nino lahiffe and the road to forgiveness

Summary

The veil has been lifted, the fog of lies dissipated - well, for one person, at least: Nino Lahiffe. And he wants to make amends with Marinette - but it’s not going to be as easy as smoothing things out like the cream of a macaron. Marinette’s heart was big, and would always have space for her childhood friend Nino in it - but his choice to initially ignore her words had hurt. Bad.

Kagami didn’t trust the boy with the red cap and the worn out headphones, but Adrien seemed to hold out for him, so she would trust his judgment… but she would keep an eye on him for Adrien and Marinette. And maybe that involved being around him for more than necessary. And becoming his friend.
He had a lot of work to do if he wanted to follow the road to forgiveness.

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An AU born out of salt and a craving for a rarepair. It's not necessarily in direct chronological order. Some chapters will directly succeed each other.
nino lahiffe and the truth unraveled

Chapter Summary

The Tiger Miraculous wasn't a ring.

Nino liked to think he was a good person. A person who did what he could - loved his family, stayed connected with his friends, did his best on his studies, and enjoyed his hobbies. He liked to think that he hadn’t really done anything to warrant too much bad luck, apart from the occasional akuma. Those were nearly unavoidable thanks to Hawkmoth’s tendency to take advantage of the poor Parisians.

He had a pretty good life. A good, if a bit overzealous, girlfriend, a great best friend, fantastic classmates, a dream in mind. Things were going pretty well for Nino Lahiffe.

Well… at least. It had been.

It had been another school day. They’d just come back from an emergency evacuation where an akumatized janitor had sent cleaning supplies out to chase the ‘naughty littering students’ of the school. Classes hadn’t restarted yet since some students were taking their sweet time coming back from where they’d run away.

Nino’s eyes dart all over the room, bored. His girlfriend, Alya, was excitedly chatting it up with Lila about something or another. He wasn’t really paying too much attention - when the two of them were talking, things tended to get a little too heated for him. So usually he bounced out or tuned them out.

His eyes follow Alix hopping up the steps to her seat, taunting Kim. The taller boy sticks his tongue out at her before swiping at her, only for Alix to hop up on her desk and blow a raspberry at him. Their mutual friend, Max, only shakes his head as he goes to take his seat - only to yelp as Kim lunges at Alix.

The thump that resounds is loud, but it doesn’t call the others’ attention. He supposes it was natural, though - the two of them got incredibly rowdy at times. It was often too tiring to tell them off when they were in the mood to bother each other specifically.

Speaking of things too tiring…

Nino tunes back into Lila and Alya’s conversation, only catching the tail end of Lila’s words. “...and so I said, wow, really, Ladybug?! Thank you so much! You really are a true friend!”

“That’s so cool, girl, but… you shouldn’t really be telling me this, you know?” Alya warns softly, her eyes darting around nervously. Nino raises an eyebrow in confusion. “People could be listening.”

Lila gasps, covering her mouth. “Oh no! I wasn’t talking that loud, was I?”

Nino coughs into his fist.

Alya and Lila glance at him, and Alya squints at him. “You didn’t hear anything, did you, babe?”
“Caught the end of her words. Something about Ladybug?” Nino could only guess what Lila had said about Ladybug this time. She had - and he was not joking about this - so much to say about her. He supposes it was a given though. Alya had had so much to say about Marinette once.

That had been before, though.

Recently, Nino had found that Alya had begun to distance herself from Marinette, ever since the girl had begun to insist more and more that Lila was ‘a liar’. Tired of trying to convince Marinette otherwise but stubborn enough to hope that the two could be friends, they’d had a rather long, long argument over it. Which had ended with Alya accidentally throwing a book at Adrien’s face by mistake when he’d walked into the room at the wrong time.

That had been a week or so ago, though. They hadn’t really spoken ever since. At least… not like Alya and Lila currently were. It was a sad occurrence, but Nino hadn’t really been given too much time to dwell on it - not when Alya seemed insistent on reaffirming that ‘Lila wasn’t a liar’ and that ‘Marinette was just dwelling on her jealousy for some stupid reason or another’.

Privately Nino thought that that was stupid, and that Marinette wasn’t really the type to dwell on jealousy that much, but he hadn’t talked to Marinette himself in a while, so he couldn’t say for sure. He didn’t want to discredit Lila, because honestly it seemed unbelievable that she’d lie about everything she’d said, but he also didn’t want to distrust Marinette. Not after they’d known each other for years.

Maybe he should try and talk to her when Alya wasn’t looking and get her side of the situation…

Alya turns to Lila with puppy dog eyes. “Oh, can we let Nino in on it? He won’t tell anyone, I promise.”

“I don’t know, Alya…” Lila twirls a lock of hair around her finger coquettishly. Had Nino not known better, he would have said she was flirting with either him or Alya. But that was stupid. “You did say that I shouldn’t have been telling you in the first place…”

Nino nearly gets knocked over by Alya’s pleading. “Nino is trustworthy, Lila, I promise. He’s the most trustworthy person in this room!”

“How can I know for sure though?” Lila asks in worry.

Alya taps her chin thoughtfully before a lightbulb lights up over her head. “He’s the only one in this classroom whose first akumatization was on someone else’s behalf and not his own.”


“But you were doing it for Adrien,” Alya soothes, something that makes Lila’s eyes flash something fierce. Nino’s not sure what emotion crosses her face, or if it had been really there at all, because Lila’s suddenly looking incredibly tickled pink at the idea of telling him now. “You cared about him a lot and just wanted the best birthday for him, right?” She taps his nose. “Not your fault Hawkmoth can’t dress people for shit.”

Lila touches the area where her heart would be gently. “Oh wow… you and I are so alike, Nino. We both care so much for Adrien - even though it could put us in danger!”

“Oh, I guess…?” Nino didn’t want to admit it, but he didn’t like the look on Lila’s face. Her smile was sweet, but her eyes said something else.

“I can totally tell you this then…” Lila gestures for Alya and Nino to lean closer before showing
both of them a ring on her hand. Seated gently on her middle finger, the ring is a soft rose gold, with five gems that looked like peridots nestled on prongs arranged around each other like a tiny pawprint. The ring itself is ridged with dark silver stripes. “Ladybug came to me last night in the middle of patrol for a visit. I thought it was because she was just checking up on me as usual and making sure I was safe, but lo and behold, she gave me a Miraculous!”

Nino’s eyebrows shoot up to his hairline, but he doesn’t say anything yet, prompting Alya to say jealously, “It’s your first time with a real Miraculous, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and it’s such a heavy weight on the shoulders,” Lila preens, gently patting the ring. “I know she just gave it to me last night, but already I’m worried I won’t be a good enough hero for Paris to believe in!”

Nino scratches at his cheek thoughtfully. “Well… I mean… if you’re gonna be a permanent hero… people are gonna have to trust you, right? And since you’re helping Ladybug directly… it shouldn’t really be a problem as long as you actually help her like the other temporary heroes.”

“Are you saying I wouldn’t help her, my best friend?” Lila asks, schooling her face into a hurt expression.

Alya elbows him before amending, “That’s not what he meant! He means that you shouldn’t worry about being a good enough hero, because actions speak louder than words! Right, Nino?”

“Oh, but-” Nino yelps when Alya elbows him again.

Alya turns to Lila excitedly. “But it wouldn’t hurt to have Lila put in a good word or two, right?”

“Alya, please go back to your seat,” Miss Bustier calls. “We’re going to start class now.”

“Lila, please go back to your seat,” Miss Bustier calls. “We’re going to start class now.”

“Lila looks down at the ring again. “What Miraculous is this one then? Looks a lot like Chat Noir’s.”

“Ah, sorry, Miss Bustier!” Lila apologizes before winking at Alya and Nino and going back to her seat next to Nathaniel. From where Nino is seated, he sees her try to engage in conversation with him, but the artist didn’t seem like he was having any of it, so she eventually gave up. It wasn’t really weird - Nathaniel didn’t enjoy one-on-one conversation very often, and Nino wasn’t sure if he’d warmed up to Lila enough just yet. Which was fair - Lila was overwhelming in her own right.

As Nino goes to face the board, Alya taps his shoulder. “Hey, Nino?”

“What?”
“You think…” Alya lowers her voice even further. “You think she’ll do it?”

Nino squints at the whiteboard. Miss Bustier’s writing was getting impressively harder to decipher by the day. “Do what?”

“Like… recommend to Ladybug that we keep our Miraculous permanently,” Alya whispers excitedly. “That’d be so cool - we could be Rena Rouge and Carapace and do patrols, and keep watch over Paris, and be recognized as permanent heroes-”

“Alya,” Both of them flinch at Miss Bustier’s chastising. “I don’t see any note taking there. Stop bothering Nino and please focus on your studies!”

Alya nods, abashed, and when the teacher turns around again she whispers, “It’d be like Spiderman. I could set up my camera and Spiderman everything-”

“It’d be nice,” Nino agrees. “But shouldn’t we just… wait for Ladybug to trust us fully?”

“What’s one little recommendation gonna hurt though, Nino?” Alya, thankfully, had decided that taking notes was in her best interest - well, at least, Nino thought she was taking notes. When he looks over, he sees her doodling out plans. “I have to be more trustworthy for Ladybug. I have to. I’ll talk to her tonight on patrol and ask about Lila, actually-”

Nino frowns. “But, that’d be like interrupting her patrol-”

“Nino, Alya, if you two don’t stop talking in class, I’m going to have to ask you both to switch seats,” Miss Bustier’s voice cuts through their discussion, and much to their embarrassment the others are staring at them. Marinette and Adrien in particular seemed to watch with blossoming curiosity from their new seat in the back, across from Lila. Much to Nino’s surprise, Marinette didn’t look at all that flustered to be seated next to Adrien as she should have been.

“Sorry Miss Bustier,” The both of them apologize.

When she turns around, they both actually go to write notes this time.

Later, after class, Marinette taps on his shoulder as he’s packing up, and asks, “You and Alya seemed pretty talkative earlier, huh?”

“Oh- oh yeah, definitely,” He laughs, tucking in his pencilcase. “Were we really that loud?”

“A little,” She admits bashfully. “Adrien could hear it all the way from where he was seated, and told me about it.” Her voice lowers. “So… is it true?”

Nino raises an eyebrow, suddenly wary. “What is?”

“Adrien said…” And here she leans into his ear. “Adrien said Lila got the Tiger Miraculous last night? From Ladybug?”

Nino blinks in surprise. How had Adrien heard all that over the noise of the classroom? “Uh-”

“NINO!”

Both he and Marinette jump as Alya storms over, pasting a rather fake smile on her face at the sight of Marinette. The sight is unsettling to Nino - Alya never smiled like that at Marinette before. “Oh, hi, Marinette. You don’t mind if I steal my boyfriend, do you? We have a date this afternoon.
“He’s all yours, Alya,” is all Marinette says, voice as dry as the desert before Alya whisks him away, him just barely managing to grab his bag before she does so.

He nearly misses Adrien walking past them back into the classroom and heading towards Marinette, the door shutting between him and his best friend.

Later that night, an akuma attacks Paris. Something about ‘annoying night lights’ or another. Nino hadn’t really been paying attention.

Much to his surprise, Ladybug appears on his balcony - or rather slams against his bedroom window hard enough to scare the shit out of him and make him drop his headphones. Once he recovers, however, he scrambles to open the windows as Ladybug tumbles in with a gasp.

“Ladybug, are you okay?!” He asks, helping up the superheroine.

Ladybug groans, rubbing at the back of her head just as Chat Noir goes sailing with a scream into a nearby building. “There’s no time- I need your help once more Nino. Can I trust you?”

“You know you can trust me, Ladybug,” Nino promises, drawing a cross over his heart. Did Lila actually…?

“Can’t wait to see Wayzz again.”

Ladybug shakes her head, a wry smile on her face. “Not this time, Nino. I need someone who understands that patience is a virtue, but is not afraid to encourage his friends in a way that bolsters their strength.”

Nino blinks. Three times exactly.

“Nino Lahiffe,” Ladybug begins, holding out the familiar black box of the Miraculous. “Here is the Miraculous of the Tiger, which grants the power of synergy. You will use it for the greater good. Once the job is done, you will return the Miraculous to me. Can I trust you?”

Nino’s entire bloodstream freezes over.

“The… the Tiger Miraculous?” Nino asks weakly.

Ladybug raises an eyebrow. “Is there a problem?”

“I just… no,” Nino takes the box, and opens it up. A dark pink light bursts out from the Miraculous inside the box, revealing a cute magenta tiger-like kwami.

The kwami bares her teeth at him. “Hi! I’m Roaar. Wow, is this your room?” Roaar looks around Nino’s room in wonder before squealing, “There are so many interesting things here!”

“There’s no time for that now, Roaar,” Ladybug reminds. “We have an akuma to-”

“LADYBUUUUUUG!” Chat Noir howls in the distance.

Ladybug winces. At the shout, Nino slips on the panjas bracelet. The bracelet turns into something like a gauntlet around his hand.

“This is really the Tiger Miraculous…?” Nino turns his hand over, something akin to dread settling in his stomach.

“N... nothing Ladybug. Nothing at all.” Nino swallows, and remembers Lila. Remembers Alya, and Marinette. He barely hears Roaar say the transformation phrase to him before one sentence makes itself incredibly loud and clear in his head.

He so owed Marinette an apology.

“Roaar, into the light!”

If she would even forgive him after he’d abandoned her like that.

Some childhood friend he was.
Nino isn't alone in knowing the truth - not really.

Nino goes to school earlier today.

To no one’s surprise, literally no one is in the classroom this early. And who would be? Classes begun at 8AM at its earliest, and right now it was 6AM. Literally no one would be around at this hour save for a few early birds.

Much to Nino’s surprise, one of them is Nathaniel.

The redhead sits by the windowsill of the classroom, gaze turned to the street below, uncaring of the world immediately surrounding him. A sketchbook rests on his knees, cover flipped open to a page deeper in, and twirling around his fingers is a graphite pencil, the eraser on the other end practically chewed off.

As if responding to his thoughts, Nathaniel lifts the pencil to his mouth, chewing thoughtfully on the eraser.

“Dude,” Nathaniel practically spits out the pencil as Nino speaks up. “Aren’t you gonna like, choke on that thing?”

Nathaniel gives him a dirty look. “And a ‘good morning’ to you too, Nino Lahiffe. No ‘good morning, Nathaniel’? No ‘how are you Nathaniel, I almost scared you off the ledge and sent you sprawling to your doom, Nathaniel’?”

“Ha ha,” Nino rolls his eyes before pointing with his eyes at the sketchpad. “Can I take a look?”

“By all means, though there’s nothing much yet,” Nathaniel leans back against the wall as Nino comes closer, peering down at his sketchbook. The sketches on the current page were mostly gesture drawings, though a few were more detailed renders of people sitting at benches or standing around by the front staircase. “I’ve been trying to look for people to do a portrait of, but nothing’s really been doing it for me, you know?”

Nino leans away as Nathaniel closes the sketchbook. “You could ask any of our classmates to model for you, man. Chloe would probably enjoy a portrait. Or five. She’d even pay you for it.”

“Doubt that,” Nathaniel snorts, and there’s something in the way he says it that makes Nino squint
Nino scratches thoughtfully at his chin. “You sound so sure that Chloe wouldn’t pay you to make her a portrait.”

“Oh- oh no, that’s not-” Nathaniel runs a hand through his hair, though whether or not it’s out of frustration is still a mystery to Nino. “Gah. No, I know Chloe would definitely pay for a few portraits, no doubt about that. She’s commissioned me before to do a charcoal render of Sabrina’s dog Henry.”

The absurdity of the sentence makes Nino choke on his own spit. “Dude, what?”

“I’m not kidding you,” Nathaniel pulls out his phone and pulls up Instagram, scrolling for a bit before turning the phone around to face him. On the screen is what was most likely Nathaniel’s art account, and on the screen was a charcoal render of what looked to be a German Shepherd, eyes alight with unbridled joy. Around its neck, a collar with a single tag, shaped like a pawprint.

Nino lets out a low whistle. “That’s epic. How much did it cost?”

“Well, normally, I price these portraits at the price of at least 75 euros, depending on complexity and detail work - and depending on when the client needed it. In Chloe’s case,” Nathaniel ponders the drawing for a bit before eventually saying, “... She needed it in time for Sabrina’s birthday as well. An embellishing present for the big party she was going to throw for her or something? Either way, she didn’t want to stick around for the numbers and just threw thrice… five times? Five times the amount she needed to pay in my face.”

Nino counts for a few moments. “... What the fuck, that is- seventy five plus seventy five plus seventy five carry the one-” His eyes widen. “MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED-”

“SHHHH!” Nathaniel chucks a rubber eraser at his forehead to silence him. “I know, I know. It’s kind of a lot for a charcoal drawing, I would’ve priced my landscape paintings around that range if not higher since those take forever.”


“Nino,” Nathaniel replies patiently.

He lets himself gawk for a few more minutes as Nathaniel packs up his art supplies. “Bro, you’re acting like this is... like that sort of money isn’t anything.”

“Believe me, I was just as distressed as you are when it actually happened,” Nathaniel snorts. “So watching you right now is like an eerie sense of deja vu. But anyway, that’s neither here nor there, Nino. You don’t usually come to school early. Why are you here?”

Nino is suddenly, and very violently, and very painfully, reminded of the reason why he’d come to school early.

“What time does Lila come to school?” Nino asks.

Nathaniel blinks at him. “What makes you think I know what time that fox comes out of her hidey hole?”

“...” Nino squints at him, and Nathaniel holds his stare, gaze steady. Eventually, it clicks. “... You know.”
“That depends on what you’re asking about,” Nathaniel says coolly. In response, Nino makes a gesture that vaguely resembles Lila’s triple sausage tied hairstyle, and the sight of it makes Nathaniel choke with laughter. “Yeah, okay, yeah. I know about her.”

Nino grabs him by the shoulders. “You knew she was lying.”

“Mm.”

“And you didn’t tell me?!”

Nathaniel stares at him, unimpressed. “Nino, we’re not exactly what you call ‘close’, for one. And besides, why would I have said anything after what you guys did to Marinette?”

“What do you mean—” And then Nino remembers. Remembers with a dawning sense of horror - how little by little, Marinette had been ostracized. Little by little, Marinette had been isolated, unintentionally or not. Little by little they began to forget about their everyday Ladybug’s selfless actions for the class. Everyone had forgotten.

Everyone except Nathaniel, and….

Nathaniel watches the emotions warring on Nino’s face. “You guys got a little too absorbed in Lila’s lies. Marinette, who’d known from the beginning, never had anyone listening to her when she told you about them. I didn’t at first, either.”

“What made you change your mind?” Nino asks. He tries not to think about how hurt Marinette must have been at how they’d all begun to forget her like that. And for some stupid lying two-faced-

Nathaniel’s gaze is stormy as he looks away briefly. Nino notes the way he grips onto his sketchbook tightly. “Let’s just say Chloe and I have an understanding and Lila tried to paint it in a bad light.”

“An understanding?”

Nathaniel doesn’t answer. Nino supposes it’s a good enough answer as any for now as Nathaniel then asks him, “And you?”

“Huh?”

“What exactly made you see the light, Nino?” Here Nathaniel peers at him critically. If Nino didn’t know any better, he’d say that the facial expression on his face mirrored Chloe’s on a good day. “What made you realize that Lila was…?”

Nino swallows. He’s not sure how to explain it to Nathaniel. “... I just... it’s something…”

“... something you can’t talk about?” Nathaniel tries. At Nino’s nod, Nathaniel continues his guesswork. “Since I’m guessing, you technically didn’t tell me anything. Okay. Is it... related to Ladybug?” Nod. “Temporary heroes?” An awkward half shrug. “... Ah. Lila claimed to be a superhero again but this time had something like a Miraculous to ‘prove’ her point but you somehow know that it’s a fake Miraculous.”

Nino nods vigorously. And a few more times. And a little more until Nathaniel has to reach out and stop him with a hand. “Ow. My head.”

“You didn’t need to nod so hard,” Nathaniel shakes his head before asking, “But okay. That’s
good. You’ve come to see the light already. That’s a good baby step forward. But now you have to take a leap of faith off the cliff and into the abyss.”

Nino groans. “Speak French. Please.”

“You’re going to have to apologize to Marinette, Nino,” Nathaniel says slowly. “That’s the abyss, because when you decide to openly side with Marinette, Lila’s going to think of you as an enemy. And everyone else that believes in her will too.”

Nino blinks at him. “What? What do you mean? And how do you know this?”

“I don’t know all the details,” Nathaniel admits softly. “But… Chloe’s confronted me like you have before. She told me… told me what she heard in the bathroom. Lila, threatening Marinette. And everything she told Marinette? It’s all been coming true, little by little.” He shakes his head morosely. “We are the blind sheep, and Lila is the wolf preying on us one by one. You escaped. You’ve got at least more than one braincell in there.”

“Thanks?”

“But honestly, Nino. Be careful,” Nathaniel warns. “The instant she catches wind that you know the truth, she’s going to turn on you and make everyone turn on you in an instant. She hasn’t done that to me because I haven’t directly done anything to her yet. I’m a wild card to her, but one that she still thinks she can benefit from…” He ponders on a word. “…bewitching. That’s a word. I remember now.”

“Hold on, Nath. What’s- you know what, I’ll ask about all that stuff with Chloe later, what’s this about Lila threatening Mari in the bathroom?!’

Nathaniel speaks.

And Nino listens.

He listens well.

It’s agonizing, knowing what he knew now.

Even more agonizing to sit next to Alya and Lila chatting it up, knowing that every word spilling from Lila’s lips was a straight out lie.

“Sorry, Alya, I didn’t get to talk to Ladybug last night,” Lila says regretfully, toying with the ring on her hand. The fake ring. The fake Miraculous. Nino knew the feeling of the real Tiger Miraculous - the panjas bracelet, turning into a sleek gauntlet around his hand. “The akuma last night was so tiring to face, you know?”

Alya cocks her head to the side curiously. “But… but the Tiger hero last night… it was a male, wasn’t it? It didn’t look like you at all…”

Nino scoffs mentally. Let’s see her lie her way out of this one.

“That was me, silly!” Lila giggles. Her laughter is like nails on a chalkboard to Nino’s ears. “Don’t you know? The Miraculous lets you look completely different so people don’t guess who you look like!” She tosses her hair, drumming her fingers on the desk. “I had to look as scrawny as I did last night so people wouldn’t know it was me! It’s the perfect disguise!”
Nino chokes loudly, making Alya turn around to face him in worry and Lila look over in slight disinterest. “Nino! Are you okay?”

“Just- something in my throat.” Nino gasps, scrambling to find his water bottle before finding it right in front of him. Gratefully he grabs it and chugs the water before sighing in relief. “Thanks, dude.”

“No problem, Nino.” Adrien smiles warmly, and it’s then that Nino realizes Adrien had handed him the water bottle and not Alya - and that the water bottle was Adrien’s, not his. His was still under the table. “Couldn’t let my best friend choke to death, right?”

Lila, quite immediately, throws herself at Adrien, simpering, “You’re so thoughtful, Adrien! I wish I had a best friendship like you and Nino do! Always out there for you, always sticking by your side…”

“What am I girl, potato salad?” Alya jokes.

Lila gasps, eyelashes fluttering in ‘surprise’. God, how fake could this girl get? “M-me? I’m your best friend? B-but, I thought…” Lila’s eyes flicker over to Marinette briefly.

“Who says people can’t have more than two best friends?” Alya says, loud enough for Marinette to hear from her seat all the way in the back. When Nino goes to look, he sees her glance briefly at Alya and Lila before looking at Adrien, and then at Nino, before going back to look at her notebook. “Consider me your best friend, Lila, because I’m never gonna let you down.”

Lila gasps in mock delight. Nino thinks he might throw up in his mouth a little. “That’s so sweet of you Alya! Consider the same for me - I’ll never let you down either!”

Nino watches as Adrien carefully but firmly pries Lila away from his side. The disgust on his face is beautifully masked, enough that the normal person couldn’t see it - but as his best friend, Nino knew he didn’t like her touching him from his expression alone. “Right… hey, Nino? Can M- me ask you to sit with me for lunch later?”

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“Nice grammar, bro,” Nino snickers.

Adrien rolls his eyes before correcting himself. “Can we sit together at lunch later? I wanna talk with you.”

“We’ll sit with you!” Alya offers, holding onto Lila’s hand excitedly.

Adrien’s smile turns slightly strained, but it’s only for a millisecond. It’s back to his normal sunshine smile within a moment. “Sorry, Alya, but this is ‘guy time’, you know? You and Lila can spend some time together this lunch, can’t you?”

“Can’t intrude on the bro time, Alya,” Nino tips his hat at her, but unfortunately Alya didn’t seem like she was having any of it, because she takes hold of his hand too. “A-Alya-?”

Alya shakes her head. “Sorry, Adrien, but you understand, right? I want to spend time with my best friend, and I want to spend time with my boyfriend. You and Lila get to spend time together too! It’s a win-win, isn’t it? Me and my boyfriend, and you and your-”

“Alya isn’t my girlfriend?” Adrien says, confused.

Alya snorts. “You can’t hide the truth from a star reporter, Adrien. It’s okay, your secret’s safe with us, right Nino?”
“What are you talking about, Alya?” Nino asks, flabbergasted. “What secret?”

Lila sniffs, and Nino retches internally. “Adrien and I… we’re actually dating, but we don’t want anyone else to know. The press can get very invasive, you know.”

“We’re not dating,” Adrien stresses. “Sorry, Lila, but you’re not my type for one, and I’m already taken.”

Alya rolls her eyes. “What, by Ladybug? Face it, Adrien. Your celebrity crush can only really go so far, you know. You can’t pull the wool over these eyes.”

“I’m not dating Lila!” Adrien exclaims loudly, calling the attention of the others in class. Thankfully, Miss Bustier had yet to arrive, which meant class had yet to start. “What’ll it do to take you to believe me?!”

Lila whimpers. “B-but… Adrien-”

“But bullshit,” a voice crows from the side, and Nino watches as Chloe stomps over and practically grabs Adrien by the arms and wrestles him out of place and farther from Lila. “If Adrikins says he’s not dating Lila, then he’s not, got it, Cesaire?!?”

Alya scoffs. “Whatever, Chloe. We all know you’re just jealous Lila’s actually dating him and you’re not.”

“Bah! As if I’d be jealous when I’ve got my own perfectly smooth lovelife going on. How’s yours and Lahiffe’s going, hm?” She sneers at Nino and Alya, but seems to pause, gaze flickering behind Nino briefly… to where Nathaniel was sitting.

Alya’s hold on Nino’s hand grows tighter. “We’re as perfect as ever, Chloe! And in an even better relationship than you and your ‘imaginary partner’ are in right now! Right, Nino?”

“Um…” Nino begins, and suddenly everyone’s turning to him. Jesus Christ.

Alya lets go of his hand to cross her arms. “Thinking…?”

“I was… thinking…” Nino looks around the room in a panic, trying to gather the words. His eyes scan the confused and concerned faces of the others until it seems to settle on Marinette, and for some reason, Nino felt very small. The look Marinette was giving him was one of complete and honest concern, but it also seemed to be searching him for something - combing him through carefully.

Alya lets go of his hand to cross her arms. “Thinking…?”

“I think… I think we should take a break,” Nino finishes awkwardly.

Silence.

“A… a break?” Alya is floored, judging from her expression. “What… what do you mean?”

Nino scratches the back of his neck awkwardly. “It’s just… we’ve always done things together, and… it’s almost like we’re just a unit, you know?”

“That’s how couples work!”

“No, it’s- I don’t-” Nino inhales sharply, pressing his hands together before pointing his hands at Alya, still pressed together. “Sometimes I don’t get to do anything for myself anymore, Alya. It’s

Alya is silent for a few moments.

Eventually, she asks, “Are you breaking up with me?”

“... It’s a break, not a breakup,” Nino says finally. “I just want time to myself. I want to be able to do things, Alya. I want...”

“Autonomy?” Adrien offers helpfully.

Alya snaps, “Not now, Sunshine Boy. This isn’t your business.”

“Don’t talk to him like that,” Nino snaps right back, startling her. He stands up and slams his hands on the desk. “This is his business right now, actually, because your best friend keeps claiming she’s dating Adrien when he’s said already so many times that they’re not! It’s his business because he’s my best friend and you kept forcing your truths on him!”

Lila whimpers, “I’m sorry, you two- this is my fault, I shouldn’t have-”

Alya stands up as well, hissing, “It’s okay, Lila. It’s not your fault that Nino’s finally revealed his true colors and feelings.”

“‘True’ colors?!” Nino barks out a harsh laugh. “That’s a laugh. When has Lila ever spoken the truth?”

Lila gasps, and immediately her lower lip wobbles. “Y-you think I’m lying?”

That catches the attention of a few people in class - namely Marinette, Adrien, Chloe, Nathaniel, Max, Kim, and Alix.

“I know you’re lying,” Nino scowls, and picks up his things. “But you know what? I’m not expending any more energy trying to prove it when Alya’s too stubborn to listen to anyone but you, anyway. I’m done.”

Alya gapes. “What- what do you mean you’re done?”

“I’m done, Alya,” Nino bites out. “I’m moving to the back with Nathaniel. Your new best friend can sit with you up front.”

As he climbs his way towards Nathaniel, Alya shouts out, “You sit down up there, and we’re going to break up for real, you hear me, Nino?!”

“You keep standing by the liar’s side, and we’re going to break up for real, you hear me, Alya?” Nino parrots.

Alya fumes. “NINO...”

Nino hovers over the seat.

“NINO...”

Nino, very deliberately, makes a show of sitting down on the seat next to Nathaniel. The artist tries to reign in his wince.
Alya tugs at her hair in frustration and yells, in all her flaming fury, “WE’RE DONE, NINO LAHIFFE! DONE!”

“Fine by me,” He bites back, and suddenly, the fire seems to die down in Alya’s eyes. The cold dismissal seems to shock her as Lila ushers her to sit back down, whispering soft platitudes into her ear just as Miss Bustier enters.

The teacher blinks, immediately picking up on the energy in the room. “... Is everything alright, class?”

“... Never better, Miss Bustier!” Alix gives her a thumbs up.

“Nino?” The teacher looks up at him. “Whatever are you doing all the way up there?”

Nino grins weakly. “Wanted to sit next to Nathaniel today, Miss Bustier. That cool?”

“Well, yes, of course, as long as it doesn’t interfere with the lesson. Speaking of which, we need to start it. Sorry for being late, everyone!”

As Miss Bustier goes to set up her things, Nathaniel discreetly pats Nino’s shoulder. “You didn’t have to break up with Alya, you know. Now Lila’s definitely going after your head.”

“... It’s okay,” Nino sighs. “I just... I got mad on Adrien’s behalf too. They’re really not dating, right?”

Nathaniel shakes his head. “No. As far as I know, Adrien isn’t seeing anyone.”

“Then that’s good enough for me.”

“Are you going to be alright, Nino?” Nathaniel asks carefully.

Nino watches as Lila wraps an arm around Alya, the girl numbly leaning into her touch. The sight is vile, but he keeps it down. “... Yeah. I will be.”

Lie.
This isn't the Chloe he knows.

News traveled fast in Françoise Dupont, whether one liked it or not. By the time lunchtime rolls around, Nino hears whispers and rumors fluttering around like flies to honey - or akuma to negative emotions. That was probably a better metaphor.

“Out of my way. Shoo. None of you are fit to even be seen in my presence.”

The whispers that surround him are traded for yelps of panic and worried muttering. Blinking in surprise, Nino looks up to see Chloe approach him, parting the throngs of people like Moses and the Red Sea. The blonde, unsurprisingly enough, is tailed by Sabrina - but a double take makes him realize that she’s not the only redhead lingering around Chloe. Behind Sabrina is none other than Nathaniel, whose eyes are trained only on his phone at present.

Nathaniel…?

Nino jumps as Chloe throws out a hand to him. “Well, Lahiffe? Are you going to just sit around here and mope, or are you going to come with me?”

“Go with you?” Nino asks, bewildered.

Chloe scoffs. “Well, duh. Do you want to be surrounded by lowlifes with nothing better to do than to gossip about the latest breakups and makeouts?”

“Chloe,” Sabrina nudges her gently.

With a long-suffering groan, Chloe massages her temple with her free hand but doesn’t retract her other one. “Sabrina.”

“What Chloe’s trying to say is,” Nathaniel looks up from his phone to give Nino an encouraging smile. He still doesn’t know why Nathaniel is hanging around Chloe and Sabrina - well. He has an inkling and it’s wholly based on what he and Nathaniel had talked about earlier, but that’s not really much to go off on. “There’s someone waiting for you in the cafeteria, and she wants to take you to him already before anyone else asks you about…” He trails off awkwardly. “…you know.”

Nino’s eyes widen. “Adrien?”

Chloe rolls her eyes in exasperation. “Who else loves you to pieces more than Adrikins? Ugh, honestly, Lahiffe, you’d better be gaining back your braincells now that you’re-”

Both Sabrina and Nathaniel immediately nudge her on both sides.

“…Right,” Chloe stops, face taking on an unreadable expression at the look that crosses Nino’s face. With a sigh, the girl amends, “Come on, Lahiffe. Adrikins is waiting.”

Nino looks around him. All eyes are on him. Not all of the people seem to be whispering about
him, however - Alix seems more or less disinterested and more inclined to butting heads with Kim, who was being held back by Ondine with a laugh and a shake of her head. Max had his eye on the confrontation, but Nino knew half his attention was dedicated to Alix at present, talking to her about her present situation.

He knows Alya is looking from somewhere. Probably with Lila. He can feel the heat of her stare no matter where he is. It’s a stare he half wishes he didn’t know so well, and probably wouldn’t forget for quite some time.

He follows the blonde and her redhead brigade into the lunchroom despite the burn.

True to her word, Adrien is waiting at a lunch table near the side. It’s one of the bigger ones, but only he and Marinette appeared to be sitting at the current table. A lot of the chairs at the table were occupied by bags Nino didn’t recognize at first, but eventually he realizes they belonged to Chloe, Nathaniel, and Sabrina respectively as the three take their places, their bags moving to hang on the backs of their chairs - save for Chloe’s, which ends up sitting in her lap instead.

Adrien waves Nino over to take the seat on his other side. “Nino! Glad you could make it.”

“Thanks to Chloe, he managed to get here safe and sound!” Sabrina hums, pulling out her packed lunch. Chloe nods proudly while Nathaniel rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t comment, instead taking out a sandwich and opening up his sketchbook again.

Adrien smiles. This smile is the one Nino knows best - a smile like the sun. “Thanks, Chloe. Knew we could count on you.”

“Of course, Adrikins,” Chloe replies, and much to Nino’s surprise again for God knows how many times in that day alone, her smile is genuine and soft. This is a smile he doesn’t know. “You can count on me, no matter what.”

“I’m glad for that.”

Nino’s head was beginning to spin. Nathaniel, willingly trailing behind Chloe? Chloe, being nice? Marinette sitting next to Adrien and not freaking out? Since when had his world flipped upside down like this?

“Nino?” Adrien asks in concern. He places a hand on his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

No, he was not okay.

Nino folds his arms across the table and buries his face in it, groaning. It wasn’t quite clear as to which of the many reasons he had was the cause for it, but it was definitely one of them. Adrien pats his back as he lets out a long-suffering groan that maybe ended in a half-choked sob. He’d never own up to it. Never.

“How’d he realize it?” He hears Adrien ask one of the three across the table.

Nathaniel’s voice is the one that answers, which was logical enough. He’d only talked to Nathaniel about it. “Something about Lila lying about the… Tiger hero last night?”

“What was his name?” Chloe’s voice grumbles. Nino hears the snapping of fingers as though she were trying to recall it with them. “Stripey… Tigey…”

Sabrina pipes up, “I don’t think he had a name yet, he ran off really quickly with Ladybug and
Chat Noir before any news reporters could get his name! The news has taken to calling him Tiger Boy though, see?”

Nino looks up slightly as Sabrina points to her phone screen, where indeed a blurry as all hell image of him and Paris’s beloved heroes jumping across the rooftops was displayed. He squints at it as Adrien jokes, “Maybe they could just name him Tigerclaw, y’know?”

“Like in your furry books, Adrikins?” Chloe wrinkles her nose as Marinette and Nathaniel choke on their own spit. “Seriously! He’s still reading them! I’ve seen them!”

Nino turns his head sideways to see Adrien’s cheeks burn bright red. “H-hey! They’re very good books, okay?!”

“And this is why I have decided you are unworthy of my romantic advances,” Chloe sniffs overdramatically, and Nathaniel puts down his sandwich and closes his sketchbook to pound a fist on the table lightly, trying not to burst out laughing.

Adrien shakes his head, smiling. “Whatever, Chlo. I already know where your advances have been going, anyway.”

“Zip it, Adrien!”

As the two blondes at the table playfully bicker, Nino’s eyes travel around the table, his head still resting on his arms. With Chloe in between the two redheads, it was a bit difficult for them to have a small bit of conversation over the blonde rich kid battle happening in the center, but they were managing. That was pretty good.

Which left…

Nino’s eyes meet Marinette’s briefly from across the table, and for a moment, all is still. There is a look in Marinette’s eyes that is undecipherable at first, and with a start, Nino realizes that despite the kind smile on Marinette’s face, it doesn’t reach her eyes at all. Her smile is genuine, but her eyes are sad, a kind of resigned sadness reflected within them that makes Nino’s gut twist painfully. Had he contributed to this sadness, somehow, in some way?

Is this what they had been doing to her, as a class?

Nino opens his mouth. “Marinette-”

CRASH!

Their table - and every other table in the vicinity - goes silent.

Nino’s eyes are forcefully torn away from Marinette’s to look at the scene. At the lunch line is Lila, holding her wrist and crying wolf while shedding crocodile tears. In front of her is Mireille Caquet - except the usual Mireille wouldn’t be covered in soup and salad. By her feet is a dropped lunch tray, the contents of the bowls and plates scattered across the floor and all over Mireille. A smidge of the salad dressing had gotten on Lila’s jacket - and much to Nino’s realization, it was a small win in his opinion.

Chloe scoffs. “Wonder what ‘sin’ was committed against her this time.”

“Poor Mireille,” Sabrina murmurs. “She doesn’t even interact with Lila, does she?”

Nino shouldn’t have been so startled to hear Marinette’s voice, but he is. He picks up on how tired
she sounds underneath the facade as she snorts. “Oh, she does, apparently, since Lila ‘knows someone higher up in the news scene’. If she doesn’t, that would mean Lie-la was a liar. And that’s just not true, is it?”

Since when had Marinette become so… salty?

“Easy, little Saltinette,” Adrien assuages, and Nino squints at the nickname - and at how Adrien tucks a stray lock of hair behind Marinette’s ear with such softness. The real selling point here to Nino, however, was that she doesn’t even flinch as he does so.

What the fuck, honestly?

Marinette groans and buries her face in her folded arms across the lunch table in an act similar to Nino as Nathaniel murmurs, “Don’t look away now, but here comes Aurore.”

“This just went from boring to slightly spicy.” Chloe says delightedly, making the redheads on either side of her elbow her. “What?! I’m just saying.”

Nino knew Aurore. Or at least, interacted with her to some degree. Aurore Beaureal was one in a pair of weather girls with Mireille Caquet, and was more publicly known as her best friend despite her defeat during the first competition they had together - which had resulted in her akumatization into Stormy Weather. She’d approached him once with Mireille on creating a little jingle for the two of them specifically as a weather girl pair.

She reminded him incredibly vaguely of Chloe - or at least the Chloe he used to know, in a way, and not just because they were both blonde and blue eyed. Where Chloe was rich and barely had to lift a pinkie to get anything she wanted, Aurore worked hard for her accomplishments. Both of them were rather prideful in their own way, and yet people were surprised that they’d both managed to get a friend ‘for keeps’ despite their personalities - Mireille and Sabrina respectively.

Nino tunes back into the current situation just to witness Aurore bonk Lila over the head with her umbrella.

Chloe bursts into uncontrolled cackling.

Nathaniel turns away from the scene to focus on his phone, but from where Nino is seated he can see Nathaniel’s face rapidly turning red in his attempts not to accompany Chloe in her laughing fit. Adrien snickers under his breath as Marinette tries to pretend she didn’t see that, while Sabrina winces on behalf of Aurore’s umbrella.

“Come on, Mireille,” Aurore loudly declares. “We don’t want to hang around little miss butterfingers any longer than we should. I’ll help you get cleaned up okay?”

Mireille nods numbly as Aurore leads her away by the hand, the lunch forgotten. As this happens, Lila continues to cry crocodile tears at the ‘misdeed’ done to her as someone goes up to help her clean up and soothe her, that someone being A-

Al-

Her name gets stuck in his throat. It’s agonizing to try and say her name.

Nino forces himself to look away, hands clenching into fists. It’s not really… rage that he’s feeling. He’s angry at Lila, certainly, for having managed to fool him for so long, and irritated at Alya for believing her still, for being so unreasonable …
But he’s not really raging. He’s more… sad than anything.

It’s a cold kind of rage, the kind that freezes and chills him to the very core. But it’s more sad, than angry. It’s a numb ache that takes a while to go away.

He doesn’t notice the butterfly coming his way - but everyone else in the table certainly does. Marinette and Adrien both scramble around for something to catch the butterfly with while Sabrina hurriedly takes a photo of it as proof that it was there and to keep as future reference. Nathaniel, on the other hand, eyes Chloe warily as she too looks for something to catch the butterfly with.

And then she does something incredibly stupid, and just a little out of character, in Nino’s honest and humblest of opinions. But then again, she was being nice to Nathaniel and him. And Marinette, to some degree. Maybe she was having an off day.

Much to the surprise and disgust of literally everyone there, right before the butterfly goes to touch Nino’s cap, Chloe snaps at the butterfly and traps it in her mouth. Nino looks up and scooches away just a little, eyes wide. Chloe was way too close for comfort.

“CHLOE!” Nathaniel shrieks, grabbing at her arm and forcing her to sit down. “The FUCK was THAT??!”

Chloe doesn’t open her mouth, but she does try to convey how it was the last resort idea she had by angrily gesturing to Nino and then to the akuma she’d just kept in her mouth. The people at the surrounding tables, who’d initially moved to run away, were now just staring with looks of awe and disgust at the argument that was happening.

“That’s GROSS! ”

“Mmmmngngpgh!”

“No, spit it out!”

“DON’T SPIT IT OUT!” Adrien and Marinette both screech.

Marinette massages her temples clockwise as Sabrina pipes up, “Don’t worry! I already sent it to Bug’s Eye View! Aurore should have it up in a few seconds and Ladybug will be here any moment!”

“Great…” Marinette groans. “I need to go to the bathroom. This is giving me one hell of a headache.”

“I’ll go with you,” Adrien offers. “Nino? Can you stay and watch… er… Chloe?”

Nino gawks at the hand he has on Marinette’s back. Since when had they become so touchy feely?


He would’ve called her Nettie, like he used to as a kid, but right now he didn’t feel like he deserved to.

Adrien nods gratefully to him, but not before leaning forward to whisper in his ear, “You and Mari can talk later, I promise. Where it’s more quiet and private. This really isn’t the place to properly talk.”

“Adrien-” But his best friend had already gone, leading Marinette outside.
Nino sighs and looks back towards the situation in front of him. Chloe was already looking a little green around the gills at having had to hold an insect full of dark magic inside her mouth for so long, and Sabrina was quickly fanning her with a paper as Nathaniel continued to talk to her, trying to coax her to be calm, and be cool.

“This was the stupidest thing you’ve done yet, Chlo,” Nathaniel tells her simply, making Chloe glare at him. He doesn’t seem to be fazed in the very least however as he adds, “Yeah, no. You get no sympathy from me. You’re the one who ate the akuma.”

Chloe angrily gestures that the akuma is still in her mouth and not in her stomach.

“Don’t swallow,” is all Nathaniel says.

Ladybug and Chat Noir arrive a few moments later, and with a gasp Chloe spits out the akuma, dripping with spit. Ladybug grimaces and purifies the poor thing before sending it off back to the butterfly war and placing a hand on Chloe’s shoulder.

“You okay, Chloe?” She asks. “Normally, when people catch akumas for us to check, they use glasses, not mouths.”

Chloe grabs at the tissues in Sabrina’s waiting hands and wipes at her tongue and the insides of her mouth, shuddering. “Never again. Never again. It tasted so vile, like… like…”

“Like an akuma?” Nathaniel offers dryly.

Chloe rolls her eyes and lightly kicks at him from under the table, but continues to pat at her mouth regardless.

Nino looks up at Ladybug and Chat Noir as the black cat hero says seriously, “Nino. We were told by your friend here-“ He gestures to Sabrina, and Nino vaguely wonders, Are we friends? before Chat continues. “- that the akuma was going for you. Is everything okay?”

“…” Nino looks at his hands, then at Chloe, Nathaniel, Sabrina, then at Ladybug and Chat Noir…

… and then, most unwillingly, at Alya and Lila, all the way from across the room.

Alya’s gaze is still searing hot, burning brands into his skin. He knows she’s still angry at him to some degree.

But he’s not as angry anymore. Not really.

He’s just tired.

“I’m just tired, Chat Noir,” Nino admits, and it feels like a weight has been lifted off his chest admitting it to this leather clad superhero. Sabrina reaches across the table to pat his hand sympathetically as he adds, “It’s just been… a very long day.”

Nino feels a hand on his shoulder, and when he looks up he sees that Ladybug has moved to him this time. He’s struck by how similar the look in her eyes is to Marinette’s - tired, sad… and yet, still strong - or as strong as she could be.

“I know the feeling,” is all Ladybug says, and somehow, that makes Nino feel slightly better.
If you’d told Nino that he’d find himself on the wrong end of a fencing rapier on his way to finally get on his knees to beg for Marinette’s forgiveness, well, he would have told you that he probably deserved it.

And yet, it still catches him off guard when it actually happens.

True to Adrien’s word, Nino receives the opportunity to talk to Marinette later after class at the park - but not before finding out after lunch that Chloe had enlisted the redhead brigade as his ‘new bodyguards’ or something. It was strange, given that Nathaniel was more of a loner and that Sabrina was practically the complete opposite, but Nino honestly had no room to complain.

“I’m a policeman’s daughter,” Sabrina tells him brightly when he asks after lunch. “Daddy taught me a few things about self-defense, so I definitely know how to protect you, and Nathaniel, and Chloe, and Adrien, and Marinette, and-”

Nathaniel reaches around Nino and taps her on the headband once like an alarm clock. “I think he gets the point.”

“Ohops,” Sabrina’s cheeks color a faint pink. “Sorry.”

Nino gives her an awkward smile, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s alright, dudette, but you really don’t need to be like my bodyguards or anything.”

“We’d rather not take any chances,” Nathaniel admits. “Not with the rumors still fresh off the press. To every single one of Lila’s followers, you’ve been made public enemy number one.”

Nino’s blood chills considerably. “And those followers would be…?”

“That’d be the rest of our class!” Sabrina chirps brightly. “Well… besides Alix, Kim, and Max. Moreso Alix. Where she goes, Kim tends to follow, and Max along with them!”

Nathaniel mutters something under his breath. Nino catches something along the lines of ‘losing an eye’ and ‘stupid napkin’.

He doesn’t ask him to clarify.
Either way, as the bell rings to signal the end of the day, Nino goes to gather his things. Nathaniel, who’d already been ready to go the moment their teacher had started discussing final announcements for the day, was conversing with Chloe and another person just by the door. Sabrina was just outside and out of sight, judging by Chloe consistently calling her name. Marinette and Adrien had already gone ahead, which meant it was only Nino at the back row.

“Nino.”

Her voice is like a burning hot poker, branding her words into his skin.

Nino doesn’t look up, resolutely packing in his pencils into his pencil case and then tucking it into his bag.

“Nino.”

He still doesn’t look, steeling himself internally and reaching over for his notebook-

Alya’s hand slams on top of his notebook, and much to his internal displeasure he flinches instinctively. He didn’t look up, but his hold on his notebook doesn’t loosen. “I need my notebook.”

“We need to talk,” Alya stresses. “Now.”

Nino’s fingers dig into his notebook’s cover. “Let go.”

“Not until we talk.”

“Not now. Please.” He hates how pathetic he sounds, how weak he sounds. He’d rather not beg Alya to just let him be for now, but…

“Nino-”

“He said ‘not now’, Cesaire. Or did you lose your hearing along with your braincells hanging around Liar Rossi?”

Nino had never been so thankful to hear Chloe’s voice.

“This isn’t any of your business, Chloe,” Alya snaps. “It’s between me and my boyfriend.”

Chloe laughs sardonically before fluttering her lashes at Alya. “It became my business when you two made it public class knowledge. And don’t you mean your ex-boyfriend, hm?”

Alya stiffens. Nino’s throat goes dry.

“Hasn’t even been a day and already you’re trying to crawl your way back to him, hmph!” Chloe scoffs. “You have no power over him anymore, Cesaire. Which means,” And here Chloe takes Nino by the wrist delicately, startling him out of his stupor enough to grab his bag. “That we’re out of here, and there’s nothing you can do about it. SABRINA!”

Chloe drags him out, and Nino watches as Sabrina flashes Alya an award winning grin. He’s not sure he wants to know what she was going to do to Alya.

Eventually, Chloe lets him go off alone - even without the redhead brigade. The three of them let him be at the entrance to the park, taking off towards the Seine to see if Andre the ice cream man was there, leaving Nino to fiddle awkwardly with his bag’s strap and look around. Where did
Adrien say Marinette would be waiting again?

He lets his feet carry him to nowhere, walking leisurely around the park looking for Marinette. He sees a few kids playing among the bushes, a few couples seated together chatting happily…

The sight, coupled with the fact that he’d freshly broken up with Alya, makes his heart ache despite him willing it not to. He had been happy with Alya, during the time they’d been together, there was no mistake about that. He’d genuinely enjoyed her company, her wit, her care… and yet…

Nino realizes, for the first time in forever, that he’s alone. Completely and physically alone.

It’s jarring to him, he realizes as he rounds the fountain, that he was alone. He’d always had someone by his side, no matter where he went outside, and it was usually Alya. He would have said that he was alone in his own house, but even then Alya sometimes invited herself over. It had been a while since he’d been completely and utterly alone.

Nino’s not sure if it’s a pleasant feeling or not.

Eventually, his eyes laid on a dark haired girl seated at a bench, and with a sigh of relief he approaches. He reaches out to tap her shoulder - and immediately goes flying into the nearest bush when Marinette grabs him by the arm and flips him over her head.

His hat askew, Nino sees and feels a shadow cast itself above him as he immediately says, “It’s just me, Marin-”

Something lifts the rim of his cap away from his face, and Nino realizes with startling clarity that no, he had not almost tapped on the shoulder of Marinette Dupain-Cheng. Where Marinette’s hair was a lighter blueish black, this girl’s hair was darker, nearing the blacker end of the scale. Where Marinette’s hair was medium length and tied up in twin pigtails, this girl’s hair was cropped short to just below her chin.

And where Marinette’s eyes were bluebells, hers were a sharp golden brown, like zircons.

What had lifted his cap’s rim was the tip of a long sword - a fencing rapier, if Nino’s basic knowledge of one of Adrien’s many extracurriculars was to be relied on. It appeared more customized to the girl more than Adrien’s, with a red pommel and hilt that matched her shoes and skirt.

For some reason, being on the sharp end of her sword in particular was slightly familiar, but Nino couldn’t place it at first.

“Who are you?” The girl asks sternly, and instantly he remembers. He remembers exactly when she’s pointed a sword at him before.

Heroes’ Day.

Except he hadn't been Nino then, and she hadn't been herself. She'd been akumatized, and he'd been Carapace.

Nino holds up a finger, a sign asking for her to wait before clumsily trying to roll off the bush she’d launched him at, to no avail. Eventually, however, he manages to pop off with a yelp, landing face first into the grass, his cap fluttering down over his head. Hurriedly he goes to stand before brushing himself off, adjusting his cap on his head before going to meet the girl’s gaze.
again. 

Wow. Her gaze was intense.

“I repeat. Who are you, and how do you know Marinette Dupain-Cheng?” The girl asks. The grip on her rapier does not slacken in the slightest. “Answer wisely.”

Nino gulps, but before he can answer, a familiar voice catches both of their attentions. “Nino! Kagami! There you are!”

“Dude!” Nino exclaims as Adrien runs over, a smile on his face. At the second name, however, he turns to the girl in surprise. “Your name is Kagami?”

Kagami nods curtly at him before turning to face Adrien, a much warmer smile on her face... or at least, Nino thinks it’s a much warmer smile. He’s not sure yet. “Adrien. You know him?”

“Yeah, he’s my best friend, didn’t I already tell you that?” Adrien laughs before slinging an arm around Nino’s shoulders and fistbumping him with his other hand. “I’ve talked about you guys to each other, but I guess now’s a good a time as any for you guys to ‘properly’ meet! Nino, this is Kagami! Kagami, this is Nino! Better play nice, you two!”

Kagami appraises Nino for a moment, looking him up and down before nodding stiffly. “My apologies for our... initial altercation. I’d thought you were someone dangerous when you seem about as harmless as a leaf.”

“... Thanks?” Nino answers unsurely.

“Wait, what do you mean, altercation?” Adrien’s brow furrows. “Did you guys fight?”

Nino shakes his head wildly - as well as his hands. “No way, dude! We didn’t fight-”

“I threw him into the bushes by accident believing him to be one of Lila’s rats out to get me,” Kagami states. “I reacted instinctively and thus acted in my own self-defense.”

“Ah.”

Nino, studying the cracks in the sidewalk, wonders if it would be possible for him to melt to the ground in that very instant and seep through the cracks like water, escaping the rather awkward situation.

“... Right! Nino, you were looking for Marinette, right?” At Nino’s nod, Adrien points towards the direction he’d come from. “She’s sitting over there trying to think of a new hero-inspired design based on Tigerclaw, so you could probably just wait for her to finish or put it aside when you get there.”

Kagami looks at Nino questioningly. “He’s desperate to talk to Marinette? Why?”

“I’m not desperate!” Nino protests weakly.

Kagami raises an eyebrow. “Your body language indicates otherwise.”

“Guh.”

“Let’s just... let him apologize to Marinette, Kagami, okay?” Adrien not-so subtly moves around both Nino and Kagami to stand behind him and nudge Nino forward, and after a few nudges, Nino takes off, leaving Kagami to face Adrien curiously. He doesn’t want to think about what they
could be talking about. Not now.

Finally, he sees Marinette - the real Marinette this time. Like Adrien had said, she was sitting on a bench, a pencil tucked into one of her pigtails. On her lap sits her design book, closed - which meant she was either done, or she'd sensed he was approaching. Nino figures it was a bit of both. She’d always had a keen sense for when he or Kim seemed to be approaching, even when they were kids.

Remembering that he’d used to be incredibly close with Mari tears his heart a new one, but with a gulp, he steadies his resolve. This was why he was here - to make amends.

Marinette doesn’t look at him as he takes a seat next to her, careful to maintain a respectful distance. She is eerily calm, eerily still, as Nino opens up with a “Hey.”

“Hey,” She answers softly. “Nice afternoon, isn’t it, Nino?”

Nino nods. The knot in his stomach and his throat slowly unravel in her presence. Maybe it was a Mari thing, being so… nice to be around, generally. “... Yeah. It’s a nice afternoon.”

“...” Marinette closes her eyes, and smiles, allowing the afternoon sun to beam down on them, and when Nino looks at her, she only says, “Let’s wait for a while, okay, Nino?”

“Mari-”

“Just a little while. I don’t think you’re really ready yet.”

How did that girl know exactly what was going on with him?

You were childhood friends before you ruthlessly abandoned her, taunts the voice in his head. Of course she still knows you. She remembers the good Nino. The Nino that was a good friend. The Nino with BRAINS. The Nino that-

“Nino. You think very loudly, did you know that?”

Nino turns a faint shade of red, and Marinette giggles. Nino didn’t realize how much he missed her genuine giggling until he heard it again. “Don’t worry. I think really loudly too. Alya…” And here her expression becomes pensive. “Alya used to say I thought too much. I guess that’s another thing we have in common, huh, Nino?”

“You’ve always been the better one between the two of us though,” Nino admits, the tangle in his stomach loosening even further. “Smarter, braver, overall nicer. We don’t share that in common.”

“Yeah, but we were still friends,” Marinette murmurs, opening her eyes and turning to look at him. “Weren’t we?”

Weren’t they?

Nino’s throat goes dry, but he tries to speak anyway. “Marinette…” The words get stuck in his throat. He tries to clear his throat, but it’s difficult. “... I’m sorry. For everything.”

“I’m sorry for believing Lila,” Marinette watches as Nino’s eyes shut tightly, everything spilling from his lips like prayers from a sinner in church. “For not listening to you the first time you warned all of us, for just going with the flow because Alya said so, for not… for not siding with you when you needed me, for leaving you behind… everything.” His hands clench into fists on top of his knees. “We’ve known each other since we were kids, Nettie… and yet I turned my back on
you. That’s unforgivable.”

“It is,” Marinette answers, startling Nino into looking up. He’s ashamed to admit that his eyes had started watering when she corrects, “But that doesn’t mean I don’t accept your apology, Nino.”

“Huh?”

Marinette smiles gently, and reaches out to pat Nino’s hand with her own. “I accept your apology, Nino. You were honest when you apologized, and that’s all I could ever hope for. But… I don’t think I can forgive you.” He droops. “Not yet, at least. Not immediately.”

“You hurt me, Nino,” Nino winces at the barely hidden hurt in Marinette’s voice. “When you and Alya, and the rest of the class, started believing in Lila’s lies and acted like my words were just because I was… because I was jealous. You believed I was just that petty and childish…” Her gaze flickers down briefly at the same time his does. “…and that stung. A lot.”

“But…” And here Nino looks up again at her, and sees the old Marinette - the warm, smiling Marinette he knew from childhood - in her eyes and her smile. “You came and apologized. Adrien knew you would, and I knew you would too… even though it would’ve taken a little while.”

Nino murmurs, “You guys believed in me?”

“Always did,” Marinette nods. “There’s always room in my heart for you, Nino, you’re one of my oldest and dearest friends! But… it’ll be a while until I can fully forgive you. It still hurts.”

Nino shakes his head, smiling. “Dudette, that is more than I thought you’d even give me. I’ll spend forever trying to earn back your forgiveness if I have to.”

“Maybe not forever-”

“Nuh uh, forever and ever. You’re stuck with me now.”

Marinette dramatically lays a hand over her forehead. “Oh, woe is me! I have suddenly been latched onto by a koala and he refuses to let go! Now I am carrying around his weight forever! Oh, who will save me from this miserable fate?”

“I shall, my princess!”

Nino choking on his own spit as Adrien over dramatically swoops behind the bench they’d been sitting on to lace his fingers with Marinette’s, an arm draped over her shoulder as she giggles and bumps heads with him. Yo what the fuck.

Behind him, Kagami too follows, still holding her rapier. At the sight of Nino her gaze seems to darken, and it sends chills up his spine as Adrien gestures for Kagami to come closer. She obliges reluctantly.

“So, what’s the verdict?” Adrien asks, though whether or not he was addressing Nino or Marinette was up in the air.

Nino decides to take the plunge and answer it himself. “I’m gonna try and gain Mari’s forgiveness no matter what. She deserves it.”

“For a moment there, I thought you were going to say you were going to try and gain Mari’s hand, because that’s unfortunately mine,” Adrien says casually. Marinette’s cheeks turn a bright red as she chokes on her own spit, and Kagami only looks away, curiously enough. “But really though.
Good on you, Nino. I knew you could do it.”

Nino laughs awkwardly, but before he can say anything, Kagami mutters, “Is he really worthy of your trust, Marinette? He was one of Lila’s little rats.”

“But he was my friend first, Kagami,” Marinette corrects gently. “A childhood best friend who took a little while to learn from his mistakes. And now he’s here. I can’t not give him a chance when he’s willing to work for it.”

Kagami gives her a long stare, which Marinette meets levelly before Kagami sighs and crosses her arms. “You are too forgiving, Marinette. One day that will bite you in the rear.”

“I wouldn’t say she’s too forgiving,” Adrien teases. “She ragged on me for taking the high road at one point, and we all know what she thinks about liars, especially Lila.”

Marinette snorts, pinching his cheek despite his whine. “I give people my trust if they deserve it. And Nino… I think he deserves it. Not all of it right now, but some of it.” At this, she turns to Nino, and gives him a heartbreakingly kind, sad smile. “But I’m sure he’ll get it. I know he can.”

“Me too,” Adrien agrees.

Kagami’s eyes turn to Nino, and then towards Adrien and Marinette, before she sighs, inhales sharply, and holds out a hand to Nino. At his bewildered stare, she clarifies, “I don’t trust you, Nino Lahiffe. Not fully, anyway. But Adrien and Marinette seem to believe in you, so I will give you the benefit of the doubt.”

“… Thank… you…?” Nino hesitantly reaches out for her hand - or at least begins to, when she grabs it and shakes it firmly. “Grk-”

“We are not friends, you and I - not yet, anyway,” Kagami states seriously. “But I can’t be your friend until I’m certain you are worthy of my trust, and of Marinette’s and Adrien’s trust. They believe in you, so I withhold judgment… for now.” She grips his hand tightly. “I hope you don’t disappoint, Nino.”

Nino swallows, the back of his neck feeling a little hot. It was a little like when he knew Alya was looking at him… except this wasn’t a searing burn. This was a cooler flame against his skin. “I. Uh. Hope I don’t. Either, dudette. I MEAN KAGAMI! Yeah! Kagami. Yup. That’s your name.”

Kagami raises an eyebrow, and Nino smiles awkwardly at her, giggling nervously.

Adrien and Marinette only look at each other before shaking their heads, sharing a secret smile.
nino lahiffe and the plan of action

Chapter Summary

Maybe he should make a tally of how many times he's cried and apologized.

Now that Marinette had accepted his apology, it was easier to get around.

Ever since his embarrassingly public breakup with Alya, the class had been rather divided on who to stand with. Marinette and Adrien, of course, stood with him - as well as Nathaniel, Chloe, and Sabrina. That made five out of the fifteen in the class that had taken his side on the matter.

Juleka, Rose, Ivan, and Mylene were still on Alya’s (and by extension Lila’s) side - only tentatively though, from what Nino could see. Rose’s romantic heart had gone out to Alya, and Juleka usually kept to Rose’s side more often than not. Mylene too, being one of the few in class with a relationship, had decided to comfort Alya in these trying times, and Ivan supported her where he could.

