Second Chances

by Packetdancer

Summary

After seven years, the fight is finally over. Hawkmoth has been defeated, but at a high cost: parts of Paris are damaged, and lives were lost. And all of the city grieves one loss in particular: that of the city's longtime protector, Ladybug. As the rebuilding begins, the city gathers together in memory of her—both the beloved heroine they all saw, and the woman behind the mask who most of them never knew.

Her family and teammates grieve. For those who were closest to her, who called her their friend and fought at her side, it's a loss that's hard to accept.

But for her partner, it's one he doesn't think he needs to. Because Adrien Agreste has a plan to fix everything.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

It was a lovely funeral; Adrien couldn't deny that. It just didn't feel like her, not the Marinette he had known.

Chapter Notes

I actually meant to work on chapter 3 of Matchmaker, but I had this one particular image keep sticking in my mind. When I couldn't shake it, I decided to open a file and take some rough notes on the idea so that I could come back later and flesh things out.

Instead, I found myself writing prose versions of the images. Then I found myself writing snippets around them. Then connecting the snippets. Until I realized this entire chapter had happened and I might as well post it. *shrug* Brains are weird sometimes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The organizer, whoever they were, had tried to make sure the funeral was a send-off worthy of a hero. Adrien couldn't argue that point; Paris had spared no expense, declared no cost too high for a final farewell to the city's spotted protector. The three enormous banners hanging off of rods fixed to the Eiffel Tower more than testified to that, even as they obscured the worst of the damage to the city's skyline beyond them.

The first banner was of the Ladybug they'd only just lost: the leggings and gloves of her suit as jet-black as the hair she wore cut short, the half-length black jacket resting on spotted shoulders. A woman to be reckoned with. It was a candid shot clearly taken during a daytime patrol; she stood atop the roof of a building, one foot on the edge and a smile on her face as she looked out over the city she'd protected for years.

The second banner was of the young Ladybug they'd all met seven years ago, her suit still an unbroken expanse of red and black and her hair bound up in two pigtails. It was a shot from the Ladyblog entries covering their first year as heroes, one Alya had taken as Ladybug left the scene of an akuma attack. One leg was still outstretched behind her as she leapt off from her perch, the string of her yo-yo vanishing off the upper right corner of the banner. She'd still been new to her Miraculous then—they both had—and it was obvious from the smile on her face that the feeling of flying over the city, of bounding and swinging effortlessly from building to building, was still a fresh joy for the heroine.

And the last banner was one of Marinette Dupain-Cheng herself. The image had been cropped so that only the shoulders of the blouse she was wearing were visible, but Adrien was certain it was one of her own designs. She was looking just slightly away from the camera, her face alight with a smile just on the verge of breaking into happy laughter.

The photo couldn't be that recent; the Marinette on the banner wore her hair hanging loose past her shoulders, a style she hadn't worn for at least two years. He remembered how Ladybug had called it
a "tactical fashion choice" when she showed up for a patrol with her hair clipped short only days after an akuma had grabbed those long black locks and used them to hurl the heroine aside.

Somehow, he'd never thought to question it when he caught up with Marinette two weeks later and noticed she had the same hairstyle.

A small, sour lump of guilt settled into his gut as he realized he didn't actually know when or where that last photo was taken, not like the photos back in school. When he had settled into university after graduation, he hadn't made as much time for his friends as he once had. He'd told himself that several times a month was enough to stay close to them all, that his schoolwork and his duties as Chat Noir had to come first.

As logical as that had been at the time, at this moment, as he saw the same smile looking back at him from those three enormous banners, he realized he wouldn't have happily failed a class—if it meant he'd spent more time with Marinette. They had made thousands of memories together behind the masks over the past seven years, but he yearned for more. He felt the ache, the loss, of the memories they didn’t have, the ones they could have shared as Marinette and Adrien rather than their heroic alter-egos.

The sun was growing low on the horizon, and the red-and-black lanterns that had been strung throughout the area began to glow. The three enormous banners were illuminated by spotlights placed at the base of the Tower. The last arrivals of the huge audience—hundreds of people, maybe more than a thousand—settled into their seats, gazing up at the stage where he and the others were seated, each waiting for their turn to speak.

No, he really couldn't deny that it was a lovely funeral.

It just didn't feel like her. Not the Marinette he'd known. The one who loved pink, who excelled in every artistic endeavor she'd tried. Who would still, even in university, stand on her dorm-room bed with Alya and bounce around together as they rocked out to the latest Jagged Stone album.

But then, this wasn't really for her. This was a chance for the city that she'd loved to say their farewells to a heroine who they'd loved in return.

He forced himself to sit motionless and watch as the mayor stepped up to the podium to address the crowd. Adrien often wondered how it was that André Bourgeois stayed in office; he didn't seem astute enough—or well-spoken enough—to be such a successful politician. But the grief in the man's tone tonight as he began to eulogize the city's hero felt genuine, and—for once—his statement wasn't self-aggrandizing in the least.

The mayor had a lot of pretty things to say about their service over the years. About the sacrifices that Marinette must have made in her personal life in order to remain Paris' loyal defender. He painted a glorious, heroic picture of their final battle with Hawkmoth, of Ladybug's selfless sacrifice to end the threat.

Heroic? Adrien carefully schooled his expression back into grief, refusing to let even an ounce of anger show. But what did anyone else know? They hadn't been the ones who were there. To Adrien, the final battle with Hawkmoth—with his father—felt anything but heroic. The way it ended had been an act of utter desperation.

And as much as Adrien didn't want to think about it, his traitorous thoughts turned back to that terrible night.

#
Three weeks earlier...

The sirens were growing more faint in the distance as they made their way deeper into the ruins of the Agreste mansion. Chat Noir could feel his boot getting tighter as his ankle began to swell. Trying to walk on it was bad enough, especially with the rain making the uneven surfaces of the rubble slick; he wasn't certain how he was going to fight with this injury.

Ladybug glanced over at him and stepped closer, silently offering a shoulder to lean on. "You should save your energy, chaton. We still don't know what else he has planned." Her words were gentle, but he could see the lines around the edges of her mouth. The exhaustion in her eyes. Of the two of them she had always been the one who looked on the brighter side of any situation, but tonight had been enough to strain even her optimism. The smile he'd adored for years was nowhere to be seen, not tonight.

"Forty akumas at once is a little excessive, even for Hawkmoth; I wonder what he's compensating for." Chat tried to muster his usual charming attitude. He couldn't find a pun or a joke within him, but he wanted more than anything to see Ladybug's smile one more time. If he could see that smile one more time, he felt like he'd be able to face any battle.

But Ladybug still didn't smile. She hadn't smiled at all that night. Not since Hawkmoth had unleashed a literal army of his most powerful akumas to rage through the city, keeping all five Miraculous holders busy trying to minimize the resulting death and destruction. Not since the villain had sent one last akuma to deliver an ultimatum: he would stop the rampage if Ladybug and Chat Noir met with him. Alone, in private, at the Agreste mansion.

Ladybug hadn't smiled since they had realized Hawkmoth was Gabriel Agreste.

Which was a revelation Chat Noir was going to have to work through later. He could feel the acidic burn of rage and resentment somewhere inside his belly, but ruthlessly quashed it. Let it simmer for now, he told himself; when the fight was done, then he'd let himself release all the furious screams that were building inside him. Then he would let himself rage against the man who had not merely ruined Chat's life, but terrorized everyone in Paris for seven years. However, he wouldn't do that right now. Right now, Ladybug still needed him at her side.

The rubble around them made for an uneven walking surface; Chat's ankle twinged any time he stepped on a piece slanted the wrong way. The Agreste mansion itself had been reduced to wreckage, a casualty of the earthquakes caused by one of the akumas. Chat thought it was a fitting symbol of how his family had crumbled entirely.

"Rena and Queen Bee are dealing with the akuma. Carapace can handle the evacuation." Chat knew Ladybug's words were clearly a mantra to convince herself that they'd done the right thing in abandoning the bigger fight to deal with the root of the problem. But still, he felt obligated to answer them.

He tried to muster another pun or two, hoping it might brighten his partner's mood. "Don't worry, my lady! We've got a claw-some team; they'll take care of everything else while we deal with the purr-ple menace."

Not even a flicker of a smile; her attention was fixed on something ahead of them.

"Chat Noir and Ladybug!" Now Chat saw it as well: Hawkmoth stood atop the rubble nearby, hands clasped together atop his cane as he stared down at them, seemingly unbothered by the pouring rain. A disdainful smile spread across his face. "I see you've finally come to your senses, and come to surrender your Miraculouses."
"Wrong!" Chat could feel his own expression twist into an uncharacteristic sneer of disgust as he looked at the villain. At his father. "We're here to take yours, Butterfly Man."

"Ever the defiant one, Chat Noir." Hawkmoth's words were smug. "I always knew your partner was the brains of the pair; perhaps she's more ready to surrender hers. After all, I only need them for a short while. I can fix all of this. I'll even return your Miraculouses to you when I'm done with them!"

Ladybug just glared back at their nemesis, her eyes narrowed in defiance. Never letting her gaze falter, she thrust her arm defiantly upwards and called for her lucky charm. Somehow, this time, her usual cry sounded more like a warning. No, Chat realized, not a warning: a statement, a promise.

What fell into her waiting grasp was a spotted version of an all-too-familiar type of box. An identical box had changed Adrien's life seven years earlier, when he opened it to find the Miraculous of the Black Cat. Ladybug opened the Lucky Charm box and held it out to Hawkmoth expectantly, never even turning from him to glance at what was in her hand; for once, it seemed like she had already known exactly what the charm would be. "It doesn't have to be this way, Hawkmoth. You have one more chance: return your Miraculous to the Guardian. End this peacefully."

The smile vanished from Hawkmoth's face, replaced with a look of absolute fury. "Seven years! Seven years you've defied me! Seven years you've kept me from her! No longer! This ends tonight!"

"It does." Ladybug's words were a flat statement of fact. No doubt crept into her tone, no hesitation.

And then they all burst into motion. There were no guarded moments of circling each other, there was no gradual transition from confrontation to combat; the fight began as abruptly as flipping a light switch.

Ladybug dropped the Lucky Charm, hurling her yo-yo at Hawkmoth; he dodged her attack, only to be hammered in the side by Chat Noir's staff as the black cat sprang forward. A blast of purple energy from his cane knocked Chat Noir back against the remains of a wall, while Ladybug ensnared his arm with her yo-yo.

Back and forth, around and around, parry and riposte. The battle faded into a blur; Chat Noir no longer knew how long they'd been fighting their archenemy.

He often felt like his fights alongside Ladybug were a dance, a set of motions honed by years of practice into near-perfect synchronicity. But this battle was different; they were barely staying ahead of Hawkmoth's moves, reacting rather than acting. It felt less a dance and more like a desperate brawl. The duo were already exhausted from their earlier akuma fights, and Chat was certain that Hawkmoth had waited to send them his ultimatum until they knew they were already worn down.

A twinge of pain stabbed through his injured ankle as he sprang off a wall towards Hawkmoth, grasping for the villain's cane. If he could just get the weapon away, it would be far easier to take their opponent down. But once again Hawkmoth stepped aside, and Chat Noir went flying past.

This time, however, Ladybug hurled her yo-yo at the perfect time; it wrapped around Hawkmoth, binding the man's arms to his side and immobilizing him. She immediately dashed forward, hand grasping for the Miraculous that Hawkmoth wore at his throat.

Chat tried to flip and land in a crouch, to spring back to his partner's side. Instead, his full weight came down on the injured ankle; there was a sickening crack and an unbelievable wave of pain washed over him. He couldn't help himself: he cried out in agony as he crumpled to the ground.

It was reflex as much as anything that made Ladybug turn towards him, he was sure. A single instant
of carelessness, nothing more than a single speck of sand on the beach of all the time they'd spent together.

It was enough.

Somehow, Hawkmoth had worked his way free of the yo-yo restraint, and the moment Ladybug's attention was turned away he reached out quickly, tearing the earrings from her ears. Chat didn't even realize what had happened until he saw the burst of light that surrounded Ladybug fading and Marinette standing there instead.

The realization that Marinette—a friend he'd met literally on his first day as a hero—was his longtime partner was enough of a shock to leave Chat Noir frozen.

Later, he'd curse himself a thousand times over for not moving immediately. He would replay the next seconds in his mind endlessly, wondering if he could have changed anything. But here, in that moment, he hesitated.

And Hawkmoth did not.

As the woman who'd stymied his plans for years stood in front of him, stripped of her Miraculous and defenseless, he whipped the sword hidden inside his cane from its sheath and plunged it through Marinette's chest.

It felt as though the world had gone still. Chat Noir was certain his heart had stopped beating. He tried to order his body to move, to run to her, but he was frozen in place.

Marinette blinked, her expression turning confused as her hands grasped ineffectually at the blade. She looked down to where it disappeared into her body, to where a small red stain surrounded the metal, turning the dark blue fabric of the dress she wore an ironic purple shade. She coughed once, a trickle of blood running from the corner of her mouth.

Hawkmoth stared into Marinette's eyes with a cold smile of victory. "So falls Ladybug," he proclaimed. "Protector of Paris."

Chat could see the instant that Marinette made the decision; something changed in her eyes as she met Hawkmoth's gaze. She seized the blade abruptly, driving it deeper into her chest. Caught off-guard, Hawkmoth found himself stumbling forward a step to end up nearly pressed against the young woman. Easily within her reach.

Marinette's gaze never left the man's eyes, but a defiant smile spread across her face. "S-so ends Hawkmoth," she answered. "Pathetic t-terrorist."

Then she snatched the Miraculous from his collar and hurled it across the room.

Purple light flared around the villain, dissipating to leave a startled Gabriel Agreste standing face-to-face with Marinette Dupain-Cheng. The sword vanished along with the rest of Hawkmoth's costume, and Marinette crumpled first to her knees, then to the ground. The purple stain across her dress began to spread much more rapidly now, the Miraculous blade no longer sealing her wound.

The instant she hit the ground, it was as though a spell had been broken. With an angry howl, Chat Noir launched himself across the room. He didn't care about the pain in his ankle. He didn't care about his own safety. In that instant, he didn't even care about the Miraculouses. All he cared about was making the man suffer.

The first blow sent Gabriel staggering. "Wai..." The black-clad hero didn't even let him get an entire
word out before striking him again; this time, the villain collided with a wall. Chat was back on him in an instant, punching him square in the face.

Again. Again. Again. None of the blows were enough. None of them would make this man hurt the way he'd hurt Chat over the years. The way he'd hurt Ladybug tonight. Everything was a red blur of rage; he was almost startled when Gabriel slid down the wall, clearly bereft of any further will to fight.

Chat stared at the defeated villain crumpled weakly onto the ground before him and felt nothing but loathing. It seemed like every bit of suffering in his life, every bit of loss, somehow tied back to this man. If he was gone from the world, maybe the pain would stop. Chat raised his hand. "CATA—"

"No." Marinette's voice was quiet, but somehow it still cut through Chat's fury. He turned to stare at her, and found that she'd managed to push herself up from the ground enough to turn her head and meet his eyes. "Don't do it, chaton. Don't become something you'll h-hate later."

For a moment, Chat hesitated, still tempted to wipe his father from the face of the earth. But Marinette's gaze never wavered.

Chat lowered his hand. Spotting a piece of rebar among the rubble nearby, he grabbed it and bent it tightly around Gabriel Agreste, ensuring that the man was immobilized even if he came to his senses.

And then he ran to his fallen partner's side, catching her as her arms gave out and she collapsed once more. He pulled her across his lap, brushing the rain from her face as best he could. "We won, Buggaboo. It's over. Help will be here soon."

"Pound it?" She grasped for his hand, a smile spreading across her face as she looked up at him. Her first smile of the night. Chat's breath caught in his throat as he took her hand, clasping it tightly.

He could feel the prickle of tears in his eyes, but he forced himself to answer her smile with one of his own as he squeezed her hand. "Pound it."

Marinette closed her eyes, sighing once. A small amount of bloody froth trickled from between her lips.

"Hey. Hey, no. Stay with me, Marinette." He squeezed her hand again. "Just hold on. Someone will be here any minute, okay?"

As she drew her next breath, he heard a bubbling noise that he didn't like in the least.

