**Lucky Us**

by **PrincessKitty1**

**Summary**

-AU- Marinette Dupain-Cheng's life isn't going as planned: twenty-six, recently dumped, and running her parents' bakery. The highlights of her day are the emails sent by her mysterious pen pal, Chat Noir. That is, until handsome model Adrien Agreste starts swinging by the bakery after hours. But how is he to know the Ladybug he loves is standing right in front of him?

**Notes**

My first multi-chapter fic for this fandom. Let us all pray for my sanity as I try to write this and a novella at the same time.
Chapter 1

Marinette Dupain-Cheng rose before the sun. If she hadn't been a morning person, that might have been a problem for her. But while other Parisians slept undisturbed, or shuffled around their kitchens in search of coffee, Marinette sprang from bed wide awake and ready to take on the day.

Her morning routine hadn't changed much in the last year: wake up, wash her face, fruit for breakfast, get dressed, then downstairs to the bakery where she'd knead, mix, roll, flour, measure, fill, frost, butter, and decorate a day's worth of goods. By the time dawn's colors appeared on the horizon, half the block had been roused by the delicious smells coming out of the little business on the corner.

At approximately thirty minutes to seven, Marinette would emerge from the kitchen covered in flour and sweating thanks to the heat of the ovens. She switched on the storefront lights, put on a pot of coffee, wrote the day's special on a small chalkboard in looping cursive, topped off the cash register, then went around to each table in the sitting area and straightened out chairs.

Only after all of this did Marinette turn on her cell phone, leaning over the counter as she waited for the lock screen to appear.

In the stillness before opening, Marinette couldn't help missing her parents. How many times had she woken up to the smell of fresh bread, to her father's singing and her mother fretting over the daily special? It was their bakery, the child they'd raised together before Marinette came along. Her mother Sabine had chosen the dark green curtains for its six front windows and created the small seating area for the regulars. Her father Tom had perfected their cheesecake recipe and attracted customers with his jovial manner. But when an ailing relative had called Tom and Sabine away from the bakery, it was Marinette who'd taken over with the assurance that she could handle it.

And she could handle it. Maybe not as gracefully as her parents did, but between herself and her tiny staff, the business stayed afloat.

Her phone chirped once. Marinette smiled as she unlocked her screen and opened her email app. "Right on cue."

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\textit{Chat Noir}

\textit{RE: 2015}

\textit{2 minutes ago}

Bonjour, buginette! Did you sleep well? Did you dream of me? Will today be the day I win your heart at last? If it isn't, well, at least I have something to look forward to. But in the meantime what do you propose I do with all this longing? Climb to the highest point in Paris and shout your name to the wind? Cast myself into the Seine? Have mercy, my Lady! My suffering knows no end!

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A rhythmic knock sounded on the door. Marinette left her phone on the counter and walked over to let her assistant in. "It is so humid out there," Manon Chamack cried. The tan-skinned teenager had her long brown hair in one hand and a black hair tie in the other, her apron draped over the crook of her arm. "If the whole day's going to be like this, then—you have flour on your cheek."
Marinette shrugged. "It's in the job description." She followed Manon behind the counter, picking up her phone along the way. "Could you set the pastries out for me? I have to get started on the Labelle order."

"Sure, but can you promise me you'll splash some water on your face before you-know-who comes in for his morning croissant?" Manon ignored Marinette's flustered glare and whipped her apron strings behind her back. "Hey, you're the one with the crush."

"I'm also the one who pays you," Marinette said, and the two grinned at each other. It used to be the other way around: Marinette earned money babysitting Manon for the better part of the girl's childhood, and over the years the two had developed a strong sisterly bond. When Manon came looking for a part-time summer job, Marinette was more than happy to take her on. But that also meant she had to deal with Manon's teasing. They walked into the kitchen where trays of fresh cakes, rolls, croissants, and cookies sat waiting to be put on display. "What difference would it make if I washed my face? I could step out, get my hair and makeup and nails done, put on my best dress, and Adrien Agreste still wouldn't notice me."

Manon rolled her eyes and grabbed two trays. "You're prettier than you think, Marinette. It's your attitude that sucks."

Marinette liked to think she was aware of that. Every morning she took in her glossy black pigtails, her large blue eyes, her body toned from strict exercise to ward off becoming as jolly as her father, her small nose, round cheeks, and shoulders dusted with freckles, and she decided she wasn't hideous. Sometimes she even went as far as admitting she was cute. And it wasn't like she hadn't had boyfriends before; at twenty-six she'd tangoed with love on more than one occasion.

But there was cute-enough-for-nice-boys, and then there was cute-enough-for-Adrien-Agreste: supermodel, Paris's golden boy, son of famous fashion designer Gabriel Agreste, and one of the bakery's regulars.

Marinette still remembered the first day he'd walked in. Early morning breakfast rush, her father at the register, Marinette moving back and forth to grab pastries and put them on plates or in bags. She'd hit her stride and was doing just fine, bantering with customers while she prepared their orders, confidence and charm in full swing. Then a noticeable hush fell over the bakery, followed by a shrill, "What are all of you staring at?"

For there in the doorway stood the mayor's daughter, Chloe Bourgeois, with her arm looped through the elbow of Adrien Agreste.

Marinette stared. She couldn't help herself. The sun came in through the window at just the perfect angle to catch in Adrien's blonde hair and create a halo of light around his handsome face. He was dressed in a white polo, designer jeans, and Gabriel brand sneakers. He said something to Chloe in a low voice that she answered with a loud complaint that her outburst had been justified, followed by even more complaints as she eyed the bakery's cheerful interior with open disdain.

Marinette had only seen Adrien in magazines before. Her best friend Alya often teased her that his images were probably doctored at Gabriel Agreste's behest, so no one would find out the real Adrien looked like the hunchback of Notre Dame.

But there was the real Adrien Agreste, stepping up to the counter.

There was the real Adrien Agreste, and he was gorgeous.

"Hello," he said to Marinette in a voice that made mothers weep for joy and had girlfriends' fathers
insisting he call them by name.

Marinette continued to stare. Gone were confidence and charm, departed for some faraway shores. The connection between her mind and her mouth had been severed by his eyes, the greenest eyes she had ever seen, eyes that could bring nineteenth century poets back from the dead just to sing their praises.

Then Chloe snapped her fingers in front of her face and Marinette realized what she was doing. Fatal levels of mortification flooded her body. *She'd been gawking at Adrien Agreste.* "When you're done being incompetent, give me five strawberry macarons and a coffee, to go," Chloe barked.

It took Marinette a few more seconds to untangle her vocal chords. She looked again at Adrien, whose expression had rearranged itself into one of sheepish embarrassment. "A-And you?" she asked.

"Ah, I'd like to try the cheese Danish, please."

Marinette managed a mute nod and stooped over to find the best looking cheese Danish on the tray. When she went to grab Chloe's coffee, she saw that her mother, like any good business owner, had been drawn out of the kitchen by the change in the bakery's atmosphere. Marinette watched Sabine Cheng assess the situation in the span of two seconds, then switch into proprietor mode. "What an honor to have you in our bakery, Monsieur Agreste, Mademoiselle Bourgeois!" She came forward and whipped out a paper bag for Chloe's macarons. "Were you just passing by, or…?

Adrien answered for Chloe, who stared at her nails like she hadn't been spoken to. "Here on recommendation, actually. I was in the mood for something new and a friend of mine told me this was the best bakery in Paris."

"It most certainly is," Tom Dupain boomed from the register.

Marinette's hands shook so badly that it took several tries to snap on the coffee cup's lid. She wrestled the foam cozy around it and carried the drink to the counter, where her parents had formed a tag-team of hospitality. "We guarantee you'll be back before the end of the week," Sabine said.

"Uh, not likely. Adrien needs to watch his figure," Chloe said at the same time Adrien said, "Looking forward to it." Marinette stood motionless by the coffee pot, hoping she'd blend into the scenery, but Adrien Agreste's beautiful green eyes saw through her attempted camouflage and he gave her a friendly smile. "Thank you," he said.

And then he was gone, leaving nothing but a swarm of paparazzi in his wake.

He came back before the end of the week.

He walked in on Friday, causing Marinette to overfill a coffee cup and burn her fingers. He returned the following Monday to try a cake roll. Chloe was with him on Wednesday, and his driver—affectionately dubbed The Gorilla—came in his stead the next Friday. The bakery saw an increase in business once word spread that Adrien Agreste had made a habit of stopping by. Even Alya came around to gawk at him alongside Marinette, who would not speak to him, could not speak to him no matter how regular a customer he became. At least not in complete sentences.

Which brought her back to the present day. Marinette guessed Adrien kept a rigid schedule because he always appeared at the same time—8:15—on the same days—Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.
—and on the rare occasions he stuck around, he left after half an hour. Marinette spent this time either hiding in the kitchen or pretending she was very busy. If another regular was in, she'd go out to the seating area and talk to them so she could be closer to Adrien without the pressure of making conversation. But ever since her parents left, it became harder and harder to avoid him.

She worked straight through opening, arranging the 150 cupcakes for the Labelle order without pause. The event they'd been ordered for was at eleven, but the client wanted them ready by nine so the display could be assembled without rush. Marinette had just put the finishing touches on one row when Manon breezed into the kitchen. "Going to the restroom."

"Sure," Marinette said, "let me just put this frosting bag down and..." She glanced at her watch. The hour hand pointed a little north of eight. The minute hand laid comfortably on three. Marinette gasped. "Manon!"

"It's an emergency," Manon drawled as she disappeared into the restroom.

The bakery door's bell jingled.

A customer.

The customer.

"Oh no, oh no oh no oh no." Marinette ran to the sink and squinted at the small mirror hanging above it. Still flour on her cheek. She ripped a paper towel from the dispenser, ran it under water, and took furious swipes at the flour until it vanished. Now her cheek was pink. Not that it'd be noticeable under the raging blush crawling up her neck—oh why did Manon have to grow up into a scheming teenager? Why couldn't she stay five and cute and blissfully unaware of boys?

Marinette took a deep breath. She could do this. She'd spoken to Adrien before, albeit in stuttering, fragmented sentences that were never longer than two or three words. Today would be no different. All she had to do was get him a pastry and ring him up. Simple. She could do it in her sleep. She wiped her hands on her apron, steeled every nerve in her body, and marched stiffly out of the kitchen.

No one was there.

Marinette deflated. Her brow wrinkled. Well, that was strange. It was 8:15, the bell had rung... maybe someone left?

Adrien Agreste stood up from behind the pastry display.

Marinette screamed.

He jerked backwards in surprise. She clapped a hand over her mouth. The patrons sitting at the tables turned to stare at her. A very awkward silence ensued.

Adrien let out a breath. "Wow, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

He'd been crouched in front of the display case, examining the desserts on the bottom row. Marinette prayed for the ground to open up and swallow her. Or a lightning strike. Any quick death, really. She wasn't picky. "I-It's okay," she said, even though she felt her heart clawing its way up her throat.

Adrien smiled uncertainly. "You sure?"
Marinette nodded and reached for a pair of disposable gloves. She was going to *strangle* Manon. "What can I get for you?"

Adrien pointed out a flaky apple strudel with a light coating of powdered sugar. Marinette picked up a ceramic plate and plastic tongs, fumbling with the door of the display case until it opened. She scrutinized each slice of strudel for the biggest, flakiest, and gooiest of the bunch. No way was she going to sell Adrien Agreste anything less than the best after shrieking at him like some whacked out nutjob.

"Marinette?"

She gasped as she lost her grip on the tray, but caught it again before it hit the glass and scattered the strudel. Her name. He'd said her name. *He knew her name*. On second thought, could her quick death be postponed until he said it again? "Yes?"

Adrien's grin was that of a kid who'd just won a game. So boyish. So charming. Marinette ascended to cloud nine. "I knew I had your name right," he said. "Marinette… Dupain?"

"Dupain-Cheng," she whispered. "Both. I-I use both."

"Marinette Dupain-Cheng."

She didn't know how she managed to stay upright when her legs felt like pudding. "Yes."

Somehow she got the apple strudel onto the plate and to the counter without dropping it or tripping over her own two feet. As she rang him up, she stole a quick look at his clothes. A plain black t-shirt today. Cargo shorts. Loafers. God, he had nice legs.

Adrien handed her a few bills and took his plate. "Tell your mother and father I said hi, will you?"

Marinette nodded mutely. She watched him walk over to his usual seat, a table by the door, and continued to stare until she heard someone clear their throat. Manon stood in the kitchen doorway waving her over. Marinette scurried to her side. "Well?" She jerked her head in Adrien's direction. "How'd it go?"

"I screamed at him."

"That was you?"

"But he knows my name." Marinette's face went from horror to pure, unbridled happiness. "He knows my name."

And later, everyone at the Labelle party could have sworn Marinette's cupcakes were the most beautiful cupcakes they'd ever laid eyes upon, because Adrien Agreste knew her name.