Alix, Kim, and Max were a mystery. Alix was like Nathaniel - a wild card at heart, violently vivacious in her passion and willingness to stand up for what she believed was right. Kim, on the other hand, had a heart of gold, but was a dumb of ass. Especially when butting heads with Alix. While often misguided, his heart was usually in the right place - and he’d been Marinette’s childhood friend as well. If he knew the truth, Nino had a gut feeling he’d be right here with him as well, on his knees and begging her for forgiveness.

And Max… well. Usually he had the brain cells between the three of them, but recently he’d been rather inclined towards Lila in particular. He still hadn’t asked Nathaniel about the napkin thing he’d muttered about before when he’d mentioned Max.

Nino mentally writes Max down as a ‘maybe on their side’.

Lila had happily moved up front next to Alya permanently, no doubt to continue ‘supporting her dearest best friend in her time of need’. Every now and then Lila would glance back at him whenever in class and then hurriedly whisper in Alya’s ear - probably something incriminating, he assumed. Probably also something that wasn’t true in the slightest. Nino was beginning to see her track record for what it was now: absolute garbage.

That was still a thing. Lila was still a liar. Alya still believed her. A good chunk of the class still believed her.

“Why haven’t any of you said anything? To the others, I mean?” Nino asks over lunch one day at Marinette’s. With their afternoon classes cancelled due to their teacher being out sick and Adrien’s next photoshoot scheduled during the sunset hours, they had quite some time to kill together - and so Marinette’s house had been selected.

Needless to say, Tom and Sabine had been more than willing to welcome Nino back into their arms, especially upon learning that he was trying to make amends with their daughter.
(“I’m sorry,” Nino whispers softly, regretfully. “I wasn’t there for her when she needed me. Some childhood friend I am.”

Tom puts a hand on his shoulder when he apologizes, and when he looks up the man’s eyes are full of nothing but warmth. “But you’re here now. And you know what you’ve done wrong, and you’re trying to fix it. We’re just happy to know that you still care about our Marinette.”

Sabine only touches his cheek gently, like a mother would, before saying simply, “We missed you, Nino,” before both of them tuck him into their shared embrace.

He isn’t ashamed to admit that he cried a little. Their hugs had always been the best.)

Currently they were in Marinette’s room, scattered all over the place. Marinette was at her desk with Sabrina by her feet, helping her pin down sections of the cloth. Adrien was rolling around on Marinette’s bed up in her loft, while Chloe sits on one of Marinette’s chairs, a leg crossed over another while she scrolls through her phone. Nino, on his end, is seated near Nathaniel, and Kagami is perched on the steps to the loft, watching over most of them from abovehead.

Marinette frowns as Chloe answers, “It took a lot to even get you listening. What makes you think those brainless sheep will?”

“You forget, we were once part of the mindless herd,” Nathaniel reminds her from where he was lounging on Marinette’s chaise, sketchbook open and in use. He was chewing on his pencil again. Nino had half a mind to get him something else to chew on before he lost all his pencils to his own hubris. “And it took Adrien for you and Sabrina to see sense.”

Chloe rolls her eyes, but doesn’t move. Nino suddenly realizes that she’s posing in a way one might for a portrait - and when he looks over Nathaniel’s shoulder, his suspicions are confirmed. “I’ve always seen sense. Nobody in their right mind would let someone like her on their set for any movie, no matter how niche it is.”

“She could be a good actress,” Sabrina chirps. Her hands are splayed against a portion of the cloth Marinette was currently working on, keeping it in place. “She’s got the adlibbing part down, don’t you think?”

Marinette snorts with laughter, pausing in her pinning. “You tell me, Sabrina. You tell me.”

“And to top it all off, she told Sabrina she’d modeled for my mother as a child. HA! As if my mother would ever give someone like her the time of day and deal with child models!” It’s clear from the struggle in Chloe’s eyes that she’s trying incredibly hard not to scowl. “She didn’t even give me the time of day. Why should some nobody hold her attention?”

“Chloe…” Sabrina murmurs softly.

When Nathaniel gives her a thumbs up to let her know he was done, Chloe flops backwards onto Marinette’s bed, groaning dramatically. “It’s ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous. Ugh, it gives me stress lines thinking about her ever interacting with Liar Rossi. Let’s think about something else. Adrikins!” She snaps her fingers. “Think of a new topic!”

“Wha-” Adrien peers down at her from Marinette’s loft. “Why me?”

“Because you’re probably falling asleep up there and this is no time to be snuggling up to Marinette’s cat pillow.”
“That is not what I’m doing!”

“Uh… I have a suggestion.” And here most of the people in the room turn to Nino, though Marinette doesn’t look away from her work as he speaks. Understandable. “Before we were talking about your mom, we were talking about why none of you guys continued telling anyone about Lila’s lies… why don’t we talk about how we can uh… expose her?”

Chloe’s lower lip curls. “Nobody listens.”

“Then… then we make them listen!” Nino all but shouts, making the others startle with how loud his voice had suddenly gotten. “They can’t refute if we gather evidence that they can’t deny, dudes.”

Adrien moves out from his spot on Marinette’s bed and goes to sit on the highest step of the staircase to the loft. “Marinette tried once. You remember, right, the cafeteria? She threw the napkin at Lila to prove that she didn’t have a sprained wrist.”

Nathaniel loudly grumbles yet again about napkins and Max, and Sabrina can’t stifle her giggle.

Nino stops to think about it for a moment, looking at Marinette with a squint before his eyes widen considerably. With a frustrated groan he remembers exactly what had happened that day - the day Lila had ‘come back’ from her round-the-world trip.


“Max,” Nathaniel agrees with gritted teeth.

Nino moves to the far end of Marinette’s room, the others’ gazes following him curiously. Facing the wall, he bangs his head lightly with each word he says, borne out of frustration. “I’m. So. Fucking. Dumb. Napkins. Aren’t. SHARP. God. Dammit. Fucking. Hell-”

“You’re going to knock a hole through the wall if you keep that up,” Adrien teases, sliding past Kagami to walk over and put a hand on Nino’s shoulder. “Come on, Nino. It really wasn’t your fault that our classmates believed her so fast when it came to that. She did keep promising them all cool things.”

Nino stops banging his head on the wall. He doesn’t look at Adrien as he whispers in horror, “She promised she’d introduce me to Spielberg. Son of a bitch, she said she’d introduce me to SPIELBERG.”

“She said she helped someone appraise one of the pieces down at the Louvre once while she’d tagged along with Alix, Mylene, and I,” Nathaniel adds on thoughtfully. “Honestly, if you picked apart her words, it’d be easy to get on her bad side.”

Marinette snorts. “It’d be easy to get yourself cornered in the bathroom.”

“WAIT.”

Marinette suddenly finds Nino standing right in front of her, eyes reflecting an unreadable emotion. “What do you mean, she cornered you in the bathroom?”

“Lila Rossi followed Marinette into the bathroom,” comes Kagami’s eerily calm voice from above. Nino looks up as Kagami stands up, and slowly, gracefully, intimidatingly goes down the steps as she speaks. “From what Marinette told us, she threatened to take away every single one of her friends, and turn them against her, all because Marinette was intelligent enough not to take
her words at face value.”

Nino nearly flinches at the growl that seems to rumble from Adrien as he adds on, “I’d told Marinette to take the high road then, and let her be. I didn’t know she’d threatened her. And I thought that just bending over backwards and accepting things as they came would be the best course of action.” His hands tighten into fists. “... I was wrong.”

“You didn’t know, minou,” Marinette soothes. “None of you knew- oof!”

She’s suddenly interrupted by Nino throwing his arms around her, hugging her tightly. He doesn’t care that the others are staring, doesn’t care that his brow has furrowed and his eyes have squeezed so tightly that the tears have already begun leaking out again. All he cares about is Marinette.

Marinette - strong, strong, Marinette, who’d been fighting her way through Liar Rossi’s lies to no avail, and yet always seemed to come back smiling, even when it hurt. Even when the people who’d known her since childhood had turned their backs on her. Strong, sweet Marinette.

“I’m so sorry,” Nino chokes out, for the millionth time that day alone. The others do not say anything, feeling that the event was too private to even be witnessing. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry-”

And then Nino feels Marinette’s arms wrap around him as well, and he sinks to the ground, his arms sinking down to hug at Marinette’s waist instead, as Marinette’s form curves over him and hugs him from above.

“It’s okay, Nino,” Marinette whispers. Her cheek rests on the top of Nino’s cap. “You didn’t know.”

“No it’s not,” Nino grips at the back of her shirt, but it’s a clumsy hold. “God. I’m a lousy childhood friend.” Forcefully he lets go and pushes himself away to give Marinette what he hopes is a determined look, but he’s pretty sure he looks like absolute garbage considering that he just cried all over her shirt and pants. “We’re not letting her get away with this. Not this time.”

Kagami’s eyes seem to flash as she focuses on Nino. “And what do you propose we do then?”

“You said you knew she was lying?” Nino asks Marinette, who nods. “Then we gather all the proof. Uh. Sorry about your shirt.”

Marinette glances down before shaking her head. “It’s fine. You didn’t know.”

“Proofs that she was lying. We gather them all in one place, and then get people to back us up. Everything has to be shown in a place that everyone can see and isn’t easily disregarded as fake, but first...” Nino thinks for a moment, brow furrowing. “Somebody name one of Lila’s lies.”

Chloe wrinkles her nose. “That one kitten one with Jagged Stone.”

“Oh, that I can do,” Marinette goes to get a change of shirt as Sabrina perks up, saying, “Right! You designed his glasses!”

“And he’s got a commission in my to-do list right now,” Marinette says as she ducks behind her divider to change her shirt. “I can contact him, ask him to vouch-”

Adrien raises a hand. “Clara too. She likes what you make, you’ve got her number too right?”

“If you need any of them staying over for a personal appearance, let me know,” Chloe brags.
“Daddy wouldn’t mind housing any of them ever again.” At Nathaniel’s nudge, she huffs. “... And I can call my mom about what Lila said about her.”

Nino worries his lower lip. “Rose knows Prince Ali, doesn’t she?”

“... She could write him,” Adrien realizes, eyes widening. “Then we’d know if she actually went to Achu or not for charity work!”

Kagami gives him a deadpan stare, crossing her arms. “More likely she didn’t though.”

“Oh, she definitely didn’t,” Sabrina says.

Everyone stares at Sabrina - even Marinette, who’d just come out from behind the divider. At their stares, Sabrina blinks in confusion before realizing why they were doing so. “Oh! Right! None of you know this - only Ladybug does!”

“Ladybug?” Adrien discreetly glances at Marinette, who glances at him as well, before he asks, “What does she know?”

Sabrina’s glasses lens flare in the light. “Volpina was active during Heroes’ Day! That one illusion of Ladybug killing Chat Noir atop a parade balloon-”

Adrien stiffens.

Marinette’s touch is feather light on his arm as she says, “Then that means she never left Paris. That’s even more evidence.”

“But this isn’t enough,” Kagami clenches a fist. “We need to gather more evidence - concrete, solid evidence, and then put it all together and show it for the world to see. Perhaps online…” She glances to the side, lost in thought.

Nathaniel’s eyes widen, and he snaps his fingers, calling everyone else’s attention. “Aurore and Mireille run a blog, don’t they?”

“... Bug’s Eye View, of course!” Marinette’s eyes shine with renewed determination and energy. Nino’s just relieved to see it back in her gaze as she pumps a fist. “We can post it to Bug’s Eye View! If Lila’s going to rely on the Ladyblog for her rise to fame, then she can count on Bug’s Eye View for her fall of infamy.”

Adrien grins, looping an arm around one of Marinette’s own. “Poetic. Have you been practicing when I’m not looking?”

“Maybe. Why, worried that I’ll be the one waxing poetic between the two of us, minou?” Marinette teases.

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“UGH, get a ROOM,” Chloe cries out dramatically, making the two of them split apart instantly. Nathaniel had respectfully averted his eyes while Sabrina had giggled nervously into her hands.

Nino, however…

His head was spinning again.

“Okay, just so we’re clear. We’re all gonna gather evidence debunking Lila’s lies,” Everyone else nods. “Then we’re gonna meet here, and put it all together, get Aurore and Mireille to publish it.
Maybe get Ladybug and Chat Noir’s support—"

“—because Lila Rossi has claimed to be ‘best friends’ with Ladybug even though she’s admitted to wanting to get her killed,” Kagami hisses. “Ladybug would never stand for that.”

Marinette nods. “Right. I think Adrien and I can handle getting Ladybug and Chat Noir.”

“Is that clear then, dudes and dudettes?” Pause. “And uh, Kagami?”

Kagami raises an eyebrow. “Am I not a ‘dudette’?”

“I- uh- buh—” Nino flails for a moment before grabbing onto the rim of his cap nervously. “I wasn’t. Sure if you wanted to be called dudette so.”

“Oh, so you care about whether or not she wants to be called dudette, but don’t ask me for my opinion?” Chloe rolls her eyes. “Typical.”

Kagami’s face is impassive, but she nods. “I don’t mind. If it’s easier for you to call me dudette by including me in the collective.”

“Okay, now that that’s settled…” Nino turns to Adrien and Marinette, and gestures wildly to the both of them. “Before Adrien has to go. When did this happen.”

“When did what happen, Nino?” Adrien asks innocently. Chloe chokes on her own spit laughing.

Nino gestures to them again, this time more forcefully. “That. That flirting with Mari thing. Since when was that a thing she couldn’t even say two words to you without choking.”

“It’s a long story,” is all Adrien says before he has to go for the photoshoot. Before he descends the trapdoor, however, Nino points his fingers at his eyes, and then at Adrien, indicating that he’d be watching him. With a roll of his eyes, Adrien waves goodbye to the rest of them, until finally, he’s gone.

“…”

“…”

“…”

“…”

“…”

“…”

“The room is quiet. Deathly so.

And then, Sabine’s head pokes out from the trapdoor - along with a tray of cinnamon rolls.

“Cinnamon rolls, anyone?”

Nino was so fucking glad to be in Marinette’s good graces again.
It starts like this: with Chat Noir landing face first into the new pot of dirt Marinette laid out.

He’d been sailing past the rooftops on patrol alone that night, having been informed prior by Ladybug that tonight she’d be busy dealing with something in her civilian life and that she wouldn’t be able to properly patrol that night - but he could always count on her to show up should an akuma attack at any time. He trusted his Lady - if she said she’d come, she would.

So here he was, a cat all alone without his lady, running wild and free.

He enjoyed his time as Chat Noir immensely. It was a refreshing break from being Adrien Agreste, model and the face of Gabriel. As Chat Noir, he was able to be his truest self… or so he liked to think. Ladybug liked to remind him otherwise that whoever he was without the mask, he was also them with the mask - but she couldn’t possibly have known that she was interacting with Adrien Agreste. She probably would have treated him differently.

And even though the idea that Ladybug would treat him differently as Adrien was appealing, a bigger part of him recoiled at the idea. He didn’t want to be treated differently for being Adrien Agreste - he wanted to be seen as Adrien. As Chat Noir. Chat Adrien. Adrien Noir.

Maybe he needed to work more on his names.

_BONK._

And his focus.

In his lapse of concentration, he’d launched himself straight into a brick wall. The impact, embarrassingly enough, makes him stick off the wall to slowly peel off and roll into the tarp that had been laid out by whoever lived there-

- and presently made him land face first in a pot of dirt.

“Chat Noir?!” A voice asks incredulously - a voice he knows all too well.

Marinette Dupain-Cheng.

Chat lifts his head off of the pot of dirt and grins toothily at her. “Good evening, Marinette. Sorry about your pot of dirt.”
“You’re lucky I haven’t started putting in the fertilizer,” Marinette chastises, but otherwise she pulls him over to the chair she had set up on her balcony to sit, motioning for him to stay as she went back down inside her room.

He liked Marinette, he really did. She was intelligent and resourceful, as well as kindhearted and funny, and a good friend. He’d meant it when he’d said she was their everyday Ladybug - she possessed all the qualities Ladybug had as a good person, so he’d been both delighted and just a little bit upset when she’d accidentally outed herself as Multimouse to him during the Kwamibuster incident.

Ever since Glaciator, he’d taken to visiting Marinette on extremely rare occasions. Evillustrator had been their first contact with each other, but it had taken a shared night of broken hearts for them to properly connect with each other. He’d found Marinette’s company to be rather pleasant - and the baked goods definitely helped sweeten the deal. And their interactions.

But really, the highlight here was Marinette. He genuinely liked being around her and talking to her when he had the time. She had a lot to say when she wasn’t stammering. It was hard talking to Marinette as Adrien a lot of the time. Nino had told him she wasn’t scared of him, but why did she keep stuttering around him then and looked for ways to not be around him for too long? It was very confusing.

When Marinette pops back up, there is a spray bottle in one hand and a towelette in another. Chat freezes in place at the sight of the spray bottle.

“Oh, come on, Kitty, don’t tell me you’re afraid of water?” Marinette teases, coming closer. “It’s just a little spritz to get all the dirt off of you, trust me.”

Chat crosses his arms and grumps, “Okay, but I won’t be happy about it.”

“Oh, he who falls into flower pots.”

“It was an accident!”

“And I suppose this is because you weren’t looking were you were going, huh?” Marinette asks. When Chat nods sullenly, she shakes her head with a sigh, spritzing his face with water before rubbing it off with the towelette. “Honestly, Kitty. What will I do with you?”

Chat pretends to tap his chin in thought before grinning cattily. “Purrhaps a sweet little treat for a sweet little kitty?”

“I should be scolding you, not rewarding you for bad behavior, silly kitty,” Marinette pinches his cheek before folding the towelette back on the table and putting the spray bottle next to it. “So what brings you over here tonight, Chat?”

“Oh! N-no, that wince wasn’t directed at you,” Marinette bites the inside of her cheek as she looks away. Chat picks up on an undercurrent of bitterness, and wonders what could have possibly entered her brain to produce such a bitter taste from a sweet girl. “I was just reminded of something I had to deal with earlier before you came by and interrupted my re-potting.
Chat raises an eyebrow, curious. “A penny for your thoughts, Princess? That wince didn’t look like a paw-sitive thing. It always helps to tell a friend.”

“Are you my friend, Chat?”

It should have been a joking question, but Chat is taken aback by the serious look on her face. Any jokes that would have come from that dies on his lips as he crosses a claw over his heart. “Cross my heart, hope to die, stick Cataclysm in my eye.”

Marinette snorts with laughter. “Really?”

“Hey, no dissing the childish promises,” Chat sticks his tongue out before he schools his gaze into something serious again. “But yeah. I promise. I’m your friend, Marinette.” In and out of the mask, I hope. Even if you don’t know it’s me.

“Well…” And here Marinette sighs so deeply, she looks like she might have breathed out her entire body’s weight in air, and suddenly Chat notices how low her shoulders seem to sink when she does. Was she okay? “It’s just… I dunno. You’d probably think it’s dumb. You’re a superhero. You shouldn’t be listening to the woes of some civilian girl.”

Chat frowns, and a fake leather ear twitches in her direction like a real cat’s ear would. “You’re not just some civilian girl, Marinette. I told you - I’m your friend. And friends are always there for each other.”

“…”

Chat reaches out to hold both of her hands in his, and smiles. Marinette blinks at the sudden contact, and despite herself her cheeks turn a little pink. It’s a cute look on her, he thinks. “If it really bothers you, well, pretend I’m not Chat Noir right now. If you can pretend I’m not Chat, then it’s not a superhero listening to you right now, yeah? It’s just a friend listening to you.”

Marinette twitches when he says ‘just a friend’. but otherwise doesn’t react.

“C’mon, Marinette. There is no Chat Noir. Only a friendly stray cat,” Chat coaxes. “A handsome stray cat that wants to listen to your troubles.”

“That’s not how it works, kitty,” Marinette rolls her eyes, but Chat is delighted to see her giggle slightly. “It’s hard not to see a blonde boy in a black leather catsuit on my balcony right now when it’s the only thing of note in here.”

Chat purrs thoughtfully, “I see you. You’re another thing of note.”

“Flatterer,” Marinette snipes, but she seems to think about it as she looks at Chat thoughtfully. “Promise not to laugh when I say the name of the person I’m pretending to think of in your place right now?”

Chat nods. “Of course!”

“Okay, okay… here goes…” Marinette closes her eyes, breathes in sharply, and exhales. Chat tenses in place, unconsciously leaning forward, waiting for the outburst - only to receive nothing except a tear streaking down one of her cheeks. He reaches out instinctively to wipe away the tear, but hesitates. Touching her with his gloves would break the illusion.

“I’ve tried so hard,” She whispers, and even with his super hearing he’d almost missed it. “To take the high road, like you said. I’ve tried to ignore her. I’ve tried to not let her get to me, because I
knew you knew too, and we were in this together…”

Chat’s blood chills. Why did these words sound so familiar?

“But I can’t… do this anymore!” Marinette’s fists clench at her sides, and more tears cascade down her cheeks. Her brow furrows in anger, in sorrow, in her frustration. It was killing him to stay still. “She’s got everyone on her side, everyone believes her, and no one believes plain old Marinette Dupain-Cheng - Marinette who they’ve known for years, Marinette who brought them pastries, Marinette who fixed their clothes, helped them out, broke up fights—”

Chat had never seen Marinette in such a state. His heart is discordant, and yet in time with each angry, despairing beat of Marinette’s voice as she paces in front of him, tears still streaking down her face. “But no! They chose to believe the words of the liar, the one who swore to take away all my friends, take away A- a lot of things I care about.” What was that stumble? “I just… can’t… do it anymore, Adrien.”

Chat’s heart skips at least seven beats.

Of all the people she could be pretending to vent to, it had to be his alter ego? Does that mean she trusts me? Adrien? She trusts Adrien with this stuff?

Of course she does, another voice in his head says. You ARE the only one in the classroom that isn’t her who knows of Lila’s lies… that you two know of.

Fair.

“She threatened me, Adrien.” Chat stiffens when Marinette’s voice takes on a wobbly quality. “In the bathroom. When Chameleon happened, the day she came back? She threatened me in the bathroom. She said…” She chokes. “She said she’d take away all of my friends… make me an outcast… that the boy I liked would be hers… and it’s working!”

Chat nearly flinches when Marinette ends up wrapping her arms around him, as though she wasn’t hugging leather, wasn’t hugging Chat Noir. No - to her, she was hugging Adrien. That’s right. She was imagining Adrien in his place right now. Shit. What Would Adrien Do?

Carefully, he wraps his arms around her. He doesn’t speak. He knows that speaking will ruin the illusion, and he wants Marinette to just let it all out the best she can. It seems to work - Marinette only sobs into his suit, fragile, tired, broken.

How furiously the flame began to grow in his stomach, coursing through his veins like a wildfire. How dare Lila Rossi break down such a strong person as her? How dare she- she-

“Sorry…” Marinette sniffs, and a strangled noise escapes Chat’s throat at the sound as she opens her eyes to look at him. Her eyes are watery. “I got carried away… it’s just… at least someone else knows the whole story, besides me. Adrien doesn’t know that Lila threatened me. He doesn’t have to know—”

Marinette is startled by Chat suddenly hugging her incredibly tightly, allowing her to bury her face in his shoulder again. While surprised by the sudden contact, she doesn’t complain as she lets herself hug him back again, just as tightly.

Chat holds out a hand, and whispers, praying to God that Marinette doesn’t hear, “Cataclysm.”

The akuma that had been aiming for Marinette disintegrates under his touch.
Marinette sniffs, and pulls back just as Chat smiles back at her kindly. “Thanks for the hug, Chat. And for listening. It’s just… been a really long day.”

“I understand completely,” Chat nods solemnly. “I’ve had to deal with Lila Rossi before, you know. She’s the reason Oni-chan went after me and Ladybug that one time.”

Marinette frowns. “I remember Oni-chan. Kagami was ashamed of it for weeks on end when she told me about it.”

“She shouldn’t be ashamed. She was victimized by Hawkmoth for having emotions.” Pause. “Wait… Marinette, is that why you haven’t been telling anyone about Lila?”

Marinette freezes. “How do you know I haven’t been telling anyone?”

“Marinette, you literally just told me that now I’m the only one who knows the whole story! Even Adrien doesn’t know the whole story!” Chat’s voice rises with worry and anger. “It is, isn’t it?!”

“I’m not allowed to be angry or upset,” Marinette murmurs. “I can’t.”

Chat’s rage burns white hot, but upon remembering what he’d just done he tries to calm down. For Marinette’s sake, and for Ladybug’s. He didn’t want to become an akuma - Marinette needed him right now. “I hate Hawkmoth. We literally can’t feel upset anymore without him going ‘owo wats dis’!”

Marinette *chokes* on her own spit. “EXCUSE ME?!”

“You heard me!” Chat rants, but half of it is mostly to see if he can get Marinette smiling again. “Hawkmoth is *literally* the kind of guy who goes ‘owo wats dis? Hewwo? Hewwo negative emotion? I shaw use it fow my own pewsonaw tomfoowewy! Fwy, fwy, fwy my pwettes!’”

Marinette’s crying again. But it’s not out of sadness - it’s out of *laughter*. She clenches her fists and pounds on Chat’s chest. “Stop it! Oh my *God*, STOP! I don’t want to even *think* about him like that!”

“Come on, Princess, it’s funny!” Chat laughs before beginning to peacock across her rooftop balcony. “‘Hewwo yes it is I, the Hawkest of Moths, I require the Miwacuwous for my evil pwans, uwu.’” He punctuates his sentence with a mocking evil laugh that sends Marinette cackling.

“PLE-HEE-HEEEAAAASE!”

“‘Be afwaid of me, oh Pawis, fow I, big bad buttefwfy man, will turn you into the clown of the week! Observe!’” Chat pretends to twirl a cane before tapping on the railing. Marinette nearly stuffs her fist into her mouth to keep her from screeching with laughter. “Bippity boppity boo! I curse you with… *zero fashion!* ”

Marinette frantically slaps her hand over his mouth, trying to get him to shut up, but she’s giggling so hard all it does is make her practically vibrate and stumble all over him. “Stop it, kitty - we’re going to end up calling everyone’s attention!”
“Then we take this to inside your room!” Chat crows, and before Marinette can protest he’s already clambering over to the window that leads to her loft. “Will the pretty lady please let the pretty kitty in?”

“You’re not my cat, Chat Noir,” Marinette giggles, but then she asks, “Don’t you have a patrol to get to?”

Chat shrugs. “I was on my way home anyway, Princess. You were my final pit stop.”

“Really? Because I recall you weren’t paying attention and crashed into my chimney.”

“Shhh. That never happened.”

With a roll of her eyes, Marinette cautiously leaves the door open for Chat, saying as she goes, “It’s getting pretty late, though, so you’re going to have to be quiet or else my parents will know you’re in my room. You remember the last time you were here with my parents aware, right?”

“Yeah,” Chat winces, moving to clamber down to her loft. Were dad had been a terrifying adversary.

The sound of crashing startles him, and Chat ends up falling off the ladder and landing face first in Marinette’s bed in his surprise.

**beep**

“Ow…” Marinette whines. When Chat peers over the side of the loft to look at her, there are shoeboxes scattered all around her as she rubs her head, sitting on the floor. At his concerned look she laughs awkwardly. “Sorry, kitty. I’m just so clumsy sometimes, ahahaha.”

“What were you getting?” He asks curiously.

Marinette looks around the fallen shoeboxes before turning around to crawl around on her knees, groaning. “I was supposed to be getting something like a notebook? So I could write down a lot of your stupid jokes so I can use them against you -”

“Rude,” He chirps.

“Oh, put a sock in it, kitty,” Marinette rolls her eyes before they land on the notebook that had launched itself under her desk. “Aha! Found it!” **BUMP**. “Ow!”

“You okay?”

“Just bumped my head on my desk, it’s okay- ow -”

**beep**

_Hm... funny, I swear that sounded a lot like my Miraculous._

“Chat? You don’t have a tracking device, do you?” Marinette calls as she heads for the stairs.

“Why?”

“I hear a beeping up there and it’s not my alarm clock!”

Chat realizes too late that he’d forgotten he’d used Cataclysm earlier, and his eyes widen when he looks at his ring. **SHIT! ONE LEFT!**
“I- uh-”

“Chat?” Marinette asks, already halfway up the steps when she sees him scrambling towards her loft’s exit. She raises an eyebrow as she asks, “Leaving already? And here you are saying you had all the time in the world-”

**BEEP.**

The final print leaves his ring, and green destructive magic makes him turn back right when he’s halfway through the door.

Marinette drops the notebook. She’d know those pants and shoes and legs *anywhere*.

Adrien *freezes*.

“... *Fuck*,” He swears loudly.
adrien agreste and the lady’s true spots

Chapter Summary

All’s well that ends well for Ladybug and Chat Noir... for now.

Chapter Notes

direct continuation of the previous chapter, then we can get back to our shenanigans with nino and kagami

“Marinette-”

“You’re Chat Noir.”

“Marinette-”

“Adrien is Chat Noir. I just CRIED. IN FRONT OF ADRIEN. WHO IS Chat Noir.”

“Marinette-”

“Oh my God. Oh my God, oh my God-”

Adrien opens his mouth, ready to appease her in any way he could, before Marinette shrieks at him, “I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU SAID ‘FUCK’, ADRIEN!”

“... hah?” Adrien blinks.

“My head is spinning.”

Adrien really didn’t blame her this time for feeling dizzy. It must’ve been a shock, finding out that the local fashion model and the face of a brand and (hopefully) one of your good friends from school was also the person who’d been visiting you after hours, otherwise known as the friendly neighborhood Chat Noir in a leather catsuit.

That sounded better in his head. It really did.

Adrien awkwardly watches from the loft, his legs dangling off the edge, as Marinette paces to and fro, hands massaging her temples like they’re bread dough. Or cookie dough. Any kind of dough. It made sense to him - she was a baker’s daughter. She lived right above a bakery. Bakery analogies were completely logical.

His stomach rumbles. Great. Now he was anxious and hungry. Great job, Adrien.

Marinette didn’t seem to stop in her pacing however, much too preoccupied with trying to process that Adrien and Chat Noir were one in the same. From where he was seated, Marinette to him appeared to be muttering to herself, but if he looked closer, she looked like she was talking to a
completely different person.

Maybe it’s a designer thing, Adrien wonders, remembering how his father would sometimes just murmur to himself while working at his tablet. *I mean, I talk to Plagg, but that’s different. It just LOOKS like I’m talking to myself when I talk to Plagg.*

“You said ‘fuck’,” Marinette repeats, looking up at Adrien.

Adrien dangles his arms over the railing. “Why are you so hung up over that?”

“You also did an ‘ooooowooooo’ voice while impersonating Hawkmoth,” Marinette adds, squinting at him. “And you make cat puns all the time. And terrible jokes.”

Adrien pouts. “Meow-ch, my lady~”

His hands slap over his mouth immediately in a panic at Marinette’s wide-eyed response. Shit! That had been on instinct. *Marinette isn’t Ladybug, don’t forget, don’t forget, DON’T FORGET-*

“Ugh, you two really need to stop dancing around each other already,” A voice whines, and before Adrien can stop him Plagg already darts out from his shirt and floats in front of Marinette. “Marinette, can I have some cheese tarts? You guys have the *best* cheese tarts in all of Paris!”

“Plagg!” Adrien would have jumped from the loft to the floor, but that was a stupid idea. He wasn’t Chat Noir right now - Chat Noir mostly impervious to impact damage caused by flying off ledges. He was Adrien Agreste - model, poster boy, and pretty damn fragile and easy to bruise. It was unfortunately something he’d inherited from his mother - easy to bruise, easy to bleed. His father called it thin skin? He couldn’t remember.

Much to his surprise, however, Marinette puts both her hands on her hips as she glares at Plagg. “And I suppose you had a part to play in this?”

“Meh. Not my fault he conveniently forgot the time limit while talking to you. You make it sooooooo easy for him to forget that he has any problems at all,” Plagg shrugs nonchalantly as Marinette’s gaze slowly moves up to look at Adrien, his face already reddening considerably at the blatant exposure. “Now can I have a cheese tart? Pleaaaaaaaase, Marinette?”

Marinette points to herself in disbelief. “I… make it easy for you to forget you have problems?”

“D-don’t listen to him, he’s a dumb cat,” Adrien stammers, inching backwards and away from the edge to go and make his way down the stairs. “I-it’s not like that, I swear, Marinette. I just-”

“- really really really really like you, but I don’t have the guts to approach you as Adrien and I think you’re scared of me, so I approach you as Chat Noir because you’re not afraid of him,” Plagg yawns before declaring, “You know what? I’m gonna go raid your fridge for a cheese tart. Then Adrien can pay for it while we’re here.”

And before either of the humans can react, Plagg already phases through the floor and heads for the Dupain-Cheng kitchen.

Adrien immediately whirls over to Marinette with an embarrassed groan. “Sorry. He’s - he’s a handful sometimes, but he’s not normally like this. Um. So.” He awkwardly extends out a hand, putting on his best Chat Noir smile. “Hi. I’m Chat Noir?”

Marinette gives him a Look, her arms crossed over her chest.
Adrien wilts and laughs awkwardly, scratching the back of his neck. “Okay. No handshake to pretend that never happened then.”

“Oh, kitty,” And here Marinette’s gaze softens as she shakes her head. “There are some things you can’t take back. Like the fact that you said ‘fuck’ when you detransformed right in front of me-”

“Why are you so hung up over that?”

“- because Adrien Agreste doesn’t normally swear!” Marinette explains, tugging at her pigtails. “I know he can swear because he can talk but it’s just- he’s never’s done it in front of me before! It’s usually Nino who swears-”

Adrien raises an eyebrow. “Then you know who to blame for my tainted tongue.”

“…” Marinette stares at him before furiously tugging on her pigtails. “Oh, I am sharing some words with him. Eventually. Now on to another thing!” Marinette lets go of her hair to point at him once more. “Adri- Chat- Adrinoir!”

“Adrinoir?” He asks in amusement.

Marinette’s cheeks turn a rather pleasant shade of red before she waves her arms around. “Not the point! Where did you use Cataclysm?! Your Miraculous shouldn’t have timed out unless you used Cataclysm, and there hasn’t been an akuma tonight, but you used Cataclysm! Where did you-”

“There was an akuma though,” Adrien says, but it’s mostly a low mutter. “I dealt with it so you didn’t have to.”

Marinette pauses, squinting at him. It feels like he’s being stared at through a microscope as she asks, “… We’ve been up on my roof for more than five minutes. That means you used it while you were here.”

“That’s right,” Adrien confirms.

“… There was an akuma coming for me,” She realizes with a soft whisper. Marinette looks up at Chat - looks up at Adrien, and he shouldn’t have been so startled to see how vulnerable she looks, after everything that had happened, but he is. It’s frightening. “Tell me the truth. Was I about to be…”?

Adrien inclines his head downward once - the barest of nods.

“Oh… not again…” Marinette goes to sit on her chaise, curling up on it as Adrien barely manages to process her words. Again? I know she was almost akumatized into Princess Justice once, when Lila got her expelled, but… that was it, wasn’t it? “That makes it what, the third? Fourth time? Ugh…”

Adrien blinks once. Twice.

“Wait, fourth?”

“Maybe third, I need to do a recount…” Marinette mumbles before she freezes, realizing she’d said everything out loud. “GAH! Forget I said anything! I didn’t say anything!”

Frowning, Adrien moves closer to Marinette, crouching in front of her chaise where she’s curled up, knees to her chest as she lies on her side facing him. She’s not crying, which is a good sign - but she’s pensive, which is not always a good sign. Bluebell eyes stare at him as if daring him to
pry further.

Which he does. Because Adrien was nothing if not overly concerned for his friends.

“What do you mean, third time?” Adrien asks carefully. “Marinette, was Princess Justice not…?”

Marinette looks away. Carefully, oh so carefully, Adrien reaches out to place a hand atop one of her. She tenses, but doesn’t move away. “Marinette… you can talk to me.”

“No I can’t,” Marinette mumbles.

“Why?”

“You’re Adrien.”

Adrien visibly frowns. “You could talk to Chat Noir. Chat Noir is your friend. Adrien is your friend too. Why is Adrien any different, Marinette?”

“Because I l-!” Marinette stuffs her other fist into her mouth to silence herself immediately - but it’s too late. Had Adrien been transformed, one would have seen his fake cat ears prick forward in attention at her words, his eyes wide, pupils dilated.

“What was that?”

“Asghfdkgfgijkl.”

“I don’t think those are words, princess.”

Marinette turns pinker at the nickname. Adrien privately thinks she’s beginning to match the rest of her room. “It’s so weird hearing that nickname from Adrien and not Chat Noir.”

“Why? I think it’s purrfectly appropriate, don’t you think?”

“... Okay the puns, I think I can see now. Both Adrien and Chat made horrible puns.”

Adrien deflates, a sight that makes Marinette giggle. “Really? Are they that terrible?”

“They were pretty groan-inducing, you have to admit,” Marinette says. She shifts until she’s lying on her side, her head resting on her arm while still facing him. “The thing is… when Chat made them, I groaned on the outside. When Adrien made them… erm.”

“Erm?”

Marinette turns even pinker.

“C’mon, Marinette, you can tell me,” Adrien inches closer, grinning his trademark Chat Noir smile. “It’s just me, your kitty. Except minus the leather. You can see the resemblance, right?”

Marinette squints, and with her free hand reaches out to ruffle his hair a bit before examining him once more. “... Oh my God.”

“Uncanny, right?”

“I can’t believe I made it this far without knowing it was you behind the mask,” Marinette moans, burying her face in her hands. Her cheeks are now redder than Nathaniel’s hair, and that was saying something. “What kind of hero am I to not know my own partn-”
Marinette chokes on her own words again. She seemed to be doing that a lot in his prese-
Adrien stops.

The gears in his head turn for a few moments, until they produce a single thought. A thought that shouldn’t have made as much sense as it did at that moment, but did.

“Ladybug?” Adrien squeaks.

Oh my God the pieces were falling into place.

Plagg peeks out from the floor. “Are you two done dancing around each other yet?”

“Plagg?” Adrien tries to clear his throat, but his voice is still up in the air. “Ladybug?”

Plagg stares at him. “Duh?”

“I told you not to interfere!” And lo and behold, from one of Marinette’s pigtails emerges a very familiar red and black spotted creature, zipping over towards Plagg to karate chop him on the head with a nubby hand. Paw. Something. “Now look what you’ve done!”

Marinette was Ladybug. Ladybug was Marinette.

He’d been talking with his lady - he’d been friends with his lady, he’d been friends with Marinette in and out of the mask this whole time.

Adrien felt faint.

Plagg rolls his eyes before darting over to Adrien’s head, bouncing up and down on his hair. “Oh please, sugarcube, as if you haven’t been waiting for this whole thing to happen already to spare everyone the trouble.”

“Yes, but you could’ve warned Adrien that his time was running out!” Tikki scolds. “We’re one of the only kwamis who can actually vaguely talk to our owners when they’re transformed!”

Marinette gapes. “Wait, you can do that?”

“Most of the time I’ve never found reason to,” Tikki admits in shame, hanging her head. “But sometimes, when you feel like you’re on the verge of giving up, Marinette, and you hear a voice in the back of your head as Ladybug? That’s me trying to help you stand up again.”

Her gaze softening, Marinette murmurs, “Oh, Tikki. I’m not mad at you. Come here.”


As Marinette sits up, Tikki moves to nuzzle at Marinette’s cheek before giggling at Adrien. “Looks like someone else is tongue tied now, don’t you think, Marinette?”

“Is it really so hard to think I might be Ladybug, kitty?” Marinette asks, genuinely concerned for the state of her recently revealed partner. He seemed to be having a conniption fit on the spot on her bedroom floor. “… Actually, don’t answer that, me and Ladybug are completely different. Tikki, can I erase memories so that neither of us remember this ever happen-”

Adrien holds onto her hand with both of his, startling her. “I don’t want to forget, milady! Don’t erase our memories!”
“Adrien, you of all people should know why we can’t know each other’s-”

“I know! I know! But- isn’t it better this way?” He asks, genuinely begging her to reconsider. His hold on her hand is firm as he asks in earnest, “Ladybug is Marinette, Adrien is Chat. Friends in and out of the mask. Shouldn’t that make our bond stronger?” At Marinette’s befuddled look, he clarifies, “We know each other in and out of the mask now. It should be easier, knowing that we can trust each other in and out of the mask.”

“Chat…”

“Adrien. I’m Adrien right now.”

“Adrien…” Marinette tries, and finds that it’s not as difficult as it had been earlier to say his name in regards to Miraculous affairs. “Adrien, if Hawkmoth ever akumatizes any of us, you know the risk, right? Our identities, our families.”

“I won’t let anything akumatize you ever again, Marinette,” Adrien swears, and shifts so that his hands are now holding Marinette’s properly, sandwiching hers in between his. “I did it tonight. I’ll do it again. I’ll destroy as many akumas as I have to if it means it’ll keep you safe.”

It’s a pretty romantic scene, if Adrien thinks about it. He’d shifted to going on one knee somewhere in the middle of his proclamation, now looking as though he was proposing to her, while Marinette’s hand was held in between his, her sitting upright on her chaise like the princess she was and deserved to be called.

“…” Marinette seemed speechless, her cheeks still pink. In the dim light of her room, her eyes seemed to sparkle like sapphires. Adrien’s heart skips a beat.

And then his heart just straight up skips a few more beats when Marinette’s other hand, wiped clean, reaches out to cradle his cheek with her palm. “Oh, my dear kitty… my dear, reckless, brave, handsome Chat Noir…”

Adrien internally squeaks. *Handsome? “Marin-”*

He’s silenced immediately by Marinette leaning in.

She smiles, her breath coasting against his cheeks. “You don’t need to promise me anything but to help me protect Paris. That’s all I want, kitty.”

“I’d give you the world if I could,” Adrien breathes. Was the room getting hotter or was it just him? Maybe it was just him. His ears were burning. Was he on fire? Maybe he was on fire.

Marinette smiles at him, and it’s like the entire world was right in front of Adrien’s eyes. “You don’t have to.”

“But I would.”

“Oh, GET A ROOM!” Plagg howls, destroying the mood with an ill-timed verbal Cataclysm.

Both Marinette and Adrien flush scarlet as they lean away from each other, but neither of them let go of each other’s hands as Tikki floats over to Marinette in concern, asking, “So… will either of you tell Master Fu?”

“Shit,” Marinette curses as the reality of the world comes crashing back on her shoulders. “I... we have to. He deserves to know what happened. *Adrien* deserves to know Master Fu better too.” She
gives Adrien a smile, and squeezes his hand gently. Adrien is not sure if he’s dead yet or not.

Tikki beams. “Good answer, Marinette.”

“‘Bout time that guy let loose, anyway,” Plagg scoffs. “Wayzz did not do him any favors being his partner.”

“Master Fu is going to be hard to convince, Marinette, but I’m sure it’ll all work out!” Tikki headbutts Marinette’s cheek gently before adding, “You’re the best Ladybug and Chat Noir history’s ever seen so far. Maybe it’s about time for change.”

“Maybe,” Marinette muses.

Adrien, addressing Tikki, turns to the floating red kwami. “You’re… okay with this?”

“Well. It really could’ve been under better circumstances than you making fun of Hawkmoth,” Tikki scolds. “But you know what? Marinette hasn’t been this happy in a while. I’m just glad to see her happy again with the boy she likes.”

Adrien’s thoughts come to a screeching halt.

Marinette squeaks. “TIKKI!”

“Am. Am I the. I’m the boy you said you.” His thoughts were stuttering like a deliciously laggy Dailymotion video. “I’m the. Boy you like. Huh?”

Marinette scrunches her eyes shut, and leans in again. Adrien nearly keels over.

“Plagg?” Tikki turns to her counterpart. “Help me set up a sleeping bag - there’s one under Marinette’s bed. We’ll send you two off back to the Agreste mansion in the morning. It’s been a long night.”

---

Adrien does not sleep in the sleeping bag that night.

He does leave as Chat Noir in the early hours of the morning however - but not without kissing a snoozing Marinette’s forehead goodbye and petting Tikki on the head with a claw.

He sleeps peacefully in his bed until Nathalie comes to wake him up.
Aurore Beaureal was a sensible young girl who knew what she wanted in life. While prideful of her many charms and talents, unlike many others she actually had said talents to back up her words - and a friend or two to reign her back as necessary. Two of those friends happened to be Mireille Caquet and Marc Anciel.

Mireille was an absolute godsend at times, especially when she was about to explode from all the pressure that came with running Bug’s Eye View. The blog was yet another in a sea of would-be Ladyblogs, but unlike Alya Cesaire’s beloved Ladyblog, Aurore wasn’t in it for the dangerous documentation that came with throwing herself in the middle of the battles. Bullheaded Alya and her desire for imminent self-destruction could deal with that.

Aurore liked to be a little more… civilized about how she received her footage.

Unlike the Ladyblog, three people had access to Bug’s Eye View, and each of them only had access to certain portions of the blog, locked under different passkeys for each section. This was to ensure that should any of the passkeys get compromised, only a segment would be in danger and not the whole blog. Aurore didn’t trust like that.

Aurore had the passkeys to the news and information section.

Marc had the passkeys to the inbox and submission box.

Mireille had the passkeys to the ‘wiki’.

It was a very beneficial team effort - with Aurore taking the lead on the latest news on akuma attacks, all Mireille had to do was manage the sort of akuma database their blog had ended up hosting while Marc was in charge of any submissions by concerned civilians within vicinity of the current akuma. Since he had the most free time out of the three of them, he was given the responsibility of sorting through submissions.

The three of them prided themselves in their work. While they weren’t the beloved Ladyblog, they were a good source of akuma resources and information on past akumatized victims, as well as common akuma behavioral patterns. People did rely on them, and that was all they could ask for.

So it’s not too much of a surprise when Nathaniel approaches Marc with a request.
“Publish something specific?” Marc asks curiously. At Nathaniel’s nod, he nibbles on his lower lip. “We’d have to run it by Aurore first. She’s the one in charge of the news section.”

Nathaniel nods, shifting his weight to his other leg. “I know. I went to you though because you were in charge of the submissions box, and that meant it’d pass through your hands first before it passed Aurore and Mireille’s.”

“What’s it about?”

“Have you heard of someone called Lila Rossi?”

Immediately Marc’s face contorts in such an ugly way that Nathaniel bursts out laughing. Marc swats at him for it, but even he ends up laughing at himself as he says, “What did you expect my reaction was going to be when you mentioned that name?”

“Chloe bet me about ten euros you’d throw up your lunch at the mere mention of her name, I said you’d rub at your arms like a fire ant had just touched you,” Nathaniel groans. “Sabrina, on the other hand, said you’d just make a face so ugly that it almost matched Lila’s. Guess we both owe her money.”

Marc shudders. “I’d rather not be compared to Lila Rossi, thanks.”

“Who’s being compared to the Silvertongue?” A voice calls out, and Marc waves to someone behind Nathaniel as they approach, eventually revealing themselves to be Aurore and Mireille. “Hello, hello, Monsieur Mightyllustrator, winner of the heart of She Who Stings. Have you come to sweep his Royal Cuteness off his feet at last?”

Marc snickers at the bright red that colors Nathaniel’s cheeks. “Well? Are you, Nath?”

“Whatever, you two,” Nathaniel grumbles, still red in the face. As nice as it was that the two of them were so supportive of his weird relationship with Chloe, it was still kind of weird - mainly because he also liked Marc and Chloe also liked Aurore. And Marc liked him and Aurore maybe liked this nice Chloe. Maybe. It was very confusing. Nathaniel would say he envied Marinette and Adrien, but those two had been trapped in a love square for ages . If anything, they were more complex. “That’s not what I’m here for though.”

Mireille smiles kindly at him, gesturing for Nathaniel to take a seat by Marc, which he does gratefully. Aurore and Mireille sit on the bench across from them as she asks, “What were you two talking about before we came here?”

“Nath wants us to publish something on Bug’s Eye Out,” Marc explains. “Though he hasn’t told me what it is yet, actually.”

Aurore’s eyes glint in the light. “Is this, by any chance, for the same reason Chloe and Sabrina approached me and Mireille earlier?”

“Probably,” Nathaniel hums. “We want you guys to do a little featurette on Lila Rossi.”

Aurore violently fake-retches, making Marc reach over to pat her back in sympathy. “I know what you mean by that, but it still makes me sick . Ugh, what even does that class see in her sausage tails?”

“You tell me. Thank God Nino moved in and kicked her out of her seat,” Nathaniel snorts. “Anyway, are you guys okay with doing a featurette on Lila?”
“Only if you actually explain what the featurette is about,” Marc points out. “Because normally I wouldn’t touch her with a fifty foot pole.”

Nathaniel winces. “Yeah, understandable. See, we’re going to try and expose her for the liar she is, and we’ve mostly got a plan.”

“Do you now?” Aurore leans forward, resting her chin atop her steepled fingers. “Tell us more.”

Nathaniel’s next pit stop was Alix Kubdel.

With classes over for the day, all Nathaniel had to do was catch her before she left for home - or for Kim’s house, depending on the day of the week. He still hadn’t memorized her pattern. Occasionally Alix would sleep over at Kim’s or the other way around too, so that was another factor he had to figure in while planning to tell Alix the plan. Kim was a good guy, really he was - but there was a chance he could tell.

… Not that he was a tattletale. Sometimes things just accidentally spilled when you were Lê Chiến Kim. Really, it wouldn’t be his fault if he got caught up in the heat of the moment and accidentally said something that Lila would overhear.

Nathaniel shakes his head wildly. He’d rather not entertain the thought.

As Nathaniel darts past Lila and Alya on his way down the steps, he unfortunately overhears something along the lines of ‘moving on’ and ‘greener pastures’ and ‘not good enough for you’, but by that point he’d already tuned Lila out. He’d met his ‘hearing Lila’s voice’ quota today, thank you very much.

“Alix!” Nathaniel calls.

The pink haired girl turns around as Nathaniel skids to a stop in front of her, panting. “Nath? You could’ve just walked to me, you know. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Wrong - you were going to the Seine with me and Max for a dare,” Kim turns around as well to rest his arm on Alix’s head - at least until she swats him away. “But hey Nath. What’s up?”

Nathaniel inhales and exhales. “Alix, where’s Max?”

“He already went ahead to the Seine with Markov to meet up with Ondine, why?” Alix squints. “Was that all you were gonna ask me? If I’d seen Max?”

“No! No,” Nathaniel breathes, shaking his head wildly. “Of course not, Alix, no- I was looking for you, and Kim too - and Max and Markov would be a bonus, a really big bonus. It’d make my life easier to just have you all in one place while I asked for a favor.”

Kim raises an eyebrow. “A favor?”

“It’s really important,” Nathaniel stresses. “You said Max and Markov went to the Seine? Let’s go to the Seine.”

“You didn’t mention Ondine,” Kim points out with a frown. “Is she good to hear what you’re gonna say or?”

Nathaniel considers it. Ondine was a sweet girl, a good friend of Kim’s - hadn’t they been a thing at some point? Were they still a thing? Nathaniel wasn’t sure -, and she seemed trustworthy
enough. She definitely had more braincells than Kim did, at any rate.

“... Yeah. Okay. Sure.”

Kim whoops. Alix rolls her eyes before gesturing for the boys to follow her.

“Let me get this straight,” Max clarifies. “You want Markov to serve as a fact checker?”

“I can do it Max! Oh, can I Max, can I?” Markov flits around Nathaniel’s head excitedly. “It sounds like a most rewarding endeavor to partake of, and it shouldn’t take too much time if the information is handed to me in small chunks!”

Max hums in thought, gesturing for Markov to stop. “I mean, I don’t mind, Nathaniel. But whatever for? Are we reviewing the Ladyblog’s content for Alya?”

“As if we need Markov to know that lately all Alya’s been writing about is Lie-la,” Alix sticks out her tongue, and Kim responds in turn - which then devolves into a staring contest while simultaneously playing chicken with each other’s tongues. It was… certainly a sight.

Ondine rolls her eyes before smiling at Nathaniel. It was strange seeing her out of her swimming attire, considering most of the pictures of her on Kim’s Instagram were in her swimsuit. Today she was wearing a cute black hoodie with red patterns reminiscent of a fish’s scales, with little translucent red bits reminiscent of a fish’s fins, and black leggings. In one of her hands was an ice cream cone from Andre the ice cream man. “Is it about the Ladyblog? It’s been getting pretty one-trick pony lately with that strange girl.”

“Well… yeeaaah?” Nathaniel furrows his brow. “No, yeah, it actually is a bit about the Ladyblog, since a good number of information is on there about Lila. We need Markov to run a fact check on everything Alya’s ever posted relating to Lila Rossi, and whatever information is gathered should be ferried over to Marc Anciel of Bug’s Eye View.”

Ondine perks up. “I can do that! Marc and I share a class so it should be easy to get things to him if Markov can’t.”

“What’s the big deal with Lila, anyway?” Kim asks, looking away from Alix. “I mean, I know she’s probably part of the reason Nino broke up with Alya-”

Alix kicks him lightly in the shin before turning to Nath. “So you finally picked a side, huh?”

“It was probably about time, anyway,” Nathaniel grins lopsidedly. “Chloe’s visibly on Adrien’s side, after all.”

“And you’re on Marinette’s,” Max says softly. “That’s completely understandable.”

“I still can’t believe you, by the way,” Nathaniel turns to Max, frowning. “That napkin couldn’t have blinded you at all, and yet you acted like Lila saved the entire population of France.”

Max looks down in shame as Ondine shoos Nathaniel. “He gets it, Nathaniel. Don’t be so harsh on him.”

“I am well aware of my lapse in intelligence that day,” Max mutters. “And to this day I’m still paying for it, aren’t I?”

Nathaniel nods sternly.
Alix skates over to pat Max on the back, empathetic. “It was a stupid thing to believe, Max. But hey! You got your braincells back, didn’t you? Really not your fault Liar Rossi somehow sucked the brains out of you that day.”

“It really was a strange event! But I do not fault you for it Max, you are but human and humans make mistakes!” Markov chirps, going over to do his equivalent of a nuzzle to Max’s cheek. “Even robots like me make mistakes!”

“Markov’s right - everyone makes mistakes. Which means Lila could have made mistakes besides her lying,” Nathaniel gestures for the group to lean in closer. “So what I need you guys to do is this…”

By the time Nathaniel waves goodbye to Alix, Kim, Max, Ondine, and Markov, it’s already rather dark, the moon shining above him and bathing his surroundings in a soft glow on top of the usual Parisian lights. The redhead hurries along his way back home, already trying to refit the time he’d unintentionally lost that should have been dedicated to art when suddenly he hears screaming from his right.

And an akuma, tearing through the building also to his right.

Nathaniel is barely given time to blink before he’s crushed underfoot.

By the time Nathaniel waves goodbye to Alix, Kim, Max, Ondine, and Markov, it’s already rather dark, the moon shining above him and bathing his surroundings in a soft glow on top of the usual Parisian lights. The redhead hurries along his way back home, already trying to refit the time he’d unintentionally lost that should have been dedicated to art when suddenly he hears screaming from his right.

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- safe in the arms of one of the heroes of Paris, though he had yet to identify which one since he had his eyes shut. They land in a fairly secluded alleyway, away from the akuma.

“Are you okay?!” asks the hero, and it’s definitely not Ladybug or Chat Noir that rescued him, because the voice is feminine with a hint of haughtiness to it. “Hey! I can’t stand here too long, you know!”

Nathaniel opens his eyes and gawks at the hero standing before him. It’s a Snake, judging from the color palette and motif of the attire, but Nathaniel only knew of Viperion and Snake Noir from the news reports. This was someone entirely new.

It was another female hero, though not one he recognized on sight. Her hair was primarily a dark honey blonde with darker teal streaks, tied tightly into a ponytail - but it did not sit still. How wildly her hair fanned out behind her head, like a collective of snakes growing from her ponytail. Her face was partially obscured by a domino mask of a dark teal, nearing black shade with scalelike patterns adorning it, small fangs peeking out below the mask like Viperion’s mask. Her eyes weren’t human at all - a frightening yellow with black slit eyes, exactly like a snake’s.

Nathaniel didn’t get the chance to examine the rest of her attire, however, because the akuma roars to his left and to her right. With a curse muttered under her breath, she tells Nathaniel, “Stay here, and don’t get in the way of the akuma!” before bounding away to join the battle once more-
- but not before Nathaniel calls out, “Wait! What’s your name?”

“I-” The heroine falters, looking back at him, before eventually settling on a name. “Call me Medusa, tomatohead.”

She throws herself back into the battle just in time for Ladybug to call for her Lucky Charm. Nathaniel, meanwhile, stands alone in the alley, clutching his bag, cheeks warm.

Oh, no, Nathaniel’s thoughts return to the morning’s teasing about Marc and Chloe and Aurore, and he turns an even brighter red. Not another one.

Chapter End Notes

i’ll draw medusa one of these days - i’ll link it here when i do!
Chloe Bourgeois and the Second Chance

Chapter Summary

Chloe gets a second chance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chloe had long since accepted that she’d never get the Bee Miraculous again.

After the mess she’d made during her mother’s akumatization, and her own akumatization into Queen Wasp, she’d been utterly humiliated and exposed for the world to see. Her participation during the akumatization of her father into Malediktator and during Heroes’ Day as one of the heroes had served to heal her image slightly, but it did little to improve the overall public opinion of Chloe herself. Queen Bee’s civilian identity had already been exposed to Hawkmoth. She was a liability.

But Chloe understood. She trusted Ladybug’s decisions, trusted Ladybug.

And Ladybug believed in her to change.

So she’d tried. Oh how she tried.

Adrien had been one of her pillars during this time of extreme change, perfectly happy to assist in correcting her behavior as needed whenever she slipped. But the thing about Adrien was that he was a bit too lenient on her as her childhood friend. Some little mistakes he let slip under the rug. Sabrina was the same.

That was where Marinette had come into play - and when Marinette played, Marinette played hard.

Marinette Dupain-Cheng didn’t pull any punches. She’d known Chloe since preschool, and had been one of her victims as a bully - so she was one of the few who had the most firsthand experience regarding Chloe’s bullying tactics. It was easy for Marinette to spot when Chloe was slipping back into her usual habits - and easy for her to call her out on it. It had been painfully infuriating at first, as was Chloe’s natural instinct when it came to reacting to Marinette herself, but eventually things had dulled into irritation, until eventually she’d begun to just take Marinette’s chastising at face value and corrected her actions on the spot.

Chloe would never admit it publicly (at first), but Marinette had become a friend. Never like her Adrikins, of course - but a friend nonetheless.

Marinette had given her a second chance - a second real chance. And this time, Chloe refused to waste it.

The instant Lila’s appearance had shoved Marinette to the back, Chloe had taken it upon herself to assemble a squad in defense of Marinette - though it was extremely difficult, given that nobody believed she was really being nice because she wanted to change for real. Sabrina of course had stayed by her side, loyal as always, and thank goodness for that.
(No, she did not almost cry when Sabrina had reminded her that they were best friends and she was glad that Marinette had been able to help her where she couldn’t stand up to her.

The apologies she’d expressed in those ten minutes would never be enough. But Sabrina had understood. She didn’t deserve Sabrina.)

Adrien she was sure would join her squad, for one reason and one reason only: she was ninety percent certain that boy was smitten with Marinette but was just too blind to see it. She’d always entertained the thought of marrying Adrien, but mainly to make sure they’d stay together, not because she was romantically interested in him. He was a little too much of a pushover.

She hadn’t been able to ask him about the squad when Chameleon had showed themself, but once the situation had died down, she’d been about to stand up to talk to him about it - at least, until she saw the look on his face, looking at Marinette sitting alone in the back.

(“That boy is smitten, Sabrina,” She’d told her best friend haughtily. “If he isn’t, then I’ll eat my diamond encrusted phone case.”

Sabrina had giggled at that.)

That day had been like a catalyst for a huge change. The seating arrangements had changed, the dynamics had shifted. Public opinion had shifted in favor of Lila, while Marinette’s reputation within the classroom had begun to slowly inch down. Even Chloe had been more favored than Marinette at one point - at least until Chloe had decided to break her own ‘changing my attitude’ promise just to make sure Marinette didn’t sink to her level of being hated. It was the least she could do for Dupain-Cheng.

And oh, had it not gone unnoticed.

Nathaniel Kurtzberg had approached her sometime after that incident, and asked about the squad.

“How would you know about that?” Chloe asks, doubtful. “I never spoke about it to anyone besides Adrien and Sabrina.”

Nathaniel’s eyes are on his shoes, clutching his bag’s strap tightly. “I’ve seen you trying to change, Chloe. And I overheard Sabrina and you talking one day.”

“Didn’t take you to be an eavesdropper, Kurtzberg,” Chloe snorts.

“I’ll join it.”

Silence.

“W… what?”

“I’ll… I’ll join whatever squad you three have,” Nathaniel states, looking up to meet her eyes. She’s struck by the determination in his eyes, and no her stomach butterflies don’t flutter at the
sight of it, of course they don’t. “If it means we’re doing this for Marinette, then I’m game for whatever you guys have planned.”

Chloe schools her face into a disbelieving expression. “Don’t tell me you still have a crush on Marinette after all this time.”

“She’s Marinette,” is all Nathaniel offers, and that serves to squash the annoying little insects in Chloe’s stomach. Of course he still likes her. She’s *Marinette Dupain-Cheng*. She was the everyday Ladybug - who wouldn’t be smitten with her?

*(Chloe will admit to having a crush on Marinette, just like her crush on Ladybug. Just a tiny one. Borne out of her being so constant in her life, helping her become a better person. But that’s about it.)*

And so Chloe welcomes Nathaniel into the fold. What a motley crew they were - a sheltered rich boy, a spoiled rich brat trying to improve, an organized follower, and an artist with a sharp tongue. All joined hands to be the support group of one Marinette Dupain-Cheng.

She didn’t need to do this. But Chloe *wanted* to do this for Marinette. She deserved better than to get shunted aside by their own classmates like that - and if her childhood bully had been more attuned to this than her own closest friends, then they were going to have a problem.

Chloe thought she was doing this all pretty discreetly. But Marinette had noticed.

And oh, how she *noticed*.

The plan had been simple. Arrange for Jagged Stone and Clara Nightingale to stay for a while in Paris at her father’s hotel for a small, mostly discreet visit to Marinette. If they couldn’t stay a while, help Marinette host a little video call to them to check in. If she was able to manage it, ask Ladybug and Chat Noir’s help in debunking Liar Rossi on the way.

Except that night had been different. Before she could even begin to think about calling out to Ladybug and Chat Noir with her Queen Bee light signal, an akuma attack had occurred.