"Help." He looked around the ruins of the mansion, but they were alone. Everyone else in Paris was dealing with the fires, the earthquakes, the injuries, the dozen other calamities the akumas had been causing before Hawkmoth's Miraculous had been ripped away and they'd dissipated. No one was left to see the two heroes among the ruins of the Agreste mansion. "Help! SOMEONE, HELP!"

Marinette's breathing was becoming shorter, more desperate. Her free hand grasped weakly at her chest.

"PLEASE, SOMEONE HELP!" Chat felt as though his heart was slowly being crushed in a vise. This wasn't what victory should be. He'd imagined it often enough: swinging away onto a secluded roof, revealing their identities to each other at long last. Laughing as they went out together in their civilian identities for the first time, taking an evening to finally celebrate the end of this long conflict.

Never once had he pictured it this way, with his friend—his partner—drowning on her own blood as she faded away in his lap.
"No." Chat clenched her hand even more tightly, as though that alone could keep her with him. The tears were running freely down his cheeks, the warm salt mixing with the cold rainwater. His hand scrabbled against her chest, as though he could somehow collect all the blood and stuff it back inside of her failing body. "No no no no no."

He desperately looked around the area, trying to find something—anything—that might help. Rubble, the fallen butterfly Miraculous, Ladybug's earrings... there! The red spotted Miraculous box, Ladybug's final Lucky Charm. He leaned over, scrambling to reach it without dislodging Marinette from his lap. "It will be okay, my lady. I promise. We'll fix this right now."

Hurling the box up into the sky, he shouted, "MIRACULOUS LADYBUG!"

The box clattered to the ground.

He picked it up and hurled it upwards again. "MIRACULOUS LADYBUG!"

This time, it landed on its side and rolled several inches away.

There was always a way to fix things. He'd seen the magic thousands of times by now; he knew it could work. It had to work.

The box was hurled skywards again, and again, and again until his voice broke.

That was how the rescue crew found the heroes of Paris ten minutes later: Chat screaming two words over and over again in a voice gone ragged, desperately hurling a box into the air with one arm while cradling the lifeless form of his partner against him with the other.

When they tried to take her from him, he clung so fiercely that they had to pry him off. As they finally pulled her away, his hoarse and desperate screams turned to a wordless howl of grief.

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Adrien tore himself out of those dark memories, forcing his attention back to the funeral. His foot itched in the cast, and he forced himself not to fidget as he sat through yet another celebrity's eulogy praising the fallen heroine. Did absolutely everyone in the city have to step up and say something about Ladybug?

They'd asked Alya to speak, of course; not only was she the Ladyblogger, but she had been Rena Rouge. Everyone knew that now; the rest of the heroes had publicly unmasked themselves after Marinette's death. Even in his grief, it had been some comfort for Adrien to learn that two of his closest friends had been the other heroes who fought by her side all these years.

But Alya had declined the invitation. All of the other heroes had declined, in fact, even Chloé. They'd all spoken at the much smaller, private funeral held for Marinette's friends and family—again, even Chloé—but none of them had wanted to bear their hearts to the entirety of Paris. Their grief was still too fresh.

But Adrien had felt obligated to do so. As the partner who'd fought at her side the longest, as a friend of Marinette's outside of the mask... even as Hawkmoth's son. He was the intersection point of everything in the seven-year-long war they'd lived through, and he felt he owed one last thing to the city that she'd given everything to defend.

Still, he was finding it more and more difficult to sit and listen to these eulogies by so many notable
citizens of Paris, so few of whom had actually known the girl behind the mask. And none of whom had known her heroic identity half so well as he had.

But eventually there was only one more speaker left before Adrien's turn, and he found himself leaning forward in his seat to listen. This speaker, after all, had actually known her.

Jagged Stone made his way to the podium and looked out over the crowd. When he spoke, however, the rocker's voice was bereft of its usual borderline-manic edge; instead, the words were heavy with grief.

"Everybody knew Ladybug, right? Most of you here were probably saved by her at least once, probably more. So I don't need to tell you about how great she was; anyone can do that. But most of you here never knew the girl behind the mask."

"I met Marinette when she was still just a kid. Somehow, she ended up being my go-fer for a day, and putting up with all my requests." A pause, as Jagged surveyed the audience. "And you can imagine how crazy a rock star's requests are!"

Scattered, almost reluctant laughter from among the huge crowd.

"But she handled it with a responsibility that surprised me at the time; not so surprising now that I know she was already saving Paris as Ladybug! Anyway, here's this girl tasked to run errands for me, and I ask her for a pair of sunglasses that didn't even exist because I wanted to wear something like them for my concert. And instead of complaining, or telling me she couldn't get them anywhere, she just made me these herself!" The rock star reached up to tap the pair of slightly-battered Eiffel Tower sunglasses he wore propped up on his forehead. "That was Marinette for you: she'd never protest that something was impossible. Instead, she'd go out and find a way to do it."

"The kid always said she wanted to be a fashion designer someday, but she was already a great artist. And I loved her style. She designed several of my album covers, she designed the jackets I wore on two different tours... She did so many things for me that after a couple of years she pretty much became my honorary niece. And I was so glad that I got to watch her grow up, so proud of her. I always knew she'd do great things someday, and I couldn't wait to see what they were." Jagged Stone paused in his eulogy, bowing his head over the podium. From where he sat, Adrien could see the suspiciously bright glimmer of tears in the musician's eyes. "Now I know she was already doing greater things than I could've guessed."

Then he looked up, gazing out over the crowd again. "I guess what I mean is... Marinette Dupain-Cheng was totally rock-and-roll."

The applause as Jagged stepped away from the podium was thunderous. As he moved back to the row of chairs along the back of the stage, he caught Adrien's eye and gave him a respectful nod.

And then it was Adrien's turn. Taking his crutch under one arm, he stood and slowly thumped across the stage. It took him far longer than the other speakers had, but the audience remained absolutely silent as he moved; everyone here knew exactly who he was.

He stood in front of the microphone, staring out at the sea of people. Thanks to his days on the catwalk he was no stranger to huge crowds, but this felt different. When he was modeling, he always felt like he was hidden away behind a mask, like the clothing was his armor. Tonight, he was going to bear his heart—his soul—to what felt like half of Paris. Probably half of the world, since he knew the funeral was being broadcast.

He took a deep breath, feeling the air catch against the lump of grief in his throat. He held his breath
for a moment, then exhaled slowly, envisioning all of the tension flowing away. You can do this, Adrien. The pain isn't forever. You know what you need to do.

"I'm Adrien Agreste. You all know what that last name means, and who my father was." He chose the past tense deliberately, though he couldn't keep the venom from creeping into the word 'father'. The man sitting in a secure cell pending the most-awaited criminal trial in Parisian history was no longer any family he would bother to claim. "But that's not why I'm here tonight. I'm here tonight because as Chat Noir, I was Ladybug's partner... and as Adrien Agreste, I was Marinette's friend. And I loved both sides of her with all my heart. When you lost Ladybug, I lost my other half."

Now he could hear her voice, encouraging him like always. He could even see her encouraging smile in his mind. You can do this, mon minou.

"Our first meeting as heroes could probably have gone better: she got us both tangled in her yo-yo. But I think it was a fitting start to our partnership; over the years it became clear we were always bound together, and always would be. That anything we faced, we'd face as a team."

Always a team, mon chaton; no one could ever replace you.

A small, sad smile crept across Adrien’s face. "Actually, my friendship with Marinette didn't start out that well either..."

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He'd reserved a private room for the four of them. It was a necessity as much as anything else; if Paris' four remaining heroes had eaten together publicly, especially right after the funeral, they'd never have been able to finish a conversation without people crowded around.

They started by sharing stories about Marinette over dinner. Alya had endless tales of campus mischief she'd dragged her best friend into, mishaps that set them all laughing. Nino had known Marinette nearly as long as Kim had, and so had dozens of anecdotes from childhood; Adrien was particularly fond of the one where a seven-year-old Marinette had chased a nine-year-old bully out of the sandbox for tormenting her friend. He could just envision what Nino was describing: a little girl with her hair in a braid, standing there with her hands on her hips as she gave the bully that fierce and unyielding look that he'd seen her polish to perfection as Ladybug.

Even Chloé had a few stories to share; she'd known Marinette for years before Adrien and Alya met her, even if the two girls had not gotten along. But even then, long before she'd tried to change for the sake of her teammates, there were dozens of times Chloé could recall when she'd been in grudging awe of something Marinette had done.

This was his family, Adrien realized. Not the cold Agreste household, where it turned out a man's callous disregard for his own son had been the least of his crimes. No, his heart belonged here, among the people who he'd known for years both in and out of the masks. The only other people he knew who knew both sides of Ladybug the way he did.

But it was a family that still hadn't healed.

Four years ago, the akuma attacks had become dangerous enough that the others were each granted their Miraculous permanently. After that the team had begun practicing together whenever they could arrange to meet up. They had made memories and shared in-jokes that no one else in the world could understand, and over time they'd fashioned themselves into a perfectly balanced pentagon.

Now a corner of that pentagon was missing, and the whole thing felt... wobbly. With Marinette’s
death, everyone at the table had lost someone in both of their lives. And though they tried to smile and laugh as they shared the ways the missing corner of their group had touched their lives, Adrien was all too familiar with the grief he still saw weighing them down. It was the same grief he'd felt when he lost his mother. It was a grief that he knew didn't always heal.

It was time for him to fix that. He could wipe away the pain and suffering, restore the balance of their family. There was no problem they'd faced before that they hadn't been able to tackle together, and this was no different. The more he saw that too-familiar grief in their eyes, the more certain he became of his choice.

Adrien placed his drink back on the table before moving to stand. "There's something important we still need to talk about."

Alya raised one eyebrow. "Between the funerals and tonight—and that talk last week about what happens to our team—I thought we'd pretty much covered everything."

Adrien shook his head. "There's one really important thing we still haven't discussed at all."

"Then don't keep us hanging, bro." Nino's words were still subdued, but there was an undercurrent of curiosity there as well.

He felt a Chat-like grin spread across his face, the first one since that terrible night three weeks earlier. Placing his hands on the table, he leaned forward and tried to catch the gaze of each of his teammates, one by one, waiting until he was certain everyone's attention was fully fixed on him.

"I need to tell you how we're going to bring Marinette back."

Chapter End Notes

The vivid mental image that I couldn't shake, the one that this chapter was built around, was the idea of Chat Noir holding Marinette and screaming "MIRACULOUS LADYBUG!" over and over in desperation as he tried to trigger the healing magic, tried to fix everything.

From that somewhat dark seed was this concept grown.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Adrien lays out the plan to bring Marinette back, while Plagg lets the others in on another impending tragedy.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the comments and kudos you left on the first chapter; your feedback—and emotional anguish, in the case of this fic—gives me life.

Alas, this second chapter took me a little longer than I had hoped it would to write, but this has been kind of a weird week for me. I do worry that the first scene here might drag on a little too long without much action, but there's a fair amount of information in there that needed to be imparted, both to the rest of the team and to the readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I need to tell you how we're going to bring Marinette back."

The statement seemed to hang in the air. The words had their own presence in the room, as though they'd coalesced into something more than mere sound. An unexpected intruder into what had been a known and charted territory only moments earlier. A variable that had changed in a known equation, and now had to be accounted for.

One second. Two. Five. Adrien felt as though the world itself was holding its breath along with him, waiting at the precipice and hoping his friends would jump as well.

"And you all said I was the reckless one back in school." Unsurprisingly, Alya was the first one to break the silence, slamming her hands down onto the table as she shot to her feet. Her words burned with an anger that caught Adrien off-guard. "But this... This! Have you lost your entire damned mind, Agreste?"

Nino got to his feet more slowly than his fiancée, shooting a look as he did. "We all miss her, bro. But Marinette's gone. To get her back you'd need a wish, and that's..."

"That's exactly what you've been fighting to stop—what we've been fighting to stop—for seven years!" Alya slammed her hands on the table again, heedlessly trampling over whatever Nino might have sent. Her eyes were narrowed as she glared across the table at Adrien. "Seven! A third of our lives!"

"Alya..." Nino reached out to put a hand atop hers, as though maybe that could be the button that might soothe her anger. Might stem the flow of words.

Alya shifted her hand, slipping it out from under her fiancé's in a clear rejection of the offered comfort. "Marinette gave her life to make sure a wish couldn't be abused for this exact reason! And
now you want to throw that away to bring her back, just like..." The reporter lifted a hand off the table, snapping her fingers for punctuation. "...that? She'd hate that, and you know it. It would break her heart to see you follow in your father's footsteps!"

Nino flinched at the words, his gaze snapping from Alya to Adrien. Even Alya drew back the moment she'd spoken, her eyes widening as she realized what she'd just said. But it was too late; the words were out there now, hanging between them like a cloud gathering over the table.

"Adrien, I didn't..." The anger had faded from the journalism major's voice as Adrien straightened, drawing back from the table in what he suspected Ladybug would have called a "defensive retreat" from the accusation. The fire had faded from Alya's eyes as well, replaced by a silent plea for forgiveness.

For years, Gabriel Agreste had demanded his son conceal his emotions. Tears were a sign of weakness, and fury meant you had no self-control. It was a habit Adrien had been trying to break over the past few years, but now old reflexes took over and he fiercely quashed the wave of hurt that washed over him at that comparison. It took a deep breath for him to steady himself, but he was pleased to realize his voice was only shaking slightly when he finally spoke.

"I am not my father, Alya. I will never be my father."

"She knows." Nino's voice was like water poured over the fire that had broken out between his friends; the room might still have smoke—the tension that would take time to fade—but at least the flames themselves were extinguished now. "She didn't mean it like that, bro. She..."

"You honestly think I haven't had that same idea? Thought about it a dozen times already?" Alya cut Nino off once again, but more quietly this time. The anger was gone from her words; now her voice was rough, her grief caught in her throat again. She stared down at the table rather than meet anyone's eyes. "She was my best friend, Adrien. And I'm sorry for what I said; I didn't mean it. But we just... we can't do that. Even if it wasn't wrong to spend someone else's life that way, Marinette would never forgive us."

"Alya..." Adrien shook his head. Something inside him wanted to scream that he was nothing like Gabriel Agreste, that he would never be like that man, to pour his heart to the others and prove it.

But the words were all tangled up somewhere inside, and he couldn't unravel them enough to give voice to anything.

"How?" The question cut through the remaining tension. Everyone turned to look at Chloé, the only one still seated, but she only bothered to make eye-contact with Adrien. "Look, the idea that you'd do anything like Gabriel is ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous. And we all know that, even blog-girl over there." The edge of her voice was sharp, seasoned with a hint of the old Chloé of years before. Adrien suspected that, teammates or not, his oldest friend might take some time to wholly forgive Alya for the emotional wound she'd just dealt him.

"So obviously there's something else you've thought of," Chloé continued. "Which you'd probably have explained already if certain people hadn't opened their big mouths." Alya winced as Chloé shot her a look, but offered nothing in her own defense. "So, how are you saying Marinette can be brought back?"

Adrien exhaled slowly, trying to let all the emotional turmoil flow out of him along with the air in his lungs. "We're not actually going to bring her back, exactly. We're going to make it so she never died in the first place."

This time, Alya didn't interrupt; she reached out quietly to clasp Nino's hand in hers. Chloé just
nodded once, silently encouraging Adrien to continue.

"You all remember when Alix got akumatized that first time years ago, back when everything was just starting?" When everyone nodded, Adrien gave a nod of his own in return. "That's how we save her: time travel. We already know the butterfly Miraculous can give a Champion that power, so we just go back and make sure that Marinette lives through the battle. We know how it happens, so we can change it."

"I like the idea, but..." Nino frowned. "Didn't Timebreaker have to feed a bunch of people to her skates in able to make them work? And even once she had enough time-gas, it only took her back a couple of minutes. You're talking about going back weeks, bro."

Adrien found he was beginning to warm to the topic again, some of his enthusiasm returning. "No, see, the problem was that Timebreaker was physically going back in time. But if one of us went back that way, then there'd still be two of us left after we changed the timeline, just like how there were two Timebreakers and two Ladybugs in that fight. That wouldn't work out anyway."

"Okay...?" Nino drew the word out, his eyebrows rising in obvious question.

"So we don't send back a person, we send back memories. Giving an earlier version of someone their memories from now." Adrien found himself gesturing in the air as though he could physically grasp the concept itself and present it to the others. He forced his hands back to his sides, trying to dispel his sudden nervous energy by tapping his foot instead. "It's like picking up someone's soul and moving it back into an earlier version of them."