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**Ladybug**

RE: 2015

2 hours ago

*Not sure what you should do about your longing.*

*A cold shower, maybe?*

*Please don't shout my name from high places. You'll upset the pigeons.*
The strangest, most wonderful thing happened to me today.

I won't go into detail.

You tend to throw **hissy fits** whenever I talk about guys who aren't you.

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Adrien Agreste dropped his phone on his face.

Beside him, his black cat Plagg let out a small chirp, but couldn't wake up enough to open his eyes. Adrien left the phone where it landed. Twenty-six years old, successful model, a practiced master at controlling his emotions, yet there he was, sprawled on his bed, giggling.

Hissy fits.

He'd gotten her to pun.

Adrien stretched his legs, still smiling from ear to ear when the rest of the sentence slapped him across the face. "Wait." He bolted upright, scaring Plagg enough this time to earn him a green-eyed glare. "What does she mean *guys who aren't me*?"

Adrien slid from his sleek, modern bed and began to pace the length of the room. His pensive reflection followed him from one picture window to another, disappearing when he reached a wall of overstuffed bookshelves. Why was this so surprising? He knew Ladybug had a crush on someone. Was it that ex-boyfriend of hers? The one who'd ditched her and flown off to America? No, it couldn't be. She never talked about him. Then again, she hardly ever talked about her love life. The mysterious crush had only been mentioned once in passing; Adrien just had an absurdly good memory when it came to all things Ladybug.

He sighed, glared at the email, then turned and banged his head against a row of books. He was crazy, right? Falling in love with someone who'd accidentally emailed him a year ago. Someone whose face he'd never seen, whose gender he couldn't even be certain of. Someone who proved time and again that they had no romantic feelings for him whatsoever. It sounded crazy, even to him.

Plagg watched him from the comfort of the bed. Adrien checked the time on his phone's screen. 10:30PM, and Ladybug's email had been sent two hours ago. He knew she went to bed early. Would she still be awake?

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**Chat Noir**
**RE: 2015**
10 minutes ago

*My Lady, do you really think the pigeons of Paris will care if I shout at them? Have you seen the way they dodge oncoming traffic? You could fire a cannon at those birds and they'd probably just walk a little faster to avoid getting hit.*

*Tell me more about this guy who isn't me. I'd like to challenge him to a duel.*

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**Ladybug**
See what I mean?

Hissey fits.

There's not much to tell.

He's impossibly handsome and out of my league.

How was your day?

x.x.x

Chat Noir

RE: 2015
5 minutes ago

Impossibly handsome? Are you sure he isn't me? Because I have to say, buginette, if you ever met me in person I'm paws-itively certain you wouldn't be able to keep your tongue in your mouth.

Do you know what I love about you? You always ask me how my day went, even though I never have anything good to say. It was a day. I lived it. By tomorrow it'll have melted into the blurred landscape of days past. Indistinguishable. Irrelevant. Unless you feel like confessing your undying love for me...?

x.x.x

Ladybug

RE: 2015
3 seconds ago

As a matter of fact, I don't.

Listen, Chat Noir.

Whoever you are.

It may not seem like it, but I know how you feel. A routine life where everything is safe and familiar? Never taking risks or chasing after your own ambitions? It's stifling, isn't it? Some days I can hardly breathe.

But strange and wonderful things still happen to sleepwalkers like us.

I accidentally emailed you and, rather than let it go, I took a risk and we became friends.

It's time for you to take a risk.

Sweet dreams.

x.x.x

Adrien read Ladybug's message until he could have recited it from memory. A risk. If she'd known the truth of his identity, she wouldn't have made the suggestion so easily. What risk could a public figure like him take without it showing up in the tabloids the next day? Better still, what risk could
he take that his father wouldn't find out about?

He could ask for her phone number, but he was ninety percent sure she'd turn him down.

Adrien sat beside Plagg, who'd resumed sleeping when it became clear his master wasn't leaving the room. The good news, he thought, was that Ladybug viewed their friendship as something strange and wonderful. A risk taken. A break from her routine life. (He couldn't imagine Ladybug living a routine life; she seemed like the kind of person who worked an exciting job and spent her weekends rock climbing or skydiving or free-running through the streets of Paris.)

She must have known the feeling was mutual. One little mistake changed his entire life. Suddenly the endless parade of work and public events became full of mystery and excitement. Suddenly he was checking his phone more often. His smiles were sincere. He felt like a guy for once, not his father's poster child, not Chloe's favorite doll, not the public's eye candy.


Was it possible? Could he channel Chat Noir and accept his Lady's challenge? He was in desperate need of a miracle.

But he'd have to start small. Nothing too drastic. No dyeing his hair, no announcing his retirement, no tattoos, no trying to find the good in Chloe. Whatever it was, it had to be unpredictable, but not altogether different.

Man, he was hungry. That apple strudel from the Dupain-Cheng bakery this morning had really hit the spot. It should have been illegal for things he wasn't allowed to eat that often to taste so good…

Adrien grinned.

He knew what he was doing tomorrow.

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
9 hours ago

My Lady,

Your wish is my command.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Oh, Mari. Ooooh, Mari...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
3 minutes ago

Good morning, buginette! It looks like we're about to have another beautiful summer day, doesn't it? But somehow I did not think it beautiful enough for you. I looked out my window, turned up my nose and cried, "No! This will not do! My Lady deserves better than this!" So I wrote you a poem:

"Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
When will you see that I'm purrfect for you?"

x.x.x

"Hold on. I think I might have wax in my ears because it sounded like you said you screamed at Adrien Agreste." Alya Cesaire stuck her pinky finger into her ear and pretended to dig around. Marinette glared at her.

"Alya."

"All right." She leaned closer to Marinette. "Say again?"

Marinette filled her lungs to capacity and let out a full body sigh. The bakery closed at six o'clock, after most people gave up on the idea of snacks and went off in search of a proper meal. She had half an hour left before she could sit down and prop her feet up for a while. "It was humiliating," she said. "I couldn't sleep last night because I kept getting these worst-case scenarios in my head, like what if he doesn't come back? What if he only wanted to know my name so he could tell people I was crazy and to not buy from our bakery? What if we lose our customers and have to close shop because I can't go two seconds in Adrien's presence without turning into a moron?"

Alya rolled her eyes. She was used to Marinette's theatrics; they'd been best friends since middle school, and she'd seen her through many a crush. "If he does do that, I'll use my journalism powers to call him out as a bully and restore your good name."

"You're the best."

"Don't I know it?" Alya took a sip of her coffee. "Although," she said, "if the bakery were to close, there'd be nothing holding you back from chasing after your real dream."
Marinette untied her loose apron strings and knotted them up again. She'd known the bakery her whole life, had grown up learning and perfecting recipes under her parents' careful instruction. Working there had been so inevitable that she'd pretty much started without anyone asking her to. But when she wasn't rolling dough and making fruit fillings, she sewed. She drew. She snatched colors out of dreams and turned them into clothes of all kinds. Her desk was covered in sketchbooks, fabric samples, eraser shavings, and fashion magazines.

Since high school she'd earned money on the side by sewing clothes for ball-jointed dolls. She eventually made enough to purchase her own—a miniature she named Tikki—which she displayed in the bakery whenever she made her a new outfit. But apart from the occasional gift and the bakery's colorful aprons, the only human Marinette had ever made clothes for was herself.

She smiled at Alya. "We both know it isn't the bakery that's holding me back."

Her mind flashed to the night before, to the email she'd sent Chat Noir before going to bed. Telling him to take a risk—she must have been the biggest hypocrite in all of Paris. Her favorite designer's son came to her bakery every other day. What was stopping her from showing him her work?

Her inability to form a complete sentence before getting lost in his eyes, for starters.

"There have been whispers down the grapevine this week," Alya said. "Rumor has it Gabriel Agreste might be holding a design competition before the end of the year. Apparently he's still undecided, but…" Alya gave her hand a squeeze. "If he does, promise me you'll think about it?"

"Sure, if his son hasn't filed a restraining order against me."

"Oh my God," Alya groaned. She checked her phone, then pushed away from the counter. "Gotta go. Someone sent an anonymous tip that Jagged Stone is in town, and I want to see if I can persuade him to talk about his second farewell tour." She got as far as the front door before turning and pointing a finger at Marinette. "Think about it!"

Marinette waved at her. "I will." As much as she'd ever thought about entering a Gabriel Agreste design competition, anyway. She could picture herself, sitting at her desk with a glass of wine to brainstorm, and by midnight she'd be surrounded by wadded up paper, simultaneously crying and pouring the rest of the wine down her throat.

As she waited for her last customer to leave, her thoughts drifted back to Chat Noir. Earlier, during a lull in customers, she'd replied to him saying his poem must have had Lord Byron rolling in his grave. Honestly, that guy. To think she could recall a time before Chat's messages were full of purple prose, terrible puns, and dramatic love confessions.

Emailing him had been a simple mistake. She'd meant to write to a regular client, whose email address was chatnoir1588, to confirm she was available for a meeting the following afternoon. She sent it off without realizing she'd typed chatnoir1589 instead.

Needless to say, chatnoir1589 was very confused, but he sent a polite reply informing her she'd gotten the wrong email address. Marinette cringed and wrote him a short apology… then hesitated before clicking send. Admittedly, she hadn't had both feet in her right mind that day. She'd gone through a mutual-but-less-than-amicable breakup a few months earlier and still coped with the fact that she was back at square one instead of planning her wedding. Hell, she was woman enough to admit that part of the reason she'd taken over the bakery was to distract herself from the pain of abandonment.
And now, here came opportunity knocking on her door. An anonymous person. A whole new human being that didn't know her and couldn't give her pitying looks (poor Marinette, so cute and she still got dumped!). Someone who would never have reason to believe that she was an awkward twenty-something hiding at home to nurse a broken heart.

But what could she say to this stranger? Her eyes roved the email until they landed on his username. *Chat Noir*. Not a real name, but a pseudonym. She couldn't judge him for that; her account went by *Ladybug*, a childhood nickname given to her by her parents for being their lucky charm. Marinette thought for a moment, then added a line under her apology: *P.S. What kind of a name is Chat Noir?*

Not even half an hour after that, a reply: *What kind of a name is Ladybug?*

*I asked you first*, she wrote back.

Five minutes later: *A secret identity. ;3*

And just like that, she had a friend. A friend that no one knew about. Not her parents, not Manon, not even Alya. *Chat Noir* belonged to Marinette alone, and even though he'd gone from intriguing stranger to flirtatious goofball, she was always happy to see his name in her inbox.

The sound of the front door's bell snapped her out of her reverie. "Thank you, come again!" she said to the departing customer. It was 6:02. Closing time.

There wasn't much left in the display case at this point. Her parents had long since figured out how many desserts they needed to make each day. What happened to the leftovers varied. Marinette liked to pick one out for after dinner, generally the most deformed looking pastry. The bread she sold at half price the next day, and the cakes and other sweets she donated to a local homeless shelter.

She stepped out from behind the counter and walked to the front door. Outside, Parisians reveled in the summer evening. The sun was on its way down but wouldn't set until well past nine. If she wanted, she could go out for dinner that night, enjoy a plate of someone else's effort for once. She'd told *Chat Noir* to take a break from his routine, so why shouldn't she do the same? It wasn't like there was a shortage of restaurants in Paris. She flipped the open sign around, then locked the door and smiled to herself. All right then. As soon as the people from the homeless shelter came by for the leftovers, she was leaving.

Marinette got three steps from the door before she heard a sound.

*Taptaptap.*

She turned. A man in a black hoodie wearing a cap and sunglasses stared in at her. At least, she guessed he was staring in at her. His sunglasses were the mirrored kind, so all she could see in them was her own puzzled reflection. She approached the door, too wary to open it, and spoke loud enough for him to hear through the glass. "Sorry sir, we're closed."

The man glanced in another direction, then brought his face closer. "Marinette," he said, "it's me." He tipped his sunglasses down.


"May I come in?"
So many questions hit Marinette at once that her mind temporarily shut down. Her body, however, moved on autopilot, and turned the lock on the door before stepping out of Adrien's way. He entered in a rush and let out a sigh, and she just stood there, mouth open, gawking for lack of a better response. "Thank you so much," Adrien said. He looked over his shoulder. "I—ah!"

Marinette followed his gaze. His bodyguard, The Gorilla, walked up the street at a distance from the bakery. The panic on Adrien's face snapped Marinette out of her shock and she sprang into action. "The kitchen," she said with an unnecessary point in its direction. While Adrien slipped away she busied herself drawing all the window curtains shut. What in the world was happening? She had no idea. Her brain was a whirlwind of panic and confusion. The Gorilla paused in front of the bakery. Marinette gave him a friendly smile, gestured to the closed sign, and resumed covering up the windows. After a few seconds of minding her own business, she looked up and saw the enormous man lumbering back down the street. "He's gone," she called out.

Adrien poked his head around the doorway, but he didn't move until the last of the curtains had been drawn. Marinette watched him emerge from his hiding spot, lower the hood of his jacket and remove the cap underneath it. He'd taken off his sunglasses, and his blonde hair was delightfully tussled. Marinette's knees would have weakened at the sight had she not been so bewildered. What was Adrien Agreste doing in her bakery, on a Tuesday, after closing time—other than hiding from his bodyguard?