Chloe ducks behind one of the many potted shrubs on the roof deck as a large monstrous creature tears through a nearby building, roaring. Once its back is turned, she peers over the edge to get a better look at it. It seemed so… *generic* compared to some of Hawkmoth’s other creations, save for the tail that resembled a wrecking ball and the mouth that resembled a digger in structure. It was probably a construction worker, if Chloe’s memory served her correctly.

*Ugh, it’s probably *one* of Daddy’s workers*, Chloe thinks morosely, resting her cheek against her palm. Her father had recently had to lay off some builders after a recent environmentalists’ protest had managed to change his mind on a construction project that would ultimately further destroy the already fragile environment of Paris. It was probably someone who was furious at her father for being so wishy-washy in his decisions.

Chloe rests her forehead on the railing, sighing. Queen Bee could’ve been a help - could’ve used Venom on the huge akuma, given the opportunity… maybe. The thing moved rather quickly, and demolished just as quickly. Maybe Queen Bee, while fast, would also end up getting squashed like a bug instead of actually helping.
She shudders.

And then she hears the familiar sound of Chat Noir’s bo staff shrinking behind her, and she turns around.

“Chat Noir?” She asks in surprise, blinking rapidly.

Chat flashes her a grin before saying, “Looks like you’re in luck tonight, Chloe. We’ve come to ask for your help again.”

“M-me?”

“Know of any other blonde Bourgeois ladies that have helped us before?”

Chloe snorts at the quip, but it’s not unkind. She nibbles on her lower lip nervously before eventually saying, “Why me?”

“Because we both know you can help us this time,” Chat smiles kindly, and briefly Chloe’s breath halts as she’s reminded of a familiar smile - familiar green eyes, same blond hair… but no mask. “We’ve seen how you’ve been trying to be a better person, Chloe. We appreciate that very much. And Ladybug believes that her trust that you would improve wasn’t misplaced - and so I follow in her footsteps.”

Chloe’s heart warms considerably at his words. “She… both of you believed in me?”

“Still do,” Chat winks. “But now’s not the time to elaborate on that. We’re running out of time.”

“But…” Chloe wonders. “Ladybug said I can’t wield the Bee Miraculous anymore. Hawkmoth already knows the identity of Queen Bee.”

“Now who said anything about the Bee Miraculous?” Reaching into one of his suit’s many pockets, Chat Noir extends a familiar black box. But the contents are not the same - Chloe is suddenly made very well aware of that fact. “Chloe Bourgeois, this is the Miraculous of the Snake, which grants the power of Second Chance. You will use it for the greater good, as long as you’re willing.”

Chloe knew of the Snake Miraculous. She’d seen the reports of the Snake hero Viperion, and Snake Noir - though most of Snake Noir’s existence was chalked up to be a fanboy’s rather impressive photo edit of an existing Chat Noir image. And of someone they swore was named Aspik. But that was ridiculous. Viperion was the only real confirmed Snake on the news.

“Can we trust you, Chloe?” Chat asks, the box still in his hand. Chloe looks away from the box, and at him, and sees his eyes relay a second message.

Are you willing to take on the responsibility of becoming a true hero?

Chloe smiles up at Chat, and he returns it wholeheartedly. “… Yes, Chat Noir, you can trust me. You and Ladybug.” And the rest of Paris.

Chloe takes the box, and opens it to reveal the bangle. The light that emerges is not like Pollen’s sparkling yellow, and when the kwami reveals itself, she raises an eyebrow. “I’m not sure what I expected.”

“Perhapssss you expected far too much, Miss Bourgeois,” Sass, the snake kwami, offers as an answer. “But either way. I am Sass, and I will be your kwami.”
“You’re nothing like Pollen.”

Sass smiles cryptically. “Indeed I am not. But now isss not the time for that. If you’d like to transform, all you have to say is ‘Sass, scales slither’!”

Chloe slides the Snake Miraculous onto her wrist. It morphs into a braided bracelet of green gold, its two ends ending in four snake heads hissing at each other.

“Sass, scales slither!”

The Snake Miraculous is a different experience altogether, in Chloe’s opinion. But hey - at least Hawkmoth wouldn’t recognize her anymore! … Mostly. Her only real big issue was the fact that her hair had gone absolutely wild, and with a grumble she tugs on a few of the locks running wild as she and Chat Noir run towards the battle together.

“I think it suits you,” Chat comments, bounding across the rooftops. “Not in a bad way, mind you. Makes you seem all powerful, like a wild queen. Or Medusa!”

Chloe hums. Medusa. Now that didn’t sound too bad of a hero name - reclaim the name of Medusa as that of a heroine’s. Give it a second chance as a name. Like Ladybug and Chat Noir had given her a second chance. Like Adrien, Marinette, and Nathaniel had. Like everyone else in their small friend group had.

Her heart warms considerably at the thought of all of them again, but especially Nathaniel. Nathaniel, who had warmed up to her as much as Sabrina had - Nathaniel who’d wormed his way into her heart and stayed there. Stupid tomatohead with his stupid cute smile and sharp tongue and-

“Hey! W-watch out!” Chat yelps.

BONK.

Chloe runs straight into a chimney.

With a groan, she bounces back, mostly unharmed everywhere save for her pride. Great. Her first day on the job as the snake hero and she ran into a chimney. Joy of joys. She follows after Chat Noir once more the instant she recovers, and is just in time to witness Ladybug call out, “Glad to see you’ve joined the fight, uh…”

“Medusa,” Chloe - Medusa - shouts back, swinging into battle to yoink Ladybug out of the way as Chat slams his bo staff over the akuma’s head. “Call me Medusa!”

Ladybug looks her up and down before nodding. “That’s good. CHAT NOIR!”

“You called, milady?” Chat Noir bounds over to where they’re mostly hidden as the akuma roars for Ladybug and Chat Noir. “We better think fast - Destructosaur over here’s not getting any happier.”

“We need to take it down and minimize any casualties - we’re lucky he’s only aimed for the unfinished and mostly uninhabited buildings so far, but you never know,” Ladybug warns. “Medusa?”

Medusa smiles and twists her Miraculous. “Second Chance.”
It’s a steep learning curve, being Medusa. While both Medusa and Queen Bee are more required to wait for the opportunity to strike, Queen Bee was more battle-ready and capable of being thrown into the fray with her trompo. Medusa’s lyre was borderline useless - at least, in Chloe’s eyes.

Also, turning back time over and over? Not fun.

Medusa’s eyes furrow in frustration, trying in vain to memorize each strike Destructosaur made to his surroundings and calling them out as necessary to Ladybug and Chat Noir. Every now and then she’d swap places, trying to get a better angle, and every time she barely missed either Ladybug, Chat Noir, or a civilian getting destroyed.

“SECOND CHANCE!”

Okay. Okay. Ladybug to the right, Chat to the left-

The two main heroes of Paris do exactly that.

Scoop up the woman and toss her to me- Medusa puts down the lady and gestures for her to run, which she does. Direct Destructosaur’s tail to swing at the Rosette Building instead of the Verity Apartm- huh?

Medusa’s eyes catch sight of something red that isn’t Ladybug out of the corner of her eye, and she goes to glance. Her eyes widen.

“Nathaniel?!"

The akuma stomps on him.

“SECOND CHANCE!”

That idiot! What’s he doing alone wandering Paris at night?! Medusa rages mentally, having already instructed Ladybug and Chat Noir about the flow of the battle. As she bounds through the air, yelling at civilians to run out of the way, she sees the same scene play out - Nathaniel, rushing down the streets trying to get home, the akuma aiming for one of the Verity Apartment buildings with its tail, its foot about to crash over him-

Medusa’s heart skips a beat as she launches herself at Nathaniel, scoops him into her arms, and backflips onto a roof. Immediately she runs a fair distance before dropping back down onto the ground into an alleyway, letting him go.

“Are you okay?!” She demands to the disoriented boy, heart still pounding with worry. What had he been thinking?! “Hey! I can’t stand here too long, you know!”

“LADYBUG!” The akuma roars in the distance, and Medusa groans in frustration, muttering a curse under her breath.

She points at Nathaniel, saying, “Stay here, and don’t get in the way of the akuma!” before going off to rejoin the battle-

- but not before Nathaniel calls out, “Wait! What’s your name?”

Medusa falters and looks back. It’s infuriating how cute he is. His eyes are wide, his cheeks flushed red, his hair windswept from the sudden rescue. He doesn’t even know that she’d seen him
die.

Medusa’s - Chloe’s - heart clenches. She’d seen him die.

“Call me Medusa, tomatohead,” she says, before going to rejoin the battle. She’s lucky - Ladybug had just called her Lucky Charm and already had a plan in motion.

As Ladybug goes to secure something around one of the akuma’s back ridges, Chat turns to Medusa curiously. “Where’d you go?”

“Saved a civilian,” Medusa says breathlessly. “Chat Noir, have you ever used the snake miraculous before?”

Chat raises an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Is it really like that? Remembering things that never happened for others except for you?” Pause. “Remembering that because of certain mistakes, people died?”

Chat’s gaze softens, and he pats her shoulder gently. “Yes. I’ve used the snake miraculous before - but not as that stupid Snake Noir stuff everyone’s harping about.” He pouts, making Medusa snort with laughter. “And believe me, it never gets easier. But at least you can rest easier knowing that you changed that fate, right?”

“... Right,” Medusa murmurs, just as Ladybug calls for the signal.

They hop back into battle.

With the akuma purified, all three heroes had to leave soon - but Chloe knew they wouldn’t leave without taking back Sass and the Miraculous.

The three of them land on the roof deck of her father’s hotel as she detransforms, letting Sass sit on her palm as she says, “Thanks for giving me a second chance, Ladybug. Here’s the miraculous back.”

“A second chance, was it?” Ladybug looks over at Chat, eyebrow raised. “I didn’t say it was a second chance. Chat...”

“It was a pun and I didn’t want to miss the oppurrtunity!” Chat whines. “C’mon, bugaboo.”

With a roll of her eyes, Ladybug pinches his cheek affectionately before turning to Chloe. “You and I both know I’ve given you more than enough chances to be a better person. And judging from what we’ve seen of your civilian life... you definitely deserved this chance.”

“Thanks, Ladybug,” Chloe says earnestly, soft smile on her face, cheeks warm. “I’m... I’m still trying very hard, though. It’s really hard to be nice.”

Ladybug nods. “I know it is. And we’ve seen your struggles. But you’re getting better, I promise. Even if you think you aren’t, trust me when the people you call friends say that you are. They see what you can’t.”

“...” Chloe blushes further, but continues to hold out the Miraculous - only for Ladybug to fold her fingers over the top and push it back to her. Her mouth drops open in surprise. “L-Ladybug?”

“Chat and I,” She glances at Chat, who nods and smiles before they both turn back to Chloe. “Have been thinking. Chloe, how would you like to be a permanent hero?”
Chloe chokes. "M-me?!!"

“We saw how you handled tonight’s battle. You have experience - and to top it all off, we trust you!” Chat Noir winks. “And like I said. You’re not Queen Bee. Hawkmoth has no idea who you are now. Your loved ones are safe with you as Medusa.”

“Of course, that means you’re taking on permanent responsibilities if we give you the Miraculous permanently,” Ladybug says seriously. “Are you ready to take on these responsibilities, Chloe? We know you’re already going through so much in your civilian life, but-”

“Are you sure?” Chloe asks in a very small voice. “That you really want me to be on your team forever?”

Ladybug and Chat Noir look at each other once more before nodding. They don’t miss the way Chloe’s eyes seem to shine with unshed tears as she slides the Miraculous back on tentatively. Sass emerges once more from the Miraculous, yawning, before going to sit on her shoulder.

“I’m going to miss Pollen,” Chloe murmurs. “But you don’t seem so bad.”

Sass smiles. “I will be here to oversee your personal improvement as well as be a friend to you, Chloe. I am no Pollen, but I hope you will find a ssspace in your heart for me as well.”

“Of course I will, you silly snake,” Chloe huffs, making Chat chuckle. “I’m going to be the best Snake ever, just watch.”

Sass nods. “That I will.”

“We have to go, Chloe, but tomorrow you can join us for patrol, okay?” Ladybug waves to her before swinging away on her yoyo.

Chat Noir nods towards Chloe, saying, “Tomorrow Ladybug’s going to talk to you about the Guardian, and your responsibilities, so take care of Sass and the Miraculous until then, okay?”

“You can count on me!” Chloe salutes.

Chat grins again in that familiar way that reminds her so dearly of Adrien, and with a wave goes bounding off into the night as well.

“It’sss getting late. Should we rest?” Sass asks as Chloe goes back to her room.

“That’s such a cute bracelet, Chloe!” Sabrina gushes the next morning at school, her eyes immediately picking up on the minor change to her attire. Sabrina had always been rather perceptive to change when it came to her. "Where’d you get it?"

Chloe looks down at the Miraculous, disguised. She winks at Sabrina before leaning in and whispering, "Keep a secret, won't you? My daddy immediately got this for me after the premiere of that new Snake heroine last night when I asked. And I didn't even demand for it! I just asked."

"Good on you, Chloe," A hand claps on her shoulder, and Chloe looks behind her to see Adrien. He smiles kindly at her, and she pats on his hand before pushing it off gently but firmly. "That is a nice bracelet though."

Chloe feels Sass shifting in her jacket slightly at the praise, and she harrumphs semi-proudly.
"Definitely better than Lila's little ring, don't you think?"

"Chlo."

"Adrikins."

Chapter End Notes

for clarification: most events from S1-S3 did happen in this au. Heart Hunter and Miracle Queen don't happen though - which is why any mention of Snake Noir is more chalked up to 'fanart' and 'fanfiction' of the heroes based on current knowledge of the existing Miraculous. Dragon Bug too is born of fanart and fanfiction here.

Chloe's change really began post Heroes' Day. Therefore, events like Stormy Weather 2 happen because of slightly different reasons (if Chloe helped cause the akuma or influenced it).
nino lahiffe and the pretty terrible day

Chapter Summary

It's not a good day to be Nino Lahiffe.

He supposes he should’ve expected trouble to come knocking sooner, really. But he’d grown lax, much too lax, that trouble had managed to corner him on his own in the locker rooms the instant everyone had already left. The moment he closes his locker door, there Lila Rossi stands to his right, smiling sweetly.

“Hi, Nino,” She starts as a greeting. Nino visibly tenses at her words, something that doesn’t escape her gaze. Her lips downturn in a frown, brows creasing with sadness. “Oh, I’m sorry. Seeing me must be really painful, huh? Since I’m still best friends with Alya and all- oops!” Her hands reach up to cover her mouth. “I’m really sorry, Nino. I keep slipping up.”

“What do you want, Lila?” Nino eventually asks, shoving a hand into his pocket as he adjusts his cap. “I really need to get going soon, so if it’s something we can just talk about online we can do that.”

Lila’s expression is that of concern. “Where to?”

“It’s not any of your business, actually?” Nino stresses. “Lila, can you just get to the point alread-”

He is duly unprepared for Lila’s hands slamming on either side of his head, pinning him to the locker. Nino’s eyes widen in surprise as she practically headbutts him to stay in place, smiling like a shark.

“L-Lila?” He hates how his voice cracks in that moment.

Lila’s voice is saccharine, painfully so. “I see you’ve chosen to side with Marinette. How’s that going for you, hm?”

“Weh-”

“Let me make this clear for you, Nino - the moment you chose to publicly declare that you believed I was a liar was the moment you’ve signed your death warrant,” Lila’s index and middle fingers spider crawl their way up his arm, making him shudder at the contact. “You’re lucky that no one really listened to your words, or else you wouldn’t even still be here, being extended another chance.”

Wha- “Another chance…?!”

“Alya thinks that it’s all her fault that you two broke up, and I’ve been telling her that poor, sweet Nino is just being misguided,” Lila coos. “After all, it’s not sweet Nino’s fault that his mind’s been poisoned by the lies of your former best friend, Alya, isn’t it?”

A protective growl rumbles at the back of his throat. “Marinette didn’t tell me anything! She’s not the liar - I found out by myself that you weren’t the Tiger Miraculous owner, and just connected the-“
Lila slams her hand on the space next to his ear. The metal of the locker clangs against his eardrums. “I’m giving you this last chance, Nino, exactly like I gave Marinette. You’re either with me, or against me. You’re going to make up with Alya, and tell her that everything you said was a mistake—”

“NO!” Nino yells, the feeling returning in his bones allowing him to shove Lila away and making her stagger back slightly. His breaths come out in pants as he declares in between each one, “I loved Alya, but this is- this isn’t what I want. This isn’t what she deserves, she - she deserves someone who didn’t just get back with her because someone’s telling her pretty words! And I’m not going to listen to a liar who has nothing better to do than ruin my childhood friend’s life with her stupid lies!”

Lila, much to his frustration, only hums, smiling devilishly. The sight of it makes shivers crawl up Nino’s spine. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay, Nino. It seems you’ve chosen a side!” She says brightly. It’s very unsettling to hear such calm words coming from her. “You’ve made your bed, now you’re going to lie in it, Nino Lahiffe. You’ve chosen your friends, and now you have to stick with them.”

Lila turns, and sashays off towards the door, but not before turning one last time to look at him. “Oh. And by the way, Nino?”

Nino looks at her warily.

“You’ve seen what happened when I got Marinette expelled, didn’t you?” She smiles serenely. Nino’s blood turns into ice. “I could do so, so much worse than that, you know. Remember whose side you’ve picked when your world comes crashing down. How did that nursery rhyme go again?” She taps her chin in mock thought. “Ashes, ashes…”

“... we all fall down,” Nino whispers.

Lila grins, and walks out of the locker room, the door slamming shut behind her.

“Nino, right?”

Nino flinches violently at the touch on his shoulder, and turns around. Standing behind him is none other than Kagami, whose brow furrows in concern. “S-sorry, dudette- gah, Kagami. Didn’t know it was you.”

“You were in the way of my next class,” Kagami says before squinting at him, lip curling.

Nino tries his hardest to stand still, but upon remembering Lila’s words from earlier he feels a chill run up his spine once more, making him visibly shudder. To Kagami, he looks much paler than usual, and a lot less ‘chill’.

“You look unwell. Are you feeling ill?” Kagami frowns. Judging from her attire, she’d just come from her last class and was about to head to her next one. “You should consider visiting the school clinic if you are. It wouldn’t do you any good to be spreading any disease you may be carrying right now.”

Nino shakes his head violently, clutching his schoolbag. Calm down, Nino. Lila can’t do anything, she’s just a liar. You’ve got friends that can help. “I’m not- I’m not sick, I promise! Just spooked,
“Really?” Kagami squints, and Nino visibly sweats under her gaze before she declares, “You’re sweating. Whatever fever you must have must have already broken, but you still need to head to the clinic just to get your temperature checked. If you need assistance, then I will lend it.”

Nino is very unprepared for Kagami to hold him by the wrist and lead him down the stairs, heading for the school clinic - so much that he nearly stumbles and falls off the stairs. “W-w-howa, hey- w-wait-”

“We must act swiftly. If we are all going to be meeting up at Marinette’s house after school today you shouldn’t come there ill,” Kagami explains stiffly, still holding on to him. She does seem to pick up that he’s about to trip and fall, however, because she stops to steady him for a bit before continuing on. “It would make Marinette and Adrien worry immensely about you.”

Nino nearly trips over his own feet as he asks, “But- but I’m really not-”

“Nino?”

Nino and Kagami both turn to see Rose Lavillant, blinking curiously at them from around the bend. “Where are you going? Classes are about to start for the afternoon, right?”

“Your classmate is feeling unwell,” Kagami tells her stiffly, gesturing to Nino’s rather sweaty face. He picks up on how she uses the term ‘classmate’ instead of friend. “I was simply escorting him to the clinic before heading to class myself. Will you tell your teacher that he’s in the clinic?”

Rose blinks rapidly at being addressed by the Ice Queen, but nods vigorously. “Of course! Oh, poor Nino! Get better soon, okay? I’ll make sure to tell our teacher so she can let you off today - if you even stay here the whole time I’ll bring you the classwork? Sound good?”

“Rose-”

“Eek! I’m going to be late- see you later Nino!” Rose waves before darting up the stairs, leaving Nino and Kagami to continue heading on towards the clinic. By the time Kagami shuts the door to the clinic, Rose had already made it to the classroom, already chattering away at the teacher about ‘poor Nino and his sickness’.

Kagami sits Nino down at one of the beds, telling him, “Wait here. I’ll go get the nurse,” before beginning to move away to talk to the school nurse sitting at her desk.

“Kagami, wait!” Nino reaches out to latch onto Kagami’s wrist, making her stiffen before looking back at him. The response immediately makes him let go before saying, “Sorry, I uh- I’m really not sick, I promise. Sorry you went through all the uh. Trouble to drag me here and all.”

Kagami’s gaze, much to his surprise, softens by a fraction. Or did it? He might have been imagining things. “You still seemed unwell. It wouldn’t hurt to get the nurse to check on you properly and send you home as necessary.”

“I was just thinking about something bad, I promise,” Nino raises both hands and moves them in a sort of ‘calm down’ motion. “You can go get the nurse now to check on me. I’ll stay still.”

Kagami frowns. “Must have been a terrible thought if it made you look like you’d seen Hell itself.”

“I’ll explain later,” Nino mumbles, wringing his wrists. He hopes she doesn't remember later.
Kagami doesn’t ask him to elaborate further, turning once more to go tell the nurse the situation. When she comes back with the nurse in tow, she goes to pull up a nearby chair as the nurse takes Nino’s temperature and check on his vitals.

Ms. Flamel, the school nurse, was no stranger to Nino, especially after PE classes gone wrong. With dark chocolate brown hair packed into two tight buns at the base of her head and curly bangs, one would not be shamed to assume that she was a kindergarten teacher instead of a school nurse.

“Well,” She says, after a few minutes of deliberation, amber eyes narrowing in thought. She taps her chin thoughtfully as she continues, “Your temperature seems normal enough, and there’s nothing wrong with you physically. Your blood pressure is a little low, however. Have you been getting enough sleep? Food?”

Nino nods.

“Hmm… then perhaps… is everything alright with your family, or your friends? You don’t need to tell me any details, of course, but… perhaps just a yes or a no.” At Nino’s barely hidden wince, she sighs. “Ah. Then it’s not a physical problem itself. You should consider seeing the school counselor.”

“... We have a counselor?” Nino asks incredulously.

The nurse blinks, and groans, pinching the bridge of her nose in frustration. “Oh, right, of course. I’ve been telling Mr. Damocles to get on with officially announcing that the school now has a proper counselor, but he always seems to forget with all these akuma attacks running rampant. It’s a shame, really - your class is the one that keeps getting targeted by akumas, isn’t it?” At Nino’s bewildered stare, she clarifies, “I have files and documents on everyone’s health and conditions as required by the school district. That includes akumatizations, because it coincides with mental health and other conditions. We still don’t know too much about akumas and what their aftereffects are physically, so we’re required to have notes on a person’s previous akumatizations on hand as well.”

“Really?” Kagami perks up ever so slightly. “Then that means you have a file on Lila Rossi.”

“That I do, though I don’t understand why you’d ever want to look at her file had you been authorized. She has a perfectly clean bill of health.”

Nino and Kagami look at each other, and for the first time since they’d met, they feel a sense of kinship with each other at the realization they’d both arrived at.

“Ms. Flamel,” Nino begins, making the nurse turn to him. “Lila has a clean bill of health?”

Ms. Flamel nods. “That she does. She’s had a perfectly clean bill of health since she’s come to the school. She’s never had to visit the clinic, and that’s rather miraculous, don’t you think?”

“Wait… but Lila’s ‘fallen off stairs’ and the like loads of times,” Nino makes air quotations. “You mean she never passed under your hands?”

Ms. Flamel blinks in surprise. “She has? Why has nobody told me this? Falling off the stairs is a very dangerous thing! She should have been brought in here by then!”

“That’s because they’re lies,” Kagami says through gritted teeth. “She doesn’t really fall off of stairs. Nor does she truly possess any of the illnesses or ailments she has, like tinnitus or arthritis.”

The nurse gasps in horror. “What?! Who lies about tinnitus?!”
“Lila does,” Nino murmurs. “Lies about everything she says, probably.” She was probably lying earlier. Probably lying that she’d ruin you, and your friends’ lives. It’s fine. She lies as she breathes. Lila always lies. Lila always lies-

“Nino, you’re growing paler by the minute,” Kagami’s tentative touch on his knee is what startles him out of his stupor. “Are you certain you’re not ill?”

Ms. Flamel worries her lower lip. “... I’ll write you two some passes to go home early today. I think it’d be best if Nino went home today, don’t you think?”

“I don’t need to-” Kagami is interrupted by the nurse raising a hand to stop her. “Ms. Flamel?”

“It’s alright. Nino needs someone to escort him home, and I don’t think he lives very close by. It’d be much easier if you were excused from afternoon classes as well to assist him.” Ms. Flamel nibbles on her lower lip, brows creased in frustration as she goes towards her desk. “I’m asking this as your school nurse. Will you take Nino home, Miss Tsurugi?”

“I… alright.” Kagami bows her head before turning to Nino. “You have all your things with you, don’t you?”

Nino nods. “Yeah… yeah. They’re all in here.”

“Then we can leave as soon as Ms. Flamel writes us the passes-” Kagami turns to look at the nurse, but not before crying out, “Ms. Flamel?!”

Nino looks up just in time to see a frighteningly familiar black butterfly connect with the pen in her hand. Hawkmoth’s piercing white butterfly insignia hovering over Ms. Flamel’s face, the nurse’s face grows terrifyingly still as the message is delivered to her.

"Plague Doctor. I am Hawkmoth. A student has been taking advantage of the uneducated public by feigning illnesses of all sorts. That's no good, is it? Perhaps she truly is ill, and if she is, she's infecting the others with her illness."

"I give you the power to heal these poisoned minds, and their gratitude for your kind act will allow them to do as you say. In return, I ask that you bring me back the Miraculous of Ladybug and Chat Noir. Do we have a deal?"

Ms. Flamel pulls up the facemask to cover her nose and mouth, the black magic bubbling over her. "As you desire, Hawkmoth."

“We have to go,” Kagami hisses, and this time, Nino’s feet work properly as she takes hold of his hand and pulls him along. “Now.”

Nino doesn’t let go of her hand even as the clinic’s doors burst open behind their retreating selves.
Today was supposed to be a relatively calm day. Kagami had been counting on it to be so. Things had been going smoothly for most of the morning - morning classes had gone by mostly uneventfully, she’d managed to finish a good portion of her homework even before the class had been dismissed so she’d have more time in between dismissal and training, and she’d even enjoyed the lunch selection at the cafeteria that day, which was rare in itself.

And then she’d run into Nino Lahiffe.

She didn’t trust him as much as Marinette and Adrien did, but that was a given - they saw him every day in their class, while she didn’t. Kagami had no basis for how to formulate an opinion on Nino yet, simply because their only interactions had been under the supervision of Marinette, Adrien, or any other combination of their arguably large extended circle. They had yet to properly interact one on one - save for the incident where Nino had mistaken her for Marinette.

That had been… well. Not an insult, per se. Marinette was lovely. But Kagami didn’t like it when people mistook her for Marinette simply because they were both Asian - and she always showed her displeasure for it whenever she got the opportunity to. And yet… it had been a warm afternoon, she had to admit, and she’d been sitting with her back to him. Perhaps she’d let it slide this once - they hadn’t formally met at that point.

Either way, Kagami had run into Nino today, and from there things had taken a turn.

He’d looked frightfully ill when he’d turned around to face her, and the sight had made her frown considerably. From what she knew of him from his classmates (Adrien, Marinette, Chloe, Nathaniel, and Sabrina respectively), he wasn’t exactly the wilted sort - he was, as Adrien had kindly put it, ‘like the river, in a way. He’s always following the flow where he can.’

Marinette had described him as bamboo - bending in the wind, but never really falling if he could help it. That one had made her reconsider a little. ‘Like bamboo, he bends in the wind. He seems like he’s not worth much at first, but trust us when we say that there’s more to him that meets the eye.’

The natural course of action seemed obvious. Extend her assistance to the friend of a friend, because he was indeed a cherished friend of both Marinette and Adrien, and she respected that,
even if she had yet to understand it herself. So she’d taken him to the clinic.

And now the nurse was akumatized. Great.

Life just… wasn’t very ideal right now for Kagami Tsurugi. Or Nino Lahiffe.

“Where are we going?!” Nino asks in between puffs of breath as she pulls him along. For someone who didn’t exactly do any sort of physical training like her and Adrien, he was surprisingly able to keep up with how fast she was running.

Kagami only glances back at him slightly to make sure he wasn’t on the verge of tripping over his own two feet. “I’m taking you somewhere safe - preferably far away from this school and away from Ms. Flamel. We need to minimize as much damage as we can as civilians in order to help Ladybug and Cha-

LOOK OUT!

Without giving him so much as a warning, Kagami yanks at his arm hard enough to pull him forward and in front of her before pushing him down to the ground, landing on top of him and knocking the wind out of him. Above their heads, streams of cotton candy pink clouds coalesce into a large mass that soon divides itself yet again between all the rooms in the school.

Leaning towards his ear, Kagami warns, “Don’t breathe it in if you can,” before going to hold her breath - only to be surprised as Nino rummages around his pockets and offers her a large handkerchief from them.

At her pause, he mumbles, “It’s clean, I promise,” before making a motion that indicated that he needed her to get off of him - which she does. She rolls over and off of him as he gestures to her with the handkerchief, and with surprisingly deft fingers he ties it around her face so that it was covering her mouth and nose.

It’d have to do for now.

“What about you?” Kagami asks, realizing that he’d probably sacrificed his only handkerchief for her. It seems to occur to him as well, because his eyes widen before he shakes his head, grabbing his cap off of his head and holding it to his mouth. It was a really bad substitute - and he couldn’t keep holding it to his mouth like that.

Kagami reaches inside her pockets, patting around for her handkerchief before pulling it out. Unlike Nino’s, it was definitely smaller, and would be a much tighter fit if she tried to tie it around him, but it’d have to do.

She ties it in the same way he tied his around her face.

“What is that?” They hear voices ask. “What’s that smell? That fragrance?”

“Worry not, sweet children,” booms the voice of Plague Doctor, sweet like candy, echoing like a voice in a cavern. “Plague Doctor will cleanse you of the sickness that has poisoned your minds.”

When Kagami and Nino turn to look at where they’d come from, they see Plague Doctor standing daintily atop one of the basketball hoops in the courtyard. Like an actual plague doctor, she’d donned the white beaklike mask, but from the tip of the mask there appeared to be a hole from where the pink smoke currently all around the area was coming from. The beak of the mask itself was attached to a butterfly-shaped “mask” of sorts, still white, while the rest of her head and hair were obscured by a dark blue sheer cloth tied below her chin, attached to the dark blue, nearing black plague doctor’s hat that more closely resembled a sunhat more than anything.
The entirety of the dress robes she wore was dark blue save for the white section of lacy cloth near the front of her bust, with the skirt being a more vibrant blue than the top, and her gloves were still yellow like the rubber gloves she’d worn prior to being akumatized, with red segments near the wrists. The only thing not blue on her was the corset-like accessory around her waist, with a wooden brown exterior shaped like feathers curling around her waist and a lighter brown center, strings pulling the corset tight around her.

“The akuma must be in that thing she’s holding,” Nino’s voice is muffled as Kagami’s eyes hone in on the thing twirling in between Plague Doctor’s fingers: a black staff-like object with golden rings, topped by a dark blue butterfly and two big batlike wings that didn’t seem to serve any particular purpose. “Whatever that is.”

“It’s meant to be a cane,” Kagami realizes, just as Plague Doctor begins to raise it and wave it around like a conductor would their stick. “Plague doctors would use it to interact with their patients without actually touching them. But I don’t understand the pink smoke…”

“Oh, that smells nice…”

“Juleka, it smells like roses, don’t you think?”

“Smells like… rosemary.”

The voices that float out from the windows of the classrooms are unmistakably voices of the students, but the most prominent voices seemed to come from Nino’s class in particular - making Nino look up in alarm. Slowly, one by one, as if in a trance, students from his class trudged out of the classroom in a marching line - or at least seemed to be lured in by Plague Doctor’s pink clouds of smoke.

“Ring around the rosies, a pocket full of posies,” Plague Doctor sings slowly, waving her cane around to the beat of her song. “Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.”

Kagami’s gaze narrows as she pulls out her phone, immediately sending an alert to Marc through Bug’s Eye View’s inbox before gesturing for Nino to follow her. “Come on. We need to get out of here so that we don’t cause any more trouble for Ladybug.”

She grabs his hand and tries to pull, but unlike before he stumbles. When she goes to look at him, she sees him transfixed on the sight of his classmates one by one dancing in a circle above their heads, still directed by Plague Doctor.

“Naughty little children, with lies inside their head - cleansed now, cleansed now, before you’re dead.” Plague Doctor’s mask releases a particularly large cloud of pink smoke, making Kagami yank harder on Nino’s arm and pull him away - just in time for them to witness the smoke seemingly enter and exit the others’ bodies through the nose and through the mouth respectively. Except when they’d entered, the smoke had been pink. Upon exit, they’d turned black - as if poisoned.

One by one, as the smoke exited each of them, each student of Caline Bustier’s class turned into a younger, smaller replica of Plague Doctor. It was hard to distinguish who was who the moment they’d been transformed.

One of them had been Alya Cesaire.

Kagami understood, if only a little. She was Nino’s ex-girlfriend, and things were still rather fresh in his heart. To see her in such a state must have hurt.
“Somebody is missing, the source of all the sickness,” Plague Doctor muses, tapping on her chin. She taps on one of the Mini-Plagues with her cane. “Where is, where is, Miss Lila Rossi?”

Kagami’s eyes narrow. That wasn’t good: if Lila wasn’t around, that only boded danger. “Nino, can you see Lila anywhere?”

“…” Despite the pink smoke luring out more students from their classrooms still, Nino tries his best to squint through the cotton candy fog. “I don’t really see her…”

“There!”

“Over there!”

“Poison! Toxin!”

“Purge the toxin!”

The Mini-Plagues all cry out like a murder of crows, all spreading out to try and corner where they assumed Lila Rossi was. Kagami pulls Nino along and behind a pillar as they hear the sound of Lila screaming for help - though her cries are drowned out by the angry twittering of the Mini-Plagues.

“It’s probably wrong that I’m enjoying seeing her like this, huh?” Nino mutters lowly in her ear, hovering over her as they both peek around the pillar. Kagami only rolls her eyes, but doesn’t disagree.

Still… Lila, a civilian, was in danger. And as nail-bitingly frustrating as it was to think about it, they had to do something.

Kagami briefly considers making a break for it and grabbing the janitor’s mop laying abandoned nearby when she hears the familiar whizzing sound of Ladybug’s yoyo, and with a screech at least five Mini-Plagues are knocked out of the air, landing upside down on their hats and still upright - clothes and all.

“Isn’t this a swell party - nobody told me it was Halloween,” Chat’s voice purrs as the sound of his bo staff follows immediately after Ladybug’s yoyo. “I would’ve come in my best feathers.”

Plague Doctor’s voice booms from her mask. “Ladybug and Chat Noir! The life bringer and the plague bringer themselves! While it pains me to destroy the giver of life, if you ally yourself with the plague itself, I, Plague Doctor, must eliminate you as well!”

“This is what I get for having a kwami named Plagg,” Chat jokes as he dodges out of the way of a few Mini-Plagues sent his way. “Milady, what’s the plan?”

“This is what I get for having a kwami named Plagg,” Chat jokes as he dodges out of the way of a few Mini-Plagues sent his way. “Milady, what’s the plan?”

“I need these Mini-Plague Doctors distracted, kitty. Can you do that?” Ladybug spins her yoyo around and tries to slam a few of the Mini-Plagues into the ground when she manages to snag them. It only serves to make them squawk indignantly. “I need it to cast Lucky Charm.”

From where Kagami is watching, Chat winks before hollering, “Hey, birdbrain! Haven’t you heard that plague masks are so last century? They’re a stain on fashion history!”

“You’ll be nothing but a stain on the medical records when I’m through with you, black cat!” Plague Doctor jumps off of the basketball hoop to try and blow smoke at Chat Noir, but thanks to his bo staff spinning rapidly around he manages to deflect the smoke the best he can.
“Destroy!”
“Cleanse!”
“Purify!”
“Purge!”

The Mini-Plagues’ screeches are overwhelming, like bees buzzing in her head. Kagami’s grip on the pillar tightens as she turns to Nino, barking out, “The only Mini-Plagues out there right now are from your class. That means the other classes are stuck in their rooms trying not to breathe in the smoke.”

“Are you saying we should help them evacuate?” Nino asks behind the handkerchief, eyebrow raised.

Kagami nods - but not before turning her gaze to the abandoned mop. “We’ll need things to temporarily defend ourselves as we go and get everyone we can out since Ladybug and Chat can’t focus that much on them. I’ve already found my weapon - cover me.” And before Nino can react, she ducks and rolls out to snap the mop - right as a Mini-Plague sees her.

“Poisoned! The ill! They run rampant!” The Mini-Plague screeches. Their call summons a portion of the Bustier class Mini-Plagues to descend upon Kagami swiftly, and, tightening her grip on the mop, she readies herself-

- but is suddenly greeted by the sight of Nino, darting into her defense with a trash can lid he’d picked up in hand like a shield.

The Mini-Plagues’ canes all whack at the shield simultaneously with a loud CLANG.

And another. And another.

But Nino didn’t falter.

Kagami had to admit, she was impressed.

“I’ll cover you as you go - you go lead those dudes outta here!” Nino declares. Kagami, not really one for delay, nods in determination before making a run for the nearest classroom, with Nino running alongside her and holding the trash can lid up to defend from any strikes. It was impressive that he seemed to match each strike as they came as though he were already used to the action, but she didn’t have too much time to dwell on that - the civilians were priority.

Kicking down a door, Kagami yells through the handkerchief, “Get out of here already! Ladybug and Chat Noir need all civilians out of the area as soon as possible!”


CLANG.

Nino jams the shield in the upper section of the doorway, still holding on to it, as Kagami confirms, “There’s no time! Don’t breath in the pink smoke, or you’ll turn into one of the Mini-Plagues like Miss Bustier’s class!”

“So that’s what’s happening…” A brown haired boy mutters. Unlike the rest of his class, he
already seemed to have his shirt pulled up to his nose to protect himself. “Veronique had walked out of class, remember?”

Kagami briefly falters, but only for a millisecond. “One of your classmates already got turned?”

“Most of our classmates got turned,” Aurore, by this point, already had a shawl tied around her own face as she gestures to the remaining students in the classroom. “But when we accidentally inhaled some of the smoke, nothing happened.”

Nino yelps as a Mini-Plague tries to get in through the bottom section of the door, but he kicks them in the face. “We really need to get a move on, dudes!”

“Just get out of here while you still can then! Ladybug and Chat Noir need to be free of distractions in the meantime!” Kagami whacks the mop against the floor to call them to attention, and without much argument the members of Aurore’s class that had remained duck out from under Nino, protective objects still on their faces. Once the job was done, Kagami taps on Nino’s shoulder, and with a yell he pushes forward with the shield, knocking the Mini-Plagues out of the way.

“This way!” Kagami calls, batting off any Mini-Plagues that tried to get at her. They continue down the line of classrooms as fast as they can, doing the same thing they did with whatever students had remained.

As Kagami and Nino go around, Ladybug shouts, “LUCKY CHARM!” and tosses her yoyo into the air, receiving… “A flute?”

“What are you going to do, Ladybug - play Ring Around The Rosies back at me?” Plague Doctor breathes out another thick cloud of smoke, and it takes a lot of holding their breaths to even avoid breathing in the forced fumigation Plague Doctor was enacting on Francois-Dupont. Nino nearly chokes and gives in as Kagami convinces Ondine and her class to get out and get help.

Ladybug, despite the difficulty breathing, suddenly realizes exactly what she needed, and with a yell of, “I’LL BE RIGHT BACK, CHAT! KEEP THEM DISTRACTED!” she zooms off, leaving Chat Noir to bat off Plague Doctor and her Mini-Plagues on his own.

“Is she daft?!” Kagami hisses as the last of the students and staff run for the exit. “This is no time to be running off!”

Nino yelps as one of the Mini-Plagues tugs on his shield, and before he knows it the trash can lid is tossed aside, leaving both of them vulnerable-

BONK.

Well. Not anymore. Kagami had just knocked one out with the mop in her hands.

“... I worked with what I had,” She informs Nino, who stares incredulously. “They’re lucky I did not have my sword.”

A Mini-Plague crows out loudly, “There she is! The poison! The toxin!”, pointing towards the entrance to the school, and when Kagami and Nino turn they see Lila already booking it outside of the school.

“NO!” Plague Doctor shrieks. “She will POISON the minds of everyone she meets! AFTER HER!”

“Hey! We’re not finished yet!” Chat hollers, trying to block their way, but Plague Doctor simply
propels herself up into the air with the pink smoke coming from her mask before soaring out with her droves of Mini-Plagues to descend upon Paris, still hounding a screaming Lila Rossi.

The smoke that had been covering most of the school soon fades away, leaving the few that hadn’t been affected alone and allowing them to peek out of their hiding places, unharmed. As Chat Noir gets ready to run off after Plague Doctor, Kagami sees Chloe burst out from the locker room to ask him something, but she doesn’t get to see or hear much else before Chat wraps an arm around Chloe and bounds off away with her.

Nathaniel runs out of the locker room soon after, breathless.

“Where’s Chloe?” He asks as Kagami and Nino approach. “... And why are you holding a mop?”

Kagami drops the mop. “Chat Noir took her with him. Why? I have no idea. Were you two hiding in the locker room this whole time?”

“Chloe asked me for help in bringing up her art project to the art room before class - we’d-” Nathaniel wheezes, holding his hand to his chest. “We’d gotten passes beforehand, so we were clear before we saw pink smoke coming in.”

“It was Ms. Flamel, dude,” Nino mumbles. “The akuma.”

Nathaniel’s eyes widen. “The school nurse? What made her upset?”

“...” Kagami looks at Nino before turning to Nathaniel. “We told her about Lila’s medical mishaps. She was frustrated. Akuma.”

“In her pen… which was probably her cane!” Nino lights up in realization. “We have to tell Ladybug and Chat Noir!”

“But they already left,” Nathaniel points out, but not before they all hear a familiar whizzing sound of a yoyo. “Oh, Ladybug’s back. You could tell her now - and can you ask her where Chloe was taken?”

Nino raises an eyebrow at him, and Kagami watches as Nathaniel turns a little redder than his hair. “Concerned?”

“Shut up.”

“Ladydude - gah, I mean, Lady bug, over here!” Nino calls.

Ladybug, from her perch on the second floor, jumps down at his call as Kagami and Nino approach her. “Nino Lahiffe. Kagami Tsurugi. My sources tell me you two were there when Plague Doctor was akumatized.”

“Who are your sources, Ladybug?” Kagami’s eyes narrow.

Ladybug smiles. “No need to be worried, Kagami. Rose Lavillant of Bustier’s class told my source that Nino here was in the clinic, and other sources tell me Plague Doctor may be the school nurse. Can you confirm this?”

“Yes. We’d told her about a student’s medical mishaps and now she’s frustrated over how people have been believing her lies,” Kagami scowls, guiltily thankful that she was able to be furious now that there was already an akuma in someone else. Hawkmoth always made it hard to feel anything
intense nowadays. “Ladybug, Plague Doctor already went out on the streets of Paris with the Mini-Plagues, tailing after her. Chat Noir is alone, and unguarded - and with a civilian.”

Ladybug blinks in alarm. “Another civilian?”

“Chloe. He has Chloe,” Nino supplies, and suddenly Ladybug’s face clears. Kagami wonders why. “Nathaniel’s worried about her.”

Ladybug shakes her head. “He doesn’t need to be worried about her. I’m sure Chat took Chloe to a safe place on her request because she’s been on very good behavior recently - and he probably owes her a favor. But that’s not why I’m here. I need to ask the two of you a favor.”

“Anything, Ladyd- GAH.” Nino stumbles over his words again, but Ladybug only giggles. Kagami nods as well, eager to help.

“Nino, I need you to find Chat Noir. There’s a high chance he’s brought Chloe to her father’s hotel, so you can go there and tell him to take this,” Ladybug presses something into his palm, and looking down at it Kagami realizes that it’s a recast Lucky Charm. Earlier, it had been a flute.

“Can I trust you with this Nino?” Ladybug asks, and there’s a glint in her eyes that Kagami feels she’s seen before, but it’s gone before she can ponder too much on it. Nino nods in determination before making a run for it, heading outside the school without so much as a means of protection.

Kagami’s lip curls at that, and Ladybug asks humorously, “Something wrong?”

“He did not bring anything to protect himself,” Kagami says stiffly. “He’s going to get hurt, Ladybug.”

“Nino knows a thing or two about how to protect himself, but it’s only temporary, I promise. You and him are going to play a very important role in this akuma today.” Ladybug looks around as if to check for any other people. “Has everyone else evacuated?”

“Nathaniel’s in the locker rooms.”

“Then I’ll move us up on the roof.” Suddenly Kagami feels an arm wrap around her waist, and with a yip the two of them are soaring in the air, landing atop the roof of Francois-Dupont. “Sorry. We’re running out of time.”

In the distance, Kagami sees more and more dark figures littering the streets of Paris, crowing out loudly. More Mini-Plagues. Ladybug curses under her breath at the sight before turning to Kagami.

“Kagami Tsurugi, here is the Miraculous of the Fox, which grants the power of illusion. You will use it for the greater good, as long as you’re willing.”

Kagami’s breath hitches. “A Miraculous?”

“I know it’s not the Dragon, but Hawkmoth already knows the identity of Ryuko,” Ladybug says apologetically. “And we need illusions to trick Plague Doctor and her Mini-Plagues into redirecting their focus to somewhere else while we figure out her akumatized object.”

“It’s her cane,” Kagami manages to say. “Ms. Flamel - the akuma went inside her pen. It must have become her cane.”
Ladybug’s eyes suddenly light up. “This makes things much easier then. We’ll use the power of illusions for tricking Plague Doctor still.”

“I’m not someone who likes being on the sidelines, Ladybug,” Kagami interrupts, a little harshly. At Ladybug’s look, she rubs her arm self-consciously before saying, “We’ve fought before. I rushed headfirst into battle as Ryuko. I’m not much of a team player.”

Ladybug’s gaze softens, and she puts a hand on Kagami’s shoulder. “And yet you managed to work with me and Chat during Ikari Gozen - and right now, if I’m hearing it right, you’re working with Nino and Chloe and the others to clear Marinette’s name. Isn’t that right?” At Kagami’s blush, Ladybug only nods. “You are a team player - moreso than you think. But I think you work best with a partner - but we’ll talk about that later. I think the Fox will be a good learning experience for you.”

“How?”

“You get to learn to wait, before you strike. Isn’t that how some fencing techniques work?” Ladybug smiles. “Can I trust you with this, Kagami?”

Kagami nibbles on her lower lip, looking down at the box before her. “... Is this not the Miraculous of Rena Rouge?”

“Rena Rouge has been… indefinitely retired,” Ladybug murmurs. There is something in Ladybug’s eyes that Kagami cannot read when she says so. “If you don’t want to be the Fox, I understand. I’ll bring you back down, and-”

“No! No... I’ll...” Kagami clenches her fists, and declares loudly, “If you believe I’m up to the task Ladybug, then I’ll do my best.”

“That’s what I was hoping for, Kagami.” Ladybug’s proud gaze makes Kagami steel her resolve, and without any more ceremony she takes the box, opening it. Where Longg’s glowing orb was reminiscent of a plasma globe, the Fox’s, to Kagami, was more glittery, like a tiny sun.

Trixx bounces out, grinning. “Hi there, pretty girl. I’m Trixx, and I’ll be your kwami today.”

“The power of the Fox… Mirage?” Kagami asks as she hooks the necklace around her neck. The foxtail pendant rests squarely against her tie, and much to both her and Ladybug’s surprise, the singular foxtail necklace morphs into a circular pendant. In the center, a foxlike shape seemed to be curled up, its tail taking up most of the pendant.

“To call it off, Reality!” Trixx nods before floating around her as if to inspect her. “Not bad. We have some work to do though.” Kagami frowns, but before she can respond properly, the kwami says, “All you have to say is ‘Trixx, let’s pounce!’”

Kagami looks at Ladybug, who nods at her. She looks to Trixx, who nods at her, before she inhales through her nose and focuses her attention.

Ladybug and Chat Noir needed her assistance.

“Trixx, let’s pounce!”

Chapter End Notes
Pauline Flamel/Plague Doctor:
nino lahiffe and the fox's play

Chapter Summary

That's not Rena Rouge. That's not Rena Rouge at all.

Chapter Notes


Maybe he should have asked Ladybug to clarify on the instructions beyond ‘take this to Chat Noir’. Maybe he should have done that. Instead he’s running towards Le Grand Paris with a spotted Lucky Charm of an extension cord held in his arms like he’d hold his brother Chris should they be caught in danger together.

What even was his life anymore?

Kagami’s handkerchief still wrapped around his face, channeling his inner Carapace he ducks and hides behind various cars and pillars and trees each time a Mini-Plague crosses the street above him, like gravity was nothing to them. One nearly spots him when he ducks below a table, but they’re distracted by a sound that’s borderline foreign to Nino.

Well. If it worked to his advantage.

Creeping past a tall bus, upon seeing a clear path to the entrance to Le Grand Paris, Nino books it, running as fast as he can towards the doors to the hotel-

“Virus?! VIRUS?!”

“CLEANSE!”

Oh no.

Nino’s barely given time to react before one of the many Mini-Plagues tugs on the back of his shirt-

BONK!

“Hands off the DJ, little birdies!” Chat Noir’s voice crows from above, and when Nino looks up he sees Chat sailing down his extended bo staff and kicking off, roundhouse kicking at least five Mini-Plagues in the plague mask with one go. “Medusa, a hand if you will? Get him out of here!”

“You’re lucky I know exactly where to put him,” an unfamiliar voice says, and before Nino is truly aware of what’s happening he’s been thrown over someone’s shoulder as they climb up the side of Le Grand Paris with the grace of… well. A superhero. “Hey, hold still! You’re going to fall if you don’t!”
“Who are you?” Nino asks incredulously. “I mean. I know you’re the current temporary Snake hero based on the news, but—”

As if responding to his question, her hair seems to whack him on the forehead in a chastising fashion as she turns her head to look at him. “I’m Medusa, and I promised Chat Noir I’d put you somewhere safe, so be quiet for a moment so I can concentrate on making us both not fall off the side of the hotel!”

“Wow. Bossy.”

“Sometimes, it works,” Medusa sighs before continuing her climb back up the side of the hotel. Once they reach the top she carefully puts Nino down and instructs, “Now hide behind these things Chloe Bourgeois set up, or the planters. There’s a lot of places to hide in up here so those bird people don’t get you.”

Nino holds out the Lucky Charm. “Ladybug told me to give Chat Noir this.”

“A Lucky Charm?” Medusa squints at it before taking it. “To Chat Noir, right?” At Nino’s nod, Medusa’s hair seems to flare out even wilder. “Okay. Just stay here and don’t get into trouble! I’ll go get this to that cat.”

A beeping sound alerts both of them to Medusa’s miraculous, and with a groan she holds up a finger. “You know what. Hold on, I need to recharge. Look away, civilian, and maybe block out your ears.”

Nino dutifully lifts his hands to his ears and turns around, closing his eyes as Medusa says, “Sass, scales rest.”

“It wasn’t necessary for me to recharge this immediately,” A voice that Nino can only assume is her kwami drawls.

Medusa’s voice is snippy, but concerned. “No, but I needed to set a new reset point. With this Lucky Charm here and Ladybug not here, we could make a lot of mistakes.”

“Very clever. You’re learning fast, hatchling.”

“W-whatever!” The way Medusa had said that was strangely familiar. “Sass, scales slither!”

The sound of someone cutting through the wind behind him makes Nino turn around, but Medusa is already gone. When he goes to peer over the edge of the hotel, he sees Medusa already hurtling back into battle with the Lucky Charm in hand, tossing it to Chat Noir as she goes.

“Well he-llo, little snake, what’s this?” Chat asks, looping the extension cord around his belt as he dodges a strike from a Mini-Plague.

Medusa crams a Mini-Plague’s mask in between the strings of her lyre before twisting the lyre and tossing the Mini-Plague into the nearest building. The poor person squawks in pain at the impact. “Ladybug’s Lucky Charm! Means she’s probably coming back any minute now to help—”

BONK.

A Mini-Plague falls out of the air, struck dumb by a yoyo zipping past their comrades and smacking them right in the plague mask.

“Very intuitive, Medusa,” Ladybug teases when she pulls herself over. At the sound of her earrings
beeping, her teasing look immediately fades away in favor of focusing on the situation however as she squints at their surroundings, trying to figure out the Lucky Charm’s use before her time ran out. “I need to detransform for a bit to recharge Tikki after I figure this out.”

“See anything?” Chat carves a path through the Mini-Plagues as Medusa activates Second Chance. Ladybug’s eyes narrow. “Where’s Plague Doctor?”

“We haven’t seen her in a while,” Medusa reports. “She might be hiding somewhere- augh, get away from me!” Medusa kicks a Mini-Plague square in the nose the instant she feels one of their gloved hands on her.

Wait... they don’t know where Plague Doctor is?

“VERMIN!”

“POISON!”

“CLEANSE!”

The Mini-Plagues all seem to stir up into a frenzy as they all disperse, leaving the heroes on the streets to relax as they all spread out, relaxing only by a hair. From where Nino watches, he sees them divide themselves among the streets as if chasing someone, but… Weren’t they all just chasing after-

He hears the sound of something moving behind him, and immediately he whips around, on the defensive, only to falter. “Lila?”

“Shhhh!” Lila hisses from her spot behind one of the planters. “Stupid Ladybug and Chat Noir can’t even do their job, protecting civilians from akuma! Ugh! Stupid goody-two-shoes heroes and their ‘protect everyone’ mentality.”

Nino scowls. “Like you’ve given them any incentive to prioritize you, anyway, Liar.”

“You’re still on that?” Lila scoffs, daring to leave her hiding spot to approach Nino. Despite himself Nino finds himself backing away slowly as Lila struts her way over, a cruel smile crossing her face. “I’m a civilian. The public demands that Ladybug and Chat Noir save civilians, especially civilians targeted by supervillains. But you’re right - Ladybug and I aren’t friends. But your stupid girlfriend doesn’t know that for real, does she? Oops, I’m sorry,” She pauses in mock surprise. “I meant your ex-girlfriend. Oopsie. Sometimes it’s so hard to forget you two were even individuals with how often you were together—”

“SHUT UP!” Nino roars, startling Lila when he rushes towards her instead-

A cane stops him. Both his and Lila’s blood turn cold.

“It’s alright, sweet one,” Plague Doctor coos softly. The pink smoke continues to escape her mask. “Your mind is clean. My fumes won’t do anything to you. But to her?” Plague Doctor turns her head sharply towards Lila. “Not even my cure will do anything.”

“How about a little Miraculous Cure instead, then?”

Ladybug pops up behind Plague Doctor, who backs off at the sudden appearance of the spotted heroine. With her back turned, Medusa and Chat Noir sneak around behind her setting up… something. Nino wasn’t sure what the hell was going on, but it was definitely involving things
Chloe had left sitting around on the roof.

Plague Doctor growls, twirling her cane before calling out, “Mini-Plagues!”

Silence.

The akuma gasps, and practically floats over the edge of the hotel and past Ladybug to see her Mini-Plagues scattered all over Paris. “NO! What have you done to them?! What are they doing?!”

“They’re doing exactly what you asked them to do,” Ladybug grins. “Cleanse Lila Rossi.”

“But-!” Plague Doctor’s head whips around between the Lila inching towards the exit and towards the ground, and Nino, despite himself, peers over the edge.

Wait a minute… “That’s...?”

“They’re all chasing Lila, just like you asked,” Ladybug throws her yoyo at Plague Doctor, who dodges expertly before breathing out black smoke from her mask. Ladybug cries out before she goes to hold her breath, “Chat Noir! The extension cord!”

“Already hooked up, milady!” calls Chat Noir’s voice.

“Medusa?!”

“Fans primed and ready!” Medusa’s grin is fanged and victorious as Nino suddenly realizes the plan.

The industrial fans the two heroes had set up whirr to life, and the strength of the wind sends the smoke coming out of Plague Doctor’s mask away, the clouds dissipating in the air no matter how much Plague Doctor tried to produce more. With a snarl, Plague Doctor lands on top of the roof and runs at Ladybug, her main source of power being deflected by the winds.

“You are just like Lila Rossi!” Plague Doctor snarls, whacking the top of her cane against an approaching Chat Noir’s face as she duels with Ladybug on top of the roof. “Preventing me from cleansing the public of their poisoned minds!”

Before Ladybug can retort, her eyes catch sight of something popping up behind Nino, and before she can react, Nino finds himself tossed in the air by the Mini-Plague that had snuck up on him, and said Mini-Plague catches him almost gently.

“Poisoned minds, poisoned hearts,” chants the Mini-Plague. When Nino looks down to the ground, the Lilas they’d been chasing had already disappeared, and the Mini-Plagues were slowly gathering at the hotel. One Mini-Plague grabs at Lila by the hair and holds her up again, and dangle both civilians over the edge of the hotel.

“End the poison at its root! End the poison at its root!”

“Cleanse! Cleanse!”

“Bad toxin!”

“I’m not a toxin!” Nino yelps, struggling in the hold of the Mini-Plague. The Mini-Plague only holds him tighter against its chest. “H-hey! Lemme go!”

“Shhh,” whispers the Mini-Plague, and Nino stills, gawking. “I’ll drop you if you keep struggling. Ladybug needs us to play along.”
Medusa’s hand goes to do Second Chance, but Chat Noir stops her, hissing, “We can’t. Your last Second Chance was ages ago. You’d need to detransform to reset.”

Hawkmoth’s butterfly mask emblem hovers over Plague Doctor’s face briefly as Plague Doctor laughs. “Listen to me, Ladybug,” she croons as the Mini-Plagues dangle Nino and Lila over the edge - or at least, they’re dangling Lila over the edge. The Mini-Plague holding him is curiously holding him rather securely. “And let me show you how Lila Rossi has poisoned your mind of the truth. But before that, your Miraculous, if you so please - or these civilians are doomed.”

“I don’t think so, Plague Doctor,” Ladybug winks as she yells, “INARI!”

The Mini-Plague holding Nino reacts, and in midair they dash for the Mini-Plague holding Lila, knocking them out with a headbutt and making them drop Lila. Lila screams bloody murder as she falls - until the Mini-Plague grabs her by the hair again right before she hits the ground. The tug on her scalp is painful, but she’s alive.

And then the Mini-Plague unceremoniously deposits her on the ground before darting back into battle.

“What?!” Plague Doctor shrieks, and the distraction is enough that Ladybug’s yoyo wraps around her cane and pulls it out of her hands. She whips her head around in shock. “NO!”

Ladybug snaps the cane over her knee, and the akuma comes out.

“A little cleanse, a little rinse, and bye bye, little butterfly!” Ladybug sing-songs as she catches the akuma and purifies it. Once it floats away, Chat Noir tosses the extension cord back to her before she tosses it up in the air. “MIRACULOUS LADYBUG!”

As the ladybugs go to cleanse the city, the black magic bubbles over Plague Doctor, revealing Ms. Flamel once more, sitting up confused. “What…? Wasn’t I at the school…?”

“You were akumatized, ma’am,” Chat Noir explains gently. “I’ll take you back if you’d like me to, of course, but you better think fast - I’m about to turn back.”

At Ms. Flamel’s grateful smile, Chat Noir gestures for her to hang on to him before saluting to Ladybug, bidding her farewell and taking the nurse with him back to Francois-Dupont. As Medusa hurriedly excuses herself to detransform, Nino watches as the Mini-Plague that carried him gently puts him back on the rooftop on his own two feet before descending next to him.

“Thanks, Ladybro-LADYBUG! Ugh, sorry,” Nino apologizes, making Ladybug giggle. “I thought I was a goner there.”

Ladybug shakes her head. “I really don’t mind if you call me Ladydude or Ladybro, I promise. And thank you, by the way, for delivering my first Lucky Charm to Chat and Medusa. It gave them the idea to use the fans over there that the Bourgeois family never really use.”

“Ladybug, if the akuma’s been purified already, then what’s…?” Nino looks at the Mini-Plague still standing next to him.

Ladybug yelps, an action that seemed so characteristically Marinette more than Ladybug that it makes Nino blink in surprise. “Ack! Inari, you’re still-”

“Reality.”

The Mini-Plague’s appearance melts away at the familiar command, and Nino steps back at the
sight of the heroine. The new fox heroine, if the appearance was to be explained away.

The first thing one would notice about her would be the fact that her face was nowhere to be seen - unlike the other heroes with domino masks only covering a section of their face, this hero’s face was just straight up hidden by a decorated white kitsune mask that covered all of her face, tied to her head with a red orange ribbon. Her hair was as dark as the night, save for the ends of the hair that weren’t her bangs, which were tipped white.

Where Rena Rouge had been a bright orange, this hero seemed to favor darker oranges in turn, along with gold. Her reed flute was a darker orange as well, and where there should have been white rings, there were golden ones. She called to mind an armored shrine maiden with her golden pauldrons and copper chest armor. At the center of her chest armor was a foxlike shape, its tail the most prominent part of the design - segmented into five, like the Fox Miraculous out of stealth mode.

One of the sections of the tail blinks out.

“Inari here helped us by creating illusions of Lila to distract the Mini-Plagues,” Ladybug explains. Nino watches Inari cautiously as the heroine remains eerily still, waiting for further instruction. Her mask’s eyeholes had black fabric covering them from the inside, so nobody could see her eyes, but she could see out. It was very eerie. “That last part wasn’t something I’ve seen before. How did you manage to maintain the illusion even when you hit that Mini-Plague?”

Inari cocks her head. “Is that not something the previous Fox could do?”

“Not that I was aware of, no,” Ladybug’s brow furrows, making Nino wonder what she could possibly be thinking of before shaking her head. “Either way, Inari, I’m about to transform back and yours is only down a segment - could you take Nino back to the school for me please?”

Inari’s voice takes on a note of alarm. “Ladybug, the Miraculous-”

“Can you take care of it for me for a while? I’ll get it back from you later tonight at your balcony,” Ladybug promises. “Now, if you’ll excuse me-”

“Wait, Ladybug!” Nino steps forward, brow knitted in concern. “Is Kagami okay? We had to separate when you asked me to take the Lucky Charm to Chat Noir. I didn’t see her after that.”