"And how do we do that?" Alya's voice was subdued now.

Now Adrien rubbed at the back of his neck; this was the part of the plan that he knew would be chancier, but they deserved to know all the risks. "Well, that part's a little problematic. Plagg says the theory's good, but he doesn't think a normal person would technically still be... A hesitation. "...sane after being sent back that way."

Nino blinked. "Dude, that seems like a pretty big 'problematic', not a little one."

"Hello, I'm Chloé Bourgeois, have we met? My interests are fashion, politics, and turning into a magical bee-person who fights evil brainwashing butterflies." Chloé raised her hand in front of her face, dramatically examining her fingernails for chips, before drawling, "Does any of that sound sane? We're already halfway there."

"So our lives aren't exactly always sane, Chloé, but we are," Nino protested.

Chloé glanced over at Alya pointedly, then back to Nino. One eyebrow quirked upwards in an unspoken question.

"I said a normal person!" Adrien added hastily, desperately hoping to get the conversation back on track before another quarrel broke out. Everyone's emotions were still too high. "When we're transformed, though, we're half magical ourselves. Plagg and I think that might be enough." He tried to put a little more certainty into the statement than it warranted, hoping the others would skim over the 'might'.

"I'll do it." Alya's first words were quiet, almost inaudible, but then she put a little more determination into her words. "I'll do it. Marinette was my best friend, and I'd do anything for her."

"No." Adrien shook his head. "Alya, you and Nino are supposed to get married in a few months."
"And Marinette was supposed to be there at my side when we do!" Alya looked back at Adrien. "I wasn't there for her when she needed me. We should have been there with you. You shouldn't have had to do it all alone. Let me fix this!"

"You have a family who loves you. Parents, sisters. You have a fiancé. And if something went wrong, they'd all be heartbroken." Adrien felt one corner of his mouth quirk upwards into a small, sad smile. "You all have family who'd miss you. I don't."

"We'd miss you." Chloé's words earned supportive nods from the other two.

"Alright, I guess it's not true that I have no family." Adrien looked at the other three, and his smile brightened just a shade. "But I don't have any family left other than you three. And you all want her back too."

"This plan is too risky," a small voice added from inside Nino's jacket.

The kwamis had been keeping a low profile all evening just in case the serving staff wandered into the room without warning; even though everyone knew who these four were, no one who didn't have a Miraculous knew how their powers worked. They intended to keep it that way; the last thing anyone wanted was someone new learning about Miraculouses and turning into a new Hawkmoth.

But Wayzz clearly couldn't keep his silence anymore; he phased out through the fabric, floating over to hover above the center of the table. The little turtle met Adrien's gaze gravely. "If you have to be transformed when we do this, and there's a risk, that means that you'd be putting Plagg in danger as well."

At this point, the other kwamis began venturing out as well. First Trixx, flitting out from his little den inside a special pocket of Alya's messenger bag. Then Pollen, slipping out of Chloé's purse. And finally Plagg, who hovered right beside Adrien's shoulder rather than joining the other two beside Wayzz.

"He knows the risks and agreed to them." Adrien glanced at Plagg, who nodded.

"It's still irresponsible." Wayzz' tone was chiding, the look he turned towards Plagg full of disapproval. "He's half of the core pair of Miraculouses. If something happens to him, the consequences could be terrible."

"Tikki could die!" Pollen's tone was distraught, her gaze going back and forth between her Chosen, Adrien, and Plagg.

"Hey, sometimes you gotta take a chance to get something done," Trixx countered, folding his little arms in front of himself defiantly. "Like when Alya's chasing a story!"

Wayzz shook his head. "It could be worse than that, Pollen. The forces of creation and destruction must remain in balance. Even if Tikki were not harmed, there could be repercussions for all of magic."

Pollen shot up several inches, vibrating back and forth in tension. "Well, then you absolutely can't..."

"SHE'S ALREADY DYING!" Everyone fell silent, all attention now focused on the small black kwami floating just above Adrien's shoulder. Even Adrien himself turned to Plagg in surprise; he knew about Tikki, but he'd never heard his kwami actually shout before. Snarkiness, sarcasm, and teasing? That was Plagg most of the time. Serious? Occasionally. But in seven years, not once had he heard the kwami raise his voice like that.
"Tikki's dying." Plagg repeated, his voice lowering once more. "That's why I'm going back with the kid; we're going to save both of them."

Nino was the first to recover, as his attention snapped to his own kwami still clustered with the other two in the center of the table. "Wait. What? Kwamis can die?"

"We can become sick in various ways, master Nino." Wayzz pivoted to face his Chosen. "And if that illness is left untreated, we can be weakened enough that we have to retreat into the Miraculous, where we lie dormant until we can regain our strength. Luckily, that usually only takes a century or two."

"Only a century?" Alya was clearly caught off-guard. "So, you mean Tikki might be lost for a century?"

"Or two, yes," Wayzz clarified.

Plagg slowly floated lower and lower, sinking until he was physically perched on Adrien's shoulder. "Tikki's not sick, though. She's fading."

This was met with horrified silence from the other three kwamis, and confused silence from their Chosen. Nino finally cleared his throat. "Uh, dude?"

"Each of us is the embodiment of a concept." Wayzz sounded almost as calm as ever, but even Adrien could see how shaken the turtle kwami was. "If something changes and a kwami can no longer represent their concept, we begin to fade away and eventually vanish entirely."

"Tikki's giving up?" Trixx sounded appalled.

"If any of you had visited her in the Miracle Box after she lost her holder, you'd know that!" Plagg snapped, his green eyes accusing as he looked over at the other three. "But you've all been comforting your own holders. Because our Chosen are important to us. That's why she's giving up."

"But Marinette isn't the first holder she's lost; I've seen historical records about other Ladybugs."

Alya's attention shifted from Trixx to Plagg, confusion obvious in her tone.

"We always lose our holders." Perched on Adrien's shoulder, Plagg shifted a little closer to his Chosen's cheek. There wasn't a trace of snark in the kwami's voice as he continued. "Humans aren't immortal and we are, so we'll always lose them. But it helps if we've seen them grow older. Have a family if they wanted. We always remember our Chosen, and it's easiest when we can remember them happy."

"Marinette cannot have been the only Miraculous holder to die in battle, though," Chloe pointed out. "Probably not even the only Ladybug. It's absurd to think Tikki's never gone through this before."

"No, my queen, she's not." Pollen turned to look meet Chloe's gaze, her tone melancholic. "But when they do die in battle, we can ease their passing. Take away their pain, comfort them as they go. It's always hard, but it's one last way we can be there for them."

The other kwami all looked thoughtful—even Plagg—and Adrien wondered if they were remembering their own past Chosen. Who would Plagg be thinking of? What past Chat Noir was he remembering? The question rose unbidden in Adrien's mind, but he pushed it aside.

"You've had dozens, maybe even hundreds of Chosen. But Tikki and I have been out of the Miracle Box far more than any of you. We've had over a thousand Chosen each. And of all of Tikki's, Marinette was her favorite. She was one of the youngest to receive the ladybug Miraculous, and
Tikki loved her like a daughter." Plagg closed his luminous green eyes. "But she couldn't be there for her Chosen at the end, because no one was wearing the earrings. Tikki was locked away inside the Miraculous so she couldn't help Marinette or ease her pain."

Not for the first time, Adrien cursed himself silently for not having grabbed the earrings that night, instead of the Lucky Charm box. If he'd picked up them up and put them on Marinette, maybe she could have performed the cure. Fixed everything. Healed herself. And even if she couldn't, at least she would have had her kwami with her.

"That's tragic." Trixx scowled. "But that shouldn't be enough for Tikki to just give up!"

"Out of all her Chosen, do you know how many she hasn't been able to be there for?" When Trixx shook his head in answer to Plagg, the cat kwami let out a soft 'hmph'. "Two. In more than a thousand holders, out of all the ones who died before their time, Tikki only couldn't be there for two."

"Who was the other?"

Plagg floated up from Adrien's shoulder, settling atop his holder's head and making a nest in the blond hair before answering Nino's query. "She was also one of the youngest holders Tikki's had. She found the Miraculous when she was about Marinette's age and then a few years later, she joined a war. She needed to reclaim a Miraculous that she and Tikki had learned was being used by the opposing army."

Adrien hadn't heard this particular part of the story before. He thought he detected an odd note of guilt beneath his kwami's words, but decided not to pry.

"She managed to finish her mission, but that didn't end the war she'd gotten herself caught up in, So she kept fighting." Plagg continued, his face all but obscured by Adrien's hair. "And eventually she was captured by the people she'd been fighting against, who put her on trial and sentenced her to death. But she renounced Tikki and sent the Miraculous away to safety before they did. So when they burned Jeanne alive, Tikki couldn't be there to take away her pain. That broke something inside her. She swore to herself that she'd never let something like that happen to one of her Chosen again."

Plagg finally raised his head out of the blond nest he'd made, meeting the eyes of those around—and on—the table. "So when she had another young Chosen who led people in battle, finished her mission, and then died too young while Tikki couldn't be there with her? It's killing her. It's too much like what happened with Jeanne, and she'd promised herself never to let that happen again."

"And that's why she's given up?" Pollen sank to the surface of the table, looking dejected.

Plagg only nodded in return.

Everyone sat silently, as though they were still working through everything they'd just learned. Only Chloé moved, silently reaching out a hand towards her kwami, palm up. Pollen floated up and nestled into into her bearer's hand as though seeking comfort. Chloé didn't pull her hand back once Pollen was nestled there, letting the kwami remain close to the other two.

"Alright, then." It was Alya who finally spoke up again. "How do we get started?"

The break in the silence seemed to stir everyone else back to action. "If we do this, we'll need to go get the butterfly Miraculous from the Miracle Box," Wayzz observed thoughtfully. "And someone will need to practice with Nooroo for a while. We'll need to make certain you can create a Champion
with the talents you specifically hope for."

"I will." Nino's words earned a startled look from Wayzz. "Don't worry, dude, I'm not renouncing you forever or anything, just until we do this. Then I'll be back. And we'll let Master Fu hold you while we do this so you're not stuck in the box or anything. But you've said it takes creative energy to get just the right Champion, right? I'm the musician, so it makes sense for me to do it. Plus, Adrien's my best bud."

"Besides that," Alya added, "if this works this timeline will be gone anyway, right? It will change to one where we never lost Marinette, and where Nino never even had to give you up. Not even for a little bit."

"Mm." Wayzz inclined his head after a little thought. "Alright, master Nino. And we'll need someone willing to become the Champion, who..."

"Me." Chloé's jaw was set in a determined manner that almost reminded Adrien of Marinette. She glanced around to each of the others, as though she were daring any of them to challenge her on this. "Adrien's my oldest friend. If we have to pull his soul out and throw it back into the past, do you really think I would let someone else do it? Don't be ridiculous." In a slightly more sarcastically self-deprecating tone, she added, "Besides, which of us here has the most experience tearing people's souls out? Metaphorically, at least."

"You aren't like that anymore," Nino pointed out. "Not most of the time, anyway."

Chloé tilted her head, giving Nino a quizzical look. "Lahiffe, we're talking about using magic jewelry to send our friend's soul back in time to change the past so one of our other friends—who, it turns out, was also my most bitter childhood rival—never dies in the first place. How are you not overwhelmed? If I can't laugh, even at myself, I'm going to start crying."

"If we're going to do this, we'd better start getting ready," Alya interjected. "And someone will need to go tell Master Fu what we're planning. I really don't envy whoever draws that short straw."

"Why's that?" Adrien asked.

"Because whoever it is, they're also going to have to tell him about Tikki."

#

In the end, it was Alya who drew the short straw. Nino and Chloé settled in at Chloé's apartment to make their plans on how they'd design a Champion who could send Adrien back about two months. Adrien, for his part, was supposed to see how much he could remember of exactly what had happened around that time, so that he wouldn't alarm anyone outside of their team.

After all, it was one thing if the other Miraculous holders learned that he'd come back in time. But if anyone who knew him outside of the suit managed to figure out something was different, it would only complicate things. And worst of all was the possibility that Gabriel Agreste himself might realize something had happened, and decide to change his own plans to something they didn't expect. It seemed like a long shot that he'd be able to put the pieces together, but seven years as Hawkmoth must have made him quite familiar with the powers of the butterfly Miraculous.

Unfortunately, Adrien's own journals had been in his room at Agreste Mansion, which was now both a pile of rubble and a crime scene the police were still sifting through. And even if the police let him in to search, he found didn't particularly want to go anywhere near the wreckage. Instead, he decided he'd search through his texts and emails the next day; those, at least, were preserved on his
phone or in the cloud.

But first, he had another visit to make.

The burial had been a week and a half ago, and the crowds kept coming to the cemetery. Even now, fairly late in the evening, he could see there was still a decent sized crowd of people gathered together down the path from him. Occasionally he saw the burst of a camera flash, illuminating the monument that marked her grave.

It was elegant, to say the least: a marble statue of Ladybug standing tall, a pure white butterfly in the process of emerging from the yo-yo she held open in her hand. The half-jacket she wore had been so skillfully carved that he could almost imagine the fabric fluttering in the wind, the same way it always had when they stood together high atop the Eiffel Tower.

*LADYBUG*

*Marinette Dupain-Cheng*

*Beloved Daughter, Friend, and Hero*

*Defender of Paris*

The crowd concealed the granite pedestal itself from his sight, but he knew the engraving on its face by heart already. Beneath those lines were the dates of her birth and death, a span of time far too short. And just below that, an engraved copy of the little sigil she had always signed things with as Ladybug: a circle with five dots inside it and a line through the center that extended past the edges.

He wasn't honestly certain she would have liked it. She might have thought it was ostentatious, more than she deserved. She might not have liked that her costumed name was placed above her real name. But just like the funeral earlier, the monument was more for Paris than it was for her.

His crutch slipped off the path, the rubber foot embedding itself into the ground just beside the paving stones. Adrien stumbled a step, nearly falling forward; only muscle memory honed by years of racing across Paris' rooftops and leaping to the streets below allowed him to keep his balance. The Miraculous made that much easier, yes, but it was still his own muscle and bone beneath it, and everyone on the team had improved their strength and reflexes over the years.

It was enough to draw attention, however. Adrien heard the murmur go through the cluster of people ahead as he was recognized, and the crowd began to part to let him through, moving back from the gravesite to give him space. A few camera flashes went off as he made his way to the monument. Chat Noir at Ladybug's grave was a photo opportunity that some couldn't pass up, he guessed.

The grave itself was absolutely covered in flowers: roses, lilies, even orchids. Most of them were bouquets of red and black, clearly left by those honoring Ladybug, but here and there he could see bundles of pink that he knew must have been left by those who actually knew Marinette. Maybe even their friends from back in school.

His gaze drifted upwards, to the sculpture. "Hello, my lady." He spoke softly, not wanting words meant privately to carry to the crowd still gathered around. "I was with the others, tonight. We all miss you. You're..."

Adrien swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat, and momentarily cursed himself for grieving. This would all be over soon; she'd be back with them. But just in case it didn't work, just in case they couldn't, there were things he needed to say. "Without you, we're not whole. There's a piece missing. From our team, from your family, from the world. And not as Ladybug. It's Marinette
we miss the most."

"Thank you, son." The familiar voice was quiet, rough with grief, and a large hand rested gently on Adrien's shoulder. "Thank you for being there for her. Both of her."

He glanced up to see Tom Dupain standing just behind him, Sabine Cheng at his side. He'd seen them quite a bit over the past few weeks, of course, but every time it struck him how much they'd changed since that night. The baker somehow seemed a little smaller to Adrien every day, as though the loss of his daughter had diminished his presence. His moustache had begun to go gray, and his shoulders slumped in a way they never had before.

Sabine, too, had changed. She didn't seem smaller, but there was something fragile about her now. A sense that she was fractured somewhere inside, like cracks running through a clay mug, and that one more good blow would shatter her entirely. Still, she offered Adrien a smile that almost looked like the ones he remembered from happier times.

"It's good to see you both." It was the truth; he'd loved the Dupain-Chengs for years. He knew they weren't the image of perfection he'd thought they were when he was younger; they'd been almost too lenient with their daughter, not worrying as much as they probably should have when she was bullied in school, or came home with yet another unexplained injury. But he never doubted that they loved their daughter with all their hearts, and he'd be forever grateful for how willing they'd always been to welcome any and all of Marinette's friends into their home whenever one of them needed a good meal or a sympathetic ear.