"I appreciate it," he said. His face was flushed, and Marinette realized he must have been hot wearing that thick jacket in the middle of summer. Then his greenest of green eyes met hers and she lost her mental capacity for realizations. "Err..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "This probably seems strange to you."

Marinette managed a dumbfounded nod.

"It's weird for me, too. I don't usually, uh, sneak out of my house. Not that I have to sneak out of my own house. I mean, I kind of do? But it's not what it sounds like. I have every intention of going back. I just" —he sighed— "really wanted something to eat."

Marinette stared at him.

Adrien ran a hand through his unkempt hair. "Wait, that makes it sound like I'm being starved to death."

"You wanted something sweet," she offered.

Now it was his turn to stare at her. He must have been surprised that she'd put together a complete sentence without stuttering. "Yes," he said, "I wanted something sweet." His gaze shifted to one of the tables. "And maybe a moment's peace, if it's alright for me to stay a few minutes?"

Marinette heard a trace of longing in his voice that wrapped itself around her heart and squeezed. Though her mind still reeled at his presence—at the knowledge that he'd come here to escape from the world, of all places—she pulled herself together and smiled at him. "Have a seat," she said before dashing back behind the counter. She picked up a plate, hands trembling, and went to the display case to see what she had left. One decadent slice of raspberry cheesecake, two puff pastries, a couple of lemon macarons, and a huge chocolate chip cookie. She went for the cheesecake.

Adrien had settled in his regular spot. She brought the cheesecake to him with a clean dessert spoon and two napkins. Adrien reached for his wallet. "How much?" he asked.

Marinette shook her head. "On the house," she said, then turned and marched back to the kitchen as
fast as she could.

Well.

Well.

This was an interesting development.

She did a full lap around the kitchen, then stopped at the doorway and peered at Adrien. He held a spoonful of cheesecake in one hand and his phone in the other. She flattened her back against the wall. Oh God. Okay. She had to keep it together, she knew that much. Act natural. But then what? Leave him alone. He was there for peace. Yes, good. But wouldn't it be strange pretending he wasn't there?

She had to call someone. Manon? No, she'd find a way to make the situation worse. Alya? No. Reporter. Bad idea. Her mother? What time was it in China? She could send Chat Noir an email, but knowing him, he'd move heaven and earth to find her location, show up at the bakery and chase Adrien away.

A car horn beeped twice outside and Marinette nearly jumped out of her skin. The homeless shelter volunteers. She ran back into the bakery and found Adrien half out of his seat. "No! Ah—they're not coming in!" she said. "It's fine." She picked up a large white box and began filling it with the last of the pastries. "They're from the homeless shelter. We donate our leftovers to them. It'd be wasteful not to, right? Everyone has to eat so why not do our part and help feed the hungry?" She knew she was rambling but she couldn't shut her mouth. "Nothing to worry about. You just sit there and, uh, relax!"

She didn't even try to gauge his reaction before carrying the box into the kitchen and pulling open the side door. Once the pastries were delivered and the volunteers awkwardly waved off, Marinette found herself able to breathe again. Unless Mayor Bourgeois decided to march an entire parade through the bakery for shits and giggles, that should have been the last of her visitors. Which left her, once again, with the present dilemma: Adrien Agreste was in the next room and she had no idea what to do about it.

If the goal was to act natural, then she had cleaning to do. Dishes to wash. The storefront needed to be swept, the counters wiped down, the coffee dumped, cups and lids restocked. She'd start there.

Adrien was halfway through his slice of cheesecake when she emerged with a wet rag. "It's cool that you guys give your leftovers to the homeless," he said.

Marinette's eyes widened. She hadn't counted on him talking to her. "My father insisted on it," she said, concentrating very hard on wiping the counter. "Normally we have more than we did today, and there's no way the three of us can eat it all ourselves, let alone just me."

"Is it hard running the bakery on your own?"

Marinette had two options here. She could make herself sound more impressive than she was, or she could tell the truth. "It helps that I have employees," she said, "but I still don't get much time to myself. I'm up every morning at four o'clock to prepare for opening at seven, work until six, have dinner, maybe watch a little television before going to sleep early to do it all again the next day…" She looked up at him, horrified. "I hope it doesn't sound like I'm complaining! It's not bad, really."

Somehow, telling the truth had managed to impress him. He regarded her with wide eyes. "Wow. I've been getting up at six for years, but I'm not even coherent until eight."
Marinette laughed a little too loud. *Adrien Agreste is sharing personal details with me*. "I would've never thought that. You always seem so refreshing—refreshed, when you come in. I meant to say refreshed."

Adrien's gaze lowered to his phone. "Guess I'm good at keeping up appearances," he said in a tone that suggested he wasn't very happy about it. He spooned another bite of cheesecake. "Are you sure I don't have to pay for this? It's incredible."

Color flooded her cheeks. "I-I'm glad you like it."

"That's an understatement. I'd come here every day if I could."

Marinette pinched herself. Either she was dreaming or she'd tripped and knocked herself out on the counter and this was one long hallucination. But when the pinch didn't wake her up, she found herself facing another choice, another strange and wonderful risk that she could either take or leave and allow her life to be swallowed up in routine once more. "You can," she said.

Adrien raised his head.

"If you want to." She didn't know how she kept finding room in her body for more embarrassment. "If you're craving something sweet, or you need another moment's peace." Could he see how red her face was? "You can come here."

To her surprise, he became flustered. "Wouldn't it be troublesome for—?"

"No! No, it's no trouble at all."

"I hadn't even intended—this was supposed to be a onetime thing, I don't think I can pull it off—"

"Oh God, I didn't mean to assume—"

"No, you're alright, it's just…" They both stopped and stared at each other. Adrien cleared his throat. "That's a serious offer?"

"Yes!" Marinette cried. Then, terrified that she'd sounded too eager, she backtracked. "You're a regular costumer, and to be honest we got a lot of new business when you started coming here, so consider it a thank you?" She waved her hands in front of her. "But I won't tell anyone about you! About this. There wouldn't be much point in sneaking out if people knew you were sneaking out, would there?" Her shoulders sagged. "I'll stop talking now."

Adrien stood and brought his plate and spoon to the counter. "I appreciate it, Marinette," he said in such an earnest voice that she could have melted on the spot. "Really. It's not every day that…" He stopped himself short and shook his head. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Marinette took the plate from him. "I-If you do come back, maybe you can knock on the house door? It's not as conspicuous."

He nodded. "Right. Don't know why I didn't think of that today."

She couldn't function as well with him in close proximity, so she shrugged and made a vague noise. He went back to his table and picked up his hat and sunglasses, resuming the disguise he'd used to get there. But before he put on the shades he turned to Marinette and sent her a small wave. "See you tomorrow morning?"

Tomorrow. Wednesday. Routine. "Yes," she said, then added a feeble 'good night' as he slipped out
the front door and into the crowd.

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
2 hours ago

An insult? Is that the thanks I get for my effort?! I'm not a morning person, My Lady. It cost me to write that poem. I argued with myself about the last line for half an hour.

I a-paw-logize for my out of character behavior yesterday. You must have been worried if you stopped rejecting me long enough to offer advice. And very sound advice, I might add. I followed it to the letter and the universe rewarded me for my obedience. I'd like to think it was a gift from you, buginette. That your good luck rubbed off on me and made my day just a little brighter.

Ladybug
RE: 2015
23 minutes ago

I'm glad you had a nice day, Chat.

Question:

What do you do when you royally screw yourself over?

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
1 minute ago

I break into my father's wine cellar and party with the dustiest bottle I can find. Why?

Ladybug
RE: 2015
17 minutes ago

Comparing notes.

I got the wine part right.

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
5 minutes ago

Oh my God. Are you drunk emailing me?! LADYBUG ARE YOU DRUNK?
Ladybug
RE: 2015
42 seconds ago

You can drink without getting drunk, Chat.

...

Kay I might be a little tipsy.

Just a bit.

Like this much

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
31 seconds ago

You're aware that I can't see your fingers, right?

Brb breaking into the wine cellar. Tell me what we're drinking to and I'll raise my glass in your
general direction. (Alas, I do not actually know what direction that is, but I'll do my best.)

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: 2015
12 minutes ago

Chaaaat. Chaaaaaaaat.

Where'd you go?

Here, minou...

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
50 seconds ago

Ladybugs and gentlemen, we have wine! And north seems as good a direction as any to point stuff
at. Now then, what are we toasting?

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: 2015
Just now

My big fat mouth.
Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista)!
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Let's play twenty questions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
3 minutes ago

Good morning, My Lady!

Since you've made it clear that poetry is not your thing, I decided to try a different approach to being the first person to make you smile today. Attached is a picture of Plagg. I started him mid-bath and his tongue got stuck outside his mouth. Isn't he adorable?

(For the record, I'm pretty adorable myself.)

Last night I dreamt I was having a terrible day at work when suddenly you arrived! Only you were an actual ladybug. A large, person-sized ladybug. It was a lot like The Metamorphosis, and just as terrifying.

x.x.x

Reality was, unfortunately, not too far off from the dream.

Plagg woke Adrien an hour before his alarm by sitting on his face and nearly suffocating him. After that, he couldn't go back to sleep no matter how hard he tried. Determined not to break routine, he emailed Ladybug at 6:45 on the dot, then managed to bump into his father—when was the last time that happened outside of work?—who graced him with a lecture about running away the day before.

"And don't think I haven't noticed the missing wine, Adrien. Control yourself. The last thing our image needs is for you to develop unsavory habits," Gabriel Agreste said in his calm, cool voice as he slipped out the door.

Chloe was waiting for Adrien when he emerged, tired and annoyed, from the mansion. Wednesday breakfast had been their routine for as long as Adrien could remember. He had mixed feelings about her company—they'd been friends for years and she understood him in a way many couldn't, but she was vain and selfish, something that age had never cured her of. She chattered all the way to the Dupain-Cheng bakery about how she'd snagged the latest smartphone before its release date, and insisted they take no less than twenty selfies together. Then, the moment they stepped into the bakery, her good humor vanished and she looked around like its existence personally offended her.

Here Adrien found an oasis in his less than stellar morning: Marinette Dupain-Cheng. He'd always been under the impression that she didn't like him, as she seemed determined not to spend more than a minute in the same room as him. But yesterday had changed his mind. The way she'd helped
him hide without knowing why he was hiding, her modesty, and her generous offer to let him come back whenever he needed to, painted the picture of a kind, easily flustered girl. As if to verify his conclusion, when he approached the register she greeted him with a jerky smile and a noise that might have been 'hello' but could have easily been a whimper. Adrien returned her smile. He'd have to get to know her better.

And speaking of people he wanted to know better…

His thoughts turned to Ladybug on his way to the studio, how much and yet how little he knew about her. She was an early riser, but he wasn't sure when she woke up, so he sent his good morning messages fifteen minutes before a reasonable hour. She was close to him in age, and worked a job that she liked, but didn't seem passionate about. She'd tried online dating once and got set up with an artist who later hit the big time and left her. She lived in Paris—and the possibility that Adrien might have seen her, might have walked past her, might have been within twenty feet of her without knowing filled his stomach with butterflies.

Most importantly, Adrien knew that she lived for design. She'd sent him a concept sketch of an outfit once and he'd had to resist the urge to tell her who he was right then so he could get her a job with his father. More than not knowing her identity, it bothered him that he had the means to help her realize her dreams, but couldn't.

Or could he?

Adrien allowed his thoughts to roam. Sure, he wasn't all that close with his father, but he knew how to speak the man's language. And a proposal like that wouldn't be all that farfetched; his father was already toying with the idea of holding another design competition. Why couldn't Adrien give him a gentle push in that direction?

By the time he reached the studio, he had his plan. But to execute it he'd have to get back in his father's good graces, which meant no more drinking with Ladybug, unfortunately.

Ladybug. He sighed. Her messages were so cute when she was tipsy! It had taken every ounce of his self-control to keep from becoming an insufferable flirt last night. Ladybug trusted him, after all.

With the help of a croissant and the memory of Ladybug's emails, Adrien's mood lifted. But it appeared the universe had decided he shouldn't be happy that day. A combination of an irritable photographer and an equipment malfunction caused Adrien's shoot to extend for hours, and he almost wished for the distraction a human-sized insect would offer.

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: 2015
1 hour ago

It's the return of Plagg!

How is the old geezer doing?

I had a dream last night, too.

It was one of those awful reoccurring ones where you get to school and there's a test you haven't studied for.
Why do we have to have school dreams in adulthood?

Wasn't going to school punishment enough?

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
35 minutes ago

Plagg is as lazy as ever, unless it's to follow me to the kitchen and beg for cheese. Can you believe him? Almost dies and he still wants to eat the stuff. Here's a transcript of our most recent conversation:

"No, Plagg, I'm not giving you any camembert." "Mow." "Remember when you got sick and we had to take you to the vet?" "Mow." "It's because you became lactose intolerant from eating too much cheese." "Moooow." (He gets up on his hind legs and paws at the refrigerator door.) "I said no, Plagg."