Ladybug’s eyes flicker briefly to Inari before she smiles. “She’s okay, I promise. You two did very well today. Inari, can I trust you to take him back safely?”

“Inari scoops Nino up bridal style, eliciting a yelp from him, before the fox heroine jumps off the building and runs across rooftops, heading back for the school.

She drops him off somewhere on the second floor of the school in a more secluded area. Since a lot of the students had evacuated or been turned into Mini-Plagues, the students were still slowly trickling in. Once she lets Nino down gently, she moves to leave - but he tugs on her sleeve.

“Yes?” She asks.

Nino’s gaze darts to the floor before darting back to her mask. Her face. “Did… did you see Kagami?”

“As Ladybug promised you, she is unharmed,” Inari says softly. It’s hard to pick up on the tone behind her voice when there is no face to associate with it beyond her eternally frowning fox mask. “She also left you a message: wait for her at the clinic, and she will meet you there to take you
home as she’d been asked to.”

Nino’s cheeks turn a little red. “She really doesn’t have to- I can go home on my own.”

“Would you rather I took you home instead?” Inari asks. At Nino’s yelp, she answers her own question. “I suppose not.”

Another segment of the fox tail on her armor blinks out.

“I have to go. I’m about to transform back.” Inari leaps up onto one of the railings, catching the eyes of many of the students just entering the school. She looks back at Nino once before hopping up on the roof and disappearing out of sight.

“NINO!”

Nino finds himself crashing to the floor when Adrien rams into him. “DUDE!”

“Sorry, sorry- are you okay?!” Adrien asks, helping him back up. “I heard you were caught up in the akuma attack.”

“I.”

“NINO!”

Nino is knocked back down again, this time by Aurore. “Who was that person you were talking to?! Was that a new hero?! You have to tell us everything, you were caught up in the middle of the attack and Mireille needs to update the database!”

“Gauuauuaaugh.”

“You might want to get off of him first,” Adrien points out.

“Sorry,” Aurore bows her head as she helps Nino up as Adrien had. “It’s been a while since anyone directly from this school has been akumatized like that - and went targeting Lila,” She says in an exaggerated stage whisper, prompting a snicker from Adrien. “So! New hero?”

Nino nods distractedly as he sees the familiar form of Kagami approaching the clinic on the ground floor. “Yeah… yeah, new hero… uh, sorry dudes, I gotta jet.”

“Where?” Adrien asks in confusion. “Classes are either cancelled or going to start all over again in a bit.”

“Ms. Flamel’s writing me and Kagami some passes to go home today, sooooo… I’m gonna just…” Nino takes a step around the two blondes, and another, before booking it for down the stairs. He nearly stumbles and falls off the last few steps in his rush, but he manages to catch himself just in time for Kagami to spot him.

Kagami raises an eyebrow at his harried appearance. “… You look exhausted for someone who’d just been brought in by a superhero.”

“Let’s just,” Nino wheezes, holding up a finger to tell her to wait. “… Let’s just go home already. Did Ms. Flamel write out the passes?”

Kagami holds out the slips in her hand. It’s good enough for him.

They exit the school just as Lila Rossi goes back in.
Kagami Tsurugi and the Choices Made

Chapter Summary

Kagami makes a decision that changes her life forever.

Kagami and Marinette didn’t have a lot in common, but they were very good friends regardless. They brought things to the table that the other did not possess, and thus their friendship was both fulfilling and very interesting.

One of the few things they shared, however, was that they hated lying.

Ladybug didn’t lie when she said she’d come back for the Fox Miraculous later that night. Ladybug had long admitted to hating liars herself, with such vehemence that Kagami had wondered if that tangle with Lila and Onichan had made her distaste for liars even worse. She didn’t blame her - Lila would make anyone feel spiders run down their spine. Not that Kagami felt that herself - Lila’s thinly veiled threats didn’t scare her with what she could do to her; no, she was more worried for everyone else’s sakes.

Trixx was a bit of a headache - no, that was being too kind. Trixx was a nightmare in a handful of orange fur. Fur? Kagami thinks it’s fur. When she touched him the texture certainly felt like fur, so she’d consider it fur for now.

“Ladybug will be coming to get you and the Miraculous tonight, so until then, you’re going to be with me. That means you must be quiet for the entirety of the car ride and until we are safe in my room,” Kagami warns the kwami under her breath as she walks back from where she now knows Nino lives. “Do you understand?”

She can hear the smirk in Trixx’s voice when he responds. “Have you forgotten, kit? We’re foxes. We’re sneaky when we want to be.”

He’d darted back into her jacket by then. Sneaky fox.

Thankfully enough, her mother doesn’t seem to pick up on the slight change of weight provided by the presence of the Fox Miraculous hanging around her neck… at first. When she sits in the car, the necklace doesn’t make a sound, tucked snugly under her tie. She manages to make it through most of the house with Trixx undeterred until finally, she shuts her door behind her, and Trixx immediately flies out of her jacket.

“That took a while, kit,” Trixx stretches in midair before going around to look at his surroundings. He hovers over Kagami’s rapier and hums in approval. “You fence?”

Kagami nods once.

“I can see why Longg likes you very much,” Trixx hovers over to the next item on Kagami’s desk painfully slowly as his words sink in in that moment.

Kagami’s eyes widen. She knows that name. “Longg? He… talked about me?”

“Yeah, wouldn’t shut up about you, y’know?” Trixx smiles before turning around to face her, and
puffs up his chest as if pretending to be someone else. In this case, Longg, the dragon kwami.

“Miss Kagami was the pinnacle of panache, the epitome of excellence, the most exquisite of samurai’... just say you like her, geez.”

Despite herself, Kagami feels her chest warm. Longg hadn’t been with her for very long - in fact, their very first interaction, she’d failed to listen to his instructions and transformed without much care for anything other than to prove to her mother she was capable. To know that he thought so highly of her regardless...

“He does miss you, you know,” Kagami blinks, realizing that Trixx had wandered up to her and placed one of his tiny paws on her hand. “He’s only had you for a day, and already he talks about you like you’re the best thing since sliced bread. I think you made quite the impact on him.”

Kagami’s cheeks redden slightly. “I didn’t listen to him at first.”

“Oh, I know,” Trixx says cheekily. “But then again, Plagg’s holder did the same thing during the first akuma in Paris. You ever heard about Stoneheart?”

Kagami had - through the news. One usually had to be informed of previous akumatizations before entering Paris nowadays, in order to be prepped for what would become the norm.

“I understand how he feels though,” Trixx sighs, doing a loop de loop in midair. “I remember your predecessor. She was okay.”

“... Just okay?” Kagami didn’t believe that for quite the second. “You were used very frequently in tandem with the Turtle Miraculous. I remember this. Surely Rena Rouge was a good hero to have been called in so many times.”

Trixx sniffs. “Yeah... she was okay. She was strong, smart... but she betrayed Ladybug.” At Kagami stiffening, he amends, “Not like, ‘went to work for Hawkmoth’ betrayed, mind you, but... Ladybug’s had problems with her civilian identity losing trust in Rena Rouge.”

“Am I allowed to ask the specifics? Only if you know, of course.”

Trixx makes a zipping motion with his paw. “I know, but Ladybug will tell you in her own time. Either way, Rena Rouge is now retired, as Ladybug must have told you, and now you are the person she will call upon to use the Fox as needed! If we’re lucky, all the time.” Trixx wags his tail excitedly. “It’s been forever since I’ve had a permanent holder.”

“Wait a minute, permanent?” Kagami holds up a hand, brow furrowing. “Ladybug said she would retrieve this Miraculous from me tonight.”

“And she will!” Trixx nods. “Ladybug always keeps her promises. She never lies if she’s able to think about what she’s saying. She’s a very honest person. But I’m just saying - if she brought up that Rena Rouge is retired, and she gave me to you, then that means she’s considering-”

“No.”

“No?” Trixx raises an eyebrow, but much to Kagami’s consternation he doesn’t really react like she expected him to. “I’m guessing you don’t want to be the Fox.”

Kagami holds onto the round pendant of the Fox Miraculous, her thumb tracing over the fox shape in its center. “I am grateful to Ladybug for this chance to help and be a hero again, really, I am... but I do not think I am suited to be the Fox.”
“And why is that?”

“You’ve heard of me from Longg,” Kagami says, letting go of the Miraculous to pick up her rapier and settle into a stance. With practiced breaths, she strikes at the air as she speaks. “I am not subtle. I am not sneaky. I go for things head on and strike as necessary. One might call me bullheaded and stubborn, even, and aggressive and harsh.”

“Mmhm?”

“... I do not have many friends,” Kagami says, after a moment’s hesitation. It’s stupid that she hesitates. Tsurugis never hesitated. “I stumbled into my friendship with Marinette, am still stumbling into a friendship with Chloe and Nathaniel and Sabrina, and Adrien is my friend because our parents are working together.”

Trixx cocks his head to the side. “And that boy you gave your handkerchief to?”

“Nino?” Oh no. She’d forgotten she’d given him her handkerchief - and when she reaches into her pocket, she finds his handkerchief there instead. Oh no. “We’re not friends. I don’t trust him yet.”

Trixx floats upside down, his gaze never leaving Kagami’s. “Why not?”

“He used to believe in the conniving witch that is Lila Rossi,” Kagami returns to attacking the air, but each strike is vicious as she imagines Lila standing there instead. Trixx seems to pick up on this, but he doesn’t comment as Kagami continues. “Until something changed his mind, and now he’s vehemently against her and everything she stands for.” A slash. “It cost him nearly everything.”

Trixx hums, gesturing for her to continue.

“He had a girlfriend,” Slash. “Alya Cesaire.” If the name rings any bells to Trixx, he doesn’t show it. “They broke up publicly after Nino called out Lila for being a liar. Alya too is stubborn and hotheaded, and very single-minded when it comes to unmasking Ladybug.” Strike. “She puts herself in danger unnecessarily and worries her loved ones. Her tenacity would have been impressive if it hadn’t put so much stress on Ladybug and Chat Noir making sure she was out of the way and safe from akuma attacks.”

Trixx laughs. “I can see why you call yourself harsh.”

“Do you think I’m harsh?”

“I just think you’re very honest about what you feel,” Trixx tells her sincerely. His words make her pause as she looks at him. “You are a very headstrong girl, very fierce like a fox protective of its family. You don’t take nonsense from anyone, and while blunt, you do not lie. You know what you want. You know what you need to do to accomplish things you need to accomplish, and are not afraid to take charge as necessary.”

Kagami waits.

The kwami rests his chin on his paws as he floats in midair. “You have a good heart, Kagami. I can see why you’d think I’m not the right Miraculous for you, but did you know that Sass isn’t necessarily the right Miraculous for Medusa either?”

“Medusa?” The Snake heroine. Kagami had only glimpsed her up close today, but she’d already helped a few times. “Really?”
Trixx nods. “Medusa was more suited to the Bee Miraculous, because of her tendency to take charge and lead, a bit like you, in fact. You could say you could’ve been the Bee Miraculous holder instead of the Fox Miraculous holder, if Ladybug had thought about it. Even the Bee’s power of Venom is more suited to your head-on way of attacking.”

“What then didn’t I?” Kagami finds herself asking. “Get the bee, I mean?”

The fox kwami grins. “Because holding the Bee wouldn’t teach you, or the kwami that came with it, anything. You already know how to bee, if you’ll pardon my pun for now,” Trixx cackles at the look that crosses Kagami’s face. “And I bet you’d be able to talk sense into the Bee kwami, but that’s it. You already know how to be the bee in all senses of the word.”

“... And the Fox?”

“You still have much to learn,” is all Trixx offers, and Kagami huffs almost impatiently, making him laugh. “What? It’s no fun if I tell you everything. What do you take me for, the kwami of telling everything?”

Kagami’s irritated look melts into a thoughtful look as she hears a knocking on her window. When she turns around, she sees Ladybug at her balcony, and immediately she puts her rapier back down and hurries over, opening the window.

“Good to see you safe and sound, Trixx,” Ladybug greets the fox kwami as he floats lazily behind Kagami. “And good to see you made it home safe as well, Kagami. Is your mother home?”

Kagami stills for a moment, listening. The action makes Trixx watch with a pleased look as Kagami answers, “She is in her room, asleep. We’ll be undisturbed as long as we don’t make any extremely loud noises.”

“Good, because I’m about to ask you for a favor,” Ladybug goes to sit on the railing of the balcony, and gestures for Kagami to sit down. Kagami shakes her head, instead choosing to sit on her legs on the ground as Ladybug leans forward.

She’s not sure why, but the seriousness in Ladybug’s tone unsettles her. “Kagami, have I told you why Rena Rouge has been indefinitely retired?”

“Trixx gave me an idea,” Kagami admits, prompting Ladybug to glare at Trixx. “I asked him, he did not tell me of his own accord, I promise. You may put the blame on me for this one.”

Ladybug’s gaze softens as she turns back to her. “You’re wondering why I referred to her as retired right as I gave you the Miraculous, huh?”

“Are I…” Kagami toys with the pendant idly. “... Are you considering me to…”

Why was she hesitating? She never hesitated. This was Ladybug - not her mother. Ladybug was the city’s heroine, she could tell her anything.

And yet…

“Am I considering you as the next Fox Miraculous holder?” Ladybug tries. When Kagami nods very slightly and very stiffly in response, Ladybug hums in thought. “To be very honest with you… yes. I’ve considered you for other Miraculous, definitely.”

“Like the Bee?”
“Trixx, have you been spilling all my secrets?” Ladybug asks in exasperation.

The kwami only gives her a fanged grin. “Just enough information. If my kit figures it out with just that, then it’s no longer my fault.”

Being called one of Trixx’s ‘kits’ makes Kagami’s cheeks warm considerably.

“Well, either way, yes, I’ve considered you for the Bee, and Chat thought you’d make a great Bee too! But I thought you could try and learn from Trixx here,” Kagami glances at Trixx as she speaks, and the kwami smiles back. “Like I learned from Tikki, and Chat learned from Plagg.”

Kagami lets Trixx sit in the palms of her hands before she looks back at Ladybug. “Could I not have learned something new from the Bee?”

“I feel like someone else could benefit from learning from the Bee, and the Bee from them,” Ladybug amends. “Or at least, benefit more than you would have. You really are best suited for the dragon by default, but Longg also doesn’t teach you anything that you don’t already know by default. It’d be like having a more lenient, ‘more supportive of your friendships’ version of your mother.”

Kagami, unintentionally, blanches - a sight that makes Trixx cackle maniacally.

“Chat does the same thing when he talks about his father,” Ladybug snorts, but continues. “Either way… I also trust you more than I trust Rena Rouge’s civilian identity right now. You haven’t done me anything wrong, and you’ve proved that you’re worthy of being a hero again. I just wanted to give you another chance at being one because Hawkmoth stole away being Ryuko from you.”

Kagami’s thumb traces over the circular pendant again, as if she was already acclimating to a habit that would be hard to break. “... I still do not think I am the right person for the fox.”

“I didn’t think I was right for the ladybug either,” The spotted heroine admits. “But… I think you could do it. And… I’d really appreciate having a fox I can trust on my side again.” Ladybug smiles at Kagami. “So… I ask you. Are you willing to try and be Inari, the permanent Fox Miraculous holder, and help me and Chat Noir, as well as Medusa, in protecting Paris the best you can?”

Kagami’s lips purse, her brows furrowing in thought. She glances at Trixx, who’d taken to floating just a little above her shoulder, and then at Ladybug, before looking back at the Miraculous around her neck. Her thumb follows the gold edges and etches on the pendant’s fox figure slowly.

“Like I said before, I’d understand if you don’t want to at all. I can take Trixx back if you do, and I’d still be grateful for your help,” Ladybug explains with a gentle, understanding smile. “Just remember that if you do accept... you’re going to be going through the same things Medusa is currently going through as a new member of the team. You’re going to learn all the responsibilities that comes with being a Miraculous holder.”

Kagami sighs. This was, quite honestly, a very difficult decision. “I’m sorry, Ladybug... I just… I’ve never been this hesitant before. It’s very strange. I don’t know how to deal with it.”

“A friend once told me to ‘never hesitate’,,” Ladybug says softly. “And I’ve connected that quote to something else someone told me. Now, one of my personal quotes is, ‘never hesitate to do what’s right’. Do you think this is the right thing to do, Kagami?”

She does.
“Then what’s stopping you?”

She knows exactly what.

“I…” Kagami falters briefly before shaking her head wildly, steeling her resolve before meeting Ladybug’s gaze. “I am afraid, Ladybug. Afraid of disappointing you, Chat Noir, Paris. Afraid of not meeting expectations. But…” She glances at Trixx, and then at Ladybug. “You two seem to believe I can be a good Fox… and neither of you have let me down so far.” She bows her head. “I will listen to you.”

“Is that what you really want?” Ladybug asks, one last time. “Or is it just because the two of us think you could be the Fox?”

Kagami pauses for a moment, and reevaluates, before nodding in determination. Trixx’s grin is ecstatic as she says, “I… I will be Inari. For as long as you need me to be, for as long as Paris needs me to be. I will try my best not to break your trust and faith in me.”

“That’s all I wanted to hear.” Ladybug says softly, standing up and tossing her yoyo out to loop around a nearby building. “Become Inari tomorrow night, and meet everyone else properly during patrol. We’ll discuss patrol routes and schedules, as well as a meeting with the guardian.”

Kagami blinks. “The guardian?”

“Of the Miraculous,” Trixx murmurs as Ladybug sails away. “But you must be tired, so we can talk about that tomorrow. We should go to bed, don’t you think?”

Kagami moves to stand, and finds her knees a little weak, startling her. Her grip on the railing tightens as she tries to steady herself, before she looks off to where Ladybug had disappeared to. The weight of her choice was finally beginning to sink in.

She was going to become a superhero. Permanently.

… She really needed to go to bed before she did something she would regret in the future.

“You can sleep here,” Kagami points to a pillow that she sat on whenever she was doing ikebana on her mother’s request. “I’ll… get a better one as soon as I’m able.”

“Are you kidding?” Trixx sails over to it and nestles himself in the middle cozily. “This is great! I’ve been stuck in the Miracle Box for so long I’ve forgotten what a real pillow looks like! Thanks, kit!”

Kagami smiles softly, her cheeks warming, before she goes to turn off the light.
nino lahiffe and the reality he faces

Chapter Summary

Alya's not the same Alya he thought he knew anymore.

Lila’s quiet the next day.
She’s frighteningly quiet.
Rose - sweet, sweet Rose who could never really harm a fly unless it hurt her darling Juleka, and even then she’d probably just tell it off and teach it how to be a better person - immediately picks up on the shift in energy in the room and fusses over Lila like a mother dove would. Lila, in response, waves her off ‘feebly’, telling her that she’d ‘get over it’ in a bit and that yesterday was just extremely exhausting for her.

Nino, out of the corner of his eye, sees Alix making a face that indicated she was biting the inside of her cheek to keep from saying something. He really doesn’t blame her.

“It’s understandable,” Rose coos sympathetically. “She was targeted by the akuma, wasn’t she?”

Alya groans, cheek resting atop her palm. “I didn’t even get any footage of this akuma because I got turned into one of her Mini-Plagues. This sucks. I’m sorry, Lila - maybe if I’d gotten out of there faster I would’ve gotten the footage out faster for Ladybug and Chat Noir to rescue you.”

Highly doubt that, Nino snorts mentally, eyes flickering back down to his notebook. The current page is blank, the previous one actually filled with notes. It never really did occur to him how much note taking he didn’t take while seated next to Alya until he’d moved up to sit next to Nathaniel. He’d at least been able to take some notes while seated next to Adrien, thanks to Adrien being a diligent note taker even though he liked to pass him notes in class. But with Alya? It was easy to get distracted.

Was that a bad thing?
...It probably was.

“It’s not your fault, Alya,” Lila places a hand on Alya’s shoulder, patting it delicately before batting her lashes at Rose. “And really, thank you so much for your concern, Rose. I’m just feeling a little under the weather today, but I’m sure I’ll be fine in a few days’ time!”

“You should consider visiting the school nurse, Lila,” Mylene suggests. “Ms. Flamel’s very accommodating and considerate, and she probably already knows what to do with your tinnitus and your arthritis should it act up on the way.”

“Yeah!”
“Sounds good.”
“You really should, Lila.”
“I don’t know…” Lila murmurs in mock concern, twirling one of her pigtails around a finger. “I wouldn’t want to bother her or anything with my conditions, she must already have sooooo many people coming over there for her assistance. I could always just go to our family doctor for my problems.”

Rose shakes her head. “Ms. Flamel wouldn’t mind at all! She’s so nice she’ll even give you a little treat if she sees you’re really feeling under the weather even after she gives you a checkup!”

“You really should consider going, girl,” Alya encourages. “I remember when I had a sore throat once, and I had to get myself excused during PE just to make sure it wouldn’t stop me from doing any physical activity, she gave me a whole instruction packet and a few lozenges to deal with my sore throat and any lingering aftereffects after it healed.” She pats Lila’s shoulder thoughtfully. “It’d really help.”

“You think so?” Lila sniffles.

“Uh huh.”

“Well… maybe I should… but, oh… I’d be a bother…”

“You should reaaaaally listen to those who actually care about you, Lie-la,” Chloe’s voice sails over the rest of them, prompting literally most of the class to look over at her. She’s not looking at them - she’s facing Sabrina for the most part, the two of them poring over a magazine she has spread out on their desk. “They only mean the best for you, don’t you agree, Sabrina?”

Sabrina was circling a few things in the magazine every now and then with a pen, referring to her phone every so often before each one. She hums thoughtfully at Chloe’s question. “That’s right! Ms. Flamel’s very nice, she helped Chloe with a broken nail once!”

“I thought she was a nurse, not a manicurist,” Alya raises an eyebrow.

Chloe rolls her eyes. “And I thought you were a journalist, not a tabloid reporter.”

“What?!”

Nino really doesn’t blame himself nor Nathaniel for flinching violently when Alya’s palms slam against hers and Lila’s desk in righteous outrage. Was it righteous? Maybe he was using the word wrong. Either way, he could feel Alya absolutely seething at Chloe’s words - and the worst (best?) part of it was that Chloe hadn’t even looked up from her magazine.

Sometimes he wondered how she managed to do it - stay so unflappable in the face of someone practically breathing fire down her neck.

He figures it probably came with the backstory.

“The Ladyblog has and always will be a reputable source of information, Chloe,” Alya hisses, pointing at her above Lila’s head and from across the room. “Unlike your stupid vlog about ‘Ladybug’ admiring you and asking you for advice while you played dress up on your daddy’s hotel roof, I get my own footage, actually see akuma attacks up close—”

“- and put yourself in so much danger,” someone declares seriously, interrupting her.

Nino turns his head to the side, and sees Marinette staring down with a frown at Alya, arms crossed on top of her desk. “The way you get your footage is extremely dangerous. It puts you at so much risk of being hurt that the heroes have to actually go out of their way to save you or
protect you from any incoming attacks.”

The silence is deafening. Marinette hadn’t talked to Alya in forever - and here she was, calling her out.

Alya turns to face Marinette from all the way in the front, and Nino is struck dumb by the hurt in her gaze, mixed with a sort of poisonous glare that he knows for sure didn’t belong on her face. Alya would never look at Marinette like that. The Alya he knew would have never looked at Marinette like that, like she was… like she was…

Like she was beginning-of-the-year Chloe, a voice whispers in his ear. It sounded a lot like Lady Wifi. Lady Wifi was separate from Alya in terms of voice - she, in Nino’s opinion, sounded a lot more harsh, a lot more direct. And a lot more dangerous.

“And how else is everyone going to receive exclusive, up close and personal footage of akuma attacks, Marinette?” Alya challenges. “That’s what the Ladyblog is here for, after all.”

“Putting yourself in danger was not your modus operandi before, Alya,” Nino really had to admire Marinette for staying so calm about all this. She was still just as composed as she’d been, and objectively very concerned for her best friend - her former best friend, if Alya’s sentiments were to be taken at face value. “What you wanted to do was speculate on Ladybug’s powers, interview people who’ve interacted with Ladybug under various pretenses, and uncover Ladybug’s identity.”

“And I still do that!” Alya crosses her arms.

Marinette frowns. She steeples her fingers together on her desk as she speaks. “I’ve told you before, Alya. Trying to uncover Ladybug and Chat Noir’s secret identities is a dangerous activity - to both you, and their families and friends. Hawkmoth could go after them and hit at their weakest points - you saw how Hawkmoth went after Chloe during Heroes’ Day, didn’t you?”

“...” Chloe tenses at the reminder, but at Sabrina’s pat, she relaxes by a hair. “She makes a point, Cesaire. If I hadn’t exposed my identity, Daddy and Mommy and Jean-Luc wouldn’t have gotten akumatized and gotten to me. I wouldn’t have let down Ladybug.”

Nino notices her fiddling with the new bracelet around her wrist, twisting it every so often as she speaks. It’s a strange contrast to her usual all-yellow attire.

“They’re public figures in masks,” Alya points out. “The public, of course, want to know who their mysterious masked saviors are. I’m just helping in my own way.”

Marinette’s brow creases in frustration. Nino sees her drumming her fingers on her desk - one of her old tics that signalled her annoyance. He’s mildly pleased that some aspects of Marinette never really changed, and that he still remembered them, but the fact that he was so happy about this little thing dampered his mood.

“Why are you so hellbent on finding out their identities?” Marinette asks, waving a hand around. “You don’t try and figure out the identities of Rena Rouge and Carapace - I know you don’t. You don’t even try and figure out the identities of the temporary heroes like Ryuko or Viperion. Why just the two main heroes?”

“I…” Alya falters, and Nino swallows when he sees her look his way. She knows he’s Carapace, he knows she’s Rena.

Marinette doesn’t.
She’d been backed into a corner - but if Nino knew Alya, then he knew that wouldn’t have stopped her. True enough to his guess, Alya shakes her head before pointing at Marinette. “T-that’s not the point here! Why do you care, anyway? I thought you hated the Ladyblog!”

“I don’t hate the Ladyblog,” Marinette stresses, her two hands rising to pull an invisible thread held between her fingers taut. “I’m just disappointed that it became so unreliable because of-”

“Because of what, Marinette?” Alya asks her in a dangerously low voice. Nino knows that voice. That was the voice of Alya who was dangerously close to exploding - and that was not good.

“Because I post about Lila, is that it?”

Marinette’s gaze sharpens, but otherwise her face remains terrifyingly cool and passive-aggressive. “Yes, Alya. That’s exactly it. I’m glad you have enough self-awareness to know exactly why I’m disappointed in the Ladyblog, and in you.”

You could’ve heard a pin drop in the silence that followed.

Alya is stunned by the bite in her voice, and honestly, Nino can’t blame her. Marinette had a bite that she rarely let loose, but whenever she did, it was sharp and painful. As kids he and Kim had made jokes about Marinette actually having a knife for a vocal chord, even though it hadn’t made sense at all, even years later. It had made sense to them as children, however.

“Alya-” He eventually hears Lila’s voice say meekly - or at least, as meekly as someone like her could get. Alya looks down to see Lila’s hand on the edge of her shirt, tugging her down as if to ask her to sit. “It’s okay. No need to defend me. Marinette’s always had it out for me, after all, it’s totally okay. I wouldn’t want to stress you out any more than I should.”

Alya’s gaze softens at Lila, and Nino feels an ancient pang in his chest at the sight. He remembers when Alya would look at him like that - would look at Marinette like that, would look at Adrien like that. Look at them with so much love and affection that sometimes it’d just overflow in the form of sudden hugs and squeezes of the arm when they were together as a group - well, in Adrien’s case, whenever he was actually there with them.

Nino remembers it so dearly. And it was a painful memory to hold inside his heart.

Where had everything gone wrong?

“You sure, girl? ‘Cause I’d defend you where Ladybug can’t against her ,” She looks up at Marinette with a pointed look before looking back at Lila. Marinette only watches coolly from her spot up above. Nino privately thought she looked like an angel enacting judgment from above. “Just openly trashing you like that.”

“I promise,” Lila says sweetly, and Nino suddenly feels a distinct need for mouthwash. Or a boiling hot bath. Whatever would wash away the grimy sort of feeling he’d suddenly acquired at the sound of her saccharine voice. “I’m so lucky to have a friend like you, Alya. You’re so sweet and kind.”

Alya’s face finally breaks into a smile, and she sits back down, saying, “What are best friends for, huh?”

Nino sees Marinette’s pencil snap in her grip.
“You doin’ okay, Nino?”

At the sudden touch to his arm, Nino tenses, glancing to his right. Once he confirms it’s just Alix, he relaxes by a hair, rubbing at the back of his neck. “Yeah… just tired, dudette.”

The four of them were headed for lunch - Nino, Kim, Max, and Alix. Adrien and Marinette had gone to the library to do research while Chloe had dragged Nathaniel and Sabrina off to have lunch outside of school. This had left Nino to hang around the three (mostly) wild card members of the class of Caline Bustier, but he didn’t mind. It was nice to be around Kim again.

Oh. Markov was there too. He couldn’t forget about Markov.

“You’ve been easily exhausted for the past few days, Nino,” Max points out matter-of-factly, walking alongside him on his left. “And you skipped class one day because you weren’t feeling particularly well. Are you certain you are not ill?”

Nino hums noncommittally, waving his hand around. He’s not exactly sure how to word that he hadn’t really been feeling right ever since Lila had cornered him in the locker room without causing undue alarm, so he sticks to vague answers for now.

Alix wrinkles her nose. “Don’t tell me you caught whatever Lie-la has.”

Nino unceremoniously and violently doubles over, gagging - a sight that makes Kim, who was walking in front of them, choke with laughter.

“Don’t even joke about that,” Nino warns her pointedly.

Alix holds up her hands in mock surrender, snorting, only to walk right into Kim’s back. “What the- hey! Why’d you stop?”

“Do you not see the crowd right in front of us?” Kim gestures pointedly to the throngs of students right in front of them - not that it mattered to him, because he could see above most of them, but for Alix and Max it was definitely a problem. “We can’t get through. I don’t see a path.”

“Lemme up there, big guy,” Alix gestures for Kim to pick her up, and with a practiced gait Kim turns around and kneels down on one leg. Nino watches as Alix goes to sit on his shoulders before Kim stands up again, allowing Alix to scout out the area. “Yeah… no. There’s no clear path through them. You’d have to be a bull or somethin’ to break through that mess.”

Max glances at Markov hovering near his head. “Markov? Could you scout ahead? You could fit through the small spaces and see what’s causing the commotion.”

“At your service, Max!” Markov chirps, rising above the crowd to dart through the open space they couldn’t reach. For a few minutes, they wait patiently as the crowds move forward at a snail’s
pace, until finally Markov flies back towards them, looking rather excited. “It seems there is currently a fight going on inside the cafeteria!”

Nino frowns. “A fight?”

“Indeed! Alya and Aurore appear to be having a very intense argument in the middle of the lunchroom about the new heroes and their blogs!”

“Aurore ,” The four humans all say simultaneously before Kim decides to crack his knuckles. “Alright, outta the way, everyone, cool guy comin’ through!”

“Hey!”

“No pushing!”

“We were here first!”

“Sorry- sorry! Sorry, real sorry dude- we gotta get there-” Nino apologizes to each person Kim nearly barrels over, Alix still on his shoulders. Max brings up the rear with Markov, who was still chattering about the details he’d picked up about the fight they were about to see. Nino vaguely picked up on some words like ‘Alya’ and ‘Miraculous’ and ‘copycat’ amidst all of Markov’s chattering.

He really hoped it wasn’t what he was thinking of.

The instant he walks into the cafeteria and sees a visible divide between those who supported Aurore and those who supported the Ladyblog, his heart sinks to his stomach. Yeah. It was exactly what he was thinking of.

“How do we know you’re not making it up, Beaureal?” He hears Alya crow out from her table. “How do we know it’s not a staged performance of yours to deride and ruin the credibility of the Ladyblog?”

Aurore laughs harshly, twirling her umbrella before closing it and pointing at her from across the room. “As if I need to do anything to ruin the Ladyblog when you’re doing it all on your own! I don’t risk my life needlessly to capture what can be captured from a safe distance.”

“That’s why people turn to my blog instead for content, because you’re too much of a coward to get up close to the akuma to get a good look for everyone else,” Alya slams her palms on the table, making him flinch. “But that’s not the point here! How do you know that this person you saw was really another hero?”

“I know she is!” Aurore insists. “She was only briefly seen assisting a civilian before running away!”

“How do you know she isn’t just another one of Hawkmoth’s allies, huh?” Alya tests, crossing her arms and smirking victoriously. “For all we know, that was a Sentimonster made by Mayura to lull us into a false sense of security!”

Aurore slams her umbrella down on the table, making Marc and Mireille on either side of her jump. “She is too a new hero! And I can prove it!”


Aurore’s eyes wildly dart around, and Nino feels a chill race up his spine, knowing exactly what
she was thinking. His fears are confirmed when her eyes land on him and she lights up, pointing at him with her umbrella. “There! He knows! He was the civilian I was referring to!”

“Nino?” Alya asks incredulously. His name on her tongue sounded like broken glass. “What does he know?”

Aurore smirks triumphantly. “I have quite the few eyewitnesses who tell me that the new hero was last seen talking to him before darting off after Plague Doctor. I would have gotten her name out of him, but he had to go home because he was sick.” She turns to Nino before immediately noting his pallor. Her face falls in realization. “... You still look sick. Maybe I shouldn’t have called you out like this.”

“You can’t seriously be telling me that there’s a new hero, and I wasn’t aware of it,” Alya rolls her eyes, hands on her hips. She turns to Nino, gaze searing like a flaming knife tearing into him, as if daring him to contradict her. “I know I was one of the Mini-Plagues, but there’s no way there was a new hero. It’d be all over the Internet if that were the case - and then I’d be interviewing people who’d seen the new hero!”

“Too bad, I beat you to it! Or I’m about to,” Aurore smiles. “Solve the problem for us, Nino. Wasn’t there a new heroine on the scene, and didn’t she bring you back to school herself?”

Nino looks at Aurore, then at Alya.

Aurore’s smile was earnest and excited. Alya’s smile was strained.

“I. Uh.” Nino rubs at his wrist awkwardly. Inari didn’t seem very keen on being seen, even though a lot of students at the school had already seen her because he’d called her back for a question. God, should he even answer? What even was the right course of action during all of this?

“Someone just submitted a picture of the new hero to Bug’s Eye View,” Marc reports, drawing everyone else’s attention to him. Anyone who was able to access their phone went to the site as a somewhat low-quality picture of Inari on the railing talking to Nino was uploaded. The point of view of the image seemed to be from the ground floor of the school, and framed Nino and Inari in a way that invoked ‘don’t go’ on Nino’s end.

He wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

Aurore squeals in delight as Alya frowns. “I told you the new hero is real! And she looks like a new fox hero too! Perfect timing, actually. And she’s got a really good sense of fashion!”

“I wouldn’t mind wearing that,” Mireille comments with a smile, pulling out her laptop to go update the akuma and hero database they’d built with Inari and Plague Doctor. “Don’t you think, Marc?”

Marc turns a little pink, but he nods in agreement. “Yeah... I don’t think I’d mind either. It’s very mysterious-looking... actually makes you very curious about who’s under the mask, but also intimidated enough to stay away.”

“How are you so sure it’s a new fox?” Alya asks, frowning. “It could be a vigilante hero and not a new fox. Ladybug still has Rena Rouge, after all, doesn’t she?”

Nino bites the inside of his cheek. Way to be subtle, Alya.

Aurore only shrugs. “She looks like a Fox hero. She acts like a proper fox hero. She helped a civilian, and she’s very mysterious. Arguably, better than Rena Rouge.”
Alya tenses. “What’s wrong with Rena Rouge?”

“Nothing, really,” Aurore answers honestly, finally cooling down as she goes to sit back down in between Marc and Mireille. “But if Ladybug has a new fox, that means that Rena Rouge either didn’t live up to expectations or had her identity compromised, which meant she had to be replaced. We’re thinking of asking Ladybug soon.”

“Inari’s definitely a new fox,” Nino blurts out. Almost immediately, everyone else hones in on him, and he gulps at the murderous glare Alya throws his way. Aurore’s eyes were alight with delight as she lists down the new fox’s name. “I uh. I was there in the middle of the battle.”

“Nino,” Alya hisses.

Aurore shushes her before gesturing for Nino to continue. “Well?! Go on! This is basically like a documentation of what the public didn’t get to see up close! Were you scared? How was she? How’d you know she was the new Fox user?!”

“I. She was actually disguised as one of the Mini-Plagues,” Nino closes his eyes, trying to recall that day. Being held in the arms of the Mini-Plague that had been Inari, dangling high over the ground - not that there was any danger of him falling since she wasn’t one of the akuma’s minions. “She played Plague Doctor for a fool with her illusions, allowing her to be distracted enough for Ladybug to break her object. And then she took me back to school.”

“Nino.”

“Did she tell you her name herself?” Mireille asks, genuinely intrigued. “What made her take you back to Francois-Dupont?”

Nino tugs at his shirt collar nervously. He didn’t like that most of the students’ eyes were on him as he spoke. He also didn’t like the searing hot look of Alya, burning into his skull. “Ladybug mentioned her name, that’s how I learned it. And Ladybug asked her to take me back because I was caught up in the middle of all of this. Chat Noir delivered the akuma victim back while Medusa had to detransform, so it was up to Inari to take me back.”

“And how did you feel being in such close quarters with the new hero?” Marc asks, cheek on his palm as he looks up at Nino. “Did you like being saved by the new hero? Did you feel safe in her hands?”

Did he feel safe in her hands?

Nino closes his eyes, trying to block out the feeling of Alya boring holes into his head with her eyes, trying to block out the sounds of the cafeteria buzzing with gossip. Did I feel safe in Inari’s hands…?

Eventually, he settles on an answer - one he delivers with certainty and confidence. “... Yeah dude. I think she’s a great Fox hero, and that Ladybug made a good choice of Fox.”

“So cool…” murmured a student.

“I want to be like Inari…” said another.

“She’s totally better than Rena Rouge,” cheered another. “Don’t you think?”

“Yeah, Rena Rouge’s outfit is so plain.”
“Is that all you care about, man? What about whether or not they were good heroes?”

“I call it like I see it, buddy. Rena was a good hero, but Inari already seems so much cooler in comparison, and with a cool mask to boot! Ladybug should probably take notes, actually.”

Nino could see Alya slowly turning purple at the comments, and almost immediately, old habits kick in. He reaches out to her, placing both hands on her shoulders to try and pacify her even though making contact with her after their breakup felt like pins and needles. “Alya-”

“Rena was a good hero!” Alya protests, grabbing onto his shirt as though searching for security. The yank is like a tug at his heart, as if telling him to go back to Alya. “You agree, don’t you? Even though there’s a new Fox?”

Nino bites his lower lip. He really didn’t want to answer this. “Alya-”

“Answer me!” Alya demands, her other hand now reaching up to grab his shirt as well. “You know Rena Rouge! You know how she was like as a hero!” Alya, no… Alya, you’re being too obvious…!

“Rena Rouge was just as great as Inari, right?!”

Nino hated that the others were beginning to mutter around them, gossip flying through the air and spreading like wildfire. No… this wasn’t right, this wasn’t right at all. Alya didn’t deserve to be outed like this - and she wasn’t even aware of what she was doing. “Alya… maybe you shouldn’t-”

“You were Carapace!” Alya practically shouts, silencing the entire cafeteria. “You’d know the answer to this!”

Nino’s heart stills for a great many seconds, realizing that no, Alya hadn’t outed herself. She’d outed him as Carapace. Carapace, the awkward and friendly turtle hero that occasionally made an appearance when Ladybug needed a protector for Chat Noir and herself.

Alya had outed him without his consent. And now Ladybug could never use Carapace ever again.

“… Is it true?” Aurore asks, eyes wide. Mireille and Marc - as well as the rest of the cafeteria - were shellshocked at the revelation. Mentally Nino snorts at the term he used in his brain. Shellshocked.

“Are you… were you… Carapace?”

Nino remembers Wayzz. Remembers coming up with a little secret handshake and brofist deal with the little turtle kwami after the bond they’d formed together.

And now…

“I was,” Nino says softly, grabbing onto Alya’s wrists firmly. He gently but firmly pulls her off of him as he meets her gaze, now finding that the burn she’d so often inflicted on him with her eyes alone was… not as painful as it had been before. “But I guess I can’t be him anymore, can I, Alya?”

“I…” Alya looks up at him, and for the first time in a long while he sees something like remorse in her eyes. “Nino-”

“Rena Rouge was a good hero,” Nino says, almost too softly for everyone to hear. There is a hidden meaning to it that he knows only Alya will understand. “The keyword here is ‘was’.”

He lets go of Alya’s hands, and it feels like he’d finally really let go of the Alya he’d known and loved.
It was a good idea that he did, anyway. He’d rather remember the Alya he used to know than the Alya that stood before him now.

Nino exits the cafeteria alone. The others don’t follow him, leaving him alone to his thoughts, at least for a little while.
nino lahiffe and the ties that bind

Chapter Summary

Nino, in his solitude, finds that he isn't really alone even after all that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Alya did WHAT?!”

Nino had never seen Adrien so furious. Not even since the time Lila had gotten Marinette expelled, and already then he’d been relatively passive. No, Adrien was downright steaming from where he was seated. He was also pretty sure Adrien’s hair seemed to be fluffing up like a cat’s fur would when provoked, but he might have been seeing things that time. The boy’s fingers were practically tearing into his pants with how hard his fingers were digging into his thighs.

Currently, Adrien and Marinette were at Marinette’s house in her room, working on a partner project that Nino was pretty sure he’d forgotten all about with all of the recent excitement and troubles. They were on video call with Nino, who was at home lying on his bed, his homework spread all over his sheets. Other members of the video call included Chloe and Sabrina, currently in Chloe’s room having what appeared to be pedicures, and Nathaniel on what appeared to be his balcony. Alix and Kim shared their own video camera, lounging around in what looked like Kim’s room on beanbags, while Kagami was busy working on her calligraphy, but still listening in. Marc looked like he was on the move on the streets of París, earphones plugged in to better hear what they were saying.

“Down, kitty,” Marinette cautions, pulling at Adrien’s button-down, but even she looks furious at what her former best friend had done - so the pulling was half-hearted at best. “She really did that? Out in the open, just like that?”

“I have the footage- well, Aurore has the footage,” Marc answers, glancing at the camera before continuing his walk to make sure he didn’t walk into anyone. “Mireille and I didn’t really need to convince her that this wasn’t something to be published on Bug’s Eye View since she deleted it herself from the blog soon after, but people were already talking. Mireille and Alix tried to do damage control, but it was already too late.”

“Oh, Nino...” Marinette’s eyes softened with a sadness Nino couldn’t properly place, but he could practically feel the waves of concern coming from her window of the video chat. He wasn’t really sure how to feel about that, considering that he was trying to earn her full forgiveness, not her pity or concern.

Nino sighs into his folded arms, chest heavy.

Chloe sighs along with him, her lips curling down in a frown. “Guess that makes two of us, huh? At least I did it to myself, gave myself consent to out myself to the general, ungrateful public - Cesaire didn’t even have the rights to do that to you!”

“Just because you two were exes doesn’t mean she had the right to expose you like that, bro,” Kim
groused, flopping over on his beanbag to face the camera he and Alix had set up. “I mean… that’s just rancid, dude.”

Alix reaches over and gives him a noogie. “Not to defend her or anything, but you also blurt things out in the heat of the moment, you know.”

“I’d never blurt out secrets like that though!” Kim protests, comically slapping her hand away before proceeding to do the same to her. “Right, Nath?! Back me up here!”

Nathaniel stumbles and, based off how his camera fumbled in that moment, nearly drops his phone off the side of his balcony. “I. Uh. Well. I’d thought at first you might accidentally talk about the plan with Lila within earshot of her before I told you guys.”

“No see, that’s different. That’s within earshot. Not meant for her intentionally to hear,” Kim tries to rationalize. “Now, if I knew a superhero’s secret identity and was trusted with it, I wouldn’t blurt it out like Alya did even if I was mad at them! Watch this - hey, Alix! I know you’re the owner of the uh… skater miraculous! But I’m not gonna tell the world, because I respect you.”

Nino snorts. “Skater miraculous?”

“It was the first thing on my mind, okay?” Kim defends just as Alix throws a pillow at him. “Hey! Foul play, Tinkerbell!”

“That’s what you get for giving me something as dumb as a skater miraculous, Hercules!” Alix laughs. “That’s not even an animal, genius!”

Sabrina pipes up, “Pretty sure that’s a bug, so there could be an actual skater miraculous somewhere out there, right? It doesn’t seem too farfetched.”

“Either way… Nino, are you okay?” Marinette redirects the focus of the conversation back to Nino, who’d been close to dozing off during the playful argument, his head rested in his arms, folded in front of him while his tablet was propped up in front of him. “I know this must be a really difficult time for you.”

Nino sighs, watching as Kagami puts down her brush out of the corner of his eye on her camera. “It’s okay, dudette. It’s just… gonna be a real hard time not being a hero anymore, since technically my identity’s already been exposed to the public.”

“Alya had no right to do that,” Adrien nearly spits, but at Marinette’s arm wrapping around him he melts into her touch, though his face is still incredibly grumpy. “Let me have a little ‘chat’ with her, Buginette. She doesn’t get to talk to my best friend like that!”

Marinette presses a kiss to his temple, making his face soften considerably. “Not a good idea, especially with how angry you are. This does mean that we should push through with exposing Lila already - and soon. I can’t stand seeing Alya dig herself into an even deeper hole like this, Adrien.” Her voice lowers into a murmur, barely caught on the microphone. “We’re no longer friends, but… she doesn’t deserve to be run into the ground.”

“I’d contest that opinion, but I love you more than I want to destroy her for outing Nino as Carapace,” Adrien grumbles petulantly. Marinette only taps his nose in response. “I mean, seriously! If I were a hero- which I am not, by the way-”

Nino sees Kagami’s camera shift until she’s facing them all, the camera properly angled towards her. “Marinette’s right, Adrien. As cathartic as it would be to vent out your frustrations on her, it wouldn’t be right. While she’s liable for her own actions, she’s still a victim to Lila’s
manipulations, just like the rest of your classmates.”

“She still didn’t have to out Nino like that because she was angry,” Adrien says sullenly.

Nino sighs, running a hand through his hair. “I’m honestly more worried about what’s gonna happen now. I can’t be Carapace anymore because she exposed me, and there’s probably gonna be someone working for Hawkmoth coming after her because she somehow knew my identity.” And to top it all off, she’s Rena Rouge. Or used to be Rena Rouge, if Inari’s presence is anything to be worried about. “What’s Ladybug and Chat Noir gonna do?”

“They’re going to have to find a new Turtle, probably,” Marinette says almost regretfully, tracing circles on top of Adrien’s hand with a finger. “Just like they found a new Snake, and a new Fox. Maybe send someone to watch over you at night to make sure no akumas targeted you while you were vulnerable.”

Marc wonders out loud, “Are they like, permanent heroes though? It looks like they are. They keep showing up more often to battles - well, besides Inari, anyway. She’s super new to everything.”

“And to top it all off, she’s Rena Rouge. Or used to be Rena Rouge, if Inari’s presence is anything to be worried about. “What’s Ladybug and Chat Noir gonna do?”

“Medusa, at least, looks like she’s gonna be permanent,” Alix observes. When Nino goes to look at the camera for Alix, he finds her now sitting on top of Kim like it was the most normal thing in the world. “She’s showed up for Plague Doctor and for that Destructosaur guy, as well as a few other akuma in between whose names I forgot.”

Medusa, at least, looks like she’s gonna be permanent,” Alix observes. When Nino goes to look at the camera for Alix, he finds her now sitting on top of Kim like it was the most normal thing in the world. “She’s showed up for Plague Doctor and for that Destructosaur guy, as well as a few other akuma in between whose names I forgot.”

“Destructosaur, Birthday Bash, and she helped with Harpette as necessary even though Second Chance wasn’t directly needed,” Nathaniel answers absenty, yawning. Nino had half a mind to tell him to move away from the balcony before he fell asleep and dropped his phone. “And then Plague Doctor, yeah.”

Chloe raises an eyebrow. “You seem awfully up to date.”

“Oh right, didn’t you know?” Alix teases. “Our Nath here has a crush on Medusa, like, highkey. You and Marc have com-pe-ti-tion, Chloe!”

Marc snorts as Nathaniel turns bright red, stumbling back inside his room to stammer, “Hey! I told you not to tell them that!”

“Don’t worry, you can tell them all about my crushes too, then we’ll be even - except for that one crush!” Alix warns when Nathaniel opens his mouth. “Just my celebrity or superhero crushes. Medusa counts as one, after all.”

Nino watches as a smirk crosses Nathaniel’s face. “Alright, if you say so. King Monkey.”

“What!” Kim exclaims, sitting up at lightning speed and practically launching Alix off of him and into his bed. “You never told me you were into King Monkey!”

“That’s because it never really mattered, beans for brains!”

“Of COURSE it matters!”

“Why?!”

“And there they go again,” Marc sighs as the two bicker on their portion of the video call. “Anyway… we have Bug’s Eye View all set up for Lila’s featurette, we just need to have a small interview with her so that she isn’t suspicious as to why we’re featuring her in the first place. You guys all have your things ready?”
Chloe glances at Sabrina, and immediately the redhead reaches below her chair to pull out a folder, waving it at the camera. “Written statement debunking anything Lila has said about Audrey Bourgeois, on paper and ready to show!”

“My mother’s also said to phone her as soon as Lila tries to debunk her written word regardless, no matter where I am,” Had Nino not known better, he would have said Chloe’s smile was… not sharklike, but fanged all the same. “So we’ve got her on speed dial at any point in time.”

Nathaniel, having moved to his bed, drums his fingers against his arms thoughtfully. “Alix, Kim, any updates from Max’s end?”

“He said he sent them over to Alix’s email already, we just haven’t gotten around to checking it yet,” Kim answers while in the middle of being held in a headlock by Alix’s thighs.

Marinette nods in determination. “Jagged promised to video call later to get updates on his commission, so we’re going to get him to confirm that he doesn’t own a kitten and has never written a song about Lila.”

“There’s also Ms. Flamel,” Kagami says eventually after a while of having remained silent. “We have her on our side.”

Nino perks up; he’d nearly forgotten about that small, but very important detail. “Oh yeah, dudes! We can totally get Ms. Flamel to back us up, it was the whole reason she was akumatized!”

“You never told us that,” Adrien’s brow furrows in consternation. “But I guess we didn’t really ask, huh? Sorry, Nino.”

Nino shakes his head, adjusting so that he was lying on his side with the tablet still in view. “It’s okay, dude. Either way, Ms. Flamel has everyone’s medical records, and she’s already told me and Kagami that Lila’s never been to the clinic before-

“- despite her many, many disabilities,” Kagami mutters. “Finding out that Lila had faked so many conditions allowed her to become vulnerable to Hawkmoth. This is most likely why the akuma was plague-based when she was sent out.”

“Then we should talk to her as soon as we can tomorrow, maybe even before class if she’s early!” Adrien pumps his fist excitedly. “Operation: Burn The Witch is about to commence!”

Nino chokes. “Since when did we have a name for this whole plan?”

“Since just now,” Adrien says proudly. Marinette and Chloe groan simultaneously as Kagami suddenly stiffens. The entire call is treated to the sound of something falling over on Kagami’s end of the call.

“What was that?” Alix asks curiously.

Kagami reaches toward her phone to shut it off. “A small animal snuck into our house recently. I must deal with it, so I’ll have to end my end of the call for now.” She logs off.

“I gotta go too,” Marc apologizes. “The creative writing class I’m attending today needs me to be completely focused.” And so he too logs off.

“Hey, Mari?” At Marinette’s hum of acknowledgement, Nathaniel proposes, “I think we can also get hold of Prince Ali through Rose really soon.”
Alix frowns. “Isn’t Rose basically on Lila’s side?”

“... Talked to Juleka,” Nathaniel admits, tucking a lock of hair behind his ear. “Or, well, talked to Juleka until Rose picked up on our conversation and decided that mailing to Prince Ali would be a good idea. She said she’d be getting a response from him very soon about Lila’s latest charities.” Pause. “Juleka isn’t on Lila’s side, by any means. She’s just on Rose’s side, like how Ivan’s on Mylene’s side but not Lila’s.”

“Which means we could still convince them of the truth before we drop the bomb,” Marinette muses thoughtfully. “We can push the reveal a few days later. We just need to convince Juleka and Ivan to reconsider, and there’s a chance Mylene and Rose will follow.”

Chloe raises an eyebrow. “And if they don’t?”

“... Then we’re going to have to ask Luka for help,” Marinette murmurs, making Adrien look up at her in concern. “Juleka listens to Luka. And Luka... he knows a fair number of my problems with Lila. Not all of them, but...”

Alix nibbles on her lower lip thoughtfully. “You think it’ll work?”

“It has to,” Marinette clenches a fist against her chest. “If she talked to Nath, then that means she’s still possibly willing to listen if she’s alone or with Luka. Nath?” The redhead ‘hmm’s in response. “... Find a way to talk to Juleka tomorrow, and find a way to convince her to talk with us, or at least hear us out without any interference... if you can.”

Nathaniel smiles softly. “I’ll try, Marinette.”

“Chloe, Sabrina... you two get some rest, do whatever for the rest of the evening, because tomorrow, we’ve got work to do.”

Chloe doesn’t respond, but Sabrina nods eagerly enough for the both of them before she goes to turn off their side of the call.

“Alix, Kim... go check the email, and once it’s all there, print them out for a hardcopy while keeping a softcopy on hand. The hardcopy you give to Ondine to pass to Marc tomorrow.”

“Got it!” This time it’s Kim who turns off their side of the call.

“And Nino?”

Nino looks up at Marinette’s voice. Both she and Adrien look at him as if contemplating something. “... Bros?”

“... You sure you’re going to be okay, after that?” Marinette asks one last time.

Despite himself, Nino absentely traces his wrist with a finger - the same wrist where the Turtle Miraculous would usually sit whenever he needed to become Carapace. It’s an action that does not elude either Marinette or Adrien’s gazes. “... Just need some time, probably. To think and all.”

“Okay,” Adrien says softly. “We’re here for you, you know that, right?”

Nino nods, smiling at him. “You really are my best bro, Adrien. You and Marinette... all of you really are the best friends a guy could have.”

“Get some rest, Nino,” Marinette says kindly. “We’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”
The video call ends, and Nino sighs, letting the tablet fall over on his bed before rolling over to stare at his ceiling. He hears the sound of his phone buzzing, and reaches over to look at it.

5 missed calls from: Alya

15 unread messages from: Alya

A few days ago, he would have hesitated in blocking her number, finding too much sentimental value in their old conversations. But now? He deletes the notifications and blocks her number, eventually sighing a heavy sigh as he lets his phone go, letting it drop onto his sheets. He stares up at the ceiling of his room, at the cracks in the ceiling, and lets himself bask, for once in his life, in the feeling of just being Nino.

Nino Alone.

He thinks about how Wayzz would have smiled at him - would have praised him for being so levelheaded and calm about the whole thing, and despite himself he lets a hand grasp at the cloth near his chest, gripping his shirt as the hollow feeling of never seeing Wayzz again hits him. Of course, he could see Wayzz if he accidentally stumbled on whoever would be the next Turtle holder… but it wouldn’t really be the same.

Nino thinks about Wayzz sharing a secret handshake with another holder, and feels his heart ache painfully.

He fails to notice the black butterfly that floats in through his open bedroom window, headed for his bedsheets.

He does, however, notice when the sound of a closing jar echoes in the silence of his bedroom.

Nino jolts up in surprise, and gawks when he sees an akuma, fluttering impatiently inside a small glass jar. Holding the glass jar?

“Inari?”

Chapter End Notes

i am seeing so many comments with people speculating on who'd get the other miraculous, if any, and quite frankly it's making my fingers shake not being able to type fast enough for you guys to find out sooner aklghldfkhlklfdg

i'm just glad that people have been enjoying my first purely mlb "fanfiction" so far (since most of my mlb fanfics are just mlb crossovers)!! thanks so much for everyone's support so far
kagami tsurugi and the bonds she makes

Chapter Summary

She didn't trust him - but that didn't mean she didn't understand how he felt.

All she wanted to do was return the handkerchief before her mother found it.

Seeing as that her mother was blind, a lot of the laundry was done by the family maids. Most of the clothing they wore in the Tsurugi household was specifically chosen for its texture and quality, as well as ease of movement when one would need to attack in said attire. Even Tomoe’s wedding attire had been battle ready - or at least, loose enough that she could still perform her usual stances in them.

If the maids had washed the handkerchief and not recognized it, it would have most likely gone to her mother’s drawers. Her mother would have felt the handkerchief immediately and known it didn’t belong to her or Kagami. She’d have gotten into trouble, lose what rights she’d managed to fight for, lose what freedom she’d managed to wrangle out of her mother-

She had to return Nino’s handkerchief.

But first she had to go patrol.

“Trixx,” She asks quietly. “Is my mother asleep?”

The fox kwami backflips into the wall, taking a peek at the Tsurugi matriarch’s prone form before popping back in Kagami’s room. “You know, one of these days I’ll teach you to be able to stay still and listen for yourself if she’s awake. It’s important to be able to stay as still as untouched water when hiding in an illusion, trying to fool your enemies.”

“Maybe, when my schedule isn’t as busy,” Kagami agrees as she brings forward the Fox Miraculous. It did sound like something worth learning, but very rarely did Kagami have enough time for herself unless she powered her way through her schedule. “Trixx, let’s pounce.”

The magic of the Miraculous washes over her like a cold winter’s breeze - a stark contrast to the tickle of flames she’d felt when she’d transformed into Ryuko. She feels the familiar weight of Inari’s mask sitting upon her face, and tentatively she touches it, lifting it up slightly to feel the cloth tied around her eyes. There were no holes to it, so if anyone did rip off the initial fox mask, they wouldn’t discover her identity still thanks to the cloth.

Right. The patrol. Picking up Nino’s handkerchief and tying it around her flute, she heads for her bedroom window. Opening her window, Inari hops up onto the roof before bounding off in the direction of the Eiffel Tower - the designated meeting place for the heroes. The ribbons of her hero costume flutter in the wind as she hops from roof to roof with precision and care - so much that each step barely scuffed any of the roof tiles she’d landed on. It was like she hadn’t even been there.

As she passes by the Agreste mansion, her Miraculous-enhanced hearing picks up on a sound she’s heard many times before, and she glances to her left.
An akuma!

She stumbles slightly at the sight, but it’s a very brief stumble - soon she’s chasing after the butterfly the best she can without alerting Hawkmoth to her presence, practically dancing on air as she follows it like a shadow.

*Focus, Kagami,* Inari chants to herself, steeling her heart and dampening her feelings. Any sudden spikes of negative emotion like anxiety or fear would alert Hawkmoth to her, and there was a risk for akumatization. She *had* to trap the akuma for Ladybug, if not purify it herself.

… Not that she knew *how* to, she was very new to this.

The akuma leads her down a familiar road, and with a start Kagami realizes it’s the same road she’d taken to Nino’s house when she’d escorted him home from school. Despite herself she grits her teeth. *Of course… I’m so stupid - it’s most likely going after Nino especially after today… I should have stayed longer in the call!*

Learning that Nino had been Carapace was a bit of an eye-opener for her. He’d been the hero to help her up after she’d been red akumatized into Riposte on Heroes’ Day the first time, and had been by her side after they’d both recovered from being attacked by red akuma the second time. *Now* it made a lot more sense how he’d taken to the trash can lid for a shield when they’d gone around evacuating students - he already had experience defending others.

And she’d seen his work on the news, as Carapace. Seen how he’d taken to defending the heroes as asked of him - seen how he’d prioritized the civilians where Ladybug and Chat Noir were unable to. He was the kind of person who’d mastered the art of defense.

‘*Like bamboo, he bends in the wind. He seems like he’s not worth much at first, but trust us when we say that there’s more to him that meets the eye.*’

*Seems like you were right, Marinette. There’s more to him than meets the eye - Nino is a defender,* Inari thinks to herself, leaping onto Nino’s balcony and gliding in through the front window. Thanks to her quiet entrance, he hadn’t even noticed she was there - and she’d made it before the akuma too. *But now, it’s my turn to defend you.*

Her eyes dart around his room. Something, anything to catch the akuma… *there!*

An empty jar, sitting on his computer desk.

Inari snatches both cover and jar just as the akuma flutters through his window, and hurriedly she reaches over and traps it inside the jar, the lid clicking against the glass. She screws it tightly shut as Nino sits up with a jolt, gawking at the akuma fluttering impatiently against its glass trapping.

“*Inari?*” He asks in surprise.

*Crisis averted,* Inari sighs inwardly with relief as she straightens back up, the jar still in hand. Realizing that she still hadn’t greeted Nino, she bows, her head low.

“I apologize for intruding, but I saw the akuma heading for your house,” She explains, holding up the jar. “I didn’t have any means of capturing or purifying it, so I had to settle for the jar I found on your desk. I hope it’s not a bother.”
Nino blinks rapidly before shaking his head wildly, waving his hands around as if in a tizzy. Inari briefly wonders if he’d picked up Marinette’s mannerisms when they were children. “N-no way dudet- guh, I mean, Inari! It’s totally fine, I- thanks a lot. I didn’t… know Hawkmoth had been gunning for me tonight.”

“Akuma attacks are never predictable,” Inari says matter-of-factly. Maybe telling him the straight facts would reassure him. “It’s not your fault that Hawkmoth always seems to be awake, finding no rest, looking for someone new to torment.”

Nino groans, reaching over to hug his pillow to his chest. “I just feel super terrible today, that’s all. Terrible feelings, terrible thoughts.”

“Must have been a terrible thought if Hawkmoth himself came after you,” Inari’s lips twist into a frown.

Nino chuckles dryly. “I’m guessing you didn’t hear about it then.”

“I might have, might have not. It’s not my place to pry, really,” Inari knows he’s referring to the Carapace scenario, but he doesn’t know that she knows. She wasn’t Kagami right now. “But if you’re willing to share, then I’ll listen.”

Nino sighs, burying his face in his pillow for a few moments before slouching over his pillow, still hugging it tightly. “I used to be Carapace. You know, the turtle dude that used to hang around the lady that used to have your Miraculous?”

