Chat turns away, every inch of his face unbearably hot, flushed with embarrassment. This was a mistake. He should have just quietly changed his behavior instead of making a grand gesture out of it. But he didn’t want her to think that he just *stopped* loving her because how could he ever…?

His heart skips a beat when there’s a sharp yank on his belt, keeping him in place. He hardly dares to breathe when her footsteps grow closer, closing the distance between them – until arms wrap around his waist from behind and she’s resting her forehead against his shoulders.

“Chaton.” Her voice is muffled, face pressed against his suit. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” he says, and then screams silently because what kind of response is *that*? But it’s so hard to *think* with her arms wrapped around him like that, enveloped in her warmth and her delicious scent and–

She’s shaking.

When she takes a too-deep breath, pressing her nose to his shoulder blade, horror strikes like lightning.


Chat stands frozen to the spot, his brain adamantly refusing to process the notion of *Ladybug* crying. Ladybug. His Lady. Who’s been thrown through walls and stared down supervillains and jumped into a T-Rex’s jaws, all without ever losing her composure.

And he’s made her cry.

What is *wrong* with him today?

“Sorry I’m ruining your suit.” Her voice is barely audible as she sniffs. “I’ve had a really rough day. Couple of days. So – thank you. I just – I really need a friend.”
Somehow, he manages to locate his tongue and prod it into action, his voice a hoarse whisper. “I volunteer as tribute.”

His Lady makes a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. “Yeah. You do, don’t you? You always…”

She trails off just as she tightens her hug, squeezing so hard his ribs start protesting. Chat doesn’t care. If bruised ribs are the price of making Ladybug feel better, he’ll gladly pay. He heals fast, anyway.

When she withdraws, he has to stifle his protest. But then she takes him by the hand, tugging gently yet insistently, and he follows her. When she plops down, legs dangling over the edge of the roof, he sits down beside her.

She’s carefully keeping her face from his line of sight, so he respects that, gazing at the city sprawling out under their feet instead.

He awkwardly clears his throat. “Do you… do you want to talk about…?”

“Yes. No.” She sighs, and a moment later, her head is resting on his shoulder. “Can we stay like this? Just for a little while.”

Chat nods. “As long as you need, bugaboo.”

She sighs happily. When her arm winds around his waist, he mirrors that, too.

“I’m glad it’s you, you know,” she says, and he tilts his head with a confused chirp. “That you’re the one chosen to be my counterpart. I don’t say that enough, do I?”

His mind goes blank, and he cannot help the rumbling noise that erupts from his chest.

Even when it’s fragile and a little teary, his Lady’s laughter is still the most heavenly sound on earth. Whatever response he might have had dies in his throat when she presses her ear to his vibrating chest. The purr that’s caught her attention sputters out before roaring back to life, louder than ever.

Thunder rolls overhead.

He only realizes that it’s not just the frantic beat of his heart when she makes a small sound of disappointment. He echoes her displeasure when a drop of water hits his nose a mere moment later, and he turns to glare at the sky.

“Lucky Charm.”

Chat startles, but manages to snatch the conjured object from the air before it sails past them. Ladybug doesn’t even try to catch it, only huddling closer.

“Five more minutes,” she mumbles.

“Okay,” he says, and raises the polka-dotted umbrella to shield them from the rain.
A special thanks to Ziri and Tempomental for their help with this chapter <3
The classroom door swings open, and Marinette’s knuckles turn white as she grips the edge of her table, gaze snapping upward.

Oh.

It’s just Max.

“Girl,” Alya says gently. “You need to relax.”

Relax? She has better odds of spontaneously growing wings and taking flight.

Marinette exhales a trembling breath, gaze returning to the empty seat in front of her. The seat that won’t be staying empty for long. It’s only a matter of time until he arrives, and then she’ll have to spend the entire day staring at the back of his head and try not to cry. Again.

“It’s going to be okay.” Alya reaches to rub her back, and it feels nice, but it brings Marinette no closer to being okay, because she’s not ever going to be okay again. Briefly, last night, it had felt like she might be, but then the rain had chased her kitty off, and her thoughts had resumed their spiraling all throughout the night.

She slept so poorly that she’s not only punctual, she arrived at school before Adrien did.

Once again the memory of yesterday’s humiliation flashes before her eyes, her stupid jerk brain shoving the highlight reel into her thoughts every ten seconds.

The pity in his voice.

How she ran away like a coward.

The way he didn’t hesitate.

Even as her wildest dreams painted visions of him declaring his undying love in return, her realistic best-case scenario had involved him being willing to give it a shot. A date, maybe, and then the undying love. Marinette had been bracing herself for having to wait while he made up his mind.

But he hadn’t hesitated.

Marinette is not an option even worth considering.

Yes, thank you for the reminder, brain, you can stop now.

But it doesn’t.

She squeezes her eyes shut, and buries her face in her arms atop the desk.

“Oh, Marinette,” a saccharine voice rings out.

No.
No no no.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Marinette raises her head until Lila’s face comes into view.

“I heard what happened.” The words drip with concern, yet are just a touch too loud to be appropriate. The stupid liar’s voice fills the room, and heads swivel toward it. Lila’s expression is soft and gentle, showing none of that triumph she must no doubt be feeling. “I’m so sorry.”

Shut up.

Go away.

Marinette stares, unblinking, biting her tongue and fighting to keep her breathing steady. The tightly coiled knot of misery within her belly twists painfully. Her skin flushes as all the frustration of the last few days rises to the forefront of her mind, red-hot rage seething under the surface.

Lila’s gaze slithers to Adrien’s empty seat and back to Marinette, the reassuring smile she’s wearing growing a little wider. “You must be so uncomfortable with him right in front of you. I’ve been thinking…”

She reaches out, fingertips ghosting over Marinette’s shoulder in some horrid mockery of comfort.

“Would you like to switch seats agai–?"

“Don’t touch me!”

Marinette slaps Lila’s hand away from her shoulder, yet the crawling under her skin still lingers. Lila stumbles back, clutching her bandaged wrist to her chest. The classroom falls silent, a dozen pair of eyes glued to the confrontation and holding their breath.

Lila’s eyes fill with tears, her lower lip trembling.

“I…” she chokes out. “I was only trying to help.”

“Marinette.”

Alya’s reproach cracks like a whip, and something within Marinette just snaps. Whirling around, she snarls at her best friend. “Fine! You want me in the last row that bad, I’ll go to the last row!”

Heartbeat booming in her ears, drowning out the chatter around her, Marinette stuffs her belongings into her bag. Holding her chin up high, she swings the bag over her shoulder and stomps up the stairs, keenly aware of all the eyes on her. Slumping into her new seat, she stubbornly crosses her arms and stares out the window.

Her eyes are burning, and she blinks to ward off the traitorous tears. She’s done crying. That sort of self-indulgence is not for her. Paris depends on her keeping the butterflies at bay. Ladybug can’t afford to be Akumatized.

You won’t get me.

I’m proud.

I’m confident.

I’m Marinette.
She silently mouths the words, but they all ring false even in her head. The stinging in her eyes grows worse, the wave of anger ebbing and leaving a hollow in the pit of her stomach. Her gaze darts back to the front of the class, dread rising.

Lila is slumped in Marinette’s seat, crying prettily into her hands, while people crowd around her in comfort.

This is not the plan. She had a plan. Throwing a tantrum in front of the whole class is the **absolute opposite** of her plan. Marinette is supposed to strengthen her bond with her friends, not antagonize them.

Like a coward, she wrenches her gaze away from the group, unwilling to tally up the damage she’s just done. She’ll fix this. Later. Somehow.

Ladybug always manages to fix everything. Right?

Rather than providing comfort, the thought only makes her feel exhausted.

A loud thump rings out, and Marinette startles, whipping her head around. Alya is slumped in the seat next to her, noisily unpacking her bag.

“What are you doing?” Marinette asks, torn between incredulous and hopeful.

Alya arches an eyebrow as she pulls out her notebook and lays it down in jerky, agitated movements, even as her voice is as smooth as silk. “Moving seats?”

There’s a heavy pause as Marinette braces herself for a reprimand, mentally rehearsing her defense. But Alya says nothing, only interested in aligning her pencils to be perfectly parallel with the desk’s edge.

“Lila did that on purpose,” Marinette finally blurts out, and Alya sighs heavily.

“Girl, let’s not.”

“No, she was—“

Alya holds up her palm to interrupt her, and Marinette trails off at the look in her eyes. It’s not accusing, as she’d expected it to be, but rather soft and a little sad.

“I don’t want to fight, Marinette. That was… not cool, but I know you’re in a bad headspace right now, and I don’t want to add to it.”

Well, you are.

The vindictive words sit on the tip of her tongue, and Marinette swallows them with great difficulty. “Thanks,” she says instead, turning her face to stare at the floor because she can’t quite bring herself to smile at her best friend. “For being here.”

Because Alya is here, and is trying to be kind. That has to count for something, doesn’t it?

“No place I’d rather be.” Briefly, her shoulder presses against Marinette’s, and then Alya is fiddling with her bag again, pulling out a chocolate bar and sliding it over. When Marinette shoots her a confused look, Alya grins. “Emergency heartbreak rations. I came prepared.”

And that thoughtfulness does coax a small smile to Marinette’s lips.
It dies when Adrien walks through the door. He frowns at Lila sitting in Marinette’s seat, still surrounded by half the class trying to soothe her, and then his gaze travels up to the last row. Marinette turns her head back to the window before their gazes can meet.

“Do you want me to talk to Mme. Bustier about sitting back here?” Alya asks gently.

Marinette hesitates, absently twisting the plastic wrapper in her hands and squishing the chocolate within. Not having to look at Adrien is a relief, and yet…

It’s galling to let Lila win. She won’t.

Because Ladybug doesn’t just run away.

At least that’s what she wants to say, but then she chances another glance at Adrien and pain lances through her chest.

Ladybug can’t afford to be Akumatized.

“Yes,” Marinette whispers, and hates herself for it.

✧✦✧

“Marinette, can we talk?”

What she wouldn’t have given for him to be paying so much attention to her only yesterday. All throughout the seemingly endless day, he kept craning his neck to look back at her. She closes her eyes and counts to three before she allows herself to pivot to face him, pasting her best approximation of a smile on her face.

“Yes, Adrien?”

“I…” He trails off, then steels himself. “About yesterday.”

“We really don’t have to talk about that.”

He blinks slowly, likely needing a moment to decipher her high-pitched squeak, then shakes his head. “No, it’s… it’s important, I wouldn’t be bothering you if it wasn’t.” He takes a deep breath, then says firmly, “You’re not deluded.”

Now it’s her turn to blink in confusion.

“You called yourself deluded,” he adds, and she belatedly realizes she’s never heard him speak with so much intensity. “For thinking I could like you back.”

“Well, you don’t.” She doesn’t mean to make it sound bitter, but it does.

“But I could!” She takes a step back in surprise at his raised voice. “And maybe I would if it wasn’t for—” He abruptly cuts himself off, looking as lost as she feels.

“…if it wasn’t for what?” she asks, and tries, tries, tries not to indulge this stupid spark of hope suddenly igniting inside of her.
He hesitates for a long moment, then mumbles, “Someone else.”

The spark flickers out, but makes sure to punch her in the gut before it does.

“Right. Someone else.” And then, because she’s clearly a masochist, Marinette finds herself asking, “Kagami?”

He squirms uncomfortably, a blush rising to his cheeks. “No. She doesn’t go to this school. I know her from work.”

Of course.

Some supermodel friend who’s a thousand times prettier than Marinette.

Part of her immediately conjures up an image of someone more glamorous and even crueler than Chloe. All style and no substance, just a vapid void of a personality with a pretty face. Yet even as the spiteful thought crosses her mind, she realizes, no, that mystery model girl is probably perfectly kind, because Marinette can’t imagine Adrien being fooled by just good looks.

A perfectly pretty girl with a perfectly nice personality becoming a perfect family with the perfect boy, making perfect babies and owning a perfect hamster.

“Well, thank you for taking the time to tell me this,” she says stiffly, and turns to leave, but he grabs her arm.

“Marinette.” There is desperation in his voice now, mingled with frustration. “Marinette, I mean it, it could have been y–”

“But it isn’t!” Wrenching herself out of his grip, she storms off, ignoring his plaintive “Marinette.”

Air. She needs some air.

Her boots hit the ground with enough force to make her teeth chatter, sharp pain shooting up her legs. Yet having no choice, Marinette pushes forward, vaulting over her next obstacle – a low railing separating the sidewalk from the street – and breaks into a run.

Tires squeal as cars are forced to grind to a halt, and she can hear the outraged shouts of a passerby, but she doesn’t waste her breath on apologizing. Every second counts.

She almost loses her balance when she takes a sharp turn into a cramped alley, shoulder scraping along the wall thanks to her accursed clumsiness. With wild eyes, she looks behind her – it’s not here yet, can’t see her – and whisper-shouts, “Tikki, spots on!”

Light fills her vision and by the time it fades, the purple butterfly is rounding the corner.

Willing her hands not to shake, Ladybug flicks her wrist. The yo-yo snaps forward.

The Akuma is caught mere seconds before it would have touched her.

Clutching the yo-yo to her chest, Ladybug sinks to her knees, breathing heavily. Did it see her
transform? Just how much can Hawkmoth see through the eyes of his Akumas when they’re not attached to a victim? Do they even have eyes?

She bursts out laughing when the image of a glowing butterfly with googly eyes flits through her mind, because laughing is better than crying, which is what she really wants to do right now, but she can’t, she can’t, she can’t afford to–

“My Lady?”

She blinks at the familiar voice, raising her head to see Chat Noir standing over her, concern written all over his face.

Oh god.

Did he see?

“What are you doing here?” He flinches at her sharp tone and she wants to regret it, but she’s so tired.

His answer is hesitant and measured, like he’s carefully choosing his words. “I saw a butterfly and took off after it.”

“I caught it,” she says, pushing herself to stand and flicking open her yo-yo. The purified butterfly takes flight, but Chat barely spares it a glance. Instead, he’s staring intently at her face, and then peers over her shoulder.

“And the girl it was after?” he asks, and there’s something in his voice she can’t quite place.

“Kept running before it could catch her.”

Chat’s shoulders sag in relief. “Good. That’s good. Do you think we should go after her in case Hawkmoth sends more butterflies?”

Allowing some of the tension to ease from her posture, she shakes her head. “I didn’t see which way she went, and she’s long gone.” Chat opens his mouth as if to argue the point, and she adds, “If another Akuma appears, then we cross that bridge when we get to it. We can’t protect people from being upset, Chaton.”

He closes his mouth, the lips pinching together so hard they turn white. “No,” he says softly. “I guess we can’t.”

The expression on his face – so strangely vulnerable, so very un-Chat – and the way his cat ears are pressed flat makes alarm bells ring. Why – oh! “Except sometimes,” she hastens to add.

“Huh?”

“Last night. You – I haven’t forgotten that. You protected me last night.” She awkwardly fiddles with the yo-yo’s string to keep her hands busy, restless energy making her want to do anything but stand still.

His ears perk up at once just as a smile lights up his face. But then his radiance dims, his searching gaze drawn to her face. “Are you feeling better, buginette?” By the tone of his voice, she knows he can see that she doesn’t.

“No,” she admits reluctantly. “But I did for a little while, thanks to you.”
He hesitates, and then his claws are gently brushing her shoulder. “The offer to talk still stands, you know.” Chat smiles, and it’s a little lopsided. “I’m pretty bad at… all this. But I’ll try my best.”

“Bad? Seems to me like you’re a natural.” Closing her eyes, she leans into the comforting touch, just a little. And it does feel better. A little.

“Well, then, tell me what’s got you feline down.”

She cracks open her eyes just enough to shoot him a withering glare, and he has the audacity to grin.

“Told you. Bad.”

“The worst,” she agrees, but somehow an answering smile is tugging at her lips.

“Seriously, though, what’s bugging you?”

Choosing to ignore the terrible no-good pun, she bites her lips as she considers the question. Sincerity is written all over his face – as is hope. She knows this look, it’s the one he always wears when he’s trying to find out more about her. Like every little morsel about her life is a treasure he’s jealously squirreling away somewhere.

And that’s dangerous.

It’s why she avoids spending too much time with him. Their secret identities must be protected at all costs. Duty comes first, always, and yet Chat Noir seems determined to jeopardize it all for…

“I love you.” His voice wavers, green eyes filled with so much longing it makes her heart ache.

She swallows heavily, painfully reminded of what brought them here.

God, but how is he so composed? She can barely stand to be in Adrien’s presence, and yet here he is, all focused on her pain, not his. Always smiling, joking, flirting. Bouncing back from every rejection like it’s nothing. For the longest time, she thought his declarations of love weren’t even serious because of that.

But he was serious. Is serious.

So how could she possibly be callous enough to cry in front of him about loving someone else?

God, but she wants to.

Wants to be able to lean on his shoulder and just say what she thinks, vomit up every unkind thought she’s had about her friends abandoning her to fend for herself. She feels fit to burst, pent up pain and rage and sorrow in every vein, with nowhere to go.

But duty comes first, always.

“Switzerland,” she says at length, and really means Alya.

“…Switzerland?” He tilts his head. “Switzerland is bugging you?”

“Yeah. Always staying neutral and supplying chocolate.” A hysterical giggle escapes at his utterly perplexed expression. “Pick a side, you damn fence sitter.”
You won’t get me.
She turns over, restlessly drawing her blanket even tighter around herself.

I’m proud.
Is this pillow filled with stones?

I’m confident.
Every angle is wrong and uncomfortable.

“I’m Marinette,” she whispers, but the chant that once managed to drive an Akuma away does little to drown out her racing thoughts. Nights are the worst, always have been, her overactive imagination filling the silence with all her worst horrors.

Beside her, Tikki stirs, oversized eyes blinking sleepily. “Marinette?”

“That’s me.”

“Can’t sleep again?”

Marinette hums and turns over, facing the wall lined with her handmade dolls.

Her gaze is drawn to one in particular, and she reaches out to gingerly wrap her fingers around the torso.

“Tikki,” she whispers. “Do you think it’d be… okay… if I confide some things about myself to Chat Noir?” Yes, she has a confidant in her kwami, but an ancient, powerful being can only empathize so much. And though she is sweet and loving, there are moments when Marinette is reminded that Tikki is very, very other.

“Of course!” Her kwami flits into view. “You’re partners, Marinette! You’re meant to share each other’s burdens!”

“But what if he manages to put together the clues to figure out who I am?” When they’d parted today in that alley, Chat had casually said something about needing to get back to class before lunch break was over. So now Marinette is aware that his school has to be somewhere close enough for him to have caught sight of the butterfly chasing her.

And that’s not the kind of thing she wants to know.

“Secret identities are important, yes.” Tikki says, extending a red paw to brush away a strand of hair from Marinette’s eyes. “But so is your mental health. When I told you to keep the secret, I did not mean that you must run yourself ragged over it, or avoid getting to know your partner. Quite the opposite. The better you understand each other, the more you improve your teamwork.”

It’s hard to imagine that she could ever be more in sync with Chat Noir than she already is. Yes, him cracking jokes at the worst possible time drives her mad, but then there are times when they fight like they are one. Sometimes she doesn’t even need to tell him what to do. In the heat of battle
just a nod and a gesture has him following her plans.

And he is always, always there to protect her.

With that thought in mind, Marinette sets the Chat Noir doll on her nightstand, and turns it to face her.

To watch over her as she sleeps, and keep the butterflies away.

Chapter End Notes

Many, many thanks to Ziri, Tempo, Bridget, Lila (no, not that one) and CaughtFeelings for helping me with my horrendous case of writer's block.

A sincere thank you to everyone who commented on this story. I cannot express just how much it means to me, and how much it helps with dealing with this accursed block.
I would like to sincerely apologize to Swiss people.
And girls named Lucy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hey, bro.”

Adrien looks up from his seat and greets him with that bland smile usually reserved for photoshoots.

“Hi, Ninoooo…” The vowel turns into a stifled yawn and he reaches to rub his eyes.

“Man, is your dad overloading your schedule again?” Nino frowns as he slides down into the seat next to his best friend.

Adrien shakes his head, a little too vigorously, as if to wake himself up. “No, this one’s on me. I stayed up late.”

“Oh? What were you up to?”

“Nothing,” Adrien answers a breath too fast. “Just… couldn’t sleep.” His gaze darts to the empty seat behind him.

Nino sighs. “I hope you're not going to be picking at scabs today.” Again. “Just let it heal. I really mean it, Alya will kill you, you have no idea how hard she was raging yesterday.”

“I know, I know.” Abandoning the perfect posture he was raised with, Adrien sinks deeper into his seat, all but melting into a puddle of misery. “I’ll leave her alone. She’s made it abundantly clear she doesn’t want me anywhere near.”

“Sorry, bro. It’ll pass.” I hope. Nino’s enjoyed the dynamic their quartet developed over the last year, and he doesn’t want to see it permanently shattered.

“Hi, boys!”

Glancing up, Nino is greeted with the sight of a wide grin. “Hi, Lila.” He expects to hear an echo of his words from Adrien, but he’s silent, with only a head tilt acknowledging her. Shit, he really needs to do something to cheer his bro up if he’s at the point of letting his impeccable manners slide. “What’s up?” Nino adds to draw her attention to him, hoping she hasn’t noticed. Being the new girl in school is hard, all the more so when the most popular girl in class has taken a dislike to you.

“I’m throwing a party!” She’s bouncing on her heels, all giddy excitement. “This Saturday, at my house. And I want you both to be there.”

“My father won’t let me attend,” Adrien says and when Nino not-so-gently nudges him under the table with his foot, he belatedly conjures an apologetic smile and softens his tone. “Sorry.”
When her face falls, Nino quickly interjects, “But I can make it. Sounds fun.”