They'd certainly been far better parents to him than his seemingly sociopathic father ever had.

More cameras flashed behind them, as some among the crowd saw another photo opportunity. The partner and the parents, all gathered together with the flowers behind them piled up against the granite pedestal. It must seem very picturesque indeed; Adrien was certain these photos would be circulating online within hours, if they weren't already.

"Are you doing alright, dear?" Adrien knew the concern in Sabine's tone was genuine. It was tempting to give the trite answer—that he was fine—but he knew the couple too well to think they'd been fooled by it.

"No," he replied, shaking his head once. "No, I'm not doing alright. I'm not ready to let her go, not yet. But I'm going to try to move forward." Or backwards, he added silently. "But I came here to return something of hers that she gave me ages ago."

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the lucky charm that Marinette had given him seven years earlier. The string had gone a bit gray from being carried around in a pocket all this time, the edges of the little stones smoothed out by years of rubbing a thumb across them, but Adrien could see that Tom and Sabine recognized it instantly.

"You should keep that, Adrien," Tom said gently. "It's a good thing to remember her by."

But Adrien shook his head, limping forward to lay the charm atop the pedestal at the feet of the statue. "I don't need it to remember her. There's no way I could ever forget her."

Tom moved forward to embrace Adrien, careful not to make him drop the crutch. Sabine, too, stepped forward to join in. His crutch made it awkward to return the embrace, but he folded his arms around them as best he could. He could feel their love as they enfolded him, but also their grief.

"Don't worry," he murmured quietly. "Hawkmoth will pay for what he's done. I promise you that."
And if I have my way, Adrien silently swore, this time around, he'll do so before he ever gets a chance to hurt Marinette.

All he had to do was be patient for a few days until everything was ready.

Chapter End Notes

Next time on *Second Chances*, Team Miraculous performs their own impromptu take on Quantum Leap and things get Really Interesting™ for Adrien.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

The week has gone by incredibly slowly, but now it's time for Adrien and Plagg to take a trip two months into the past to fix everything. The team gathers together to see Adrien and Plagg off as Chat Noir bids a final farewell to the original timeline. It's very nice; there's a cheese platter and everything.

The entire business goes exactly according to plan, of course, and there are absolutely no complications whatsoever.

At least, that's what Adrien really wishes had happened...

Chapter Notes

This one took a little longer than I would've liked, but the week was busier than I expected. This chapter also concludes the original timeline, where Hawkmoth has been defeated; from here on out, we're elsewhen!

(Yay! We finally actually get to the 'time travel' part of a time travel fic!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

One week. Seven days.

That was all Adrien had to wait. One week didn't sound like much when he said it aloud, but somehow this week felt like it had taken a geological era to pass. Worse still, everyone else was buried in preparations for this ritual, leaving Adrien to focus on trying to keep his father's company afloat.

Signing papers, reviewing records, making deals... it all felt pointless to him. If he went back in time and fixed things, this timeline would be gone. None of what he was spending this time on mattered. But if the ritual didn't work, there were employees who would still need to be paid as long as the company was solvent.

Luckily, "fashion designed by a supervillain" was, at least temporarily, a trending fad.

Six days had dragged by this way; only one was left. Tonight it would finally be time, and Adrien could fix everything. The evening couldn't come soon enough. But first, he had to make it through one more day of putting out fires and managing crises.

As much as he now loathed the man, Adrien was beginning to understand precisely how much work Gabriel Agreste had done on a day-to-day basis. The workload had forced him to grudgingly admit that maybe not every one of his father's absences had been related to secret supervillainy; if akumas had still been attacking the city, the others would have had to handle them alone.
Of course, if akumas had still been attacking the city, Adrien wouldn't be running the company and Marinette would still be alive.

Exiting the elevator in the lobby, he stopped and took a deep breath. He had to steel himself for what waited just ahead. The hotel he'd made his home since the destruction of the Agreste mansion had protected his privacy fiercely—a service he was paying them very well for—but they had little control of what happened outside their doors. Which meant that any time he left the hotel—or returned to it—he had to run the gauntlet of journalists and paparazzi waiting for him outside.

The serious publications had all been trying to woo Alya with increasingly ridiculous sums of money for an exclusive report. She might still only be a journalism student yet, but she was also Rena Rouge. And someone who could write about the fight from the perspective of one of the heroes? No major publication wanted to pass that up. The ones who didn't think they could land an exclusive from Alya were still asking for private interviews with any or all of the heroes.

The ones clustered here, trying to ambush him? They were the ones just asking the same questions over and over, hoping to trip him up enough that he might say something new they could build a story around. He could probably have written a list of all the questions himself by this point, and just handed out pre-printed lists of answers each morning.

Still, now and then a question managed to catch him by surprise, and he was determined not to let his facade crack in front of them.

Straightening his back, he stepped through the polished brass doors—silently giving thanks that he was finally off the crutches—and out onto the sidewalk. Immediately he found himself fenced in by the crowd, microphones and cameras thrust insistently in his face. A clamor of voices washed over him, questions piling atop one another until they just became meaningless noise. He sighed. "I can't stay long, but I'll take a few questions. Yes, you over there?"

The tall woman he had pointed to cleared her throat. "M. Agreste, do you regret defeating your father? Any lingering feelings that you betrayed family?"

"No." That one was easy. "He lost any right to call himself my family when he chose to terrorize the city. Yes, you?"

"Do you have any plans for the future, M. Agreste?" The stout man pressed forward in the crowd, thrusting his microphone closer to Adrien's face.

"No, not yet." It wasn't even a lie; Adrien had plans for the past, not the future. "Right now, I just want to make sure the employees of my father's company aren't collateral damage. After that, we'll see."

"You were friends with Ladybug in your civilian lives; do you really expect us to believe that in seven years, neither of you realized who the other was?" One of the nearby reporters blurted this out without waiting to be called on, and Adrien shot him a glare. Still, there was a curious murmur from the crowd, so he resigned himself to answering it nonetheless.

"Our identities as heroes were protected by the same magic that gave us our power. That magic made it harder to accidentally realize another hero's identity. But," and here Adrien offered a rueful smile, "magic or no, you're right; I probably should have recognized my partner sooner."

"Yes, you?"

In the back of the crowd, a shorter woman was bouncing up and down, trying to catch a glimpse of him; no one else seemed to care to let her through. Adrien decided to throw her a bone. "Yes, you?"
"Oh!" The woman seemed surprised to be called on, vanishing behind the crowd and not returning. After a moment, she bounced up again, looking over at Adrien as if curious whether he'd really called on her. Adrien nodded to her in return, hoping that would encourage her to go ahead. This time, only her voice emerged from behind the crowd. "Chat Noir, were you and Ladybug in love?"

This wasn't the first time Adrien had been asked that question, but even he had never been satisfied with any answer he'd given; none of them seemed to encompass what they were to each other. Had he loved Ladybug, and had she loved him in return? Unquestionably; there was no one in the world—not even the other members of the team—that they'd been closer to when wearing their masks. And outside of the masks, Marinette had been one of his most treasured friends.

But being "in love"?

There'd certainly been moments, early on. Marinette had once had a fangirl crush on Adrien, which he'd tried to politely ignore rather than break her heart; it had faded in time, and firmed into an unbreakable friendship. And he'd been infatuated with Ladybug for the first two years, convinced they were meant for each other.

He'd been right, of course, but not in the way he thought at the time. They were meant for each other, yes, like two puzzle pieces that fit together. Each filled the empty spaces in the other's heart, and they were capable of far more together than they ever were apart. Even when they didn't recognize each other outside of the masks, they'd been the sort of friends.

It had been deeper and far more important to him than his early infatuation; they'd become the sort of friends who had the other's back whenever they needed, each a rock the other could cling to when life became too much and threatened to sweep them away.

Yes, he'd loved Marinette with all his heart. But that wasn't what the journalist was asking.

"Despite persistent rumors, no; she was my other half in so many ways, but Ladybug and I were never a couple. As heroes or as civilians." Adrien felt one corner of his mouth tug up almost involuntarily, a wry smile briefly brightening his expression. "I'm sorry; I know that disappoints more than a few people."

He nodded to another reporter nearby, an older man whose red hair was salted with gray. The man pressed forward in the crowd, maintaining eye contact with Adrien the entire time. Something about his expression made Adrien uneasy, and he felt old reflexes take over. One foot shifted slightly backwards to grant him a more solid stance, and his attention sharpened; he found himself watching the man's movements as Chat Noir might have observed an akuma before entering the fight.

But when the attack came, it wasn't what Adrien had expected at all.

"Chat Noir, if she was your 'other half' as you claim, how do you feel that it was your own father who struck her down? Do you feel any guilt for getting her killed? For the destruction your father left behind—the people left dead—when she couldn't repair everything like she always had? Do you feel any responsibility for that?"

Something hot and furious washed through Adrien, leaving him shaking as he stared at the man's smug expression. He wanted to lash out, to hit the man. To scream that of course he felt guilty. He couldn't see the ruined areas of Paris without remembering what was lost that night. To wonder if there was some way—any way—to have used her final Lucky Charm to have fixed everything. To have fixed the buildings. To have fixed the city. To have fixed the people.

To have fixed Marinette.
There was a sharp stabbing pain in his right hand, and he realized he'd made a fist and clenched it so tightly his fingernails were digging into his palm. Holding himself rigidly, Adrien forced that first reaction down until he no longer felt the overwhelming urge to punch that smug, smiling face. He couldn't keep his tone entirely calm when he spoke, however. "I have things I need to do. We're done here."

Adrien began pushing forward through the crowd, ignoring all the cries of "M. Agreste!" or "Chat Noir!" as the crowd tried to get in one last question. His car was waiting at the curb, and he climbed in as quickly as he could before slamming the door firmly shut behind him. Only once he knew he was concealed behind dark windows did he let himself relax, slumping into his seat.

His bodyguard didn't ask any questions; he only pulled quickly away from the curb before and set out towards the offices of the Agreste fashion empire. Adrien was glad the man had stayed in his service; 'the Gorilla' had been a fixture in his life for more than a decade, and was one of the few solid things left in his life outside of his team that still felt familiar. Besides, the man never asked prying questions. Honestly, he rarely spoke at all, and right now—when everyone seemed to need to talk about something—that was a quality that Adrien had recently discovered he valued highly.

*Just one more day,* he reminded himself. *That's all. This evening, it's done.*

Somehow, he just knew this day would feel more like a week.

#

Adrien had been wrong. The day hadn't felt like a week; it had felt like a month. At several points, he could even have sworn the clock on the wall went backwards rather than forwards.

But now he was done waiting. He was here at the door of Chloé's suite, with everyone waiting for him on the other side. A door that was all that stood between him and a complex ritual of untested, purely theoretical magic.

For the first time, he felt himself falter. For the first time, he had a moment of doubt about this path.

"Kid." Plagg emerged from Adrien's jacket, giving his chosen a long look. But he didn't say anything else, instead turning to look at the door. The gaze had said enough: Plagg was worried too.

Adrien thought that the fact his kwami was worried should have terrified him, but somehow he found it comforting.

He pushed the door open, stepping inside to where his friends waited.

Every remaining Miraculous holder had gathered in Chloé's living room, where enormous floor-to-ceiling windows looked out over the lights of Paris below. Even Master Fu was there, his expression troubled. They had all gathered into a small clump around the couch and chairs, even the kwamis. But no one was sitting yet, no one looked relaxed. The snacks Chloé had put out sat on the coffee table, almost entirely untouched.

Plagg shifted in Adrien's pocket, then suddenly shot out into the open. "Camembeeeeeert!" he proclaimed excitedly, rocketing over to the neglected cheese platter and opening his mouth wide enough to engulf an entire wedge of his favorite cheese.

Alya smirked in the cat kwami's direction. "Never change, Plagg."

"The kid's been *starving* me today," Plagg protested after swallowing his prize. "Just meetings, meetings, meetings. All paper and talking, and some evil thing called 'Power Point' that I think curses humans into magical slumber. And did he think of his poor kwami at all? No, *I* had to wait in his
pocket, forgotten and neglected. Cheese-less." The kwami's eyes were wide with horror as he hissed the last word.

Chloé tried to swallow a laugh.

"You're not fooling anyone, Plagg," Adrien pointed out, while his kwami attempted to look as pathetic and starving as possible. "I gave you two entire wedges of cheese for lunch."

"Exactly! Only two! I'm going to waste away!" Plagg swooned, allowing himself to collapse on the cheese platter in a mockery of death. The melodrama was somewhat spoiled moments later, when he turned on his side and inhaled a stack of swiss cheese slices without even opening his eyes.

Leaving Plagg to occupy himself by consuming several times his own body weight in dairy products, Adrien turned his attention to the others. Each of the kwamis stuck near their Miraculous holder, save for two: Wayzz seemed uncertain whether to stay closer to Master Fu or Nino, and Nooroo was approaching Adrien himself.

"Adrien." Nooroo hovered right in front of his face. The butterfly kwami's expression, his body language, was a mixture of awkwardness and guilt all stirred together. They stayed there like that, just looking at each other for several seconds, until Nooroo suddenly moved to press himself against Adrien's cheek. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I wanted to warn you all, to tell someone what was happening. To stop master Gabriel before things went too far. I even tried to come back to the Miracle Box for my birthday this cycle, hoping I could warn the others! But I couldn't. This is my fault."

Somehow, in the midst of everything that had been going on, it had never occurred to Adrien that Nooroo might blame himself for all of this. For everything Gabriel had done as Hawkmoth—all the akumatizations, all the fear that had seized Paris for seven years. For all that Adrien had gone through as Chat Noir.

And for Marinette's fate.

If he were honest, some part of Adrien even wanted to blame Nooroo. If the kwami hadn't empowered Gabriel, after all none of this would have happened. And he was here, a convenient target for that blame. But Adrien knew that the kwami had never had any choice in the matter, and so instead he raised a hand to his cheek to gently cup Nooroo. "No, it wasn't. None of it was your fault. Everything was on Gabriel."

Nooroo remained nestled against Adrien for a moment longer, before floating away from Adrien and back towards his present holder.

Adrien's gaze followed the butterfly kwami until his attention was caught by the brooch that Nino wore. He felt a chill run through him; he knew Nino would never use Nooroo's powers the way his father had, but after seeing that Miraculous on Gabriel's collar every day for seven years it was hard to disassociate it from the man.

He shook his head, as though trying to dislodge that thought from his mind. "Alright. Let's do this."

"What, right away?" Nino seemed startled. "Dude, don't you want to sit and talk for a while before we say goodbye?"

Adrien shook his head. "No. I want to do this before I have time to think too much more about it. I want to get back to her as soon as I can. Besides..." And here he grinned at each of them.

At Nino, his best friend who'd fought at his side, who was willing to wear the Miraculous that had
caused them all so much grief. At Nooroo, who was trying to redeem past actions, to make right what he'd been forced to make wrong.

At Alya and Trixx, Marinette's best friend and the kwami who'd ensured Alya would no longer be an endangered bystander at akuma attacks.

At Chloé, who he'd seen change over the past seven years from a bully into someone he was proud to fight alongside. At Pollen, who'd been instrumental in that change by giving Chloé a confidant she could be vulnerable in front of.

At Master Fu and Wayzz, who had chosen him as the balance to Marinette seven years earlier, and brought this team—this family—together, enriching his life in ways he'd never thought possible.

"This won't be goodbye," Adrien assured them. "We'll still all be together on the other side. And we'll save Marinette together."

No one seemed to have an answer for that. As if by silent agreement, the four remaining members of Team Miraculous and their kwamis clustered together into one more hug; even Plagg tore himself away from the mostly-devoured cheese platter to join in. Only Fu and Nooroo hung back. The team held each other that way for several minutes, then broke apart all at once.

"Well! I guess we don't have anything else left to do, then." Chloé's eyes were suspiciously bright, but she seemed to be refusing to let herself cry. "So we might as well get started, right?"

"When you tell all of us about this in the past, you'd better give me details on what time travel is like," Alya warned. "That'll make for a great article."

"I promise." And then Adrien spoke the words he hadn't said since detransforming the night of the battle. It hadn't seemed right to do so. "Plagg... claws out!"

The familiar sensation of the magic spread over him, like an electrical current just beneath the skin. As it faded, it was replaced by the familiar leather-like black material of his suit. No matter how he'd had Plagg change the costume's appearance over the years, being sealed away behind Chat Noir's armor always felt the same.