“Rena Rouge,” Inari answers, her free hand ghosting over the fox emblem on her armor. She’d always found it rather silly that most of the Miraculous easily slipped off of the person, or were easily accessible, so to see that the Fox Miraculous had essentially embedded itself into her armor in such a way that it was harder to take off was a surprise to her. She hadn’t realized it would take her personal feelings into account when it designed her hero attire. “I hadn’t recognized you as Carapace, no.”

Nino cracks a smile. “That’s kinda the point of secret identities, yeah? You don’t recognize me?”

“... Yes, I suppose so,” Inari agrees, and for the briefest of moments she allows her mouth to curl up in the smallest of smiles. It was… strange, interacting with Nino like this. He was unaware that she was Kagami Tsurugi under the mask, and so would most likely react differently to anything she said. It was… liberating, in a sense.

“Well… yeah. I used to be Carapace,” Nino mumbles. His gaze is distant, elsewhere, and the akuma slams itself against the glass of the jar insistently at the flareup of emotion. Inari keeps it tightly shut. “But… I was outed by someone I thought I could trust. Someone I thought I knew.”

Nino watches him quietly as he sighs, drawing his knees up to his chest, the pillow still in between his legs and chest as he hugs his knees the best he can. “Well... either way. That’s all in the past now. I can’t be Carapace again, and I know for a fact that Rena Rouge can never ever be Rena Rouge again, especially since, uh, you have the Miraculous and all.” He looks up at Inari, and smiles. “... Sorry I just dumped this all on you. You’re a new hero and everything and here I am airin’ out my dirty laundry just like that.”

“Did it help?” Inari asks.
“Huh?”

“Did it help? Airing it out?” She repeats.

Nino blinks, before nodding. “... Yeah. Yeah, it did.”

“Then I don’t mind at all,” She says softly, moving towards his window once more, the jar tucked safely in her hands. “As long as your negative emotions aren’t bottled up, things will be fine, and I do not mind having to listen.”

Nino gets up from his bed to watch as she perches on his railing, and for a brief moment Inari is reminded of the first time they’d interacted inside Francois-Dupont - her about to leap from a railing, him safe on solid ground. She turns to look at him.

“I’ll return this to you once Ladybug purifies the akuma,” She says, rattling the jar with the akuma in it. The poor thing seemed to have already given up, seeing as that it was sitting on the floor of the jar almost as though it was tired. “Unless you want us to get rid of the jar entirely.”

Nino scratches at the back of his neck awkwardly once more. Inari notes it down as a tic. “I uh. Maybe you could use it? As like an akuma capturing thing if you can’t find Ladybug immediately at first? We never really thought of that when we were heroes... maybe you guys can make a habit out of it.”

“... Not a bad plan,” She muses thoughtfully, nodding at him. “Thank you, Nino. That... is your name, right?” Best not let him know you already know his name. “Ladybug mentioned it.”

Nino nods. “That’s me, foxy lady.”

Beat.

Inari’s not exactly sure how to react to that as Nino immediately turns beet red. “GUH! Sorry, sorry! I’m just- gah- it’s a habit- NO, I mean- not really a habit-”

“You make a habit of giving nicknames to the Fox Miraculous holder?” Inari asks, genuinely concerned.

Nino looked like he wanted to turn into water and just trickle out and away from existence entirely. “Please don’t tell Ladybug I called you a foxy lady. Or literally anyone. That was a slip of the tongue, never happen again, I swear-”

“You’re fine, Nino,” Inari reassures. “And I won’t tell if you won’t tell anyone I entered your room without permission tonight.”

Nino raises an eyebrow. “You’re still concerned about that?”

“Breaking and entering is not a good thing most of the time.”

“My window was wide open, I think you get a pass.”

Inari snorts - a sound that she notices makes him perk up considerably. “Alright. I suppose I’ll see you around then, Nino. I have to get to patrol with Ladybug.”

“Uh! Inari!” He tugs on her sleeve yet again, and Inari is hit with a serious case of deja vu. “Can you... can you tell Ladybug to...” He falters briefly before steeling his courage. “... Can you tell Ladybug to say hi to Wayzz for me? And... to say I’m sorry.”
Inari blinks. “Why would you be sorry?”

“Just… tell him I’m sorry for losing him so fast,” Nino laughs humorlessly, and despite herself Inari feels a pang in her chest - one that mimics his tone for tone. The feeling of never seeing the first kwami you bonded with ever again...

She knew that pain all too well, didn’t she?

“If it’s all the same to you,” She tells him. “You shouldn’t be sorry for something that was out of your control, but I’ll pass the message along.” Inari bows once more to him, and awkwardly he bows back, before she bounds away atop the rooftops once more, the jar still in her hands.

Once she passes the akuma over to Ladybug and gets her to cleanse it, the patrols resume properly, with Inari sent to patrol the southern section of Paris. By the time 3AM rolls around, they all return home, and Kagami practically collapses on top of her bed, shoes and all.

And then a familiar cloth flutters on top of her head, having detached from her flute when she’d detransformed.

Shit. She’d forgotten to return his handkerchief.
Chapter Summary

Nathaniel gets caught up in a misunderstanding.

Juleka Couffaine was not a fool.

Nathaniel knew this for a fact - he’d been classmates with Juleka even before this year, and knew her almost as well as he knew Alix. Juleka was quiet, timid, and had about as much anxiety bones in her body as Marc did - but she was no fool. Juleka was not a Sabrina, nor a Max, but she was clever in her own right, and possessed a keen sense for when someone wasn’t exactly ‘right’, almost a lot like her brother did with music.

Nathaniel called it her vibe checker.

It was this sense that allowed Nathaniel to approach her freely without her being startled or surprised, as though she’d already figured out that he was going to try and talk to her. Rose was absent from her side, but this was still a common sight given that they were easier to identify separately from each other. Juleka and Rose weren’t necessarily joined at the hip, even if they were in a relationship - and that was a good thing.

“Hi, Juleka,” Nathaniel greets, sliding into the seat next to her for the time being. It was currently first break before lunch, and Nathaniel had managed to find her alone from Rose sitting at a bench in the locker room, looking through her phone before the time ended. Juleka gives him a smile and a small nod as he opens up the conversation with, “You got a minute?”

Juleka raises an eyebrow. “We have the entire break.”

“Fair point,” He amends sheepishly before schooling his face back into a more serious expression. No more fooling around, this was Serious Business. “I was thinking, maybe. Do you and Rose wanna like… come over to the Seine with me and some friends? Just to hang out and stuff.”

Juleka gives him a scrutinizing look. “… Just hanging out?”

“… Okay. Well… I… also need to tell you something important there, yeah? Can’t be here, it’s too public.”

“… you remember that I have a girlfriend, right?”

Nathaniel chokes on his own spit before biting on the inside of his cheek in frustration. “Sorry. Right. That wording could’ve been taken otherwise. I meant like… this is like a very big secret and I’d really appreciate it if I got to tell you - and Rose,” He corrects. “The secret in a less confined area like the classroom and stuff. You get me?”

“This secret involves Lila in some way or form,” Juleka guesses correctly, making Nathaniel nod. “This also involves Marinette somehow.”

“Okay, humor me for a bit. How did you know?”
Juleka’s smile is one of her weaker ones, but it’s definitely sincere. “You’ve been hanging around Nino, and Nino’s been hanging around Marinette. It’s not that hard to connect the dots.”

“You didn’t connect shit.”

The goth’s smile gets wider. “I connected them.”

Okay. Okay. This was good, right? Juleka knew why he was here. Juleka knew it was about Lila, about Marinette. So why was he so tense? “Listen, Juleka… I know I talked to you about this before, about Lila-”

“You know I don’t really have a very strong opinion on her beyond that she talks too much,” Juleka reminds him softly. “But Rose thinks very highly of her. She… really does admire Lila for all the work she does.”

“‘Claims’ to do,” Nathaniel makes air quotes before sighing and putting both his hands on Juleka’s shoulders. “Listen, Jules. It’s too early for me to tell you this, but I don’t know how else I’m supposed to convince you to come later. We’re planning to expose Lila’s lies-”

Juleka’s eyes widen. “Expose her?”

“You know she’s lying through her teeth, right?” Nathaniel asks. At Juleka’s weird shrug, his brow furrows. “What do you mean, ‘not really’? Juleka, she lied about Jagged Stone, the man who once played with your mother. She said he wrote a song about her!”

Juleka tenses under his hold. “… Okay, that one I still have doubts about, actually. Luka and Mom tell me all the time that you can’t write songs about underage people if you’re years older than them. The other stories… I guess they weren’t really so unbelievable. She didn’t know Marinette knew Jagged personally, that my Mom knew Jagged personally.”

“That’s why we need your help, Jules,” Nathaniel smiles in relief; she seemed to be catching on. That was good, this was good, things were going okay. “We’re planning to expose Lila’s lies, but before we do that we really wanted to try and convince the rest of the class ‘on her side’ that she was lying first so they don’t get caught in the fallout.”

Juleka nibbles on her lip thoughtfully. “You really think the fallout is going to be that bad, huh?”

“You saw what happened with Alya and Nino,” Nathaniel mutters, and Juleka winces. “Alya believed in Lila - and Nino just went with the flow, until he learned how bad the truth was for himself. He chose to call her out, but Alya was stubborn.”

“… I don’t want to happen with me and Rose…”

“I don’t think that’ll happen,” Nathaniel reassures, the hands on her shoulders moving to hold one of hers in between his. “You and Rose have been with each other longer than Alya and Nino have… your relationship is probably one of the strongest ones here. That’s why we want to tell Rose now before-”

“T-tell me what?”

Juleka’s eyes widen as she looks over Nathaniel’s shoulder, and slowly he turns around. Standing in the doorway is Rose, looking like someone had told her Christmas had been cancelled forever with how she clutched at her phone, held in front of her chest. Her eyes are watery, tears threatening to spill over her face, her lip wobbling.
And over her shoulder?

“Didn’t I tell you Rose? First poor Marc, making him turn to Aurore, and then he’s seen with Chloe, and now poor, sweet, Juleka,” Lila coos in fake sympathy. “An artist is never satisfied, it would seem.”

What?

“Go on, Nathaniel - tell Rose everything you want to tell her!” Lila says, arms wrapping around Rose in what was supposed to be a sympathetic gesture. To Nathaniel - and to Juleka, if he’d been in her head right then and there -, it looked like a boa constrictor, strangling its prey to death. “Tell her everything you and Juleka talked about.”

Alix’s words ring in Nathaniel’s ear. So you finally picked a side, huh?

Nathaniel sees red - but not red enough that he doesn’t see the akuma flutter past his ear, hitting Rose’s phone.

He wishes he caught on camera the fact that he saw Lila’s face flash into a smirk before morphing into a look of terror, running away and screaming about an akuma getting Rose. When Nathaniel swivels around to look at Juleka, he knows for sure now that she would be there later for the talk with the others, because her hands are trembling, unsure of whether to seek comfort with Nathaniel or to reach out for Rose.

“Pixie Pop, your heart aches because your beloved has been taken away by another. Now I give you the power to spirit others away to the Neverland unreachable, so that nobody may stand between you and your Wendy. Not even that Peter Pan.”

“Please, Hawkmoth…” whispers Rose in a broken voice, right before the dark magic of the akuma bubbles over her. Juleka chokes back a sob as Nathaniel takes hold of her wrist, and pulls her along, trying to get away.

Until something wraps around Juleka’s waist, making her shriek in alarm. Nathaniel barely has time to react before she’s pulled away from his hold and back into the locker room, the door slamming shut in front of their faces.

“JULEKA!” Nathaniel screams, slamming against the door. His hands clenching into fists, he pounds at the door frantically. “JULEKA!”

“What are you doing?!”

Nathaniel feels a tugging on both his arms, and when he looks back it’s Marc and Aurore trying to pull him back. “Marc? Aurore? Quick, Juleka’s-”

“- in there, we know,” Marc says grimly.

Aurore shakes her head with a huff. “Heard the Silvertongue herself shrieking that ‘Rose was akumatized over seeing Juleka cheat on her with Nathaniel behind her back’. Naturally as a reporter we went to confirm the source because we were worried about you.”

“You tried to get to Juleka?” Marc asks, and at Nathaniel’s furious nod, he amends, “Thought so. Lila must have caught wind somehow, or she’s just ‘doing this out of the goodness of her heart’, because you don’t just do that unless you’re paranoid of your castle falling down.”

“I’ll tear her castle to shreds,” Nathaniel hisses as he tries to pry open the locker door still despite
their restraints. “Fooling innocent Rose like this-!”

“Rose wouldn’t hurt Juleka, Nath,” Aurore reminds him, still pulling on his arm insistently. “But you’re going to get hurt if she leaves that room! We have to go - NOW!”

“But-!”

“Here’s why Bug’s Eye View’s reporters are better than the Ladyblog’s,” Marc begins. He looks at Aurore, nods at her at the same time she nods at him, and with practiced synchronicity they grab Nathaniel by the waist and throw him over their shoulders, making him yelp. “We know when it’s time to get out before things get hairy. Rory?”

Aurore winks. “Here’s my forecast for today: things are about to get pretty hairy, so it’s time to go, Nath!”

“But, Juleka-!”

“You can’t help Juleka by being captured yourself! Let’s go!” Marc yells over the sound of the locker doors straining at the seams. The two of them carrying him were surprisingly strong together as they dash away from the scene - just as the doors of the locker room open again with a slam.

Rose’s voice is high pitched and trilling as it comes from the locker room. “Wheeeeere’s Nathaniel? Where is that BLASTED Peter Pan trying to take away my Wendy?!”

“Oh no,” Aurore hisses before gesturing for Marc to put Nathaniel down. “Marc, get Nathaniel somewhere safe and hide him. I’m gonna go try and send out an alert on Bug’s Eye Out, then find Mireille and Chloe and Sabrina.”

“Wait! Aurore-”

“I’ll be fine! A weather girl is always prepared, whatever the weather!” Aurore winks at him and blows both of them a kiss before darting upstairs.

Marc tugs on Nathaniel’s arm. “We have to go - now!”

“We can’t just leave Aurore-”

“And you shouldn’t be out in the open. Both of you.”

Medusa lands in front of the both of them, her hands on her hips and her lyre strapped to her back. Her hair seems to dance like live snakes as she whips her head between the two of them to sternly look at them individually. “Both of you need to be brought somewhere safe if you’re both involved with the akuma. You in particular, civilian, seem to be her target.”

“How’d you know I was the target?” Nathaniel asks, eyes wide.

The question seems to catch Medusa off guard, because she stammers, “B-because I’m a hero and the grapevine works fast! I knew I had to get to you and whoever you cared about before the akuma did, so- so here I am! I can’t use Second Chance the first time twice in one battle!”

“That hurt my head,” Marc mumbles, just as Pixie Pop shrieks, “NATHANIEL KURTZBERG!”

Medusa’s eyes narrow into slits, and before either of them can complain her arms are already around Marc, throwing him on her back with an ‘oomph’. Marc’s arms automatically hook around
her as she turns to Nathaniel. “Shit. I can’t carry both of you at once.”

“You take Marc somewhere safe, Medusa,” Nathaniel instructs. “I can hide someplace.”

“Are you sure?” Medusa stresses. “I could yell for Inari through the communicator.”

Nathaniel clenches his fists before nodding in determination. “I’ll be fine, Medusa. Just… protect Marc for me, please. Aurore’s already looking for Chloe and Mireille and Sabrina… at least I can be sure that Marc’s safe.”

“… Okay,” Medusa eventually relents before bounding off with Marc on her back.

Nathaniel sighs in barely contained relief before he yelps in surprise again when Ladybug drops down in front of him. “L-Ladybug?!”

“Nathaniel, I need to talk to you,” Ladybug pulls him into the nearest science classroom before anyone else can see them, shutting the door behind her before asking, “Did Medusa get to you?”

“Medusa went to hide Marc when I asked her to,” Nathaniel says. “Ladybug, why are we here? Why’d you- why aren’t you fighting outside?”

“Chat Noir and Inari are distracting Pixie Pop as we speak. I have a plan to beat her, but I need to know some details first. The akuma seems to be after you in particular,” Ladybug muses thoughtfully, looking to him. “Can you tell me why?”

Nathaniel hangs his head. “Uh… honestly, it’s a huge misunderstanding caused by a liar in our class. I was talking to Rose’s girlfriend, Juleka, alone in the locker rooms, about the two of them meeting with me and some other friends after school to talk about something important.” He paces around as he continues. “The liar must have caught wind and told Rose lies that Juleka was seeing me behind her back, or at least that I was trying to move in on Juleka, and…”

“Juleka… the goth girl in your class?” Ladybug tries, and he nods. “I don’t know about you, but isn’t she like… not that into guys?”

Nathaniel nods vigorously. “That’s the thing - Rose knows that too, they’re both bi but Juleka really prefers girls. Mostly Rose. That’s probably why it hurt her so much to see us… Lila timed it so that she’d see that happening between us-” He slaps his hand over his mouth. Shit. He’d namedropped. Maybe that was a bad idea.

“Ah. Another akuma caused by Lila Rossi,” Ladybug groans. Despite himself the sight makes Nathaniel snort. “When will we ever stop hearing her name. Anyway, is that all you know about the situation?”

“Her akuma is probably in the mirror she has… she was holding her phone when it got hit,” Nathaniel points out. “And she probably will try and hurt you more if you try to get at Juleka and rescue her… she has Juleka with her.”

“That must be the purple ball of light hanging around her…!” Ladybug realizes with a gasp. “She’s been floating around Pixie Pop this whole time taking hits!”

Nathaniel winces. “Be careful, Ladybug. You and Chat Noir - and the new heroes - are Paris’s best hope right now. I can’t really do anything but watch and stay out of the way.”

Ladybug smiles warmly. “Thank you, Nathaniel. That’s very sweet of you to say - but I can’t leave yet. You know how either me or Chat Noir ask people to become temporary heroes, right?”
Nathaniel nods.

“You know how some people recently, like Inari and Medusa, have been seen more frequently during battles?”

He nods again, cheeks flushing at the mention of Medusa. The sight doesn’t escape Ladybug, who giggles. “Marc and Aurore… they told me that the heroes might be permanent heroes this time. Which means Viperion and Rena Rouge are indefinitely retired… right?”

“Right again! You know Queen Bee’s retired too, right?”

Oh, he knew. Chloe, sometimes, talked about a Bee ‘kwami’ thing called Pollen, with a wistful look in her eyes that he usually associated with whenever she talked about Mr. Cuddly. He had no idea what she looked like, how small she was in reality, but he knew very well how much Chloe missed her - and how much Chloe regretted losing her to her own hubris before she’d painfully begun her slow reform.

Nathaniel looks at the windows of the room and sees Chat Noir fly into a pole with a loud resounding CLANG. “Ladybug? I... think you should get back to the battle… it’s getting kinda bad out there.”

“GAH! Sorry, sorry, I just-” For a moment, Ladybug resembled Marinette in mannerism, something that made Nathaniel blink in surprise - but the moment is gone as Ladybug holds out a box. “I just wanted to lead up to this properly. Nathaniel Kurtzberg, here is the Miraculous of the Bee, which grants the power of subjection. You will use it for the greater good.”

Nathaniel’s throat runs dry. Was... was Ladybug seriously offering him to be the temporary hero of the Bee? After- after Chloe had misused the Bee?

“I- I can’t, Ladybug, you know- Chloe’s going to be upset-” Nathaniel’s hands wave around frantically. “I can’t do that to her- she misses being Queen Bee-”

Ladybug’s lips curl up in a secretive smile. “I think you’ll find that Chloe will be fine with it, trust me.”

“I don’t know… can’t you use Queen Bee again for this battle?”

“There isn’t much time, Nathaniel,” Ladybug insists. “I considered using Chloe but Pixie Pop already got to her before I could. If we’re quick, you can help with the plan to immobilize Pixie Pop and stop her from causing more damage.”

She got Chloe? “Marc- and Aurore, are they-”

“I know Marc is safe, I had Medusa take him to a safe place, but Aurore is probably staking out somewhere,” Ladybug nibbles on her lower lip nervously. “Hopefully not in a place like Alya does... please, Nathaniel. Paris needs your help today.”

Shit. “… Okay Ladybug. Okay. I’ll use the Bee. I’ll help.”

Nathaniel takes the box and opens it, revealing a golden light that bursts from it like a firework. Once the light clears, it reveals a small beelike creature with blue eyes and a sweet smile. “Greetings, your grace.”

“Uh.” What.
“Pollen tends to call everyone who wields her ‘my queen’, ‘my king’, or some variation of that,” Ladybug explains hastily, laughing nervously. “It's a bit of a bad habit. She called Chloe ‘my queen’ all the time.”

Nathaniel pokes at Pollen’s fluff cautiously, making the kwami giggle. “No kidding... “ He looks down at the hair comb, and raises an eyebrow before slowly sweeping his bangs to his right side instead of the left, pinning it in place with the comb. “… This looks stupid, doesn’t it.”

“Why don’t you pin it the other way?” Ladybug suggests.

“It’d look too much like Mightyllustrator, and that’d give away my identity…” Nathaniel mutters, making Ladybug touch her pigtails thoughtfully. It takes a few moments before his face lights up - he had an idea. He pins the haircomb to his chest like a brooch, and just like that, the Miraculous morphs to suit him by hooking a pin through his shirt. The teeth of the comb adjust to look more like they were part of a brooch than the teeth of a haircomb on him. “This’ll have to do for now.”

“The words you require, your grace, are ‘buzz on’, ‘buzz off’, and ‘venom’,;” Pollen informs him. “Shall we?”

Nathaniel sighs. “Please don’t call me ‘your grace’. I’m just Nathaniel.”

“But you are holding me, your grace! Ladybug chose you! You must be of status!”

“Not now, Pollen,” Ladybug warns.

Nathaniel sighs, and clenches his fists. “This is for you, Chloe. Pollen, buzz on!”
The emperor's new clothes are definitely the bee's knees for Chloe Bourgeois.

Medusa had always been prepared for the arrival of another Bee.

Ladybug had mentioned as much to her while she and Inari had been settling into the patrol routine. The concept had hurt, definitely, but she’d accepted it after a few days. She’d even planned to hopefully catch any future Bee heroes during patrol and offer them a brief respite in her bathroom while she said hi to Pollen, even offering Pollen her favorite food before sending her and her new holder on their way. Not that she brought up said plan to Ladybug, but it was worth a shot, of course.

Still, the fact that Ladybug had brought in a Bee so soon after Inari and her had even been inducted to the team? It had nearly knocked her off the roof she’d been standing on.

“Inari! What’s the status?” Ladybug yells, pulling on her yoyo and coasting along the edge of the fray.

Inari, who’d been tag teaming with Chat Noir and working up close even though she wasn’t supposed to be an up-close-and-personal hero, delicately ducks out of the way of a giant mallet made of glittering golden dust before backflipping over to stand atop a chimney, gazing down at Ladybug. “Pixie Pop’s spirited away all of the art club members to her ‘Neverland’, wherever that is, as well as the members of the school board and all the teachers of Francois Dupont. Medusa and I tried to pull civilians to safety, but a lot of them are…”

Inari’s gaze flickers over to Pixie Pop, the akuma Rose had become, and Ladybug’s gaze follows.

Pixie Pop at best resembled a Rose Lavillant-sized Tinkerbell, with a dress possessing a texture and pattern similar to that of cut crystal that ended with jagged edges like that of broken glass. Unlike her first akumatized form Princess Fragrance, Rose’s pixie cut had been maintained in this form, but that was it.

Her face didn’t seem to be there - or was never seen, because for most of the battle Pixie Pop had been holding onto an ornate hand mirror that she held in front of her face like a shield. It did float on its own, however - as seen whenever she summoned creations out of golden ‘pixie dust’. Holding onto the mirror seemed to give her more stability, and less of her dress seemed to shatter when she did. The pixie dust made her able to shrink and return to normal size as needed, and seemed to be the one holding up her mirror when she wasn’t holding it herself.

Dancing around her head were balls of different colors, like tinier pixies. One of the brightest ones was a deep violet that called to mind Juleka, and with each strike Chat dealt the Juleka light seemed to meet them, catching his hits to make Pixie Pop stay unharmed.
“Ladybug! Where’d you go?” Medusa asks impatiently. Ladybug had assigned her to civilian rescue duty with Inari while Chat was on distraction and attack duty, but Inari had needed to double up as an attacker when Chat had gotten pummeled way too many times to count on his own. That had left Medusa on her own to make sure civilians stayed out of the way of Pixie Pop’s fairy dust.

Ladybug yells out as she heads for Pixie Pop, “Just got us some backup—”

“L-LOOK OUT!”

“Wha-” Medusa suddenly becomes very much aware of the sound of buzzing approaching her at rapid speed - and of the fact that Pixie Pop had fluttered away and that Inari had backflipped onto the nearest roof to avoid something. The Snake heroine’s barely given enough time to react before something crashes into her screaming, and they both fall off of the roof.

Ladybug sails in not a moment afterwards, calling out, “N- Kaiser?! Kaiser, where are you?!”

“They’re down on the ground, Ladybug - just like you’re going to be when I’m through with you!” Pixie Pop surrounds herself in pixie dust, shrinking right before their eyes, before darting around and giggling manically around the spotted heroine. The sudden movements meant that Ladybug had to have her hands on her earrings at all times - Pixie Pop was hard to see and catch when tiny, and could get her Miraculous at any moment.

Medusa, meanwhile, struggles to push whoever was on her off as she complains, “Get off me, seriously! Ugh, that was seriously dangerous! What even—”

“I’m really sorry- I’m - I’m just. Really new to this whole hero thing,” the person murmurs apologetically, backing off as she sits up to brush herself off. Her hand reaches behind her to strum once at the lyre on her back to check all its strings before she reaches up to play with her hair.

Yep, still running wild and free.

“So Ladybug picked another fresh hero off of the recommendations list, huh?” Medusa begins. “Well. I guess that means Inari and I aren’t the new kids on the block anymore by tonight.”

“I’m just a temporary hero, I think. So... you probably won’t see me again after this.”

Medusa finally takes a look at him. And then gapes. And then thinks ‘oh my God I should’ve been more creative with my Queen Bee costume’.

His collared bodysuit was mostly a light honey gold, two stripes of black near his biceps. The front of his suit emulated a tuxedo with two black stripes running down the front and converging at a point near his pelvis, the center a lighter buttercream yellow. His boots were black with honey gold accents and stripes, his wrists and ankles surrounded by buttercream yellow fur. His gloves were primarily black, but past the fur surrounding his wrists and up to his elbows his gloves were a darker honey gold with honeycomb patterns. Upon his shoulders rested a black cloak that seemed to end just past his shoulders, at which point it was split into four long blue translucent sections reminiscent of bee’s wings. The cloak was pinned in the center by a brooch that resembled the Bee Miraculous’s bee without its comb, the wings much bigger than she remembered to emulate lapels.

Idly Medusa wonders how this new hero had managed to pin the comb onto his shirt, of all things, especially without its comb, until her eyes trail past the Miraculous itself to meet his eyes. The primarily black domino mask with yellow segments under his eyes worked its own magic to hide his identity, but he would’ve been unrecognizable even without the mask - especially with his inhuman turquoise, bug like eyes, devoid of pupils and irises. When her eyes trail further up, she
sees where the Miraculous’s comb went - into his crown, a nine-toothed headpiece of black that rose like thorns from his red hair.

“... That is so hot,” Medusa blurts out before slapping her hands over her mouth. *STUPID! Just because you didn’t think that you could have a crown in your Queen Bee outfit doesn’t mean you can just call newbies hot*, you idiotic-

The bee hero sitting in front of her blushes a bright red, nearly matching his hair, but before he can say anything Inari screams at them, “MEDUSA! YOUR POWER!”

“Shit - SECOND CHANCE!” Medusa twists the snake bracelet curling around her wrist, the snakes shifting accordingly to accommodate each other and the activation of the Snake’s power. With that set, Inari’s flute melody dances through the air before she activates her Mirage - and runs straight into battle. “Oh my God, she knows she’s not supposed to jump into battle-”

Pixie Pop smacks Inari with a blast of pixie dust, turning the fox heroine into a glowing ball of orange that disappears into the horizon.

“SECOND CHANCE!”

“INARI! DON’T USE YOUR POWER YET JUST BECAUSE I DID!”

The Fox tenses in frustration, but does as she asks, instead choosing to kite Pixie Pop from the various chimneys with her flute as Ladybug and Chat Noir continuously try to strike at her mirror. The problem was, however, that the glowing lights around Pixie Pop always came to counter each strike, taking the blow for her each time. But they weren’t dying.

With a relieved sigh, Medusa finally refocuses on her new companion. “Okay, listen here-” Medusa jabs a finger at the new Bee’s chest just below his Miraculous, just in case it would be easily dislodged. If it was anything like hers or Inari’s Miraculous, however, it wouldn’t be as easily moved - especially if the comb part was in his hair for one. “I know you’re new. I know you have no idea what the *fuck* you’re doing, but you’re going to have to man up and be a hero today because Ladybug asked you to be one, okay?! We can’t let her down!”

“...” The bee stares at her, and Medusa self-consciously barks, “What?!”

“You just... remind me of someone I know,” he says, and he says it with such a soft, wistful smile that Medusa feels her stomach butterflies flutter - *NO! NO! Not happening, nuh uh, you already have one whole boyfriend, one whole girlfriend, and one whole partner, you are not catching feelings like you caught that Akuma in your mouth that one time.* “It’s reassuring.”

Medusa is broken out of her mental fight with herself at his words, raising an eyebrow. “What’s reassuring?”

“That you remind me of her - the girl I know,” The bee shakes his head before looking up and back at the battle. “Ladybug said I needed to immobilize Pixie Pop with my top, but I don’t know how to do that.”

Medusa smiles coyly at him, tapping on her Miraculous. “That’s what my Miraculous is for, pretty boy. Second Chance. But I set it to before this conversation, so you won’t even remember my cool pep talk if ever.” She pouts, her hair seemingly drooping with her.

The bee laughs, and the laugh makes her coy smile turn into a much warmer and more relaxed one.
“At your command, Queen Cobra.”

“It’s Medusa to you, Bee boy,” Medusa looks up and gears to throw herself back into battle, but the Bee hero puts a hand on her shoulder to stop her. “What? What is it?”

He looks up with a squint. “I think I can get us up there faster. Do you trust me?”

“Well, Ladybug trusts you, so I guess I’m obligated to.” Medusa suddenly feels his arms wrap around her, and with a yelp she nearly struggles before he takes off into the sky- “YOU HAVE WINGS?!”

The bee hero stumbles in midair, but his grip is still strong as he says, “I was trying to get the hang of it earlier when I crashed into you earlier, but now I can fly, yes!”

“That’s it!” Ladybug gasps upon seeing the Snake and Bee pair. “Bee, toss Medusa at that cluster of lights! Medusa, catch the purple one and run! Inari, you know what to do! And Chat-”

Chat’s grin is deliciously feral as he slams his claw onto the chimney next to him. “CATAclysm!”

The chimney collapses at his destructive touch as the bee hero launches Medusa at the gathering of fairy lights. Right before she crashes face first into the ground and misses the cluster she reaches out and snags the purple light, trapping it in between her hands before running into the nearest alleyway for her life. She hears the telltale sound of Inari’s flute playing for her Mirage, but she doesn’t stop. She keeps going.

The light that she’s told is Juleka is warm in her hands, like the girl itself. She was quiet, but Medusa knew Juleka was a good person. She’d bullied Juleka before, and knew her weaknesses - but recent review had reminded her that some of the weaknesses she’d thought to be weaknesses… no, they were actually strengths. Juleka’s silence was one of them.

Unlike the other lights, Juleka made no noise, as if knowing she was in the hands of a heroine. Medusa was thankful for that.

When she bursts out into the open once again, she feels the light bouncing around in her hands as if vibrating out of control, and with a yelp she lets go as the light bursts, Juleka descending to the ground in its place. The goth girl looks disoriented as she stumbles and nearly falls, but Medusa manages to catch her by the hand.

“You okay?” She asks her. Juleka only nods wordlessly - just as she ducks behind Medusa at the sound of Pixie Pop screaming with rage. “Shit.”

“Medusa! She’s figured out Inari’s illusions! You have to get her out of here!” Ladybug yells just as Pixie Pop’s collective of fairy lights appear above Ladybug’s head. With a loud, ear piercing shriek, the tiniest speck that is Pixie Pop zeroes in on Medusa and Juleka’s forms on the ground.

“NO! JULEKA!” Pixie Pop’s form grows back to its normal size - Rose sized - as she spots Medusa and Juleka on the street. “YOU GIVE HER BACK YOU-”

“VENOM!”

Pixie Pop freezes in midair. The bee hero withdraws his top in satisfaction before fluttering in front of the frozen akuma victim. He draws back his fist, and-

- the sound of shattering glass fills the air as the mirror shards fall to the ground, releasing the
akuma. Ladybug catches the akuma with her yoyo and a sigh, purifying it before sending the butterfly off with a wave.

When Pixie Pop turns back into Rose, the bee hero is waiting to catch her gently in his arms, and with a blush on her cheeks she holds on as he descends to the ground in front of Medusa and Juleka, placing her gently on the ground.

“J… Juleka-” Rose is interrupted by Juleka throwing her arms around the smaller girl, embracing her as tightly as she can. While initially startled, Medusa watches as Rose returns the hug with just as much fervor. “Oh, Juleka, I’m so sorry! I knew you wouldn’t do that to me, I knew, but… but Lila said-”

“Lila is a fucking liar,” Juleka snarls before her voice softens again. She draws back to tuck a lock of hair behind Rose’s ear as she says, “I should be the one sorry. I always had a feeling - I told you about my feelings regarding Lila, but I couldn’t bear to fight with you… not when you so honestly believed-”

Rose’s lower lip wobbles. “She told me you’ve been cheating on me with Nathaniel the whole time, and that you two weren’t just friends.”

“What?! That is ridiculous!” Both Juleka and Rose - and the Bee - turn at Medusa’s violent reaction, and she colors red at her sudden outburst. “Uh. I mean. Don’t mind me. That just sounds. Really ridiculous!”

Rose moans, “It is… I know that for sure now! I just… I didn’t want to believe her, but Lila had never lied to me before, and she kept saying all she wanted was the best for me, and I did definitely see you talking with Nathaniel so many times-”

“Nathaniel and I are friends, but that’s it,” Juleka reassures. “He’s got Chloe, Marc, and Aurore to deal with already, you know that right? And he’s cute, but he’s never going to be as cute as you.” She grins softly at Rose’s embarrassed giggle before turning to Medusa and the Bee hero. “Thank you… really.”

Rose gasps. “I should apologize to Nathaniel! Oh, he must think me such a terrible person…!”

“We both need to - and we need to meet up with the others later. He was going to ask both of us to meet him and the rest about Lila later today.”

“I think this Nathaniel guy wouldn’t blame you for being tricked by this Lila girl, little lady,” Much to Medusa’s surprise, the Bee pats Rose over the head gently. “Ladybug’s told me about how your akumatization was related to her, after all. I think he’ll be cool with whatever you tell him.”

Ladybug jumps down with a smile, followed closely behind by Chat Noir and Inari. “It’s good to see you two back to normal. Do you guys need a ride back to school?”

“If it’s not too much trouble,” Juleka mumbles. Chat Noir winks before scooping her up in his arms, Inari going to do the same for Rose. With nods at each other, the Cat and the Fox bound back to Francois-Dupont as Ladybug goes to face the Bee and Medusa.

“Good job you two,” Ladybug gives both of them fistbumps before glancing over at the Bee. “I think you know now what we have to do, so Medusa? I think you should head on back to where you were earlier.”

Medusa hums thoughtfully before asking, “I never got your name.”
“Huh?”

“Your name, Bee boy. Queen Bee was the one before you- so who are you?” She points at him, a hand on her hip and a foot tapping almost impatiently. “Unless you want me to keep calling you Bee boy.”

Ladybug groans and facepalms, but much to her confusion the Bee hero actually looks thoughtful, lips drawn into a thin line. Before she knows what’s happening, he smiles a very cocky smile - almost like Chat Noir’s, but more prideful in nature than chaotic as he gestures grandly and bows a very low bow.

“Kaiser Biene, at your service,” He introduces, just as a stripe on his Miraculous fades away again. He curses under his breath at the sight of it before straightening back out again. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, my dear. This lady and I have to have a chat.”

Ladybug looks this close to losing it. “Alright, alright, little bee, into the alley with you.”

“You sound like you’re about to murder him,” Medusa points out, though her brain runs wild with what Kaiser Biene had called her. MY DEAR?! MY DEAR?! What is he, Chat Noir’s redhead twin?!?

Kaiser snorts. “Worried about me, sassy scales?”

“Wh- hah! As IF!” Medusa huffs, cheeks red at the nickname he’d given her, but it only makes him laugh before Ladybug bounds away and he buzzes after her. With his back turned, Medusa could see that the translucent wing-like parts of his cape weren’t just for decoration after all - they were his actual wings.

Medusa harrumphs, but it’s not unkind as she ducks behind a nearby tree to detransform. He was a pretty good Bee, that Kaiser Biene. A worthy successor.

“Are you alright, Chloe?” Sass asks as Chloe fishes out a boiled egg from her bag. The kwami peels at the shell while waiting for her answer. “That must have been quite the experience, seeing your successor.”

Chloe huffs. “He was okay.”

“Just okay?” Sass presses.

“... Okay. He was super cool,” Chloe admits before crossing her arms. “But I am so not talking about that right now. Eat your egg, we need to go back to school on foot so people don’t get sus.”

Later, when she’s back at school and lounging on a bench during break with Sabrina and Nathaniel watching Aurore and Marc work themselves up into a tizzy, she’s greeted with a question from Aurore.

“Chloe! You were the former Bee hero, Queen Bee!” Aurore points at her. “Your opinions on the new bee, Kaiser Biene! Is he hot, or is he not?”

“I don’t think we should-” Nathaniel’s cut off suddenly by Chloe answering in a very bored tone, “He’s hot and efficient.”

Marc pumps his fist in the air as Aurore crows victoriously, “HA! Told you so, Mireille! You owe us each two euros!”
“Wait- wh- you bet on Chloe’s answer?!” Nathaniel stammers. Chloe’s not sure why his face is so red, but he sure is adorable. “What was the bet?!”

Marc grins as Mireille hands over the money. “Mireille bet you’d be okay with him. Marc bet you’d think he was a good Bee. I bet you’d think he was hot.”

“He is not!” Nathaniel yelps.

Sabrina hums in thought. “Well, he’s pretty good-looking, a lot like Chat Noir, definitely. I can’t say hot, but everyone’s got their own thoughts on the matter!”

“EXACTLY!” Aurore says.

Nathaniel’s face is red for the rest of the conversation until the bell rings. Chloe’s at least twenty percent sure that his face remains red for the rest of the day.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Summary

Adrien goes to pay a visit to a Marinette busy with redesigns and Miraculous plans.

When Adrien goes to visit his lady love the instant Nathalie tells him there’s been a change in schedule, giving him at least two hours of free time, he finds her with her back turned to the hatch leading up to her room, facing her whiteboard with her hands on her hips. One of the hands held her marker - the board, however, was filled with writing he couldn’t decipher.

“Don’t tell me there’s been an akuma and you’re already plotting to defeat it out of costume, my lady,” Adrien teases as he raises the hatch door all the way.

Marinette squeaks in surprise, dropping her marker, before turning around to give him the stink eye as he lets himself in. “Ha ha, very funny, kitty. I thought you had a photoshoot scheduled for right now, what are you doing here?”

“Something suddenly came up and Father had to forcibly reschedule today’s photoshoot with another model,” Adrien shrugs. He didn’t particularly care about the specifics - as long as he got to skip out on another modeling gig with Lila, he was more than happy. It meant getting to spend time with Marinette out of school - and time away from the vixen’s claws. “I thought Lila was about to blow a gasket when Nathalie came to tell us of the change.”

Marinette snorts with laughter as she goes and picks up her marker. “If she did it’d be so much easier on our ends and we wouldn’t even be planning her takedown anymore. Now c’mon, have a seat, I have to show you something by the way.”

“Oh?”

“I just need your opinions on a few things,” Marinette begins as she climbs the stairs to her loft. Adrien takes a seat on her chaise as he listens carefully for her voice. With how her room was structured, her voice seemed to echo throughout the whole place whenever she was in specific corners of her loft. “Oh, where is it- Tikki, do you remember?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the Ladybug kwami peeks out from the side of Marinette’s desk sorter. “It’s tucked in between your cross stitch reference books, Marinette! Remember, you put it there when Manon climbed up there once and fished it out of your bed!”

“Right, right, thanks Tikki!”

Adrien leans against the chaise as he asks Tikki, “So uh. What’s Mari up to?”

“She’s been thinking about-”

“NO SPOILING THE SURPRISE!” Marinette yelps, throwing a pillow down at Tikki and Adrien before rummaging around her books some more - judging from the sounds anyway. “AHA! Found it!”

Marinette clammers down from her loft, carrying one of her sketchbooks. Picking up the pillow she
threw at them, she takes a seat next to Adrien and curls up next to him, her head on his shoulder as she opens up her sketchbook. Adrien leans his head on top of hers as he watches her flip through a few pages before settling on a page with two cleaner sketches.

“What’s this, milady?” Adrien asks curiously. His fingers go to trace the shaded sections of the sketch he was currently eyeing - it looked like Chat Noir, but there were key aspects to his outfit that had changed. The figure next to it looked like Ladybug, but no longer was her suit just all red with spots. “Thinking of making us costumes for the next Halloween?”

Marinette rolls her eyes but taps a finger against her sketchbook. “They’re possible costume redesigns. Tikki mentioned to me that it was possible for us to change our suits even though we already established our suits if we really wanted to, so I thought ‘hey, why not?’”

“You wanted an excuse to design something new,” Adrien says matter-of-factly, reaching over with one hand to toy with the stray strands of hair that didn’t line up with the rest of Marinette’s pigtails.

“Okay, yeah, but also, the new heroes got me thinking.” Marinette flips over to the next page, and Adrien watches as a pencil she’d tucked into her hair is pulled out and then used on the page, sketching out quick half bodies of Inari, Medusa, and Kaiser Biene respectively. “You saw how their Miraculous were embedded into their outfits, right? Or at least when you look at them they’re not immediately recognizable unless you knew what you were looking for.”

Adrien hums in thought. He did notice that - but in his private opinion it was probably because everyone by now had begun to take the loss of a Miraculous seriously and had subconsciously reacted to it by wanting to protect the Miraculous they were given. He’d only really noticed it first with Nino and the Tiger Miraculous - it had turned into a gauntlet that clung to his hand. Everyone else after that seemed to follow the same trend.

Medusa’s Snake Miraculous in camouflage mode was a bracelet with two headed snakes that met each other in hisses, and when transformed the snakes twisted around her arm like vines, the indicator for when she’d used her power being a single loop of the snakes around her arm. It fit Chloé’s taste for the extravagant.

Inari’s was simpler - the usually dangling pendant of the Fox was now just a Fox, curled up inside an emblem carved into her armor itself. When he’d seen her in civilian form, the fox tail pendant had become a round coin shape of the same emblem on Inari’s armor. Functional and symbolic - Kagami’s choice here was clear.

Kaiser Biene’s was incredibly unique, the most out of the three. He hadn’t even thought about separating parts of the Miraculous into attire, but Nathaniel’s artistic mind had turned the teeth of his comb into a crown and his bee into his cape and brooch. In civilian attire, the bee was a brooch... or a pin? Adrien wasn’t sure, but he knew Nathaniel usually had it pinned on the inside his shirt and hidden in his jacket for extra safety. It had become a pin instead of a haircomb for the boy who liked to keep his hair in front of his eyes.

“I don’t know how you plan on changing up ours though,” Adrien plays with the ring on his finger thoughtfully. “The thing is, mine is a ring. Yours are earrings. Too straightforward to do much else with it.”

Marinette taps his nose with a finger. “That’s only if you’re as straightforward as you are, Adrien. Remember when you were Mister Bug?”

“Yeah? The earrings became clip ons, but that’s all I know.”
“The thing is... what we want to do is fool Hawkmoth into thinking we hid the Miraculous somewhere inside our costumes. You remember Bunnyx, right?”

A Burrow portal opens up in that instant, and Adrien and Marinette both yelp as Bunnyx pokes her head out. “Of course he remembers me, I’m a bit unforgettable in this day and age. Nice work with the new recruits by the way, Minibug and Kitty Noir. Now I’m stuck with a rascal that pops in at random to check if I’m still awake at 3AM and drags me off to bed like my job isn’t a full time thing.”

“You love me, tokki ,” A voice echoes from behind her. “And someone’s gotta drag you to bed or you won’t get any sleep at all.”

“Like you’re one to talk,” Bunnyx calls back. At Adrien and Marinette’s wide-eyed incredulous stares, however, she only winks and salutes them with two fingers. “It’s nothing too serious, Minibug, I promise. I like having him here - but never all the time, his powers could fuck up a lot of timelines if I let him stay for longer than ten minutes in my Burrow.”

“I’m more concerned about the fact that you decided to pop in randomly just now,” Adrien watches as Tikki darts over to Bunnyx with a worried look on her face. “Did something happen in the future to warrant this visit?”

Bunnyx cracks a smile. “Genius with the walking stick over here’s been watching your rabbit hole while I was watching everything else and accidentally touched it with his bare hands. It was going to go to shit and cause more chaos for all of you if I didn’t tell you about it at this exact moment in time.”

“Why?” Marinette asks curiously.

Bunnyx zips her lips. “Rabbit’s secret, Minibug.”

“Hey Bunnyx, this one has me with the Dog Miraculous and you with the Fox, isn’t that cute? It’s kinda like that one movie! I gotta see more of this - do cameras work in your Burrow? I should bring a camera next time, actually.”

“What the- don’t touch that one too, idiot! Do you want half of Paris to go down in flames?!” The rabbit hole disappears as Bunnyx darts back in, leaving Marinette and Adrien to blink at each other to try and process it before returning to the notebook in front of them.

Plagg hovers behind Marinette and Adrien as the Ladybug wielder repeats, “So like I said, we could take some notes from our new teammates and try and change up our outfits a little - like, to just make things a little harder for Hawkmoth’s akuma, you know? Pixie Pop had me with my hands on my earrings and your hand clenched tightly the whole time when she was tiny - I can’t spend entire battles like that, even with Second Chance and more teammates.”

“I can see why we’d need that, but I’m not really following,” Adrien holds out his hand. “How would you change up or hide my ring?”

Marinette hums in thought, taking his hand in hers. Adrien takes this time to marvel over how small her hands are compared to his. He’d held Ladybug’s and Marinette’s hands many times before, separately, and every time he couldn’t help but observe how dainty they were in his hold - it matched the girl, with and without her mask. Unassuming, but she packed a punch.

His bug was the best. Kaiser Biene be damned. Chloe, Marc, and Aurore could fight him on that.

“Adrien? Adrien, are you listening?”
Adrien blinks rapidly before sighing to himself. “Sorry, I kinda dozed off thinking about how small your hands were.”

“Wha- you know what? I’ll buy that - just hear me out again,” Marinette traces his Miraculous with her index finger all around. “You could consider making your claw gloves like full on gauntlets, just like Nino did with the Tiger Miraculous. Embed the cat’s stone in the same finger your ring is currently on right now, but it’s a whole gauntlet - that’s attached to your suit.” She touches her earrings. “As for me I’d have to figure out what’s the most difficult kind of earring to remove.”

Plagg chooses this moment to sit on the book, startling Marinette. “Or, you could just think about something to cover up the earring itself but make it look like it’s still the earring, just bigger. Who was your holder who did that again, Sugarcube?”

“Micazoyolin!” Tikki brightens up at the memory.

“Micazoyolin?” Marinette asks skeptically.

Tikki nods, going to sit next to Plagg as she explains, “I’ve told you about some of the past Miraculous holders before, right? Micazoyolin was an Aztec warrior who wielded me during his time - when he was transformed he had a headdress with bands over both of his ears, and on those bands were two ladybug jewels!”

“But I’m not really the kind of person to wear something on my head while transformed…” Marinette’s brow furrows. “Well. Except when I’m wearing the Miraculous that needs stuff on the head, like Xuppu’s circlet… ah!”

Adrien watches with quiet interest as Marinette hurriedly scribbles something onto the page before showing it to him. The sketch was of the same Ladybug from the previous page, but now her earrings were… “Okay, I’m either tripping, or you have four earrings on in this drawing.”

“What?” Marinette looks down, and corrects it. “Sorry, I meant to draw three on each ear.”

“Why?”

“To fool Hawkmoth!”

“Marinette, I’m not sure this is going to fool Hawkmoth. Honest opinion,” Tikki says apologetically, looking over the costume thoughtfully. “You’re better off not changing anything about the earrings at all.”

Marinette pouts slightly, something that makes Adrien laugh and nose at the hair on her head. “Okay well, maybe it isn’t one of my best ideas… but it’s still in the workshop!”

“I think we’re both better off only doing changes to our outfits if ever, Mari,” He amends with a soft chuckle, allowing Marinette to groan and curl further into his side. If she hadn’t been so clearly a Ladybug, he would have joked that she was a different bug altogether. “It’s okay, Buginette. You’ll hit that creative spike yet.”

Marinette only groans even louder.

“Hey Pigtails?” Adrien, out of the corner of his eye, sees Plagg dart up to the whiteboard that Marinette had been working on when he’d arrived. “What’s all this on the board? If you were trying to be discreet that you were Ladybug your friends are gonna figure you out when they see this, you know.”
Adrien raises an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“Oh… oh right, yeah, I needed to ask you another thing too!” Marinette draws away from his side, leaving his side oddly cold and making a whine crawl up at the back of his throat. “Adrien… what do we do about Nino and Alya?”

_Nino_… The whine dies in his throat as the topic of his best friend comes into mind. “I really was looking forward to fighting with him again… maybe even make him a permanent member if Master Fu allowed it.”

“We can’t, he got outed as Carapace… and I already long replaced Rena Rouge with Inari…” Marinette tugs on her pigtails in worry, worrying her lower lip. “We never really formally told them both that they were retired- I’ve been trying to avoid Alya ever since as Ladybug- Nino almost got akumatized that one time-”

Adrien places his hands on her shoulders. “Mari. If you want, we can tell them both tonight during patrol. Since Kaiser Biene is joining us you can send him and Medusa down your usual route, and Inari I can send down mine.”

“Wh-?”

“Your usual route has Nino’s house on it, doesn’t it?” Adrien asks patiently. At her nod, he continues, “And mine has Alya’s. I can confirm to Alya that she’s been permanently retired for Inari without you having to deal with it, and you can at least give Nino the assurance that we’ll protect him even though his identity got exposed.”

Marinette places both her hands on his wrists, pulling them down to her lap as she holds his hands. She squeezes his hands like they were lifelines as she murmurs, “That’s why I had all that stuff on my board that I’m going to transfer to a notebook… I was trying to think about what Miraculous to give Nino.”

“Really?” Adrien asks, baffled. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to do it right _now_, he _just_ lost Wayzz.”

“No, no, of course not _right now_ right now,” Marinette amends, waving her hands about frantically. “But if we ever needed his experience with a Miraculous, I’ve been trying to pin down one for him in preparation.”

Tikki goes to sit on Adrien’s shoulder as she says, “Marinette’s been thinking about this for a long time, actually. Since some Miraculous were shuffled around and some were locked out of someone’s hold permanently, she needed to find a way to give someone she wanted to give a Miraculous permanently to a Miraculous they could learn from.”

“As long as you don’t give it to Nino immediately…”

“I wouldn’t do that to him, _minou_,” Marinette’s hold on his hands tightens again, and her gaze turns to their joined hands, pensive. “I… he didn’t deserve that. I wish I could do something to make him feel better…”

Plagg, surprisingly, is the one who pipes up at her words. “Maybe we should ask Master Fu if you can borrow the Turtle Miraculous for a little bit. Let the guy say goodbye properly and everything.”

“It’s dangerous!” Tikki zips in his face. “You know we’re supposed to be very careful in choosing the Miraculous we bring out permanently! You remember what happened with the Bee Miraculous the first time, don’t you?!”
Marinette blanches. “Uh huh.”

“Relax, Sugarcube. Babybug here’s learned from back then, right?” Plagg chomps on a cheese tart Adrien’s sure he’d stolen from downstairs. He’d have to pay Marinette back later. “And for that matter, I know what you’re gonna say. This accidental reveal is nothing like some previous holders. Wayzz deserves the chance to tell him goodbye at the least.”

Tikki frowns considerably. “It’s still too risky…”

“It’s not going to turn out like Joan. Not everyone’s going to be like Joan.”

Marinette’s eyes widen, as do Adrien’s. The name was familiar - in a way that the faces of old family members you haven’t seen in years were familiar. “Joan? You mean…”

“…” Tikki’s eyes water slightly, but she doesn’t cry. Never has Adrien seen Tikki cry directly - if she had cried, through Ladybug in transformation, he would never truly know unless she confirmed it herself. The little red kwami goes to sit on their joined hands as she murmurs, “I never did get to tell her a proper goodbye before they burned her at the stake.”

As it clicks in their heads who exactly she’s talking about, the kwami’s head only sinks lower. “She’d taken me off unwillingly before she’d been properly captured, and thrown me into the hands of her squire, sending us off far, far away, as far as possible. I never got to tell her goodbye.” Tikki’s voice cracks. “When I woke up, alone, the Miraculous and I hidden somewhere far away… I knew by then she was already gone.”

“Oh, Tikki…” Marinette lets go of his hands to cup Tikki in hers, hugging the kwami to her the best she can.

Adrien looks at Plagg. “Have you ever had to do something like that?”

“Lots of times, kitten,” Plagg mutters. “But I don’t want to talk about that.”

He doesn’t press further.

“If you believe you can convince Master Fu, then I won’t stop you,” Tikki tells Marinette softly. “Nino’s a good person. He’s been working so hard to earn your forgiveness properly and this isn’t what he should be getting in return.”

Marinette nods. “You’re right… he at least deserves a chance to tell him goodbye. But I still want him to be able to be a hero when we need him to be. He has experience as a Miraculous holder that I don’t really want to waste yet, but we can’t give him the Turtle again.”

“You know… I do have a suggestion for Nino’s future Miraculous,” Adrien says brightly. At Marinette’s wide eyed look, he grins a familiar Chat Noir grin. “But first, we need to discuss what to tell Alya and Nino tonight.”
adrien agreste and the anger that spills out

Chapter Summary

A Black Cat visits a former Fox.

As he had expected, when he passes by the Cesaire household he’s immediately flagged down by the girl sitting on her balcony, looking incredibly pensive. A nasty little thing in his chest is pleased to see her in such a remorseful state, but the more sensible part of him chokes it as he puts on the sternest expression Chat Noir’s ever made towards a civilian as he perches on her railing.

“Alya, right?” He greets, carefully observing her. “I was wondering when you’d flag me down.”

“Ladybug’s been ignoring me, hasn’t she?” Alya asks. Her posture is stiff, but she’s not aggressive. He remains on the alert for any change in demeanor, however, ears pricked. “You don’t usually go this patrol route.”

Chat shakes his head. “She’s off to talk to Nino Lahiffe tonight, so we switched patrol routes with everyone. You know why, don’t you?”

“I’m sorry, okay?! It slipped out, and I just-” Alya’s grip on the railing tightens, and the muscles under Chat’s suit tense in preparation until she relaxes again. “I don’t even know why I turned to him-”

“Rena Rouge,” She stiffens further at him addressing her by her former name. Good. “You were asked to keep identities a secret until Ladybug hadn’t been able to take you away from each other out of costume on Heroes’ Day. Even then you were asked to keep it secret still. Ladybug trusted you.” He flashes her the slightest hints of a snarl, something that makes her inch away a little. “And yet you broke that trust like she breaks akumatized objects.”

Alya’s voice takes on a hostile tone. “I already told you it was a mistake, okay?! I was just- people were praising the new Fox and trashing on Rena Rouge and- they were only pointing out the bad things and I went like ‘but didn’t I do good too?! Didn’t I become a hero too?! Is everyone that fickle to easily replace heroes as soon as they’re shuffled out of circulation?!’”

“I don’t know, Alya. Ask Lila if it’s that easy to replace best friends too,” Chat Noir mutters to himself, but not quietly enough - because he sees Alya’s hackles rise in fury at the words he’d muttered.

“Did Marinette tell you not to use me as Rena Rouge anymore?! She did, didn’t she?!”

“She did nothing of the sort!” Chat Noir growls, claws tightening around her railing. Tikki, give me strength... and the patience... “Marinette was not verbally involved in the decision to bench you, and never will be verbally involved. She is a civilian - the fact that she knows both me and Ladybug so well is already a huge target on her back. We would never willingly involve her in the chaos of our lives.”

“She has to be involved somehow!” Alya nearly shouts, and he’s thankful she’d closed the glass door that led to her living room because wow was she loud even when restraining herself. The
streets, thankfully, were devoid of people. When she gestures, her gestures are angry, her arms moving like blades through the air swiping at nothing. “People have seen you visiting her all the time. She gets visited by Ladybug. She’s probably already painted Lila in a bad light to her best friend of all people—”

Chat’s whole body language shifts into hostility in response. “Lila Rossi didn’t need Marinette to paint her in a bad light, she did that all on her own.”

“Lila and Ladybug are best friends!” Alya protests.

The black cat can’t help but snort. “Who told you that, Lila?”

“I- well-”

“You know what? Let’s stop talking about her. She’s not why I’m here tonight, Alya.” He’d get off the railing, but he knows a small part of him would Cataclysm something if he touched the floor of the Cesaire household. “Marinette Dupain-Cheng is uninvolved in this, yet you’d so willingly jump to the conclusion that she’s the reason for your own failings as a hero and as a person?!”

“My failing as a-”

“You knew Nino was Carapace,” Chat takes a step forward on the railing, closer to Alya. Alya takes a step back. “You knew his identity, and he knew yours. You were tasked with keeping it secret and you failed, all because you wanted the public reassurance that ‘you were a good hero’ when others weren’t praising your accomplishments under the mask.”

Alya clenches her fists, but she doesn’t verbally lash out at him. “Wasn’t I?”

“Before I knew who you were for sure behind the mask? I did,” Chat mutters bitterly. “We worked together really well during Sapotis, Alya. I remember that much. You wanted to save your sisters. You were a hero.”

“I’m still a hero if Ladybug would-”

“What part of ‘NO’ do you not understand, Alya?!” Chat snarls. “You’re not listening! You betrayed Ladybug’s trust in revealing the identity of another Miraculous holder. You betrayed Ladybug’s civilian identity with your actions as a civilian. And now you’re condemning your civilian classmate to a hero of Paris because you think she’s the reason for all your problems!”

Alya’s eyes are wide as he prowls atop her railing, never getting too close, but never going too far either. The leather belt that was his tail thrashes like a real agitated cat’s tail as he does so. “Alya… you’re a good person at heart. Ladybug knows that. I know that. Overzealous at times, but you’re good at your core. That’s who you are.” He looks up at her, and sees that her eyes are still trained on him. “You want to be a hero. You idolize heroes. But would a hero really have done what you did?”

“I made a mistake,” Alya says softly, brokenly. “Exposing Nino like that. I made a mistake.”

“You did,” Chat agrees. “And you know what heroes do when they make mistakes, Alya?”

Alya blinks at him. He can see her trying to blink back the tears that threatened to spill over her cheeks.

“Heroes don’t push the blame on others for the problems they caused and the mistakes they’ve
made when someone’s already telling them what they should be doing,” Chat mutters. “Heroes know when to be humble. When to be kind. When to know truth from lie.” He laughs softly to himself. “Ladybug… she’s all of that. She has her own faults, her own troubles... but you can always count on her to be a hero, inside and outside of the mask… no matter if her own best friend became her enemy.”

Alya is quiet as he sits properly on her railing this time, like a person would and not like a cat. “As Ladybug’s proxy, tonight I came here to tell you that you have officially been retired from the position as Rena Rouge, and will never be able to receive the Fox Miraculous ever again.”

“And this is all because I exposed Nino publicly?” Alya asks softly. “Were you planning to use me again at some point, even with Inari out and about?”

Chat doesn’t answer at first, claws flexing. “... No. It really runs deeper than that. But that’s something only Ladybug can tell you personally. If I told you anything I might actually get akumatized with how pissed off I am at you right now,” He goes to stand, pulling out his bo staff. “If Ladybug ever decides to use you again, ever, in the future… well. I don’t know if I’d be happy with that, but I’d respect her decision if it ever came to that. But right now?”

Alya looks up at him. He looks down at her. The moon makes him cast a shadow upon Alya that reminds him of the shadow his father always cast upon him whenever they talked. “I think you need to do some self-reflection of everything that’s happened to you. And everything you’ve done.” And the people you hang around with.

“... I’m sorry that you broke up with Nino, Alya,” He eventually says, prompting Alya to look up in alarm. When she opens her mouth to no doubt ask how he knew, he interrupts her with, “Gossip sent through the grapevine travels fast in civilian life, and in your school.”

“Figures,” Alya says bitterly. “Wait, does this mean you-”

“Go to your school? No, but Marinette does,” Chat confirms. “And before you get mad again, she was worried about you two getting akumatized over it.”

Alya deflates. “She… she was?”

“Of course?” Chat looks up and sees a familiar shadow dart past his line of vision, and he knows that it’s time to go. He stands up. “She’s - no, I guess that’s not true. She used to be your best friend, right?”

Alya frowns. “... Yeah. Used to be.”

“And yet here she is, still worrying about you,” Chat’s thumb hovers over the button on his staff. “While you’re here trashing her reputation to a hero who knows better. Hm. Isn’t that a treat.” He sees her cringe at his words. “I purrrsonally think you need to think about what you’ve been doing recently, Alya. Who knows? Maybe you’ll figure something out along the way.”

The familiar sound of Ladybug’s yoyo zips past, and both he and Alya look up to see Ladybug coasting across the rooftops. Not long after that, the sound of Kaiser Biene’s wings sails above and after Ladybug, in his arms being the familiar figure of Medusa being carried with him.

And then last of all…

Quiet, ghostly Inari, darting across the rooftops and leaving not a single speck of dirt each time she took a step. When Chat goes to look at Alya to gauge her reaction, he sees her eyes fill up with mixed emotions.
Fury at being replaced.

Wistfulness, most likely remembering how it felt to run and jump across rooftops herself.

Sorrow, because she never got to say goodbye to Trixx and apologize for her mistakes.

*You should give Nino a chance to say goodbye to Wayzz*, Plagg’s voice echoes in his head.

Did that mean he should let Alya say goodbye to Trixx as well?