“Awesome!” The smile is back and aimed at him now, growing wider. “I heard you’re a great DJ, so you can take care of the entertainment.”

Nino blinks, taken aback at having just been voluntold. “Um.” She tilts her head, still smiling so sweetly, and he can’t quite bring himself to say no, especially since he has DJ’d at class parties before. But as much as he enjoys it, it’s still a form of work and will keep him from just relaxing and having fun. “Yeah, alright.”

“Great!” Lila turns back to Adrien, a pleading note in her voice. “Will you talk to your dad? It never hurts to ask.”

Something dark crosses Adrien’s expression, but it’s so fleeting Nino isn’t even sure it was there at all. “Sure,” he says at length. “I’ll ask him. But he’ll say no, Lila.”

Just then, the classroom door opens and Alya walks in. Nino perks up at once, but instead of looking at him, Alya’s gaze instantly locks with Adrien’s. She raises her hand and uses two fingers to point at her eyes, and then at him. Adrien manages to contort himself even further in his quest to become one with the chair.

Marinette trails behind, pointedly not looking at Adrien. Alya had told him she was going to meet her at the bakery and walk to school together, to keep Akuma-watch. Nino doubts it will do much good and they can’t watch Marinette every second of the day – especially when she decides to just ditch class, like yesterday – but feeling useful keeps Alya from going crazier – with worry.

Moving to intercept her path, Lila calls out, “Hi, Alya!”

“Hey, Lila.” Alya greets her with an answering smile, coming to a halt to chat.

“I’m throwing a party this Saturday, you in?”

“Oh, um.” Alya’s gaze darts to Marinette who is very much not stopping to chat. “I… might… already have plans…?”

“Please?” Lila steps closer, pleading. “I want to get to know you all better. Unless…” As Marinette walks past, Lila’s shoulders slump and she sighs. “No, you’re right. It was probably too much to expect you to be friends with both of us.”

“Girl, we are friends!” Alya reassures her, and as Nino watches Marinette silently slink to the last row, somewhere in the back of his mind alarm bells start ringing.

✧✦✧

u shouldn’t have accepted that invite babe
not cool

I just couldn’t figure out how to say no without hurting her feelings

what about mari tho
p sure she’s the hurt one now
like
thats the last thing she needs
she’s the only one not invited al
thats not ok

You can’t blame Lila for not inviting someone who’s been nothing but mean to her
im not blaming
i’m saying this sucks

I know!!!

Don’t you think I know that? :/

God I wish they’d just work out their stupid drama

Shit I think Mme Bustier just saw me gonna put my phone away rq

Alright I apologized to Marinette

She told me she’s okay with it

“and u believed her?”

Nino stares at the unsent message, then thinks better of picking a fight with his fierce and sometimes terrifying girlfriend.

✧✦✧

“Meet me on the roof. You know the one.”

Chat Noir does know. They agreed on it long ago, and it belongs to a non-descript, run-down apartment building, the kind the eyes tend to just skip over instead of stopping to marvel at the gorgeous architecture on display elsewhere in Paris. The perfect meeting spot away from prying eyes, if they ever have a need for it.

His claws are tearing through concrete and shingles, speed his only concern. His Lady looked so serious and was so terse in her message that he knows something big has to have gone down. Has she found something on Hawkmoth? Just the thought has him running as fast as he can.

That reckless charge forward turns out to be incompatible with a graceful landing.

“I’m here!” he yells as he jumps back on his feet and pretends he didn’t just faceplant right in front of the love of his life.

She stares, stunned, and then holds her hands in front of her mouth to stifle a giggle. “So I can see, Chaton.”
Oh god, why. Why am I like this.

Deciding that he might as well lean into it like he’s in on the joke, he takes a deep bow, which coaxes another laugh from her. And hearing that beautiful sound is always worth the bruise on his dignity.

“Thank you for coming,” she says when he straightens his back and peers at her.

“Of course. You sounded serious, what happened? Is it Hawkmoth?”

“No.” She falls silent, looking unsure of herself. “Does, um. Does the offer still stand?”

Offer? What has he offered her recently?

His breath catches when he understands exactly what she wants, a dizzying burst of hope exploding inside of him.

“YES!” He doesn’t mean to yell but the ring sometimes makes it so hard to control himself, amplifying his emotions until it takes all his willpower to not shout his love from the rooftops. But he promised, he promised he would stop doing that, so he takes all his excitement and stuffs it down as deep as he can, following ancient Agreste family tradition. Feelings are a treasure – best buried deep. “Yes, of course.” He’s tamed his volume, but the giddy smile hurting his cheeks won’t budge.

Her shoulders sag with relief, and her smile is tentative and filled with hope of her own. “Thank you.” Ladybug hesitates as if she doesn’t quite know what to do with herself now. “I, uh. I brought pastries. And a blanket. I thought – maybe like a picnic…” She gestures vaguely at the horizon, their nondescript vantage point offering a surprisingly pretty view of the Paris skyline.

“I’d love to,” he says, and means it. He does love this. So, so much. Any minute now he will wake up and find himself in his bed because he has dreamed of this before. Just this, just them. No Akuma, no Hawkmoth, no patrol, just the two of them spending time together. Like friends.

And maybe more, whispers that greedy voice inside of him, forever wanting more than the good fortune he already has, and he does his best to muzzle it. His Lady’s friendship is not a consolation prize, it’s precious, and he will not jeopardize it any more.

Chat follows her to the blanket she’s laid out, drinking in the sight of the pastries she’s neatly arranged, for them, for him, and they’re the most beautiful and sure to be delicious pastries he’s ever seen. As that thought flits through his mind, it’s quickly followed by a mental apology to the Dupain-Chengs, for being unfaithful.

Being reminded of Marinette dims his smile, and as he sits down beside her, he peers at Ladybug’s expression. It’s not quite as heavy as it was yesterday, so that’s good. Maybe. But she wasn’t willing to talk to him yesterday so what changed between then and now? Did things get worse?

“So,” she says.

“So,” he echoes when she trails off.

So they sit in silence, neither of them knowing how to start. Chat picks up one of the croissants and shoves it in his mouth just to fill the air with noise.

“Do you like it?”
“Mfffw?”

“The croissant.”

He nods, cheeks too full to speak, and she smiles.

“I made it myself.”

And of course it suddenly tastes like the best croissant he’s ever had, and then he has to offer another mental apology to the Dupain-Chengs.

Oh no.

What if he messes this up like he messed up with Marinette?

He promptly starts choking, and Ladybug has to hit his back a few times to dislodge the treacherous bits of too-delicious croissant.

Smooth.

“So,” he says desperately as soon as he’s able to breathe again. “Tell me about Switzerland.”

“It’s a garbage place,” she says at once. “Filled with garbage people.”

“Right,” he says with a nod. “I get it.” He doesn’t get it.

“Like the kind of place filled with people who would go to a party that you – and only you – aren’t invited to, but you can’t really say anything or stop anyone from going because you don’t want to come off as a control freak. And also nobody believes you when you say the party is hosted by Satan.”

He blinks as he processes this. “Satan’s throwing parties?”

“Yeah,” Ladybug says bitterly, “She is.”

“So, hypothetically speaking,” he says slowly, “If I told you I am very, very lost in this conversation, and would like you to start from the beginning, what would your hypothetical answer be?”

“Hypothetically speaking, I’d say…” She pauses, measuring her words. “There might be this girl. At school. For story purposes, her name is, um…”

“Lucifer.” He nods solemnly, and she shoots him a grin.

“Yes. And Lucy’s the worst. Just. The absolute worst. But not the worst thing about the situation. No. That’d be my friends. I mean, I’m no stranger to fighting villains, you know? I can handle Lucy. But what hurts…” She trails off just as her voice wavers. He leans in closer, because instinct tells him it’s the right thing to do, and she doesn’t lean away. “My friends don’t believe me. They like her. She treats me like dirt and she does all these awful things, but I’m the bad guy when I try to call her out.”

Her breaths are growing shallow, eyes shining wetly.

“And – and they tell me to stop fighting because I’m making things worse but fighting evil is what I do. And I – and I…”
When her voice breaks on a sob, he wraps his arms around her, and she responds in kind. The torrent of words is still flowing, like a dam breaking, made unintelligible by ugly sobs and Chat tries hard not to get lost in the flood, straining to hear every word.

“I’m not even allowed to be sad because I’m Ladybug and we can’t let him win. I hate him. I hate him I hate him I hate him. And her. So much. And I – I don’t even want to fight her at this point. Because – I can. I can defeat her, that’s not – I’ve dealt with bullies before, there’s this other girl in class who used to – but why won’t anyone ever fight for me?”

“I will,” he whispers, but that only makes her cry harder. So he holds her close and tries to summon that instinctive sensation of purring, the one that cheered her up the last time, but really, it’s the last thing he feels like doing. No, what he wants is to claw and tear apart the people hurting her, but they’re not here, and also murder is bad, so purring it is.

And she does press her ear to his chest when he finally manages to do it, clinging closer, sobs subsiding. So he keeps holding her and watches the sky for butterflies, like he wishes he could have done for Marinette last night instead of being reduced to lurking around her balcony like a creep.

When the tears slow to a trickle, she takes a deep breath. “I’m ruining your suit,” she murmurs apologetically. “Again.”

“It’s been through worse. A lot worse.”

“Yes.” She swallows, then clears her throat, wiping her arm across her eyes. “There’s been a lot of worse.”

“We,” he says, and stresses the syllable, “will get through this, too.”

And Ladybug smiles. Hardly daring to breathe, afraid he’ll destroy this fragile progress, he brushes his thumb along her cheek, wiping away the remaining tears.

“We will,” she whispers, and she almost sounds like she believes it.

So he hugs her again – he will just keep hugging her until she does believe it – and asks, “What does she do?”

“Huh?”

“Lucy.” He growls the name he knows to be fake but has nonetheless already grown to hate. “What are your friends letting her get away with? Can’t fight for you if I don’t know what we’re up against.”

“I don’t think you can help me with her,” she murmurs against his neck. “She doesn’t cause the kind of problems you can cataclysm away.”

“Try me.” He can always cataclysm her.

Ladybug raises her head to gift him with a smile, but it dies quickly. “She’s manipulative,” she says at last. “She cornered me in the bathroom and told me she’d turn all my friends against me.”

Another growl escapes, and this one’s real, deep and animalistic and not a sound he knew he was capable of making. She startles, but then almost seems pleased by it, and keeps talking.

“And she lies. All the time. About every tiny thing! And such obvious lies, too!” Her lips curl up in
“I hate liars.”

He blinks, taken aback by the venom in that declaration. “Uh. You do?”

A sharp look. “Don’t you?”

“I mean…” A little bewildered, he gestures to the two of them. “My dad thinks I’m in my room doing homework. I have to lie a lot to be able to do this. Don’t you?”

She grows very still, and by the chill that runs down his spine at her withering look, it dawns on him that he should not have said that.

“Yes,” she says slowly, like the first cloud heralding a storm. “I lie. All the time. About everything. Where I’ve been, where I’m going, what I’m doing. Because my duty demands it, because the safety of my parents and my friends and all of Paris depends on me lying to their faces.

“And then I lie some more because sometimes I’m a stupid idiot who does stupid idiot things I don’t want anyone to know about, and then I tell white lies to spare people’s feelings and then I lie by saying they haven’t hurt my feelings. I have no right to go up to my friends and say “Hey, you need to believe me about Lucy, you can trust me, I would never lie to you!” Because that’d be another lie!

“But you know what? You know what sets me apart from her – what makes me nothing like her?”

Her voice has been steadily rising while he’s been steadily retreating from his Lady’s legendary temper flaring to life, leaning back as far as he can at this point yet still caught in her accusing gaze. “What?” he squeaks.

“I HATE IT!”

Her scream is thunder and fury and he really, really regrets taking the conversation down this path.

“I hate lying! I hate being a liar! I’m bad at it, it makes my stomach turn with guilt! But not her! She lies as easily as breathing! It means nothing to her that she’s abusing people’s trust, that she’s reaping adoration she hasn’t earned, that everything about her is fake!”

Recognition stirs, as does nausea. And it hurts.

“Don’t you dare compare us!”

“I’m not,” he says softly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that you’re anything like her, I was just confused by what you meant.”

Okay. Good.” She exhales, shooting him one last glare, only for her expression to soften. And then it’s like the clouds have parted and the sun is shining again. “Wow. That felt really good to get off my chest.” Then, sheepishly, she says, “Sorry for yelling. That wasn’t – I wasn’t yelling at you, or at least I didn't mean to, I’ve just been… keeping that pent up for a while.”

“It’s alright, my Lady,” he says. And then, like the liar he is, Adrien Agreste smiles. “No harm done.”
Chapter End Notes

Comments are, as always, much-loved and appreciated. I really enjoyed your speculation and discussion with each other in the last chapter <3
“Good morning!”

Still dressed in pajamas and trying to prod her tired brain into remembering how spoons work, Marinette blinks blearily at her best friend. Alya is standing at the doorway leading to the rest of the bakery, dressed in a variation on her usual ensemble, fresh-faced and ready to go to school.

“…morning,” Marinette mumbles and turns back to her cereal, only to realize she’s been holding her spoon the wrong way up.

Crossing the distance between them, Alya slides into the chair on the other side of the breakfast table. “Girl, if you don’t hurry up, we’re going to be late for school.”

“I’m going to be late for school. You’ll be fine.”

“Nuh-uh. I’m not leaving without you, so my fate is in your hands, Marinette.”

*Isn’t it always?* She sighs and dutifully raises the bowl to her lips to slurp it down quickly. Spoons are simply too advanced a technology at this unholy time of day. Then she darts off to get dressed and the two of them make it out of the house at a reasonable enough chance to make it to school on time.

A 20% chance at best, as Max would put it, but a chance nonetheless.

“Hey,” Alya says oh-so-casually as she slows from their light jog. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

The chance takes a plunge off a cliff.

“I thought you wanted me to hurry,” Marinette says with more than a hint of irritation. If she’s going to be late *anyway*, she could have taken her time getting out of the brain fog instead of resorting to a quick and highly unpleasant cold shower.

“I did. Because I wanted to clear this up before we get to class.”

With a heavy sigh, Marinette slows down to normal walking speed, yet keeps looking straight ahead. Knowing that her life’s been on a downward trajectory lately makes her doubt that this will
be a good conversation. “Alright. What’s up?”

“It’s about Lila’s party. Tomorrow.”

Alya peers at her to gauge her reaction, but Marinette doesn’t give her one. “What about it?”

“I talked to Lila. About inviting you, too.” She smiles, cautious optimism in her voice. “And we worked out a truce.”

“A truce,” Marinette repeats.

“Yeah.” Alya’s hand comes down on her shoulder, forcing her to stop. “Marinette, would you look at me, please?”

She doesn’t want to. Marinette is bad at hiding her emotions, and it’s infinitely harder when she has to look people in the face while doing it. But, not having much of a choice, she does, and braces herself for whatever new blow this is going to be.

Satisfied, Alya smiles, and continues. “So, I really thought it wasn’t fair to you to not be there when the entire class gets the chance to go. I understand that you two don’t like each other and want as little interaction as possible. And that’s fair. But for stuff like this, which are essentially group events, Lila has agreed to never exclude or antagonize you – if you extend her the same courtesy.”

Her tired brain needs a moment to process this, and when it does, the cereal in her stomach starts a rebellion, demanding the way up her throat.

And then, just as suddenly, the revolutionary fervor dissipates.

“So,” Marinette says, every word clipped and carefully enunciated. “You want me to let Lila tag along to every event that I organize.”

Alya shakes her head. “I mean, obviously not when it’s just you and me, but for something like this party, or girl’s night out, just stuff that’s big enough where purposeful exclusion gets hurtful…” She trails off, pressing her lips together in disapproval at whatever must be written on Marinette’s face. “Come on. It’s a fair offer.”

“I suppose it is.”

As silence elongates, Alya decides to prod her. “And…”?

“And I’m not interested,” Marinette says.

Exhaling in frustration, Alya squeezes her eyes shut, likely fighting to keep her composure. Marinette can almost see her thought process. The kid gloves need to stay on. Can’t be mean to the recently-rejected potential Akuma-victim with an irrational hatred for poor, innocent Lila.

Marinette watches the struggle with a strangely detached sort of interest. She knows she should be feeling something. Might have exploded if this conversation had happened yesterday.

Maybe her kitty has soothed her hurt.

Maybe putting it all into words has finally robbed it of its power.

Or maybe her rage has grown so great she has looped right back around to becoming the eerily calm sort of maniac.
Whatever it is, looking at her best friend inspires none of the highs and lows it usually does. No warm glow of joy at having her around, and no agonizing splinter burrowing its way into her heart either. Only one thought is left.

You’re not fighting for me.

So what’s the point of fighting for you?

“Is this really what you want?” Alya gestures with a wild sort of helplessness. “Are we going to be splitting group hangouts into Marinette-events and Lila-events now?”

“It’s not what I want. But it is what it is.”

“God, Marinette, this isn’t like you. Why are you doing this?” Alya’s eyes are growing shiny, voice rising. “Are you really asking me to ostracize some girl who’s done nothing wrong just because you don’t like her? Is this the type of mean girl shit we’re at now? Do you want me to go up to Lila and tell her I’m not going to her stupid party after all? You know I changed schools to get away from bullshit like that!”

“I’m not asking you for any of that, Alya,” Marinette says softly. “You can hang out with Lila if you want. Go to the party. I’m not stopping you or trying to control you. There’s no ultimatum here.”

“Yes, there is!” Alya cries. “You’re sabotaging every compromise offered to you!”

“Because the one and only demand I do have is that you believe me when I say Lila is a bad person.” As she speaks, certainty hardens within. Yes. This is what she wants, and she will accept nothing less. “That’s not something I can compromise on.”

“Where is y–“

“Fuck the evidence.”

Alya rears back, eyes wide.

A tiny nudge, that’s all it would take. Lila has built a house of cards just waiting to collapse. One transformation into Ladybug and a casual interview with a certain blogger would undo her.

Marinette holds the key to ending all this. All this pain, all this frustration, gone, just like that. Vindicated at last. And she could do it tonight, never mind what Adrien told her.

But that won’t really make things turn back to normal, will it?

Because it’s not about the evidence. It never was.

“I’m asking that you trust me, Alya.”

And when the girl meant to be her best friend hesitates, that’s all the answer Marinette needs. She turns to walk to school, and ignores Alya’s pleas for peace.
They spend the first half of the school day in silence, Marinette giving her bench partner the cold shoulder. Alya alternates between trying to get Marinette’s attention, growing frustrated and mirroring the silent treatment, only to try again. The cycle repeats.

Eventually, as lunch break comes to a close, she slides more chocolate Marinette’s way.

It’s a Swiss brand.

And Marinette laughs. Laughs and laughs, until Alya’s hopeful expression turns into one of concern, clearly wondering whether she should be calling for the school nurse.

When she recovers from her laughing fit, Marinette collects her prize, because why not, and smiles like a shark. “Thanks, Switzerland.”

Thinking she’s in on the joke, Alya’s shoulders sag in relief, and she laughs politely to break the tension.

✧✦✧

When the last period of the day rolls around, Marinette finds herself paying no attention whatsoever. Instead, she’s staring out of the window and imagines herself running across those familiar rooftops with her partner.

✧✦✧

The bell rings and the class immediately starts chattering about tomorrow’s party – where to meet, what to wear and who to share a ride with. Marinette barely takes notice, lost in her daydream. She only starts paying attention when she nearly trips down the stairs, only saved by Alya’s quick reflexes.

They stare at each other for a long moment, Alya’s hand still on her shoulder, and then Marinette is suddenly being crushed in a hug.

“Want to hang out on Sunday?” Alya murmurs near her ear.

“Family plans,” Marinette lies, and then lies some more by wrapping her arms around Alya in return.

“Oh. Then I’ll pick you up from the bakery on Monday morning.” Rocking back on her heels, Alya scrutinizes her face. “Okay?”

“Okay.”

✧✦✧
so r u coming to the party or not babe

gdgffhgsddggf

I don’t know

If I don’t show, Lila’s going to take that as me not wanting to be friends with her

But I have NEVER seen Marinette this pissed

AHHHHHHHHHH

y can’t u just explain that to lila

it’s just THIS party

not all her parties 4ever & ever

Because a bad early impression is a lasting impression

Exhibit A: Marinette and Lila

but

counterpoint

marinette and adrien

adrien and me even

thought he was the ken to chloes barbie

…tbqh

dude needs to work on his first impressions

all his impressions rly

Doesn’t even matter

Nothing short of skipping all of Lila’s parties “4ever & ever” will make Marinette happy

so shes not budging at all huh

No

And it sucks

I love her but I’m so frustrated rn

well

maybe

she has a reason then

Yeah
Jealousy

God is there anything more infuriating to witness than two great girls fighting over some mediocre guy

ey

adriens not mediocre

stop randomly dragging him so much

only im allowed to do that

I suppose the only thing more infuriating would be seeing your boyfriend derailing the topic by getting worked up over his bromance

I’m in a crisis here Nino

our love is everlasting sorry babe he was there first

anyway

the whole mari/adrien thing

that ship has sailed

well

sunk

so y would she even be mad at lila anymore over that

Ugh

Boys

First: lasting impression

Second: if Adrien got together with Lila NOW, that would be like THE ultimate blow to her self esteem

hm

makes sense I guess

still think itd b better for u to sit this one out tho

I don’t see YOU skipping

uh yah?

im the dj

no party without me, cant back out on short notice

plus shes YOUR bro alya
About tomorrow, I don’t know if I’ll be able to make it. Please, please don’t take this personally, I’m just super worried about Marinette getting akumatized! This thing with Adrien hit her hard. It’s just going to be this one time.