Everyone turned to look at Nino, who still looked a little uncertain. Adrien couldn't blame him; he was going to use the Miraculous they'd fought to empower a teammate so that they could tear out another teammate's soul and hurl it back in time. A bit of uncertainty was probably fair.

But then Nino touched the brooch and spoke. "Nooroo... wings unfurl."

Adrien didn't know what phrase his father had used to trigger the darker aspect of the Miraculous, but Nino's outfit differed considerably from Hawkmoth's. He wore a domino mask like they did as heroes, rather than Hawkmoth's full hood. His outfit was form-fitting like their heroic identities, patterned in shades of purple; the arms and legs were a gradient, the purple slowly darkening until it seemed almost black at the hands and feet. A two-layer purple cape completed the ensemble, each layer divided into two halves in a manner reminiscent of a butterfly's folded wings.

And in his hands, a sword-cane that Adrien had hoped never to see again. A blade that still haunted his nightmares almost every night. As the cane reflected the lights of Paris outside, it gleamed red; for a moment, he almost thought it was still stained with Marinette's blood.

He forced himself not to flinch as he tore his gaze away.

"My turn now." Though Chloé stood in a confident stance, Adrien could hear the slight quaver in
her voice as she looked over at Nino. Of all of them, he could tell she was the least comfortable with this course of action. He wasn't sure if it was the necessity of saving Marinette, or loyalty to Adrien himself, that kept her moving tonight. Maybe both. Or maybe it didn't even matter why.

Nino cupped his hands together, a glow forming between them. As he drew his hands apart, the glow coalesced into a glowing white butterfly like those he'd seen Ladybug release from her yo-yo countless times. Holding the butterfly up in one hand, Nino let it free with the instruction "Empower my champion: Rewind."

Now everyone else watched as the butterfly fluttered across the room to Chloe, settling on her wrist and beginning to melt into the bracelet she wore. A bracelet, Adrien realized, he had given her as a birthday gift years ago. The white glow spread out from the bracelet, encompassing Chloé in blinding light for several seconds before fading.

Chloé now stood there in a blue leotard patterned with large black diamonds directly on the sides, creating the hint of an hourglass shape on the front and back which was then outlined in white. Her hair had turned a pure silver, the arms and legs of her costume black with with edging. At her waist, she wore a belt with a small silver clock for a buckle, and in one hand she held a wand... no. Adrien looked closer, realizing it was the oversized hand of a stylized clock.

"I designed this one for him to dress me in," Chloé—Rewind—noted towards Adrien as she spun once to show off her outfit. "I didn't want anyone turning me into something downright hideous like some of those akuma victims were. Honestly, you'd think your father had absolutely no sense for fashion!"

The last comment made Adrien smile, if briefly. "Alright. So, how do we do this?"

"I point this at you, focus on two months back, and hit you with my power. Your kwami's magic provides the fuel to get you that far." Chloé shrugged. "It's easy enough that anyone could do it."

"Then let's make it happen." Adrien braced himself, waiting for the blast.

Chloé raised the wand, her hand shaking just slightly, then hesitated. "Adrien... be safe, alright?"

Alya and Nino nodded their agreement to this request.

"I promise."

Finally, Master Fu broke his own silence, leaning forward as he rested his weight on his cane. "This is very dangerous, Chat Noir. I caution you to be careful; the more you change in the past, the less certain the path of the future will become."

"It's only two months back," Adrien assured him. "I doubt I can change that much. And if we get rid of Hawkmoth before he trashes a huge chunk of Paris, that's probably a change for the better."

The elderly guardian nodded. "I trust you; you have used your Miraculous wisely and well since I chose you. I am certain you will do well in this also."

"And say hi to Marinette for us all, okay?" Alya swallowed, clearly fighting a sudden swell of grief. Even after a month, the pain was still fresh.

"I won't have to; you'll all be there, and you can say hi to her yourself." The longer this was drawn out, the harder it would be for Adrien to go. He knew this, and turned a pleading gaze towards Chloé.

This time, Chloé's aim was steady as a rock as two entwined beams of silver and black energy
erupted from her wand. As the beams rushed towards him and blended into one, Adrien almost thought he saw the face with the hours and minutes marked off within the glow. Then it struck him, and the insistent ticking of a clock grew louder and louder in his mind. He felt like a piece of clothing being pulled tight, the seams beginning to stretch and pop. Only the seams here were what sewed him onto the fabric of the present.

The last thing he heard was Chloé's shout, "And keep her safe!"

Then everything went white, and Adrien was falling backwards into a void.

#

The world slammed into existence around him once again, the white void fading away. Yet somehow he was still tilting backwards; it felt like he'd just passed that precarious point where a single shift in weight would either mean he was righted or crashed down. He tried to grab at anything nearby that he could use to keep himself upright.

Sadly, nothing came to hand, and Adrien's chair crashed to the floor.

"Dude! Are you okay?"

A familiar hand reached down and Adrien grabbed it, allowing Nino to haul him back upright. "Yeah. Thanks, Nino; I didn't expect that."

Nino shook his head. "You were tilting your chair backwards, bro; I'm not sure why you wouldn't expect it."

His thoughts felt as though they'd been scrambled up like the eggs in an omelette, but Adrien knew there was something important he had to do. Something just on the tip of his tongue. He just needed a few minutes for it all to come to him.

Glancing around, he let himself catalog his surroundings. It was warm and sunny out, but with just a tiny bit of a chill in the breeze that hinted at fall around the corner; a pleasant change from the damp fall that he'd just left. He'd been seated at one of the outdoor tables at the small deli where he and Nino often ate lunch. A half-eaten sandwich on his half of the table attested they'd been there at least a little while.

Righting his chair, Adrien sat himself back down. "Sorry. What were we talking about?"

Nino sank into his own chair with a sigh, his expression glum. "Alya."

That was an insufficiently specific topic. When no further clarification seemed to be forthcoming, Adrien leaned forward slightly. "And...?"

"I don't know, dude." Nino groaned. "Like I said, she really wants us to move in together."

Move in? Adrien's mind was still fuzzy, but he was certain Nino and Alya were already living together. "And... that's a bad thing?"

"Ugh. Even if we pool everything we don't have much money. Anywhere we can afford will be pretty small." Nino tipped his head to rest on the back of his chair, staring upwards at the clouds as though he hoped to find sky-writing with the appropriate answers. "We'd be in each other's laps all the time. No space for my music gear, no space for her to write. I just..." He slumped a little lower in the chair, still gazing skywards. "I just worry we'll get on each other's nerves and everything will fall apart. I don't want to lose Alya, bro."
"But..." But you're already engaged. It wasn't hard to say, yet it felt as though the words had solidified in Adrien's throat, crystallizing into a sharp and painful object that was suddenly choking him. The more he tried to say the words, the more painful it became. But the instant the words were no longer trying to push out, the instant he was about to cry for help, the pain stopped.

Adrien swallowed twice, just to be certain. Not a sign of whatever that had been.

Nino straightened, staring across the table at him. "Oh, dude... I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking. This has got to be hard, what with Vi and all."

"Vi?" Adrien rubbed at his throat once, then met Nino's disbelieving gaze.

"Yeah. Vi. You know, Violet? Your ex?"

Adrien waved a hand dismissively. "Vi was years ago, why should I care about that?"

Nino's eyebrows rose towards his hairline. "Adrien Agreste, I love you like a brother. And I know after Vi broke it off with you last night, I told you to try to put it all behind you. But 'years ago'? That's a little harsh, don't you think, bro? You're allowed to be upset still!"

Last night? No, that was definitely wrong, Adrien was certain of that. He hadn't even thought about Vi in ages; he barely even remembered her. Honestly, there'd been so many...

Though, now that he knew everyone's identities, he realized none of them had really had luck with relationships except Nino and Alya. Which, in retrospect, made sense; they were both on the team, so neither had to lie to the other. Every other relationship seemed inevitably to fall apart.

Adrien had gone through a stream of girlfriends—and two boyfriends—over the years. He'd enjoyed the companionship, enjoying having someone he could go to dinner or a movie with, or even just a walk. But it always ended, often bitterly. Sooner or later, they got tired of his vanishing in the middle of dinner, or making an excuse why he couldn't show up. Some thought he was cheating, some thought he just didn't take them seriously. All of them dumped him.

Chloé had it even worse; she had gone through a small set of boyfriends in a lackluster manner, followed—after certain self-realizations—by a much larger collection of girlfriends. She didn't have to keep her identity a secret; unlike the others, all of Paris knew she was one of the heroes. But that was the problem; almost everyone she ended up dating didn't care about Chloé, they just wanted to date a superheroine. To show her off like a trophy. More than a few akuma-free nights had been spent perched at one of the team's meeting spots, one or more of them comforting a heartbroken Queen Bee.

Unlike Adrien, Chloé was always the one who called off her relationships.

He'd been convinced Marinette would make it work, though; after two or three abortive attempts at dating, she'd settled into a relationship with Luka Couffaine. They seemed to be well-matched, and Adrien had been thrilled to see his friend so happy. The relationship had seemed to go strong for nearly three and a half years. Then one day, Luka left Paris abruptly; no matter how many times they'd asked if she was alright, wondered what happened, Marinette simply said it hadn't worked out. She never elaborated.

She never dated after Luka, either.

And now here he was with his best friend, uncertain what to say; Nino seemed to think he should be broken up about a girlfriend from ages ago, but Adrien honestly couldn't even remember what Violet had looked like.
But his thoughts were almost clear, and now he remembered why he was here; there were far more important things to talk about than his past love-life.

"Sorry," he ventured to Nino. "Guess after all that, I just didn't get a lot of sleep last night, you know? Feeling a little punchy. Maybe we could talk about something else?"

"Yeah, sure." Nino picked up the cup containing the dregs of his soda, slurping the last of it up through the straw until suction stuck the remains of an ice cube to the end. He pushed the drink away, turning his attention to Adrien.

"I... I know you're Carapace. The words congealed in his throat again, sharp edges painfully catching somewhere in place. The instant he stopped trying to say it, the pain vanished once again.

Swallowing once, Adrien tried once more. "M... Marinette is Ladybug, and unless you help me she's going to die. Again the words caught in his throat, choking the breath from him.

"I... I used a Miraculous to come back in time. I really need your help. The pain was becoming almost overwhelming, and Adrien fought the urge to clutch at his throat as he struggled to draw breath.

"Bro... you don't look so good." Nino was leaning forward, all other thoughts overridden by concern for his best friend. "You need something? Water? The Heimlich maneuver?" A pause. "Paramedics?"

Adrien shook his head, giving up on his attempt; as he expected, the moment as he stopped trying to push the words through, the pain and blockage immediately vanished. It was clear something was stopping him from saying certain things, but he had no idea what it was, or what exactly triggered it.

Nino frowned. "You sure?"

It was clear that Nino's worries weren't going to be dispelled quite so easily, and equally clear Adrien wasn't going to be able to tell him anything useful. Instead, he just offered Nino a weak smile. "Sorry, Nino. You're right; I guess I'm not quite as over last night as I thought. I think maybe I should just go home and try to get a little sleep."

"If you're sure." Nino did not even attempt to sound convinced. "Just set an alarm so you don't miss your class tonight. And if anything's bothering you still, you just text me or call, okay? Your friends got your back, dude."

Adrien offered what assurances he could, until Nino looked at least marginally mollified. As each rose from the table, gathering the detritus of lunch to dispose of it. Once the table was as clear as they could make it, the two waved farewell to each other and headed their separate ways.

Once Nino was out of sight, however, Adrien ducked into an alleyway. He had no intention of going home just yet, no desire to encounter his father. He wasn't certain he'd be able to control himself if he did.

Instead, he tapped the inner pocket of his shirt. "Plagg?"

"Hey, kid." Plagg zipped out, then looked at Adrien's empty hands in disappointment. "You didn't save any of your lunch for me? I'm wasting away!"

"You can't still be hungry." For a moment, Adrien had the terrifying thought that this Plagg might not be his Plagg—the Plagg from the future. That he might be alone in the past, with no one else who knew what might happen.
"You know how they say you can't take it with you?" Plagg's ears drooped, the melodrama so thick Adrien was pretty sure he'd have needed a butcher knife to cut it. "Turns out that's true with time travel, too. Sure, I had eaten... will have eaten... might eat? Ugh. I hate time travel. Even talking about it is confusing. I will have had eaten, but I haven't eaten here. My poor stomach is a void that needs to be filled with cheese."

The relief that ran through Adrien was as soothing as rain after a hot day. He suppressed the sudden urge to hug his kwami to him. Whatever was going on, he wasn't facing it entirely alone. "Plagg, something's not right. I'm not sure what's going on, but Nino thought..."

His phone buzzed in his pocket, a sign that someone had just texted him. Acting on reflex as much as anything, he pulled it out and reached to unlock it. Instead, as he glanced at the screen, he suddenly felt sick to his stomach. "This can't be right."

"What is it, kid?" Plagg's teasing tone faded, his luminous green eyes narrowing in concern.

"We were supposed to go back two months, right?" When Plagg nodded, Adrien held up the phone, turning the screen towards his kwami. "Okay, then. Any idea why the hell we jumped two years instead?"

Plagg regarded the phone for a long moment, tilting his head quizzically as he studied the date on the lockscreen. "Hmm. Extra power? Maybe I ate a little too much cheese."

"Wait. This is because of the cheese platter?" Adrien stared at the little cat kwami in utter disbelief.

Plagg grinned, offering a little shrug. "Oops?"

Adrien groaned inwardly; the mission was clearly off to a downright stellar start.

Chapter End Notes

There's always complications with time travel; even the Doctor has had to deal with them. But for all the myriad ways in which time travel can go wrong, across all universes and stories, this may very well be the first time it's ever gone awry due to a cheese platter.

Congratulations, Plagg!

No doubt this is the only hiccup they'll face, and everything else will go perfectly smoothly. After all, how much trouble could Adrien and Plagg really stir up by meddling in the timeline this far back?

...never mind, don't answer that.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

A friendly visit, an emotional reunion, an unpleasant dinner, an unfortunate realization, and an exasperated kwami. Adrien's first day in his own past is full of ups and downs.

Chapter Notes

This chapter took a little longer than I meant for it to. I've been alternating chapters between this and Matchmaker and intended to get this one out by about this past Wednesday, but between being busy at work this week and wanting to make sure I had the reunion fully clear in my head, I didn't quite make that goal. Alas!

Also, thank you all for the feedback and kudos! I'm glad people seem to have been enjoying the story thus far.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Adrien had expected that his afternoon physics class would be trivial. After all, he knew all the material already; he was literally two years ahead on the subject. What could his first-year physics professor possibly throw at him that would trip him up?

To his humiliation, he couldn't have been more wrong.

Oh, he knew the material; that part he'd been right about. If they'd given a quiz on their coursework today, he was positive he could have aced it. If they'd asked generic questions about physics, he would've breezed through them. In fact, the few times he had been asked such questions, he'd been able to answer immediately. (Though the first time he'd been half-afraid his throat would close off again like had happened when he tried to speak to Nino.)

No, it wasn't knowledge that tripped him up; it was memory.

Because of course the professor would ask things like, "As you can see, this ties back to last week's reading. M. Agreste, can you summarize that for the class?" No. No, he could not, because 'last week' had been two years ago and he genuinely had no idea what coursework he'd read on a specific week two years ago. Who would?

"M. Agreste, can you explain the theory that our last test focused on?" Not really, because he also had absolutely no idea what the last test had been on.

"M. Agreste, can you summarize this week's assigned reading so far?" To his great humiliation, no, he couldn't do that either.

And so he'd spent most of the class with his cheeks hot with embarrassment, hiding behind his textbook in hopes that he wouldn't be called on again while Plagg silently shook with laughter in his pocket. Evidently his public disgrace was a source of endless amusement to his kwami.
To add insult to injury, it was such a stark difference from Adrien's usual performance in physics that Professor Hooke actually drew him aside to talk to him after class; he had to stand there while the concerned teacher questioned whether there was anything wrong that Adrien might need to talk to someone about. In the end, he'd blurted something out about being worried about a close friend and extricated himself as quickly as possible.

Which hadn't technically been a lie; he was still worried about Marinette, even if he apparently had a great deal more time to put things right than he'd planned for.

Dragging himself out of his thoughts, he realized his aimless path fleeing campus had taken him to the Dupain-Cheng bakery. He was suddenly seized by the urge to step inside and see if Marinette was home. To prove to himself that she was here again, that this mission hadn't been for nothing.