The logical part of him said yes, he should - if they were extending the opportunity to Nino, Alya had the right to receive the opportunity to say goodbye to Trixx as well, no matter what she did. She *was* kind to Trixx, and Trixx *did* like her.

The salty, bitter part of him, however, said no, he shouldn’t - Alya didn’t *deserve* the right to say goodbye to Trixx. Not after what she did to Nino, to Marinette-

Chat bites the inside of his cheek. It draws blood, leaving his mouth tasting of copper. It wasn’t all Alya’s fault. She made mistakes, and she needed to own up to them, yes - but a lot of them were directly and indirectly the results of Lila’s machinations. Chat didn’t have to feel so *angry* and salty on behalf of Nino and Marinette when Alya was still human and prone to making mistakes like everyone else did. Like he did, by telling Marinette to take the high road.

But *God* did he feel angry as Adrien Agreste on their behalf.

“C-Chat Noir!” Alya gasps, pointing at something behind him.

Chat holds out a hand, muttering, “Cataclysm,” and grabs the akuma, crushing the butterfly in his hand. *Not today, Hawkmoth. Not today, you slimy bastard*.

“I have to go. We’re having a meeting tonight,” Chat goes to extend the baton, but not before Alya calls for him one last time. “What?”

Alya rubs her wrist awkwardly. “…You’re a hero. Was… was I a good Fox?”

Chat stares down at her, and his grip on his baton tightens.

“You were an okay Fox,” he eventually mutters, before pressing the button on his baton and extending it, making his exit and leaving Alya alone on her balcony to think about his words.

When he goes to meet up with the others, Inari is the first to greet him with, “You’re late, Chat Noir.”

“Sorry, sorry! Had to run a few errands before I came here,” Chat looks at Ladybug. “Are we all good to go? Did patrol go by smoothly for everyone?”

Inari nods in assent as Kaiser replies, “Smooth as honey, catman. With the help of Medusa, of course.”

“You’re a bee. You make honey, not butter, so stop buttering me up!” Medusa attempts to flick at Kaiser’s nose, but the Bee hero only flits upward, leaving her on the ground. “Hey! That’s cheating!”

Ladybug blinks at the sight of Chat’s ring going down a pawpad. “Chat? Did you use Cataclysm?”

“Akuma headed towards Alya Cesaire’s house,” Chat says simply. “Cataclysmed it.”
“I didn’t know you could do that,” Kaiser stares at him thoughtfully. “That means the butterfly it was possessing died, though, right?”

Chat nods tersely. “Yeah. At least no one got akumatized.”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” Ladybug squints at him, and in response he tilts his head to the side and flicks his bell. *We’ll talk about it later.* The signal makes her stop squinting as she sighs and says, “If that’s all we have to report about, then for tonight patrol ends. I’d make us stay a little longer, but Chat used Cataclysm and he needs to get home as soon as possible.”

“Thanks, milady.”

As the three newer heroes disperse, Ladybug approaches him, gaze soft as she cups his cheek. “Are you sure you’re alright, chaton? Was that akuma meant for Alya?”

“I think… it was meant for me,” Chat admits softly. “But I destroyed it.”

“Oh, Chat…”

“I would never let myself get akumatized over something like that,” Chat swears. “I assure you, my lady. This cat’s a bigger person than that.”

“There’s nothing wrong with feeling,” Ladybug murmurs. “We can’t be the bigger person all the time. But… I’m glad you weren’t akumatized.” *BEEP.* “Oh no. You should go home now, kitty - before it times out while you’re halfway there. Wouldn’t want Paris trying to figure out why Adrien Agreste was stuck on the roof like a kitten in a tree, would we?”

Chat rolls his eyes, but moves to kiss her hand in farewell anyway. “Har har, milady. See you tomorrow?”

“See you tomorrow, Chat.”
nino lahiffe and a misunderstanding to clear up

Chapter Summary

There's a bit of unclarified goings-on happening with Nino and Kagami.

Chapter Notes

me, having held snippets of this chapter and the next chapter even before i wrote this fic: [mute screaming because i finally get to use it and my agenda is finally out in the open]

researching luka's characterization was difficult when mr. astruc doesn't give me much to work with

Lila knows.

She knows that Juleka and Rose have begun to question her words, her stories, her lies. Nino knows she knows - and he has the sinking feeling that she also knows that he’s aware of it. Her smiles are like bear traps lying hidden in the forest, waiting to clamp onto his leg and wound him until he bleeds out alone. They’re still just as practiced and perfect as they usually are - but her hold on everyone is loosening. She can feel it - and he can see it.

Rose’s akumatization into Pixie Pop hadn’t gone as she’d planned it to be. Neutral Juleka had finally chosen her side, and where Juleka went, Rose would always follow. Where Juleka went, her older brother Luka was usually sure to follow as well. It helped that he’d held feelings for Marinette - and still did, possibly, even though Nino was at least ninety percent certain Adrien and Marinette were already dating and just not telling anyone.

Nino had been there when Juleka had told Luka what had happened with Rose and Lila. He’d also been there when Luka had actually snapped one of his guitar strings in response to his sister’s words. The guy wasn’t very violent by default, not at all - Nino would even say that he and Luka were similar in that regard, in that they preferred to go with the flow and remain easygoing where possible.

So to see him so enraged at the actions of Lila Rossi towards his sister and her girlfriend that he’d ended up breaking a guitar string was, without a doubt, a big surprise.

It was also a big surprise to realize that he was so furious that an akuma had been called to him, but that had been dealt with quickly - thankfully without Chloe keeping it in her mouth again this time. Kagami had swiftly chugged down the orange juice Marinette had poured out into her glass before using it to snatch the akuma from the air and keeping it in there with a magazine - an action so out-of-the-blue that Luka’s anger had immediately melted into surprise, matching literally everyone else’s reactions to her action.

With the akuma safely trapped in the glass, most of them had relaxed afterwards, but Luka still had
things to say to Juleka with his anger now more manageable.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you, Jule. I should’ve been there to protect you from her cacophony.”

“You can’t protect me all the time,” Juleka murmurs to him when he lets her go from his embrace. “You know that, right?”

Luka frowns. “I’m your older brother. It’s one of the things I should be able to do for you, at the very least. What good am I if I can’t figure out how to protect the people I love from people like her?”

“You didn’t know how terrible she was, Luka,” Rose reassures. Marinette and Adrien nod in assent. “You knew her song, but-”

“- but not the extent of her damage,” Marinette finishes for her. She smiles at Luka, and Nino can tell that it hurts just a little for Luka to see her with Adrien. He knows he’s strong, however, when Luka smiles right back at her with the same affection he always held. “I didn’t tell you everything either… it really isn’t your fault that you didn’t speak up sooner.”

Adrien waves a hand around to emphasize his words as he speaks. “Everyone here’s been fooled or hurt by Lila before, Luka. You may not have been affected yourself, but the people you care about have been, and now you know more than you did before.”

“If I’d known more… I don’t think I would’ve been able to stop myself from saying ‘yes’ to Hawkmoth,” Luka admits softly. They all look at the akuma still sitting on the table, being openly ignored. “Lila… she hurt you, Juleka, by hurting Rose. And by hurting you, she hurt me too. I wouldn’t have been able to stand that. I can’t stand that. And I can’t stand by here being unable to do anything to protect the people I care about.”

Adrien leans into Marinette’s ear to whisper something, and Nino watches her eyes widen. He’d ask to clarify, but by then Chloe had pointed out something strange - the akuma had been purified while still trapped in the glass.

“Did Hawkmoth just… give up?” Nino asks incredulously.

Nathaniel crouches in front of the glass to get a better view, and before anyone can stop him he lifts the magazine away, allowing the now white butterfly to escape out one of the windows. “Looks like it. The little guy can’t hurt anyone now. Good thing you didn’t eat it, huh, Chloe?”

“Will you ever let me live it down?”

“Eventually.”

After that day had come and gone, it was a relief for everyone to know that they now had even more allies within Bustier’s class, which meant that only three were left on Lila’s side within the class: Mylene, Ivan, and Alya.

Alya…

Even though he’d blocked her himself on most forms of contact, she’d been surprisingly distant from everyone, even Lila, as though going through a period of self-isolation or self-reflection. She refused contact with most people besides Lila, who demanded contact no matter what - but even he had to admit that she at least seemed to be limiting her touch to gentle pats on the shoulder or the
hand where she seemed to deem it necessary.

It was… odd, to say the least. To see Alya so quiet, so… not Alya. It was like she was going through something, an internal struggle he had no idea of. Maybe he would have known if they were still speaking to each other, but… even then that was still a fifty fifty. Alya didn’t speak of all her problems to him every time - she usually had Marinette to rant to. If Marinette wasn’t available, then she’d turn to him.

*And now she has Lila, right?*

Nino thinks about it, and shakes his head. Probably not; Lila seemed too focused on herself to really give anyone the time of day, but maybe with Alya she at least *pretended* to listen, given that Alya listened to her. It was a fairly sociopathic way of looking at things - pretend to listen to the one who listens to you in order to keep yourself in their good graces. And if he knew Lila, there was probably going to be a way she’d turn it into something about herself or twist Alya’s problem into her own.

…

Nino mentally writes down ‘might be a sociopath’ in his rarely touched ‘Lila Rossi’ file.

Now that the number of people they needed to try and drag away from Lila had whittled down to three, it was getting increasingly harder to get to them. Mylene and Ivan usually kept to themselves already by default, similarly to Rose and Juleka, but now that Lila didn’t have her focus on everyone, she was tightening the leash on the two of them. She’d group with them whenever Alya wasn’t available, or pull Alya along with her for the groupings in classes.

Alya’s leash was already choking her, and she didn’t even know how bad it was.

“Lila knows. She’s got to. Or at least is very much aware we’re planning something,” Nathaniel breathes later on during lunch. To keep up pretenses, Alix, Kim, and Max alongside Juleka and Rose still kept to their own table, but they were sure that Lila wasn’t buying it even for a second. “Why else would she have caused Rose to break down enough to get akumatized over that?”

“It doesn’t make sense though,” Sabrina frowns, tapping her pencil against her chin as she scribbles something down. “If Lila knows, shouldn’t she have already tried to stop us outright - like, ruined all of our reputations in one fell swoop? She knows we’re all friends and always hanging out together, it’d be easier for her.”

Chloe flips the salmon on her plate over, the fish making a *splat* noise when it lands back on the sauce. “Knock on wood, Sabrina. She can’t target a big group just like that, that’s called ‘being stupid and assuming everyone is going to react the same’. She targets individuals and lets everyone else do the dirty work for her.” With a scoff and a toss of her ponytail, she sticks a bit of salmon in her mouth and swallows before adding, “I should know. Bully tactics come in all tricks and ways. Hers is more… underhanded.”

“Just say her bullying’s worse in both the ‘your bullying tactics back then were better’ and ‘it’s worse on the victim’ way, it’s okay, it’s a safe space here,;” Adrien says. Chloe throws a ball of tissue at his forehead, the tissue bouncing off and hitting Nino square in the nose before landing dangerously close to Marinette’s pudding.

“Ooooh, you’re right, you’re right…” Sabrina knocks on the wood of her pencil when she finds no other wooden surface to knock against. “But then… what do we do now?”
“The thing to do now is talk to Mylene or Ivan. Marinette, do they still talk to you?” Nathaniel directs this question to Marinette, who pauses in her eating to consider his words. “I know Ivan and Mylene aren’t the type to not talk to you, but… what’s your experience?”

Marinette nibbles on her lower lip thoughtfully. “I do talk to them… one on one, or together. But you’ve seen Lila’s tactics recently. You can barely get to talk to either of them without Lila hovering nearby ready to pounce.”

“I can’t talk to them either, same case. You saw what happened with Juleka and Rose,” Nathaniel sighs, and out of the corner of his eye he sees Chloe’s hand drop down under the table to most likely pat his hand or hold it. “Literally none of us can get close enough to either of them without Lila, can we?”

The table grows silent, weary of the trouble. They had their evidences, they had their plans ready - but on Marinette’s insistence, they wanted the others to avoid being collateral damage. They wanted Mylene and Ivan - and if they could, Alya - out of the danger zone. It was the only thing keeping them from enacting the plan. But how could they do that without alerting Lila?

Marinette was a no-go. Nathaniel too. Chloe and Sabrina people were still wary about, and Adrien…

“Adrien? Maybe you could do it?” Nino suggests.

Adrien considers it. “Hey, yeah, I could. Yeah! That’s a great idea!” He brightens up considerably, and the sight of his smile seems to lighten the mood at the lunch table. “I’ll talk to Ivan and try and convince him and Mylene to come over to-”

“- not my place, or any places Lila is allowed at,” Marinette interrupts, frowning. “And you’d need a good excuse to get Ivan to leave Mylene’s side at all.”

“Kitty Section.”

Nino jumps; Kagami had been quiet for most of the conversation for so long he’d nearly forgotten she’d been listening to everything and assumed she’d just been busy doing… something on her phone.

“Ask Luka to call together band practice,” Kagami tells Marinette, whose eyes brighten at the idea. “That brings in Juleka, Rose, and Ivan - and Adrien.” She turns to him next. “You can invite Mylene as well.”

Chloe hums. “Not bad, Tsurugi. Have you been plotting this the whole time we’ve been talking?”

“I prefer to call it ‘sitting back and observing before making an educated decision’,” Kagami replies matter-of-factly. “Something that many of Lila’s followers have failed to do by continuing to believe in her lies and feeding into her ego.”

Nino winces. Okay, that one hit.

Kagami seemed to notice his discomfort, however, because she actually pauses for a moment, eyes flickering to his face for a brief moment before darting back to the table. It takes a few moments before he finds her eventually saying, “… No offense meant towards you, and the others that fall under the umbrella.”

“I-it’s okay dudet- I mean Kagami - I’m really sorry-” Nino claws at his cheeks with a groan. Great. He really needed to break out of the habit before he fucked himself over with addressing her
as such. He knew she’d already consented to being called dudette, but… something about it just
didn’t sit right with him. Calling her dudette almost seemed… disrespectful, in a way, but was he
about to explain that to the table?

Nope.

“She already said she was okay with being called ‘dudette’, right, Nino?” Adrien asks curiously.

Adrien, noooooooo. “Why don’t you do that?”

Nino tries to voice his thoughts out in that moment, he really does. But all that comes out is a
strangled squawk.

“It’s alright, Adrien,” Kagami says, voice carefully neutral as she seems to avoid his gaze. He’s not
sure why it makes him so uncomfortable. “If he’s uncomfortable with calling me by such, it’s
understandable. We aren’t exactly friends, after all. It’d be strange to refer to me so casually.”

Her words bash his head in with a metaphorical mallet. Ow.

Marinette frowns. “Kagami, that’s not it at all.”

“Isn’t it?” Kagami asks. “We are allies united under a common cause, but we aren’t friends. It’s
understandable that he doesn’t refer to me like he would a friend.”

No- shit, that wasn’t it at all-

Before he can even begin to formulate words to correct her assumption, the bell rings, signaling the
end of lunch. Kagami is the first to stand, grabbing her bag and slinging it over her shoulder before
collecting her lunch tray. “I’ll be seeing you all later after school, if we’re still all going over to
Marinette’s house afterwards.”

“Don’t we have training later?” Adrien asks.

Kagami nods. “My fencing gear is in my locker. You can go ahead - I have extra lessons with Mr.
D’Argencourt, so I might be later if we’re still going to Marinette’s house.”

“I don’t know… maybe it’s not a good idea for you guys to come over,” Marinette taps on the
screen of her phone to show the weather forecast. “It’s been muggy for the past few days, hasn’t
it?”

Chloe harrumphs, examining her nails. “Aurore’s been telling all of us to bring umbrellas,
remember? Ugh, do I need to bring over some extras from the hotel?”

“I’ve got mine with me all the time if anyone wants to share just in case it rains later!” Sabrina says
cheerily. “I can ask Dad to drop you guys off at your place as needed!”

Adrien sighs, rubbing at the back of his neck. “I could try convincing the Gorilla to do the same
too, but that depends a lot on the schedule, so I can’t really guarantee it.”

“It’s still a kind sentiment, Adrien,” Kagami says softly before bowing to them. “I have to go. I’ll
see you all later.”

The instant she’s out of earshot, the table seems to zone in on Nino, who picks up on their attention
and wils in place. Uh oh.

“You’ve been antsy around Tsurugi this whole time,” Chloe is the first to break the silence,
pointing a perfectly manicured fingernail at him. “Spill, Lahiffe. What’s the big deal?”

Nino’s knees go weak. “I. Uh.” Great. Now he was cornered.

“Chloe,” Marinette chastises before turning to Nino. “Is it true?”

“W-what is?”

“Aren’t you and Kagami friends?”

Nino doesn’t answer for a few moments. He’s… pretty sure they’re on the same side, at the very least, he and Kagami. They were, as she put it, allies - and probably nothing more. The thought makes him slump in his seat. “I don’t think so, Nette.”

“You don’t ‘think’ so?” Nathaniel squints. “What makes you say so?”

Nino tugs on the rim of his cap. “I dunno dude, I just- you weren’t there for when we first met. She threw me into the bushes because she thought I was a creep or something.”

“No way,” Chloe snorts with laughter. “You got thrown into a bush by Tsurugi?”

“To be fair, she does fencing, she must be pretty strong!” Sabrina points out.

Adrien shakes his head in disbelief. “That doesn’t mean she hates you, Nino. Kagami’s kind of bad at making friends. You’re going to have to show her you really mean well.”

“That’s not it, dude… I don’t think she trusts me at all,” Nino groans, pulling his cap down over his face. “Like… not even after everything. I don’t think she really trusts me or anything.”

Nathaniel raises an eyebrow. “After Marc told me you two were tag teaming during Plague Doctor like you were born to be a team? I doubt that.”

“Kagami doesn’t trust everyone to be able to protect her like you did back then,” Adrien says, and for a brief moment Nino wants to ask how he knows that - before remembering that he’d been friends with Kagami for longer than most of the people at the table. “Based on everyone else’s accounts, I’d say she does trust you.”

“Trust on the ‘battlefield’ is different from normal trust though,” Marinette muses, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “It’d make sense that Kagami would trust Nino during Plague Doctor with what we know now… he was Carapace, after all. Defending others probably came naturally… sorry for bringing it up, Nino.”

Nino shakes his head. “It’s okay, Marinette, I promise. I don’t mind being reminded of it.” Well, he did, but that was for him to know. It wasn’t as bad as it had been a few days before, however. It still ached, but it was duller now. He could ignore it.

“So what you’re saying is… Kagami trusts Nino to protect her during akuma attacks, but… doesn’t… trust him emotionally? Is that it?” Nathaniel asks.

Marinette nods. “That’s why she says they’re not friends. She doesn’t trust him enough outside of a dangerous situation to believe they are friends.”

Nino groans, going to stand up. “We should get going, dudes. Class is starting soon.”

“You want to be friends with Kagami though, right Nino?” Adrien asks thoughtfully as he goes to stand as well.
Nino doesn’t even think too hard about his response - he nods. He was actively friends with everyone in the group except for Kagami, and that was because she didn’t trust him all the way yet. “I get why she doesn’t trust me though. I used to believe Lila’s lies. I hurt you, Marinette - and I know you still haven’t forgiven me all the way. That’s okay too. That means *she* won’t do that either.”

“Nino…” Marinette stands up to touch his wrist gently - exactly where the Turtle Miraculous would sit when he was Carapace. “I think you and I both know that by this point you’ve done enough to prove to me that you can be trusted to the fullest, and that I’ve forgiven you already.”

Nino looks up to meet her gaze, and knows for a fact that she isn’t lying. Marinette hated liars. There is a hidden meaning to her words that only Adrien seems to know based on how he was poised, but judging from the look in her eyes, it didn’t seem like she would tell him. “... I don’t think Kagami knows that though, dudette.”

“I think she does, but she still wants to be sure for herself that she can trust you on her own.” Adrien smiles, and pats his shoulder thoughtfully. “Tell her everything, Nino. Show her… the Nino we know. Kagami will understand. Just… be yourself.”

Nino gulps. “But… you know how I am, dude.”

“Yeah? And I like you for being you, Nino. I’m sure Kagami will too,” And here Adrien uses his other hand to touch his heart. “Kagami and Marinette weren’t friends before. I think you already knew this. But now they’re the closest of friends, because they stayed true to who they were and tried their best to get to know each other better.” He smiles at Nino. “Marinette and I… we became close because we finally learned how to talk to each other. It’s all in communication.”

Nino’s gaze flickers over to Marinette, who nods, and then to Chloe, Sabrina, and Nathaniel, who stare at him as if goading him on.

“Trust me, Nino,” Adrien reassures. “Just be yourself. And be honest with her. Kagami doesn’t like liars.”

Nino snorts and punches his shoulder lightly. “Like anyone in our friend group likes liars.”

“Fair enough.”
Raining again…

The past few days had been particularly gloomy for some reason. Aurore and Mireille had warned them about it beforehand, telling them to always bring around an umbrella, so Kagami was indeed prepared. A foldable umbrella tucked into one of the corners of her fencing bag, safe in its plastic holder. It was small, and could only fit her, but it’d have to do. Normally, she would have packed in her much bigger umbrella, but it didn’t fit next to her sword.

What terrible luck… Kagami sighs, holding out a hand to test the rainfall. The rain patters viciously against her fingertips, and she withdraws quickly, shaking off the droplets. The rain’s very strong today… I wonder if the umbrella will hold up.

Cautiously she stretches her neck out slightly, barely avoiding the rainfall, to look around for the family car. Her mother had told her over the phone that she’d ordered Tatsu to pick her up from school immediately after training due to the inclement weather, so she was hoping to see the flash of red amidst all of the gray.

But no dice.

Kagami sighs, fiddling with the ring on her hand.

“Kagami?”

At the familiar voice, Kagami blinks and glances to her right. Nino Lahiffe approaches her, an umbrella in hand. It looked much bigger than the foldable one she’d brought today - almost as big as her usual umbrella. He gives her a small wave before looking up at the sky himself to gauge the rainfall.

“Whack rain, huh?” Nino asks, laughing.

Kagami’s gaze turns back to the sheets of rain that sliced through the air. She’s not really sure what he wants her to say. “... Yes.”

“...” Nino swallows awkwardly, and for a few moments, all is silent between them, both unsure of what to say to the other. For Kagami, it was because she’d been given all the opportunities to see that Nino could be trusted, but needed to give him one final test out of the insistence of her logical mind. For Nino, it was because all he wanted to do was to reassure her that he wouldn’t turn his back on Marinette and Adrien - and the rest of their group - ever again, but couldn’t find the words to.

The sound of an opening umbrella makes Kagami glance sideways, and when she turns fully she sees Nino, arm outstretched to her, umbrella in hand and open above her.
“You and your fencing gear need to go home dry, right?” He asks. Kagami blinks in surprise at the offer, and opens her mouth to tell him that it wasn’t necessary, that she had her own umbrella, but she’s interrupted by him scratching at his cheek as he says, “I mean, that’s just a guess that I hope is right, because it’s metal and Adrien sometimes talks about how he has to clean the rust off every now and then on his, but… yeah. Wouldn’t want you or your sword getting wet, dudette- gah. Sorry. Kagami .”

Unbidden, her lips curl up into a small smile. “I’ve said before that you can call me dudette. It’s fine.”

“Guh- I just-” Nino’s cheeks flush red before he slumps over, groaning. “I dunno… I just… I don’t think it fits you, y’know?”

“Doesn’t fit me…?”

“To be just called ‘dudette’!” Nino exclaims. Kagami’s surprised by the sudden vigor in his voice as he explains, “Like, I call everyone dude and dudette. That’s me. But I’ve tried calling you dudette so many times but it just doesn’t… feel right, you know? N-not that I’m saying you’re not-how do I explain this, gaaaaah-”

Kagami watches with barely disguised interest as he tries to explain his thought process in the simplest terms. “It’s like trying to call Mr. Agreste ‘dude’, y’know?”

“You’re… comparing me to Gabriel Agreste…?”

“NO! Aghhhhh,” Nino whines, nearly dropping the umbrella in his frustration with himself. “Why is it so hard to talk to y-”

Nino freezes, and looks over at Kagami. She’s frozen in place, the smile gone from her face and traded for an indecipherable look. Not good, NOT GOOD, Nino, you stupid-! “No, that’s not… that’s not what I meant. You’re hard to talk to, but it’s not because… of.. whatever you’re thinking.”

“... I know I’m not exactly the easiest person to be friends with,” Kagami says stiffly. “I understand.”

“But you ended up becoming friends with Adrien, with Marinette,” Nino reassures. He dares to step closer to her as he says, “You’re friends with everyone else in the group, right?”

“Debatable… and I…” And here Kagami’s gaze darts to the ground as her cheeks turn the faintest red. Nino chokes the tiny thought in his head that says that it’s a cute look on her. “… I don’t really know how to make friends. I rely on an app that causes more trouble than good for me.”

Nino’s gaze softens, and with his free hand he gingerly places a hand on Kagami’s shoulder. When she doesn’t shrug him away, only looking up at him questioningly, he smiles softly, heart pounding. He hopes she doesn’t hear, somehow. “You don’t need an app to make friends, Kagami. Like a friend of mine once said, ‘just be yourself’.”

“Myself isn’t exactly very friendly.”

“That’s how you find your real friends,” Nino murmurs. “If they don’t understand the real you, the you that you really are… are they really your friends?”

Kagami goes silent, mulling over his words as he continues quietly, “I know I haven’t made the best impression on you because of everything that’s happened, but… I just want you to know that I
would never ever turn my back on my friends. Never again.”

“...”

"And just so you know... I can't call you dudette because I don't think it suits you at all. Like... guh. I don't know how to explain it, but it's like disrespectful, to me. In a way." The way he stumbles over his words is endearing in a way that Marinette's clumsiness and Adrien's optimism was endearing, but she didn't say that out loud. "It's like you're, I dunno... trying to refer to Jesus Christ the man up there as 'Jeezy-boy', y'know?"

Kagami blinks at him, bewildered.

"... Okay, so maybe you don't know," Nino sighs to himself. "Great job, Lahiffe. You screwed it up again."

Screwed up what again, is what she wants to ask. But she remains silent. She was here to hear him out, as she had done for him as Inari. And while the Kagami from before would have simply tried to talk him out of whatever stumbling stupor he was currently in, right now she opted to remain silent, listening to him get his thoughts out properly. He looked like he needed it.

“I know you might never really trust me," Nino says softly, making Kagami look up at him again in surprise. “But I really do want to be your friend, and if I have to jump through rings of fire to earn your trust to do so, then I’ll do it. If I can do that for Marinette, I can do that for you. Because you matter a lot to them… and I’d really like to know you better too… if you’ll let me, though. If you don’t, I’ll respect that as well.”

The words that attempted to bubble up die in her throat. She’s speechless.

“Here,” It’s moments before she feels Nino’s hand reach out for one of hers. His hand is much bigger compared to hers as he moves the other hand holding his umbrella to her hand. “You need this more than I do right now.”

“B-”

“My place is only a short walk here, I promise,” Nino crosses a finger over his heart before smiling. She knows this isn’t necessarily true - she’d walked him there herself, and while it was short, in the rain it would feel like an eternity before you got there. “I won’t mind getting a little wet. It’s just water after all. And you have to protect both yourself and your stuff. My ‘brella’s big enough.”

Kagami blinks before eventually murmuring, “You’ll be drenched. This isn’t a normal storm.”

“I’ll live,” Nino shrugs before reaching out to clap a hand on her shoulder again. For some reason, where they make contact, a warmth blooms - from Kagami’s shoulder to the rest of her body, and from Nino’s fingertips to the tips of his toes. Neither say anything about it as Nino says, “Be seein’ you tomorrow, Mimi.”

He pulls away, and turns to the rain, before gathering his courage and running through the rain. Kagami watches him run down the empty streets and past Marinette’s house, her hand still on the umbrella, her cheeks warm.

“Nino!” She shouts impulsively, both hands gripping the umbrella handle tightly. She’s not even sure if he heard her-

- but then much to her surprise he seems to stop at her call, and turns around. When she opens her
mouth, nothing really comes out except for a strangled noise she knows Nino can’t hear, so instead she forcefully grips the umbrella with one hand and uses the other to awkwardly wave at him.

And from where she can see him, she sees Nino turn bright red and beam, waving back at her before continuing his run.

Trixx peeks out from within her blazer, grinning smugly. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say he’s in love with you, or at least has a crush on you. Nobody goes through that much effort to befriend someone.”

“Oh, what do you know,” Kagami scoffs, but there is a softness in her eyes as she watches Nino disappear around the corner that Trixx knows is not normally on her face. “We’re barely even friends.”

The fox kwami tuts softly, squishing his cheek against hers affectionately. “He gave you a nickname, didn’t he?”

“…” It sinks in, in that precise moment, that he did give her a nickname, and despite herself Kagami’s eyes widen, her cheeks blossoming a little redder. “He… called me Mimi.”

Trixx floats upside down in front of her face, giggling. “That he did. And who else has a nickname in your little group?”

“Marinette,” Kagami murmurs. “But… that’s because they’re childhood friends. They’ve known each other for a long time.”

“And Marinette is very important to Nino,” Trixx reminds, grinning. “Which means he thinks you’re important too.”

Kagami bites her lower lip. It’s a bad habit that her mother has told her off for before, but she’s not here. “Adrien is important to Nino too, and he doesn’t have a nickname. And they’re both closer to each other than we are.”

“Which means he really would like to get to know you even better,” Trixx placates, patting her cheek. “I’m telling you, kit. He’s either in love with you, has a crush on you, or I’m not a kwami.”

Kagami rolls her eyes, just as Tatsu rolls up in front of the school. With Nino’s umbrella in hand and above her, shielding both herself and her bag from the rain, she descends the steps and goes inside the car before going home.
nino lahiree and the farewell overdue

Chapter Summary

Nino meets Ladybug’s newest teammate, the new fortress of the team.

He’d expected it to come eventually. A lot of akumas Ladybug and Chat Noir faced were ruthless - some required not just the power of Second Chance, not just the trickery of illusions, or the halting power of Venom, but an actual means of defense. A means of protection. A place where Ladybug and Chat Noir could collect their thoughts before proceeding with battle.

A Shelter.

Carapace had fallen unwillingly due to the hubris of a Fox that fell from grace, setting a flame his bridge and leaving him to burn. And from his ashes rose a tower - no, a fortress, to protect the Ladybug and her allies from the Butterfly and the Peacock.

Bastille.

The akuma attack this time was from one of the other classes - an odd girl who’d been seen talking to nothing on occasion and who fancied herself as ‘not belonging to this world’. While half her class left her alone, the other half relentlessly bullied her for her nonsensical outlook on life. The bullying had brought her anger - and her anger had brought around the akuma Vorpal Miss, whose favorite thing to do was to slice down everything that stood in her way, or didn’t see it her way.

Definitely one of the more violent akuma.

Their class had been asked to evacuate before things got worse, but unfortunately for them Vorpal Miss had already begun slicing and dicing her way through Francois-Dupont, deciding that anyone who didn’t automatically bow to her was out for her head. And literally half the population ran away from her instead of bowing, so one probably knew the aftermath to that. It took a while before Ladybug and Chat Noir managed to arrive on scene, and even by then a good chunk of the population of the school had already dwindled into flailing headless bodies.

Nino, thankfully enough, counted himself as one of the few who still had their heads on - literally. He’d tasked himself with at least managing to help some of his classmates get out and away from Vorpal Miss before going to hide himself - the same being Rose and Nathaniel, as well as Mylene and Sabrina. Ivan had unfortunately had his head offed, and now his body was running around the basketball court willy nilly along with the rest of Vorpal Miss’s victims.

Honestly, it would’ve been a funny sight if the concept wasn’t so downright horrifying.

“Oh? Oho? A Mock Turtle?”

How the fuck did he not realize Vorpal Miss was already right there in front of him.

“A Mock Turtle, Hawkmoth!” crows the mischievous and elegant Vorpal Miss, and Nino witnesses Hawkmoth conversing with her via the glowing butterfly mask. Vorpal Miss’s face beams as she says, “A Mock Turtle for mock turtle soup indeed! Hawkmoth demands to know, where is the Turtle Miraculous, little turtle?”
When he doesn’t react fast enough, Vorpal Miss’s face twists into a snarl, and she raises her blade to strike him-

**CLANG!**

The blade clashes against something hard and metallic and not his neck, making Nino look up. His breath catches in his throat at the sight that greets him.

It’s an entirely different experience to be the one protected, and not the one protecting.

Above his head, a shield shaped like a turtle shell protects him from Vorpal Miss’s blade. And attached to the shield - the new Turtle hero.

The new Turtle is taller than him, and looks significantly older. His hair was darker than Ladybug’s and Inari’s, obsidian in hue for the most part, but the tips of his hair were dyed a blue so dark it was barely distinguishable from his base hair color. His hair was styled in what was either an undercut or a mohawk, he couldn’t tell from the angle he had fallen. Nino didn’t get much of a chance to observe him further, however, because by then he’d found himself in the arms of one of the other heroes, snatching him away from danger.

“Inari, take him to safety with the others!” The new hero barks out, and when Nino looks up towards his savior carrying him in her arms Inari only nods once.


Bastille was an uncanny name for a Turtle hero, but Nino could see why he’d call himself that. The Bastille had been a fortress that once stood where the Place de la Bastille stood now - and fortresses were meant to protect. In its case, it was a prison - which, if he thought about it enough, suited the Turtle just as well. He could trap villains in his Shelter just as much as he could use Shelter to protect his teammates or civilians.

“... You okay after that?”

Nino thinks about it, and hesitates for the slightest moment - a moment he hopes neither Nathaniel nor Adrien noticed.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay.”

He wasn’t.

Later that night, he’s treated to the most baffling sight: the new Turtle hero, Bastille, darting across the rooftops as the patroller for the night, stopping at the rooftop right across from his. His face is turned towards his window, and for a moment Nino wonders if he can see him-
and then the Turtle hero takes a running leap, and clears the distance that is the air above his street, landing safely on Nino’s railing with only a little wobble. Politely he stares through the window, as if to check it’s him inside, before politely reaching over and knocking on the window pane.

**KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK**

Nino opens the window, speechless. First Inari, suddenly dropping by to catch an akuma that had been heading for him one night and listening to his silly woes, and then Ladybug to let him know that he was now officially retired from being Carapace. And now the new Turtle hero of all people, on his windowsill?

Literally, what had his life even become by this point?

“Nino Lahiffe, right?” Bastille asks. His voice is smooth as silk, the rumble in the back of his throat like a bassline riff to the melody of his words. “The… previous Turtle, right?”

Nino chokes on his own spit, unable to really say anything - so instead he nods vigorously to let Bastille know that he’d heard him. Okay, so Bastille knew of him - no doubt thanks to gossip and rumors flying about regarding Alya’s spill in the lunch room about his identity. Great. Now he had to do more damage control in terms of his reputation because of all these new heroes and gossip.

The new Turtle hero nods in recognition before looking around, as if searching for something. Before Nino can properly open his mouth and ask, however, Bastille is suddenly asking, “I shouldn’t be doing this, I think… there’s probably a rule somewhere, and Ladybug doesn’t know I’m here right now, but… do you have a bathroom I can hide in?”

“A b-bathroom?” He manages to choke out in surprise. Nino points to a door sitting in between his desktop setup and his dresser. “Uh, there’s one connected to my bedroom right there through that door, but- but why though?”

Bastille smiles kindly at him as he makes moves to let Nino know he was about to enter the room. “I can’t have you learning my identity, after all. That’s one of the few things Ladybug emphasizes a great deal, or so I’ve been told.”

“Learn your-!” Wait, was he- was he going to- “Why would- are you detransforming?”

Bastille nods gently as he carefully enters Nino’s room before heading straight for the bathroom. Nino barely has even time to catch up before he hears the sound of the door’s lock clicking shut, and with a groan directed at himself he just facepalms. Eventually, however, he calls out, “You uh… does your kwami need something to eat? I got a buncha stuff from the last time that I-”

His voice catches in his throat again.

Before Nino can say anything further, he hears the familiar phrase of “Wayzz, shell off,” and a flash of green light coming from the inside of the bathroom, and suddenly a familiar little face is phasing through his bathroom door to look at him with wide yellow and green eyes like he’s in disbelief that he’s really there-

- and suddenly Nino’s heart rate seems to stop for a few beats as his mind catches up with the rest of his body, while in this same span of time the face of the little green kwami of the Turtle breaks into the widest smile Nino’s ever seen him have and practically barrels him over despite how tiny he is and-

“Nino!” Wayzz cries out, and his voice is the hammer that shatters the silence and the ice that had
frozen Nino in place at the sight of him, and it’s only been a few days since he’d been officially
tired by Ladybug herself and yet it had felt like an eternity- having known that it was basically
final that he’d never be Carapace again- never see Wayzz again like he had before-

Nino feels something wet on his cheeks, and reaches up to wipe them away - only to realize they’re
tears. Tears running hard and fast at the sight of the tiny kwami, and it’s probably incredibly silly
that he’d grown so attached to the little guy like this that he was crying like an absolute baby-

- but Wayzz is crying too, he realizes numbly, and he remembers a little turtle fact. Turtles live for
a very, very long time. Turtles would have seen many events come and go in their lives, many
people come and go.

Wayzz has probably seen many Turtles come and go. Many, he hopes, that didn’t experience
anything similar to what he had experienced. He’s not sure if Wayzz would have handled so much
repetition of mistakes like that.

“I thought- Ladybug said I would never be able to use you again,” Nino says weakly, cradling the
kwami in his palms. He probably looks like an absolute trainwreck, he thinks, sitting in the middle
of his bedroom on his knees, holding a tiny god in his very hands like it was the most precious
 treasure of all. “And- you have Bastille, and-”

Wayzz’s tiny stubs hug one of Nino’s thumbs, and Nino bites back a sob at the comforting touch.
“It was Bastille’s idea to come over and… let me see you like this one more time. Ladybug is sure
to catch wind of this eventually, but your successor believes that she will understand once she
learns of it.”

“You guys… snuck out and came over here without Ladybug’s content? Dude…”

The kwami smiles. “She is one of the best Ladybugs I have come to know in my many years of
existence. Very kind and understanding. She was planning to bring me over herself, though she
wasn’t sure how she’d go about wearing two Miraculous at once without overexerting herself.
Bastille here has solved her problem unintentionally.”

“You’re both geniuses, dude,” Nino whispers, moving Wayzz to his other hand in order to wipe
away at the tears still forming. He wills them to stop, but they don’t. The fact that he was finally
getting the chance to say goodbye - the chance that had been robbed from him... “Shit... I... I
dunno, little dude… now that you’re here I don’t wanna…”

“Say goodbye, I know,” Wayzz presses his cheek to Nino’s thumb in reassurance. “As Duusu
would say, ‘parting is such sweet sorrow’. But it’s better, isn’t it - that we get to say goodbye
properly?”

Nino’s voice gets stuck in his throat. He nods instead, unable to properly vocalize his feelings,
before he reaches up and gently moves Wayzz to his chest, carefully holding him close. He feels
Wayzz’s little stubs tug on bits of his shirt in a hug, and for a few moments, that’s all they do.

Just sit there, with words unspoken yet understood.

“Wayzz?”

“Yes, Nino?”

“... Was I a good Turtle?”

“... You were a very excellent choice on Ladybug’s part. And you always will be - in the eyes of
Ladybug, of Paris... and mine. Paris will not forget Carapace so easily in learning to accept Bastille as their new Turtle.”

“...”

“There will always be new Turtles. But there will only ever be one Nino Lahiffe, the Carapace of Paris.”

Nino’s heart both swells and aches at his words.

When Bastille bids him farewell minutes later, taking the Miraculous - and Wayzz - with him, the weight in Nino’s chest feels considerably lighter.

He watches Bastille until he disappears over the rooftops before going and tucking himself into bed.

Nino’s dreams are mostly calm that night.
“You seem happier, Kagami.”

Kagami pauses in packing her bag. Her mother’s stance remains the same as always, and yet for some reason she can’t help but remain wary. Tomoe Tsurugi was no Gabriel Agreste, yes - she let Kagami pursue many of her chosen endeavors as long as it contributed to her overall wellbeing, and was generally more open-minded - , but she was still a very strict woman. Kagami often worked around her rules via loopholes she could determine from the get-go, and even then she seemed to be aware when her daughter was breaking a rule.

Of course, having Trixx around had taught her better ways of outmaneuvering her mother’s keen senses. ‘Clever as a fox,’ he’d say.

“I…” Kagami glances her way. “... Do I really seem happier?”

Tomoe nods slightly. “There is a lightness to you that I did not sense before. Has Adrien done something favorable recently?”

… Right. Her mother still believed that she was interested in Adrien.

Kagami was not stupid. Somewhere, sometime or another, Marinette had finally ceased hesitating. She’d finally made her choice, and spoken up and admitted her feelings to Adrien where Kagami did not see - and Adrien, as she had predicted, had reciprocated. It was inevitable - she’d always had the notion that Adrien had been interested in Marinette, even though he hadn’t been necessarily aware of the affection he held for her. She was... glad that Marinette had summoned up the courage, and glad that they were happy.

Sure, she did like Adrien. She still found him admirable - kindhearted, respectable, and honorable. But... she hadn’t moved quickly enough. Marinette had found her voice, and found solace in Adrien’s arms like she’d always dreamed of.

Did it hurt? Yes.

But, Kagami found that in the long run, she was fine with it.

In school, they never acted romantic, not at all. They weren’t like most romantic couples at all - which was strange, given that she was rather certain Adrien was the kind of person who liked PDA. It was only in private settings like hangouts at Marinette’s house or over video call that she saw them even holding hands at the very least. It was no wonder that most people assumed that Adrien was still single - and maybe that was the plan all along, now that she thought about it. Maybe they weren’t being public about it.

She could respect that.
“... It’s not related to Adrien, mother,” Kagami eventually says, zipping her bag closed and slinging it over her shoulder. “I’ll be heading down to the Liberty now. I’ll be back before sundown.”

Tomoe clicks her tongue. “Back on Anarka’s boat, I see.”

“That’s where my friends are,” Kagami says stiffly. She wills Trixx not to move even the slightest from inside her blazer - her mother could sense even the slightest of off-movement and change in the air, especially in such a closed setting like their living room. “Marinette and Adrien will be there, mother. You don’t need to worry.”

When Tomoe doesn’t respond, Kagami takes that as her cue to leave, but the minute she turns around she asks a question. “Kagami, you are not keeping secrets from me, are you?”

“Mother?” Kagami asks, genuinely bewildered as she glances back at her. Did she know…?

“What do you mean?”

Tomoe doesn’t move from where she’s seated, but she does tilt her head to the side in her direction. Her voice is eerily calm. “I am simply wondering if there are some things you aren’t telling me, Kagami. And if there are, are they anything that I should be worried about?”

“...” The weight of the Fox Miraculous, resting squarely below her tie, suddenly feels like it’s dragging her down. Her gaze catches Trixx’s purple one as he carefully peeks out at her from his hiding place before she says, “There is nothing for you to be worried about, Mother. I’m not keeping anything from you.”

“You are certain of this?”

“Yes, mother.” Don’t move, Trixx… not a hair…

Tomoe is silent for a few moments. “Remember that you are a Tsurugi, Kagami. Our family values honesty, integrity, and above all, zero hesitation. We do not hesitate in this family. Nor do we lie.”

“Yes mother. I know.”

Despite her mother being blind, Kagami feels as though when she turns to face her, she is boring a hole through her very core, as though she can see Trixx hidden in her blazer, the Miraculous under her tie. She tries her best not to let Tomoe pick up on her tension, however, letting her breaths come out as evenly as possible to distract her from the churning feeling in her gut.

“I can withdraw you from school and have you homeschooled at any time if I find out you’ve been lying to me, you know this, Kagami,” Tomoe reminds. “Gabriel’s methods may be rudimentary, but in rare cases it can teach lessons to the disobedient child.”

A jolt of genuine fear courses through her body, but the feeling of Trixx’s paw on her shirt allows her to remain still. “Mother, I’m not lying, or hiding anything that would be detrimental to me from you. I promise.”

“You are certain?”

“Yes, mother.”

Tomoe goes silent again, but this time, she changes topics. “Are you getting picked up by Adrien?”

“He should be coming around,” Kagami says, the tension in her shoulders only relaxing by a hair at the change in topic. Why had her mother asked her such a question? Did she know, somehow,
that she was sneaking out at night to patrol as Inari? She knew her mother listened to the news, but she’d been careful not to speak very often in the rare cases that she was seen in public. Her mother knew her voice best - Ryuuko had been evidence of that, to some degree. “I’ll wait at the front porch for him.”

“I will accompany you,” Tomoe says, standing up from her seat.

“N-no, mother, it’s fine,” Kagami holds up a hand, but it does little to dissuade the older woman from feeling her way past Kagami and heading towards the front porch of their house. With a sigh, Kagami adjusts the strap of her bag before following after her mother, looking around for the Agrestes’ car.

Within a few minutes, the car comes rolling up in front of their house, but it’s not Adrien who greets her first. He’s definitely in there, but much to her surprise, someone else peeks his head out of the car.

“Nino?” She asks in surprise. Inside her blazer she can feel Trixx giggling, so she pokes at him to make him shut up.

Nino waves awkwardly from the car window in the back as Adrien pokes his head out next from the seat shotgun. “Hi Kagami, good morning miss Tsurugi! I hope you don’t mind that Nino hitched a ride today too, his mom’s got an errand to run and couldn’t bring him over to the Liberty.”

“I… don’t mind at all, Adrien,” Kagami smiles as the Gorilla gets out of the car to put her bag in the trunk and open the door for her. She takes a seat behind Adrien and next to Nino as her mother approaches the car carefully, feeling her way with her shinai. “Mother?”

“Ma’am?” Adrien asks curiously. “Is something wrong?”

Tomoe is calm as she says, “Aren’t you going to introduce me to the person next to you, Kagami?”

“I- oh-” Kagami rolls the window down a little more so that Nino can better see her. Of course. I should’ve known. There was probably no problem in introducing Nino as a new friend to her mother. “Mother, this is Nino Lahiffe. He’s Adrien’s best friend from school, and our schoolmate. Nino, this is my mother, Tomoe Tsurugi.”

To his credit, Nino’s grin is only a little awkward. He must have learned from interactions with Mr. Agreste. I don’t blame him. “Good morning, d- ma’am, it’s a pleasure to meet you!”

Tomoe nods at him, but spares no other words as she addresses Kagami next. “Remember, Kagami. Sundown.”

“Sundown,” She murmurs in reply, as the Gorilla rolls the windows up and begins the drive towards the Couffaine houseboat.

Much to her amusement, Nino visibly exhales and practically melts down into his seat next to her. When she turns to look at him full on, his cap is askew on his head as he moans, “You didn’t tell me your mom was that intimidating.”

“I told you, but you didn’t listen to me,” Adrien interjects playfully from the front seat. “Sometimes, I think it’s you who’s gone deaf from the Kitty Section practices.”

Nino gives him the stink eye as Kagami hides a giggle behind her hand. “Ha ha, dude. It must be a rich kid thing, having parents that scare the bones outta their friends.”
“Your bones all seem to be here though,” Kagami points out with a snort, reaching over to poke at the side of his head to emphasize her point. At her touch, Nino pretends to crumple further, and this time she can’t stifle the giggle. “Ah, my mistake. That wasn’t your skull at all.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Adrien beam at them from the rearview mirror. “You guys seem to be getting along great, huh?”

Nino chokes on air, and when Kagami turns to look his hands are on his cap, pulling down on the rim to hide his face. The tips of his ears are red as he stammers, “I mean- yeah- I guess- I-I mean not I guess, I’m just- I hope that we’re-”

“We’re getting along just fine, Adrien,” Kagami finishes for him, and the sigh of relief from Nino is palpable. She feels Trixx shifting in her blazer as she turns to him and asks, “Your mother was busy today?”

Nino pulls himself back up on his seat as the Gorilla turns a corner. “Yeah. She’s meeting with some relatives and having lunch with them today, so she couldn’t really take me. Adrien offered to pick me up - I just didn’t know I’d be riding with you today.”

“Is that bad?”

“You? Riding with us? Nah, of course not!” Nino shakes his head and smiles earnestly at her, tugging a bit on his cap. “I mean, it’s also a long way down there from your place, right? It makes sense that Adrien offered to pick you up too, you two are really good friends and all, and of course I’m not his only friend, which means-”

“Nino, you’re rambling like Marinette,” Adrien reminds in a singsong voice.

Nino immediately clams up, cheeks turning red. “I. Uh. Sorry. Didn’t mean to ramble, did I bore you or-”

“You’re fine, Nino,” Kagami reassures, just as Adrien declares, “Oh, we’re here! Thanks for bringing us. Can you pick us up sometime before sundown?”

The Gorilla nods in acquiescence, and with that the three of them climb out of the car, Kagami going around the back to pick up her bag before boarding the boat where the others were waiting.

“Hey Nino! Hey Adrien! Hey Kagami!” Rose’s voice, predictably, is the first to greet them as her feet land on board the Liberty. From where she was standing, she could see Ivan and Luka hauling instruments on deck while Marinette and Mylene were helping set them up. Juleka seemed to be below deck, judging from her absence.

Adrien, stepping up beside her, asks, “Where’s Nathaniel and Chloe? Or, uh, Nathaniel?”

“They’re on a date with Marc and Aurore somewhere at a cafe near the Arc de Triomphe,” calls out Alix’s voice. When they turn to look, they see her dragging up a box from below deck with Juleka on the other end. “Something about wanting to take advantage of a promo or something with the desserts there. Aurore went absolutely haywire when she heard about it.”

Marinette laughs as she straightens up. “They know they can come to the bakery for discounted prices, right?”

“You know Aurore and Chloe,” Adrien sighs, but it’s not a tired sigh. “They’re a lot more energetic when put together when it comes to hot spots in Paris. It’s a wonder Marc and Nathaniel can keep up.”
Alix snorts. “Trust me, sunshine boy. You haven’t seen those two in the art room when they’re in the zone yet. They’re like wild animals, hissing at you if you even dare touch them while they’re at peak creation mode.”

“That doesn’t sound like them at all,” Marinette comments. “But then again, I could be wrong, of course. Been a while since I’ve dropped by the art room.”

The sound of something heavy being set down makes everyone look towards the front, where Ivan and Luka are panting next to the biggest of his drum set.

“I think that’s everything,” Luka wipes some sweat off his brow before turning to the rest of them with a smile. “Good to see you made it, you three. Wouldn’t be the same without you, actually.”

Mylene looks at all of them, and with a frown her brow furrows. Kagami can practically hear her doing the mental math before she exclaims, “Hold on.”

“What’s wrong, Mylene?” Ivan asks.

Mylene spins around, looking at all of them, before turning to Marinette. “You didn’t invite Alya?”

“No,” Marinette says simply. “I didn’t think that it’d be a good idea to invite her, since…” Her gaze flickers to Nino, and Mylene’s face immediately softens in sympathy. “Besides, we needed to talk to you and Ivan first before Alya.”

Ivan raises an eyebrow. “Talk to us about what?”

The mood immediately sombers.

It’s Adrien, however, who steps forward and mutters, “It’s about Lila.”

“Tsurugi household. Tomoe speaking.”

“…”

“Gabriel? You do not usually do house calls like this. Is something the matter? Did Audrey sentence you to yet another rant?”

“…”

“… Excuse me? Kagami is currently with Adrien at the Liberty with their schoolmates. She will be coming home at sundown as she has promised, and Adrien will take her back with your car, as promised.”

“…”

“Kagami would never do that. Perhaps you are drawing from experiences with your own son, Gabriel, and projecting them upon us.”

“…”

“This conversation is over, Gabriel. I had thought you a trustworthy man with actual common sense, but it seems I was-”

“…”
“... You know I am blind, Gabriel. No matter what you have, it is but hearsay to me until I hear it from Kagami herself.”

“...”

“I will ask her about it tonight then upon her return. I will prove to you that Kagami is not what you have just told me. And perhaps even convince you that your source is not as trustworthy as they seem.”

“...”

“Good day to you, Gabriel.”

CLICK.
nino lahiffe and his inability to stop running his mouth

Chapter Summary

It's nice, talking to Kagami despite the chaos.

“You know… now that you put it that way… it does make sense that she’s been lying this whole time.”

Nino watches as Mylene’s legs rock back and forth from her seat atop one of the many boxes on the Liberty, her brows furrowed and her lips pursed in thought. In contrast, sitting next to her, gentle giant Ivan looked like he wanted to snap his drumsticks in half - with one hand. He supposed they should be grateful that getting through to the two of them was ultimately much easier than when they’d tried to get to Juleka and Rose - and that they had more sense than most people when it came to accepting things at face value.

Mylene looks up at them. “She mentioned once that she was part of the group of people who founded Baby Hops, the charity dedicated to rescuing domestic rabbits that keep getting released after Easter. I think that was the specific time I was beginning to doubt in her words - because I know the people who founded Baby Hops.” She toys with the stone pendant around her neck thoughtfully as she says, “Most of them were protesting with Ivan and me that one time, during the time Marc was akumatized. I was there when they founded Baby Hops. Lila wasn’t one of them.”

“And you all knew she was lying from the start?” Ivan asks them. It probably was unintentional, the slight accusatory tone in his voice, but it makes most of them flinch anyway.

Alix crosses her arms. “Not all of us. If you recall, Ivan, Nino and Alya had a fight over this pretty recently.” Pause. “Sorry, Nino.”

“It’s okay, dudette,” Nino makes a peace sign with his left hand before turning to Ivan. “Not all of us knew from the beginning that she was a liar. Marinette was the only one who knew from the get go - we all just… learned the hard way afterwards.”

Mylene raises an eyebrow. “Even Chloe and Nathaniel?”

“Definitely.” He confirms.

Juleka’s voice is venomous as she mutters, “She’s the reason why Rose got akumatized into Pixie Pop. Kept telling her lies… I’m going to snap her in half.”

“Jule,” Luka warns, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“Not if I do it first,” Ivan growls. “We should tell Mister Damocles-”

“We already have a plan, actually,” Adrien holds up a hand to stop him. “And we’ve been ready to enact it for days now. We just wanted to try and convince everyone that Lila was lying before the fallout, though. We… didn’t want anyone getting hurt.”

“Besides Liar Rossi, you mean,” Alix snorts.
“Wait… so that’s why you wanted to get us first…” Mylene looks at Marinette, and Nino sees Marinette’s gaze travel to the floor as she rubs her arm awkwardly. “Alya’s the closest one to Lila… she’s going to be the hardest to get through to. That’s why… oh, Marinette…”

Marinette smiles weakly. “It’s okay, Mylene. Alya and I may no longer be best friends, but… she doesn’t deserve to be caught in the fallout still. She’s still a victim to Lila, and while she’s responsible of course for her own actions, she was still heavily influenced by her.” She bites her lip before adding, “I want to at least try to convince her one more time. Before we launch the plan.”

“You’re a fucking saint, Mari,” Alix groans. “If I were in charge I would’ve already run Lila into the ground. Preferably with my skates. At high speed. And maybe Alya would get a few skid marks accidentally.”

Marinette gives her a Look. “Alix.”

“Okay, okay…”

“This must be difficult for you,” Nino hears Kagami say, and with a start he realizes she’s addressing him as she continues to speak. “Hearing that… Alya is the hardest person to reach, when she was once the closest one.” She pauses, and then asks carefully, “... Was I too forward in saying that?”

Nino can’t help but crack a smile. Adrien really hadn’t been kidding when he’d said she was bad at making friends - but he could tell she was trying. And he appreciated it. “A little.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s no biggie, Mimi,” Nino says casually, waving it off. “That’s who you are, right? Straightforward, to the point… I’d tell you if it was like way past the boundary, anyway, and that wasn’t it.”

Kagami blinks rapidly, and for a moment Nino thinks he might have been too forward himself when her gaze seems to soften, an equally soft smile accompanying her look, and okay, what the fuck was going on, his traitorous heart had suddenly skipped a few beats, what the fuck. “Thank you, Nino. It’s reassuring to know you’d tell me if I’d overstepped any boundaries.”

“That’s what friends are for,” Nino reminds her, grinning at her and willing his heart to start back up again properly. “And we’re friends now, right, Mimi?”

Kagami’s eyes widen at his words, and for the briefest of moments he thinks he might have seen her cheeks redden slightly. But he was probably hallucinating that, because in the next moment she nods, her eyes brighter than they had been before. “Yes… I think, with the nickname you have given me… that means we are definitely friends.”

“Can we uh. Can we get some onions from the peanut gallery over there, or are we interrupting something?”

Nino’s brain screeches to a stop as Alix raises an eyebrow, her arms crossed and her foot tapping against the deck. “Uh. Yeah. I mean- you’re not interrupting anything, we were just talkin’ over here and- what were you gonna ask?”

“We were asking if it would be okay if you went to try and talk to Alya, Nino,” Rose explains timidly. She wrings her wrists as she adds, “It’s okay if you say no though, but you’re probably the best choice to reach out to her under Lila’s watch because you could like… say you’ve changed your mind and everything-”
Kagami makes a noise of disbelief. “I hardly doubt she’s that stupid. She knows we’re planning something, after all. She’s been hounding Mylene and Ivan after Pixie Pop, after all.”

“Mylene and Ivan have agreed to humor her and pretend they’re still ‘on her side’,” Adrien makes air quotations with his fingers before he adds, “It’s probably a possibility that she can be convinced that you’ve genuinely turned your back on the truth to go along with her plans.”

Nino frowns. “I dunno, dude. It’s pretty risky. And… you know I’ve blocked Alya on everything.”

“You don’t need to unblock her, Nino,” Luka’s voice says serenely from where he’s leaning against the edge of the boat’s side. “But you could probably use the closure. I’ve been told it was a messy breakup between the two of you, and very public.”

Nino winces, but finds that the pain isn’t as sharp and painful as it used to be. It’s a dull throb in his chest now, like a vice grip that had loosened itself after some time. “You want me to… talk to Alya.”

“And try and convince her of the truth,” Alix finishes for him. “After that shit she pulled in the lunch room with your hero identity, and the fact you’ve blocked her on everything? She’s probably itching to talk to you and apologize.”

Marinette finally opens her mouth, face set in a frown. “This isn’t a good idea, guys. It’s still a recent breakup, you know. We can’t just force them to talk to each other.”

“We’re not forcing him to talk to Alya. It’s still his choice if he’ll do it - after all, we have Plans B to Z, don’t we?”

Juleka stares. “We do?”

“Well. We have plans B and C,” Alix counts off her fingers. “We’re still working on D to Z.”

“If Nino doesn’t want to talk to Alya, then he shouldn’t be made to talk to her in the first place,” Kagami says sternly. He’s thankful for the defense from both her and Marinette as she continues, “There’s a very high chance of tensions rising should they make contact with each other and talk with each other with only Lila watching. And we’re all well aware that Lila won’t let him talk to her if one of us is with him. It will ruin the illusion.”

Nino looks at her in awe. “You thought really far ahead.”

“Like chess, it pays to be able to somewhat predict your opponents’ moves or strategies ahead of time in fencing,” Kagami explains matter-of-factly. “While you can strike wildly and it will net you some points, it is much more beneficial especially in epee fencing to be able to step back and strategize before going to strike.”

Adrien hums thoughtfully. “What if I talked to Lila while you talked to Alya?”

There is a dissonant chorus of ‘Adrien, no’ and ‘Adrien that’s social commit personal perish’ that erupts from most of the people on deck, with Juleka vehemently insisting, “Adrien. That’s dangerous.”

“Oh, but you forget, Lila’s my coworker!” Nino snorts when he sees Adrien immediately blanch after he says it. “We can… discuss future shoots somewhere far away, and Alya will then be left alone for you to talk to - but only if you’re willing, Nino. We’re not doing this if you don’t want to, of course.”
Did he want to do it?

Nino reflects on this for a few moments, closing his eyes. In the span of days - weeks? - his world had been turned upside down at least five times already - with his breakup with Alya being like the root of many of the events that had followed. His retirement as Carapace, the emergence of four new permanent heroes, the slow but careful enlightenment of many of his classmates in regards to Lila’s lies... his slow moving friendship with Kagami. All of that had been kickstarted by that one event - and that one event had happened because Nino had finally opened his eyes.

And, despite everything... he wanted Alya’s eyes to open too.

He still cared for her, after all this time. He’d loved Alya once, like Marinette did. Perhaps that was one of the things he and Marinette would always have in common.

“... I’ll do it,” Nino says, eventually, after a few moments. At everyone’s stares, he clarifies, “For the Alya I used to know, I’ll try my best.”

In the midst of all the cheering, he feels Kagami’s hand brush against his to try and grab his attention. When he looks at her, her gaze is trained on the whooping group as she says, “You still love her.”

“I did love her,” He clarifies. “But that was the Alya I used to know. Not this Alya. I’m doing this for the Alya she used to be... hoping that maybe she’s still in there, somewhere.”

“And then?”

“Then... what?”

“Will you get back together?”

Nino chokes on his own spit, and holds up a hand. “Okay, hold on- no, you didn’t go too far, I’m just-” He feels Kagami’s hand on his back, gently whacking it in what he assumed she thought was a helpful way. “Hrgk- okay, uh. First of all, what gave you that idea, and second of all, no, I don’t think we’re getting back together, even if she does return to being the Alya I used to know.”

“May I ask why?”

“Why? Uh...” Huh. Now there was a question. Arguably, he could go back. But did he want to? “Because... y’know. She’s not.” He gestures lamely. “... This is hard to put into words.”

“Well... it looks like they’re about to start practicing at last, and we’re not part of the band,” Kagami glances sideways, and he follows her gaze to see Kitty Section headed for their instruments. “So you can spend the whole time trying to put it into words for me, Nino. We have all day.”

Nino gawks. “You seriously gonna just sit there and try to listen to me fumble through my words?”

“Is that not what friends do?” Kagami asks genuinely.

Her words make him snort, and he nods. “Yeah... yeah, you’re right. But I warn you: sometimes I can’t articulate for shit and I’m bad at French.”

“Don’t worry. I talk to Marinette regularly.”

At that one, both of them share a quiet chuckle, just as Rose begins her screamo routine.
By the time the practice session is over, it’s only 4PM, leaving at least an hour to goof around without practicing. The whole time, Nino and Kagami had been talking about rather mundane things and observations during practice - ‘You had a crush on Marinette? Understandable.’ ‘W-WHAT DO YOU MEAN UNDERSTANDABLE-’ -, so by that point they’d gotten into a rather relaxed state, just laughing to themselves while the others took a break.