Okay :(

I mean I get where you’re coming from.

But I have to be honest, it feels really shitty of Marinette to be throwing around ultimatums like this. I promise she’s not usually like this.

I’ll take your word for it :/

Evidence is a bit thin on the ground where I’m standing.

Slamming her physics textbook shut and breathing a sigh of relief, Marinette leans back in her chair, staring at the ceiling.

Well.

This is an unsettling feeling.

There’s nothing she should be doing.

Homework all caught up with, no deadline looming, and nothing planned with her friends. Having coped with Lila’s appearance by throwing herself into work, somehow her previously near-insurmountable mountain of responsibilities has shrunk down to manageable size.

Just how much of her days had she been dedicating to serving other people’s needs?

She purses her lips as she ponders what to do now, basking in the soft evening light streaming in through the windows.
An entire weekend all to herself. The thought strikes her as obscene somehow, like that’s not the kind of decadence she can afford. And when had that happened? When did it become her new normal to run herself ragged for the benefit of everyone but herself?

Her fingertips brush against her earlobes, and she knows exactly when it happened. The moment she accepted the weight of guarding the city, it became a dereliction of duty to let anyone around her be unhappy.

*Everyday Ladybug.*

Except without all the fun bits of being Ladybug.

Like gratitude.

Or soaring through the sky with the wind in her hair, unbound by gravity and with power pulsing through her veins, far more graceful than clumsy Marinette can ever hope to be.

And even Chat’s stupid jokes cracking her up at the worst possible time and having to hide her laughter so his ego doesn’t get any bigger than it already is.

Marinette sighs at the direction of her thoughts. Wallowing in self-pity will only attract another butterfly and she’d rather not spend her first free weekend in ages rampaging through Paris as an Akuma.

As she keeps staring at the ceiling, tallying up how much progress she could make on her personal projects, her gaze strays to the latch leading to the balcony. A grin and vibrant green eyes flash through her mind, and she bites her lower lip.

Maybe…

But as nice as yesterday had been, her tears have dried up, and she doesn’t really want to have another heart to heart. She doesn’t even want to *think* about any of this anymore. Not Lila. Not Alya. Not *Adrien*. Out of mind, out of sight, no longer her problem. Bye-bye, little butterfly, you’ll find no victim here.

No, what she needs is some *fun*.

✧✦✧

The string snaps taut and her body is pulled forward in a rush, the heel of her boot just barely scraping the pavement before she is flung into the sky once more. As her arc hits its peak, her gaze sweeps over the shining city below, and instinct whispers how many seconds she has before she hits the ground.

Okay.

Now a quadruple backflip followed up with a–

Movement at the edge of her periphery vision derails her plan, and she seamlessly transitions to another.

“Catch me if you can!”
Her joyful shout is lost to the howl of the wind, but he understands her anyway, giving chase like he’s always done. Rooftops and winding streets pass in a blur, and for all that her heart is pounding in excitement, there is peace in this.

An arm wraps around her waist, and they go tumbling down together, breathless laughter on her lips. Their powers save them from hurting themselves in their messy landing, but he still tries to cushion the impact by shielding her with his body. At once, he rolls them over to pin her to the ground.

“Caught you.” It’s not quite a growl, it’s too tender for that, but it’s new and raw and not something she’s heard from him before.

But then, they’ve never done anything like this before, either.

“ Took you long enough.”

His cat pupils are dilated so wide they look almost human. Then he blinks and they go back to normal. At once, he eases his grip on her wrists. “Whatcha doing out here, buginette? When the dutiful protector of Paris doing sick stunts in the sky started trending on twitter, I didn’t even quite believe it until I saw it with my own eyes.”

“It’s my day off,” she says with a giddy grin. “Besides, why should you get to have all the fun goofing off at night? Don’t think I haven’t heard about that.”

He tilts his head, a rumble in his throat. “I never made any claim to exclusivity.” Almost shyly, he adds, “You’re welcome by my side always.”

Warmth spreads across her cheeks at the way he says it, so strangely vulnerable, and she wonders who this boy even is, that she’s only meeting him now.

The ground shakes.

An explosion lights up the sky.

And Ladybug groans in disbelief.

Of course.

No night off for her, ever.

“Well,” she says, and pushes Chat off her. He offers no resistance, already half-risen to that alert cat crouch he favors. “Let’s get this over with.”

Chat’s eyes the spreading fire with trepidation. “This looks like a really destructive Akuma, my Lady,” he says and throws her a questioning look. “Maybe some back-up for this one? Carapace, maybe?”

“No,” she snaps, and he startles, so she tempers her tone. “No.”

There is nobody to entrust a Miraculous to. Nobody who will have her back and fight for her.

Nobody but him.

Flashing him a grin that’s far more confident than it has any right to be, she lets her yoyo soar. “Just you and me tonight. And we can overcome anything.”
Quite a few Saltinette fics have her changing schools to escape Lila, but I've always thought it'd be interesting for her to take a page from Adrien's playbook and escape to the other side of the mask.
Surprise! It me! A day early because after months of hiatus and promising you guys a regular update schedule, I realized I managed to pick the busiest/worst day of the week as my goal. You know, like a smart person. So the regular updates will be on 
tuesdays, not 
not 

Now please enjoy this next installment of Everyone Gets A Mental Breakdown: The Fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Miraculous Ladybug!”

Ladybug beams at her partner as the pink swarm swoops over them, raising her fist.

And he hesitates.

It’s only a fraction of a second, but she’s still running high on adrenaline, all her senses as alert as can be and attuned to him like never before.

“Pound it!”

His knuckles press against hers and he is smiling, but it’s–

Off. Somehow. Not like the exuberant grin she’s come to expect.

“You alright, kitty?” The carnage around them has mended, the blisters on his cheek healed over. But he had gotten thrown through a wall, so maybe he’s still shaken.

“Purrfect as always, my Lady, thanks to you.”

The end of his belt dragging along the ground tells a different story.

She purses her lips just as her earrings give their warning beep. Should she press the issue? It’s not like she doesn’t understand not wanting to talk.

“I believe that’s our cue,” Chat says, holding up his hand to show off the blinking countdown. His body language all but screams that he’s about to pounce away.

“Wait!”

Cat ears swivel back toward her. “Yes?”

“Um. Do you have time this weekend?”

He blinks, so slowly it has to be deliberate. “I could make time, my Lady.” There’s that wistful note she’s so familiar with. The one full of longing and hope so raw that it used to make her avoid him because she knew the path it inevitably led him to. Except he’s standing perfectly still now, waiting for her to take the next step forward.
“Great. I demand a rematch.” She grins. “Because I bet I can catch you faster than you caught me.”

✧✦✧

Adrien hesitates, then raps his knuckles on the door to his father’s office.

The knob rattles and a lock slides open, ugly metallic sounds echoing in the too-big mansion. Nathalie opens the door and bids him to come in with a nod of her head.

“You’re late.” His father’s voice is clipped and absent, but then it always is these days. Adrien dimly remembers a time when it wasn’t, but even then, warmth and laughter were rare gifts only ever intended for mother, not him.

“There was a lot of traffic today,” Adrien says, and hates how small he sounds. He can’t control traffic or even drive the car, why is he feeling the sting of being a disappointment?

Father’s only response is a hum, his attention on the screen in front of him, no doubt showing him Nathalie’s report on the last two weeks. Grades, milestones, and failures, all quantified and neatly arranged into a handful of graphs. A summary of Adrien’s life that allows his father to absorb it at a glance.

A neatly trimmed eyebrow rises just as father’s mouth grows thin in displeasure. “You didn’t place in the half-finale, Adrien?”

“…no.”

“That’s the third fencing tournament you’ve lost. In a row.”

He hears the underlying accusation, clear as a bell. You used to be a winner.

Adrien forces himself to meet his father’s steel-eyed gaze before he resumes staring down at the floor. Conjuring an aura of shame – not hard, really, there’s always an unrelated well to draw on in abundance – he lowers his voice in contrition. “It’s a very competitive season, a lot of new highly skilled opponents.”

It’s only a half-lie, which is much easier to pass off as truth. Kagami is new, and her skill is awe-inspiring.

But Adrien hasn’t lost because he lacks skill. No. He’s been losing because power has started seeping into him outside of the costume, giving him an edge that is, frankly, unfair. None of his peers can hope to defeat him in this state, and so Adrien has started holding himself back.

He hasn’t yet figured out how to walk that fine line between making deliberate, subtle mistakes that even the odds and messing up so bad it costs him victory.

“I’m sorry, father.” He’s not. “I’ll train harder.” He won’t.

“See that you do. If this keeps up, we’ll have to rearrange your schedule to give you more time with Monsieur D'Argencourt.”

Oh.
“Yes, father.”

He could make the next one a win. Maybe. Could that be justified, just to spare himself inconvenience?

A fake victory, reaping adoration he hasn’t earned. A faint echo of venom accompanies the words that have shaken him to his core.

Whose wrath does he fear more – his father’s, or his Lady’s?

✧✦✧

“Aren’t cats supposed to be sneaky?”

Grinning wide, Ladybug tilts up her head to look at her partner hiding among the scaffolding of the tower. He’s crouching as if about to pounce, frozen all the way to the tip of his belt. The next second he’s all fluid grace, rearranging his way-too-flexible limbs to sit on the steel beam like a normal person.

“I wasn’t trying to sneak.”

“Liar,” she says affectionately, and yet his cat ears instantly press down in contrition.

“Sorry.” He jumps down onto the platform beside her, dusting himself off even though there’s nothing to dust off. “I thought you wanted to play tag.”

“I do,” she says slowly as her eyebrows furrow. On impulse, her fingertips reach to ghost over his shoulder. “Everything alright, kitty?”

He cocks his head as if he has no idea what she’s talking about. “Of course. But how are you holding up? Lucy still getting to you?”

Ladybug purses her lips, weighing her words. “Not as much as she used to. I try not to think about her.” And sometimes it even works. She’s done a fantastic job of repressing the knowledge that her classmates are partying hard right now, getting drawn deeper into that web of lies.

Well, right up until he reminded her.

What does Lila whisper to them when Marinette’s out of earshot? Is tonight the night the poison seeps in? Will she still have friends come Monday?

Questions for another day, and another self. Tonight, she is Ladybug, and Ladybug has bigger concerns than some bully. What’s petty school drama compared to the threat of Hawkmoth?

“You know,” she says slowly, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. “This whole experience… I think it’s given me new appreciation for just how vile Hawkmoth is. To have the threat of becoming a monster hanging over your head whenever you so much as feel sad – hurting people you care about because he finds you in your lowest moment and puts a weapon in your hand while twisting your mind…” She exhales a little too sharply, releasing the rising frustration. Calm. She needs calm. “It’s maddening.”

“Yes.” Chat’s voice is solemn, and Ladybug is once again struck by how very un-Chat he’s being.
“Or… or if you say the wrong thing, suddenly you’re not just responsible for hurting your friend, you’re the reason they get put through hell. And then we have to fight what Hawkmoth turned them into and–“ He abruptly cuts himself off with a huff. “It just sucks.”

“It does,” she says softly, “and you know that’s why the offer goes both ways.”

He almost makes that stupidly adorable confused chirping sound, but turns it into a “Huh?” at the last moment, followed up by awkwardly clearing his throat.

“To talk,” she says, doing her best to hide her grin and stay serious. Because she is serious, and it’s plain to see that something is bothering him. “Having someone to talk to – it meant a lot to me. And with the way our lives are, I imagine you also have things you keep pent up. So… if you’d like to talk, I’m listening.”

For a moment, he is completely still. Then he flashes her his most brilliant grin, extending his baton to lean on it. “Thanks, buginette. I’ll be sure to take you up on that offer if I ever need it.”

And before she can quite find the words to pry without looking like she’s prying, he twirls his baton to gently boop her nose.

“Tag. You’re it.”

✧✦✧

Ladybug groans as she hits the ground running, momentum carrying her forward until she finally manages to come to a halt.

Then she flops to the ground, drawing up her knees to her chin and trying to catch her breath.

Impossible.

It’s just impossible to catch him.

Turns out she has a critical weakness to her opponent staying on the ground. And zigzagging.

_Hawkmoth must never know._

Not only is her window of opportunity narrowed to whenever she’s swinging closest to the ground, her trajectory is completely predictable, allowing Chat to swerve out of the way, duck into unreachable alleys or just plain stop dead in his tracks. Yet whenever she tries catching up with him on foot, he takes full advantage of his agility to gain the higher ground in an instant, his baton propelling him forward in a pinch.

The thud of his boots touching down on the roof announce his presence only a heartbeat before his smug voice does, his shadow looming over her. “Aw, don’t tell me you’re giving up, my Lady?”

“Oh god,” she moans into her hands. “I’m never going to hear the end of this, am I?”

“Are you implying I would brag about this? _Me_?” She can _hear_ the dramatic pose in his voice. “The humblest gentlecat in all of Paris?”

“Well, good.” She spreads her fingers to peek through them. “Then I won’t have to yeet you off the
Eiffel tower one day.”

His grin only grows wider. “You’d have to catch me first.”

She lets herself fall back, staring up at the night sky as his laughter envelops her. Before long, he’s plopped down beside her, companionable silence settling over them like a warm blanket.

“Ladybug,” Chat murmurs at last.

“Mhm?”

“This is nice.”

She smiles. “It is.”

Long pause.

“Was I really so annoying before?”

“What?” She props herself up on her elbow to stare at him.

His gaze is fixed on the sky above. “You never used to want to spend time with me like this.”

“That’s not—“ Her lips squeeze shut because the reassuring words on her tongue taste like lies. “Things have changed,” she says softly. “Not just because you decided to change, but because I did, too. I realized my priorities were out of balance. You’re important, Chat. Our friendship is important. We always have each other’s backs, and I’ve only now realized just how truly rare and precious that is.”

And that, that tastes like honesty.

“…because of Lucy?”

“Among other things.” When he doesn’t respond, she whispers, “Chat. What’s this really about?”

“Nothing.” The troubled expression melts into a blithe smile. “Just wondering.”

She hesitates, then decides to press the issue. “You’ve been in a strange mood.”

“My Lady wants to spend time with me. I’m in a great mood.” He turns to face her, the smile so radiant it’s nearly blinding. And yet…

“Your ears tell a different story, kitty.” She murmurs as she flicks the folded back leather. “And they don’t lie.”

The smile freezes, suddenly brittle. A heartbeat later, he barks out a laugh, hoarse and cracked. “Then they’re the only part of me that doesn’t.”

✧✦✧

“…what?”

Shit.
Adrien shouldn’t have said that.

He should not have said that.

No matter how much the thought has been ringing in his head. Where’s his composure? He’s usually so good at keeping his mouth shut.

And isn’t that the problem?

“Nothing,” he says, sitting up and looking anywhere but at her, gaze darting around the barren rooftop in search of something, anything he could change the subject to. “Forget I said anything.”

“No.” Her hard voice cuts like knife. Because he knows this tone, the one reserved for iron-willed determination, when she’s confident in her plan and an Akuma is about to go down. “No, I don’t think I will.”

Oh god. She won’t let him weasel his way out of this.

She’s going to hate him.

His breath hitches, pulse quickening, and when her fingertips brush over his shoulder it grows worse, the gentle touch leaves a scorching trail in its wake. He wants to lean into the anchoring weight and get as far away as possible, all at once.

“Chat.” The soothing murmur is so sweet and gentle and new, and he hates that he’s discovering all these facets of her now, when he’s about to screw it all up. Ladybug pauses, then says, “Hypothetically speaking, if I told you I am very, very lost in this conversation…”

He can’t help but bite out a choked laugh at the mirrored words. Wiping a hand over his eyes and taking a deep breath, he turns to face her. If he wants to be worthy of her, then he needs to start being honest. What better time than now?

Well, he can think of lots of better times, actually. Had hoped to get some practice first.

“Hypothetically speaking,” Chat says slowly. “What if I told you I’m a liar?” It’s only now that he realizes the corners of his mouth are still quirked up, that well-rehearsed smile staying glued on. He should probably stop that but he doesn’t know what else to do with his face in moments like these. “Would you hate me?”

His Lady’s lips form a silent oh, and the grip on his shoulder tightens, squeezing in what he hopes is comfort. “Chat, no, I would never—“

“But you hate liars. That girl you hate—“

“—is nothing like you!”

“How do you know that?” She recoils and he presses forward, the horrible thoughts he’s been trying so hard to keep locked inside just pouring out of his mouth. “I just told you I’m a liar! What do you know of me? If you met me in real life, you wouldn’t recognize me!”

“…you wouldn’t recognize me either,” she says softly.

He might.

Some stupid romantic part of him insists that he will. That of course he’ll be starstruck if he ever has the fortune of seeing her face, that recognition of his True Love will strike like lightning and
that there will never be a moment of doubt in his heart.

“Maybe not,” he says at length. “But you said it yourself, you’re bad at lying. You’re not pretending to be anything you’re not.”

Unlike him.

Adrien doesn’t know how to do anything but pretend. What is he even when all his façade is stripped away?


Isn’t it? The day he first put on the mask, he traded one performance for another, to see if the role of the dashing hero chafes any less than that of the perfect son. And for the most part, he does enjoy playing this part so much more, sometimes even comes close to convincing himself that he’s finally found a personality of his own – right up until he’s faced with his father’s disapproving glare, when all of Chat Noir’s bravado crumbles and only Adrien remains.

“My father…” He almost chokes on the word, throat closing up, and so he forces it through gritted teeth. “My father thinks I’m safely cocooned in my room right now. Because I lied. And you said – you said what sets you apart from that girl is that you hate lying. That you feel guilty. Well, I don’t. I – how did you put it? I lie as easily as breathing.”

Ladybug has nothing to say to that, her gaze sweeping over him as if she’s never seen him before. “…why?”

His skin is crawling under her scrutiny. “Why what?”

“Why do you lie?”

Her impossibly blue eyes are staring at him with – Judgement? Accusation? Chat doesn’t care to – can’t bear to – decipher the flavor of her disappointment, so he jerks his head to the side, staring at nothing at all.

“Because.” He takes a deep breath to vanquish the quiver in his voice. “Everything – everything good I have in life I have because I am willing to lie to get it. My friends. My freedom. You. Us.” Chat chances another glance at her immobile face just long enough to gesture between the two of them. “All of this.”

For fourteen excruciating breaths – he’s counting – she says nothing at all. Then the comforting hand on his shoulder loosens its grip – no! – only to trail down his chest until her palm is pressed against his heart.

“Are you being honest right now, Chaton?”

Chaton. Does that mean she’s not angry? “Yes,” he whispers, and hopes in spite of fear.

“Were you being honest when I cried on your shoulder and you promised we were a team?”

His eyes grow wide, head snapping around to meet her gaze because he can’t, he can’t allow her to doubt that. “Of course!”

“Then maybe,” Ladybug says, eyebrows knit together in thought and gaze hooded, “we don’t know each other as well as we should. And that could be my fault, or it could be yours. All I know is… I really like the boy I’m talking to right now.”
Ladybug’s small smile is like the break of dawn.

“I wish you’d allow yourself to be him more often.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm just... **going to put this here.**

Being raised in a toxic household teaches children to lie, and lie well. It's my firm headcanon that this is absolutely central to why Adrien gives the advice he gives in Chameleon. I can imagine no worse nightmare for someone like him than to have the persona(s) he's carefully crafted publicly exposed and stripped away, and to lose all his friends because of it. *So of course* he's reluctant to do it to Lila. What sets them apart - and which Adrien hasn't yet realized - is that Lila's lies deliberately hurt people rather than being a means for self-protection.

**tl;dr -** Lila is Adrien's dark mirror, thank you for coming to my TED talk
hey it me
I'm aware it's not technically tuesday in all parts of the world yet, but it's 6am over here and I've been up since 3, so instant gratification it is! Who needs sane posting times anyway.

Many thanks to Ziri, Tempo and Hari for beta-ing all this nonsense on short notice.

“Tell me something about yourself.”

The vibration against her shoulder fades just as his purr quietens. He turns his head toward her, eyes cracking open to reveal two slivers of vibrant green. “Huh?”

“Something I don’t know.” A mental construct of Tikki appears in her thoughts to scold her for saying this, echoes of old lectures about the importance of secret identities ringing in Ladybug’s mind. But this is right, she knows. Her partner needs this. Needs her.

And maybe she needs him, too.

She shifts more of her weight to lean against his shoulder in comfort just as the vibration rumbling through his body grows in intensity, purr deepening once more. Joy and hope and trepidation flit across his face in the span of a heartbeat, so fast she can hardly keep up. He opens his mouth, then closes it without sound, small fang digging into his bottom lip as he weighs his words.

“I’m a straight A student,” Chat says at length. “And I’m fluent in four languages.”

His gaze follows her eyebrow’s movement up her forehead, and he laughs.

“Didn’t expect that?”

“No,” she rushes to reassure him, her voice colliding with the end of his question. At the sardonic quirk of his lips, she withers. “I mean – Okay, maybe it’s… a little unexpected. Not because I didn’t expect you to be smart! But it’s just–“ Just what? For all the chaotic dumbass energy Chat Noir overflows with, she never thought her kitty stupid. Impulsive, yes, reckless, sure, but not...

Ladybug takes a deep breath, calming her racing thoughts before her rambling can hurt his feelings. Hurt them more. Think. He’s not stupid, so why this reaction?

Chat is watching her, lips smoothed into that strangely bland smile of his. It’s an ill fit on what she knows to be an expressive face, and as before, the ears give away just how anxiously he’s waiting for her to continue talking. His perfect stillness is unnerving, so at odds with the hyperactive goofball he usually is.

Oh!

She beams in relief when the puzzle piece finds its match.
“I guess I have a hard time picturing you sitting still long enough to be such a diligent student.”