And to get a macaroon or two as well, of course.

Seeing the 'Open' sign on the door again felt odd to Adrien; in his subjective timeline, the bakery had been closed for most of the past month. The hordes of people who had wanted to crowd into the bakery run by Ladybug's parents in the wake of her death were not helping the couple get over their own grief, and in the end they couldn't bring themselves to keep the shop open until things calmed down.

But now, the interior of the bakery looked warm and inviting, the light spilling out the windows and illuminating the sidewalk despite the darkening evening. Pushing the door open, Adrien made his way into the shop, taking a deep breath and savoring the scents of sugar and frosting and cinnamon and honey and all the myriad other smells that blended into the scent he associated with the Dupain-Cheng family, and the home above the bakery that had always been so welcoming to him.

The shop was rarely empty when open, and tonight was no exception; there were three people crowded around the counter, awaiting their orders. As soon as the door closed, Tom Dupain poked his head out from the kitchen space. A broad grin spread across the man's face as soon as he spotted the newcomer. "Ah, Adrien! It's good to see you. I just have to finish packing this cake, and then I'll be right out."

The last time Adrien had seen Tom, the man looked broken and somehow diminished in the wake of his daughter's death. But here he was full of life and cheer, a large and welcoming presence. Adrien couldn't help but smile back. "No rush, M. Dupain."

The three waiting for the cake browsed the counter, looking at the cookies and pastries and cupcakes. Adrien found himself making a silent bet over whether or not they'd cave and buy something else by the time Tom had their cake boxed up. He decided it was fairly likely that at least one of them would; the Dupain-Cheng bakery had an almost magical way of destroying someone's willpower when it came to baked goods.

It didn't take long before he won his bet; when Tom returned to the counter with the cake, two of the three also selected danishes while the third selected a chocolate chip cookie. As the customers left with their cake and other sweets, Tom waved Adrien over. "It's been a while since we've seen you! School keeping you busy?"

"Yeah, lots to think about, things to sort out in my head," Adrien replied with a shrug. He left it vague; let Marinette's father think he meant he was thinking about schoolwork, as opposed to how Adrien could keep his insane supervillain father from killing Tom's daughter. Again.

"Sabine's upstairs making dinner, if you'd like to stop in and say hello. Otherwise, what can I do to help?" Tom leaned against the counter, one massive hand gesturing to the many sweets. "We even
have a few passionfruit macaroons left."

"Oh, I don't need anyth-" Adrien stopped mid-word, turning to glance at the case. "...wait, did you say passionfruit?"

The baker laughed. "You've been visiting the bakery for five years, son; your tastes are not a mystery at this point."

Adrien felt his cheeks color slightly. "Sometimes I get cookies! Or cake. Or your amazing croissants!"

"You do! But a good baker can always tell a customer's favorite; it's our own special magic." Tom opened the case, pulling out the tray with four macaroons left and placing it on the counter expectantly. "How many do you want?"

Admitting defeat, Adrien selected all four. As Tom began to bag them up, Adrien fished his wallet from his jacket pocket, only to have the baker wave it away. "Marinette's friends are always welcome. And we can't have you going without sweets; it's been weeks, you must be suffering!"

Adrien laughed as took the little paper bag from the man. "Thanks. As long as I'm here, is Marinette home?"

"Ah, no. You just missed her. She should be back for dinner in about an hour and a half, but she went out to look at another place nearby." Tom's smile turned slightly amused. "Maybe this will be the one, hm?"

Adrien remembered Marinette had spent quite a bit of time looking for an apartment of her own, only to reject every option she found. It didn't have space for a sewing room, or the kitchen wasn't right, or the apartment didn't have a balcony. Her friends—and parents—had eventually come to the conclusion she was going through the motions as much as anything, merely making gestures towards adulthood and independence while still finding excuses not to actually leave the warm and welcoming home she knew so well.

Though she had eventually found a place, about eight months ago in Adrien's subjective timeline. They'd all gotten together to help her move in and had a little party to celebrate. He remembered stepping outside for some fresh air and thinking how perfect the space was; she was on the top floor, and a little ladder from her balcony led to a small garden space on the roof of the building. He remembered thinking it would have been the perfect place to slip away and transform into Chat Noir before a battle.

In hindsight, that had probably been a selling point for Marinette as well.

"Well, I hope she finds what she's looking for. I should get going—lots of homework—but say hello to Marinette and Mme. Cheng for me!" Adrien set off out the bakery door again with Tom calling out behind him, telling him not to be such a stranger.

The macaroons were every bit as good as he remembered. He hadn't had them in a very long time; the Dupain-Chengs had not felt much like baking in the aftermath of everything. The flavor and texture were perfect. Still, the bakery visit hadn't gone quite as he hoped.

He knew that he'd thrown himself back in time. He'd seen how Marinette's father was still happy and full of life, rather than the hollowed-out and grieving man he'd seen so recently. He'd heard Tom speak of Marinette in the present tense.

Intellectually, he knew that Marinette—Ladybug—was alive.
His heart wasn't convinced, however. It lingered on the loss, the pain of the last time he'd seen her. When he'd held her in his arms one last time, watching helplessly and screaming for help as her life faded. And until he saw her again for himself, he wouldn't be able to chase away that last lingering bit of doubt.

He knew he should be heading back to the Agreste mansion for dinner, but he couldn't bring himself to turn in that direction yet. Couldn't risk facing that man, not knowing what he now did about Hawkmoth. Not after having seen firsthand precisely how far Gabriel Agreste would let himself be driven in his madness. And so Adrien did the same thing he always did when he couldn't convince himself to go back there just yet. Couldn't bring himself to step back inside a cold and sterile cage he was expected to call 'home'.

Moments later, Chat Noir was racing across the rooftops of Paris once more.

#

The team had their favorite meeting spots. Some were landmarks, or places they loved for the view; the Eiffel Tower was a major one, yes, but they also gathered atop the Arc de Triomphe sometimes. A roof overlooking the Louvre was another, especially at night when the glass pyramid glowed with lights from within. Some were merely convenient gathering spots, such as the roof of the Grand Paris.

But this particular meeting spot belonged to only Ladybug and Chat Noir.

None of the other heroes even knew about this place, nor would it have had any significance to them if they did. It was the roof of a nondescript building along an unremarkable street, nothing to make it stand out on its own merits. The view was nothing spectacular either. There were no landmarks nearby.

In fact, only one notable thing had ever happened here, at least so far as Chat knew: this was where a young red-and-black heroine had—quite literally—crashed into his life years before, leaving them tangled around the lamppost below.

This was where they came when they wanted to be alone, or at least when they didn't want to be found by anyone other than each other.

He'd thought about coming here on his own after Marinette's death, but in the end he couldn't bring himself to do so. It would have required transforming, something he wasn't ready for then. And even if he had, the knowledge that Ladybug would never join him there again would have haunted him the entire time. Even now, knowing that she was alive out there, somewhere, standing at the edge of the roof and looking at the lamppost below gave him an aching sense of loss, a sadness that tightened in his chest.

He was so deep in his thoughts that he didn't hear the soft footsteps behind him.

"It's a quiet night tonight, isn't it?"

That voice. A voice he knew as well as his own heart. Whether it was gentle, or melancholy, or full of anger or determination, it was a voice that he associated with freedom. With the friendship he valued most in the world, with a partnership that was the first time he didn't feel like he was facing the world alone.

And it was a voice he associated with his first real friends, with a bakery and home that had shared their warmth and love with him over the years and showed him there were places in the world that
were welcoming. That not every home was cold and impersonal. A voice he associated with a warm smile and a creative energy that could border on manic.

Two of the most important voices in his life. The same voice. A voice that he hadn't heard in far too long, and which some part of him had feared he'd never hear again.

He turned to look at his partner where she stood beside him, looking down at the streetlight below with a soft smile and her arms folded in front of her. At first he had a moment of disorientation, as she didn't look exactly like the Ladybug in his recent memories. She hadn't yet added the black half-jacket to her costume, and her hair wasn't clipped short; instead, loose black waves ran down past her shoulders like an inken waterfall.

But it was Ladybug nonetheless.

He reached out slowly, half-afraid that touching her would reveal her to be nothing but an illusion. Nothing more than the memories which had haunted him since her death, a figment of his grieving mind. But her shoulder was solid beneath the hesitant brush of his fingertips.

He hadn't even realized there was still a band of grief clasped tight around his heart, squeezing it down. Not until he faintly felt the texture of his partner's costume beneath his fingers, even through the gloves. The tightness in his chest vanished, and his heart felt as though it had suddenly expanded. As though it were too big to fit inside, full to bursting with too many emotions to catalog.

A soft sob escaped his throat as he lurched a step closer to her, wrapping his arms around her and clinging tightly. He buried his face against her head, blinking back the tears of relief that threatened to fall. He didn't think he could have released her from his desperate embrace even if he'd wanted to.

He could feel her surprise at the sudden movement, but it only took a moment before she embraced him in return, running a hand soothingly along his back. "Oh, chaton."

The soft words made Chat's heart ache all the more, and he squeezed her a little more tightly.

"I don't know what's wrong, mon minou," Ladybug murmured. "But whatever it is, you aren't alone."

He wasn't certain how long they stood in their embrace. Ladybug didn't ask any further questions, just held him until the moment he finally took a deep, shaky breath and exhaled slowly. It took more willpower than he had expected to release her and take a step back; there was a momentary stab of panic when he tried, as though she might vanish as soon as he was no longer touching her. Once they were separated, though, he could see the concern in those blue eyes he knew so well. It was a concern he'd seen from her on both sides of the mask, and it was so very true to both of her identities that he wondered how he'd ever missed it, even with the Miraculous glamour that helped conceal their identities. It seemed so obvious that not even magic should have been able to hide it.

"What's wrong?" Ladybug hadn't released him entirely; as he stepped back she'd clasped his left wrist in her right hand, as though physical contact alone might help stabilize him. Or as if afraid he might slip away without an answer.

"M-" Marinette. That's what he'd meant to say. But it caught in his throat, crystallizing once again into something sharp and painful. Apparently her name—at least when addressing her heroic identity—was another thing he couldn't give voice to. It took him another deep breath before he could continue without his voice catching. "My lady, it's... I've had a rough few weeks."

"Do you need to talk about it?"
"No. I don't think it's something I can. Not yet." Chat wanted to laugh; the words were almost painfully true. It seemed he literally couldn't speak to her about it, not without the words themselves trying to choke him. "But I just... I really needed to see you tonight. It helped a lot."

Ladybug's smile wasn't free of worry, but she squeezed his wrist once before releasing it. "Well, when you can talk about it, you know I'll be here for you. And the others, too."

Chat could only nod in answer. All the pent-up emotion, a slurry of grief and emptiness and loneliness and relief and love all blended together, felt as though it had expanded inside him until there was no longer room for anything else. Not even his voice.

"It hasn't been a great week for me, either." Ladybug's words had grown more quiet, as she turned to look back the street below. "Life's never simple, is it?"

Chat frowned. This was a conversation he didn't remember from his original past. Was she dwelling on something minor? Or without seeing her partner at his lowest in the original history, had she just kept her own concerns pent up inside rather than wanting to worry the rest of the team? "I guess it's my turn to ask what's wrong."

Another laugh, this time from Ladybug, though it was tempered by a note of sadness and perhaps a hint of self-deprecation. "I think I'm ruining things with my boyfriend," she admitted. "With akuma attacks getting more frequent, he's starting to have questions about why I keep running off in the middle of things or cancelling our plans. And my excuses aren't satisfying him any longer."

Ignoring a momentary pang at the words, Chat placed a hand on her shoulder once again and offered a comforting squeeze.

"I bet he thinks I'm having an affair." One corner of her mouth tugged upwards into the ghost of a lopsided smile. "And I suppose I am, even if it isn't the way he probably believes. I'm in another relationship with you and the team, aren't I? And even if it isn't a romantic one it's just as important to me. Maybe even more important." A sigh. "But I can't actually tell him the truth, of course."

The sadness in those blue eyes was palpable, and Chat's heart ached for her. His relationships had all been fleeting, but he knew that Marinette had given her heart to Luka. When the relationship ended, she'd never elaborated on why; she'd tried to put it all behind her, and simply refused to dwell on it without allowing herself to show any sign of weakness. It hadn't fooled anyone, of course; her friends could see the wound it had left in the way she adamantly refused to date again afterwards. But no amount of prying had gotten answers from her.

This time around, though, he could see the pain she was going through as it all began to fell apart. He wished he could brush it all away with a wave of his hand, leaving her with the happiness he knew she deserved.

Instead, all he could do was reach out to brush away the tears that had begun to pool before they fell.

"Thanks, kitty." Though there was still a shadow of impending heartbreak darkening those blue eyes he loved so much, her face brightened with a smile as she reached up to muss his hair. "I can always count on you."

Chat batted her hands away in mock horror. "My lady! Don't mess with a man's hair. Sometimes it's the mane feature of his appeal!"

Ladybug closed her eyes and groaned. "Really? Really, chaton? And here I thought you'd gotten better about the puns."
"Better?" He leaned over with a grin.

"Less frequent, anyway," Ladybug retorted. "That counts as 'better'."

"Meow-ch." His grin only grew. He knew he'd missed her, but until this moment he hadn't truly realized how much he had missed their banter. "But a cat never really loses his sense of hu-murr."

"Oh my god, stop." Ladybug punched him playfully in the upper arm. "One more pun and I'm leaving."

His heart was so full of joy that Chat couldn't help it; he threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, my lady, I've missed this."

The noise Ladybug made was somewhere between a laugh and a scoff. "Missed me punching you when you pun too much?"

"Yes." Chat's grin didn't fade. It was true, after all; he'd missed this, along with every other part of their relationship.

"You are a ridiculous cat." Ladybug shook her head. "But pun or no pun, I actually should leave anyway. I was on my way home for dinner when I saw you here, and if I don't get back there soon I might be late."

"Well, dinner is important," Chat agreed, holding his next words as he watched the dawning horror on his partner's face with a measure of glee. "So getting home in time to eat is a choice I wholeheartedly supper-t."

"Yeah, that's it. I'm gone." Ladybug took her yo-yo from her hip and hurled it across the street. It caught on the building opposite, and she pulled the line taught. Before leaping off the roof and swinging away, though, she turned back to stick her tongue out at Chat once.

Chat watched her vanish down the street, his cheshire grin fading into a fond smile. It felt like absolutely nothing could ruin his mood. Literally, there was no power in the world which could dampen his spirits.

His stomach growled, reminding him he'd had only four macaroons to eat since his early lunch with Nino. It was time for his own dinner. Which meant it was time to return to the Agreste mansion. Time to return to his father's domain.

I was wrong, he realized. There's still one thing that has the power to ruin my mood.

#

Gabriel Agreste had actually shown up to dinner, for a change.

It was ironic, really; Adrien had once lived for those brief moments of contact with his father, yearning for a shining moment of parental affection. Or even just parental approval. Just one time where Gabriel remarked favorably on his grades at university, or a touch of pride when Adrien won a fencing match. Any sort of acknowledgment other than disappointment.

But that had been before.

Now, Adrien had to force himself to sit at the same table as the psychopath who'd he'd been trying to take down for the past seven—no, it was five now—years. He had to eat chicken piccata and risotto with the villain who'd inflicted so much pain and fear on Paris. Make idle chatter with the man who'd
made Parisians so dread having even a moment of negative emotion that more and more were moving away. Share a glass of wine with the terrorist who'd driven half of his classmates into therapy by akumatizing them, sometimes repeatedly.

Try to enjoy dessert beside the man who he'd seen kill Marinette.

The saving grace was that Gabriel was once again paying more attention to something on his tablet than he was to his son. If he hadn't been, he might have glimpsed the seething hatred that burned somewhere behind that green gaze. He might have picked up on the tension in Adrien's shoulders.

Instead, he sat there picking at his food and flipping through god-knows-what on his tablet, oblivious to the fact that Adrien was seriously considering whether or not he could feasibly incapacitate the supervillain at the other end of the table with only the cutlery he had at hand.

"And how are your classes?" Gabriel didn't actually bother to glance at his son as he asked this question.

"I'm doing quite well; I'm at the top of my class." Adrien somehow managed to keep the venom from seeping into his words. "And I find the material interesting."