Kagami, Nino had found, actually had a lot to say when she was less tense and nervous about making a mistake or crossing over personal boundaries. It had been difficult to get her to open up, but eventually she’d at least admitted that her favorite color landed among the shades of red. He’d tried to wheedle out a specific shade, but she’d been particularly cryptic about it.

“Hey, you two!” Adrien calls, breaking them out of their small bubble of conversation at his call. “We were thinking about getting some ice cream, want to join us?”

“It’s okay if you don’t, Alix is staying with Luka, Juleka, and Rose back here on the boat,” Marinette amends.

Nino opens his mouth, but just then, Kagami’s phone rings, silencing the group as she raises a finger to her lips. She answers the phone coolly. “Mother?”

“Kagami,” He hears Tomoe’s voice come through the phone as though he had the phone to his ear himself with how close they were sitting together. Wait. Since when had they been sitting this close? “It is an hour until sundown. You promised you would come home at sundown.”

Kagami mouths a swear to herself - a sight that makes him stifle a chuckle - before saying, “Adrien and I are waiting for his bodyguard to pick us up, mother. If he comes by late then it’s no longer my fault if I arrive after sundown.”

Silence.

“We need to talk, Kagami,” is all Tomoe says before she ends the call.

With a frustrated sigh, Kagami stands up. “I’m sorry, Adrien, but is your bodyguard anywhere nearby? It seems mother needs me home as soon as possible.”

“I’m sorry, Kagami, but I’d told him that I’d be extending a little over here to get some ice cream,” Adrien says apologetically. “I can’t bring you home like this.”

“I can walk you home.”

Everyone stares at him when the words leave his lips. Had he been a completely separate person he would have stared at himself as well. Was he completely out of his fucking mind? The Tsurugi residence was far from the Liberty’s docking point. Walking was a fucking mistake.

“You… are aware that my house is very far, right?” Kagami points out incredulously.

Nino nods, and at least fifty tiny Ninos in his head are begging him to backtrack right the fuck now as he says, “I mean… we could take the bus, right? And then I’d walk you the rest of the way from the bus stop to your house. Then you’d make it home before sundown. And then your ma won’t be mad!” He cocks two finger guns at her awkwardly.

Kagami is silent for a few moments, eyes wide. She looks at Adrien, who only says, “It’s definitely better than waiting for my bodyguard to come an hour past sundown,” before turning back to Nino.

Nino visibly sweats in panic. “So uh. Is that a yes to me walking you home, or...?”
Kagami stares, and then, tentatively, mirrors his finger guns with her own. She then gives him an awkward smile that's all teeth, but definitely genuine.

Nino considers melting into a puddle.
Nino takes Kagami home.

When Kagami and her mother had first moved to Paris, she’d spent most of her time trying to learn the language in a deeper fashion in order to converse better with locals to the point that one would mistake her as having grown up there all her life. For the most part, she’d mastered it enough that she was able to study at any school she wished and make her way through public transport without too much trouble. Sure, there was still a lot of slang and words she didn’t understand, but she’d always figured that experience was the best teacher when it came to the language. Most of the time you learned better through constant practice - and with the kind of company she was beginning to keep, she was learning much faster than if she’d stuck to just books and educational apps.

For example, she was presently learning around fifty ways to skin Nino alive with how he was cursing himself for forgetting about the change in the current bus schedules.

“Stupid, lousy, god damn-” With each word he says he lightly bumps his head against the bus schedule in frustration at himself, creasing the rim of his cap a little each time. “Mom warned me about the change, I forgot, I’m an absolute idiot-”

“Nino,” She calls out, making him pause. Thank goodness too - she wasn’t quite sure if either his head or the schedule could survive any more abuse. “Self-deprecation is going to get us nowhere. The clock’s still ticking.”

Nino, thankfully removing himself from the bus schedule, adjusts his cap in embarrassment. Even though he tilts the cap in front of his face, she can tell his forehead’s red from the repeated slamming. “Sorry about that minor freakout. Totally forgot the bus schedules are whack today.”

“It’s okay,” Kagami reassures, though when she glances at her phone clock she frowns. “Still… walking would take about just as long as if I’d waited for Adrien and his bodyguard from here. I’m not sure how we’re going to make it to my house before sundown at this rate…” Turning back to the schedule, she tries to figure out the best timeslot to catch. “Maybe if we chose a specific bus…”

Nino hums thoughtfully, looking around before pausing. “Yo, Mimi - have you ever biked on sidewalks before?”

Kagami raises an eyebrow at the odd question, and tears her gaze away from the bus schedule before them. “Of course I have, but rarely. Some neighborhoods back in Japan allowed me to do so. Why do you-”

She stops.

Nino, standing in between two rental bikes, smiles bashfully. “You up for a bike ride?”

Biking in Paris, Kagami found, was a lot like biking in Japan - though the terrain was certainly
flatter in Paris compared to where her family stayed. It was a bit of a learning curve not having to expect sudden elevation every now and then, but she managed to keep up with the more Paris-accustomed Nino, even surpassing him and beginning a race with him. It was fun sailing down familiar streets, her bag nestled snugly in the bike’s basket, Nino’s laughter one of the most prominent sounds in her ears besides the wind.

“That’s dangerous, you know,” Kagami cautions as Nino attempts to do a wheelie down a slope. She’d seen many others before him who’d done a wheelie down a steep slope back when she’d still lived and studied in Japan and a lot of them had landed flat on their face.

Nino laughs, pulling up the front wheel despite her warnings. “I’ve done this slope loads of times. Trust me, Mimi - I got this!”

“If you say so, bike lord.”

He does actually make it down the slope in a wheelie unharmed, something that mildly impresses Kagami. She really hadn’t pegged him for the athletic type, even after learning that he was formerly Carapace. She figured it was probably thanks to the Miraculous that he had been more battle-capable as Carapace - though the instinct to defend had certainly carried over to his civilian self.

As they turn a corner, Kagami sees Nino begin to book it the instant he recognizes it as her street, pedalling faster. A flash of competitiveness flares up within her at the sight of him, and despite herself she races after him on her own bike, the wind in her hair and a determined smile gracing her lips. When she crosses him and hears his indignant yelp, she glances back at him briefly to see his face, laughter bubbling past her lips when she sees him speed up. The sound of him speeding up behind her is enough to make her pedal even faster, until finally she skids to a stop only a few feet away from the entrance to her house, smiling and panting -

- right as Nino crashes into her, knocking her and her bike over to the ground when he sails right off of his own bike, the two of them landing into a neatly raked up pile of leaves. The street sweeper groans at the mess they make.

The two of them meet each other’s gazes, scraped knees and all, eyes wide, bikes on the sidewalk. Nino’s hat and glasses are both askew in such a way that somehow leaves had ended up in his hair, and the sight of it is so silly that a snort leaves Kagami’s mouth at the sight - only for her to sneeze when a leaf drops off from her own head and tickles her nose. That one makes Nino snort with laughter - until finally both of them are laughing hysterically as though they’re not dirty and covered in leaves on the sidewalk.

“You kids really need to watch where you bike,” The street sweeper scolds as Nino sits back and allows Kagami to stand, brushing herself off before holding out a hand to help him up. “Now I have to do this all over again.”

“Sorry,” Kagami murmurs apologetically, picking out a few more leaves from her hair as Nino goes to right their bikes again. “We could help you out if you’re fine with that.”

The sweeper hums thoughtfully. “Now that’d be nice… but no thanks, miss. It’s my job to clean up the streets anyway. Can’t have you taking that away.”

“Besides, we need to get you home already, Mimi,” Nino reminds, pointing to her house only a few feet away. “If you’re still in need of help though dude, I’ll be right back. Just need to take her home.”
Kagami watches as the street sweeper’s face takes on a knowing smile. “Ah. I understand. Okay, I’ll be right here sweeping if you come back, you hear me?”

“Thank you,” Kagami bows respectfully before gesturing for Nino to follow, taking her bike from his hands to pull it along with her. “I still need to pay you for this rental bike, don’t I?”

Nino shakes his head. “Don’t worry about it. It’s only a few euros out of my allowance. I’m just glad we got you home before sundown.”

“Still… you had to pay twice the amount. Let me at least pay for mine,” Kagami rummages around in her bag for her wallet before handing him over around fifteen euros. “I think that’s how much they cost for a day’s rental? I’m not sure.”

Nino raises an eyebrow. “You’ve never rented a bike in Paris before?”

“I don’t get out very often - when I do, it’s usually because Adrien offered to pick me up,” Kagami admits. The two of them park the bikes temporarily by the Tsurugi porch as she adds, “I… haven’t had reason to try out any of the rental bikes before today, actually. I just go to where I need to go directly.”

Much to her surprise, Nino tips his cap at her thoughtfully. “Well then, glad I got to be there to see you try them for the first time. You look like you had fun-” He pauses, and reaches out towards her with a hand to pull a leaf from behind her ear that she hadn’t even been aware was still there. “- and had a few leaves to spare.”

“Thank you,” She says softly, reaching up to her ear to touch where he’d plucked the leaf from, just as the front door opens to reveal one of the maids. Kagami turns to look at the wide eyed maid and bows. “I’ll be heading inside in a moment. Please tell mother.”

“Of course, miss Tsurugi,” The maid ducks her head in a little bow before heading back inside, leaving the door open for Kagami.

As she picks up her bag and slings it over her shoulder once more, Nino says, “I’m just gonna go and help the dude out outside your gates before returning these bikes, if that’s okay with you. My mom might need me home soon too.”

“I understand. Thank you for taking me home, Nino. I really do appreciate it.” Kagami smiles warmly at him, and much to her amusement Nino seems to turn a little pink at the sight, tugging on his cap with a soft smile on his face before turning around, pulling the bikes along with him until he’s out of sight. Once he’s gone, Kagami sighs before taking off her shoes and heading inside her house, closing the door behind her as she goes.

Seeing as that no one was at the entrance, Trixx pops his head out of her blazer. “Now wasn’t that cute. He took you home on bikes and even paid for your rental bike.”

“He’s a good person,” Kagami says sharply. “And that’s what friends do.”

“Oh sure. Friends offer to bike with you through a good slice of Paris on a nice afternoon and pay for your rental bike and show off when you’re looking,” Trixx counts off lazily. “But what do I know? I’m just a centuries-old quantic god shaped like a fox hiding in your blazer, after all.”

Kagami flicks at his nose with a finger. “Don’t be smart with me, Trixx. It’s not like you’ve been out very recently besides when Rena Rouge was still in circulation - you wouldn’t know anything about how he thinks.”
“I know the beginnings of love when I see it,” Trixx mutters before ducking back into her blazer as a maid peeks in. “Miss Tsurugi?”

Kagami puts her shoes down in the right place before following after the maid. “Ah- I’m coming- where’s mother?”

“Sitting in the living room, miss Tsurugi. She’s been waiting for you - what happened to your clothes?!“

Kagami looks down at her white blazer and red skirt, and realizes dimly that oh yeah, clothes were also a thing that got dirtied. “Ah. I just fell into a pile of leaves on the way home, that’s all. I’m sorry if I caused more extra laundry.”

“The laundry is fine, miss, but are you alright?”

“I’m fine. I just need to see mother before taking a bath.”

When Kagami finally finds herself in the living room, her mother is seated at the same spot she’d been sitting in earlier that day, earphones plugged into her ear. She was most likely listening to the nightly news. She adjusts the position of her bag strap for a few moments before Tomoe’s voice calls out, “Kagami. You’re home.”

“Before sundown, as promised,” Kagami emphasizes. “You wanted to speak with me, mother?”

Tomoe takes off the earphones before gesturing for Kagami to sit down on the couch across from her, but Kagami is wary - her skirt was no doubt dusty from her earlier fall, and that would dirty the seats. “Sit, Kagami. I just have a few things to clarify with you.”

“I’d rather stand, mother, if that’s alright with you,” Kagami admits as she walks over to face her mother head on, her hold on the bag strap tightening slightly. “What did you want to ask?”

Tomoe is quiet for a few moments, as though reviewing her words, before asking, “Why do you smell of leaves?”

“Ah- I fell down, mother, into a pile of leaves,” Kagami admits. “It was an accident, but now my clothes are dirty, and that’s why I don’t want to sit down.”

“A pile of leaves? Did Adrien’s bodyguard stop you right in front of a pile of leaves?”

Kagami tries to keep her expression neutral as she responds. “Adrien didn’t take me home, mother. Nino did.”

“... Why not Adrien?”

“Adrien had requested his bodyguard to take an extra hour because he would be staying out longer,” Kagami recounts, trying her hardest not to fidget. Trixx’s ear twitches against her chest as she adds, “Nino offered to take me home so I could be here before sundown as promised.”

Tomoe purses her lips. “Nino is the boy you were sitting next to this morning.”

“Yes mother.”

“I thought he had no means of transportation.”

And now, the clincher... “He didn’t, mother. We were going to take the bus, but the schedules were different for the day, so we took some rental bikes here instead. He paid for both our rental bikes
and offered to return both of them himself.” That last part, admittedly, she’d tacked on to make Nino look better in front of her mother - and the bonus here was that it wasn’t a lie in the very slightest. Nino had done exactly that.

“... Kagami, who is he to you?”

“Mother?”

“Who is this Nino to you, Kagami?” Tomoe asks. Her voice is cool, probing, and not at all angry - something that sets Kagami on edge. She was more used to a fiercer Tomoe than a cool Tomoe. “You said he was Adrien’s best friend.”

Kagami’s grip tightens on her bag strap even more - something Tomoe picks up on. “Nino is… Nino is my friend, mother, just as much as he is Adrien’s. We got off on the wrong foot, but we’ve been working on becoming better friends.”

“That is all you are?”

“Yes, mother.”

Tomoe seems to quietly scrutinize her for a few minutes, not saying anything. It takes a lot out of Kagami not to fidget under her ‘gaze’ before her mother eventually says, “A boy who makes sure a girl gets home safely is a respectable young man and most likely a good influence on both you and Gabriel’s son.”

“Mother?”

“You may go, Kagami. Go wash up before dinner.”

Kagami has never been so grateful to bow to her mother and duck away into her bedroom, immediately dropping her bag on the floor of her room as Trixx flies out, all smug smiles and wiggling… eyebrows? Did he have eyebrows? Were those eyebrows? “... What are you smirking at, Trixx?”

“Your mother is smarter than she looks,” Trixx teases. “‘Is that all he is to you, Kagami?’”

Kagami shrugs her blazer off before tossing it at him. “Oh, shut up.”

“Gabriel.”

“...”

“Angry that I was correct in that your source was wrong? You should be. My daughter knows the company she keeps - and the company she keeps is trustworthy and respectable.”

“...”

“Do not think for a moment that I don’t see your newest model, Gabriel. You earnestly believe she is a good influence on your son? Ha! A blind woman could see better than you.”

“...”

“Careful, Gabriel. That model of yours might be after your own son. We had an agreement, did we not?”
“...”

“Still your tongue, Agreste. I may withdraw this agreement yet if your temper doesn’t quell itself.”

“...”

“How dare you insinuate that my daughter-!”

“...”

“If you believe so much in your source, then I will meet her during our next meeting. Let’s see how much you trust in her word over mine. I know my daughter, Gabriel. My Kagami is nothing as your source claims.”

“...”

“Good evening to you as well, Gabriel.”

CLICK.

“Kagami is no courtesan, I can assure you of that, Gabriel Agreste. I can assure you of that.”
nino lahiffe and the talk gone wrong

Chapter Summary

Nino tries to talk to Alya one last time.

Chapter Notes


Today was the day.

He’d asked for about two days of mental preparation before he talked to Alya, so for two days he’d been mentally gearing himself up to face her again. That had meant spending two days watching Mylene and Ivan proving themselves to be rather good actors around Lila, who continued to pull them in and treat them like they were on her side. Mylene, thanks to her father’s profession, was better at keeping in character than Ivan was. It was great that Lila didn’t seem to pick up on it, but it wasn’t really doing any of them any favors in trying to separate her from Alya.

“Hey, Lila?” Adrien calls. The Italian girl perks up at his voice as he scratches the back of his neck awkwardly. “I wanted to speak to you about the next photoshoot schedule. Is that okay with you?”

“Of course, Adrien!” She simpers, standing up - only to pause and look back at Alya with what Nino thinks is mock concern. “Oh, but- Alya, will you be okay for a bit? Adrien and I have work to talk about.”

From where he’s watching, he sees Alya nod with a weak smile. “Go ahead, girl. I’m a big girl, I can take care of myself.”

“I couldn’t possibly leave you alone, Alya,” Lila frets. “Not when I know you still need someone to talk to. Are you absolutely sure?”

Alya gives her a thumbs up. “Course I am, Lila. You go on and clear up the work thing with Adrien. I’ll be right here in my seat working on some last minute homework, you hear me?”

“Oh! We’ll be right outside if you need us!” Lila chirps, and before Adrien can even blink she’s already pulling him along outside, chattering about how her grandfather was friends with a famous model or something. That was what Nino assumed anyway. It wasn’t too farfetched to assume she’d say something like that.

Nathaniel, sitting next to Nino, nudges him gently and gestures to Alya writing on her notebook near the front. There’s your chance, he seems to say silently. Go talk to her.

Nino swallows, and stands up - the signal for a few of the others to head on outside to give them privacy. Excuses ranged from ‘left something in the locker’ to ‘needing to submit some make up work to Ms. Mendeleiev’ to ‘suddenly breaking three nails’. The last one had been Chloe’s excuse,
and while literally nobody bought it, they also couldn’t \textit{not} buy it, with how rarely she seemed to complain nowadays.

When the last of their classmates finally exits the classroom, it’s eerily quiet, the only sounds being cellphones occasionally beeping as notifications popped up on their screens and the sounds of Alya’s pencil scratching against paper. Nino tries to steady his breathing and his shaky hands as he rises from his table in the back with as much grace as he can muster, and slowly, painfully slowly, he makes his way down until he’s only a row behind where Alya’s seated.

Alya stops writing. Nino’s breath stills briefly.

“... Hey,” She says awkwardly. She doesn’t face him.

“... Hey,” Nino greets back, just as awkwardly.

They don’t talk for a good few moments as Nino sits behind her. It’s a bit of a painful throwback to one of the oldest seating arrangements the class had had - except this time, it was Nino sitting behind her and not her sitting behind him. It’s a shift in perspective.

“... How’ve you been?” Nino eventually asks, unsure of how else to start the conversation. Honestly, he envied amicable exes, being able to talk so freely to their exes without all the excess baggage dragging them down. They didn’t have to wobble their way through a conversation hoping they didn’t piss off the other with something they said.

Alya shrugs lamely. “I’ve been better… you?”

“Same.”

Silence.

The hand holding her pencil trembles slightly, and briefly Nino wonders if she’s going to throw it at him before she drops it and turns to face him. He’s startled by the sad, watery look in her eyes - a direct contrast to the fiery, passionate girl he knew once.

“I’m sorry,” She begins, and then looks down, as if mulling over her words. She then shakes her head wildly before correcting, “No… sorry… sorry won’t ever really make up for it, will it? No apologies… nothing will make it better, no matter what I do.”

Nino stares as Alya gets on her knees, kneeling on the seat while facing him, her hands on the back rest. “I… I had no right to do what I did. I cost you \textit{everything}. I cost you your safety. I compromised your identity. All because I was \textit{angry, and hurt, and- and-}” Her voice hitches in her throat, and she grips the back rest harder. “... and because… I wanted to be validated. As Rena Rouge.”

He opens his mouth to respond, but Alya practically begs, “Please. Please, just- just let me finish, okay? I know I already talk a lot on my own but please let me get this all out first before you say anything. I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry, Nino.”

“I’m sorry- for being so \textit{stupid, so… so bullheaded, so-}” Alya, in her frustration, seems to tug at her hair. “I put my feelings before someone else’s - before \textit{yours}, time and time again- everything I did, it was because I wanted the reassurance that I was doing something \textit{right}, that I \textit{did} something right- even if-” She inhales sharply. “Even if it \textit{wasn’t} . Even if I was \textit{wrong} .”

“I shouldn’t have outed you as Carapace,” Alya emphasizes. “That was not something I had the \textit{right} to do just because I was angry that- that Ladybug had-” Nino watches the warring emotions
on her face - indignation and fury versus her sorrow and grief. “That Ladybug had replaced me as the Fox without telling me that I’d be replaced first- I just-”

Alya’s shoulders slump. “I’m sorry. You didn’t… you deserve any of that. I’m sorry… about outing you as Carapace,” Alya murmurs, voice soft and full of regret. “Really. I am.”

How cruel. Even though he’d long since deigned to let her go, she still made his heart ache with empathy. Nino’s gaze softens, but he doesn’t pull her into a hug like he would have long before over the desks separating them. “That’s long past, Alya. No need to keep beating yourself up over it.”

“But- don’t you want to be a hero anymore?” She asks him, genuinely confused. When she looks up, Nino sees that her eyes are wet with tears unshed. “Didn’t Ladybug-”

“Ladybug did retire me,” Nino confirms, stopping her with a hand. “But… it’s okay. I understand why she had to, after all. My identity was out in the open for everyone to see already - and I’m guessing that based on how we used to… you know,” He trails off awkwardly, making Alya look away in shame. “… I’m guessing people already know, or have a good guess that you’re Rena Rouge. ‘S’why Inari’s out and about.”

The mention of Inari seems to make Alya’s face twist in the slightest of scowls, but she doesn’t say anything, at least at the moment. “So that means we’re both retired from being heroes, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“… I miss Trixx,” Alya admits softly, and in that moment Nino realizes that since Alya hadn’t been as publicly outed as he had been, and with how Ladybug highly valued secret identities, there was a very high chance Alya hadn’t gotten the same chance to say goodbye to Trixx like he had with Wayzz. Bastille knew who he was - and Bastille had made the decision to let him say goodbye to Wayzz. Whoever Inari was, she didn’t know Alya was Rena Rouge.

Which meant Alya would never get the same closure he did.

The pang of sympathy he feels for her is real as he replies, “I miss Wayzz too.”

The two of them are silent for a bit, just standing across from each other. It’s a violent contrast to the last time they’d talked to each other for more than a minute - quiet, cold, unlike the fiery explosion that had been their breakup. It’s an uncomfortable sort of silence that leaves Nino’s skin wanting to leap off of his bones, but he doesn’t move, trying to compose his thoughts. This wasn’t the sort of closure he’d wanted with her, but… it was definitely a start.

“I can’t… forgive you yet,” Nino begins carefully. Alya’s face falls, but he can tell she understands the decision. “But I can tell that you get that. And… I do accept your apology. I just can’t forgive you yet.”

“I understand,” Alya murmurs. “I still haven’t forgiven myself. Even if- even if we’d broken up, maybe we could’ve still been a fighting team on Ladybug’s side- Rena and Carapace… maybe…”

“You know for a fact that would’ve been impossible. We weren’t even talking to each other. That’s… kind of what exes with an explosive breakup like ours was do.”

“We could’ve made it work out!” Alya says, and for a moment a flicker of her usual vigor crosses her face. “For Ladybug! For Paris! We could’ve-”

Nino frowns. “Not for ourselves, Alya?”
Alya freezes.

“You keep namedropping other people we could have worked out for, but you didn’t mention us at any point,” Nino points out. Alya is frighteningly still as he continues, genuinely hurt, “Relationships - you’re not supposed to make it work out for literally everyone else, you try and make it work for each other. ”

Alya swallows. “Nino-”

“Alya… I think both you and I know that we can’t be the same team we used to be anymore,” Nino tries to salvage the conversation, his voice soft and apologetic. “We’re not the same people anymore. We’re… not a unit. And we don’t have the same dynamic we used to have. Hell, Alya, we’re- we’re almost arguing right now-”

“No we’re not!”

“We’re on the verge of doing so,” Nino warns, and Alya settles down, if only a little. “Alya, I didn’t come to talk to you to get back together with you, or anything like that. I came to… to get some closure, okay? Closure, not a ‘get together again’. And… I came to talk to you about Lila.”

Almost immediately, Alya seems to go on the defensive. “What about Lila?”

“You know by now she’s lying, you can’t possibly not know she’s lying by this point,” Nino stresses. “You saw Pixie Pop happen. You heard Lila’s lies about Nathaniel and Juleka, didn’t you? You know what she said wasn’t true!”

“She- she was only trying to protect Rose from further heartbreak!” Alya protests. “She probably overexaggerated her suspicions- and- Lila wouldn’t have known better! Nathaniel doesn’t talk to her at all! How would she have known that Nathaniel wasn’t macking on Juleka?!”

Nino feels himself breathe sharply out of frustration. “That’s exactly why you should know she’s lying, Alya - Lila doesn’t know that! She’s the kindest, most loyal friend I’ve ever known and I know for a fact she wouldn’t have cheated on Rose with Nathaniel if he’d been the hottest guy in the world!”

Alya’s eyes are still wet when she meets his gaze again, but they’re angrier tears this time. “Lila never threatens anyone. She’s the kindest person I know, and incredibly sincere. She was there for me when we broke up - she was the one comforting me even though she thinks she’s the reason we broke up!”

“That’s what you used to say about Marinette,” Nino says sharply. The insinuation makes Alya’s eyes sharpen. “Remember Marinette, Alya? Remember your best friend?”
“She’s not my best friend any more,” Alya says through gritted teeth. “Not after everything… not after everything-”

“Everything what, she did?” Nino’s palms lightly smack against the desk. “Alya- Marinette’s been trying to tell you the same thing I’m trying to tell you now for ages - that Lila Rossi is a liar down to the bone, and that every word she breathes is a goddamn lie.”

“How do I know you’re not lying?”

“How do you- I don’t benefit at all from lying to you, Alya!” Nino throws his hands up in the air in frustration, willing his temper to calm down. No use attracting an akuma, after all. “Please, Alya. You’re a reporter. Use your common sense and think for a bit, check your sources, yadda yadda, but for the love of God, THINK!”

“Here’s what I think-” And here Alya stands up, fiercely meeting his gaze. “I think I should stop listening to you.”

“Oh, here we go.”

“What do you mean here we go?!”

“That’s what you always do, Alya!” Nino stresses. “When something doesn’t line up for what you believe to be true you ignore it! You pretend it’s not a thing when it’s convenient! Ladybug asking people to not investigate her identity? You go on ahead anyway! Marinette asking you to stop pushing her towards Adrien when she’s not ready? You go on ahead anyway! Everything you do is in some way or another for your own selfish wants because you don’t think of the bigger picture!”

Alya recoils, visibly hurt. “I encouraged Marinette to confess to Adrien multiple times because she liked him!”

“You keep pressuring an anxious girl into confessing when she’s not really ready,” Nino stresses. “Alya, for the love of God. I loved you once. But this isn’t the Alya I fell in love with.” His hands clench into fists on top of the table. “The Alya I know is passionate. The Alya I know rises to the defense of her friends and believes the people she knew longer than people she just met. The Alya I know is a star reporter who always checks her sources.”

His voice grows quiet. “The Alya I knew was somebody I could trust.”

Alya flinches at his words as if she’d been struck by lightning.

“I wanted to try and convince you. That she was lying,” Nino stands, heart heavy. “But you- I don’t think I can even get to you no matter how hard I try. No matter how hard Marinette tries. You believe what you want to believe.”

“Nino?” Alya’s voice is weak. He sees her hesitantly reach out to him.

He takes hold of her hand, and gently but firmly pushes it down and away from him. Where their skin makes contact, Nino feels like he’s touching dry ice. “I… I did hope you’d have listened to me, Alya. I really did. And I’m still holding out for you, you know. Even after all this. Because… I loved you once. Marinette too, loved you. And… we don’t want you to fall alongside Lila when her lies get the best of her.”

“We just… don’t want to see you crash and burn, Alya,” Nino murmurs before finally letting go of her hand. “But if you don’t want to believe me… fine. It’s… it’s fine. It’s your own funeral, Alya.” Pause. “… You really aren’t the same Alya I knew and trusted to guard my back anymore.”
Nino goes back to his seat, leaving Alya to her own devices once more, just as everyone else starts pouring back into the classroom. Those who had been aware of the plan look between Alya and Nino hopefully, but falter at the sight of Nino’s stormy face and Alya’s frozen deer-in-headlights expression. He doesn’t blame them.

“Alright class- we’ll be beginning today’s lesson in a few-” A hand interrupts Ms. Bustier’s announcement. “Yes, Alya?”

“I need- I need to use the bathroom,” Alya whispers before running out of the room, the door slamming shut behind her.

Nino’s gut churns uncomfortably as the entire class goes to look at him, and he sinks into his seat, pulling his cap over his eyes.

“Didn’t go so well, I take it?” Nathaniel asks sympathetically.

Nino only groans in response.

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“Fallen heroine… I am Hawkmoth. Your heart has been broken all over again by the one you thought would understand you. You want a chance to be a hero again, don’t you? To prove that you’re still the hero you once were, that you haven’t changed at all. To prove that you’re still worthy of anyone’s trust, that who you are now is no illusion - that you’re still the you everyone knows and loves.”

“Fallen heroine, I am Mayura, and I see that you need a partner. A partner to guard your back, a shelter from the cruel world that hates you for being who you are. Carapace will be here by your side, as if he never left. Your partner, through and through - ‘til death do you part.”

“I’m giving you the powers that were taken away from you with no cost whatsoever, but in return you must bring back the jewels of the one who took these powers away from you in the first place.”

“Carapace will help you, no matter what you ask of him to do. He is the perfect partner. Use your hurt and your rage and he will do the rest.”

“Do we have a deal?”

“... May you shape reality as you wish, Rena Rage.”
Chapter Summary

Kagami has a close encounter of the Carapacian kind.

When Kagami finds Nino and the others later that day, the boy is face down on the table, his lunch untouched and Adrien rubbing soothing circles on his back while Nathaniel, Chloe, and Sabrina watch. Her face takes on a confused look as she approaches, genuinely concerned for the state of him.

“I take it things didn’t go too well?” She asks Nathaniel, who only shrugs helplessly, unable to really answer. She turns to Adrien instead for an answer. “How was it?”

Adrien winces. “Not very good. Alya didn’t come back to class after she went to the bathroom immediately after their talk.”

“Did you encounter her after class?”

“Mylene volunteered to check on Alya in the bathrooms afterwards, but she says Alya wasn’t there either when she came back,” Marinette replies, face carefully neutral but her eyes brimming with worry. It was very much like Marinette to worry still over the liar’s final ally and her former best friend. On occasion, Kagami envied her capacity to forgive. “Where could she have gone? Classes aren’t over yet for the day… she couldn’t have gone that far, can she?”

Sabrina shakes her head vehemently. “I’m pretty sure they have someone watching all the entrances to make sure kids don’t play hooky at any point without a pass. Unless she went to the clinic?”

“I can… go check the clinic,” Nino’s movement is so sluggish Kagami is mildly concerned that he’d turned into the living dead right before her eyes. “It’s the least I can do… and then I’ll check other spots I know she’d probably be hiding in. She doesn’t hide in many spots in school, usually, she’s… always out in the open.” He hangs his head. “We never had any reason to really hide.”

Chloe snorts. “Except Super Penguino, I guess. But that’s long past.”

“Chloe,” Adrien hisses softly.

Kagami watches as Nino shakes his head. “It’s okay, dude. I promise. I’ll go look for Alya over at the clinic and some other hiding spots. You guys go look in other spots, okay?”

“Aren’t you going to eat your lunch?” Kagami asks, eyebrow raised.

Nino shrugs, moving to stand up. “It’s cool. I can eat it later.”

“You could always eat it now,” She points out, reaching out to hold him by the palm gently but firmly. “And then search for Alya later. You can’t go searching on an empty stomach - it’s not a good idea and you’ll be less focused on your search.”

“I’ll be fine, Mimi,” Nino reassures - and Kagami does not miss the way literally everyone at the
table suddenly seems to hone in on their conversation at the nickname. “I’ll take my sandwich with me if that makes you feel better. I… really need to make sure Alya’s okay, at least.”

Kagami lightly bites on her lower lip thoughtfully. “And if you run into Lila?“

“… I’ll burn that bridge when I get to it,” Nino mutters mostly to himself before picking up the sandwich and tucking it into his pocket. With a nod and a squeeze of her hand, Nino lets go, and Kagami lets her hand flop back to her side as he takes off in the direction of the cafeteria’s exit, the doors swinging shut behind him.

It’s a few minutes before she sits down, nearly completely forgetting that she’d just been standing there staring off in the direction Nino had gone. Chloe immediately grills her on the nickname the instant she does sit down, however. “ Mimi?”

“It’s his nickname for me. It comes from the ‘mi’ in my name,” Kagami explains.

Adrien shakes his head before explaining, “Kagami, I’m not sure if you know, but ‘mimi’ also means something else in French.”

“‘Mimi’ as a name means a lot of things depending on the character used while writing it,” Kagami raises an eyebrow. “French doesn’t have different characters like we do, do they?”

“Well, yeah, but-”

“It…” Marinette struggles to find words, gesturing wildly instead with her hands. “Uh. Well. Adrien! Help me out here!”

"What?!"

"Why do you think Nino called you Mimi?" Sabrina asks, genuinely curious. "It's a cute nickname, I'll admit. But he doesn't give nicknames to everyone."

“I… figured it was because we were finally friends that he gave me a nickname,” She admits, making them all raise an eyebrow. “He calls Marinette ‘Nettie’ or ‘Nette’. I assumed that was what he meant.”

Sabrina nods. “He does call Marinette that.”

“Knowing Nino, he does mean it as just ‘Mimi’,“ Nathaniel laughs. “But he completely forgot the attached meaning to it as well in French.”

“What does it mean?”

“Well…”

A sudden shout echoes out, and almost immediately everyone at the table goes on the alert. They watch as students clamber towards the nearest window, and with a hurried mumble of, “I gotta go,” from Adrien and Marinette the two take off as well. Chloe makes the excuse that she and Sabrina would get a better view from somewhere else, while Nathaniel ducks away after them, claiming bathroom break.

“Wait… are those… spiderwebs?”

At the mention of spiderwebs, Kagami instantly whips around and pushes her way through the crowd, finally making it to the windowsill. With a vice grip she clings to the ledge and leans as far
as she dares, but doesn’t see much of anything apart from chaos on the streets. Cars are strewn about everywhere, with some of them even hanging by what looked like spider silk on the nearby buildings and even atop trees.

“I don’t see the akuma,” She hears someone say loudly behind her. “This is most definitely an akuma, right?”

“What else would it be, idiot!!”

“Look closer, kit,” Kagami picks up on Trixx’s hiss from her blazer. The little kwami is barely peering out from behind her tie, but he’s still able to see his surroundings. “Something’s off about these spiderwebs.”

Kagami squints.

*Focus, Kagami,* her mother’s voice echoes in her head. *Not everything is as it seems at first glance. Even the laziest bake-danuki’s disguise is harder to distinguish from the fox’s. Use your senses - all of them.*

Her fingers tighten around the windowsill as she leans forward even more, relying heavily on the people still leaning behind her as something her foot could hook onto should she tumble off. *Something’s off… but what in the world could it…?*

And then, in that moment, she sees the faintest shimmer around one of the upturned cars - a shimmer that heavily resembled a heat haze.

It occurs to her in that moment as well that despite the current season they were in, the surroundings were incredibly hot - her cheeks were reddening and her forehead was beading with sweat as the realization hits her.

*A heat haze… that means it’s a…*

“Mirage…?!” Kagami wonders out loud, absolutely dumbfounded - just as someone shouts, “Look! There’s the akuma!”

Kagami’s knuckles are bone white as more of the other students push against her trying to get a good look at the battlefield themselves. She was sorely tempted to push all of them back when suddenly a very familiar akuma crawls across one of the buildings.

“That’s Anansi!” A high-pitched voice cries out - Rose’s, she thinks. “Oh no, she must have heard about Alya!”

*Anansi, huh?* Kagami watches as the spider continues to leave spiderwebs in her wake, laughing as she strings webs to and fro. *If the shimmer down there is any indication, Anansi too is a mirage… but what does that mean? Does that mean an akuma with the power of illusion? I’d better go and transfor-*

She’d miscalculated how far she’d actually been leaning on the edge.

Kagami falls, and the people she leaves above her scream.

She falls, and falls, but does not scream-

- but then she finds herself in arms of green.
Kagami’s hands immediately fly to her tie, both to hide her Miraculous and as an automatic defensive reaction, her eyes shut tightly at first. Once she’s sure she’s no longer falling, she looks up - and immediately gawks.

“Nino?” She asks incredulously, because sure enough it’s Carapace holding her, real as day and not a mirage in the slightest. He had to be real - how else would he be holding her at that moment? But... the turtle Miraculous... is it not with Bastille?

Carapace makes a few leaps through the spiderweb maze Anansi had made prior, ducking and avoiding each web expertly with Kagami still in his arms. As they pass through the webs Kagami feels her entire body heating up - literally, because it was that hot for some unexplainable reason - before eventually he sets her down quite a bit away from Francois-Dupont, but out of harm’s way.

“Nino, wait -” When Carapace makes a move to leap back into battle, Kagami reaches out to him.

“Weren’t you- weren’t you looking for-”

“ANANSI!”

Kagami and Carapace both look up at the shout. So do the rest of the audience.

What she sees makes her heart stop for a good few moments - before being kickstarted once more by rage and knowledge.

Rena Rouge lands next to Carapace and in front of Kagami, glaring at ‘Anansi’ staring back at them with a sneer. “Your days of being an akuma are over, Nora. Just come back home already and stop all of this!”

“What, and let you and the flyweight have all the fun?” The mirage Anansi mocks before taking a running leap and jumping in front of them. “Face it, little fox. I may be outnumbered, but I’ve got six arms, baby. You two have four altogether.”

Kagami takes a step back, and another. If she was playing her cards right, the mirage wouldn’t even pay attention to her and be focused on its conversation with Rena Rouge, who she now knew without a doubt was the akuma. Rena Rouge didn’t have the Miraculous - she did. This was solid proof. She had to tell Ladybug-

- but she falters slightly, remembering the feel of Carapace’s arms. That, for certain, had been as real as day, and was definitely solid. Carapace was no illusion, no mirage - she’d made contact with him and he hadn’t disappeared nor been rid of a disguise, if he’d been shrouded in one in the first place. But it just didn’t add up. It didn’t make sense that Nino would be Carapace again - everyone knew his identity, didn’t they? And why would he be working with the akuma Rena Rouge?

What in the hell was going on?

A yoyo zips through in that exact moment, clearing the spiderwebs and the mirage Anansi and making it disappear in a poof of smoke. Almost immediately, the temperature in the area seems to drop, and everything cools considerably, making Kagami sigh in relief. Ladybug lands triumphantly in front of Rena Rouge and Carapace before doing a double take at the sight of them.

“R-Rena Rouge?! Carapace?!” Ladybug gawks before she notices Kagami in the back. Her eyes are wide initially in surprise, but they soon melt into a look of understanding when Kagami very subtly shakes her head and reveals Trixx peeking out of her blazer.

Rena Rouge beams. “Ladybug! I knew you’d come around eventually! Thanks for leaving me the Fox Miraculous again. I won’t let you down this time!”
“There’s no pulling the Mirage over these bluebell eyes, Rena Rouge - I didn’t leave you the Miraculous!” Ladybug points at her as the others on the team swing over and position themselves behind her. Medusa a little far off but within hearing range, Kaiser Biene hovering above them protectively, his top out and ready to attack. Bastille was absent, as was Chat Noir. “Whoever you are, you’d better stop impersonating Rena Rouge, or-”

“I am Rena Rouge!” The faux heroine insists, stomping her foot. Immediately, the temperature seems to rise again, and Kagami takes another step backward. She looks around, and thankfully spots a subway staircase, which she slowly makes her way to as Rena Rouge continues to say, “I’m a hero, and always will be a hero! I’ll prove it to you, Ladybug, see - you can see my outfit, right?! I’m still here, ears and all!”

Ladybug mouths something that Kagami doesn’t understand at first, but Rena Rouge’s response is all she needs to hear. “Alya disappointed you. Alya can no longer be a hero because you thought she was no longer hero material. But Rena Rouge never betrayed you, right?! And now- and it doesn’t matter that everyone knows who Carapace is, because I can protect him better now! He’s doing better now!”

**Rena Rouge was Alya.**

It made so much sense now in her head. The dots had all suddenly connected. How else would Alya have known that Carapace’s true identity was Nino Lahiffe? Why else would Carapace have been seen flirting with Rena Rouge on Heroes’ Day when he was Nino Lahiffe, someone with a girlfriend named Alya Cesaire. *She was Rena Rouge.*

Which meant that that was probably Alya standing there trying to convince Ladybug she had the Fox Miraculous. But she’d never be able to - not when Inari’s civilian identity was about to duck into the subway system’s stairway to prove her wrong.

But that still didn’t solve the issue of Carapace being there- wait, where did Carapace go?

Kagami backs up, and hits a wall. When she turns to look, it’s Carapace standing there - but no, it’s not Carapace, she realizes numbly.

Nino’s eyes were amber, and as Carapace those were hidden behind mostly translucent green goggles. This Carapace’s goggles weren’t green - they were red.

“Give it up, akuma ,” Ladybug swipes at Rena Rouge’s necklace and smashes it to the ground, expecting the butterfly to come out - but it doesn’t. All it does is shatter Rena Rouge’s illusion - and reveal someone far more dangerous.

Where Rena Rouge’s attire was more clear cut and that of a typical superhero’s, the akuma’s seemed unable to decide where the costume began and where it ended. Incredibly dark red violet boots and gloves made an ombre into a lighter of red violet and then into gray and bled into red orange, leaning closer to red. Rena Rouge’s single coattail had been split into two smaller ‘foxtails’, with the same red violet-gray-red orange ombre on both coattails. The white front of her attire had become ash gray, and the fox Miraculous that should have been there was missing. Her flute was a single color - ash gray, like her front, and her hair-!

Her hair, like Medusa’s, remained constantly afloat, but for good reason - hers seemed to be burning alive with flames. The tips were bright yellow, and every time she moved the flames seemed to dance around with her. The air around her seemed to distort with her very existence, creating small heat hazes around herself.
Ladybug takes a step back as Kaiser Biene buzzes to attention. “Step back, Ladybug,” He warns. “That’s not Rena Rouge, that’s—”

“Rena Rage,” snarls the newly discovered akuma. “Why couldn’t you just listen to me, Ladybug?! Why didn’t you listen to me?! Why didn’t you believe me?! Now we have to fight and I have to take your Miraculous so I don’t lose Carapace!”

“What is he, huh?!” Medusa snarks. “Another one of your illusions?!”

Rena Rage’s eyes were not human, Kagami discovers, when she turns around to look at her. Her sclera are dark, her irises an inhumane, feral yellow. “Would a mirage do this? ”

Kagami feels Carapace’s - no, not Carapace - hands on either side of her grip her by the biceps tightly and lift her off the ground. Her hands still firmly grasping her tie and hiding her Miraculous in her palm, she struggles to break free, kicking at him the best she can - but he does not falter.

“Kagami!” Ladybug reaches out, but just then Rena Rage’s flames brighten. She bares her teeth at Ladybug. “Let her go, Rena Rage! She’s done nothing to you!”

“I know how much you love civilians, Ladybug!” Rena Rage snarls. “How you play favorites, how you value the opinion of one over another! Let’s see how much you care about this one - you seem to know her name, after all!”

Kagami is made numbly aware of the fact that the fake Carapace is now pressing her against his chest with one arm, his other arm having grabbed his shield and now poising it at her throat. She didn’t doubt its edge - it looked like it would slice her nose off if she even moved.

“Don’t listen to her, Ladybug!” Kagami dares to shout, still vehemently clinging to her Miraculous as the fake Carapace moves the shield closer. “I’ll be fine! Don’t give her your Miraculous!”

Rena Rage flashes fangs and pulls out her flute. “Wanna bet, Ladybug?”

Ladybug answers by hurling her yoyo at her. Rena Rage dodges instantly, and instantly her hair seems to rise even higher, the flames growing brighter. With a quick spin she lifts her flute to her lips, a blue flame emerging from the tip, before she throws it at the ground. The blue flames immediately spread, setting fire to everything it touched.

As Kagami watches Ladybug look around in horror, Rena Rage makes a mad dash for her earrings while she’s distracted. Kagami is unable to cry out with the shield pointed at her throat - but someone else comes to her rescue. Someone with a long metal baton with a green paw print that knocks Rena Rage a few feet away.

“FINALLY!” Medusa huffs as Chat Noir sails into the scene, shrinking his staff back into a manageable size. “Where were you?!”

Chat winks at her. “Aw, did you miss me, Medusa?"

“Like I miss my 2015 Gucci handbag,” Medusa sniffs haughtily. “Seriously though- where were you?! And you too, Bastille! Don’t think I don’t see your shelled behind over there!”

Bastille comes crashing in right behind Chat with a laugh, saluting at her. “Sorry. Got held up a little at my house, but I managed to get out when I saw the news.”

“I went to fetch us a new friend, and perfect timing too!” Chat looks at the flames around them with a wince. “Looks like it’s time to start putting out some fires!”
Kaiser Biene shakes his head wildly before making a dive at the fake Carapace and Kagami. “We need to save the civilian first!”

“CARAPACE!” Rena Rage snarls before fighting off a blow from Ladybug. “NOW!”

Kagami leans as far into Carapace as possible as the fake hero draws his shield nearer-

“LIGHTNING DRAGON!”

Suddenly, Kagami feels the fake Carapace convulse underneath her at an electric shock. He drops the shield and her, but luckily Kaiser Biene is there to catch her in his arms, pulling her into the air and a safe distance away from Carapace.

Her knuckles are white as Kaiser looks down in surprise at the battlefield. Where the fake Carapace is still recovering, the lightning dancing across his body reforms into an unfamiliar figure - but Kagami would know the sword and the triad of symbols on his attire anywhere.

“Claws off the civilian, faker,” the new Dragon Miraculous holder hisses, before drawing back and decking the fake Carapace right in the nose.

Kagami stares when Chat declares, “You’ll have to forgive Komodo. He’s a bit of a hothead.”

She looks down at her successor.

Komodo looks up, and smiles a fanged grin at her. The dragon’s tail peeking out from under his jacket seems to swish in reaction to his smile, and Kagami hates the fact that her heart skips a beat at the sight.
Nino Lahiffe and the Dragon's Rage

Chapter Summary

Nino will be damned if he doesn't help save Alya from herself.

Nino doesn’t run into Lila while he looks for Alya, thankfully enough - but it’s also a point of dissatisfaction for him. Alya was most likely her only real ally within the class left, and she wasn’t even bothering to look for her as well? Discarding people as she sees fit. God. And they’re supposed to be 'best friends’. It’s gonna be one hell of a ride to see her fall-

“Nino Lahiffe?”

THUNK.

Nino runs right into a doorframe.

Ms. Flamel winces at the sound, immediately reaching out to grab Nino by the wrist to make sure he didn’t fall over. “You should really consider sitting down when thinking too deeply, Mr. Lahiffe.”

“Sorry, Ms. Flamel,” Nino winces, rubbing at his forehead before remembering why he was there in the first place. “Hey, Ms. Flamel, is Alya in there?”

Ms. Flamel’s brow furrows. “Miss Cesaire? … No, she hasn’t passed by while I was around, actually. I might have missed her since I went out for a lunch break.”

“Dammit,” Nino curses under his breath as she asks, “Is there a reason why you’re looking for her?”

He looks up, throat drying considerably as he tries to speak. “I… I just needed to know if she was alright. We had… we talked again. After a long time of not talking to each other. And it ended in her going to the bathroom and never coming back for class.” His gaze flits down to his shoes. “… I just wanted to check on her.”

“Ah,” Ms. Flamel’s gaze softens in sympathy. “Well, if it’s any help at all, most teenage girls hide in the bathrooms if they’re upset. If they’re not there, there’s a good chance she’s hiding in one of the many hiding spots in school, like a less visited section of the library or the hallway leading to the boiler room.” Pause. “… Those are the ones I can think off the top of my head, anyway. The boiler room’s been a source of many small accidents on my end.”

Nino smiles weakly as he backs off, ready to go off again once more. “Thanks, Ms. Flamel… I guess I’d better get going.”

“Wait,” At her call, he turns to face her. “Mr. Lahiffe… have any of you dealt with miss Rossi yet?”

Nino’s face contorts slightly, and the nurse stifles a snort. “Judging from your expression, I’m guessing not. If you’re all too afraid to bring it up to a teacher I can always come in to support you with her medical records, you know that, right?”
“I’d… uh… forgotten,” Nino admits, rubbing at his wrist awkwardly. “To ask for your help, I mean, ma’am. But I did plan on doing so! We were going to reveal every single lie she’s ever told and your evidence would really help.”

Ms. Flamel smiles gently. “Of course. Just let me know whenever you need them - I’m always here at the clinic. But for now, I think it’s best you go find your friend - if she’s as upset as you say, then there’s no doubt that she’s vulnerable to a visit from no other than Hawkmoth.”

The thought of Alya getting akumatized again chills his bones. She’d been akumatized or had become Lady Wifi so many times already, and once as Rena Rouge she’d become her equivalent of Queen Wasp - Rena Rage. No matter what he felt towards her, no matter the situation, he couldn’t let it happen again. Nobody deserved to be akumatized for feeling like a normal human being.

“Thanks, Ms. Flamel - I gotta go-” Nino tips his cap at her before turning around, heading first for the boiler room’s door - only to find that it was, for once in its existence, locked. He jiggles the handle a few times, but no dice, so he goes and heads for the library - and finds nobody there either save for the librarian, which wasn’t that odd.

When he leaves the library, it’s eerily empty for the most part - save for a few students running back into their classrooms. There’s much commotion ado around him judging from the noise and clamor, but he doesn’t give it any particular notice, only looking out for Alya, and on guard against the possibility of coming across Lila. His shoes squeak against the blacktop as he checks any possible hiding place he comes across, but he finds no luck, and no Alya.

Nino lightly bumps his head against a nearby pole in frustration. What he wouldn’t give for some indication as to where Alya was.

“Nino!”

**CLANG!**

Nino hits his head on the pole in surprise - harder this time

Chat Noir winces and hisses as Nino stumbles around for a few moments, forehead red. “Me-owch. That’s gotta hurt.”

“Why does this keep happening to me?” Nino asks nobody in particular, rubbing at his forehead ruefully before realizing that it had been Chat Noir that had addressed him. Suddenly, he was wary. “Chat Noir? What are you doing here, dude?”

The cat hero grins cheekily. “May I borrow you for a minute?”

“Uh, yeah, sure- wait, if you’re here, is there an aku mAAAAAAA- ” Nino suddenly feels Chat Noir’s arm wrap around his waist as the cat extends his staff far and above the school roof, landing behind a chimney on one of the many high rooftops of Paris. The sudden movement leaves his head spinning briefly, and for a moment he entertains the thought of losing his breakfast. He doesn’t.

Chat Noir shrinks the baton again. “Sorry about that, but this is very important. There’s an akuma attack happening right now and the akuma is someone you might consider incredibly familiar - Anansi,” Nino freezes and stares at him. “Except here’s the thing - I don’t think it’s really Anansi. I think it’s a fake - an illusion.”
“An illusion?” Nino frowns. “Inari wouldn’t-”

“It’s not Inari’s doing,” Chat immediately amends. “You know how me and Ladybug are aware of the other heroes’ civilian identities, right? I saw her in the crowds watching Anansi, so I know it wasn’t her doing.”

Then what other… “Volpina?!” Oh, that slimy, two-faced-

“I don’t think it’s Volpina either, because I unfortunately saw Lila Rossi hiding in the bathroom earlier,” Chat shakes his head ruefully. “I have a bad feeling that I know who the akuma is, though - because I saw someone running around that shouldn’t be running around. Can you tell me who it is?”

Nino stares. “I’m not a mind reader, dude.”

“I saw Carapace,” Chat says seriously. The entirety of Nino’s bloodstream freezes over. “And I saw, darting around the rooftops, one Rena Rouge.”

No… no way… “… Alya? Alya’s been… akumatized?” Nino asks weakly.

“It’s the most likely possibility,” Chat confirms. “And Carapace… the Carapace with her, anyway… he’s not one of her illusions, he’s too solid. I think he’s a Sentimonster, just like the Ladybug we fought once before.”

Nino feels his heart pound at his chest, but it’s a dull noise compared to the blood roaring in his ears. “A Senti- why would- why would Mayura make a Sentimonster Carapace? A Sentipace? Caramonster?”

“Sentipace will do, since we called the other one Sentibug - and I have a feeling you might know the answer to that… right, Carapace the original?” Chat looks at him, eyes full of understanding, and Nino clenches his fists, shutting his eyes. “Rena Rouge and Carapace were-“

“- always a team, always together, working with Ladybug as superheroes should… just like we did in the past,” Nino mutters stiffly, the ache in his chest growing more painful at the thought. “Alya… this is my fault. It’s my fault we’re no longer a team, no longer dating… no longer Rena Rouge and Carapa-”

Chat holds up a finger. “Ah ah ah. According to my sources, it’s not your fault, or at least not fully. You chose to break up with her because of an external influence, and because you finally realized something for yourself. You were no longer Carapace because of her. She’s no longer Rena Rouge because of something else entirely.”

He places both his hands on Nino’s shoulders and shakes him once, lightly. “Stop blaming yourself for what happened. Our source tells us you tried to talk to Alya again, right? And it didn't go well? Not entirely your fault. Don’t ever think it’s entirely your fault, because you’re one of the coolest civilians I’ve come to know, Nino - and you were a great hero as Carapace, and a great hero just being yourself.” Chat smiles reassuringly. “And it’s because of this I’ve come to ask for your help on Ladybug’s behalf.”

“Where is she?”

“Out there confronting the akuma and Sentipace, most likely, with the other heroes on the way or already there. And now, I’m bringing out a new friend to help.”

Nino’s hand ghosts over his wrist. “Bastille’s already out, right? I can’t be Carapace again, even if
“No, but you can always trade one old thing for another, right?” And then, right before his eyes, Nino sees Chat Noir hold out a familiar black box. “Nino Lahiffe, here is the Miraculous of the Dragon, which grants the power of the elements wind, water, and lightning. You will use it for the greater good, as long as you’re willing. Can we trust you?”

Nino’s heart seizes at the sight of the box, and the blood that had initially frozen over suddenly burns to life. “Are- are you sure, Chat Noir? You’re really letting me use this Miraculous?”

“Like I said, Nino - you’re a great hero, in and out of the mask. Doesn’t matter which one you wear,” Chat winks.

Nino looks down at his outstretched hand, at the box sitting in his palm, and thinks about Wayzz. Thinks about the last time they’d seen each other, and their final goodbye.

_There will always be new Turtles. But there will only ever be one Nino Lahiffe, the Carapace of Paris._

He takes the box, swearing, “I’m gonna teach that faker a lesson - and save everyone.”

“I know you will,” Chat smiles as Nino opens the box, and immediately a red light bursts forth like a firework, revealing itself to be a small red dragon kwami. “Nino, meet Longg.”

Longg makes a sweeping bow - or at least the closest approximation he could get to one in midair. “Greetings, young man. As Chat Noir has informed you, I am the dragon kwami Longg, and my Miraculous offers you the powers of wind, water, or lightning. Once all three powers have been used, your Miraculous will begin to time out like any other one.”

“Seems a little overpowered, huh?” Nino asks the both of them. Chat makes an ‘eh’ gesture with his hand as Nino goes to put the Miraculous around his neck. Just like everyone else’s Miraculous, it morphs to suit its holder, and when he looks its camouflaged form appeared to be a thin braided choker with a single round pendant of black at the center. Touching it, he realizes with a start that it was able to double as an earphone splitter when he unlatches a cord that he tugs on.

Chat whistles at the sight of it. “Wow. Might be the coolest camouflage form of a Miraculous I’ve seen yet. Definitely functional.”

“All you need to say is ‘Longg, bring the storm’ to activate the Miraculous, and ‘Longg, open sky’ to detransform before the limit,” Longg informs him. “I do so hope you don’t detransform *because* of the limit, however, and that you manage to effectively use all three of your provided powers with grace and agility.”

Nino snorts, a grin crossing his face. “You kinda remind me of someone.”

“I do?” Longg asks curiously.

Kagami comes to mind, but he doesn’t say her name - instead, he declares, “Longg, bring the storm!”

As he and Chat Noir bound across the rooftops of Paris, trying to find the others, Nino lets himself get a feel for his current hero attire. Where Carapace’s attire had been more skintight and more like
armor, definitely better suited for water-based battles if he looked into it a little deeper, his current attire with the Dragon was looser - a hoodie with rolled up sleeves and pants rolled up to his knees, revealing dark boots with cleats on the bottom. Around his thighs wrapped a pattern reminiscent of a dragon’s tail, starting from below his hoodie and wrapping around his right thigh first before continuing to his left, eventually ending in an actual fake dragon’s tail under his jacket, scales and all.

Like his stint with the Tiger Miraculous he wore black gloves with fingerless gauntlets, the sections between his elbows up to his wrists covered in scales on one side. The rest of his hoodie had scalelike patterns on it, the center with a zipper designed like a dragon’s underbelly, and on his left breast a symbol matching the one on his sword rested. With his hood down, his hair was exposed, a spikier, shaggier cut compared to his normal haircut, and if Chat’s initial description was anything to go by the tips were colored as well. He’d probably have to look at himself properly in a reflective surface at some point.

“There they are!” Chat calls, pointing at the scuffle in the distance. Nino sees Ladybug and Medusa on the ground, with Kaiser Biene taking up the air, and the akuma alight with flames, the area surrounded in blue flame… he sees a figure running into the fray to his right - Bastille - , and… where was Sentipace? “I’ll go ahead, Komodo - you figure out how to put out these fires with Water Dragon, okay?”

“Wait-” But Chat had already bounded forward, launching himself at the akuma lunging for Ladybug’s earrings in the midst of the chaos. With a groan, Nino - Komodo - grabs at his sword’s handle, ready to go and put out the fires, when he sees-

His eyes shrink into slits like an angry reptile’s.

Sentipace, holding a civilian at shieldpoint - *his* shield, being used as a weapon of fear. And the civilian?

*Kagami*?!

“CARAPACE!” The akuma - Alya - snarls as Ladybug beats her off with her yoyo. “NOW!”

When Komodo sees Sentipace’s shield coming in for Kagami’s throat, he sees red.

*The Turtle was made to defend, to protect. NOT TO THREATEN AND ATTACK!*

“**LIGHTNING DRAGON!**”

His body turns into lightning as he lunges for Sentipace, forcing electricity into his veins and making him let go of Kagami, who is caught immediately in Kaiser Biene’s arms with a yelp. *Good.* He lets himself reform next to Sentipace as the sentimonster, disoriented, tries to sit up. Oh, Mayura got his likeness down *good* - except for his goggles.

Komodo’s grin is downright *vicious* when he pulls back. “Claws off the civilian, *faker,*” he hisses before decking Sentipace right in the nose, sending him flying into a nearby tree.

“You’ll have to forgive Komodo,” he hears Chat say as he straightens out. “He’s a bit of a hothead.”

Nino was not a hothead - not at all. Very rarely did he feel anything akin to rage or anything that would imply he was being impulsive - but somehow, the sight of Kagami being threatened by his
doppleganger on top of the image of his former herosona being used in a villainous manner? It had made him see red.

Maybe the Dragon Miraculous had a part in it too. He’d probably ask Longg about it later.

Komodo looks up at Kagami in Kaiser Biene’s arms, and a genuinely relieved, fanged grin crosses his face when he meets her gaze. He’s mildly aware that his fake tail seemed to respond to his relief, but ends up putting it out of his mind when he hears the akuma scream, “CARAPACE!” and rush to his doppelganger’s side.

“Good to have another helping hand on deck!” Ladybug greets, running over to them. “Inari’s currently out of commission for the moment, so until she’s able to join, we’re glad to have your help… Komodo, right?”

Komodo tries not to deflate. Inari wasn’t here? “Where’s Inari?”

“She’s currently being held up, so to say,” Ladybug smiles before addressing Kaiser Biene. “Kaiser, can you bring Kagami somewhere safe? Come back immediately afterwards.”

Kaiser nods, and shifting his hold on Kagami he begins the flight-

“NOT SO FAST!” The akuma snarls, and Komodo is barely given time to react before she presses her lips to her flute once more and aims to lob a blue fireball at Kaiser and Kagami.

Chat shouts, “Kaiser, LOOK OUT!”

“NO!” Medusa shrieks, lunging at the akuma and diverting the arc the fireball would have taken. Kaiser misses by an inch before buzzing away, Kagami safe in his arms. Komodo feels a sigh of relief escape his body at the sight of his new friend being brought to a safe place before he refocuses on the akuma Alya had become. Sentipace was slowly regaining his bearings as Medusa and the akuma began to grapple at each other, flute to lyre, hissing and snapping at each other.

“Alya, please!” Ladybug calls out, confirming that it was indeed Alya. “We don’t have to fight! Please! Hawkmoth is using you to get the Miraculous-”

“I’m not ALYA!” The akuma screeches, kicking Medusa in the face and drawing back, closer to Carapace. “Alya was the one who disappointed you! Alya upset you! Alya lost the Miraculous - but I’m not ALYA! I’m Rena Rage, and if you hand over the Miraculous, everything can go back to the way it was! I could be Rena Rouge again! Nino could be Carapace again! Everything could go back to normal!”

Komodo’s heart stops. Normal…?

Ladybug doesn’t stop spinning her yoyo, but her face turns sad, understanding. Empathetic. “Al-Rena Rage, ” She corrects upon seeing the snarl on her face. “The fact that there even has to be heroes fighting against akuma and Hawkmoth isn’t supposed to be normal. If we wanted it to be normal, there would be no Miraculouses, no Hawkmoth. No Rena Rouge and Carapace.”

Rena Rage falters slightly, which Ladybug takes as a sign to continue. “Don’t you see? Hawkmoth’s been using you, like he uses all akuma victims. Mayura’s been using you - do you see Carapace?” She points to Nino’s lookalike, and when he turns to look at Sentipace, he sees that the fake Turtle had stopped, watching the scene neutrally. “Nino can never be Carapace again. You know this deep in your heart, and Mayura used that to make Sentipace - the Nino that never changed, the Nino that’s always been there.”
“You’re clinging to the past,” Ladybug reaches out. “Please, I know you know this is wrong. This is a twisted version of the past. Rena Rouge was never an akuma, Carapace never a sentimonster. You have to let go of the past, and make way for a better future.”

Rena Rage’s flames die slightly, and she looks at Sentipace, reaching for his hand. Komodo watches as Sentipace locks fingers with her, and feels a pang of familiarity. He used to do that with Alya once.