He cocks his head, and then his fake smile becomes a genuine one, self-deprecating though it might be. Scratching himself behind his ear and disheveling his messy hair even further, he says, “Yeah, I guess that’s – that’s another thing you don’t know. I’m not… I’m not really like this–” He mimes a bow as well as he can in his sitting position, dramatically sweeping a hand. “–in real life. I’m fairly quiet, actually.”

“You?”

“Yeah.” He chuckles at whatever expression she must be wearing right now. “Would you believe me if I told you I’m shy?”

No.

It takes all her willpower to keep her tongue immobile and the thought contained. Yet she knows she’s gaping like a fish when she really shouldn’t. But – Chat Noir? Shy? These two words simply do not go together.

Does not compute.

Ladybug.exe has encountered a critical error.

She’s always tried not to think about what her partner is like on the other side of the mask. Too risky, too dangerous, like one day she’s going to run into him on the street and her brain will go “Oh there you are, I’ve been looking for you.”

But of course she’s thought about it. Carefully put together a picture of a boy forever in trouble with his teachers, quick to interrupt class with a joke to bask in the laughter of his classmates. He’s well-liked, this imaginary boy, probably the most popular boy in class.

And she doesn’t quite know how to reconcile him with what Chat is telling her.

Okay. Back to the beginning. Time for her vivid imagination to shine.

It starts with a boy, blond and green-eyed. Or maybe the green eyes belong to his transformation? No matter. There’s a boy, a shy boy, quiet and studious – and a self-proclaimed liar. What’s he lying about? Oh. Oh! A shy boy, head filled with wit and jokes and a rich inner life he hides behind a smile. The boy bites his tongue, and has no tail or kitty ears to give him away.

The world tilts on its axis and somehow her partner starts making sense again, even though nothing about him is quite like she imagined.

“Cat got your tongue?”

Ladybug blinks, ripped from her daydream, and promptly shoves him. “You use that one way too much!”

Chat laughs as he falls back. “But it’s so effective! And true, in this case. Seriously, I thought I broke you for a second there.”

“I was thinking,” she says with a huff. “Try it someti–” Pause. “Oh my god, I can’t believe that this entire time you’ve been this huge nerd and you left all the thinking to me! You lazy cat!”

He grins and sticks out his tongue, before quite deliberately making his pupils go wide and
Ladybug opens her mouth to counter, but then she hesitates. Temptation to fall into their well-worn dynamic pulls at her, yet she resists, choosing another response than the blithe one already on her lips. “I like your character,” she says instead. “It’s your choices I question.”

“Do you?” His voice is terribly small as his gaze moves past hers, staring resolutely at a spot somewhere between her brows rather than meeting it directly. “Like it?”

“Yeah,” she says softly. “I do.”

There’s an echo of a purr as he sidles up to her again, and she rests her forehead on his shoulder as she’s enveloped in a half-hug. His lips are moving, opening and closing as if he’s about to say something and then thinks better of it, so she keeps quiet while he puts whatever is on his mind into words.

Awkwardly clearing his throat, he at last says, “Can I ask the same thing of you now? I mean – would you tell me something about yourself? Only if you want, of course.”

Worrying her lip as she considers what’s safe for her to say, Fu’s stern face rises to the forefront of her mind, looking over her shoulder. “…I want to.”

His answering smile is blinding in its radiance, chasing away Fu and her doubts on whether this is the right path forward.

So, what can she tell him?

“I’m clumsy,” she says. “When I’m not transformed, I have zero grace. Minus one thousand grace. Even after all this time and practice, I’m pretty sure if I tried to swing a yo-yo while not Ladybug, I would just bonk myself on the head.”

Chat gives her a bemused look. “I thought the deal was that it’s supposed to be something I don’t yet know.”

She frowns. “Well, how would you know? This suit turns me into a certified badass.”

“You are a certified badass, suit or no suit, my Lady,” he says decisively. “But you literally fell for me on our first day, ‘clumsy girl’. Or did you forget?”

“I– I didn’t fall for you, I fell on y–” Flustered, she trails off, heat rising to her cheeks as the corrected phrasing somehow sounds even worse. “Sorry. I guess so. To be honest, I don’t remember that much of those first few transformations, it’s all a blur of panic and adrenaline while I tried to figure out what was happening.”

Chat’s lids grow heavy, a faint rumble catching in his throat. “I remember it clear as day. You were so amazing, I–” He shakes his head, pink spreading across his cheeks. “Never mind.”

“What?” She jabs a finger at his chest. “Are you just going to keep throwing out vague allusions, forcing me to force you to elaborate? Is this some sort of ploy to build an air of mystery? Because–”

It’s working, damn it.

“No.” His smile is gentle and a little pained as he lays his hand over where she jabbed him. No, not quite – he lays it over his heart. “But I promised you I wouldn’t talk about this. Anymore.”
Oh.

Oh.

“The point I was trying to make is that… I saw you.” The blush deepens as he speaks. “I know some things about the girl you started out as. I got to watch her grow into, well, you.”

There is so much weight on that word, all tangled up in admiration and wonder. You.

Me.

“O-okay,” she squeaks, and tries to ignore her heart picking this moment to engage in impromptu acrobatics, its rhythm manic and wobbly. “So! Something else about me then. Um.” It’s hard to concentrate when there’s warmth tingling all over, sudden awareness of just how close they are sitting intruding on her thoughts. It isn’t meant that way – wasn’t meant that way – he needed comfort that she didn’t hesitate to provide. As a friend. Marinette gives great friend hugs, and that’s what this is.

“I like fashion,” she blurts out. “Like, not just like, I don’t just read fashion magazines, but I– it’s a whole process, I sketch and design and sew and everything.” She forces her mouth shut before this can further devolve into a full-blown ramble.

“…really.”

And just like that, all the budding warmth is gone, doused by his flat and unimpressed tone. Fixing him with a glare, she says, “Yes, really.” He’s not the first to dismiss her passion as frivolous, so she knows the signs. It stopped stinging so much a long time ago, except not really, because it definitely stings coming from him. “It’s art,” she adds empathetically. “It’s creation. It’s what makes me a good fit for the Ladybug Miraculous.”

“I don’t doubt it, buginette,” he says, voice soft and soothing even as his gaze is faraway. “It makes complete sense for you to be an artist. It just took me by surprise. I–” He stops short, jaw churning as if he’s holding himself back from saying something. “I’m familiar with the fashion industry. I have another friend who wants to be a designer. Just – funny coincidence, that’s all.”

“Oh. Okay.” She peers at him and his strangely melancholic expression. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“Well, it is my turn, I suppose,” he says, then pauses. “To say something you don’t know. If you want.”

“Oh, there’s turns now?” He doesn’t respond to her teasing, only seems to be awaiting permission. “Of course I want to know, kitty! You’re not the only curious cat around here and you’ve got me thoroughly intrigued. Air of mystery successfully deployed!”

Finally, he grins, somber expression lifting. “Well, well. Looks like the shoe’s on the other paw now.”

She sticks out her tongue and feels his body vibrate against hers as soft laughter spills.

When it trails off, his expression grows thoughtful once again, nervous gaze darting to her and skittering away. “I don’t have a lot of friends,” he whispers. “You were – not quite the first, but almost.”

Even as her brain screeches to a halt yet again at the idea of Chat Noir struggling to make friends,
she manages to control her expression this time. The only reaction she allows herself is to tighten her hug around his waist.

“I was homeschooled,” he says, hesitant and halting, struggling to pin words to whatever thoughts are swirling inside his head. “And it’s like – like in math, right? When you miss a lesson or don’t understand a concept, and suddenly everything builds on that thing you don’t understand and then nothing makes any sense? I feel like that with people. All the time. Like I’m still trying to figure out how addition works when I’m expected to solve integrals. Except there’s no tutor to give me remedial how-to-people lessons and now I’m just stuck being this idiot for the rest of my life.”

“You’re not an idiot,” she says softly.

“Aren’t I?” He draws in a deep, shuddering breath. “I hurt one of my friends. One of the few friends I have, and I managed to mess it all up. And now she’s avoiding me and I can’t even apologize without making everything worse and…”

He cuts himself off and wipes his forearm over his eyes.

“Give it time,” Ladybug murmurs and rests her head on his shoulder. “She won’t be mad forever. And then you can rebuild.”

He doesn’t respond, but his chin ruffles her hair as he tucks her closer.

✧✦✧

“Aren’t they adorable!!?”

Marinette nearly trips over her feet when a phone screen is shoved into her line of sight. “Alya!” she whines as she barely catches herself. “It’s too early for this, have mercy.” Marinette is uncoordinated at the best of times, and Monday mornings are most definitely not the best of times.

She can still hear the siren song of her cozy bed, beckoning her to turn around and just forget about this whole school thing.

“Sorry, sorry,” Alya says, and doesn’t sound sorry at all. No, disgusting early bird that she is, there’s a spring in her step and a grin on her face. Any moment now she will burst into song and little woodland creatures will flock to be her chorus. “I’m just so excited!”

“Yes, I can tell,” Marinette mutters, squinting at the image on Alya’s phone. “What’s this about?”

And then Marinette and the asphalt get reacquainted like the old friends they are.

“Alright,” Alya says as her hand comes down on Marinette’s shoulder to help her back up, “I’m putting the phone away before you hurt yourself.”

“Wait!” Scrambling to her feet, Marinette snatches the device from Alya’s hand, staring at two figures soaring through the night sky, the photograph clearly taken from the streets below. Ladybug’s fingertips are barely brushing the tip of Chat’s belt, her face pinched in intense concentration, while Chat is laughing, only a moment away from slinking out of her grasp for good.
“Where’d you get this?” Marinette whispers.

“I got hundreds of these! They were playing tag all over the city, I could barely keep up with all the submissions to the Ladyblog.” Smiling down at her phone as she plucks it from Marinette’s hands, Alya says, “There’s also a few grainy pictures of them cuddling on some roof. This one’s my favorite though. See how they’re looking at each other? I think my ship is finally setting sail.”

“They’re just having fun,” Marinette says with a huff.

“Yeah, they’re having fun, alright.”

Marinette crosses her arms and chooses to ignore the totally inappropriate eyebrow wiggle. “Can’t a girl and a catboy be friends without everyone making it weird?”

“Well, they’ve never done anything like this before. And when the catboy is madly in love…”

“That doesn’t mean the girl is!”

Alya’s eyes widen almost imperceptibly, and then her broad grin turns rueful. She slips her phone into her pocket, and then links Marinette’s elbow with her own. “I’m sorry. Let’s table this discussion, alright? How was your weekend?”

Marinette frowns, suspicious of her stubborn friend’s sudden acquiescence. Alya can wax lyrical about the beauty of the SS LadyNoir for hours, and no amount of naysaying on Marinette’s part has ever cut it short. Why–

Oh.

No discussing romance with the heartbroken girl.

A dull pain pulses through Marinette’s chest, reminded of who she’ll be seeing in class soon. She’s done so well putting it all out of her mind, and yet every stray thought that wanders too close to him catches fire, burning and writhing and making her eyes water.

“It went well,” she says stiffly as they pass the gates to the school ground. “I started a new project for my portfolio. Spent some time with the family.”

And with Chat Noir.

Chat Noir who, no matter how much and how sincerely he loves her, she cannot love back. Not when her heart is like this, made of broken pieces and sharp edges, lined with cracks on the verge of splitting wide open and welcoming a butterfly.

Because Chat deserves better than to be her consolation prize. If Ladybug ever offers her heart to him, it will be whole and filled with love only for him.

Not that she’s planning on offering it. That’s not–

“Oh? What kind of new project?” Alya interrupts her absurd thoughts, and Marinette embraces the opportunity to take her mind elsewhere. Launching into an explanation of a line of Miraculous-themed gowns she’s been refining in her sketchbook all weekend, they make their way up the stairs to their classroom.

When Alya pushes open the classroom door, a shiver runs down Marinette’s spine like she’s just been hit by an icy gale. Gazes swivel to look at her, conversation quieting down to a hushed
You will lose your friends and wind up all alone.

Has Lila made good on her threat this weekend?

Or is this all in her head?

She raises her head and squares her shoulders, staring straight ahead at her seat as she walks toward it. Let them gawp, let them whisper. Whatever is coming her way, Ladybug is strong enough to face it.

“So I’m thinking of adding a transformation mechanism,” she says to Alya, not-so-seamlessly picking up the thread of their conversation as they sit down in the last row. “You know, make it look like an ordinary dress at first glance, and then you loosen hidden snaps so that more layers unfold—“

“Oh my gosh, really? That’d be so amazing, Marinette, you spoil us!” Rose squeals from the next row over, then slaps her hands over her mouth. “Oh no. Oh no. I’m so sorry!”

Marinette stares at her in confusion, and then glances back at Alya to confirm that she’s not the only one caught off-guard. “Um. For what?”

“I ruined the surprise,” Rose says, voice muffled by her palms before she lowers them to the front of her chest. Behind her, Juleka is rolling her eyes, yet affectionally smiling at the back of Rose’s head. “I’m really, really sorry, I’m just so excited. And thankful! Of course. You’re the best, Marinette!”

“I – sorry, I’m still not quite following,” Marinette’s gaze darts to the rest of the class to see if someone can give her a clue as to what’s happening.

Her blood runs cold when she spots Lila’s smirk.

“Well, um… forget I said anything!”

“But – no? What are you talking about?”

Rose bites her lower lip, and then hangs her head in resignation. “I heard through the grapevine that you’re designing new outfits for Kitty Section for our next performance. Oh gosh, I wasn’t supposed to let on that I know. I know you wanted this to be a surprise. I’m sorry, I’m ruining everything.”

Time slows to a crawl, heartbeat roaring in Marinette’s ears. Paths and possibilities unfurl before her eyes, the repercussions of Lila’s move shaking the chess board.

Two weeks from now, Marinette will be at the next Kitty Section concert, cheering her lungs out for friends who are nursing secret disappointment in her for not keeping a promise she never made.

No.

A minute from now, Rose’s crestfallen face will turn away from her as hopes fall dashed to the ground.

No.

A week from now, Marinette will be locked in her room, sleep deprivation making her stitches
sloppy as she tries to finish four beautiful and unique outfits in the little time she has.

Heads, Lila wins.

Tails, Marinette loses.

But she’s done the impossible before. Because Marinette is Ladybug, and Ladybug can do anything.

But then, two weeks from now, the grapevine will foist a new impossible task on her. Or maybe that will be next week. Tomorrow. Today. A rising tower of obligations that will leave her with no free time while Lila gets to woo her classmates without Marinette running interference.

And for what?

It’s not like all the many favors she’s done before have bought her any goodwill. Should they have? Is it selfish of her to expect something in return? A gift with obligations attached is no gift at all…

“I’m sorry, Rose,” Marinette says softly. “That’s only hearsay.”

“Oh!” Rose laughs in relief, and then squeezes one eye shut in an exaggerated wink. “Right. Hearsay. Of course.”

“Rose, I – I’m sorry, but I mean it. I don’t have a project like that in the works.”

*But if you want, I could start one.*

The guilt-born words sit on the tip of her tongue, and it takes all her willpower to keep them contained when Rose’s shoulders fall and true disappointment takes root.

Maybe nipping this in the bud is a misstep. Maybe this is playing into Lila’s hands. Maybe Marinette should be going the extra mile to fight for her friends.

But why?

Why is it always her who has to be the bigger person? Why should she offer her time and sanity to people who won’t do the same for her?

Let Ladybug be the selfless savior of Paris. Marinette is just an ordinary girl with an ordinary life.

And she is done sacrificing it.

---

Chapter End Notes

I was going to advance the plot some more but then I got lost in writing 2k words of Ladynoir fluff. It’s fine, just throw me in the trash like the shipper I am. In related
news, I have a pretty good outline of the remaining chapters and at a conservative estimate, this story is going to clock in at 35k words. RIP me for thinking this would be a one-shot.

PS: This is the kind of dress I'm picturing for Marinette's new project.
Chapter Notes

I've received some comments that made me realize there's some ambiguity surrounding the timeline of this fic, so I wanted to clarify that this AU splits from canon immediately post-Chameleon. So the rest of season 3 hasn't happened (yet), and neither have Lila's worst acts (Onii-Chan, Ladybug). I apologize for the confusion since my long hiatus during which these episodes aired definitely contributed to it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Plagg.”

He stirs, a growl rising in his throat at having his precious naptime interrupted. So he squeezes his eyes shut and snuggles deeper into Adrien’s bag. Maybe the annoyance will go away if he ignores it long enough.

“Plagg!”

The agitated hiss is scarcely above a whisper, clearly trying to balance gaining his attention with keeping the volume down. Plagg is tempted to respond with a hiss of his own. He really cannot take any more of this pining and worrying and endless self-flagellation. Let the boy sort out his problems on his own. Plagg is Destruction, he’s not made for holding someone’s hand and, ugh, nurturing them.

And human problems are always so repetitive! No matter how many Chosen he accompanies through their lifetime, the sad refrain of their lives is always the same.

Wah, they don’t love me!

Wah, I don’t love them!

Wah, I need to acquire more currency!

So boring. At least he won’t ever have to put up with the last one from Adrien. Hopefully.

“PLAGG!”

The whisper-shout hits him right into his sensitive ear and he yowls, just barely keeping himself from phasing through leather in his retreat. A snarl in his throat, he bares his fangs – a pitiful display in this diminutive form he’s taken, he knows, but it’s about the principle of the thing.

Yet then his ears perk up, and the growl dies down.

“Hey, sugarcube.”

His other half crosses her paws, nose wrinkling in distaste the way it always does when he calls her
“Finally. We need to talk.”

Stretching himself to shake off the last of his sleep, he yawns. “About what?”

“Everything!” Tikki flits forward and then pirouettes, darting back and forth as much as the confines of Adrien’s bag allow. “They gave each other so many clues this weekend!”

“And?” He raises a paw, letting his tongue dart out to lazily groom it. “The Veil held, didn’t it?”

“For now! But at the pace they’re sharing things about each other, it won’t much longer. It only takes one, Plagg! One moment of true recognition, and the entire magic of the Veil comes crashing down!”

“And?”

“And? And!?! They are facing Nooroo! You can’t keep secrets from Nooroo when he’s inside your head!” Zipping close to him, she knocks the paw out of his mouth. “Stop that, it’s distracting.”

“So’s your buzzing around, sugarcube. And that doesn’t even come with the benefit of hygiene.”

“Would you be serious? Just for once. Don’t you understand how close Marinette is to succumbing to a butterfly? She’s been nearly Akumatized twice.”

“Life’s too long to be serious,” Plagg says, but settles down to sit anyway, pulling Tikki down next to him to stop her frantic pacing. “Listen. I get it. The rules, the stuffy traditions, the rituals, all of it. And I put up with it, don’t I? But keeping these kids apart seems to be doing more harm than good. I think these secret identities have outgrown their use. If your little bug gets turned into an Akuma, it’s game over anyway, whether she knows who holds my ring or not. My kitten is in no state to defeat her.”

“Well, then maybe you should train him better,” Tikki says crossly. “You can’t just spend all your time napping and stuffing your face with cheese–”

“Watch me.”

“–when your Chosen is in such need of guidance. There is so much potential in him, don’t you see it?”

“Uh, Tikki, have you met me? Of course I see it. But I don’t do guidance, that’s not how I roll.” The reminder of cheese has him digging into the depths of the bag’s pockets for his stash of camembert. He generously offers a piece of his treasure to Tikki, but she turns her nose up at it. So he shrugs, and shoves the oversized bite into his too-small muzzle, speaking as he chews.

“One way or another, kid’s going to learn to sink or swim.”

✧✦✧

Swinging his bag over his shoulder, Adrien steels himself, casting a furtive glance at the back row. Most days he does his best to suppress it, the sensory input far too overwhelming for him to be able to concentrate otherwise, but now Adrien digs deep into that new part of himself. It’s disturbingly easy to find. It used to only be close to the surface when he was Chat Noir, but more and more, he
finds the cat bleeding into him even outside the costume.

Senses expand, and the world grows loud, *deafening*, too many scents burning his nostrils, and it takes all his willpower to focus on the two girls chatting with each other in the back row. The sound of books scraping against cloth and crinkling papers almost overpowers their voices, the entire class caught in the bustle of packing their bags and exclaiming their relief over the end of the school day.

“…ave time for movie night?” Alya asks, the cheer in her voice just a tad too forced. “Just you, me, some snacks, and a whole lot of self-care.”

Marinette hesitates, but then there’s a smile in her words. “Yes. That sounds really nice actually.”

“Great!” Relief mingles with genuine joy, and then the sound of footsteps joins the rhythm of their conversation. Another furtive glance confirms that they’re descending down the stairs now, headed toward him.

Should he dare?

“What kind of movie did you have in mind?” Marinette asks.

“Your choice, girl.” And then, as if sensing his scrutiny, Alya’s narrowed eyes fixate on Adrien. “But I was thinking something without any dumb *boys* in it.”

Taking the hint, Adrien lets the world grow quiet again and starts walking toward the door as well. Too soon, then.

Just how long is he supposed to wait before approaching her again? This is excruciating!

✧✦✧

He’s just going to do it.

It’s been a week, after all. Surely he’s allowed to say hi. Just to test the waters.

As she approaches the stairs to the school’s upper floor, he turns on his brightest smile, and calls out, “Hey, Marin–“

She doesn’t even freeze, just whirls around on the spot and hurries the other way, straight into a pillar.

✧✦✧

“You called, My Lady?”

He sweeps into a bow, and she can’t help the smile tugging at her lips. Ladybug doesn’t quite know when her feelings towards his theatrics had tipped over from being vaguely embarrassed to
feeling comforted by its familiarity, and she’s definitely not going to examine that now. Or ever. For now, she has decided to be a little selfish, a little greedy, and to take joy where she can find it.