Then he wouldn't talk to me for the rest of the day. ):

As for school, I wouldn't know. I was homeschooled.

Ladybug
RE: 2015
2 minutes ago

Give a poor old man his cheese!

Homeschooled, huh?

And to think I had you pegged as the class clown.

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
19 minutes ago

Wrong! Oh-so-very wrong. You see, the problem is you still believe that I'm Chat Noir in real life. But you must remember that the purpose of the secret identity is to hide.

There's so much that you don't know about me, My Lady. But I'd be willing to tell all if you asked. ;)

Horror flooded Adrien's body. Dear God, what had he just done? Message sent. It was too late to take it back. Oh no, oh no, oh no.

What now? The day, gone past in an irritating blur, had melted into a warm Parisian night. Stars strained to compete with the city of light as Adrien backed away from his desk, sat on his bed, got up, went to the sofa, picked up his phone and checked for a reply, found none, then repeated the
process.

Best Case Scenario: She'd laugh it off and say good night.

Worst Case Scenario: She would actually ask.

Adrien didn't know which he dreaded more. On the one hand, he'd be hurt that she didn't care. On the other hand, he'd have to step out from behind the pseudonym and risk her rejecting Adrien Agreste instead of Chat Noir.

He refreshed his email app. Nothing. Maybe she'd gone to sleep. Maybe he'd scared her away for good.

His phone chimed.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

*RE: 2015*

*Just now*

*If you could do it all over again, would you choose to go to public school?*

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**

*RE: 2015*

*1 minute ago*

*In a heartbeat.*

x.x.x

Marinette had been staring at the clock on the wall for five minutes. Thursday was in a bad mood: sluggish and cloudy with occasional fits of rain. The benefit of that was it drew in new customers seeking shelter and a warm, cozy atmosphere, and being busy meant time went by faster.

Manon, working the closing shift, did not fail to notice Marinette's distraction. "You got somewhere important to be?" she asked.

"Huh? No!" Marinette let out a nervous giggle. "Why do you ask?"

Manon put the rag down and crossed her arms over her chest. "Number one, you're clearly anxious to get out of here, and I haven't seen you this excited to leave since Fantastic Fabrics had that huge seasonal clearance sale. Two, you went to freshen up ten minutes ago, which makes no sense considering you'll be stuck here cleaning up for at least an hour after closing. And don't even try to lie to me because I can smell the perfume."

Marinette narrowed her eyes. Damn, she knew she should have saved the perfume for after Manon left. "Maybe I just didn't feel like stinking anymore."

Manon's eyebrow arched. "Uh-huh," she deadpanned. "Want to hear my theory?"

"I'm going to hear it anyway, aren't I?"

"You have a date tonight."
Marinette laughed, hoping it sounded convincing to Manon because in her ears, it sounded desperate. "Yes, I totally have a date with the man I managed to seduce while working here six days a week." She shook her head. "You going to tell me how I met him?"

"Alya set you up," Manon tried. Marinette smirked at her. "A random walk-in customer?" She rolled her eyes. "You went against your better judgement and reopened your online dating profile?"

"Definitely not."

Manon looked disappointed. She draped herself over the cash register with a heavy sigh. "And here I was hoping Adrien had finally noticed how pretty you are and asked you out." She didn't catch the way Marinette's entire body tensed. "But anyway, if you're not busy, do you think you can come up with a fall outfit for Jacqueline? My doll photography blog has been getting a lot of traffic, and I want her looking her best when the season changes. I'll promote the hell out of you, of course." Marinette had gotten Manon into ball-jointed dolls when she was still a kid, and while Marinette was content with Tikki, Manon had gone full-blown collector, developing intricate stories for each doll.

"I'd be honored," Marinette said. "I love Jacqueline." Come to think of it, she hadn't made Tikki anything new in a few months. She could draw up some fall designs for both dolls later.

When six o'clock rolled around, Manon helped Marinette box up the leftover pastries, then clocked out for the day, leaving her alone with her sweating palms and anticipation.

Would Adrien show up?

There was no guarantee. All he'd said was that it was kind of her to offer. No promise to return, no hint that he'd be back—in fact, hadn't he said his sneaking out was supposed to be a onetime thing? Marinette groaned. She was an idiot. Of course he wasn't coming. He was a busy guy, a famous guy whose every move was under paparazzi scrutiny. If he started disappearing, it'd be far too conspicuous.

She pouted. In any case she'd saved him an eclair, so if he did decide to show up there'd be something to eat.

A horn honked outside and Marinette grabbed the box of leftovers, headed for the back door. To her surprise, the homeless shelter's volunteer was a familiar face. "Rose?"

The young blonde woman who stood in the doorway was a former classmate of Marinette's. Her enormous blue eyes grew even bigger at the sight of her. "Wow, Marinette! It's been too long," she cried, breaking into a sunny smile. "I can't believe it. I just got back into town a few days ago and figures it would rain the day I have to drive." She rolled her eyes as if she and Paris were in on some secret joke. "Gosh, it's so good to be home, though. I've been abroad since finishing my bachelor's degree—building houses in Haiti, helping the humanitarian effort in South American countries—I speak Spanish fluently now, isn't that something?—and here I am, volunteering at my favorite shelter again. And here you are, still at the bakery! Have you decided to take over for your parents after all?"

Marinette blinked, stupefied at the amount of information Rose had thrown at her. She really couldn't believe it either: her romantic, dreamy classmate, being a force for good in foreign countries. For the first time, she noticed that Rose was both tan and toned. "Wow. Rose, I... wow." Marinette grinned at her. "Yes, I'm still here," she added. "My parents had to go to China to take care of a relative. I'm running the bakery in their stead."
"Oh, okay. So you haven't given up on your design dreams yet? You were always so talented, Marinette. I bet you're even better now!" Rose took the box of pastries from her. "Whoops, but what am I doing? There's no time to chat. I'm running late! But I'll stop by the bakery next week and we can catch up then. What do you say?"

"It sounds..." Marinette caught movement out of the corner of her eye. A hooded figure at the mouth of the alley, frozen, staring at the vehicle between them. Adrien. "Fantastic!" Marinette shrieked. "I can't wait! And whatever you want to eat, it's on me, for old time's sake. But don't expect to get so lucky next time you come in!" she concluded with an unnatural laugh.

Rose, who had never been a suspicious person, didn't notice her agitation. "I'm looking forward to it," she said.

Marinette kept smiling as Rose turned back to the homeless shelter's vehicle and Adrien ducked behind a dumpster to avoid being seen. She waved at the car until it rounded the corner and merged with regular traffic, then dropped both her hand and her smile. That was close, she thought. Too close.

But here was Adrien now, walking up to her with his hands stuffed in his jacket pockets, taking her up on her offer for sanctuary.

She really should have asked Chat Noir for advice. A confident guy like him was bound to be full of it: ice breakers for awkward situations, how to artfully leave someone alone without making it look like you were ignoring them. But no, rather than ask, she'd gotten half-drunk with him and stayed up laughing at his stupid jokes. Life choices: Marinette was good at them.

"That was close," Adrien said, echoing her earlier thoughts.

Marinette bit her bottom lip. "Maybe the alley wasn't such a good idea after all?"

To her infinite relief, he smiled, his green eyes glittering in contrast to the sullen evening. "Still easier than the front door."

She stood aside to let him in, shutting out the noise of the street. The bakery was quiet save for the hum of the freezers in the kitchen. Marinette, now magically short on things to say, wished she'd thought to turn the radio on at least. It sat on the small desk where she and her parents did all the paperwork, mocking her with its silence. "I wasn't sure if you were coming or not," she said.

Adrien lowered the hood of his jacket. He'd skipped the hat today, but his blonde hair still stood out at adorable angles, which helped accentuate his troubled frown. "Sorry. I wasn't very clear, was I?"

"It's no problem. I, uh, saved you a dessert just in case." Marinette led him through the kitchen and produced the eclair, ready on its ceramic plate. "I hope this is okay. You tend to pick something different every time you come in, so I wasn't sure if you had a preference."

Adrien took the plate from her. "You noticed that?"

I notice everything about you, Marinette thought, and her stomach fluttered. She tried to channel the spirit of the business owner, the one that made itself at home in her parents but tended to shy away from her when she needed it. "I wouldn't be good at my job if I didn't," she said. "Most regulars have a usual order, but you like to keep us on our toes." Yes, that was a nice, sane response.

Adrien looked embarrassed. "To be honest, everything is so good here, I kind of made it my
mission to try it all at least once."

Marinette couldn't stop the smile that spread across her face, his words stirring up a lovely mixture of joy and pride. Her parents would be happy to hear that. They created the recipes; she was merely one of the few sets of hands that prepared them. Gaining a little bit of confidence, she opened her mouth to ask Adrien if he had any favorites when the unthinkable happened.

Her stomach growled.

It *snarled*.

And in the silence of the bakery it was one hundred percent audible.

Blood rushed up Marinette's neck, coloring her cheeks and ears. Why couldn't she have died on Monday when she prayed for a quick death? How many humiliations would she suffer before her heart gave out under the weight of her own awkwardness? Lightning. Earthquake. Meteor. A runaway vehicle smashing through the kitchen wall. She didn't care what it was as long as it happened now.

And then Adrien burst out laughing. It was the kind of unexpected, unrestrained, totally sincere laugh that dragged others along with it, and Marinette found herself giggling in spite of her crippling mortification. "Well," she said, "it's a good thing I saved one of those eclairs for me, too."

Adrien straightened and stifled the rest of his laugh with a cough. "Sorry, that was rude of me."

"No, it wasn't." It was a relief, really. If she ever failed to become Adrien's girlfriend, she could always apply for position of court jester at Castle Agreste.

"You should join me," he said.

Marinette stalled. "What?"

He pointed towards the storefront. "At the table?"

"Ah—oh—but what about your moment's peace? I wouldn't want to disturb you…"

"A moment's peace doesn't have to be spent in silence, you know."

She floundered. She quailed. She nodded her head.

Marinette was pretty sure this wasn't how seduction worked. From what she'd seen in movies and experienced in the past, seduction involved being clever and cute, not tongue-tied and embarrassing. *Was* she trying to seduce Adrien? No. Charm him? Was there a difference? Maybe he felt sorry for her. But even if his invitation was fueled by pity, she couldn't bring herself to revoke her acceptance of it by making up a feeble excuse and running for the hills.

She fetched the eclair she'd saved for herself—it had been mishandled at some point during the day and was squished on one side—and walked out of the kitchen.

Adrien sat at his usual table. A table for two. Had it not been such a gloomy evening, the storefront would have been awash with the pink hues of sunset. But the darkness had forced Marinette to turn on the overhead lights behind the counter, leaving the sitting area half in shadow.

She'd told Manon she *wasn't* going on a date that evening, so what the hell was this, then? Snack Time with Adrien Agreste, Featuring Intimate Lighting?
She slid into the seat across from him and thanked the same higher power that hadn't killed her yet that she didn't fall out of the chair. Adrien had his phone in hand. The glow of the screen illuminated his expression, and boy, what an expression it was: half-lidded eyes, relaxed brows, and an absent smile that made Marinette's heart skip a beat. He locked the screen and the glow went out, taking the expression with it. "Alright," he said as he pocketed his phone, "it's the moment of truth."

"Eh?" What moment of truth?

Adrien picked up the eclair. Oh, yeah, that. Marinette willed herself to stop freaking out and stay present. If ever there was an important time to appear sane in front of Adrien, this was it.

He took a healthy bite and chewed with a carefully arranged look of contemplation, as if he were a food critic searching for an excuse to shut the bakery down. Then he pointed the rest of the eclair at her. "When I gain thirty pounds from eating these, I'm blaming you."

"So our eclairs pass the taste test?"

"Absolutely not. Worst eclair I've ever had," he said, then winked at her before biting into it again.

Marinette, intending to break off a small, ladylike piece of her own eclair, tore the whole pastry in half. *He winked at her.* If that didn't end up her cause of death on the autopsy report, she'd have to tell someone to write it on her tombstone.

God, she needed to pull it together. What would Alya and Manon say if they saw her failing so spectacularly at making conversation? She mopped up the custard she'd spilled on her plate, making frantic grabs at her scrambled thoughts for something to say. "Did you get in trouble?" she asked. "For sneaking out, I mean." She could have kicked herself. Why would a grown man get in trouble for sneaking out of his house?

"I did, actually," he said, sounding downright happy about it. "My father's secretary talked my ear off for ten whole minutes. Brought back fond memories of my teenage years."

Marinette tried to fit that into Adrien Agreste's known personality traits. A rebellious teenager? With a face like his? She couldn't even envision him wearing a leather jacket.

"What about you, Marinette?"

Her mind went blank. "Huh?"

Adrien shrugged. "I've been coming here for a year and I don't know that much about you."