"Mm." No trace of approval, merely a lack of censure. Gabriel Agreste took no pride in his son's achievements; perfection, or something close to it, was merely the expected baseline. Only deviation downwards was worthy of note, rewarded by a hefty dose of frosty disappointment. "At least you're taking it seriously. I suppose a degree in math may be useful once you return to your actual studies."

"Physics." Adrien felt his teeth grinding, and forced his jaw to relax. "I'm studying physics, father."

"It involves math, does it not?" One of Gabriel's eyebrows rose, though he still didn't bother to look away from the tablet. "Some of it should still be useful to a business degree."

Adrien's hand had clenched so tightly around the handle of his fork that it hurt. "I'm not going to study business."

"Of course you will, Adrien. I've tolerated this diversion of yours, but a business degree is far more practical. Besides, what would you even do with this absurd degree? I don't plan to turn the company over to some mathematician, after all."

"Physicist." Adrien was surprised he managed to correct his father calmly. Every word Gabriel said seemed calculated to break down his son, but all it was doing was make Adrien want to lunge across the table. "And I don't know. Perhaps I'll go into a research lab. Perhaps I'll stay in academia and try for a doctorate. Maybe I'll even be a teacher."

Gabriel's expression turned from bland disappointment to outright disapproval at the final sentence. "This company has paid for all the comforts in your life. It has paid for your little hobby degree. I do expect you'll treat your responsibilities with the company appropriately, and not make such tasteless jokes again."

"I promise I won't make any jokes in your presence." It wasn't a fight worth having. And his promise had been a true one; Adrien hadn't made a single joke all evening, and he didn't intend to start.

He tried to take a few more bites of the risotto, but found he couldn't force himself to. It was delicious, but the entire encounter with his father had soured his appetite. After a minute or two, he gave up and pushed his plate away. "I have a bit of homework to finish, and an early class tomorrow."
"Mm." This time, Gabriel's wordless murmur had a clear note of finality to it; evidently, he'd already expended all the attention he intended to grant his son for the evening. Once, that casual dismissal would've depressed Adrien; tonight he felt only relief.

Once he reached his room, however, he had little attention for homework. First, he had an experiment he'd meant to perform all day: determining whether the restrictions he seemed to be suffering on his speech also applied to other types of communication. As Plagg watched curiously, Adrien pulled out a pad of paper and a pen, and began to write.

*Gabriel Agreste is Hawkmoth.* That was what he meant to write, the one thing he most desperately needed to convey to the other heroes. But as soon as his pen touched the paper, a searing pain washed over him. It felt as though every nerve in his hand had been replaced with electrified lava. His hand spasmed uncontrollably, scribbling jagged lines across the paper and he bit back a cry of pain.

The instant he stopped intending to write the words, however, the pain vanished and the spasms stopped.

He tried writing other phrases, too. *I have come back from two years in the future. Ladybug is going to be killed by Hawkmoth. I know who all the heroes of Paris are.* All produced that searing agony. Trying to enter the same phrases on his computer was even less effective; typing two-handed produced the pain and spasms in both hands rather than merely one, rendering him utterly unable to type and occasionally driving him from his chair to a fetal position on the floor in anguish.

He finally gave up when his hands had begun to stiffen and ache from the repeated abuse. Instead, he went to pull his nightclothes from the closet, intending to sleep. As he opened the door, the first thing he saw inside was his favorite blue scarf.

A wave of emotion washed over him, a pang of regret gilded in a feeling of relief. He hadn't seen the scarf in a month, and had honestly never expected to see it again. He placed it aside on his bedside table before turning back to select something to sleep in: a pair of boxer shorts and a t-shirt reading 'Let me be your Lucky Charm' atop the silhouette of Ladybug swinging from her yo-yo.

He hadn't been able to wear any clothing celebrating Ladybug since that night; he had barely even been able to look at anyone wearing merchandise of the heroes. Sleeping in this shirt felt like he was taking a step away from the harsh memories.

He moved to the cheese fridge under his desk, removing a large chunk of camembert for Plagg, who promptly settled in on Adrien's desk to begin eating his dairy dinner while Adrien collapsed into his bed.

Unfortunately, once in bed, Adrien found himself unable to fall asleep. His room had never felt comforting before, but now he felt as though he were a soldier trapped behind enemy lines where the slightest wrong move could betray his position. He was all too aware that Hawkmoth was somewhere in the same building. If Gabriel had called it an early night he might even be asleep right now, resting unaware just at the other end of the hall. And he couldn't even tell anyone Hawkmoth's true identity.

But he still knew. Even without allies, he could transform and make his way down the hallway; Gabriel Agreste would never expect Chat Noir to show up in his bedroom in the middle of the night. He wouldn't be on guard. Adrien could put an end to this war tonight, with cataclysm or claws. It would be so very easy, and Marinette would be safe.

But as his mind's eye turned to Marinette, another memory bubbled to the surface: Marinette, her hair
cut short, bleeding out among the rubble of this very building. Taking what strength she had left to prop herself upright and call out to him. Even with her life fading, her eyes had been as clear as always when he met her gaze. The last request she'd made of him before she passed away echoed in his mind.

"Don't do it, chaton. Don't become something you'll hate later."

He closed his eyes. It might be the easy path, but he couldn't do it. If he killed his own father, even to protect others, he'd be ignoring her dying wish. It didn't matter that she was alive again now; he still couldn't betray that final plea. Because as much as he loathed his father, Adrien Agreste wasn't a murderer. And if he forced himself to become one, he'd never be able to look Marinette in the eye again.

And he desperately wanted—needed—to be able to look Marinette in the eye.

He'd tried to mentally merge the two women into one in the month since her death, but the impact hadn't truly hit him until he saw her again tonight. It was so much easier to truly see the one in the other when she was standing right beside him, alive and breathing and overshadowing everything else in his life.

Ladybug had once been an ideal to aspire to, the mark against which he measured himself as a hero. She was courageous and brilliant and caring, focused on the mission, and at first it had seemed she could do no wrong. He'd learned better over the years, of course; he'd seen her moments of doubt, the times she made mistakes. They'd even argued with each other, especially when she knew things about the Miraculous that he didn't. He'd come to see that behind the mask, she was another person. But even as his hero-worship had faded to something else, she was the one he measured Chat Noir against.

If he were honest, she was what he'd measured every girlfriend against, too. Even after he'd stopped pursuing her romantically, what she represented remained his ideal. A sharp mind, creativity, courage, loyalty, determination... all of that. But also the way that when the fight was done she'd laugh along with him—even when she pretended to hate his puns. The way they fell into an easy partnership, the way they simply fit together like puzzle pieces.

But even when she'd faltered, he'd never felt like Ladybug needed him to save her or prop her up. She was his partner, but of the two of them she was the greater.

And then there was Marinette. One of his dearest friends. He'd seen her when she was vulnerable and been there to help her pick up the pieces. He'd seen the way she blushed and smiled when she felt loved, the way she seemed to brighten a room when she looked at Luka. He'd seen how sometimes the creative energy in her overflowed and she had to stop whatever she was doing and immediately begin scribbling in her sketchbook, the tip of her tongue sticking out the side of her mouth as her entire world narrowed to putting what was in her mind into a form others could share.

He wanted that in a relationship, too. Someone whose face lit up when she saw him, who loved things so deeply she could lose herself in them. Someone who would be there when he needed, and who would turn to him when she was in need. A relationship that settled deep into the heart, rather than just skimming the surface as with everyone else he'd tried to date.

He wanted...

Adrien groaned, draping an arm over his eyes.

"What's with the noise, kid?" Plagg looked up from his cheese, a touch of concern creeping into his
At first, Adrien couldn't bring himself to say it. He hadn't even realized it until just now, not until it was already far too late. Not until he'd seen both sides of her, and fit them into a single perfect whole. Finally, though, he uncovered his eyes and glanced over at his kwami. "Plagg, I think I'm in love with Marinette."

"Huh." Plagg sat on the desk for a moment, considering his Chosen's words. Abruptly, he stuffed the remaining camembert into his mouth and swallowed it all at once. "Yeah, I'm out. We're not doing this again."

And so saying, the kwami zipped across to Adrien's laundry hamper, phasing through the wicker and into his little nest inside. He did not emerge again.

Adrien propped himself up to stare at the basket. "I'm being serious here, Plagg."

"Can't hear you I'm asleep so sorry!" Overly loud, melodramatic and clearly-fake snoring noises emerged from inside the hamper.

Adrien dropped back to the bed. He stared at the ceiling, willing himself to fall asleep, but found the focused effort only made him feel even more awake. By all rights he should be tired, at least mentally; he'd done a full day in his original time, skipped back, landed at an early lunch, and finished the rest of the day. Apparently time travel jet lag wasn't something to worry about.

At least he had one more fact to add to his slowly-growing knowledge of just how it all worked.

As he shifted and turned in bed, trying to find the right position to get comfortable, his gaze fell on the scarf he'd laid on his bedside table. The blue scarf he'd once loved as a sign of his father's rare affection, then loathed as a sign of betrayal. The scarf he'd rid himself of before realizing how important it actually was.

Now it was his again. And this time he'd treasure it for the right reasons.

He reached out, burying his hand in its folds and drawing it into the bed with him. His task had become much more complicated, and he still had no idea how to resolve things. Or whether he'd already changed the timeline so much that his knowledge of how things had gone the first time would be irrelevant. He had no one but Plagg to talk to about it all, and that made him feel a bit adrift. But he could face anything with his partner by his side, and if she wasn't here in person, he could still have the scarf to represent her.

With the scarf wadded up next to him, Adrien finally drifted off. But when he dreamed, he dreamed once again of the worst night of his life.

Chapter End Notes

So, when I said that the rest of the fic takes place in the new past-timeline? Apparently I lied; there's at least one more angst-filled flashback to the night that was the absolute nadir of Adrien's life thus far. So there'll be some tasty emotional trauma to start off chapter 5! Yay! (He was too happy after seeing his lady again, anyway.)

Then again, with everything that happened that night, is it really so surprising that the
memories might haunt him?
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

As Adrien sleeps, he relieves the rest of that awful night a month ago, and of a terrible mistake of his own. When he wakes up, he's decided a few things about his path in the past. If he can't share the information he has, well... he'll just have to reshape the timeline himself, won't he?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

One month ago, two years from now...

His eyes were dry, no tears left. Chat Noir knew there'd be more to come, but for now he'd cried himself dry as he watched them take Marinette's body away. All that was left was a simmering hatred of the man left bound by a piece of rebar against the remains of one of the walls.

He could barely bring himself to even look in that direction. He wanted to run, to flee the scene. He wanted to find the others and tell them Ladybug's fate... and at the same time, he didn't want to see them at all.

Because the longer he took to tell them the truth, the longer they'd have to think Ladybug was still alive.

He forced the thoughts down, turning to scan the rubble around him for the two Miraculouses that had been dropped. The police would be showing up any minute to take Hawkmoth—Gabriel—into custody. Once that was done, Chat could leave.

The butterfly Miraculous glinted in the light not far away, easily spotted due to its size. Ladybug's earrings, being smaller, were harder to spot; by the time he'd gathered both of them up, he could hear the sirens approaching. He quickly slipped both the brooch and earrings into the pocket of his suit and zipped it securely shut.

There was a groan somewhere behind him.

Chat turned to see Gabriel trying to sit up, blood still oozing from his nose and the scrapes on his forehead. Despite his battered state, however, the man's eyes were filled with nothing but hatred for his enemy.

"You've taken her from me. From us." Gabriel spat the words out, along with a bit of bloodied saliva. Then a cold smile spread across his face. "But I took something from you, too, didn't I?"

Chat felt his lips curl in an almost feral snarl, his hand clenching. He wanted so badly to punch that smug face until Gabriel stopped smiling. Until he couldn't smile any longer.

Instead, the former supervillain's smile only spread, as the sirens grew louder. "Now you know what it feels like to lose someone. You'd do anything to bring her back, wouldn't you? You have both the black cat and ladybug Miraculouses right now. You could put them both on, make a wish... bring her back." The smile turned into a sneer. "The righteous heroes of Paris, so determined to deny me my
own wish. And yet I can see it in your eyes: the thought's occurred to you, hasn't it?"

Chat said nothing. He didn't owe Gabriel anything, least of all an answer. Behind him, the sirens stopped. He could hear car doors opening, the sound of careful footsteps on the rubble. The sound of one of the officers clearing their throat behind him. "Chat Noir? Can you tell us what happened here?"

Gabriel's gaze never left Chat's; he ignored the police entirely. "We're not so different, you and I, are we?"

Chat's resolve broke.

"I am nothing like you!" he all but screamed, despite how raw his throat felt from his earlier desperate cries as he tried to use the lucky charm to restore everything. The policemen standing right behind him were all but forgotten. "I will never be like you! You know why? Because I know that if I used that wish to bring her back—if I cost someone else their life to restore hers—she'd never forgive me. She'd never forgive herself! Neither of them would!"

"What would you know?" Gabriel snarled back. "You've destroyed my family! I could have brought her back! We needed her back!"

"You destroyed your own family first! You were so desperate to chase the one you'd lost that you forgot to even care about the one you still had!" Chat's hands were balled into fists, the clawed tips of the fingers digging into the material covering his palms.

"Don't you dare judge me! You know nothing of my family!"

"Oh don't I?" Chat dropped his transformation, leaving Adrien Agreste standing there instead. He took a moment of savage, vindictive glee at the way first surprise, then horror, spread across Gabriel's face. All the fight suddenly went out of the man, leaving him limp in the rebar.

The startled reaction of the policemen behind him—and the curse one of them bit off—went ignored.

"I know better than anyone, father." Adrien spat out the last word. "Not that you deserve that name anymore. Did you even look at her after you killed her? You didn't even recognize her, did you. Remember Marinette Dupain-Cheng? You called her a 'promising young light' as a designer several times, when she won design competitions. Of course, that was before you ran her through with a sword, wasn't it?"

"Adrien, I..." Gabriel struggled to find the words. "You weren't supposed to be..."

"Weren't supposed to be what?" Adrien's words were more a demand than a question. "Weren't supposed to be what, Hawkmoth?"

"Weren't supposed to be anyone I knew." Gabriel's confession was given in a broken voice.

"Well, we were. And now you and I are both going to have to live with that," Adrien snapped. Taking a deep breath, he turned to look at the policemen still gaping at the scene. "He's powerless now. You can safely take him into custody."

"M. Agreste, could we take a statement?" The policeman who approached him had a sympathetic look in his eyes. It took Adrien a moment to place him: his daughter Sabrina had been one of Chloe's close friends back in school. He'd been one of the early akuma victims himself.

"I'll try to give a quick one, Officer Raincomprix. But I have to go tell the others what happened."
When Roger Raincomprix nodded, Adrien began to relate the evening.

He began with the appearance of multiple akumatized victims, far more than usual. How the heroes had split up to try to contain the worst of the damage. The earthquake one of the akumatized had caused to run through the city, destroying quite a few buildings, including the Agreste mansion. How Chat Noir had injured his ankle in one of the fights. How, after hours of fighting, one more akumatized citizen had been sent to Ladybug and Chat Noir, demanding that they come—alone—to the remains of the Agreste mansion to turn over their Miraculouses, in exchange for which he would call off the attack.

How they'd realized Hawkmoth was Gabriel Agreste.

Adrien had to pause for a little while after relating that part. Officer Raincomprix didn't press him, waiting patiently.

The arrival at the mansion and the fight with Hawkmoth were recited almost robotically. Adrien couldn't let himself focus too much on what he was saying or he knew he'd crumble again, though his breath hitched nonetheless when he described the way Hawkmoth had torn away Ladybug's earrings, revealing Marinette.

When Adrien got to Ladybug's death, he drew to a close. "And then I bound him with the rebar, and h-held her, while..." But he found himself unable to speak the words.

"We'll find her parents and tell them, once this is done." It was clear Roger meant to spare him the further pain of telling the Dupain-Chengs, but Adrien shook his head fiercely.

"No. I want to tell them. I need to be the one to tell them. I'll... I'll go find them as soon as I've spoken to the rest of the team. We'll help with cleanup however we can. For now, can you just..." Adrien trailed off once more, gesturing towards the bound and now broken Gabriel Agreste. "I have to go. I can't stay here. I can't."

Roger nodded without even bothering to check with the other policemen present. "If there are more questions, M. Agreste, we'll call you."

Adrien nodded once, curtly, and then spun on his heel to stalk away, ignoring Gabriel's voice desperately calling for him.