And there is a lot of joy in playing along with Chat’s silly antics.

“Yes, I did,” she says softly.

Trouble is, these days she needs his antics most when he can’t be there. She’s vulnerable to butterflies when she doesn’t wear spots and Lila’s grating voice is sawing at her last nerve.

“I’ve had an idea.”

✧✦✧

Badylug: hi
Badylug: please tell me you’re using a vpn for this
Badylug: forgot to mention that explicitly
Kitkat: Hello?
Kitkat: Who is this mysterious stranger with a name so cunningly disguised I do not recognize them?
Kitkat: Hawkmoth?
Kitkat: Is that you?
Badylug: yes
Badylug: wrong number bye
Kitkat: NO DON’T!
Badylug: :)
Badylug: so, vpn?
Kitkat: Yeah, the works. VPN, throwaway E-mail, throwaway account.
Kitkat: No burner phone, though I could arrange one.
Badylug: that’d be overkill
Badylug: or rather out of my budget
Kitkat: I could get one for you!
Kitkat: I have a part-time job, it’d be no problem.
Badylug: kitty don’t go offering me free phones what the heck
Badylug: besides

Badylug: if i suddenly pulled out a completely different phone during class that’d be super suspicious

Badylug: and defeat the entire purpose of us being able to chat with each other outside the costume <3

Kitkat: Have I mentioned this is the happiest day of my life?

Badylug: we gotta get you some better days chaton

✧✦✧

“She vaulted over a hedge, Nino!”

“You know, that’s kind of impressive for her. Coordination-wise.”

“A hedge!” Adrien’s forehead hits the table with a thump. And then he thumps it again for good measure. “I was just trying to say hi! Is this just how it’s going to be from now on?”

“Bro. I know it’s hard, but as I keep telling you, you chasing after her is just going to make her run. Let her come to you when she’s ready.”

His whine is muffled against the table. “For how long?”

“As long as it takes, dude.”

✧✦✧

Badylug: chat

Badylug: chat please

Badylug: i beg you

Badylug: stop sending me cat memes during class

Badylug: my teacher is throwing me dirty looks because I keep cracking up

Kitkat: My Lady, you really need to learn how to be sneakier.

Kitkat: Like me.

Kitkat: I manage to send these while sitting in the front row and yet my teacher considers me an angel.

Badylug: cause you’re a nerrrrrd
Badylug: you even type like one
Badylug: get outta here with your proper punctuation
Kitkat is sending cat-meme-54-0.jpg
Badylug: STOP
Kitkat: :3c
Kitkat: >:3c
Badylug: oh god
Badylug: those emojis
Badylug: i should have known
Badylug: all the signs were there
Badylug: you’re a weeb aren’t you
Kitkat: Hey.

Kitkat: If binging a bunch of magical girl shows and then trying to recreate their transformation sequence with my Miraculous is wrong, then I don’t want to be right.

✧✦✧

“Alright, girl, spill.”

Startled, Marinette nearly drops her phone, desperately fumbling with it as she catches it in-between her palms. “What?”

“You’ve spent the past week with your nose in your phone.” Alya arches an eyebrow, a sly grin slowly spreading across her face because she knows that look Marinette is wearing. “Even during class, tsk, tsk. What would Mme. Bustier say?”

“You text Nino during class as well!”

“Yeees,” Alya says, elongating the vowel in a sing-song voice. “I do indeed text my boyfriend at all hours. And I bet when I do, I’m wearing the same dopey grin you are.”

“I – I – that’s – he’s not–”

“Oh, it’s a he, huh?” Alya purrs.

“Nobody! He’s – I’m texting nobody! This is just a meme page, look!”

For a blink of an eye, Marinette shows Alya her screen, scrolling through what is, indeed, a solid wall of captioned cat pictures, with the occasional Chat Noir meme in-between. Yet before Alya can examine it further, Marinette yanks the phone back and holds it protectively to her chest.
“I take it you’re a very prolific commenter on that meme page.” The one with a layout that looks suspiciously like the interface of a certain anonymous chat app. “Considering I see you typing all the time as well.”

“Y–yeah? Can’t a girl look at cat pictures to cheer herself up? And – and leave some nice comments for the people who make the memes? They work hard, Alya, someone should thank them for keeping us supplied with entertainment.”

“Well,” Alya says, trying hard to contain her laughter. “Is it working?”

Marinette looks at her with suspicion in her narrowed eyes. “Is what working?”

“The cheering yourself up with cats part.”

Her expression softens and she glances back down at her phone, a small smile curving her lips. “Yeah.”

“Then I’m glad.” Alya winks. “And I’ll let you keep your secrets for a while longer.”

Dividing Line

Badylug: chat
Badylug: next time
Badylug: could you not fall to your knees and dramatically shout NOOOOO when the akuma reveals the hostages
Badylug: i don’t think the hostages found that very reassuring
Kitkat: I was just trying to keep morale high.
Kitkat: They know as long as I’m making jokes, everything’s alright. Ladybug and Chat Noir got this.
Badylug: yeah but
Badylug: the overwhelming time pressure
Badylug: Please take this more seriously.
Kitkat: Okay.
Kitkat: I’ll be serious.
Sirius Noir: See?
Badylug: uuugh
Badylug: fricking gryffindors
Sirius Noir: Come on.
Sirius Noir: I bet you laughed.

Sirius Noir: And before you answer that, remember:

Sirius Noir: Lying is *wrong*.

✧✦✧

Hey girl!

I’m planning a girl’s night out this weekend

Please, please, please tell me you’ll be able to come this time!

I’d love to :)

Yay <3

So I hate to bring this topic up again

But can we invite Marinette too?

Now I know what you’re thinking but she’s in a much better headspace now! I won’t deny that she’s been super rude to you but I swear if you two could just get to know each other I’m certain she’ll change her mind about you. And Marinette’s not the type of person who shies away from taking responsibility for bad behavior, she’ll apologize for sure.

Not that you’re obligated to forgive her

Ugh, sorry, this is coming out a mess

I’ll think about it.

Chapter End Notes

wow who spilled all this LadyNoir fluff definitely wasn't me

If you desperately missed getting stabbed in the heart this chapter, I've just written a short fic that should take care of that.

A little character detail that likely isn't obvious so I thought I'd mention it here.
With one last sweep of her pen, she puts the finishing touch on her design.

“It looks amazing, Marinette!” Tikki says, abandoning her vantage point on Marinette’s shoulder to float closer to the sketch book to examine her newest creation.

Nibbling on the ill-used end of her pen, Marinette says, “Does it? I’m not sure…”

For all that she struggles with ambivalence towards the fox and the bee these days, their designs for her pet project had come easily. A bold and eye-catching cut for Rena, and sleek and regal golds for the Queen. It was the cat and the turtle she struggled to adapt, forever torn between making them gowns as well or whether to design with their wielders in mind.

As her critical gaze sweeps over this newest variation of a dapper black suit, she idly fills in the sketch’s facial features, giving the generic figure her partner’s cocky grin.

The suit is elegant and formfitting, designed to emphasize an athletic build, with the tie serving as a tasteful green highlight while the waistcoat is meant to be reminiscent of his tail. It’s dashing and handsome and perfect, and yet…

Far too dignified for her goofball of a partner.

So she adds a pair of cat ears to the sketch, and the silhouette improves instantly. Oh! Maybe a venetian mask?

Her phone vibrates, and she hides a small smile as she reaches for it, already anticipating the silly cat meme of the day. Since she successfully negotiated a hard limit, he’s been making them count, alternating between maximum cuteness and absurdity. Only the best for my Lady.

She’s greeted by Lila’s smirk, surrounded by the smiling faces of her friends. Marinette’s gaze drifts to the text accompanying the newly shared post.

@alya.ladyblogger Movie night! And a pretty special one at that – got to enjoy a scoop of what was going on behind the scenes thanks to a certain someone having insider connections ;) #girlsnightout

Hey Marinette!
Hope you had a great weekend <3

So

Lila’s planning another party next week, and she asked me to extend an invitation

No terms or conditions apply

quite the party planner huh

Is that a no?

i don’t know how much clearer I can be

i want nothing to do with her

Okay :/

But

You’ve been kind of withdrawn

People miss you when you’re not around, you know that, right?

my new project’s been keeping me busy

Alright

Just remember to make time for self-care

You work too hard girl

don’t worry

finally making some progress on my portfolio IS selfcare

Okay

alya

i know you reaching out is coming from a well-meaning place

and i do appreciate that

but i’d appreciate it more if you stopped trying to get me to hang out with lila

I get that

It’s just

It looks like Lila is going to make girl’s night a regular thing

I don’t want you to be left out, Marinette

✧✦✧
Sirius Noir: hawk moth is a dick

Sirius Noir: 3am akumas need to be cancelled forever

Sirius Noir: doesn’t he know I need my beauty sleep

Badylug: you were getting too pretty

Badylug: he had to stop you by any means necessary

Sirius Noir: !!!

Sirius Noir: You think I’m pretty????

Badylug: that’s the sleep deprivation talking

Sirius Noir: :3c

Sirius Noir: No takebacks.

Badylug: go to sleep

Sirius Noir: Good night, my Lady.

Badylug: good night chaton

The harsh light of the phone screen illuminates the darkened room, on the verge of hurting his eyes, and yet Adrien can’t stop staring, reading and re-reading their exchange.

“Plagg,” he whispers giddily. “She thinks I’m pretty.”

A noise of disgust answers. “You’re a literal model, it’s your job to be pretty.”

“Yeah, but...” Adrien is used to people remarking on his supposed beauty, even if it always leaves him feeling vaguely flustered. He’s never quite sure how he’s meant to respond when people compliment his good looks. Thanks, I grew them myself. “It’s different when she says it.”

Ladybug’s compliment leaves him flustered, too, but in a different way. It’s the kind of flustered that has him grinning like an idiot, with a blush spreading across his cheeks and not-evil butterflies in his belly. For all that he has promised not to act on his feelings anymore, they’re only growing in intensity the more time he gets to spend with her. His thoughts are consumed with every new revelation about the girl on the other side of the mask, with every glimpse of her dry wit, with every stray touch.

God, her touches.

It has always felt like the most natural thing in the world for Adrien to offer a constant stream of physical affection. Clinging is a childish habit, he knows, yet it’s one he’s never been quite able to shake, no matter how hard his parents tried to wean him off of it. But he managed to learn not to expect reciprocation.

Yet now Ladybug is responding in kind. All friendly hugs and warm palms on his back. When he leans into her, she leans back. Might even reach to scratch behind his ear to lure a purr. They used to embarrass him, but she finds them fascinating, so he indulges her.
Still.

It hurts, sometimes. That sweet anguish of almost, but not quite.

She seems entirely unaware of what she’s doing to him. Should he ask her to stop? He’s meant to be her friend, nothing more, and he’s not sure this is the way to do it.

But he doesn’t want her to stop.

He rolls onto his belly, burying his face in his pillow. Sleep. He needs sleep, even if it’s only an hour before he’ll have to get up again.

“Good night, my Lady,” he murmurs, turning off the phone screen.

And for all that he tries to stamp out the unwanted seeds of hope, they find a way to take root in his heart anyway. Like obnoxious weeds.

*She thinks I’m pretty.*

✧✦✧

“Up late last night, bro?”

Adrien sprawls into his seat, and rests his head on the table. It’s frankly a miracle that he was allowed out of the house today, looking as messy as he does. “How could you tell?”

“I’m psychic.” Nino grins. “So what kept you up?”

Adrien cracks open one bleary eye. “You’re the psychic, you tell me.”

His best friend’s grin grows sly, and he taps his chin, miming deep thought. Then he scrunches his nose, squeezing his eyes shut before letting out a gasp. “Ah! A vision! It comes to me! Could it be–? Why yes, it’s Adrien Agreste, staying up late, glued to his phone.” His voice drops to an ominous whisper. “Texting.”

“Texting?” Adrien clears his throat, trying to tame the unintended squeak. Nino’s not really psychic, he knows that, but his guess is spot-on nonetheless.

*Heh,* goes the part of his brain that never stops analyzing his surroundings for pun opportunities. *Spot on.*

“Yeah. That thing you’ve been doing non-stop lately.”

Pushing himself up to sit properly, he summons his most convincing smile and mixes it with a hint of exasperation. “Yes, with Nathalie. You know my schedule is a pain to coordinate.”

Nino arches an eyebrow. “In the middle of class?”

He shrugs. “My father expects me to be available at all times.”

“So Nathalie is secretly a meme connoisseur?” For all that the words carry hints of teasing, Nino’s expression has faltered, sly grin giving way to a genuinely confused frown.
And that gives Adrien pause, even as an effortless deflection is already sitting on the tip of his tongue.

No. Not a deflection. A *lie*.

A lie Nino is already on the verge of believing. Because his best friend trusts him, doesn’t expect him to exaggerate the stress of his home life, and Adrien has gotten very good at abusing that trust on a daily basis without being caught.

“Well,” he says at length, his mouth impossibly dry and an echo of his Lady’s voice in his ear. “Maybe it’s not all Nathalie.”

The grin returns full force, and Nino leans forward with an exaggerated eyebrow waggle.

There are secrets Adrien has no choice but to guard closely. Roles he has to play, expectations to meet, identities to keep. But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have any choices at all. Moments when he can either go with the flow and fall back on what he does best, or…

Or.

He could try being a little more authentic.

With his closest friends, at least.

“There’s this girl. At work.”

When the eyebrow wiggling intensifies, Adrien instantly starts to regret this *honesty* thing.

“Good morning, boys,” a voice sweet as sugar cuts in.

Adrien breathes a small sigh of relief when Nino’s attention is drawn toward Lila and the eyebrows cease their infernal wagging.

“Good morning, Lila,” he says, and Adrien echoes the greeting.

Her gaze sweeps over both of them and lands firmly on Adrien. “I’m throwing another party this weekend! What are the chances you’ll be able to make it to this one?”

“Slim,” he answers, honestly.

She smiles. “Promise you’ll try?”

“Sure,” he says, not-so-honestly. For all that he thinks Lila doesn’t deserve to be put through a public humiliation for her dubious method of achieving popularity, he can’t say he’s comfortable around her either. He’d rather save his limited number of persuasion attempts with his father for a chance to hang out with Nino or Mar–

His thoughts shy away from the name. No invitation from her will be forthcoming anytime soon, so there’s no point in dwelling on the hope for one.

Lila’s gaze swings back to Nino. “Your music was really awesome last time, but I was thinking for this one we could move the theme a little more into a pop direction–”

“We?” Nino asks with a tilt of his head.

“Well, yes.” Somehow the brightness of her smile is turned up a notch, rivaling the sun’s glare.
“As I said, you were awesome, so I’d love to have you back.”

Nino doesn’t answer right away, his gaze hooded. “…overhauling my playlist is going to cost extra.”

“Cost?” Lila echoes, eyes growing wide and lips pushing forward in a pout.

“Yeah. Sorry, dude, I don’t mind a favor here and there, but if this is going to become a regular thing, I have certain rates for that.” Nino’s smile is as pleasant as his voice, but there’s a hard sheen in his eyes Adrien has never seen before.

“Don’t I get a friend’s discount?” Lila asks, batting her eyelashes.

“Sure. It’s ten percent.” Nino pauses as her expression falls, hurt written all over it. “I mean, this isn’t an issue, right? You said your grandfather’s a billionaire.”

“Well,” she says with a sniff. “My inheritance is in a trust fund I won’t have access to until I’m married. He’s terribly old-fashioned, you know, the kind who doesn’t trust his granddaughters with money because he thinks we’ll spend it frivolously.” Her voice quivers. “God, I can just imagine the look on his face if I ask for money to spend on party planning.”

Nino shifts in his seat, squirming. “I’m really sorry you’re in that situation, Lila.”

“And I wasn’t going to say anything, but…” She leans forward, hair bouncing as she frantically looks around as if to check for eavesdroppers, and then she lowers her voice to a whisper. “You can’t tell this to anyone, but I’m distantly related to XY, and he’s always scouting for new talent. He has a habit of dropping into parties unannounced, but he’s a bit of a flake so I can’t make any promises. But still, just think, this is potentially a huge opportunity for you!”

What the hell.

This… this isn’t right. A white lie here and there, Adrien understands, but – she shouldn’t be getting Nino’s hopes up like this. Just as he tries to decide how to best speak up without outright calling her a liar, Nino shrugs.

“Well,” he says at length, face unreadable. “If XY ever does show up unannounced, I’m sure that as my friend you’ll let me know and I’ll improvise something to impress him.”

Lila pauses, lips pursed as if she’s bitten something sour. “He’s not easily impressed.”

“I’ll take my chances.” Nino smiles serenely. “So, am I still invited?”

The flash of rage on Lila’s face is gone as quickly as it appears, tamed into a carefree smile so fast Adrien can’t be sure it was even there. “But of course! Guess I’ll organize some other form of entertainment, then.”

“Can’t wait.”

As Lila flounces away, Adrien peers at Nino’s pensive expression, unsure what to make of it. When his friend notices his scrutiny, the slight frown quickly gives way to a lighthearted grin.

“So. A girl at work, huh?”
Badylug: freedom!!!
Badylug: and nap time
Sirius Noir: :(  
Sirius Noir: Sure, rub it in.
Badylug: sorry chaton
Badylug: how many hours do you have left to go with your tutors?
Sirius Noir: Five.
Badylug: oof
Sirius Noir: Big oof.
Badylug: your dad needs to learn what a healthy life work balance is
Sirius Noir: The balance isn’t too bad.
Sirius Noir: It’s just the alter ego throwing a wrench into things.
Badylug: relatable
Badylug: i’d offer to hang out tonight to cheer you up but you’ll probably want to sleep
Sirius Noir: Oh, I’m definitely passing out as soon as I hit the pillow.
Sirius Noir: But thank you for the offer <3
Sirius Noir: Tomorrow?
“Marinette, wait up!”
She startles, looking up from the screen— and is grateful that she does, because she is only two steps away from a lamp post. Turning to look over her shoulder, she spots Nino hurrying to catch up with her.
“Oh! Um. Thanks for the save.”
He slows to a halt next to her, catching his breath and grinning. “Bold of you to challenge fate like that,” he says, gesturing to the phone in her hand. And he’s right, texting and walking do not mix well with her infamous clumsiness.
“What can I say,” she says, resolutely ignoring the way her cheeks grow warm with embarrassment. “I like to live dangerously.”
“Consider me awed by your valor.” The corner of his eyes crinkle as he smiles. “Still. Can I convince you to let me walk you home? I know you can take on the lamp posts by yourself, but I promise to have your back all the same.”
Marinette sticks out her tongue, then lets her gaze wander behind him, expecting to see Alya.
But she’s not there.

“Um, sure,” Marinette says, not quite certain what to make of this. While she hangs out with Nino on a regular basis, she can’t remember the last time it was just the two of them. Maybe he’s here to take over a shift of Akuma watch in Alya’s stead? Not that Marinette needs it much anymore, but Alya hasn’t quite shaken that newly developed habit of hovering. “Isn’t your home the other way though?”

“It is,” he says. “But I’m going to get myself some pastries at your parents’ bakery. It’s been a while since you brought any to class and I’m going through withdrawal.”

*He doesn’t mean it that way.*

Marinette nods and bites back the prickly retort to what is likely an imagined rebuke. Nino’s not really chiding her for not bringing treats to class anymore.

Right?

“Alright,” she says, “I’m sure my parents can fix that. We’re having a macaroon special today, so there’s sure to be lots of flavors to choose from.”

Nino’s face brightens, yet uneasy silence still descends when they start walking side by side.

For all that she has decided to put herself first for once, it’s hard to shake that nauseating twist of her gut that tells her she’s being selfish and a bad person. How did all these favors somehow turn into obligations in her heart? Is she going too far by rejecting them all? Swinging from one extreme to the other?

It’s not like she’s stopped sharing the bakery’s leftover treats entirely. It’s just that these days she’d rather save them for her partner, whose face never fails to light up in delight when presented with food. Turns out her kitty is a sugar addict, and with the way they are gallivanting around Paris, they both need the extra calories.

And she still helps people when it brings her joy, like with Mark and Nathaniel’s comic book, or when she beta-tested Max’s new video game.

“Enemy ahead,” Nino says.

“What?” Marinette asks, and walks into his outstretched arm.

“They truly are devious,” he says, nodding toward the lamp post he’s shielding her from. “Sprouting out of the ground when you least expect it.”

Marinette cannot help but laugh and takes a step back. “Sorry. And thanks. Guess my thoughts are elsewhere today.”

“Can I offer a penny for them?”

“They’re not that interesting.”

Nino doesn’t answer right away, appearing to weigh his words. “And yet I see you withdrawing into them a lot more lately. Why is that?”

Marinette opens her mouth – and then keeps it open, soundless, because what can she say to that?

He offers her a smile, kind and sympathetic. “Alya thinks it’s still heartbreak. But I’m starting to
think it’s something else.” Pause. “Someone else.”

When she still doesn’t answer, he pressing on, even as his words grow as clumsy as she is, stumbling all over each other.

“Marinette, I mean – I’ve seen this before, right? Alya hasn’t, but we’ve known each other for a long time and I recognize this. You’ve always been a great girl. An awesome girl. But – this last year – it’s like you levelled up, right? But now you’re – you’re going back to how you used to be, when Chloe used to get you down all the time, and…” He exhales sharply. “And I don’t want to just watch. Not again.”

Oh.

“Really?” Marinette whispers.

He nods, golden gaze burning with sincerity. “Yeah. I mean – I like to think I levelled up this last year, too. And I’m done keeping my head down.” He hesitates, then asks, “Is it Chloe?”

Marinette shakes her head, not trusting herself to speak.