Marinette chewed a bite of her eclair to give herself time to think. What was there to know? Her name was Marinette. She worked at a bakery. When she wasn't working at the bakery, she was grocery shopping, doing the finances, and placing and receiving orders for the bakery. "What do you want to know?" she asked.

"Something surprising."

*I have an enormous crush on you.* "I'm a huge Jagged Stone fan."

Adrien's face lit up. "Really? That is surprising. You don't look like a head-banger."

"And you don't look like a rebellious kid," she shot back. Alya would have been proud of her for that one.
"I take it you don't believe this is Jagged's final farewell tour?" Adrien asked before popping the last of his eclair into his mouth.

Marinette snorted. "Please. Jagged Stone is way too vain to retire. I love the guy, but as soon as someone else comes on the scene and the magazines start hailing a new King of Rock, Jagged drops a fresh single, just to remind them they'll have to pry that title from his cold, dead hands." She rolled her eyes. "It'd be sad if he wasn't so good."

"Exactly. Chloe keeps trying to argue with me that Jagged Stone's a has-been, but who's listening to his music? Everyone."

"Everyone," Marinette agreed. "My friend Alya is trying to get an interview with him as we speak. She's an entertainment reporter."

Adrien leaned back in his chair. "There's another surprising fact about you. You're friends with a reporter."

It dawned on Marinette that she should have been nervous talking to him like this, but for the moment, she couldn't find it in herself to revert to shy. He'd gotten her started on Jagged Stone. There was no going back from Jagged Stone. "Hey, I've given you two surprising facts and you've only given me one."

"You're absolutely right," Adrien said. He pretended to think about it. "I'm a cat person." He gestured for her to contribute the next fact.

"I'm not a cat person."

"Dog person?"

"Hamster person."

Adrien laughed out loud. Marinette laughed, too. "I can't imagine you're allowed to keep rodents above a bakery, though."

"Sadly, no." She mopped up more of the eclair's filling with what was left of the pastry. "Dad and I did entertain the notion of getting a rat and naming him Remy, but Mom put a stop to that very fast. She doesn't quite share our enthusiasm." Marinette chewed on her eclair, wondering how her parents would react to Adrien's after hour visits. Knowing them, they'd invite him into the house, feed him dinner, and insist upon his marrying their cute and available daughter. No, she'd better not tell them.

"It sounds like fun," Adrien said.

"Hmm?"

He shook his head and turned his attention to the door, but Marinette caught the tinge of sadness in his smile. "It's pouring out there."

"Do you need to head back?"

"Probably." He reached for his wallet again. "Are you sure I don't have to pay for the eclair?"

Marinette flapped her hand at him. "It was destined for someone, and anyway, I can't sell you an eclair that's been sitting out since this morning."
Adrien feigned offense. "You're feeding me scraps."

"Well, if you keep turning up at my door like a stray…" She grinned. Adrien's expression brightened. The rain splattered on the glass in a sudden gust of wind, causing them both to turn their heads. Marinette stood up and collected their plates. "Hold on a second."

She left the plates in the kitchen sink and ran up the stairs to her front door. Just inside the apartment was an umbrella stand, from which she grabbed her father's black umbrella—because her polka-dotted pink one would not do—before heading back downstairs. She presented it to Adrien. "I know your jacket has a hood, but in this weather I don't think it'll take much before it's soaked through."

Adrien took the umbrella uncertainly, but he gave Marinette a grateful smile. "I'll bring it back on Tuesday, I promise."

He's coming back, Marinette thought. Oh my God, he's coming back. She walked him to the alley door, watching him as he stepped into the storm, shielded by the umbrella. Before he ducked out of sight, he turned and lifted his hand in a wave, then disappeared around the corner.

Marinette sagged against the door frame, legs shaking, heart pounding out a thousand beats per second. "What the hell was that?" she murmured, running her trembling hand through her hair. Had she just been having casual conversation with Adrien Agreste? Was that her, Marinette Dupain-Cheng, making jokes, telling him things, being flirty? And if it wasn't her doing those things, was whatever had possessed her to do them willing to hang out on Tuesday?

He's coming back, she thought again, and her stomach twisted in the most pleasant of ways.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

RE: 2015

1 hour ago

I used to be a yo-yo champion.

My parents bought me one when I was a kid and I became obsessed. I learned every trick in the book. I even invented a few myself.

In my third year of middle school, I was invited to the European Yo-Yo Championship in Poland.

As my terrible luck would have it, I sprained my wrist two days before the competition.

It was the second greatest disappointment of my life.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**

RE: 2015

34 minutes ago

That's awful, buginette. It is also the cutest thing I've ever heard, and I am blessed that you have opened up about your life to me. So please don't take offense when I ask you this:

Are you sick? Dying, even?
Ladybug
RE: 2015
17 minutes ago

No.

*It just didn't seem fair that you told me something personal, so I evened the score.*

*But let's not make a habit of it.*

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
6 minutes ago

*Why not?*

Ladybug
RE: 2015
2 minutes ago

*Good night, chaton.*

Chapter End Notes

Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista)!
In which Adrien Agreste is a little shit, and girls will always sneak pics of hot guys for their friends.

Sunday brunch used to be tradition in the Agreste household. Adrien's stockpile of childhood memories were full of it. There he was at six years old, choking on the adorable bowtie his mother had picked out for him. And look, there he was at nine, amusing himself by squeaking his nice shoes together until his father snapped at him to cut it out. But he tolerated Sunday brunch and its annoying dress code because he knew that no matter how busy his parents were during the other six days of the week, they would always have Sunday to come together as a family.

Then his mother died, and Sunday brunch, like his father's kindness, became a relic of the past.

So when his father materialized from literally-anywhere-else to call Adrien to a mandatory Sunday brunch, he figured he must have succeeded in making Gabriel think he was an alcoholic. After all, only a substance abuse problem could summon Gabriel Agreste from the throne of his fashion empire.

Or a tattoo, but Adrien planned on saving that for an emergency.

His phone chimed as he lathered his face and neck with shaving cream to do away with the beard his body kept trying to grow. Sunday was the one day of the week that Ladybug had to sleep in, and she did not take it for granted. He unlocked his phone with the knuckle of his pinky finger.

---

_Ladybug_
RE: 2015
15 seconds ago

_Oh my God_

_I feel like a sandbag._

_How did I sleep for twelve hours?_

_Chat, why did you let me sleep for twelve hours?_

---

Adrien smiled and picked up his razor. She should have known better than to ask questions like that. Now he'd have no choice but to reply with a joke about bringing her breakfast in bed.

How different would his mornings be if he was in a relationship with Ladybug? A hazy picture
formed: himself, stretched on the floor of a small apartment, napping in the sun… sketches of outfits fluttering in the breeze from the open window… Plagg's nails clicking on tile in the kitchen… Are you going to laze around all morning, chaton? …and cracking one eye open to smile at… a silhouette obscured by blinding sunlight.

Adrien glared at himself in the mirror. Even without a face to match the words on his cell phone screen, he was happier in his fantasy than he was now. Pathetic.

Once he'd shaved and achieved a level of presentable his father would approve of, he went into his closet for something Sunday brunch appropriate. He hadn't forgotten his mission. No time to make a statement by wearing a Hawaiian print t-shirt—something else he kept around for emergency purposes—and sandals. He put on a pale blue Oxford shirt, white slacks, and a navy blue blazer, grateful that Plagg was too sleepy to come rub himself all over his master's legs.

Adrien grabbed his sunglasses and wallet on his way out of the room. He had plans to meet his best friend Nino Lahiffe at Le Grand Paris after Sunday brunch, and the sullen weather of Thursday and Friday had given way to an obnoxiously cheerful weekend. The sun burst through every open window in the Agreste mansion, making Adrien wince. He'd have to be careful not to do that around his father. Couldn't be sent to rehab for a problem he didn't have.

He took a deep breath before he entered the dining room. Gabriel Agreste sat at the head of the table like he always had, an empty chair on either side of him. He lifted his piercing gaze to his son's, and Adrien, mission-minded, smiled at him. Time to kiss some serious ass. "Good morning, Father."

"It's almost noon," Gabriel replied, which was as close to a friendly greeting as Adrien was going to get.

He walked over to the chair on his father's right side and a serving girl appeared out of thin air to pull it out for him. "No, it's—ah, thank you." He sat down, wishing his father didn't instill such fear in his employees. When Gabriel wasn't around, Adrien pulled out his own chairs. In the next few seconds, half a dozen plates and bowls were arranged in front of him, containing everything from fruit to croissants to sanitized water to dip his fingers in. Adrien tried not to look annoyed as he broke a grape off a clump and popped it into his mouth.

Gabriel wiped his hands with a cloth napkin. "Perhaps," he said, rolling the word around his mouth like it tasted funny, "I was a touch insensitive the other day."

Adrien almost choked on the grape. "What?"

"If there is something that is causing you stress—say, enough to develop an excessive enthusiasm for wine—it ought to be discussed. Between the two of us." He added the second part as an afterthought.

Adrien straightened. "Father, I'm not an alcoholic."

Gabriel arched one perfectly groomed eyebrow. "Is that so?" He paused. "Then where have you been disappearing to this week?"

Crap. What could Adrien tell him that didn't sound like a cover-up for a trip to the local pub? "Just taking walks around the neighborhood," he said. "It's good exercise. Fresh air. Helps me clear my mind." That wasn't a lie. He did take walks, get fresh air, and clear his mind. But did his father really need to know about the delicious pastries and the nice girl who baked them? "Anyway," he cut in, figuring it was time to take over the conversation. "How is work going? Have you decided
whether or not you're going to hold a design contest this year?"

He kept his voice as level and uninterested as possible. If his father suspected the contest might bring him any sort of joy, he'd call it off without further consideration.

Gabriel went into business mode. "I have given it a lot of thought. The interns produced by the last two competitions were disappointing, to say the least. Stubborn and unwilling to learn. I blame myself for leaving the selection in the hands of someone else."

Adrien picked up a croissant, his expression neutral. "Fall's a busy season."

"Indeed. Busy again this year." Gabriel took a sip of coffee. "No, I think I would rather hold off on the competition than bring another incompetent, upstart designer into the label."

Behind his poker face, Adrien screamed. "Let's not be hasty. The competition's always brought you —us—good publicity."

"I am aware of that, Adrien, but I simply won't have the time."

Crap, crap, crap. This was not going the way he wanted it to. He chewed a bite and reviewed everything he knew about his father before he selected his next words. "If you say so," he said, and threw in a half-shrug for good measure.

Gabriel, who was in the process of spreading jam on a slice of bread, paused. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," Adrien said, "except that you had a lot of enthusiasm going into these competitions, and to back out now because you're too busy?" He shook his head. "The journalists will eat you alive."

"You believe it is in my best interest to prioritize the competition."

"I do."

Gabriel stared him down. Adrien continued to eat like he hadn't said anything out of the ordinary. After a moment, his father resumed spreading jam on his bread. "Nice to see that you have not abandoned all of your sense," he said. "I will reconsider."

Adrien nodded solemnly. "It'll be good for us."

He maintained his composure throughout brunch, playing the part of the good son and asking permission to be dismissed so he could meet up with Nino in a timely fashion. Once outside the mansion, he slipped on his reflective sunglasses, walked through the front gate, made it out of range of the security cameras, then punched the air with his fist.

It wasn't a complete victory, but he'd take it.

X.X.X

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
19 minutes ago

Good afternoon, Sleeping Beauty! I toyed with the idea of emailing you until the notification sounds forced you out of bed, but I got caught up in fantasies about how adorable your sleeping face must look. Had I been there in person, I might have swept a lock of hair away from your
forehead before wandering into the kitchen to make us breakfast. Then you would have had to get up to extinguish the smoldering remains of my good intentions.

I am not a chef, buginette, but for you I'd do anything.

x.x.x

When Adrien reached his reserved table at Le Grand Paris twenty minutes later, Nino took one look at him and let out a low whistle. "Dude," he said, "you didn't walk here dressed like that, did you?"

Adrien removed his sunglasses and looked down at his clothes. "There something wrong with this?"

"Yeah. How many women did you send to the hospital along the way?"

"Come on, Nino."

"I'm serious. If you had one more shirt button popped, you'd have incited a riot. Figure out how to turn the model off before you kill someone." Nino grinned and bumped his fist. Adrien put his phone on the table to avoid sitting on it, then took the seat opposite him. "How was Sunday brunch? Your pops hold an intervention for you yet?"

"He tried," Adrien said. "It might have been touching if he did it because he actually cared." He shrugged out of his blazer and a pretty, young waitress all but ran to take it from him, nearly tripping over herself in the process. Adrien and Nino watched her hurry off to the coat rack.

"It mystifies me that you aren't getting laid every night." Nino shook his head. "How many years has it been since you even dated someone?"