He walked aimlessly for several blocks, far enough away that a building that was still mostly intact blocked his view of the mansion's remains. His hand in his jacket pocket worried at the lucky charm Marinette had given him, running his thumb over the beads again and again as though through it he could touch her again once more.

When the attack had started, they'd all known it was probably the final one. If Hawkmoth had been willing to make a move that big, there was never any other option. And so Adrien had chosen to take a talisman representing each of the people closest to him in his civilian life. He wasn't even consciously certain why; for luck, perhaps, or just to remind himself why he was fighting.

The lucky charm from Marinette. The USB stick of Nino's latest compositions, a gift from only days earlier. A pin Chloe had given him for his birthday when he was 8. One of Alya's 'Ladyblogger' business cards, given to Chat Noir after she first printed them out. A photo of his mother in the back pocket of his jeans.

His hand went to his throat, where the last talisman rested: a blue scarf, his favorite gift from his father. His hand clenched, his fingers tangling in the soft fabric.
"Kid? You alright?" Plagg poked his head out of the jacket pocket, then floated up to rest a tiny paw on Adrien's cheek. For once, the kwami didn't tease or make dairy-centric demands. 

"No." Adrien laughed, the sound rough and ragged. "I am so very far from all right."

With one vicious motion, he tore the scarf from around his neck and hurled it at the ground.

"If you need some time before we see the others..." Plagg's voice was worried.

Adrien didn't look at his kwami. "Did you know about my father, Plagg?"

"No." Plagg's voice was solemn. "Kid, I swear it. If I'm lying, I'll never eat camembert again." He brushed his head against Adrien's cheek. "But I wish I had known. I wish you weren't hurting."

Adrien cupped a hand against his cheek, cradling Plagg. "Thank you."

The kwami nuzzled his Chosen one more time, then floated away. "You ready to go find the others?"

"Not quite yet. One last thing first. Then I'll give you some camembert and we'll find the others."

Adrien's smile lacked all warmth. "Plagg... claws out!"

As the light of his transformation faded, Chat Noir reached down to pick up the accursed scarf in one gloved hand. As he stared down at the familiar blue fabric, memories ran through his head. The joy he felt upon first receiving it for his birthday, knowing his father had put actual thought into the gift for once. Wearing it on a cold winter night, one of the rare times he'd been able to see a movie with his friends. The one token Adrien could take with him everywhere, to remind him that no matter how cold his father might be, Gabriel did still love his son.

A lie.

Clenching his fingers around the scarf, Chat Noir made himself stare at it. Some part of him needed to watch this. Needed to see that last lingering symbol of his father's false love die.

"Cataclysm."

#

Somehow, the Eiffel Tower was still standing. Chat was almost surprised; it seemed like an inordinate number of akumatizations resulted in the destruction of the tower. Sometimes by the akuma, sometimes by the heroes. But this time, when there would be no miraculous cure to reset everything, somehow it still stood despite the damage to other parts of the city.

Chat Noir would almost find it poignant, save that he'd taken as many of his emotions as possible and wadded them into a tiny box inside his heart, sealed away until the night was done. He would be strong, for the others; they'd need answers. And if he let himself dwell on even the positive things, he was afraid that box might crack and everything else would come spilling out.

The rest of the team had already assembled on the platform they usually used as a meeting space. He'd answered his communicator just long enough to tell them he was alive, and that he'd be there soon. Clearly, it hadn't been enough to reassure them; the other three all were radiating concern so heavily it seemed to thicken the air.

As he touched down beside them, relief spread across all three faces.

"Chat Noir!" Carapace stepped forward to clap a hand on his shoulder. "Glad you're alive, bro. We
were pretty worried. Guess Ladybug'll be here after she uses the cure?"

Char Noir forced himself not to tense up.

"Why hasn't she used the cure already?" Queen Bee frowned, then waved a hand towards a fire in the distance. "There's firefighters and rescue workers out there risking their lives."

"I'm sure she's got a reason," Rena offered in a conciliatory tone. "Ladybug wouldn't let the city stay this way. She..."

"She's not going to be using the cure." Chat felt as though he'd pressed the mute button on a stereo; the other three heroes all immediately fell silent, turning to stare at him.

"W-what?" Rena sounded disbelieving. "Why not?"

Chat unzipped his pocket, taking out the earrings and holding them out on the palm of his hand. Queen Bee gasped, and Rena covered her mouth with her hand. Carapace's eyes just widened as he stared at the painfully familiar studs resting on the leatherlike black material of Chat's glove.

"Well, we just have to find her and give them to her, so she can fix it!" Queen Bee's mouth was set in a determined line.

Chat shook his head. "She's gone. She brought Hawkmoth down, but he... killed her."

"No. No, that's not right. Ladybug doesn't die like that." Rena shook her head vehemently. "I'm sure you're wrong. She's just hurt, isn't she?"

Carapace moved to Rena's side, and she turned to lean against him as though he was now all that was holding her upright.

"I'm not wrong. I wish I was. I... I'll tell you what happened." Taking a deep breath, Chat began with the akumatized victim who played courier for Hawkmoth's message. He left out precisely where they were meant to meet, speaking only in vague terms. He detailed their arrival, and the fight.

He relived the moment where his careless move and pained cry had distracted Ladybug for that crucial instant, and how Hawkmoth tore away her earrings, though he didn't share her identity with the others. Not yet.

He told them about Ladybug's bravery; when they heard how she'd pulled the sword deeper into herself so that she could bring the brooch within reach, he could see the tears in everyone else's eyes. They stood there in silence until the others managed to dry their tears; there would be time enough for mourning later, after Chat Noir was done.

"That's the bug for you," Carapace said sadly, staring down at the platform. "No matter what happened, she just kept going."

"After we'd unmasked him," Chat Noir concluded, "I bound him up with some rebar, and went to Ladybug. But she was... she was too far gone. She... I held her until..."

The others all stepped in closer as one, folding Chat into a silent hug until he could pack the lid of the box of emotions back on tightly once again. Once he'd managed to do so, he took a deep breath, offered a nod of thanks, and continued. "I tried to use the miraculous cure. I really tried! But it didn't work, she didn't come back. So I gathered up her Miraculous and Hawkmoth's, and waited for the police to take Gabriel into custody."
"Gabriel?"

It wasn't until Rena's question fully registered in his brain that Chat realized he'd spoken his father's name rather than calling him 'Hawkmoth'. He sighed. "Hawkmoth was Gabriel Agreste. The fashion designer."

The other three looked downright shocked. Queen Bee in particular looked ill at the thought. Carapace was the first to find his voice again. "We gotta go find his son, Adrien."

Queen Bee whirled on the turtle hero, her expression turning fierce. "I don't care if that villain was his father; Adrien was not involved! I've known him ever since we were little, and he would never do be a part of that!" She looked as though she were ready to fight her own teammates over this one point, and Chat Noir was touched to realize how deeply she really did care.

"Chill, Queenie!" Carapace raised his hands, as though to fend her off. "I know he wouldn't. With my mask off, dude's my best friend." Chat's attention jerked back to the turtle hero in surprise, but Carapace just kept talking. "He's somewhere out there, maybe alone, and he's going to hear that everything that's happened is his dad's fault? That's why I want to go find him! We gotta be there for him. I gotta be there for him."

As Queen Bee relaxed, Rena spoke up. "I agree, we need to find Sunshine. But where do we start? With all the chaos, if he was smart he would've taken shelter somewhere. But that means he could be in any one of the akuma shelters in the city."

Chat Noir laughed, though the sound was almost bitter even to his own ears. "Adrien didn't run. He was in the thick of it all."

"You saw him?" Carapace turned back to face Chat. "Where was he? How was he?"

"It won't be hard to find him." And so saying, Chat dropped his transformation, Plagg promptly vanishing into his pocket to find another piece of cheese. "I'm already right here."

There was another stunned silence, and then the others were all talking at once. "Dude, you were Chat Noir? I can't believe..." "Adrien, we've been fighting together all this time and you didn't tell me? You knew who I was! Everyone..." "Ha! I knew it! I knew it! And she said there was no way I was right. She's going to..."

Adrien cleared his throat. "I know Chloé there," he nodded towards Queen Bee. "But I'm guessing you two know me, too?"

Sheepishly, the other heroes all dropped their transformations. Adrien choked out something that was half-laugh, half-sob when he saw Nino and Alya standing there. He should have known. Who else would Marinette have trusted enough to give a Miraculous? "Of course it's you."

It was Nino who finally realized the implications of Chat's identity: the fact that Adrien had been one of the two to take down his own father. "How are you holding up, bro?"

"Fine." Adrien found himself the focus of three very concerned, very skeptical looks. "Okay, I'm not fine. I'm furious at him, and I'm heartbroken, and I don't even know what else. I'm just trying to hold it all together tonight. I can't think about him tonight. I don't even want to see anything that reminds me of him. I already destroyed the scarf."

"What?" Alya—Rena—frowned at those words. "Which scarf?"

Adrien scoffed. "The only one he ever gave me. The one that I thought meant that there was a part of
him that still loved me enough to find a real gift at least once."

"But that scarf— ow! Nino!" Alya glared at her fiancée as he stepped rather forcefully on her foot to quiet her.

Adrien looked between the two of them, clearly puzzled. "'But that scarf' what?"

"Nothing, bro." Nino tried to sound casual. Nino was very bad at sounding casual under pressure. Adrien knew this. Nino knew this. So Adrien just raised his eyebrows and waited expectantly.

Nino sighed. "That scarf was never from your dad, dude. It was from Marinette."

A crack ran through the box he'd bundled all his emotions into. "W-what?"

Nino looked at Alya, his expression silently conveying 'you started this, you get to explain it'. Alya grimaced, but turned back to Adrien. "Marinette made you that scarf by hand as a birthday present. I don't know how you ended up thinking it was from your dad. But when she saw how happy you were, she decided to let you keep thinking that; it was more important to her that you were happy than that you knew she'd made the scarf."

More cracks in the box. Marinette had made the scarf. Ladybug had made him a scarf, and now it was gone forever. He'd had something precious to remember her by, and he'd destroyed it. "No. Oh, no. No no no."

"Hey, it's okay. She'll understand." Nino put a hand on Adrien's shoulder, offering a friendly smile. "I mean, it's Marinette, right?"

"Besides," Alya added helpfully. "I'm sure she'll make you another one if you ask."

The box that he'd packed his grief, his anger, and everything else into shattered entirely, and Adrien felt the tears running down his cheeks again. Because there would never be another scarf; he'd destroyed something just as irreplaceable as Marinette herself.

The others stared at him, clearly uncertain what had just touched him off. Adrien couldn't tell them; he couldn't even form words past the sudden heaving sobs that left him gasping for air.

"Adrien, what's wrong?" Chloé moved closer, reaching out a hand to steady him. But he still couldn't answer. All he could do was shake his head, and hold up the hand that still held Ladybug's earrings in silent answer. There would never be another scarf because there would never be another Marinette.

The other three stared at the earrings in confusion. Even through the tears that blurred his vision, Adrien could see that it was Alya who first realized what he meant. Who first understood.

And so he saw the exact moment when her heart broke as well. The moment when she collapsed against Nino like a puppet whose strings had been cut. The moment when her tears joined Adrien's own.

#

Now...

The scarf between Adrien's cheek and the pillow was stiff with the salt from dried tears. He felt entirely wrung-out, as though every bit of grief and fear and worry had been squeezed from him. It was exhausting, but he also felt the lighter for it. Now that he was awake, the memory of that
horrible night faded in the light of hope.

He'd seen Ladybug. Spoken to her. Held her, at least for a little while. She was here, she was alive, and he was going to make certain it stayed that way. The scarf in his hand was proof enough that this was a second chance, and he wasn't going to squander it.

"Plagg?"

The kwami groaned, a muffled noise from somewhere within Adrien's dresser. "Five more minutes."

"Usually you're up before me." Adrien swung his legs off the side of the bed, then ran a hand through the bed-head that resulted from a night of intense dreams. When there was no answer, he stood and walked to the dresser, pulling out the sock drawer abruptly.

"Time travel jetlag," Plagg insisted petulantly, still nestled among the socks. He glanced up at Adrien and then burrowed out of sight once more. "It's a real thing."

Adrien pushed aside a few of the socks, revealing Plagg's head again. "I thought you'd never done this time travel before."

"I am the god of destruction; do not question me."

"Ah, well. If you need to sleep, I suppose that means I can eat all this cheese I have here..." Adrien knelt down beside his desk, pulling open the door of the mini-fridge stashed there.

Plagg's head popped up over the edge of the drawer. "The god of destruction will graciously accept your tribute. Now, gimme."

Adrien held up a wedge of camembert, and Plagg zipped over and phased through Adrien's hand, taking the cheese with him as he went. It tingled in an odd way, a bit like mild static electricity, and Adrien shook his hand once to dispel the sensation.

As Plagg took an enormous bite of the cheese, Adrien turned his attention to the room around him. Everything in it was extravagant—arcade machines, a second-floor loft that served as a library, a rock-climbing wall, an immense TV. It was the perfect picture of how the son of a rich family might have lavish gifts showered on him.

And it was completely cold, devoid of real love. Nothing in this room—none of the furnishings, at least—had been given in love. They were all pastimes, distractions meant to keep him here in the room. In the house, under his father's thumb. The only things in the room that gave him real warmth were a handful of gifts he'd received from his friends, and the corkboard above his desk holding pictures dating all the way back to collège. Pictures of his friends. Pictures of the times he was allowed out to be with those friends.

Everything in this room that mattered to him was something that represented freedom. Affection. All the things he'd been denied in this place.

He stalked over to his desk, and began pulling the pictures down, piling them beside his computer monitor. Plagg glanced up from his cheese and frowned. "Kid, what're you doing?"

"I'm taking the things that matter to me, and packing them up. That way they'll be beyond his reach if he hears I'm looking for apartments." Adrien paused, glancing over at his kwami. "I can't stay in this house, Plagg. I can't do it again. It was bad enough the first time. But now I know what he's doing."

Plagg said nothing, but his luminous green gaze was filled with sympathy and sorrow as he watched
his Chosen resume taking down the pictures. It wasn't until the pictures were all packed into a pocket of Adrien's messenger bag that the kwami broke his silence. "And after that, what're you planning to do?"

"I don't know." Adrien dropped the messenger bag on his bed, sitting down beside it. "I can't tell anyone—except you—anything we learned in the future. I can't write anything down, even when it's just the two of us, I guess because someone else could read it. Maybe you can talk to the other kwamis?"

Plagg shrugged. "Maybe. I can try next time the others are around." His tone lacked conviction, however.

"If that doesn't work, though, it's just up to us to stop it. We could confront Hawkmoth ourselves?"

Plagg just winced, shaking his head at Adrien. "Kid, even with two years more practice and growth, he was better than you and Ladybug working together."

"We were tired! I was injured!" Adrien's protest didn't seem to sway his kwami, and after a moment he slumped a bit where he sat on the bed. "Right. We'll call that the backup plan, then. So if I can't go after Hawkmoth myself, and I can't tell anyone what's going on, maybe we can just completely redirect the timeline?"

"Sure. Only losers care about the stability of spacetime!"

Adrien wasn't entirely certain whether Plagg was being sarcastic or just... Plagg. But he plowed ahead regardless. "No, listen to me. If we make some big changes now, that should shift the course of events a lot. The whole 'if a butterfly flaps its wings' part of chaos theory."

Plagg snorted. "Kid, around here, a butterfly flapping its wings isn't usually good."

"It's a metaphor, Plagg. The idea is that little things can have a big effect down the road. So if we make some big chances, the timeline should go on a completely different path." Adrien stood up, slinging the messenger bag over his shoulder.

"So, what's the first step?" Plagg floated lazily from the desk over to his Chosen, then phased into the bag.

"First, I'd like to go catch up with the others. You can see if you can talk to any of the other kwamis."

"Okay." Plagg's voice was muffled through the fabric of the bag. "And then?"

"And then..." Adrien smiled, trying to ignore how much it hurt to say what he was about to. "We're going to make sure that Luca and Marinette don't break up!"

Plagg muttered something from the bag that Adrien couldn't quite make out. It sounded vaguely like "I'm gonna need a lot more cheese."

Chapter End Notes

Adrien, just... no. Why. What would possess you to think that meddling in someone else's relationship is a good way to save the city? Still, maybe it will all work out.
(Narrator voice: Alas, it did not work out.)

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