“Lila,” he says softly.

“Yes.” Her voice breaks and she hates how desperately pathetic it sounds. “Do you believe me? That she’s a liar?”

He nods, yet breaks their eye contact to stare at the floor. “I guess I owe you an explanation for why I didn’t at first.”

“…there’s an explanation?”

“Well. Kind of. And I’m not claiming it’s a good one, or that it’s an excuse, but – it is what it is.” The smile he offers her is small and lopsided. “I thought she might be like Adrien.”

“Adrien?” And for the first time in too long, hearing the name isn’t accompanied by a stab of pain. Instead, indignation ignites like fireworks, one outraged thought chasing another. What a ridiculous comparison! Adrien is kind and sweet and nothing like that lying witch!

“I mean, you hated Adrien at first sight, too, and I figured – what if this is just another misunderstanding? No offense, but you can be kind of, um. Hotheaded. And if I’d listened to your judgement on that first day, I’d have missed out on getting to know my best friend.”

“But she’s–!”

“I know,” he says softly. “I realize that now. Really, the fact that you stayed angry at her told me something was genuinely wrong. And Lila… she’s been giving me bad vibes. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been so quick to dismiss you.”

Marinette’s breath catches at the words she’s been longing to hear from someone, anyone, and then they both go tumbling to the ground. For all that Nino hides a surprisingly sturdy body under those baggy shirts, he’s no match for her Ladybug strength when she throws her arms around him in a desperate bear hug.
I got attached to the idea of Guardian!Nino back when Carapace was first revealed but the concept of temporary heroes hadn't been introduced yet. While I know it will never be canon now, he lives on in my heart, and it shapes my characterization of him.

*Give me the protective turtle boy being properly protective Zag!!!*
**Promise**

Chapter Notes

Surprise update!
I was really blown away by the positive reception the last chapter got, and I really can't put into words how happy it makes me to see this dumb turtle boy getting so much love from you guys 😍 Not only was that the most comments I've received on a chapter ever, this fic is also approaching a kudos milestone. So, to celebrate, I'm releasing this next chapter two days early. Thank you so much for all your support, everyone, it means so much to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Sorry!” Marinette chants like a prayer as she helps Nino back to his feet after her overenthusiastic hug. The unrelentingly critical voice in her head points out that slamming into people is a poor way to keep allies. “Sorrysorrysorry.”

“It’s alright, dudette.” He dusts off himself off, an easy smile on his lips. “Have you been working out?”

“N-not really.” A rush of memories swarms her mind, all those little moments when she’d taken idle notice of Ladybug’s strength becoming her own. Has she already crossed a suspicious threshold? “Just – just got excited.”

“I noticed.” Smiling wryly, he reaches to adjust his hat, pulling it back into place. Then he gives her a long, searching look. “This really has been getting to you, huh?”

“Yeah,” Marinette says softly, gaze dropping to the ground. “It really has.”

He doesn’t answer straight away, but something warm brushes against her scalp, tousling her hair. When she realizes he’s gently tugging her pigtails back into place, she glances up through her eyelashes.

“If – if you changed your mind, Nino – does that mean Alya…?” She trails off when his face falls. But then, she already knew the answer before her lips fully formed the question. Alya is not one to keep quiet about her opinion, or to let Nino speak for her.

If she had changed her mind, she would not hesitate to be here.

“Alya can be…” Nino pauses, and it’s evident he’s choosing the most euphemistic words that comes to mind. “Tenacious. You know how she is once her mind is made up.”

“Yeah,” Marinette says. “And she’s made up her mind that I’m just being mean for no reason.”

“I wouldn’t put it like that exactly…”

“Oh, no, you’re right. Because I’m jealous.” Marinette presses her lips shut before more bitterness escapes. This isn’t fair to Nino. He’s trying to be kind and she’s spewing venom aimed at someone else. But now that there’s a crack in the dam she’s built around herself, it’s not as easy to hold back the flood.
Once again, he falls silent as he weighs his words. “Everyone has their reasons to act the way they do,” he says slowly. “And I get why having yours dismissed as petty jealousy hurts, and I’m not trying to make excuses for that. But – just as I had my reasons, Alya has hers, too.”

“What are they?” It comes out as a challenge, but it’s not meant to be. At heart, it’s a plea. Please. Please tell me there’s a reason. Say something that will make my best friend abandoning me like this stop hurting.

Nino opens his mouth, on the verge of saying something – yet then he shakes his head, apologetically raising his hands. “I’m sorry, Marinette. Boyfriend confidentiality agreement.”

“Of course,” she mutters, barely biting back a more acidic retort. She gets it, she truly does. Nino can’t tell secrets that are not his to share, and Marinette is the last person who has any right to get angry at someone for keeping secrets, and yet–

The red-hot anger in her veins doesn’t care about that at all.

Deep breaths.

Remember the butterfly you can’t afford.

“Lila is very good at figuring out the thing you want most,” Nino says gently. “And then dangling it in front of you. She did it to me, and she’s doing it to Alya. It’s not an easy thing to turn down.”

Marinette closes her eyes, gulps down a lung-full worth of fresh air, and opens her eyes with a smile. Because Nino is here, right now, telling her that he believes her, and that alone is worthy of joy.

“Thank you,” she says softly, and means it. “For reaching out. It means a lot.”

He brightens. “Of course! No bro left behind.”

And that makes Marinette giggle. “Are we bros?”

“Well.” His smile turns a little self-conscious. “I know we rarely hang out one-on-one and that I’ve maybe not been the best bro lately, but… yeah, I like to think we are.”

“I’d like to think we are, too.”

Nino beams at her, and Marinette is pretty sure the bright expression is mirrored on her face.

“And, for what it’s worth,” he says, “I’ll talk to Alya. Just. Give me a few days to prepare.” He laughs self-consciously, rubbing the back of his neck. “She’s hard to argue with.”

“Yeah,” Marinette says with a sigh. “I know. I’ve kind of given up on trying to convince her, so – maybe you’ll have more luck. I guess if anyone can convince her, it’s you…” She pauses, and swallows the thickness closing in on her throat, mustering a grin to lighten the mood. “Assuming this isn’t a cunning ploy to get all of the macarons on the house today, anyway.”

“Ah! My evil scheme has been uncovered!” He clutches his chest, and she can’t help but laugh. “But speaking of pastries, I’d like to let it be known that I accept them as a viable form of currency when it comes to paying for my DJ-ing services. You know. If you ever want to remind everyone who the best party planner in class is.”

Marinette peers at him as her mind is taken back to a memory of Nino showing off the website of
the professional camera he’s saving up for. He keeps a spreadsheet tracking his progress, and was excitedly telling them that he’ll only need five more gigs to afford it. “You know I’m joking, right? You’ll get them for free anyway. All you have to do is ask, we have plenty left over at the end of the day.”

“Yeah, but – friendship discount. Quid pro bro.”

Marinette half-groans, half-laughs, burying her face in her hands. “Please never utter that phrase again, I beg you. I’ve overdosed on puns.” And yet, part of her is already calculating ways she can casually drop that one into a conversation with Chat. God, she really needs to stop spending so much time with him, he is a terrible influence on her sense of humor.

“Don’t knock my brocabulary,” Nino says with a grin. “Besides, it’s Adrien’s fault, he’s a terrible enabler.”

All her bubbling warmth is blown away by an icy wind at the reminder of him, smile fading as she looks at the ground.

Nino doesn’t say anything for the length of a heartbeat, then says, “Sorry. That’s another thing I wanted to talk about, but I see it’s not the time yet.”

Marinette glances up, worrying at her lip. “You mean Adrien?”

“Yeah, but – it’s fine. It can wait.”

“What exactly did you mean to talk about?” Her eyes widen as a horrible thought strikes. “Is he okay?”

“Yes! Sorta. It’s fine, really, you don’t have to–“

“What do you mean sorta!” Oh, if Lila’s lies did something to him, Marinette will end her!

“He misses you,” Nino rushes to say to stem her rising alarm. “That’s all. I wanted to talk about this avoidance thing you’ve been doing. Which, to be clear, is totally understandable and I wasn’t going to try to talk you out of it.”

Oh.

Adrien misses me.

“So what would you have me do about my ‘avoidance thing’?”

“Well.” He hesitates, then smiles crookedly. “It’d be great if you would stop vaulting over hedges to get away from him.”

Her cheeks grow heated. “That was one time!”

“I won’t lie, that was a hella impressive move. But it also really hurt Adrien’s feelings, Mari. And I get he hurt yours first, and you don’t owe him anything, but – dude’s homeschooled, alright? I don’t think he’s ever experienced a rough patch in a friendship before, and it’s freaking him out.”

Marinette says nothing, letting that knowledge settle in her belly, in her heart. It feels… nice, in a horribly vindictive sort of way, and she doesn’t like that at all. It’s not like she wants him to suffer, it’s not his fault he loves someone else, but part of her can’t help but revel in knowing that her absence affects him. I matter, it whispers. My love matters. I’m more than a blip on his radar.
“Okay,” she says softly. “No more vaulting. Promise.”

“That’d be cool,” Nino says with a nod. “But more than anything, I think if you could just give him a sign that things will work out if he just stopped poking them, that you’ll be friends again… that would really help calm him down.” Pause, and then his voice gains a nervous edge. “You are going to be friends again, right?”

Marinette startles at the genuine worry in his expression. “Y-yes! I mean – I hope so! I don’t want to avoid him forever, it’s just…” She trails off, voice dropping to a soft murmur. “It hurts, Nino. When I see him. And I don’t want to be Akumatized.”

Paris can’t afford it.

His palms ghosts over shoulder, squeezing gently. “I get that. Completely. Just – let him know that this isn’t forever, alright? That’s all I ask.”

✦✦✧

The next morning, Adrien finds a little paper box on his desk, tied with a pink bow.

He frowns and glances around, uncertain if it’s been mistakenly left there.

“Bro,” Nino says, stretching in his seat with the smuggest look on his face. “It’s for you.”

“It is?” He frowns, then tugs at the ribbon to open it.

There’s a macaron inside.

His eyes widen in excitement, gaze swinging to the last row he’s spent the last weeks doing his best to avoid looking at. Marinette is watching him, a small smile on her lips, and suddenly the sun shines a little brighter. She raises her hand in a wave.

But then she looks away again.

Confused, he drops his gaze back to the gift he’s holding close to his chest, only then noticing the butterfly etched into the purple macaron. When he gingerly lifts the treat out of the box, he spots two lines written on the bottom.

It’s not you I’m running from.

I look forward to the day we can be friends again without unwelcome company.

✧✦✧

“So.” Alya peers at her boyfriend curled up in the bus seat as if he’s dozing. It certainly is early enough in the morning for him to be sleepy, their field trip having forced them to get up an hour earlier than usual. “Any reason in particular you’re trying to avoid talking to me?”
Nino nearly bolts out of his seat, whirling around to face her with wide eyes. “What?”

She laughs softly and pokes his chest. “If you’re trying to pretend to sleep, don’t give yourself away so easily.”

He slumps back, muttering petulantly. “I wasn’t pretending, you just nearly gave me a heart attack with that accusation.”

“U-huh. So you haven’t been weird around me the last few days.”

Nino doesn’t answer straight away, gaze hooded as he draws his cap deeper over his face. “Look, this isn’t the time or the place for this conversation.”

“So there is a conversation to be had,” she points out with a frown.

“Yes, but–” He makes a frustrated noise. “Babe, you know I like to have time to gather my thoughts. This is too important to mess up, so please stop pushing. Okay? Just for a little while.”


And she even means it. At that moment.

But for all her good intentions, Alya has never been able to explain the meaning of ‘stop pushing’ to that that insatiable curiosity monster inside of her.

And it’s definitely wide awake now.

✧✦✧

“You can’t be serious.”

Nino exhales a frustrated breath, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. “Look, it’s just not like Marinette to hold a grudge this long.”

“Yes, it is,” Alya counters. “Look, I love my girl, I really do, but Adrien drives her crazy like nothing and nobody else does. Haven’t you seen the way her whole face scrunches up whenever he so much as mentions Kagami?” That girl might be a bit of an ice queen, but that doesn’t warrant Marinette’s disproportionate loathing.

“It’s different with Lila,” he says. “Marinette hates her, Alya. And I’m starting to see why.”

“Oh, right. Because of the,” Alya raises her hands and curls her fingers into air quotes, “bad vibes.”

Golden eyes narrow, and Nino’s voice grows colder than Alya has ever heard it before. “I told you I wasn’t ready to have this conversation. Don’t mock me for not being at my most eloquent when you’re the one choosing to put me on the spot.”

“I’m not mocking y–“

“Yes. You are. And you always do this–”

“No, I don’t!”
“–but just because I’m not as good at debate as you are, that doesn’t mean I’m an idiot!”

Alya flinches and silence falls as he looks as taken aback by his outburst as she feels.

“…I don’t think you’re an idiot, Nino,” she whispers.

He takes a deep, shuddering breath. “Then maybe take what I’m saying seriously.”

“Okay,” she says soothingly, and reaches to take his hand. It lies limp and unresponsive in her grasp, even when she squeezes. “I’m listening.”

He gazes at her for a long moment, then makes another frustrated noise. “Look. I understand why you don’t want to have to choose, but Marinette is really hurting over this. Don’t you realize this could drive a real wedge between you two?”

“Of course I realize that!” Recognizing that she just raised her voice, she tempers it to be more gentle. “Why do you think I’m trying so hard to fix it?”

“And how’s that working out?”

Alya’s lip grow thin and she says nothing.

“You know,” he says softly. “Someone pretty cool once said that the only thing needed for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. Compromise is good and all, but not when one side is malicious.”

“But Lila’s not malicious,” Alya says, and cannot help but let her frustration bleed into her tone. “And it’s not fair to ask me to write her off as that with no evidence. She’s Ladybug’s best friend, for god’s sake! Ladybug isn’t friends with bad people!”

“Allegedly Ladybug’s best friend.”

“No. Not just allegedly. And you know that! She knows things nobody but a Miraculous wielder would know!”

Alya’s breath hitches, that painful memory that’s always on her mind these days bubbling to the surface.

✧✦✧

“Thanks again for agreeing to another interview, Lila,” Alya said with a smile as she adjusted the settings on the camera. “Your first one was a huge hit, and I’ve got a list of reader questions a mile long. People are pretty eager to know more about the savior of Paris.”

Lila returned the smile, absently smoothing her bangs. “Well, I’m not allowed to talk too much about personal stuff. Ladybug’s pretty protective of her privacy. Even though, speaking completely off the record…” She winks. “I’ve got some major tea to spill.”

“Weell,” Alya said, playfully elongating the vowel. “I’d love to hear more about tea. Off the record, of course. And I promise it won’t spill any further than me.”

Lila pursed her lips, an unreadable expression on her face, and Alya’s heart dropped straight to
her stomach. Oh no. Had she probed too hard? She didn’t want to come off as some crazed fangirl, or make Lila feel like she was only trying to get close to her because of her connection to Ladybug.

But aren’t I?

Well, maybe a little. But Lila was a genuinely fascinating person in her own right, and they were sure to be fast friends anyway.

This opportunity was just the lucky cherry on top.

Then Lila smiled, and Alya’s nerves settled down.

“Alright, you didn’t hear this from me, but – you know that new fox hero?”

Alya grew perfectly still. “Rena Rouge?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“Do–“ She cleared her throat. “Do you know who she is?”

“You mean as a civilian? No. But let me tell you, behind the scenes…” Lila let out a trilling laugh. “She’s an absolute disaster. Got herself and half the team Akumatized on Hero’s Day. Ladybug’s seriously considering replacing her with someone else.” She shrugged. “After all, there are much more worthy candidates for wielding that particular Miraculous around.”

Time stood still, every heartbeat roaring like thunder in her ears.

Breathe.

Act normal.

“Really?” Alya asked, somehow choking out a breathless laugh. “That bad?”

“Quite.” Lila tilted her head, a slightly puzzled frown on her face. “But as I said, completely off the record, please. Ladybug hasn’t yet decided what to do about her, and I wouldn’t want to be responsible for rumors of discord on the team. Hawkmoth might take advantage!”

“Well.” Alya’s mouth was impossibly dry, yet she forced herself to smile cheerfully. “Any chance you might put in a good word for her getting another chance? Call me sentimental, but I kind of have a soft spot for her.”

“Oh. You’re a fan, huh?” Lila’s lips split into a wide Cheshire smile, her tone indulgent. “I’ll see what I can do.”

✧✦✧

“There’s no footage of that fight,” Alya says, clenching her hands into fists, then forcing herself to relax. “The only ones who know how Rena Rage was created are those who were there and must have told her.”

“She could have been watching,” Nino says with a frown.
“How? Half of Paris got Akumatized and forgot what happened that day, and the other half was in hiding! And she wasn’t even in Paris!” She blinks back against the sting in her eyes. “And she’s right, Nino. I did fail, and Ladybug is mad at me. I – she always used to make time for me, but now she avoids me. You and I haven’t been called to help since Hero’s Day!”

“Well, maybe they didn’t need us since, she and Chat Noir seem to be managing fine on their—“

“Nino!” Alya shouts. “If you’re going to ask me to trust your gut feeling, then how about you consider trusting mine! Ladybug is actively going out of her way not to acknowledge me!” Miserably wrapping her arms around her waist, she whispers, “She always used to – to give me a wink, or a nod, or something. But now she just swings away, even when I know I caught her attention.”

Nino takes a deep breath, hesitantly reaching to brush his fingers along her shoulder. “Look, babe, I get it, you know I do. Being a hero is fun and all, but—“

“Fun?” Alya repeats incredulously. “Fun? Nino, it’s a dream come true! And you can’t ask me to give that up and antagonize Ladybug’s best friend because you and Marinette got bad vibes. That’s not a fair thing to ask!”

“Yeah, well,” Nino says, gaze growing cold again. “Life’s not fair. And I didn’t take you for the kind of person who’d sacrifice her friends for ambition.”

She rears back, choking on an angry yell. Heavy silence falls, a crushing weight on her shoulders broken only by their harsh breathing.

“…you don’t mean that,” she whispers.

He exhales, shaking his head. “I don’t. But babe – whether you’re aware of it or not, this is the path you’re on. And I want to have your back, but there’s only so far I can go with you.”

God, has he ever looked at her like this before? So – so disappointed?

Blinking back the hurt, she reaches for his hand again. “Alright, can we just – just stop? Please? Let’s forget this happened, okay?”

“Alya,” he says softly, “You can’t keep avoiding—“ His eyes grow wide, and suddenly he yanks her close, turning to shield her with his back. “Watch out!”

“Wha—?”

His arms grow impossibly cold, and a sudden chill runs down her body. It’s a familiar chill, one she’s felt before, and the experience still haunts her nightmares.

And then his poisonous voice whispers in her ear.

So much pain, so much anguish. All these failures about to catch up with you. Yes, it would be much nicer to forget your troubles, wouldn’t it? Turn back the clock and start over with a clean slate.

I can make that happen.

Oblivio.
So. Alya.
I've seen many variations on Alya's characterization post-Chameleon, but what I've rarely seen touched upon is just how much genuinely believing Lila to be Ladybug's best friends alters the stakes for her. It's no longer "Alya's BFF vs. the new girl", it's "Alya's BFF vs. Ladybug's BFF" - in other words, "Marinette's friendship vs. Alya's dream of being a (fulltime) superhero". It's the reason I've been holding off on introducing evidence of Lila being a liar. I want to see Alya actually grapple with the question of what is more important to her without objective evidence of Marinette being right tipping the scales.

As always, many thanks to my betas Hari and Ziri, and also a shoutout to Keyseeker whose comments inspired me to integrate Oblivio into this story.
Denial

Chapter Notes

As always, many thanks to my betas Ziri and Hari for putting up with my nonsense. Such as yeeting this chapter at them three hours before it’s meant to be published. Go check out their fantastic work <3

“Ladybug, watch out!”

He surges forward before his mind even fully registers that he’s moving. Instinct guides him, every fiber of his being filled with purpose. Protect. At any cost. His Lady’s safety is the most important thing in the world, far more important than his own. Only she can heal what Hawkmoth and his servants have destroyed, and only she can purify the butterflies.

Yet even if that was not so, Chat Noir knows he could never stand by and watch her get hurt.

Heat sears his back–

✧✦✧

“I’m Marinette.”

The sound those syllables tastes just right, and something inside of her shifts into place like it’s meant to be. Yes. That’s my name.

“Marinette Dupain-Cheng!” She raises her gaze from the ID in her hands with an excited grin on her face. “That’s me!”

The boy sweeps into a theatrical bow, and that, too, stirs recognition. His bright green eyes are sparkling with good humor. It’s a lovely shade, that green. “Pleased to meet you, Marinette.”

She can’t help but widen her grin, pleasant warmth tingling in her belly.

When he straightens his back, he pats down his pockets and brightens when he finds what he’s looking for. “Adrien,” he reads aloud. “Adrien Agreste.”

“Well,” she says, and her fingertips pinch an imaginary gown as she drops into a curtsy. “Nice to meet you, too, Adrien.”

✧✦✧

“Do you think we’re…?” Marinette trails off, blush deepening.
“Hm?”

More than just a superhero team?

“Nothing, never mind,” she says and opens her contact list, hiding her phone background. The one that shows them both as superheroes soaring through the night sky, her fingertips barely brushing his tail as she reaches for it. His face is lit up with laughter, the photograph having captured joy that makes her heart flutter.

But it’s not lost on Marinette that she’s the one chasing after him.

✧✦✧

They huddle close, hardly daring to breathe as the creature passes their hiding place, every muscle in her body coiled to spring at a moment’s notice. Her fingers dig into his shoulders so hard that her knuckles are white, but she can’t bring herself to relax them.