Adrien's phone chimed and his eyes darted to the screen. One new email from Ladybug. He covered the screen with his hand to keep Nino from seeing it and slid the phone out of sight. "Casual dating or a monogamous relationship?" he asked. In the case of the former, he'd had a thing with a model two years back, which ended because he was tired of smelling like her cigarettes. In the case of the latter, well…

"Adrien!" A cloud of familiar perfume engulfed him before a pair of sticky, glossed lips pecked his cheek. "You didn't tell me you were coming today."

"Hey, Chlo."

Chloe gave his neck an affectionate squeeze and shot Nino a flat look. "Nino."

"Chloe." Nino nodded.

Adrien extracted Chloe's arms from around his neck. "Going somewhere?" he asked. She was certainly dressed the part: a striped yellow sun dress, strappy sandals, and a Gabriel brand clutch.

"Retail therapy with Sabrina. Being cooped up in this hotel with the leather-and-sweat stink of that geezer Jagged Stone has given me a migraine. How long are alligators supposed to live, anyway?"

"Fang's a crocodile," Adrien said.

"Same difference." She rolled her eyes and waved vaguely behind her. "He's over there giving an interview and I swear my head is throbbing just standing in the same room as him."
"You sure you're not just hungover?" Nino suggested.

"Nobody asked you." Chloe took Adrien's sunglasses from his shirt pocket, snapped them open, and put them on. "Text me later, Adrikins," she said before breezing out of the restaurant, turning the heads of several rich older men as she went.

Adrien unfolded a cloth napkin to wipe the lip gloss off his cheek. "Okay, I only dated Chloe because she was my best friend, and everyonesays you should marry your best friend."

"Everyone has not met Chloe Bourgeois." Nino picked up the restaurant's menu. "Maybe all of this is hypocritical coming from me, the perpetually single DJ Bubbler, but between the two of us you have a much better chance at finding a nice girl to settle down with."

"That's not true," Adrien protested.

Nino lifted his head and raised his eyebrow at him. He opened his mouth to speak again, but his gaze shifted past Adrien's shoulder and his face went slack, words forgotten, mouth hanging open in mid-thought. Adrien recognized that expression. It was Nino's pretty-woman-at-eleven-o'clock face. He hunched his shoulders and leaned forward. "What does she look like?"

Nino kept staring. "Brown and thickset with a very intriguing mole."

Adrien turned around. "Where?"

"Dude!" Nino hit him with his menu.

"Whoa, Chloe was right, it's Jagged Stone!" Adrien looked back at Nino with a huge grin. "I've never seen him this close before."

"Yes, awesome, now turn this way before she notices us."

"Do you think he'd be annoyed if I asked him for an autograph?"

"Adrien, I swear to God."

A few tables away, the woman in question stood up and shook hands with both Jagged Stone and his purple-haired manager. She wore glasses and semi-formal attire, a brown leather satchel slung over her shoulder. To Adrien's great surprise, he recognized her. His brow furrowed as he watched her put a small recording device into her bag. Where had he seen her before?

She turned towards them and her eyes met his.

Nino made a sound like someone had just stepped on his foot and covered his face with the restaurant menu. Adrien grabbed the menu and lowered it to the table with a loud smack as the woman approached them. "Hey," she said, "you're Adrien Agreste, right?"

Adrien put on his friendliest smile. "Yeah. Have I seen you somewhere?" He hoped that for Nino's sake she didn't interpret that as a pick-up line.

"I frequent Tom and Sabine's bakery," the woman said. She held her hand out to him. "Alya Cesaire, entertainment journalist for Zag Weekly."

Adrien's eyes widened. Of course, she was Marinette's friend. He remembered seeing them talking at the counter sometimes during his "official" visits. But he wasn't supposed to know her beyond that, so he shook her offered hand and played innocent. "That's right, the bakery. It's nice to meet
you." He gestured to Nino, who had gone unnaturally stiff, his back straight and an expression of pure panic frozen on his face. "This is my friend Nino Lahiffe, better known as DJ Bubbler. He composes the music for our fashion shows."

Alya offered her hand to Nino. "Hey."

Adrien kicked him under the table and Nino hurried to shake her hand. "Yes, my name is Nino!" he barked.

Alya's brow creased, but she was polite enough not to point out the strangeness of his reply. She turned back to Adrien. "So, off the record, a few of us are dying to know: Is Gabriel Agreste holding another design competition this year? We've heard rumors, but nothing concrete."

Adrien perked up at the question. He saw, clear as day, the rest of his plan unfolding before him, a previously hidden path springing up to take him directly to his heart's desire. "My father is absolutely holding a design competition this year, and you can put that in print. Quote me on it. I'll even pose for a photograph if evidence is necessary."

Alya laughed. "It wouldn't hurt," she said, digging into her leather satchel for her camera. "But maybe we want to keep the dining table out of the shot?"

"Good call." Adrien winked at Nino, stood up and dragged the chair over a few inches, then sat down in it, draping his arm over the back and crossing a leg in the most casual model pose he could think of.

"Perfect," Alya said after she took the shot. "And the competition—it's set in stone?"

"It is a sure thing," Adrien emphasized as he scooted the chair back to the table. "We just haven't decided on a date yet."

"Awesome." She pulled out a small silver tin, from which she drew a business card. "Our print story for next week is the Jagged Stone interview, so I'll upload this to our website in the meantime. Could you give me a call when the competition details are hammered out? I'd love to do an official interview."

Adrien took the card and threw her the rehearsed model smile. "I'll do that," he said. She thanked him and excused herself, reiterating that it was nice knowing them both, then headed for the exit. Once she was gone, Adrien held the card out to Nino. "Got her phone number for you."

"Yeah, after you flirted enough to make her think you're the one interested, you jerk," Nino said, but he took the card and ran his finger over the raised text. "By the way, has your dad really decided to go through with the competition?"

"Nope," Adrien said cheerfully.

Nino stared at him. Adrien picked up the restaurant's menu and browsed it without a care in the world. "Dude," Nino said, "dude, holy shit. He's going to kill you."

"This mushroom omelet sounds delicious."

"It was nice knowing you, man."

"Or maybe a salad instead…"

X.X.X
Ladybug
RE: 2015
1 hour ago

That's very sweet of you.

But stay out of my kitchen.

My week was stressful enough.

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
3 minutes ago

It must have been for you to get drunk on a Tuesday.

(By any chance, does this have something to do with that guy who isn't me?)

Ladybug
RE: 2015
2 minutes ago

I wasn’t drunk.

I was eighty percent sober.

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
5 minutes ago

Let us consult the archived messages of Tuesday evening:

"Omg Chat shut uuuuuup I'm gonna pee. If I pee my pants because of yor stupid jokes Im never spekaing to you again."

Forty percent sober, at best.

Ladybug
RE: 2015
1 minute ago

You're right.

I'd have to be at least that drunk to laugh at anything you say.

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
2 minutes ago

Meowch! That hurts, My Lady. You have inflicted a fatal wound upon my fragile kitty heart. It's a good thing I still have five of my lives left or you'd be short one comedian.

Scratch that. I have no lives left. I've sealed my own fate, and I am a dead man walking. When my soul has departed for the next life, will you remember me fondly? (Don't ask.)

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: 2015
Just now

As fondly as most remember their deceased pets.

I may even cry a little.

Hey, so they're showing one of my favorite movies on the free movie channel at seven.

You should watch it with me and judge my horrible taste.

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
2 minutes ago

It's a date. ;D

x.x.x

"A date?" Marinette cried before her yo-yo hit her in the face. "Oww!" She dropped both the yo-yo and her phone on the couch and reached up to rub her nose, tears pricking her eyes. Eleven years later and it still hurt. Why had she wanted to pick the darn thing up again? "Get your mind out of the gutter, chaton," she grumbled. But she couldn't help the smile that teased the corners of her lips.

The doorbell rang. She forced herself up from the couch and wiped bread crumbs off her sweatpants. Had she not been expecting Alya, she'd have panicked and run to make herself presentable, but her best friend was not in the habit of judging her. Well, at least not on the only day of the week she had off.

Alya burst in before the door was more than half open. "You won't believe the morning I just—what happened to your nose?"

"Yo-yo."

Her eyes widened. "Whoa. If you're going to start dual-wielding those things again, I need to come over more often."

Marinette walked past her to the couch, where she'd set up a lazy Sunday command center complete with pillows, sketchbook and colored pencils, and a plush blanket for added comfort. "Don't get your hopes up," she said. She lifted her hand off her nose. "Is it bruising?"
Alya cringed. "Some concealer will leave you good as new."

Marinette dropped into her nest of pillows. "Great." She cleared a space for Alya, making sure there were no bread crumbs on the couch cushions. "You were saying something about an unbelievable morning?"

"Right!" Alya kicked off her shoes and sat down. "So, interviewed Jagged Stone, which was great. He's eccentric but he's not a jerk, you know? And Fang is surprisingly cuddly. Jagged loved the scone you sent him, by the way. In his own words"—Alya spoke in her best English—"this is flippin' awesome!"

Marinette gasped. "He did?"

"Refused to wait until after the interview to finish it. He kept talking with his mouth full."

She grabbed a pillow and screamed, kicking her legs in the air. "Jagged Stone likes our pastries!"

"And I gave him your address, so if he walks through the front door someday, who do you love?"

"Queen Alya, the greatest journalist in Paris." Marinette grinned at her. "You're the best."

Alya held up a finger. "There's more to the story," she said. "I wrapped up the interview and made to leave when who did I spot seated on the other side of the room?" She paused for dramatic effect. "Adrien Agreste."

Marinette's grin fell off her face. "Y-You did?"

"Mmhmm. And what's more is he recognized me from the bakery." Alya dug her elbow into Marinette's side. "If he could remember me when I haven't even spoken to him before today, his memory of you must be much better, don't you think?" She plowed on without waiting for a reaction. "Anyway, he was there with his, uh, interesting friend, so I took the opportunity to ask him if there was going to be a design competition this year, and he said absolutely yes. He told me to put it in print. Do you know what this means?"

"There's going to be a design competition this year?" Marinette tried.

Alya grabbed her by the shoulders. "You have to enter. No buts, no excuses. This is your dream we're talking about." She let go and picked up the sketchbook and colored pencils, thrusting them at Marinette. "If I have to quit my job to run this bakery while you get your shit together, so help me, I will."

Marinette stared at the page full of outfit designs for Tikki. She'd gotten a little carried away and drawn up an entire fall line which, with some adjustments, could easily be made for people instead of dolls. "I don't know, Alya." It was one thing to design for fun, another to try to make a career out of it, to expose herself to the scrutiny of her fashion idol in the hopes of being deemed worthy enough of his time. And besides, she didn't have the best track record when it came to luck.

The determination on her friend's face melted into sympathy. She'd always had the uncanny ability to read Marinette's thoughts. "Listen," she said, "it's just nerves. You're not unlucky. Superstitious, maybe, but unlucky?"

"Then why is it that every time I want something—every time I really try and really care—I get screwed over?" Marinette took back her sketchbook and laid it on the sofa, blinking away tears that sprang to her eyes. Her parents nicknamed her Ladybug because she brought them good luck, but when she was the one who needed that luck, where did it go? She wanted to laugh at the cruelty of
"Marinette..." Alya pulled her into a hug and rubbed her back. "You can't let fear of disappointment stop you from living."

"I know," she muttered into Alya's chest. But even as she said it, she thought of fifteen-year-old Marinette, curled up on her bed with a splint around her wrist, smothering bitter sobs with her pillow and thinking, *I could have been a champion.*

And twenty-four-year-old Marinette, standing in a sunlit apartment with a smile on her face, claiming to understand though she didn't understand at all.

"I won't make any promises, but..."

"You'll think about it?" Alya said.

Marinette nodded and pulled away from her. She needed to change the subject before her lazy Sunday became a full blown pity party. "So," she said in a not-so-innocent tone, "how was Adrien?"

"If by that you mean how hot was he,your best friend's got you covered." Alya reached into her satchel and withdrew her camera. "You are so lucky he offered to pose for a photograph, or else you'd have owed me big time for whatever dumb excuse I came up with to get one."

Marinette took the camera.

And spent the next five minutes giggling in octaves she hadn't known herself capable of reaching.

---

**Ladybug**  
*RE: 2015*  
2 minutes ago

*Have you ever looked at someone and immediately felt the need to repent for your sins?*

---

**Chat Noir**  
*RE: 2015*  
9 minutes ago

*When we meet in person, I'll let you know.*

*By the way, this movie sucks. It has totally changed my opinion of you. I'm not sure I can bring myself to marry you anymore. In fact, I think I need to end our friendship right this second, because I cannot bear the offense of having been forced to watch this terrible movie. It is a blight upon the glowing history of the cinema, and an affront to mankind.*

---

**Ladybug**  
*RE: 2015*  
1 minute ago
You love me. :-)

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
Just now

It's over. Goodbye, Ladybug.

(I do.)

Chapter End Notes

The first season of Miraculous Ladybug is over! But fear not, we will get through the hiatus together.

This fic and my author's notes will remain spoiler free. My Tumblr (geek-fashionista) will not. Come bother me at your own risk. :D
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Oh, Adrien. You had to know your meddling would get you in trouble.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ladybug
RE: 2015
Just now

...