“... I...” Rena Rage droops, her flames dying out even more. He sees her hold on Sentipace tighten. “I... can’t... lose... I... won’t... lose...”

Ladybug draws back, wary. “Alya?”

“My name...” Rena Rage shuts her eyes, and before everyone’s eyes, her hair bursts back into life. “Is RENA RAGE!”

Komodo leans back as he hears Medusa declare, “Second Chance!”, setting their reset point at that exact moment, and Bastille pulls up a Shelter to block out Rena Rage’s flames. As if responding to her rage, Sentipace comes to life and takes on a protective stance, shield at the ready at Rena Rage’s command.

“We have to find her akumatized item - and Sentipace’s item too,” Ladybug says as they all draw behind Bastille as he holds up his shield. “Or else Paris is going to go down in flames - fast.”

Komodo dares to look out of Bastille’s Shelter to look at the blazing inferno that was Rena Rage, and finally, finally notices something out of place on her. With her hair up and blazing like a bonfire, he could see what was keeping her hair in a ponytail - a small little tie, with two little charms.

One a ladybug, and one a turtle.

One she’d bought herself, as Alya - the other, he’d bought for her. While they’d still been together.

Somehow knowing she hadn’t taken it off from her phone, even after they’d broken up, was both a blessing and a curse.

“Ladybug,” Komodo breathes, and the others turn to him. “I think I know where both the akuma and the amok are.”
Kaiser drops her off somewhere near the Arc de Triomphe.

“Sorry it’s so far away, miss,” The Bee apologizes, flitting up in the air once more as Kagami regains her bearings. “But I didn’t know where you lived and I figured I’d remember I left you here when the time came to take you back.”

Kagami lets a wry smile cross her face at her teammate’s actions. When he wasn’t surrounded by the other heroes, Kaiser’s usual face of bravado was more subdued - in a manner that very strongly reminded her of Nathaniel. It was a refreshing sight to see - like it was a little peek at the civilian behind the mask. “It’s alright, Kaiser. I know how to get back on my own. You go get back to the battle - they need you.”

“Okay,” Kaiser nods, and with a buzz he takes off and heads back for the battlefield, leaving Kagami to duck into the nearest secluded spot to let Trixx out of her blazer. The kwami stretches his limbs and shakes his tail as Kagami crosses her arms, staring sternly down at the kwami.

Trixx looks up at her. “Yes?”

“Alya was Rena Rouge,” It’s not so much as a question more than a confirmation of what she already knew to be true, but she asks anyway.

“That she was,” Trixx confirms.

“You didn’t tell me.”

“Kwamis are not allowed to disclose the names of their current owners, and are not required to disclose their previous owners’ names unless directly pressed, word for word,” Trixx gives Kagami a lazy smile that she knows is done to poke at her, like one would poke a sleeping dragon. “But that’s not a conversation to be had right now and you know it, kit.”

Kagami scowls slightly, making Trixx snicker. “We’re not finished, you understand?”

“Loud and clear, kit. Now say the words.”
“Trixx, let’s pounce!”

Inari’s transformation is normally very short as it is - but today her transformation is even more rushed, her entire being fueled by a sense of urgency. Once she’s sure the coast is clear of civilians that could have seen her civilian self duck into the shadows, she leaps out from her hiding place and out into broad daylight, landing atop a chimney. Her silhouette, she notes, is sure to be striking against the midday sun to anyone who looked up at her in that moment, but she doesn’t dwell too long on it as she spots the rising flames of Rena Rage even from a distance.

*It’s times like these where I envy Kaiser’s capacity for flight,* Inari muses as she darts across the rooftops, nothing but a trick of the light to anyone who tries to glimpse her. It was one of the things she was best known for - her desire to keep out of the spotlight and keep to the shadows, to avoid attention.

Too bad that people seemed to focus *more* on the ones who played keep-away. Kaiser and Chat were blessings, taking up the attention of reporters whenever she and Bastille wanted to duck away. They related to each other in that regard - they were heroes, but they weren’t keen on drawing the attention to them. They’d accept praise for their work as heroes, but that was that.

A blue fireball nearly grazes her ear, and Inari hops to the side as an instinctive reaction, lightly slamming against a chimney. The impact was heavily minimized thanks to the Miraculous and her attire, so all it does is allow her to bounce back from it and launch herself into the air. She reaches for her flute with the same practiced grace she had in grabbing her fencing blade, and with a somersault that quickly picked up speed she barrels straight into Sentipace’s shield, using it as a springboard to land atop Bastille’s shelter.

“Inari!” Chat grins.

Inari inclines her head towards him to let him know she heard him before Bastille opens a small hole in his Shelter, allowing her to drop in safely with the others. Kaiser was already in there and on the ground, fingers itching to reach for his trompo.

“Sorry I’m late,” Inari apologizes. “Something in my civilian life came up rather suddenly. I had to deal with it.”

“Glad you could make it,” Ladybug nods at her, and then gestures for the newcomer to step forward. Inari watches him approach as the spotted hero introduces, “Sorry we can’t have a much better introduction, but Inari, this is Komodo. Komodo, you probably already know Inari based on the news reports.”

Interestingly enough, Komodo’s first response is to bow respectfully. “Nice to meet you like this, Inari - though we really could’ve met under better circumstances, huh?”

“…” Inari purses her lips thoughtfully, knowing that none of them could see it under her mask. She was wary of the newcomer, seeing as that he was her successor and while she’d grown to love Trixx she still missed Longg greatly - but she was instantly reminded it wasn’t the time for that when she hears something slam across the top of the Shelter.

Sentipace slams his shield repeatedly against Bastille’s shield, face enraged. Inari is chilled to see Nino’s face contorted in such rage like that - she felt it didn’t really suit him, that kind of rage. Just plain, unadulterated *rage* - that appeared to be mirrored on Rena Rage herself, still setting fire to the entire area. She could see the blue flames already reaching far beyond the space they were fighting in, civilians doing the best they can to evacuate with all the heroes in one place and unable to help evacuate.
Bastille grunts, and a hairline of a fracture appears on the Shelter. He was beginning to falter. “Any minute now, Ladybug…!”

“Right! I’m sorry! LUCKY CHARM!” Ladybug, given that the Shelter wasn’t big enough, throws the yoyo horizontally from herself. It’s Chat who catches the Lucky Charm for her and tosses it to her as she examines it thoughtfully. “... A large towel?”

Medusa grimaces at the sight of it. “If your Lucky Charm’s trying to tell us to put the fire out, we know that already.”

“It’s not gonna be any use without water though…” Kaiser muses.

Inari suddenly inhales sharply, drawing everyone’s attention. She knew what to do. “Ladybug. The Dragon Miraculous.”

“The- oh!” When Ladybug looks at Komodo, Inari is sure everyone can see the world flashing through her eyes as she concocts yet another of her more convoluted plans. “Inari, I want you to make at least five illusions of every hero here the instant Bastille drops the shield. Send them running all over the place while taking pot shots at Rena Rage where you can.”

“Alright, Ladybug.”

“Medusa, you’re about to transform back thanks to the marker you set, so find a safe place amidst the chaos to detransform and recharge before setting a new marker to after our planning.”

The Snake heroine nods, hair thrashing like snakes. “Won’t let you down.”

“Kaiser, Chat. Both of you, to the skies. Try and separate Sentipace from Rena Rage. This won’t be unfamiliar territory for you after Reverser, Chat.”

Chat rolls his eyes as Kaiser snickers. “Ha ha, milady.”

“Komodo, Bastille, as soon as the shield drops, you’re both with me. Don’t use either Wind or Water Dragon unless I say so, okay?” Ladybug points at Komodo, who jumps slightly at being addressed but nods in determination at her instructions. “We’re gonna do a little firefighting. Inari?”

Inari lifts her flute to her lips, and plays a haunting chord.

Her whisper of “Mirage” is nothing but a breath on the wind.

“LADYBUG!” Rena Rage roars. From where Inari can see her, she sees her flames turn white hot.

Ladybug shouts, “NOW, BASTILLE!”

The Shelter drops.

All seven of them scatter. So do their Inari-generated illusions.

Inari feels a surge of pride watching the illusions of her teammates and herself darting around in different directions, all seemingly following their own agenda and sharing only one goal: avoiding the wrath of Rena Rage. The akuma spins around, unable to figure out which ones were the real ones and which ones were the illusions - something that makes Inari smile, and something that makes Rena Rage shriek.

“Hey, Rena Rage!” Chat calls from the sky. Carried by Kaiser, he tosses his staff at her like a
boomerang in a maneuver similar to the one he’d pulled off against her some time ago as Lady Wifi - the staff splits in half and whacks at her twice before flinging its way back to Chat and Kaiser. “What’s the matter, cat got your tongue?”

Rena Rage’s lips are on her flute in an instant, playing a long, furious melody that culminates in a large ball of fire. With enraged swipes she spins in a circle and launches fireballs in a circle around her, not caring who or what she hit before she tosses a much bigger one at Chat and Kaiser.

Kaiser ducks and somersaults in midair as Chat taunts, “Aw, did the akuma give you double vision? Or are you just not seeing the truth?”

“Shut up! SHUT UP!” Rena Rage roars, the flames white hot somehow growing even brighter. With her back turned, Inari throws her flute like a javelin at Rena Rage’s back, the flute bouncing back into Inari’s hold the instant it connects with Rena Rage’s back. The akuma stumbles before furiously turning towards her. “YOU!”

“LOOK OUT, INARI!” Kaiser yells as Chat deflects a flying shield courtesy of Sentipace. The sentimonster had taken to personally fighting the two in the air himself as Rena Rage gives chase towards Inari.

Inari curses under her mask as she takes to the rooftops already on fire, wary of spreading the fire even further. But it wasn’t doing much good either - where Rena Rage went, the fires spread, and Rena Rage moved fast.

Swift as lightning, swift as lightning…! Inari chants to herself, remembering her mother’s words as she ducks and spins around each fireball Rena Rage lobs at her from her flute.

“YOU!” Rena Rage repeats, over and over. Her rage had become one-track, her illusions now a one trick pony - fireballs intent on setting fire to Inari and burning her ablaze. “YOU ARE NOT WORTHY TO BE A HERO! LADYBUG MADE A MISTAKE CHOOSING YOU!”

Inari mentally calls for one of her illusions to jump up as she ducks behind a chimney, and sends her off running back into the center of their battle. Thankfully enough, Rena Rage follows like a woman possessed, and Inari finds the time to catch her breath, heart pounding. She tries to still her heart as one of the many bands on her fox tail blinks out, but it doesn’t work.

“Inari?”

Inari immediately whips out her flute and smacks whoever was in front of her in the face.

Komodo reels back, and Inari freezes as he rubs at his forehead, groaning. “This is the third time today. Today is just not my day at all.”

“I thought you were Sentipace,” Inari confesses. “My apologies.”

Komodo’s eyes seem to slit at the concept. “That fake is going down, mark my words. But that’s not why I’m here. Are you okay?”

“I’m as alright as I can be. Aren’t you supposed to be with Ladybug and Bastille?” Inari asks, daring to peek out behind the chimney they’ve both ducked under. “We’re following her plan and we’re all on a time limit. Well. Save for you, I suppose. You haven’t used all three of your powers.”

She reaches out to touch the triad symbol of the Dragon on his hoodie, unconsciously admiring the feel of the textile under her fingers and through her gloves. He asks, “How’d you know? About the
Dragon’s powers, I mean. I didn’t think Ladybug had ever used the Miraculous before.”

“Lucky guess,” she murmurs. Even though her stint as Ryuuko was long over, that was still not an identity she was meant to disclose to anyone. “That, and Ladybug mentioned Wind and Water Dragon, while you’d already used Lightning Dragon to save that civilian, along with this missing mark on your costume and sword. That was very impulsive of you.”

Komodo’s cheeks color an interesting shade of red at her words. “I-”

“Don’t apologize for it. You saved a civilian the way you knew how to as a new hero,” Inari sternly stops him mid-sentence, lifting a finger to his lips. “As the Dragon you must learn to balance your impulses and become as elusive as the wind, as powerful as the flood, and as swift as lightning. You responded instinctively. That’s good, and nothing to apologize for.”

Komodo considers her words briefly, but before he can respond they both hear the sound of shields clashing. Bastille and Sentipace.

“KAISER!” They hear Medusa’s screech. Shit. That meant Kaiser and Chat had gone down.

“Get back in the battle, dragon boy,” Inari urges. “I will follow where you go. Ladybug needs us both, but she needs you the most.”

Komodo frowns. “I can’t leave you here alone.”

“And Ladybug needs you in her plan,” Inari reminds. “Go. I promise to follow - and I never break my promises.”

Komodo bites his lower lip, but rises to his feet - and just in time, because both of them hear Chat’s loud cry of “CATACLYSM!” echo in the air, followed by the sound of crumbling earth. Inari pulls herself up as Komodo jumps up on top of the chimney they were hiding behind before leaping into the air and heading back into battle.

Inari swallows and lifts her mask slightly, allowing herself to breathe before sliding the fox mask back on again. Gripping her flute like she would her sword, she dashes back into battle just in time to see Rena Rage clear out the last of her Inari illusions. On the side she sees Kaiser’s wings slash cape burning to a crisp as he ducks away to detransform before it gets worse. The ground is littered with cracks that had no doubt come from Cataclysm.

“WHERE IS SHE?!” The akuma rages. “WHERE IS THE FOX WHO TOOK EVERYTHING AWAY FROM ME?! WHERE IS THE TRUE FAKE?!”

Okay, you know what? I’ve had enough of subtlety today.

“I’m right here, Rena Rage!”

Inari launches herself into the air and aims to land a kick at Rena Rage - but is ultimately caught by Sentipace raising his shield to protect her. Inari uses the shield as a launchpad yet again to backwards somersault back onto the ground as Rena Rage snarls and initiates a fight with her, flute against flute.

“You took everything from me!” She shouts as she lunges and thrusts with her flute. Unlike the competitors Inari had faced in official fencing competitions, Rena Rage was sloppy. It was easy to parry each attack. Each strike punctuates Rena Rage’s words. “You took my Miraculous! My time as a hero! My legacy! My future!”
Inari grits her teeth as she parries each strike. “I didn’t do any of that, Alya. Ladybug chose me to be your successor. I did not ask her to do so.”

“LIAR! YOU’RE A LIAR!” Rena Rage shrieks. “I’M THE FOX! NOT YOU! WHY WOULD LADYBUG CHOOSE DIFFERENTLY?! I WAS A GREAT FOX!”

“Inari, look out!”

Inari doesn’t react fast enough, but she does hear Sentipace’s shield hurtling towards her at high speed. She also hears something clash against it, and someone’s back connect with hers. She’s not sure who it is until she feels a tail that isn’t a leather belt brush against one of her legs.

“Switch!” Komodo yells. Inari, instinctively, ducks and swaps places with him as his blade meets Rena Rage’s flute and Inari’s flute struggles against Sentipace’s shield.

“And who are you?” Rena Rage snarls at him. Inari can hear the venom in her words. “Another person Ladybug tried to bring in because she couldn’t find just two people to replace Rena Rouge and Carapace?”

Inari is startled by the bite in Komodo’s words. “Ladybug didn’t replace Carapace for no good reason - his identity was compromised. And you know exactly who did that, Alya Cesaire.”

“I AM RENA RAGE!” The fox snarls, but before she can burn Komodo’s face off he swaps places with Inari again, the true fox catching Rena Rage by the back of her knee and hooking her with her foot, sending her sprawling to the ground. Inari immediately pounces on her despite the burning sensation soon crawling up her leg and setting her attire on fire. It really didn’t help that her armor was metal - she felt like she was roasting alive.

Inari hears Sentipace thundering towards her, but Komodo is there to meet each blow and strike with his weapon. She can tell he’s inexperienced with the blade - his grip was too tight and his form was too loose, his strikes clumsier than she would have liked. But it was working.

Sentipace stumbles backwards and right into Bastille and Medusa’s hold. Medusa jams his head inside her lyre and twists, close to choking him as Bastille wrenches his shield away and pins his arms to the ground. When he struggles, Chat launches himself at his legs to try and keep him steady.

“CARAPACE!” Rena Rage howls. Even her eyes were burning hot flames now. Inari was on fire - but only for a moment, because suddenly Komodo does something unexpected.

He pulls Inari away gently but firmly, and presses one end of the towel Ladybug’s Lucky Charm had produced into her hand as the heat slowly and painfully dies away and Rena Rage stumbles to her feet, her flames coming back to life. “You ever dance around the maypole, Inari?”

“No.”

“It’s simple - you take a ribbon,” He gestures to the towel. “And you try and wrap it ‘round the pole right there.” He tips his head in Rena Rage’s direction.

Inari understands.

When Rena Rage snarls and lunges, the two act quickly, catching her in the middle of the towel and slamming her back onto the ground. With the towel’s help, they make quick work of securing her inside the towel from head to toe before Komodo says, “Water Dragon!” and disappears into a Komodo-shaped blob of water - one that soaks into the towel wrapped all around Rena Rage.
Slowly, slowly, as the time ticks by, Inari feels the heat in the area die down, until finally, she unwraps Rena Rage from the towel and stands up, squeezing the water out of the towel as it reforms into Komodo.

Rena Rage, sitting on the ground, was crying.

“I was a good Fox,” She wails, shoulders shaking. Inari has to admit the sound is heartbreaking. “I was a good Fox… everything was better before…”

Komodo looks over at Sentipace, and says, “He can’t do anything now, you guys. Let him go.”

The others stare down at Sentipace, and realize with a start that he’d stopped struggling. Cautiously they let go as the Sentimonster stands up and goes to sit by the crying akuma, and carefully, ever so carefully, wraps an arm around her.

Komodo leans over and breaks off both the ladybug and turtle charms from Rena Rage’s ponytail as she leans into Sentipace’s embrace, sobbing, “I was a good Fox… I was a hero… I helped Ladybug… I was good… I am good… aren’t I… Carapace…”

“…” Sentipace doesn’t say anything.

“He responds to her rage,” Inari hears Komodo say quietly. When she turns to look at him, he says softly, “When she’s not angry, he’s not inclined to protect her or fight. She’s sad - he was literally made to be there for her. And now he is.”

Komodo clenches his fist and shatters the two charms in his hand. The akuma and amok fly away into the air.

Ladybug had no words for when she captured them and purified them.

As the Miraculous Cure goes to repair the parts of Paris they’d damaged, dark magic bubbles over Rena Rage first, revealing Alya, disoriented and unsure as to why her eyes were wet. When she looks up, she’s startled to see Sentipace by her side, holding her tight.

“N… Nino?” She asks softly.

Sentipace, for the first time since they’d all seen him, smiles. And then he disappears as well in bubbles of dark magic, leaving Alya to reach out to nothing.

“I…” Alya murmurs as the rest of the team approaches her. “... How much damage did I…?”

“A lot, Alya,” Ladybug says sternly yet regretfully. “But you were an akumatized victim. It’s not your fault Hawkmoth took advantage of you.”

Alya bites her lip. Hard. “Ladybug…”

“I’m sorry I never informed you myself that I’d be changing you with Inari before giving it to Inari,” Ladybug says, crouching down to place a hand on Alya’s shoulder. “You have to understand that I did this for a good reason, but I also didn’t have a good reason to excuse the fact I never told you.”

Inari watches the reporter look up at the spotted heroine with watery eyes. “What was the reason?”

“You’ve done something bad, Alya - you’ve turned your back on your best friend,” Ladybug says softly. Inari gets the feeling that she and the others were not really meant to witness this
conversation. “You chose to believe another’s words over hers with lack of proof, lack of belief, and lack of trust in the girl you knew before the new person you met.”

Alya looks down. The tears hit the ground. “You’re not a bad person, Alya. I know you aren’t. I chose you to be Rena Rouge because I knew you were a good person at heart. But sometimes hearts go astray and follow the wrong path. Even the kindest hearts can be the most stubborn ones.”

“I was a good Fox… right?” She croaks out.

Ladybug nods once. “When I still believed in you to have my back, you were a good Fox, Alya. But you need to know, and to realize for certain, that you’re no longer the Fox I knew. The Rena Rouge I knew was someone who checked her sources first, who was determined and brave, and passionate. She was loyal and loving to her friends.” She lifts Alya’s chin up. “I think you know what I mean, don’t you?”

Alya swallows harshly.

“You don’t have to do it if you don’t want to,” Ladybug says, which elicits a stare from Chat Noir. “You’re your own person who makes her own choices. But as someone who’s believed in you as a teammate before… believe me when I say I trust and believe that you’ll do the right thing. Do you know why?”

Alya stares.

“Because you’re a hero, even without the Miraculous, Alya,” Ladybug says. Her words make Alya suck in a breath. “Your former best friend, Marinette? You were one of her heroes, you know. And I bet you’re your little sisters’ heroes too. You don’t need a Miraculous to be a hero and you know it. You just need to do the right thing, in and out of the mask.”


Ladybug touches one of her earrings before turning to Komodo. “You haven’t used your last power yet, which means you can stay transformed. Please take Alya back to school-”

“I- can you please take me home instead?” Alya requests. “I… don’t want to go back to school today.”

Ladybug’s eyes soften. “Alright. I’ll tell your teacher and principal when I swing by later - though I’m sure he’s most likely cancelled school for today after the attack. Komodo, if… it’s not too much trouble?”

“… Okay,” Komodo relents, and offers a hand to Alya, who takes it. There’s something about the way Alya seems to slot into Komodo’s side like a puzzle piece that sort of fit that makes Inari’s insides churn, but she doesn’t think too much of it as she darts off to detransform.

She dares not think too much of it.

When she comes home, she’s startled to find that her mother is nowhere to be found. She looks for the first maid she encounters and asks about her whereabouts, and is told, “Your mother’s gone to Gabriel Agreste’s house for a meeting, miss Tsurugi. She’ll be home for dinner in a few minutes.”

A meeting with Adrien’s father?
She supposed it was related to the agreement they’d signed before - though truth be told, she didn’t know the specifics. The only thing she’d been told was that it related to Adrien - and if this agreement was anything like she suspected, it was an arranged marriage contract.

To a boy she was keenly aware was already in love with and dating another.

Kagami sighs as she goes to get washed up, eager to get some rest in after the exhausting battle - but she’s not given a chance to immediately, because as she’s dressing she hears some of the maids outside her room greeting her mother. She’s home already?

Slipping a blouse over her head and tugging it down, Kagami steps out of her room to greet her mother. “Welcome home, mother- oof! Mother?”

Suddenly, her mother had embraced her out of the blue.

“Mother?” She asks again, her hands unsure of where to place themselves initially. Eventually, she carefully rests her hands on her mother’s back. It was very rare of her mother to give her such open displays of affection - and out of the blue, no less, so she was rather wary of what could have caused her to do such a thing. “Is something wrong? Did something happen?”

Tomoe asks, “Kagami. Are you still friends with Adrien Agreste?”

“Y… Yes, mother?”

“Good. Hold on to that friendship.” When she pulls back, Kagami notes with surprise that Tomoe’s brows are creased and her mouth is set in a determined frown. “After what I’ve done today, he’ll want to forbid his son from interacting with you, no doubt.”

“What?! Mother, what did…”

“Do not allow that to happen. Make sure you remain friends with Adrien no matter what, Kagami,” Tomoe holds up a finger at Kagami opening her mouth to speak. “I know what I said about friends. Some will disappoint you. But Adrien has proved time and time again that he is a reliable young man and worthy to be called your friend. You must retain your friendship despite what Gabriel says to Adrien. And if what I know of him is to remain constant, he will strive to remain friends with you as well.”

Kagami presses, “But, mother… I don’t understand. What did you do?”

“Gabriel accused you of something I could not forgive,” Tomoe informs her coolly. “And his source was his newest model - the one that talks too much in interviews?”

Kagami’s throat goes dry. “Lila?”

“Ah. So you know her, and it seems you do not like her either if the sudden tension in your body is anything to go off of. This makes things easier,” Tomoe shakes her head, clicking her tongue. “Gabriel’s brand is entering a steady decline if he allows someone like her to taint his brand in such a way. Arrogant young girl.”

“Mother… what did… what did she say about me?”

Tomoe doesn’t answer at first for a good few moments. When she does, Kagami’s startled by the softness in her tone. “Lies, Kagami. Only lies - lies that a blind woman could see through. You have nothing to worry about.”
“Mother…”

“When you are unable to defend yourself against a foe such as her, Kagami, never forget you can turn to me,” Tomoe reminds her sternly. “I have trained you to be a strong, undefeatable young lady, but even the best warriors fall to wily creatures like her. Where you fall, I will defend you until you can stand up again.” Her grip on her shinai tightens. “You need not worry, Kagami. Mother is here to protect you and your honor as long as the body and soul wills it.”

Kagami doesn’t know what to say.

She does, however, know to reach out and hug her mother tightly in gratitude, no matter what she had to say about it.

When Kagami goes to pull up the group chat between those in on the plan later on that night, she’s treated to a single notification - messages from the group chat. She taps on it.

**lovelylant**

*guys?? i think there’s something you guys need to see!!*

[Rose Lavillant sent an image: SCREENSHOT_0489394_20XX_Messenger]

Kagami squints and taps on the picture. It’s a screenshot of only one message cluster, from Alya Cesaire, dated only a few minutes after 6PM.

**Alya Cesaire**

* i took down all the interviews with lila in it.  
* i’ve been stupid. for a long time now.  
* tell marinette and nino i’m sorry, and that if you guys are planning anything… i won’t stop you.  

* make things right.
nino lahiffe and the beginning of the end

Chapter Summary

T minus five hours until the collapse of Torre Rossi.

It starts incredibly slowly at first.

Nino had always pondered as to whether or not to peg Lila as one of the narcissistic ones - Sabrina had once talked at length about Lila showing all the signs of being a sociopath over voice call while he and Alix had live streamed one of Max’s newest builds for his game, and Alix had brought up the idea of narcissistic sociopaths. Something she’d heard from Jalil or another, apparently. Sabrina had countered it by saying that narcissistic sociopaths didn’t know what they were doing - but Lila knew exactly what she was doing.

All she wanted was to win - no matter what the situation. She wanted to reign superior.

They all knew that.

“Alya, there you are!”

Nino is sorely tempted to lob one of the charcoal pencils Nathaniel had laid out on their shared desk at her, maybe to leave a charred black mark on her face - but Nathaniel would absolutely murder him if he did that. And somehow if he’d survived that Chloe, Marc, and Aurore would take their turns at him as well. He wouldn’t dare - even though he was sure all four of them would have privately agreed that it was at least a good cause.

Alya’s head lifts slightly from the desk. She’d been napping the entire morning away, and nobody in the class had the heart to wake her up until Miss Bustier inevitably arrived. Nino had been surprised to see her already there - usually she wasn’t as early as Nathaniel, and most of the time she arrived at school after Mylene and Rose did. According to Nathaniel, she’d arrived only a few minutes after he did, but had barely acknowledged his presence before setting up her things and going to sleep.

The dull ache in his chest makes Nino bites on his lower lip. And soon he regrets it.

“Nino, what the hell?!” Nathaniel moves aside his art materials as he lightly shoves Nino out of their shared seat. “Your lip’s bleeding! What did you do?!”

Ah, Nino thinks numbly, reaching up with a hand to touch the thin trickle of blood running down his chin. When he pulls back to look at his fingers, it’s stained with red. So it is.

Like clockwork he goes down the steps, passing by the sleeping Alya and the liar being gently shushed by Mylene to allow Alya to sleep a little longer and heading for the bathrooms to wash up. For a brief moment he feels Lila’s eyes flash over to him, and in response he tenses, but she doesn’t follow, instead just turning to her desk and phone and acknowledging that Mylene was right, she shouldn’t wake up Alya for now.

Thank goodness.
Entering the boys’ bathroom, Nino looks at himself in the mirror and tugs on his mouth to look at what had caused his lip to bleed like that. One of his sharper teeth had poked a hole into an already battered and dry part of his lip, dry skin already picked away idly. Shit. That was gross.

“I did tell you that you had to hydrate better in order for you to remain in top shape, you know.”

Right. Longg was another thing.

After he’d dropped Alya off at her house, he immediately took off, not wanting to dwell there any longer and wanting to avoid Nora’s ire and the twins’ excitement over a new hero. And okay, maybe he’d been afraid that Nora would somehow pick up he used to be Carapace or that the twins would somehow know he was Nino and he was very, very unsure, alright? Okay. Unable to find either Ladybug or Chat Noir, he’d wearily held on to the Dragon Miraculous for the time being, wary of it being taken by anyone and anything happening to it.

And then neither Ladybug nor Chat Noir had come back for it.

He’d reasoned that maybe they’d forgotten. Heroes were busy, most likely in their civilian lives as well. Or maybe they were letting him hold on to it a little longer because they trusted him enough with one.

*That* thought had warmed him up considerably.

Either way, it meant that the Dragon Miraculous was staying on his person a little while longer today - which meant that Longg was with him as well. The dragon kwami had taken to sitting under his cap, claiming that it was a wonderful spot to rest in, like a small cave - and now he’d phased through said cap, perching on its rim.

“I drank water this morning,” Nino mumbles, leaning down to wash his mouth free of the blood. “You know I did.”

Longg looks down at him with a click of his tongue. “Clearly it was not enough to hydrate you - and now you’ve wounded yourself by accident with the delicate piercing touch of your very tooth. This all very well could have been avoided had you listened to me, hatchling.”

“I’m not-” Nino sighs, tugging again on his mouth to double check once more. Longg had taken to calling him a ‘hatchling’ for some reason, which he didn’t know how to feel about. For one thing, that implied Longg had grown attached to him long enough to give him an affectionate nickname. Another thing, that meant it might be worse for him if Longg were to finally be taken back by Ladybug. “Okay. Okay, Longg. I’ll drink more water when we get back.”

“Who are you talking to, Nino?”

Nino nearly slams his head on the sink as he turns around in a panic. “Adrien?! Dude, you scared me!”

“Sorry, Nino,” Adrien rubs his neck with an awkward laugh before shaking his head. “So. Uhhhhh. Were you on the phone or something? Who was it?”

Nino can feel Longg scrabbling around on his head as he adjusts his cap. “Just a… uh. Just one of my really overbearing and strict uncles, dude. He was calling to uh… check… up on my health!”

Well. That wasn’t a lie. Longg was like that one uncle at reunions who actually cared about you and fussed over your health. Or was that an aunt?

“Can’t possibly be as bad as my dad and Nathalie though,” Adrien laughs before noting the
puncture in his lip. “Yikes. Bite your lip?”

Nino balks. “Does it look *that* bad?”

“Nah,” Adrien gives him a pat on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. I used to do that a *lot* until I got chewed out *bad* for it. Wouldn’t do to have Agreste models biting their lips raw, after all. C’mon, let’s go back to the classroom.”

“Wait,” Nino pauses. “Adrien… are we… uh. Are we… y’know?” He gestures with his hands aimlessly. “… gonna call Lila out today?”

Adrien hums. Nino notes a rather steely glint in his eye as he speaks. It was either a personal vendetta, or whatever anger that Marinette had expelled from herself had transposed itself over to him. “I, personally, would like it to be - an opinion I have all to myself, of course. Not sure about everyone else.” Pause. “Is this… because of Alya’s message last night?”

“Yeah…” Nino pinches himself to prevent him from worrying his lower lip again. “I… I dunno if you saw that, Adrien, but Lila was gonna wake up Alya from her long nap when she arrived earlier. If my guess is right, she’s gonna ask about the interviews Alya took down.”

Adrien grimaces. “Probably. Which means we’re gonna have to act fast and get everything in order. I’m… not actually sure if Marinette has the interviews on hand today, but we’ll figure something out if ever. We’ll uh… what’s the term that Ms. Mendeleiev uses? ‘Disseminate’ the instructions to everyone else in on the plan. Don’t worry, Nino. Everything’s gonna turn out fine.”

“And if Lila gets akumatized?”

“Hey, if worst comes to worst, Chloe’s going to probably launch herself at it and save us all the trouble. We’re probably going to have to owe her an internal cleansing.”

Nino laughs so hard he accidentally bites his tongue. Adrien apologizes the entire time they take going back to class.

It’s first break when Lila tries again. This time, she actually gets through.

“Hey, Alya?” Lila asks sweetly once more over break. If Nino had to count how many times he wanted to lob something at her face that day, he’d probably owe Nathaniel euros by the truckload. “I was wondering - is the Ladyblog broken or something?”

Alya, to her credit, does not act any differently from her usual self. Only those who’d known her for much longer than Lila had would have picked up on the minute change in her inflections. “What? No, of course it isn’t.”

“Can you check?” Lila twirls a lock of hair around with her finger in a way that was meant to come off as cute. “I think the code’s all messed up today - maybe someone hacked it!”

Alya raises an eyebrow, but pulls out her phone. “I’m not pulling out my laptop right now, girl, but I’ll check the mobile version for you.”

“Oh, thank you!”

Beside him, Nino hears Nathaniel muttering to himself in low tones. When he looks over, he sees that earphones are plugged into his phone as he doodles on his notebook, the contact picture on his phone telling Nino that he was talking to Aurore in the other class. What about, he wasn’t sure yet.
“Looks normal to me, Lila,” Nino hears Alya say, and he focuses his gaze back on the two of them. He sees Alya drumming her fingers on her desk. “I don’t know what made you say it was broken when it’s not? Maybe your data provider’s down.”

Lila’s eyes seem to flash something fierce from where he’s seated, and unconsciously he moves to rise a little when Nathaniel’s hand stops him from doing so, grabbing onto his arm and tugging him back down. “Maybe… it’s just, well… I could have sworn something was seriously glitched out and that some of your videos were missing! I was worried about how that would affect your blog, Alya!”

“… Which ones?” Alya asks carefully. One might argue that her posture was like that of a cornered cat. Or a cornered fox. “Which videos, I mean.”

Nino’s at least seventy five percent certain everyone in class is tuned in to the conversation now, judging from everyone’s mostly subtle shifts in posture. Suddenly Mylene and Ivan are facing the two of them despite still playing a game on their phone that Nino couldn’t fully see thanks to Ivan’s shoulders. Alix, Kim, and Max’s bodies are angled in a way that they weren’t too obvious that they were listening in. Chloe wasn’t even pretending to hide it. Sabrina was still making an attempt. Juleka and Rose were speaking in hushed whispers with Adrien and Marinette. Everyone was listening in.

Lila seems to pick up on it too, because she smiles semi-placatingly. “Just a few here and there… don’t worry, I checked, the interviews with some akuma attack victims are still there, of course! But some aren’t, like some of mine!”

“Ah.” Alya says, and then goes back to her notebook. “Okay.”

Lila blinks. Nino forcefully chokes back the laugh that threatens to escape him at the sight of her genuinely bewildered at her response. “O-okay?”

“Okay,” Alya repeats.

“You’re… not going to fix that?”

“Eh.”

“What do you mean ‘eh’?”

“It means,” Alix hollers, and Nino choked as she slams both her palms on the desk in front of her. “That the jig is up, Liar Rossi!”

The room goes silent.

Oh my God Alix.

“That’s right! Your days of lying to everyone - it’s over!” Kim joins her in slamming his palms on the table as well before doing a ridiculous pose. Max’s face indicated he wanted nothing more than to sink into the floor, but was conflicted because he also felt like saying the same thing.

Oh my GOD, Kim.

Nino sees Chloe grumble, “Idiots. Absolute idiots,” to herself before pulling out her phone, most likely calling on her mother.

“You ready for a shitstorm, Nino?” Nathaniel mutters to him.
Nino sighs. He feels Longg pat his head gently from his hiding spot in his cap.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”
“W-what are you talking about?!” Lila’s lip wobbles, her voice trembling. Here came in the crocodile tears she’d so perfected in her time at their school - or perhaps even before their school. “What is going on?!”

Max sighs before adjusting his glasses. “It would appear, Lila, that your reign of tyranny is over at last, and that there is no longer any reason for you to continue to lie to all of our faces as you have done so before, and are continuing to do so as we speak.”

“W-what?!”

“There’s no more use denying it, Lila!” Sabrina chirps in that sweet way of hers that was tempered with spite - something she’d no doubt acquired from Chloe beforehand. “Everyone in school who follows Bug’s Eye View knows you’re a liar now!”

“W-what does Bug’s Eye View have to do with-”

The speed and height at which Alix leaps over the desks and over Chloe and Sabrina is frightening. Nino wonders briefly if Alix is a rabbit as she skids to a stop behind the teacher’s desk and squats low before jumping high, snagging the small tab that pulled down the sheet they used whenever their teacher was using the screen projector hanging up on the ceiling.

“Markov!” Alix calls, and the sound of a tiny propeller whirring around fills the air as Markov reaches for the projector and turns it on for them. As Alix gets on the teacher’s computer and switches it on, quick as lightning Sabrina aims her phone at the screen and swipes forward, bringing up the homepage of Bug’s Eye View for everyone to see.

Lila is frozen as the first video on the screen plays. Aurore’s image and voice is the first one to be seen.

“Hello, little bugs, and welcome to Bug’s Eye View! Today’s report is a special one - we’re doing a little featurette on one of our dearly beloved schoolmates from Francois-Dupont! Can you guess who it is? Mireille, do you know?”

Mireille, standing to her side, giggles. “Don’t ask me, Aurore. I already know by default as your co-reporter for today, remember?”

“Oh, play along, won’t you?” Aurore rolls her eyes good-naturedly before pointing her microphone at the screen. “Tell us, dear cameraperson - what’s your opinion?”

“I’m here to shoot you, Rory, not report for you,” comes Marc’s voice from behind the camera.

Aurore sticks out her tongue. “Spoilsports. Anyway, dear viewer, if your guesses were either
Adrien Agreste or Chloe Bourgeois, your answers are **wrong**, because today is **not** their day! Sorry Chloe!” She blows a kiss to the screen, and Nino watches Chloe’s ears tint red and hears Nathaniel chuckle next to him.

“Today, dear viewer, we’re going to do a little featurette on no other than the famous Lila Rossi from Caline Bustier’s class! She’s consented to an interview, isn’t that right, Mireille?”

“That’s right,” Mireille nods as she and Aurore step aside. A video is shown behind them as they speak. “Here we have our initial interview with Miss Rossi herself. Marc?”

The interview plays. Nino doesn’t let himself listen to it, already having heard a grand majority of what they’d said due to it being a prerecorded featurette they’d shown to them before they began editing it. Instead he focuses on Lila’s body language. While at first she’d been mock terrified, she was now relaxing inch by inch, though there was always a small part of her that was wary - her fingers flexed every now and then as the interview played.

“Wasn’t that nice?” Aurore says in a dry, bored tone. “Lovely storytelling from miss Rossi, don’t you think?”

Marc snorts from behind the camera. “Okay.”

“Of course she can’t compare to you, you’re the writer for Mightyillustrator,” Aurore amends, laughing.

Mireille blinks innocently at Aurore. “Weren’t we supposed to interview miss Rossi for facts?”

“Indeed we were - except here’s the thing, my darling co-reporter: nothing she’s said is fact.”

Lila freezes. Bingo.

“Be careful, Aurore - anything we say here can be taken as slander!” Mireille warns. “This is a professional news report, after all. We only present truths.”

“And that’s why we bring forth evidences, brought to us by various contributors who have felt that miss Rossi’s stories have affected them so greatly in a negative fashion!” Aurore twirls her umbrella before shutting it and tapping on the screen, signalling for Marc to change the video onscreen.

Nino already knew everything being shown. Not the order, of course - the three behind Bug’s Eye View had to decide first during editing - , but he and everyone else who’d been deeply involved in the takedown knew what would be shown.

The first - Jagged Stone and Clara Nightingale, with Penny and Fang milling about in the background. The setting - Le Grand Paris.
The rockstar’s face is that of distress. “Why Penny, I’ve never heard of such a thing! When did I ever get a kitten? I’d never do that - Fang would totally eat them up! That’s not rock-n’-roll at all!”

Penny wrestles something out of Fang’s mouth as she answers, “I’ve been informed she said you wrote a song about her as well.”

“What? Does she think I’m a lunatic?! I would never write about a minor - that’s called being a creep! Clara, good friend, what’s the status on your end?”

Clara giggles at the rhyme, but frowns. “Alas, it’s true, I don’t know a thing - with miss Lila Rossi I did not sing! Whatever she’s said is all untrue - I can’t believe she’d do this to me and you! A lawsuit they say might be in order - after all I feel no affection towards her!”

“Is this why you called us? Why both you and our favorite designer called us over to stay in Paris for a bit? To tell us of this girl that’s totally not rock-n’-roll?”

“Thank you, my dear - it was good for us to hear. Defamation is not at all any fun - I’ve seen a lot in my work under the sun.”

“It does put a little bit of a jumble in the schedule…” Penny murmurs. “But honestly, this is important. This kind of defamation warrants a number of lawsuits against her and her family. Thank you for bringing it up with us. We’ll figure out what to do.”

“You could totally bring it up with Daddy, you know” comes Chloe’s voice, and the blonde preens as her recorded self says, “Just say the word. We want that liar brought down to earth.”

The video ends. Aurore taps on the screen again. A letter is projected, clear as day - with sections highlighted through digital means.

“I have never met miss Rossi in my life,’ says none other than the prince of Achu, Ali,” Aurore reads thoughtfully. “I would have known if someone like her is helping out, considering that you have mentioned that her mother is working as a diplomat? Either way, I am glad to inform you that your recent efforts have been a big help, Rose - please, if you wish, continue to assist in our various endeavors, and please send Juleka my regards. Prince Ali.’”

“A letter from the prince himself… how sweet,” Mireille sighs half-dreamily. “But that confirms another lie has been debunked.”

“We’d be here all day if we keep going on this way, so here is what I have to say.” Pause. “Dammit, Clara’s way of speaking got to me. Dammit! Marc, cut that out of the recording!”

Marc laughs behind the camera. “Too late, we’re still rolling.”

“Anyway…” Aurore resumes her more professional persona as she begins to state seriously, “The following evidences are going to be presented for a few seconds each in order to spare you all the effort of watching the entire thing. However, all of them will be temporarily available in the links below this video for personal reading and download should you wish to take the time to review them for yourselves. After all, my bugs, if there’s one thing the three of us always say-”
“- it’s that knowledge is power, and that one truth prevails,” Mireille, Aurore, and Marc all chorus.

And thus the evidence begins to flash in front of the screen.

Testimonials in written form, highlighted, from the various names they could reach that Lila had mentioned. Sections of articles debunking anything Lila had ever claimed about herself and her family as well as her connections. Everything was coming out and unraveling and how good was it to see Lila’s fingers visibly twitching in response. Alya’s smart enough to move away at the sight of it.

“And before any of you say ‘what if all of this is simply forged and fake’, here’s a friendly little guest who double checked and ran everything we’ve gathered through a legitimacy check!” An image of Markov pops up on screen - a video call with him - as Aurore greets, “Hello, Markov! Thanks for taking the time out of your day to speak with us today. I’m sure you must have been busy.”

“Anything for Max’s human friends!” Markov says cheerily. The backdrop of his video is mostly dark save for a light that was most likely a computer causing backlight. “I’ve already run your data through my various processors and reached as far as I could into the various information resources located on the Internet that I could access, and I can confirm with 100% certainty that all your collated information is 100% legitimate, no edits have been done, not a bit!”

Max’s smile is vicious when Markov’s message ends.

“And there you have it, everyone! Proof that our dear Lila Rossi is not at all what she seems!” Aurore sighs, dramatically placing the back of her hand over her forehead. “And, as a final note if you may notice, the darling Ladyblog has taken down her video interviews as well! One Alya Cesaire has finally found the truth - and reacted accordingly!”

Mireille scratches at her cheek. “It’s a surprise to us too, actually. We’re hoping you can’t tell, but this section of the video is very last minute edited in, especially with the latest information we’ve received.”

Nino relishes in the way Lila gawks at that new information as Aurore continues, “While we can admit that we and the Ladyblog are not on very good terms, we can at least rest at ease now knowing that that’s one less uninformed person and blog in the world - and now, hopefully all of you bugs, will be the same. Always stay informed, bugs!”

“This is Mireille Caquet-”

“And Aurore Beaureal-”

“- from Bug’s Eye View! Keep your eyes out, bugs!”
Markov unplugs himself from the projector.

Immediately, Lila bursts into tears. Alya moves to sit on the far end of the bench they share. “How could you guys?! I thought you were my friends, and here- you’re teaming up with- with liars!”

“I suppose it takes one to know one, huh?” Ivan grumbles. The sound of his voice makes Lila’s eyes widen as she looks over at him. “Except here’s the thing. We already know who’s the real liar here, Lila.”

“Ivan?!” Lila trembles. “I don’t-”

“You can’t play innocent anymore, Liar Rossi,” Alix slams her palms on the teacher’s desk this time. “There’s no way you can get out of this shitshow you started now. Not now, not ever.”

“We know you’re a liar,” Sabrina says. “And it took a while for all of us to learn our lesson, but we did.”

Lila backs up, and Alya in response stands up and moves out of the way, making Lila fall flat on her rear before scrambling back up on her feet. “I- I can’t believe all of you! You’d really turn your backs on me like this?! You’d rather believe Marinette’s lies?!”

Juleka raises an eyebrow. Her gaze is scathing, her fingers laced with Rose’s as she squeezes her hand tightly. “Who said Marinette had anything to do with it?”

“We never mentioned Marinette at any time, not in the interviews, not today, not ever,” Nathaniel points out. Nino watches as Nathaniel rises to his full height and begins a painfully slow descent from the top seat towards Lila. “Isn’t that funny? You mentioned her, not us.”

One by one, the others begin to leave their seats as well - Nino himself included. One by one, all of them, even Adrien and Marinette (though Marinette is slower to move and always behind Adrien), had gone to encroach upon where Lila was standing, and the girl could only back away slowly as each of them approached, dark looks on their faces. Nino was worried that they would attract an akuma at this rate, but at Rose’s wink, he was reassured that that wouldn’t happen… at least for now.

“You turned us against Marinette,” Juleka growls.

“You wanted us to hate her,” Mylene says softly. “Through pretty words… we believed you. We believed you would bring us good things. But… then everything started to stop adding up.”

“You’re just a liar,” Kim hisses. “And even though we were stupid enough to fall for your tricks, at least we actually learned from them. You can’t get away now, Lila.”

Nino watches as Lila’s gaze frantically darts to Alya standing to the side. “Alya! Alya, please, we’re friends, right?! You know I’m not lying, right?!”

“…”

Alya looks up, and Lila smiles at her hopefully.

And then Alya, deliberately, looks away.

The reality of the situation sinks in, and with a look of dawning realization, Nino knows now that Lila has realized that nobody in the room was on her side anymore. Her back hits the door to the
classroom as everyone begins to circle her, and slowly, they part to allow Nino passage to face her.

“You’re no friend of Ladybug’s,” Nino declares. “And I should know. She trusted me with a real Miraculous - the Turtle’s. Not like your fake Tiger.”

Lila backs up even further against the door. “Nino…”

“You have nowhere to run, little vixen,” Chloe taunts. Nino really doesn’t blame her. “Nobody will believe you now.”

And then, in that instant, Lila’s face, initially scared, morphs into a devious look. “That’s where all of you are wrong.”

Her hand pulls on the door handle, but when the door swings open, the entire class is greeted by none other than- “Mister Damocles?!”

“Ms. Flamel?” Max asks skeptically. The nurse only winks at Nino once, and when he glances behind her, he sees a familiar set of eyes staring right back at him.

Kagami gives him the smallest of smiles. She brought Ms. Flamel just in time.

“Mimi,” Nino breathes. Adrien and Marinette give him a side glance at the way he seems to say her name, but don’t say anything about it as they watch Mister Damocles cough into his fist.

The owl-like man surveys the entire ‘akuma class’ thoughtfully. “Students, you are aware break time has been over for five minutes, yes? Why are you all outside like this? Wait, no, don’t tell me,” He holds up a hand when the entire class begins to open their mouths. “It’s most likely the same reason I’m here. Miss Rossi, will you please come with us to the principal’s office? Somebody would like to see you.”

“Me?” Lila asks.

Ms. Flamel frowns down at her. “I’ve been informed of the many accidents you’ve been through, Miss Rossi - or so everyone claims you’ve been through, and reviewed your medical records to find none of them are rooted in fact in the very slightest.”

“Oh, that’s because Ladybug’s Cure-”

“Because of this,” Ms. Flamel continues on as if Lila hadn’t interrupted at all. “I deigned to call your mother, but when I went to call, none of the calls came through, as though it was the wrong number. So I went to Mr. Damocles to get your mother’s number, and-”

“- none of them came through,” Mr. Damocles finishes. “It would appear, Miss Rossi, that you’ve been giving us incorrect data, on top of lying to medical professionals, and superiors, as well as your schoolmates.” He looms over them all so threateningly it’s frightening to know that the principal that dressed up as an owl superhero every other day could be so… intimidating. “Am I correct?”

Lila stares.

“Your silence is damning, miss Rossi,” Mr. Damocles says sternly. “Come to the principal’s office. Now.”

Alix is practically bouncing next to Nino as she says, “She’s gonna get it now!”
“I…” Based on her body language, Nino guesses that Lila wanted to back away, but was well aware of the people behind her ready to grab at her neck. Instead, she backs away from both parties. “I…”

Nino is not too surprised to see Kagami go to flank his side, especially since Adrien had gone to flank his other side. “You have nowhere else to hide, you liar. You have no one else on your side anymore.”

“…” Lila’s gaze darts upward for a split second, but it’s enough for everyone to realize that the smile spreading on her face meant only one thing.

“AKUMA!” Rose screams.

Lila shoves past all of them, knocking Rose and Mylene and Sabrina over and using the others as springboards to bounce over before reaching for the black butterfly-

- only to yelp as Kagami forcefully kicks the back of her knees and sends her sprawling to the floor. The rest of the class scatter, trying not to attract the akuma to them while simultaneously trying to catch it and contain it as Ms. Flamel runs into the classroom to search for something to catch it with.

“Don’t let it anywhere near her!” Adrien yells.

Chloe scoffs. “You don’t have to tell us twice, Adrikins!”

Kagami, with Kim’s assistance, wrestles Lila to the ground as the others try and shoo off the butterfly with fanning motions and calm emotions, but a kick to Kim’s family jewels sends him off of Lila and catches Kagami off guard slightly - enough that Lila breaks free and goes to reach out for the butterfly once again-

- except she’s pushed to the side. Violently.

Everyone’s eyes widen as Marinette sinks to the ground, clutching her head. Adrien is notably the first to react, running to her side as she hunches over in agony. The blackened object?

Her pouch.

“Princess Justice. You were not the one I was expecting today, but your appearance is welcome all the same. Verity Queen may not be by your side, but you will enact justice without her regardless. I give you the-”

“No.”

“… No?”

“No,” Marinette hisses. Nino goes to crouch on her other side as she snarls, “I’m not going to listen to you. I’m not going to do anything you ask of me. The Miraculous aren’t yours, and using Lila Rossi is never going to work, because now everyone knows she’s been working with you this whole time!”

“Who says you had the power to resist me?”

“I do,” Marinette, despite the agony, reaches over for her pouch and tears it in half. The butterfly flutters off - and just in time, Ms. Flamel catches it in a water bottle. Judging from the sounds, there was still water inside it.
And then Ms. Flamel violently shakes the water bottle.

They all wait for a few minutes before she tentatively opens the water bottle and peers inside. Immediately, she shuts it again. “Whoever owns this waterbottle,” the nurse says. “I am so sorry.”

The class is silent for a moment.

“... I needed a new waterbottle anyway,” Sabrina says meekly.
nino lahiffe and the new beginning

Chapter Summary

Some things pave the way towards new, brighter beginnings.

Chapter Notes

for anyone who missed it, bastille's reference:

EDIT: and now komodo's for real this time:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was finally over.

Well, Lila’s reign of terror was finally over, at the very least. Hawkmoth was still very much a threat, that much everyone knew, but he’d lost his ‘star akuma’, Lila. That was one of the biggest sources of relief for everyone in Caline Bustier’s class, as well as the other classes who’d been affected or impacted negatively by Lila.

After the scuffle that had happened in plain sight of the principal himself, Lila had been taken to the principal’s office to be expelled from the school - with her mother herself bearing witness and providing consent. The woman’s true number had finally been located after a bit of digging around, and she’d been immediately contacted regarding her daughter’s truancy as well as all her other related infractions.

About a month or so after Lila’s fall from grace, things had finally settled back into a semi-normal situation. The seating arrangements hadn’t necessarily changed, but the shift in relationships had been very evident in the class, especially in the eyes of their homeroom teacher. Eventually, it had been Alya who’d approached Marinette of her own accord to apologize, with the others bearing witness - and it had gone as Nino had expected.

(“I… I can’t forgive you yet, Alya.”)

“I know, Marinette. I get it. I just needed to apologize to you face to face. Properly. Before I apologized to everyone else, because you were the one who got the most affected out of everyone. Because I enabled it.”

“You were just as much as victim as all of us, but yes… it doesn’t excuse what you’ve done. But… I accept your apology.”
Marinette’s willingness to be civil and kind towards Alya, even after everything, spurred something within the class. They weren’t necessarily friends with Alya again - not yet - but… they did not exclude her from anything. It would take a while for Alya to reconnect with a lot of them like she had before… but they didn’t turn her away. She’d have to work for it, but they wouldn’t turn her away.

Not when Marinette herself had shown her kindness, even if by all means she didn’t need to.

“They say Lila’s been deported back to Italy for basically working with a terrorist,” Sabrina reads off of the latest post on Bug’s Eye View. On another phone, she had the Ladyblog open with a similar post. Both blogs had currently agreed to post about the current situation in order to warn anyone still following along their reports. “The embassy’s going to have to do a lot of damage control after the stuff she pulled in our school, and she’s basically been banned from setting foot on French soil for life. She’s not going to jail… yet?” She squints. “Oh. Uh, it’s being discussed as part of her sentence for when she comes of age, but basically she’s never allowed near France again for that stunt with the akuma. People are also apparently coming forward with accounts of what she’d done to their schools as well when she’d transferred over there to them?”

“Everyone finally found the courage to speak up after seeing what we did,” Adrien smiles, brushing back a lock of hair to press a kiss against Marinette’s temple. Marinette sighs in relief as he adds, “Personally, I see this as an absolute win.”

Chloe groans, lounging on Marinette’s chaise. “Good riddance, honestly. Ugh! That’s one huge problem down, one even bigger problem still out there.”

“A bigger problem?” Nino asks, eyebrow raised.

Chloe gives him a patented Chloe Bourgeois Look. “Hawkmoth. Ugh, if I ever had the Bee Miraculous again and I saw him I’d scalp his egg head with the trompo.”

Adrien chokes with laughter. “Egghead-”

“You can’t deny he’s not an egghead! I almost had him that Heroes’ Day!” Chloe throws her hands up in the air in frustration. “He was so… egglike. No hair! Wigless!”

Nathaniel offers, “Wig snatched.”

“EXACTLY!!!”

Adrien looked like he couldn’t breathe. Marinette fans him gently and encourages him to take slow, deep breaths as he wheezes with laughter, trying not to make too much noise. It was the middle of the day and the customers downstairs could potentially hear him lose his fucking mind over Hawkmoth being called an egghead.

“Either way… I’m glad that’s all over,” Marinette says, to which everyone nods in agreement. “At least now Hawkmoth can just akumatize as usual and not focus on someone who hated Ladybug with a passion.” Pause. “Did I really just say ‘akumatize as usual’?”

Nathaniel snorts. “Hey. It’s definitely better than the alternative of Lila.”

“He’s got a point, Nettie,” Nino shrugs. “Wouldn’t you rather see Ladybug and Chat Noir just
fighting Mr. Pigeon for twenty days straight?”

Adrien’s face suddenly twists as though he’d eaten a lemon, making Chloe burst into cackles at the sight of it. “Okay, that one we can do away with. Poor Mr. Ramier.”

“There’s a lot of things better than an akumatized Lila, at this point,” Nino murmurs before he suggests, “Hey, since we’re not really doing anything… you guys wanna like, hang out somewhere outside?”

Sabrina hums. “We could hunt for Andre the ice cream man. I heard he’s at the Seine today.”

“Oh, I am so game for ice cream.”

“Me too!”

“I’ll go call Mimi.”

Adrien gives him a catlike smirk as he puts the phone to his ear. Nino squints at him. “What’s with that look, Adrien.”

“Oh, nothing… “ Adrien whistles.


“If you were calling Adrien, this is the wrong number.”

“GAH! No, no, I meant to call you, Mimi!” Nino panics as Kagami’s voice wafts through the phone, making Adrien burst into laughter. “Sorry, Adrien’s being a butt right now- uh- you wanna-er- do you wanna get some ice cream with us? We’re gonna be hunting Andre down today at the Seine.”

“Hm… I’ll ask my mother. I finished the flower arrangement she asked me to work on for my cousins’ arrival sometime within the next month earlier than expected, so I might be allowed to go.”

“Oh- uh- should we go and-” Nino’s gaze darts towards Adrien’s face. “Should we pick you up if ever?”

“Well… I think I’d like to take a bike there instead. But you have to go with me or Mother won’t let me go.”

“Me?”

“I doubt Adrien will want to really leave Marinette’s side for too long. Besides,” She giggles softly over the phone. Nino hates the fact that his ears go a little red at the sound. “You still haven’t beaten me in a race, bike lord.”

Oh, she did not.

“Is that a challenge?”

“Maybe so.”

“Oh, it is on like Donkey Kong, Mimi,” Nino swears, rising to his feet. “It is so on.”

“I’ll tell you if she lets me out. ‘Til then, Nino.” CLICK.
Marinette blinks up in surprise at him as he goes towards the trapdoor that lead to her room. “Nino? Where are you going?”

“You guys go on ahead - I’m gonna go pick up Mimi from her house,” Nino opens the trapdoor and makes his way down - but not before popping his head back in to declare, “She just declared war on my biking skills. I have to defend my title.”

Chloe rolls her eyes. “Like you had a title in the first place when Kim and Alix exist.”

Nino sticks his tongue out at her before shutting the trapdoor above him.

Kagami calls again after a few minutes, saying that Tomoe had indeed permitted her to come. Nino skids in front of her house on a rental bike moments later.

“You came by quickly,” Kagami comments as she goes to pay for her own rental bike.

Nino shrugs helplessly. “I… uh… got a little excited.”

“At what? Getting me to go get ice cream with you and everyone else?”

“... Maybe?”

Kagami laughs, but it’s not in mockery. “Okay, bike lord. Lead the way.”

Andre the ice cream man, unfortunately, had not been at the Seine that day - but it didn’t matter too much. Chloe and Nathaniel had taken off at the realization to actually hunt him down, while Sabrina had been called home by her father to watch the house right after Nino had left. This had left Marinette and Adrien waiting for them instead by the Seine, but not by their lonesome - Alix, Kim, Max, and Ondine had been there as well with the same idea in mind.

At present, they were all just seated on the edge of the concrete, watching the Seine flow below their feet at a leisurely pace. Even if they hadn’t gotten ice cream, Kagami didn’t want to go back home yet, so they hung about a little while longer.

“You know…” Nino says after a few moments. Kagami tilts her head slightly towards him at the sound of his voice. “I didn’t think it would, but it feels like things are finally looking up, y’know?”

He watches Kagami consider his words, her fingers drumming against the edge of the concrete sidewalk they were all seated on. The waters of the Seine ripple in the gentle wind as she eventually says, “Lila is only one of many evils. There are still many to deal with that have been left behind.”

“‘Course there are,” Nino agrees, looking down at the waters of the river to stare at his reflection and consider it carefully. “There’s always gonna be bad guys, and good guys. And the in-between guys, of course. It’s like… a balance in the world. Everything needs a balance.”

Kagami hums thoughtfully. “Balance is what keeps this world together. You can’t have good without evil, chaos without order. The concept of yin and yang, so to say.”


The two of them stare at their reflections in the water a little longer. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Kim and Alix playing chicken with the edge before Ondine ‘accidentally’ trips and knocks
them both into the water. The ripples in the water distort his and Kagami’s reflections as they listen to Alix and Kim shrieking bloody murder at a hysterically laughing Ondine and Max.

“They look like they’re having fun,” Kagami comments, watching as Ondine goes to haul Alix up first before tag teaming with her to pull Kim back up, the both of them sopping wet.

Nino snorts. “Their kind of fun, maybe. I’d rather chill to music, not chill in the water. I’m no penguin.”

“I thought you used to be a turtle.”

“That was a one time thing.”

Kagami raises an eyebrow, and Nino eventually concedes, “Okay, okay. I’m cool with the water. But I’d rather not get dunked in the Seine like ninety percent of the time, y’know.”

“Fair enough. I’d rather not get dunked in there without my consent either.”

It’s silent between the two of them for a few minutes - their surroundings are still noisy, what with their friends getting into shenanigans all around them, but Nino thinks that right now might have been the calmest he’s ever been since Lila’s arrival and departure: sitting next to Kagami, surrounded by their friends, just watching the water pass them by in comfortable silence.

“This is nice,” Kagami eventually says, breaking the silence. Nino’s eyes meet the eyes of her reflection in the water. Her voice is quiet, but clear; it’s all Nino can hear despite the noise all around them. “I like being here with you. With our friends. It’s… a very good place to be, I think, after all that.”

Nino’s gaze softens, and he rocks his feet back and forth on the edge as he smiles at Kagami - at her reflection - as she slowly begins to rock her own feet back and forth in rhythm with his. Yeah… it was a good place to be. It felt like things were finally turning out - for him, and for everyone in their class, and friend group.

“You know what?” Kagami looks at him. He returns her look, and smiles. “I think it’s a very good place to be too.”

Kagami gives him a soft smile - one that makes his stomach erupt into tiny little butterflies. He’s not very sure as to why this was, but he wouldn’t dwell on it for now.

For now?

He was perfectly content to sit by her side in silence, enjoying her company.

Things were looking up indeed.

Chapter End Notes

and THAT’S where i’m choosing to end ‘nino lahiffe and the road to forgiveness’, because nino finally walked down the road to forgiveness and secured it with lila being gone

thank you everyone who took the time to read this fic!! it was a real treat to know that
you guys enjoyed reading it as much as i enjoyed writing it! it's probably one of the first fics i managed to finish within the timespan of my fixation in a fandom and it's thanks to you guys that i managed to find the passion and drive to finish it!

i'm considering writing a sort of sequel, this time more focused on ninogami's development now that lila isn't a huge problem in their daily lives... also because i'm the one piloting this ship to the bitter end and i'll sail on it for a very long time (and also? because komodo still hasn't interacted with kagami. i need that to happen)

either way, thanks again for reading! 'til we meet again!

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