Only when the villain’s footsteps fade does Marinette allow the tension to ease.

A deep, rumbling sound fills the air, and he looks as startled by the purr as she is.

✧✦✧

“Hey,” he says casually while they’re running for their life. “You’re really amazing and I think I’m in love with you.”

The sound she makes in response to that is barely human, a strange high pitch caught somewhere between a pterodactyl shriek and relieved laughter because who just says that but also oh my god, yes, me too, thank you for saying it out loud.

✧✦✧

—and then it's a very different kind of heat.

He’s enveloped by warmth and bright pink light, fingers entwined with someone else’s. There’s the most wonderful taste in his mouth. It’s like his favorite scent, but more. Unthinking, he parts his lips, a dizzying explosion of his senses nearly bringing him to his knees. The drum of his heartbeat drowns out the world around him until this is all there is and nothing matters but her.

A purr rumbles through his body and when she lets out a soft gasp, he opens his eyes as far as his heavy lids allow. His vision is filled with a vibrant shade of blue, the kind of blue he could happily drown in, and Adrien smiles because he knows this dream.

He’s had it many times before.
…but why is he dreaming? Weren’t they just fighting an Akuma?

Oh.

He must have gotten knocked out.

As if suddenly disgusted by his weakness, the lady of his dreams shoves him back, retreating with her palms clasped over her mouth. He raises a hand to reach for her, but startles when an unexpected sound reaches his ears.

“Oh my gosh,” Alya half-squeals, half-whispers, and his head jerks around to spot her staring at them with wide eyes, her phone held up in front of her. Nino is standing behind her, an equally bemused expression on his face.

Chat clears his throat, blinking in confusion. Reality reasserts itself and yet somehow still refuses to make sense. His gaze wanders over their surroundings. It’s definitely the same rooftop where they were just fighting the Akuma, and yet it's nowhere to be seen. “Uh. Hi. You guys haven't seen a supervillain named Oblivio, have you?”

Nino winces, as does Alya, both sharing a look with each other. “Yeah, dude, that was, um, us. I think.”

“Oh. Okay.” So his Lady has defeated the Akuma without him. Again. He might not quite remember what led him here, but he knows he got hit by Oblivio’s attack, so that must be what has ripped this hole into his memories.

His gaze is drawn back to his Lady. Far from standing triumphant, she’s staring at him, pale and wide-eyed.

Holding out his clenched fist, he says, “Pound i--?”

Suddenly it hits him that this is real. Not a dream. Which means--

The kiss.

That was real.


_I kissed Ladybug._

His brain doesn’t know how to process this information. All he can do is stare while his mind feebly tries to construct something resembling a coherent thought.

_I kissed--_

_We kissed._

_She kissed me back!_

How?

His somersaulting thoughts are interrupted by the beep of Ladybug’s earrings. She blinks as if coming out of a trance, then whispers, “I have to go.”
“No, Ladybug, please wait!” Alya calls out, rushing forward, but his Lady has already leapt away.

And she doesn’t look back. At either of them.

*But we kissed.* Doesn’t that mean something to her?

Oh.

Oh no.

It means he broke his promise.

✧✦✧

Ladybug flies through the sky, soaring, let*ting muscle memory and the whirr of her yo-yo’s string guide her. She doesn’t look where she aims, doesn’t care where she’s going, all she knows is that she needs to get away. Away from her racing thoughts, away from the traitorous fluttering in her belly, away from—

Him.

But the frantic beeping of her earrings reminds her that she cannot run forever. That at its current trajectory, her flight is bound to end with her splattered on the pavement because Marinette can’t soar like Ladybug does. So she lands on a rooftop with a graceless thud, catching her breath.

Her heart is hammering against her chest, so hard her ribcage feels fit to crack at any moment. She wants to pretend it’s just from physical exertion but she knows it’s not. Ladybug can dance across the sky for hours without ever tiring.

Fine.

This is fine.

Nothing to worry about.

She forces out a laugh, and it’s strained and shaky. But if she can laugh about it, then that means it’s okay. Just another one of her silly freak-outs over nothing. The kind she always laughs about in hindsight.

That’s what this is.

*Nothing.*

It’s not like it’s the first time an Akuma has brought her and Chat’s lips together. It happens. Nothing to worry about.

*But it didn’t feel like this before,* whispers a voice in her head that Marinette would like nothing more than to strangle, incorporeality be damned.

“Ladybug!”

No. Nononono.
She closes her eyes just as there’s a thump behind her, and it's nothing like Chat’s normally stealthy footfalls. Of course he ran after her, how could he not run after her, and now he will want to talk about this, and then she will have to think and dwell–

“I’m about to turn back,” she says, and scans the rooftop for cover to duck behind. But it’s barren, not even a chimney in sight.

“I – I know, I’m sorry, I just–” There’s panic in his voice, genuine dread, and that makes her pivot to look at him. Because he’s her partner and she cannot bear to leave him afraid. His eyes are wide, the pupils blown wide. “I’m sorry. I didn’t – I didn’t mean to break my promise, you know that, right?”

She blinks slowly, trying to process the worry written plain on his face. Shouldn’t he be ecstatic? Isn’t this what he always wanted?

Her lips form a silent oh when understanding dawns.

“Oh, kitty, no,” she says softly. “You’re not responsible for what Akumas make us do. I know that.”

His answering smile is fleeting and shaky. “Okay. Good. So you’re okay?”

“I’m okay,” she says just as her earrings frantically sound the alarm that only seconds are left.

Still he doesn’t move, gaze refusing to leave her face as he presses the question. “We’re okay?”

So Ladybug lungs to cover his eyes with her hand, pink blaze flaring to life at her fingertips. “Close your eyes!”

“Okay,” he whispers, ears pressed flat against his hair in contrition. “I’m sorry, my Lady, I know I shouldn’t have followed. But I – I don’t want things to go back to the way they used to be.”

Neither do I.

“They won’t,” she murmurs soothingly as the last of Ladybug’s suit dissolves, leaving only Marinette behind. “Keep those eyes closed until I’ve fed my kwami, okay?”

As a little red blur dives into her bag to dig out the cookies, Chat’s head bops up and down in a nod so frantic that the fringe of his hair brushes against Marinette's fingers. Hissing in a barely audible breath, she snaps back her hand and tries to ignore the shiver.

Ladybug has never touched him before without the impenetrable layer of her suit dulling the sensation.

Well.

Except with her lips.

Lips that are still tingling with the memory of him.

Shut up, brain.

As uncomfortable silence settles around them, Chat dutifully keeps his eyes – and for once, even his mouth – closed. So there is nothing to distract Marinette from the thoughts her evil jerk brain keeps shoving at her. Why does it have to keep pointing out how nice he felt, how warm, how safe? How–
“I understand you don’t feel the same way. So I’m... I’m going to stop hurting us both by constantly bringing up the question when I already know the answer.”

–how maybe her answer is not quite the same anymore.

And that’s not fair. It’s not fair to cleave to him just because he’s there. Her partner deserves better than to be offered a heart dragged through the mud. Not when Adrien still holds power over it, when the mere thought of him is enough to pierce it.

Adrien…

Her eyes widen in horror, head snapping up as her gaze swings to the thin line of Chat’s mouth, the way he’s keeping himself so perfectly still while his eyes are squeezed shut.

As always, his tail doesn’t lie. It’s hanging listlessly, tip lying on the ground.

Oh no.

“I’m sorry!” Marinette throws her arms around him. “I’m sorry I ran! That was – it was just too much, and Alya was right there, and, and, and I think she took a picture and it’s probably going to end up all over the internet and I just got overwhelmed and–”

“Woah.” One of his hands finds its way to the small of her back, burning like a brand and yet centering her. Comforting her. Like he always does. “Buginette, it’s okay.”

Even when it hurts him. When she hurts him.

“How do you do this?” Marinette whispers.

He loves her. She knows this. It’s plainly written in his adoring smiles and the soft glances she pretends not to see. Chat loves her the way she loves Adrien.

And if she’d woken up kissing Adrien only for him to run from her in horror, Marinette would have shattered right then and there, the shards fertile ground for butterflies.

“Do what?” Chat’s chin ruffles her hair, his voice soft and soothing.

“Just – how are you here? After everything? How do you always get up again when I push you away?” How can he be so eager to be her friend when she can’t even bring herself to have a conversation with Adrien? She’s endured one rejection, and yet he – “Doesn’t it hurt?”

Chat doesn’t answer, the quiet only broken by a beep of his ring, his countdown approaching its zenith as well.

“It does,” he says, voice thick. “But not having you for a friend would hurt worse. You mean the world to me, my Lady. These last few weeks with you have been…” He trails off just as his hold on her tightens. "I don't want to jeopardize that."

Marinette’s ungloved fingers wind through his hair, searching for that spot behind his ear, the one that never fails to produce a happy purr. Far from feeling fragile, her heart is roaring in her ear, loud and strong and demanding, a thousand mad impulses pulling at her. Stay in his embrace. Lean forward. Kiss him again.

But that wouldn’t be fair. To either of them.

So she rocks back on her heels, disentangling herself to the throaty sound of his disappointment.
“We’re okay,” she reassures him. “I promise. I have to go now, but I’ll text you as soon as I get home, okay?”

“Okay.” Even though his voice carries a hint of resignation, his tail doesn’t look quite so droopy anymore, the metal tip curling with cautious optimism.

She chooses not to dwell on the shape it’s forming.

“Tikki,” Marinette says with a glance toward her kwami to confirm the cookie is gone. “Spots on.”

Pink light washes over her just as his ring starts beeping more frantically. And even though she needs to leave now, still her gaze lingers. Because he can’t see her intentions with his eyes still squeezed shut, she reaches for his hand. Raising it to be almost level with her chest, she brushes her knuckles against his.

“Pound it,” she says softly.

As she turns to swing away, an echo of her words and a flash of bright green light follow her.

✧✦✧

“Babe?”

Alya blinks, Nino’s voice pulling her out of her reverie, and she turns to look over her shoulder. He’s looking at her with concern with his eyes – probably because she’s been standing motionless, doing nothing but silently stare at the roof’s edge.

Ladybug hadn’t even looked back.

“Told you she’s mad at me,” Alya says with a brittle smile, and regrets it instantly when Nino’s expression grows hooded. What is she doing? She just got the two of them Akumatized and the first words out of her mouth directed at him are about how she’s right.

“I don’t think that was about you,” he says stiffly.

“Hopefully,” she murmurs, clutching her phone to her chest. For all that she managed to capture a priceless scoop, sure to set the internet aflame, it doesn’t feel like a triumph at all.

Will Ladybug be angry if she publishes it? Angrier?

Maybe she should consult Lila, she’ll know what Ladybug would be comfortable with…

The reminder of their argument’s cause has her taking a hesitant step toward Nino. “Hey. Um. I’m – I’m really sor–”

A thud rings out behind her and Alya startles, pivoting back around. Chat Noir whirls his staff as it retracts, and tucks it away on his belt.

“Hello again.”

Alya blinks, taken aback, then blurts out, “Did satisfaction bring you back?”
“I wish.” His lips twitch in amusement. “No, I was reminded I had to do something. So, Alya, right? Can I borrow your phone?”

“Um.” She glances down at her treasured companion, screen still displaying The Kiss that would undoubtedly cement her blog’s reputation as the number one source for Ladynoir-related news. Alya rarely lends her phone to anyone, not even her friends who are used to her overprotective ways at this point. Yet unwilling to deny one of the heroes of Paris a request when she’s already on thin ice, she finds herself holding it out toward Chat Noir. “Sure.”

Claws clacking against the protective case, he plucks it from her hand. The slight frown on his expression melts away as soon as he catches a glimpse of the photo she managed to capture. His gaze darts hungrily over the screen, pupils growing wide and round. A wistful smile plays at his lips as he stares for a long moment, enraptured.

Then his thumb taps on the display.

“Annnd deleted.”

“What!?” Alya shrieks, snatching the phone back at once. Nonono, he can’t have–

“My Lady is a private person,” Chat Noir says, both his smile and his voice gaining a sharp edge as he turns to leave. “Journalism is all well and good, but nobody likes a paparazzi.”
Paparazzi.

The word bounces around in her skull, amplifying with every echo until all her brain’s synapses are singing with the same ugly dissonance.

Paparazzi.

Is that all Alya is in their eyes now? In Ladybug’s?

Paparazzi aren’t hero material, are they?

A warm touch brushes the small of her back and she blinks blearily. Nino is gazing down at her, expression inscrutable. He smiles – it’s half-hearted and a little crooked – and nods to the bus in front of them. She can spot some shadowed silhouettes already seated inside, but most of the class idles before the doors.

And then they are spotted. As one, the crowds moves to surround them, a barrage of questions on its collective lips.

“Are you alright?”

“–saw on the broadcast–“

“–did you do to–?”

Words have been Alya’s best friend from the moment she spoke her first one, a love affair that only deepened when she learned to read and promptly started devouring every book she could get her hands on. But now they fail her, her tongue unresponsive to her brain’s half-hearted prodding for it to move.

Her wide-eyed gaze is drawn to Lila. She’s not part of the mob surrounding her and Nino, keeping a few steps back, but as soon as their gazes meet, her eyes fill with concern. Her lips form a silent question, mouthing ‘What happened?’ just as Kim’s voice booms over the others.

“Why did you guys get Akumatized?”

You.

And that’s not fair, Alya knows that. It’s not Lila’s fault that she’s the bearer of bad news, or that there’s a growing rift in class. But some ugly, unfair part of Alya still wishes things would go back to how they used to be, to that warm, sunny day when Hero’s Day had still felt like a triumph. When Marinette was crowned their class’s everyday Ladybug by her crush, and everyone had cheered for her best friend.

“I–“ Alya chokes out, only for her mind to go blank. How can she explain what happened without making everything worse? “I’d… rather not…”

And then there’s that palm on her back again, radiating warmth and comfort.
“Alright dudes,” Nino says, sighing deeply. “We’re really sorry for what happened today, but this is really embarrassing and we’d rather not talk about it.”

“Is that why you wanted to erase everyone’s memories?” Marinette asks softly and Alya’s gaze swings to her. Shoulders hunched, Marinette has her arms wrapped tightly around her waist, misery in her voice.

“Yeah,” Nino says, with only a hint of a pause. “It’s just – okay, so we snuck off during the field trip and then you guys caught us playing Super Penguino. And you made fun of us, saying it wasn’t our age and all.”

It takes all of Alya’s willpower to keep her expression somber and not to burst into startled laughter.

“I don’t remember that,” Kim says, bemused.

“Yeah, well,” Nino counters. “That was kind of the point, bro.”

✧✦✧

“Super Penguino?”

It’s meant to be friendly teasing, but Nino shoots her a wounded look.

“I did the best I could.” The whisper teeters on the edge of being a hiss, the effort to keep his voice low to keep from being overheard clashing with his defensiveness. “You know I’m not good with being put on the spot.”

“I know,” she says softly, entwining her fingers with his. “Thank you. For coming up with something.”

But even though the tension eases from his shoulders and they keep holding hands, the rest of the bus ride home is spent in silence.

✧✦✧

Alya dreams of cold tendrils wrapping around her heart, squeezing so hard she cannot breathe. A whisper in her head gives voice to all her darkest thoughts, tempting her with sweet promises of revenge and absolution.

Who is she to take your dream from you? Who gave her the right? Come join me, Rena Rage.

She wakes with a cry, skin slick with sweat and his laughter ringing in her ears.

Your identity is a secret you must guard above all others, Rena Rouge.

Alya stifles a sob as the magnitude of her failure sinks in.
He knows.

He knows!

…or does he?

She was thinking about Rena Rouge when the butterfly caught her.

✧✦✧

Her gaze lingers on the back of his head, the bright red of his hat drawing her attention like a beacon. It stirs the tightly coiled knot of misery in her stomach which is the last thing she should be doing, but Alya’s never been one to wallow passively. She wants to go to him, do something, fix this.

But he wants space, so space she’s giving him, even though it’s hard.

So she channels all her rage and frustration into a singular thought, repeating on a loop in the hopes that the Moth bastard can hear her.

I hate you.

If she can’t be a hero, then maybe she’ll give being an anti-hero a try.

*I hate you and if you send me another butterfly, I will use it to wring your goddamn neck.*

“Should I be worried for Nino?”

Alya blinks and angles her head to look up just as Marinette slumps into the seat next to her. There’s five minutes to spare before class starts, one of her friend’s personal bests, and Alya suspects it may have come at the cost of her morning routine. Far from being neatly arranged and tied with a bow, Marinette’s pigtails are uneven today, more than a few strands escaping their confines.

“What makes you say that?” Alya asks.

“Well, you’re glaring at him with murder in your eyes.”

“I’m plotting ways to murder Hawkmoth.” Alya smiles, fully aware that it likely looks deranged. “Frankly, I’m tired of having butterflies breathing down my neck.”

Marinette blinks – and then she laughs. It’s a soft and tired sound, yet it has Alya sitting up a little straighter because it’s real in a way that Marinette’s laugh hasn’t been in quite some time. “Mood,” she says. “And that’s why I came prepared.”

Reaching into her bag, she rummages through it to gingerly lift a square white box. Setting it down in front of her, she then slides it over to Alya’s half of the desk, gaze downcast and a small smile playing on her lips.

“Emergency post-Akuma rations.”

Reverently brushing her fingertips over the box, Alya unfolds it to reveal a chou à la crème lightly
dusted with coconut flakes. Her favorite. Blinking rapidly, she leans against her best friend’s shoulder with a softly whispered, “Thank you.”

Marinette’s arm loosely wraps around Alya’s waist in a gentle squeeze. “So can I get in on this murder plot?”

“Mm,” Alya murmurs, closing her eyes. “You can be my alibi. And help me hide the body.”

“Deal.”

All the tension coiled within slowly seeps away, her boneless body all but melting into Marinette’s embrace. Her bestie really is a master of the Art of The Hug.

“It wasn’t Super Penguino,” Alya whispers.

Stray strands sticking out of her pigtail tickle Alya’s cheek as Marinette nods. “I figured.”

“…Nino and I had a fight.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Can’t. Girlfriend confidentiality agreement.” It’s not quite the truth, but close enough.

“Damn those NDAs,” Marinette says without missing a beat.

“They’re the worst.” Alya swallows the lump in her throat. More than anything she wants to talk to her best friend. Tell her everything. Confide about Rena Rouge and Hero’s Day and how she knows Lila is telling the truth.

And how yesterday was the death knell for her ever being a hero again.

But she can’t.

There’s too many secrets in the way.

“He’s still mad at me,” she whispers instead. “Everyone’s mad at me these days.”

Nino.

Ladybug.

You.

“He’ll calm down,” Marinette says. “You know he’s the chillest dude in the world.”

“Yeah,” Alya says with a huff, and tries not to dwell on what it means that Marinette chose not to say that she’s not mad. “Chillest dude in the world, and I made him mad. How’s that for an accomplishment? Frankly, it merits a trophy and a podium. World’s Most Infuriating Person.”

“Hey.” The hold on her waist tightens before it loosens, and then Marinette’s soft voice is accompanied by the feeling of fingers running through Alya’s hair. Which probably looks like even more of a mess than Marinette’s. “It’s my job to catastrophize, not yours.”

“Yeah, well.” Alya shrugs in misery. “I thought I’d give it a whirl. I see the appeal now.”

“Fine. But if you’re going to steal my job, I’m going to steal yours.” Marinette pauses to clear her
throat, and then changes the pitch of her voice to be throatier. “Girl, you need to get a hold of yourself.”

Huffing out a laugh, Alya throws her hands in the air, flailing as she cries melodramatically, “But this is a disaster!”

Marinette cracks up, and the two of them dissolve into breathless giggles.

“Alright, class,” Mme. Bustier calls out as the bell rings to herald the start of the school day. “Please quiet down.”

Alya pinches her lips shut while Marinette clasps her hands over her mouth, both struggling to stifle their laughter.

A few minutes into the lesson, a note with loopy handwriting is slid over to Alya’s half of the desk. emergency movie night?

✧✦✧

_Badylug has sent crying_cat.PNG_ 

Badylug: live footage me having to get up extra early

_Sirius Noir: Do my eyes deceive me? Could it be…?_

_Sirius Noir: a cat meme_

_Sirius Noir: As thrilled as I am, this had better not count against my daily quota._

Badylug: i’ll be generous and say it does not

_Sirius Noir: I rate it 6.3/10_

Badylug: wtf

_Badylug: how dare_

_Badylug: this is a 11/10 cute cat_

_Sirius Noir: Yes, but your caption and usage are derivative._

_Sirius Noir: I’m sorry, my Lady, I cannot compromise my integrity as a cat meme connoisseur._

_Sirius Noir: Not even for you._

_Badylug has sent ChatNoir_hissing.jpg_

_Sirius Noir: 9.1/10_

_Sirius Noir: It would have been 8.1/10 but that very handsome cat takes the image to the next level._

_Badylug: bias!!!!!!!_
Badylug: you are no true connoisseur, sirrah!

Sirius Noir: Them’s fighting words.

Sirius Noir: I hereby challenge you to a duel for my honor.


Badylug: choose a sane time i’m sleep deprived as is

Sirius Noir: Where’s your flair for the dramatic, my Lady?

Badylug: i wanna be in bed by 10 dont bully me

Sirius Noir: Fiiine.

Sirius Noir: Let’s meet at sunset.

Sirius Noir: Not quite as dramatic as midnight, but it will have to do.

Badylug: can’t wait to kick your butt <3

A heart.

Does it mean something? It probably means nothing. Right?

“Adrien.” He flinches guiltily, looking up to flash his prettiest, most apologetic smile. Yet Mme. Bustier still raises an eyebrow and holds out her open palm. Resigned, he hands over his phone to be sealed in a cabinet of the teacher’s desk.