Chat.

You’re not really not speaking to me, are you?

x.x.x

Adrien poked his head out of his bedroom. He peered down one side of the hallway. A maid carried an armload of linens towards the laundry room. He checked the other side. Empty. No one on the stairs. He withdrew.

Seconds later Adrien somersaulted across the corridor, pressed his back against the wall, and crab-walked towards the stairs, making sure he stayed out of sight of anyone who might have passed through the lobby. He'd overslept. The one day he meant to get the hell out of the mansion early, and he'd snoozed right through his alarm clock. If it hadn't been for Ladybug's email, Nathalie would have been the one to come wake him. Or worse.

News of Gabriel Agreste's impending competition had hit the internet the night before. One glance at his Twitter feed showed Adrien that the whole fashion world was ablaze with the announcement. Hence the reason he now crab-walked down the stairs, praying that no one of consequence was home. He reached the landing. No hope of hiding there. He straightened up and tiptoed the rest of the way down, resisting the urge to make a run for it. The front door was in sight. So close.

Nathalie emerged from the dining room and froze as she spotted him. "Adrien!"

Adrien whirled around to face her. "Good morning Nathalie sorry I overslept and wow am I in a hurry didn't even have time to brush my hair as you can see so whatever it is will just have to wait until later bye!" He yanked the front door open and bolted.

"Come back here!" he heard her yell from the threshold. "Your father wishes to speak with you!"

He dove into the waiting car and scrambled to put his seatbelt on. "Drive, drive, drive!"

The Gorilla, used to Adrien's dramatic flights from the mansion, calmly pulled away from the curb and merged into traffic.
Only after Adrien had caught his breath did he notice he wore two different colored socks.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**

RE: 2015

30 minutes ago

My Lady, I offer my humblest apologies. I grovel at your feet. I tear my clothes and prostrate myself before you.

Last night… I had an affair.

Call me a no-good tomcat if you will. After my effusive declarations of love, you must have correctly assumed that my heart (and mind and body) belonged only to you. But you see, for years I have been pursued by another, and I must admit that her charms and seductions have been hard to resist. I am but a man, buginette. A weak man with powerful needs. It was only a matter of time before—

Oh, hell. I overslept. Sorry.

x.x.x

Marinette was surprised to see Adrien both late and unkempt. He walked into the bakery with rogue hair, mismatched socks, and a stifled yawn, but the moment he laid eyes on her, his entire demeanor changed. She had never seen anyone literally perk up before. His shoulders straightened. His mouth spread outwards in a smile he couldn't contain. His eyes glittered like precious gemstones.

In her periphery, Marinette saw Manon look from Adrien to her and back, so she knew it wasn't just her imagination. He really was staring at her like she'd made his whole week simply by existing. He arrived at the front of the line while Marinette debated whether she should faint now or faint later, his radiant smile reserved for her alone. "Good morning," he said, his tone a little too breathless for mere acquaintances.

Marinette's mouth dropped open.

Manon, correctly assuming her boss had been incapacitated, intervened. "Good morning, Monsieur Agreste. What can we get for you today?"

Adrien startled and scanned the dessert case in front of Marinette. In his apparent eagerness to see her, he'd forgotten to look. "It's too early for that chocolate torte, isn't it?"

"It's never too early for chocolate torte," Manon replied as she pressed a ceramic plate into Marinette's hands and returned to the register. "Besides, the fresher the better, wouldn't you agree?"

Adrien waited until Manon was focused on ringing him up to make eye contact with Marinette. She wasn't sure, but she thought she felt his gaze pierce the depths of her soul.

He mouthed something at her.

Marinette blinked. What? she mouthed back.

He tilted his head almost imperceptibly in the direction of his usual table before turning his attention to Manon. He wanted to talk to her? Right now? There were no customers behind him, no
large orders waiting for Marinette in the kitchen. But going over to make conversation with a guy she was notorious for being unable to speak to would make Manon suspicious. Scratch that, it would make her more suspicious than she already was. Marinette could see by the way Manon spoke to Adrien that she’d noticed something was different between them.

Sure enough, the moment he was out of ear shot, Manon turned on her. "Is there any specific reason why a famous model walked into our bakery with sex hair and looked at you the way he used to look at your cookies?" she asked.

Marinette scrambled for an excuse. "I don't, but wouldn't it be the perfect time to ask him?"

"Right!" Manon laughed. "Like you're going to just walk right up to him and start a conversation."

Marinette dusted flour off her apron, tilted her chin up, and tapped Manon on the nose. "Watch me," she said. With false confidence wrapped around her like a superhero costume, Marinette marched into the seating area. She could sense Manon's eyes on her back as she approached Adrien's table. Oh God, she was approaching Adrien's table. In broad daylight. With witnesses. And she had to act like they'd never spoken more than a few words to each other. She almost swerved to the left to talk to Monsieur Ramier instead—he always stopped in for a croissant and a bag of bread crumbs to feed the pigeons around Paris. But Adrien looked up from his phone as she drew near and dazzled her with his smile. So much for escaping.

"How's the torte?"

"Delicious," he replied, "but I was right. It is way too early for this much chocolate. My stomach won't appreciate it."

"But your taste buds do?"

"Oh yes." Adrien gestured to the empty chair across from him. "Would you like to join me?"

So far so good. Marinette waved her hands back and forth. "I can't. I mean, there are things to do. Dishes. I have dishes to wash. And dough to prepare for tomorrow. But thank you for the offer."

Adrien lowered his voice. "I need to ask you something."

Marinette laughed like he'd made some kind of joke. She snuck a glance at Manon and saw her blatantly staring at them. "About what?"

He took her cue and laughed as well. "Your friend, Alya," he said. "Is she single?"

Marinette froze. Her surroundings fell away from her, sight and sound and smells, plummeting along with her stomach into the great unknown. It was a miracle she found voice enough to reply. "Yes."

"Great," Adrien said, his happiness so genuine that Marinette felt a twist in her gut. He reached for his phone, checked the screen, and cringed. "I'm late," he said. He ate the last bite of his torte and stood up while Marinette tried to recollect where she was and what she was doing. "We'll talk tomorrow," he assured her in a quiet voice, then thanked her for the delicious cake and promised he'd be back on Wednesday at a normal volume. Marinette looked after him until he'd ducked into his private car and was driven off to whatever appointments he had that day.

She picked up his plate and walked back to the counter on autopilot. At the sight of her expression, Manon's suspicion turned to worry. She dragged Marinette into the kitchen. "What happened?"
Marinette stared at the plate in her hands. "He asked me if Alya was single."

But, she thought, maybe it didn't mean anything. Maybe she'd jumped to conclusions and that awful twist in her gut, that whisper of *you knew it was too good to be true* echoing around her skull, were simple overreactions. But when Manon's only response was a muttered "shit," Marinette lost her grip on optimism. She dropped the plate into the sink's soapy water. "It's fine," she said. "Don't worry about it."

Manon bit her bottom lip. Clearly it wasn't fine. "Marinette…"

"Can you straighten up the seating area? I'll be out there in a minute." Marinette lowered more plates into the sink and began to scrub the syrup, sugar, and crumbs off them. She heard Manon walk away after a while. A quick glance confirmed she was alone, and she let her shoulder sag.

*You knew it was too good to be true.*

Which was exactly why she wouldn't cry about it.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**  
*RE: 2015*  
10 minutes ago

*Oh Chat, you don't have to lie to me.*

*If she makes you happy, I give you my blessing.*

*PS: Know anything better than ice for swollen eyes?*

x.x.x

"Have a seat, Adrien."

If someone had asked Adrien how he thought his life would end, "at the hands of my father" would have been his first response. He tried not to dwell on the tragedy of that.

Standing in Gabriel's office always made him feel like a five-year-old. When his mother was alive and things were better, he used to play in there sometimes—very quietly—while his father worked. On rare occasions he'd look up and find his father watching him, the stress lines on his face smoothed out, a fond smile playing at the corner of his lips.

But there was no fond smile today. Only the severe, measured look of a father whose son had deliberately disobeyed him.

On Gabriel's desk sat a tablet, internet browser open to Zag Weekly's website. As Adrien slid into the chair across from the desk, his father tapped the tablet screen with his index finger. "Would you care to explain why this Alya Cesaire claims you told her I had a design competition set in stone?"

He recognized that tone of voice. It was what his father's employees affectionately referred to as the Oh Shit Voice, as in *oh shit I'm about to lose my job.* Adrien had no job to lose, but he did have a life, and considering he'd already foretold his own doom, today must have been the day the prophesy was fulfilled. He sat up straight, determined to go out like a man. "I thought that was what we agreed on yesterday," he lied.
"I said I would reconsider. These decisions take time. A design competition takes time," Gabriel said. He tapped on the tablet screen and Zag Weekly's website was replaced by a calendar crammed with events—his work schedule. "Does it look like I have time to spare?"

Adrien bowed his head. "No sir."

Gabriel let him stew in his shame before speaking again. "Well then. Seeing as you are so willing to sacrifice other people's time, I thought this might be an excellent opportunity to teach you a lesson."

The office door opened. In walked Nathalie, accompanied by a woman in a suit who, judging by the terror on her face, had yet to master the stern expression worn by all Agreste employees. "We will not cancel the design competition," Gabriel continued as the two came to stand behind Adrien's chair. "For whatever reason you appear to be looking forward to it, and I'd hate to disappoint you." His flat tone suggested he didn't care one way or the other whether he disappointed Adrien or not. "But as I cannot spare any of my time to arrange it, I am leaving you in charge."

Adrien went slack-jawed. "Me?"

"Who better? You are familiar with my method of doing business. Your schedule is lax compared to mine, and isn't it about time you started participating in the family business? Yes, I think you will do nicely." Gabriel gestured. "Nathalie and Colette are your assistants. Colette has worked on the previous design competitions and knows what needs to be done. She's scheduled a press conference for the official announcement in two days. You will be speaking on my behalf."

"A press conference in two days?" In Adrien's state of shock, he could do nothing but repeat what he heard.

Gabriel arched a silver-blond eyebrow. "Is that too short notice for you?" he asked.

Adrien put a lid on his surprise. He wouldn't give his father the pleasure of seeing him squirm. "Two days is perfect," he said, and turning to Colette he added, "Would you please call Ms. Cesaire and invite her to the press conference? I promised her I'd get in contact when I had more information."

Colette's eyes widened like she hadn't expected to be put to use, much less spoken to in a kind manner. "Right away, Monsieur Agreste."

Adrien beamed at his father. Gabriel smirked back. "I trust that you will have everything under control," he said with a challenge in his tone. "You are dismissed."

As soon as Adrien was out of the office, he drew his phone out of his pocket. He'd received a short email from Ladybug that worried him, but he had business to attend before he could reply. He tapped on Nino's number and lifted the phone to his ear.

"Dude," Nino said, "I hope you're not calling from the afterlife because you know ghosts freak me out."

"I am. Turns out they give you one last phone call—like prison—and I'm using mine to tell you where my father dumped my mangled corpse."

Silence. "R-Really?"

"No!" Adrien pinched the bridge of his nose. "Nino, listen, clear your schedule for Wednesday
afternoon. You're coming to a press conference." Excitement broke the surface of his dread. "And clean up a little, because that reporter you like is going to be there too."

X.X.X

**Chat Noir**
RE: 2015
1 hour ago

Do my eyes deceive me? An email from my Lady in the middle of the work day? To what do I owe the pleasure? In answer to your question: chilled tea bags, cucumber or strawberry slices, and cotton balls soaked in warm salt water. My best friend swears by that last one. She's ill-tempered and constantly working herself up into tears.

Is everything alright?

X.X.X

**Ladybug**
RE: 2015
Just now

Oh gosh, sorry.

A friend showed up at my door with home-cooked food and then stayed over for a couple of hours.

I'm a sucker for home-cooked food.

I'm a sucker for fast food.

I'm a sucker for food.

I'm a sucker.

X.X.X

**Chat Noir**
RE: 2015
2 minutes ago

You are no such thing.

Let me tell you who the real sucker is: yours truly. You probably knew this already, right? Well my best friend—the ill-tempered one—she's got a bit of a drinking problem. We might need to hold an intervention for her soon. Whenever she goes out on the town and gets falling down drunk, guess who ends up pulling her from whatever club she's passed out in? That's right, Chat Noir, her knight in shining armor on speed dial.

It doesn't even occur to me to say no. We've been friends since we were babies. I can't just leave her out there, you know?

X.X.X

**Ladybug**
RE: 2015
Is she the woman you had an affair with last night?

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
Just now

I OVERSLEPT. THERE IS NO OTHER WOMAN. IT IS IMPORTANT TO ME THAT YOU UNDERSTAND THIS.

Ladybug
RE: 2015
Just now

Right. ;-) 
There is no other woman. ;-) 
I totally understand. ;-) 

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
Just now

Ladybug, I'm going to cry.