“Busted,” Nino whispers.

Keeping his voice equally low, Adrien murmurs, “There’s no need to gloat.”

“True. I don’t need to.” Nino’s grin is far too gleeful, chasing away the dark cloud that’s hung over him all morning. “But I choose to.”

Okay, so maybe Adrien shouldn’t have bragged so much about being uncatchable. “Well, I’m glad my suffering is providing you joy,” he mutters. The words are laced with sarcasm, but he half-means what he’s saying. Nino is a quiet person in general, but he’s been too quiet all morning, and Adrien has no idea what to do about it.

His most successful strategy of cheering up his Lady involves wrapping her in his arms and purring up a storm. But Adrien’s not allowed to purr in civilian form, so he can’t do that with Nino.

He’s not even sure what exactly has Nino still upset. Surely getting caught playing Super Penguino isn’t so bad?

But telling someone their problems aren’t a big deal strikes Adrien as incredibly unhelpful.

“Why are you even checking your phone so much?” Nino asks quietly.

Instead of answering, Adrien sticks out his tongue, only for Mme. Bustier to clear her throat. While both their gazes dutifully swing toward the blackboard, Adrien’s thoughts refuse to obey the plea to pay attention, wandering back to do what they’ve done all morning.
Obsessing over That Damn Heart Emoticon.

Maybe his Lady is just trying to set him at ease. Reassure him that things between them truly are fine. Yesterday evening she seemed to be going out of her way to stay in touch, sending unprompted memes and bantering as if nothing has changed.

And that’s good. Great, even. Much better than her being mad.

But–

But.

It still feels like something has changed. How can it not?

They kissed.

Doesn’t she feel it, too? Just a little?

He sighs and shakes his head to dislodge that thought.

Hope is whispering in his ear, like it’s always done. Somehow it never fails to worms its way back into his heart, greedily collecting every stray scrap of affection to build visions of a better future with. Maybe, it whispers and forever sets him up for disappointment.

Maybe this time.

Maybe if I keep trying.

Maybe I can win her heart.

Maybe carries him through lonely dinners and cold shoulders. Maybe keeps the smile on his face when his roses are rebuffed. Maybe says it’s just a matter of finding the right performance to please.

And maybe, should he ever succeed in putting on the perfect show, he’ll be loved.

So what does it mean that she fell for him when he was stripped naked of all memories and showmanship?

✧✦✧

“You alright?” Adrien asks, fidgeting. “You’ve been quiet all day.”

Nino shrugs as he picks at his lunch. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just one of those days.”

Clearing his throat, Adrien solemnly lays a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “You know, even if they gave you a hard time for it, I don’t think anybody thinks less of you for playing Super Penguino.”

Nino freezes, turning to stare at him incredulously.

Oh no.

Was that bad? Should Adrien have thought of a more tactful way to bring it up? Maybe it’s like a
Marinette thing, where he’s supposed to just leave it be and give it ti–

Nino bursts into laughter, and reaches to pat Adrien’s shoulder in return.

“Thanks for trying to cheer me up, bro.”

✧✦✧

As soon as the last bell of the day rings, Adrien is standing at Mme. Bustier’s desk, all but jumping out of his seat and bounding over the table. He knows he’s moving too fast, pouncing too far, and Ladybug would scold him for being so careless with his identity. But he’s gotten through the whole excruciating day as Adrien, so now he’s impatient to be Chat Noir and talk to his Lady.

Mme. Bustier hands back his phone with a bemused look, and he makes himself wait until he’s out of the classroom before frantically navigating to the texting app reserved for her alone.

A flurry of new messages is waiting for him.

Badylug: hey

Badylug: rain check on our spar tonight? something came up

Badylug: chat?

Badylug: tomorrow?

Badylug: i promise

Badylug: i wouldn’t miss the opportunity to yeet you off the tower if it wasn’t important

Badylug: hey

Badylug: you know i’m just teasing when i say these things right?

Badylug: you mean a lot to me

Badylug: and also you’d land on your feet so

Badylug: no harm done right?

Badylug: chaton?

Adrien’s eyes widen, thumb hurrying over the screen as he types a quick answer to reassure her that he wasn’t ignoring her.

Sirius Noir: No, of course not!!

Sirius Noir: Well.

Sirius Noir: Harm was done, but not by you.

Sirius Noir: It’s with great shame that I must confess that my streak of not being caught by my teacher ended today.
He anxiously watches the screen for signs of her typing as he blindly makes his way down the stairs, only his feline grace saving him from a much faster and more painful descent. It’s rare to see Ladybug so flustered, this must have really gotten to her. That stupid hopeful part of him points out that this might mean she’s as afraid of losing him as he is of losing her.

*Maybe, maybe, maybe.*

He banishes the dizzying thought because he doesn’t *like* taking secret pleasure in his Lady’s distress.

His phone vibrates and he sags in relief, stopping to lean against one of the pillars as he savors her response.

Badylug: you realize i’m never going to let you live that down

Badylug: not after a certain cat bragged so much about being so very sneaky

Badylug: I’VE never had my phone confiscated

Sirius Noir: I sit in the front row!

Sirius Noir: It’s playing on hard mode!

Badylug: then you better git gud scrub

Sirius Noir: Wow.

Sirius Noir: The shade.

Badylug: <3

Adrien stares at the second heart emoji of the day, grinning so wide his cheeks hurt.

*Maybe, maybe, maybe…*

Badylug: brb

The brief flare of disappointment does nothing to extinguish this painfully bright spark of joy inside.

Just a friend.

They’re meant to be just friends.

*Stop now before you start making her uncomfortable again.*

But will he? He knows better now, he promised not to repeat his mistakes and he won’t. His thoughts are his own, and as long as they don’t turn into action, what’s so wrong with indulging his hopes?

“Adrien!”

He startles at the familiar voice, looking up. His breath catches.

Marinette is staring at him, something clutched to her chest. When she crosses the distance between them, her gait is strange and awkward, almost like a military march. Far from being tamed
into two neat ponytails, her hair is loose and a little wild today, framing her pixie face scrunched in determination.

When she speaks, it’s straddling the border of yelling. “Hello!”

“Hi,” he breathes, hardly daring to raise his voice for fear of scaring her off again.

“How are you?” Her face is rapidly growing pale.

“I’m… good.” He pauses, then gently adds, “And you?”

Marinette doesn’t answer right away, glancing down at the phone clutched so tightly in her hands that her knuckles are white. Yet something about it seems to set her at ease, tension draining from her shoulders as her posture loses some of its rigidity. “Better.”

“I’m glad,” he says softly. Pushing himself off the pillar he’s leaning against, he turns his full attention toward her.

Only to regret it instantly when she squeaks in distress.

Yet then she steels herself, smiling awkwardly. “I was wondering if – if you have time tonight.”

“Um. My schedule is clear this evening, yeah.”

“Would you like to join me – us! – for movie night?”

When his eyes widen in surprise – because really, that’s the last thing he expected to hear from her given the ruinous state of their friendship – she starts babbling.

“Basically! The thing is! After yesterday, Alya and Nino – they need cheering up after their fight, so I thought we could have a nice evening together? Just put everything aside and… and be like we used to…”

When she trails off into flustered silence, he murmurs, “Nino and Alya had a fight?” His friend’s sullen mood suddenly makes a lot more sense.

“Yeah,” Marinette says, nodding so fast she’s practically vibrating. “And – I want to cheer them up. And I thought – since you’re Nino’s best friend…”

*Maybe*, whispers hope as Adrien smiles. “I would love to help, Marinette.”

Chapter End Notes

This early update is brought to you by Keyseeker's lovely [analysis of Alya's character](#) which delighted me so much I can't even put it into words <3 Nothing inspires me more than seeing readers deeply engage with the story. Your comments and discussions are my muse's lifeblood, and I want to thank you all for the wonderful reception this fic has gotten.
Amelioration

Chapter Notes

I would like to formally thank Ziri for putting up with my nonsense and beta-ing at a moment's notice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So what do you want to watch?”

Alya snuggles deeper into the comforts of the couch, only to frown when something hard digs into her back. Turning around, she plucks away the decorative pillow to place in her lap as she ponders the question.

“Not sure, what’s on the menu?”

Marinette hums, flipping through the available movies as Alya examines the embroidered dog in her lap. Aggressively pink and studded with rhinestones, it’s plain to see that it’s the product of the imagination of a child.

Sewing pillow cases and decorating them were Marinette’s first tentative steps into exploring her passion. And because her parents are way too eager to show off their daughter’s talents, the Dupain-Cheng living room used to overflow with pillows – before Marinette put her foot down. Now only one of her pillows is on display at a time, rotated daily. Alya has yet to see a repeated design, and she loves them all for the childish charm they hold.

“Oh!” Marinette smiles as the poster of Majestia striking a heroic pose appears on screen. “I didn’t know the new movie was already available for streaming.”

Keeping her eyes on the pillow to hide her wince, Alya murmurs, “No, not in the mood for superheroes.”

There’s a short pause, and then Marinette says, “Okay.”

Curiosity and concern mingle together in that one short word, but Marinette seems determined not to pry. And that’s sweet, but it also sucks. Alya knows better than to breach forbidden topics, and this writhing mess inside her is all tangled up with secrets she’s not supposed to spill. But if someone were to pry, well, who’d blame her for letting something slip? On accident.

“Just say stop when something looks appealing.”

As Marinette keeps scrolling through the movie selection, Alya keeps her gaze glued to the screen. Yet the images pass her by in a blur, not really registering in her brain.

“Ladybug is mad at me,” she blurts out, then presses her lips together in a thin line.

Marinette freezes, as do the posters on screen. “What makes you say that?” Her voice is soft and gentle, yet there’s a strange undercurrent to it that Alya can’t quite put a name to.

“She’s been avoiding me.” Her fingertips dig deep into the pillow, squeezing hard. Then she forces
herself to relax her grip before she does damage to Marinette’s creation. “And Chat Noir called me a paparazzi.”

“He did what!?”

Alya nods as Marinette’s eyes narrow, her friend’s protective anger a balm soothing the sting of her wounded pride. “I managed to snap a picture of the two of them kissing. Chat deleted it before I could decide what to do with it.”

Marinette’s breath catches as she grows completely still, whispering, “He did what?”

Alya throws her a sharp look at the awe in her voice. When Marinette’s temper flares, there is little that can stop it from turning into a blazing inferno, and it always sparks to life when her friends are under attack. Yet all anger has seeped away and – is she smiling!? “You approve?”

“Hm?” Marinette blinks, the pleased expression wiped from her face. “I – no, of course not!”

“And yet you sound delighted,” Alya snaps.

“I’m not!”

“You’re a terrible liar, Marinette.”

Long pause.

“I think,” her supposed best friend says at length, “it was unkind of him to call you that.”

“Unkind is not the same thing as wrong, though.”

Marinette opens and closes her mouth, then exhales a tired breath. “I guess not. Look, Alya… the Ladyblog is a really important resource for Paris. You do good – great work in reporting on Akumas, and there’s a reason people have come to rely on you to keep themselves safe. And even though I wish you wouldn’t run into danger quite so much, I think it’s admirable. And brave.”

“But…?” Alya prompts with a quirked eyebrow.

“But…” Marinette fidgets, not meeting her gaze. “Ladybug signed up to protect the city, not to have her love life dissected in public. I get that it’s fun to speculate about your favorite ship, but – Ladybug’s made it pretty clear that she’s uncomfortable with any discussion of her private life. And she’s a real person, Alya, with real feelings.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Alya wants to snarl the words, but they come out listless and hollow. Does Marinette think so little of her?

“I think you do,” she answers, nibbling on her lower lip before adding, “But you’re… you can get kind of lost in your tunnel vision. And get pretty close to crossing lines.”

“You’re one to talk, girl,” Alya mutters, and regrets the bitter words as soon as they leave her stupid mouth.

Stop fighting.

But it’s in her nature to fight back against things that would hurt her. It used to feel like strength, but now…

Marinette stares at her, jaw working, while Alya draws her knees to her chest, clutching the pillow
in her lap as her mind gropes for words that might form an adequate apology. But then Marinette speaks first.

“You’re right,” she says. “I lose sight of the big picture, too, sometimes. And I do things I’m not so proud of. But you and I – we’re more than the sum of our lowest moments, aren’t we?”

“…I hope so. There’s been a lot of low moments lately,” Alya says softly. And it doesn’t look like Ladybug is as forgiving as Marinette. “I’m sorry for snapping. But it just – these days it feels like I can’t do anything right.”

Heavy silence falls as Marinette scoots closer, laying her head on Alya’s shoulder, only to be broken by a voice calling out from below.

“Marinette!”

“Yes, papa?” Marinette shouts back, and Alya winces, the sound too close to her ear.

“Your friend is here!”

“Friend?” Alya echoes just as Marinette springs to her feet. In a burst of hyperactive energy, she’s already bounded down half the stairs by the time it takes for Alya has pushed herself off the couch. Bemused, she follows at a more sedate pace.

And freezes as a familiar red hat comes into view.

“…tastes awesome, M. Dupain!” Nino says, words muffled by puffed cheeks, his mouth full.

“Oh, and try these, we’ve been experimenting with passion fr–“

“Papa,” Marinette scolds. “I didn’t invite Nino for you to use him as a taste tester.”

“Don’t worry about it, dudette,” Nino says as he pops another macaron in his mouth. “It’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make. For you.”

“Should I be jealous?” Alya asks lightly as she joins the group.


“Smooth. Hi, Nino.” Alya’s narrowed gaze wanders to Marinette – who smiles winningly and holds out a plate of macarons. Like bribery is going to work. “So what brings you h–?”

The doorbell chimes as the bakery door is thrown open.

Marinette squeaks just as Nino calls out, “Bro!”

Alya looks over her shoulder, jaw slackening at the unexpected sight.

“Sorry I’m late,” Adrien says in-between uneven breaths.

“That’s fine! Movie hasn’t even started yet.” Marinette plucks up her courage – and the tray from her father’s hand – to close the distance between them, offering him one of the pastries. “I’m glad you could make it on such short notice.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” And he seems to mean it, all but vibrating in excitement, like there’s no place he’d rather be than standing here, talking to Marinette. Who somehow, miraculously, managed to form a full sentence. Alya has no idea how to process any of this.
Averting her gaze to share an innocent look with Alya out of the corner of her eyes, Marinette says, “It’ll be nice. Just the four of us. It’s been a while.”

Oh.

“Hi, Adrien,” Alya greets him at length and he meets her gaze with trepidation. Like he expects her to bodily slam into him at any second in an attempt to keep him away from Marinette. Which, to be fair, is not that unreasonable of a fear since she’s spent the past few weeks running interference.

So she smiles brightly in reassurance.

Marinette’s manipulations are obvious, but that makes her tactics no less effective. If she can bring herself to put her heartbreak aside to play peacemaker, then Alya would rather not be the one to make that sacrifice be for nothing. Her gaze flits to Nino. Their eyes meet for only a moment, his gaze lingering. A brief yet warm smile flickers on his face before he turns back to face Adrien.

“I’m surprised your dad let you come, bro,” he says. “Did his heart grow three sizes today?”

Adrien’s lips curve into a sly grin. “I might have snuck out. A little.”


“Well…” As his voice trails off, Adrien’s grin dies and his face grows ashen. A beefy hand comes down on his shoulders so hard his knees nearly buckle.

“Oh no!” Monsieur Dupain’s booming voice rings out. “I appear to have been struck by temporary deafness, causing me to miss this last part of the conversation. I sure hope that it did not include anything that I, as a responsible parent, cannot condone. I know nothing of overly strict fathers and have never in my life snuck away from one.” Ruffling Adrien’s golden hair, he hands him a croissant. “Here, son. You’re too skinny.”

✧✦✧

“Okay, how about Cabin in the Woods?” Nino suggests.

“No,” Adrien murmurs, attention focused on the tray of chouquettes in front of him, calculating the rate at which he can shove these in his mouth without seeming overly greedy. “Marinette doesn’t like horror movies.”

“Well, it’s not really a horror movie,” Nino says. “It’s more of a subversion of the entire–“

Alya huffs out a frustrated breath. “The entire last sequence has the characters coated in blood.”

“It’s fine!” Marinette says. “I can just, y’know, go get refreshments during the scary bits.”

“No way, girl, that’s no way to enjoy movie night!”

“Well, neither is spending the evening arguing over which movie to pick,” Nino grumbles.

Alarmed, Adrien’s gaze darts up. With every shot-down suggestion of his, Nino’s irritation grows – and it’s so unlike him for his temper to be uneven. Getting him upset is the opposite of what
tonight is meant to accomplish.

“Um,” Adrien says, casting his eyes about the room in search of a distraction. “I mean, we don’t have to watch a movie, right? We could play video games or – or maybe tabletop games?” His pleading gaze turns to Marinette. “If you have any?”

“Oh.” Her expression is strangely blank as she enunciates every word. “We have a few strategy games lying around, yes.”

“Adrien!” Nino cries out. “What have you done!?”

“What?” Faced with his best friend’s aghast expression, Adrien sinks deeper into the couch. “I just thought – I’ve never played…”

“Stop,” Alya hisses.

“Oh no,” Marinette coos, “Did you hear that? The poor boy’s never played a tabletop game before. We need to change that.”

As she rises to stand, Nino and Alya groan in unison.

“Come on, Adrien.” Fingertips brush his knuckles as Marinette passes him by on her way to the stairs, as if she doesn’t quite dare to take his hand and drag him along. “The game collection’s upstairs in my room, you can pick out which one you want.”

While he still doesn’t quite understand what’s going on, following Marinette’s lead this evening seems like the sensible thing to do. She clearly has A Plan, and Adrien is very good at recognizing when his participation in A Plan is required.

“You fool!” Alya calls after him. “You’ve doomed us all!”

“What’s with them?” Adrien asks in a hushed voice as soon as they’re out of earshot, climbing through the trapdoor to Marinette’s room.

“Oh.” Suddenly drained of the poise that carried her this far, she self-consciously tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. First making sure the trapdoor is shut behind him, she then turns to face him, a hint of pink deepening color of the freckles dusting her nose. “T-they don’t want to play strategy games with me.”

He blinks, taken aback, then frowns. “Why not?”

“Well…” She takes a deep breath and raises her gaze to meet his, steel in her voice. “Because I will eat them alive.”

Adrien lets out a startled laugh.

And Marinette smiles.

It’s on the verge of a smirk, proud and confident, and it hits him right in the gut, his breath catching. This… he’s seen this Marinette before. But only ever out of the corner of his eyes, her fire doused in his presence. And he’s always wondered why.

The thought barely has time to take shape before she looks away again, smile retreating to only play with the corner of her lips. “The collection’s over there, if you’d like to take a look,” she says, gesturing so wildly he can’t actually make out which way she’s pointing. “And – and we can play
whichever one you want. But, um. Let’s wait, like… half an hour, okay?”

At his questioning look, she adds, “Let’s give Nino and Alya some time to sort things out between themselves.”

“Oh! Sure.” He smiles as understanding sinks in. “I guess we could play a round of our own.”

She responds with a high-pitched sound stifled by a cough. Then, voice as dignified as it can be, Marinette says, “If you’re that eager to have your butt kicked.”

“Is that a promise?” Adrien asks, unable to resist a teasing smile, only for her to bury her face in her hands, palms muffling a squeak.

✧✦✧

“What’s taking them so long?” Alya grumbles.

On the opposite end of the couch, Nino chuckles, and she frowns at him.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he says, examining his phone screen like it’s the most interesting thing in the world.

“Nino,” she says, warning in her voice.

“Out of idle curiosity that has nothing to do with the topic at hand, how often have you all but thrown Marinette at Adrien?”

Oh.

Alya’s head thumps against the back of the couch, groaning. “She’s stealing my job.”

“It appears that the student has become the master, yes.”

Grabbing one of the decorative pillows, she flings it at Nino. He catches it easily, even as his body shakes with laughter. As it trails off, he takes a deep breath. “So.”

“So,” she echoes.

“I guess we could… talk about… things.”

“Or we could drag Marinette and Adrien down here.”

“We could. But then we’d have to play against her.”

“Damn. So we’re trapped.”

Nino nods solemnly.

“The fiend!” she declares.

“The worst,” he agrees.
Alya sighs, examining her hands as they writhe, only to grimace when she realizes she’s writhing her hands.

*Stop it.*

It’s not like her to wallow. She’s always been the one to take action, to charge forward and confront the problem head-on.

But…

“I want to talk to you, Nino,” she says softly. “I miss talking to you. I hate that we’re fighting. But I don’t know if I can talk about this without getting upset.”

Without drawing his attention.

“…we don’t have to talk about it,” Nino says.

“Don’t we? We’ve resolved nothing between us.” Wiping her eyes, she makes herself take deep breaths to force the waters to grow still again. “God, I hate Hawkmoth.”

Far more destructive than the devastation his Akumas rain down on the city – which Ladybug has well in hand – this is by far the villain’s most insidious evil. All of Paris is rotting from the inside. Fear of his butterflies leaves problems to fester unaddressed, rotting and seeping into every dark crevice of the soul, because no one dares drag them into the open. And his Akumas grow stronger for it.

Gentle arms wrap around her shoulders.

“We don’t have to talk about it,” Nino says again, and presses a kiss to her forehead.

Alya sighs, sinking into the embrace, and for just a moment allows herself to pretend that all the cracks between them are mended.

Chapter End Notes

Keyseeker wrote another fantastic analysis of this fic 😊 Words cannot express how much joy these bring me, go check them out!

Since the holiday season and all its associated stresses are upon us, I'll be taking a short break from my regular update schedule. The next update will be shortly after Christmas!

Works inspired by this one

ML Fanfic Character Analysis - Alya Cesaire from MiniMinou’s “Lies We Tell”
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!