Ladybug
RE: 2015
Just now

Thanks for the laugh, kitty. I really needed it.
Good night.

Alya rushed into the bakery at noon the next day. Marinette, who wasn't accustomed to seeing her at noon on a Tuesday, steeled herself for bad news. For her best friend to run across town to talk to her the day after Adrien asked if she was single, it could only mean one thing.

Alya doubled over to catch her breath, then straightened, still panting. "Press conference!"

Marinette blinked. "What?"

"I got a call—from Adrien's secretary—inviting me to—a press conference!" Alya leaned on the counter. "I need water."
Marinette fetched a cup of ice water and brought it her. She watched Alya drain it and resisted the urge to launch into a series of more personal questions. If Adrien had asked her on a date, Alya would have opened with that. She'd have been outraged on Marinette's behalf. Every customer in the bakery would have gotten an earful of gossip.

"It's scheduled for tomorrow afternoon," Alya said. She handed the empty cup back to Marinette and grinned. "Guess that means the competition is officially official."

"Guess so," Marinette agreed. She knew she should have shown a little more enthusiasm, but it was difficult when her mind kept replaying Adrien's unbridled happiness over Alya's single status. It wasn't that she was angry—she could never be angry about a guy liking her best friend. No one was more deserving of love and happiness than her hardworking best friend. The wound was just too fresh. Marinette didn't have the energy to be cheerful, let alone fake it.

Luckily Alya was in too much of a hurry to suspect Marinette's delicate attitude had nothing to do with the competition. "Don't worry," she said, "whichever of the hundred designs you have stashed upstairs you decide to submit, it'll be perfect."

"I don't have a hundred designs stashed upstairs." Marinette lowered her voice to a mumble. "It's more like seventy. But if I do enter, it'll be with something new."

"I expected nothing less from you." Alya checked the time on her phone and leaned forward to give Marinette a parting kiss on both cheeks. "I'll come over tomorrow night and tell you all about the conference. Ooh! We should get some gelato. It's definitely hot enough."

Marinette had a feeling the conference would be the last thing on Alya's mind.

Unable to help herself, she checked her email as soon as Alya was gone. She usually didn't pull her phone out until after work. The day before had been a temporary lapse in sanity, more of an excuse to stay locked in the bathroom until her eyes stopped leaking all the tears she'd been trying to keep at bay. Today she had no excuse.

She wanted to talk to Chat Noir. He was the only escape from her daily life that she had.

_x.x.x_

**Chat Noir**
RE: 2015
4 hours ago

_I lost sleep because of you._

_For two hours I tossed and turned, wondering if you were serious or not. You should know that I would never be unfaithful to you. Chat's honor._

_x.x.x_

**Ladybug**
RE: 2015
51 minutes ago

_That would be reassuring if we were actually dating._

_You should lose sleep over more important things, chaton._
Like video games.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**  
RE: 2015  
37 minutes ago

She speaks during the work day again! What have I done to deserve this honor? I'm so touched! To see my Lady's voice before the twilight hours—etc. etc.. Can I skip the dramatics and wonder if this is the beginning of a new era in our relationship?

I'd pester you more, but there's been an increase in business lately that demands my immediate attention. Would that I could do nothing but sit around talking to you. It's much more fun.):

x.x.x

Marinette saw an increase in business herself towards the end of the work day. Three different orders came in, one for the weekend and one large enough to require extra employees on hand. She'd have to plan accordingly.

When six o'clock rolled around, she dismissed her closing shift assistant and picked out a flaky pastry for Adrien, then boxed up the rest and waited in the kitchen for the homeless shelter people to come by. Did she even want to see Adrien? Her stupid heart betrayed her. Of course she did. His having feelings for Alya didn't affect her desire to see him in any way. It was as strong and energetic as ever, setting flight to the multitude of butterflies in her stomach while she waited. She groaned and opened her email.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**  
RE: 2015  
1 hour ago

I like talking to you too, kitty.

So.

Gabriel Agreste is holding another design competition this year.

My best friend's gotten it into her head that if I enter, my victory is pretty much guaranteed, but...

I don't know.

It's one thing to design for yourself, another to bare your soul to your hero and get shot down.

I'm not sure my heart could take that.

x.x.x

Adrien ran through the darkening streets, Marinette's umbrella clutched in his hand. So much for being inconspicuous. He hoped he was disguised enough that bystanders would only see some random idiot charging through pedestrian traffic like a maniac, and not the son of a famous designer.
The meeting with the budget specialist had gone on forever. Three times in the last hour Adrien had been tempted to get up and politely kick everybody out of the meeting room, but how would that look? Did he really feel like explaining to his father that he'd left business matters unresolved in order to keep a promise to a girl?

He made it to the door, then hesitated while trying to decide if he should knock—there was no way Marinette would still be down in the bakery—or ring the buzzer—which was strangely formal. He settled for knocking first; he'd ring if he had to.

Several quiet seconds passed while Adrien caught his breath and cursed the weather for being so humid.

The door opened.

Marinette stared out at him, clearly surprised. She'd put her hair up in a bun: loose tendrils framed her face and a pencil was stuck through the bun itself, giving her an artistic appearance that nicely suited a baker. Adrien smiled sheepishly. "I got stuck in a meeting."

Marinette blinked. Another strand of hair came loose from the bun and fell to the side of her face. "I didn't think you were coming."

He nodded and rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry," he said, then remembered the umbrella. He held it out to her. "It served me well."

Her gaze lowered to the umbrella. She took it from him. Stared at it for a moment. Then she let out a comically large gasp and moved out of the doorway. "Come in," she said, making a sweeping motion with her arm. "I was just—oh my God." Her hands flew up to her hair and yanked the pencil out.

Adrien stepped over the threshold and immediately felt some tightly coiled thing inside of him relax. There was something so peaceful about the bakery, the perfect cure for his hectic day. He turned to Marinette, who had placed the pencil on the small desk at the back end of the kitchen and now charged toward the refrigerator. She hadn't let go of the umbrella. "Three people called with orders at the end of the day, so I'm just checking to make sure I have all the supplies I need. Might have to buy some more raspberries for Mrs. Chapman's crepe cake."

"If you're busy, I can leave," Adrien said. "We'll talk another time?"

"No!" Marinette whirled around with a pastry in hand. "I mean, I got most of the work done already. It's fine." She clicked on the lights in the dining area and Adrien followed her to his table. Before he sat down he checked his phone: one email from Ladybug.

Marinette took up the opposite chair, then noticed she was still holding the umbrella and leaned it against the wall. "Anyway, I figured you must be busy, what with the design competition and everything," she said.

Adrien pocketed his phone and fell into his chair with a sigh. "Even busier. My father put me in charge of the whole thing."

"Really?"

He nodded. "He thinks it's time I started showing interest in the family business. So now I get to organize the competition and the after party, food and entertainment included. Good thing my best friend is a DJ." Adrien tried the pastry. It had a subtle honey taste and left flaky crumbs everywhere. Delicious. "And speaking of best friends..."
Marinette's eyes widened. "Yes?"

He leaned in toward her. "I asked about your friend Alya because—"

"You like her?" Marinette said.

Adrien froze. "What?"

They stared at each other. Adrien's brow furrowed. He thought back to their conversation the day before and realized that, given the way he'd both phrased his question and reacted to her answer, he had indeed given off the impression that he was interested in Alya. "Oh! No, geez, not at all," he said, then backtracked. "Not that she isn't pretty or anything. That came out wrong. She's very pretty, but I'm not the one who's interested. My friend Nino—he was with me on Sunday—it was love at first sight. Or at least a very strong attraction."

"Your friend," Marinette reiterated. He couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"He's a good guy," Adrien said. "A little lacking in the confidence department, but I can vouch for him."

A smile crept its way to Marinette's face. "Your friend!" she said again. "What did you say his name was?"

"Nino Lahiffe. His stage name is DJ Bubbler. I don't know if you've heard of him."

"It sounds familiar," Marinette leaned forward. "Your friend is interested in Alya," she murmured, more to herself than him.

Adrien took that as an encouraging sign. "Yes. You should have seen the way he acted around her. Completely dumbstruck." Nino hadn't stopped texting him since the day before, sending pictures of different clothing combinations for his expert opinion on How to Impress a Woman. What kind of friend would Adrien be if he didn't do everything in his power to help?

Marinette looked thoughtful. "Well," she said, "I do want Alya to find a nice guy, but I can't set her up with just anyone…"

Adrien seized the opportunity. "I'll bring him by tomorrow," he said. "I have to give a press conference in the morning and he's coming with me for moral support. You can meet him yourself, decide if he's good enough for your friend, and if he is we can maybe try to get them together?"

"We?" she squeaked.

"If you're up for a game of matchmaker." Adrien smiled his winningest smile. He had to get her approval. For Nino's sake.

Marinette stared for a moment, then she stuck out her hand. "All right. I'm always up for a game of matchmaker," she said. "But if Alya doesn't like him I won't pressure her."

"Absolutely not," Adrien agreed as he shook her hand. The design competition was the perfect excuse. He could keep inviting Alya to cover events as they unfolded and Nino, when he wasn't working on the music, could oh-so-conveniently be in the same place, then Adrien would mercilessly ditch him so he'd be forced to either make conversation or let things get awkward. Ah, Nino was going to hate him. "May I borrow your phone?" he said to Marinette.

She almost dropped the phone trying to get it out of her pocket, but she handed it over nonetheless.
He dialed his own number and pressed the call button. "There," he said, giving it back to her. "For scheming purposes. And, well, next time I'm running late I'll send you a text."

"Right," Marinette said, her eyes fixed on the screen. She jumped like she'd been pinched. "And I can, ah, send you the menu. On Thursday. So you can pick your own dessert."

Adrien hadn't even thought of that. He laughed. "You don't have to keep feeding me."

"I insist." Her expression was a determined one.

By the time he left the bakery the sun was almost completely gone, lampposts illuminated to guide him back to the Agreste mansion. He looked over his shoulder and saw Marinette lingering in the doorway. He waved at her. She waved back. On his walk home, he added her phone number to his contacts list—which, aside from Nino, Chloe, his father, and Ladybug, consisted of nothing but employees and business associates.

He wondered if Marinette considered them friends.

x.x.x

Chat Noir

RE: 2015
42 minutes ago

Ladybug.

I say this because I love you.

Enter that design competition or I will enter you in it myself.

Chapter End Notes

Come bother me at geek-fashionista.tumblr.com
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Sabine Cheng has her priorities in order and I am a sucker for Adrien and Chloe's friendship.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I have Adrien's phone number.

It was the last thought that flitted through Marinette's mind before she fell asleep. It was the first to greet her upon opening her eyes the next morning. Before she even moved from her bed she turned on her phone and checked her contacts to make sure she hadn't dreamed the whole thing. Nope, there it was: Adrien Agreste, followed by a number.

She brushed her teeth and told her reflection, "I have Adrien's phone number." She picked Tikki up from her desk, straightened out the autumn jacket she'd sewn her, and said, "Guess what? I have Adrien's phone number." She wanted to throw open her window and shout it to the sleeping streets of Paris. She wanted to climb Notre Dame, ring the bells, and tell it to the gargoyles. She wanted to find Chat Noir on the street, shake him, then hug him, then tell him she had Adrien's phone number.

(Shed have told the pigeons dozing on her balcony, but she had a feeling they wouldn't care.)

The only thing better than Adrien's phone number being programmed into her phone was the knowledge that he did not, in fact, have a crush on Alya. It never occurred to Marinette that he might have had a crush on someone else. He wasn't interested in her best friend. All that crying for nothing! She could keep swooning over him—in private of course—without having to chide herself for liking a guy who was emotionally unavailable.

And he wanted to play matchmaker with her.

Marinette sighed a lovesick sigh, slapped her cheeks, then forced herself to focus on the tasks at hand. First, open the bakery. Then worry about the rest.

Like the matchmaking. Throughout their entire friendship Alya had only had two boyfriends. The first, in their last year of high school, had loved himself more than he loved her. The second, in college, had also been a journalist, but made snide comments about how he reported the real issues while Alya wrote celebrity gossip garbage. Needless to say, neither relationship lasted long.

Alya had been so supportive during Marinette's own nasty breakup. Didn't the two of them deserve to be happy? Besides, it was difficult to meet people as an adult without risking picking up some pervert in a bar. Here Adrien had offered up someone whose good character he could actually vouch for.

The bakery phone rang, snapping Marinette out of her reverie. She put a tray of cinnamon rolls in the oven and walked over to the desk. The landline phone was buried under a mountain of papers,
calendar pages, and receipts. She swept things into hasty piles and picked up the receiver. "Boulangerie Patisserie Tom & Sabine, this is Marinette."

"Good morning, sweetie!"

"Maman!" she cried, her heart soaring at the comforting familiarity of her mother's voice. "Is everything okay? How's Papa doing? When are we going to have another Skype chat?"

"Everything is fine," Sabine said. "I just knew you'd be down in the bakery and I wanted to say good morning. How are you? Not too lonely, I hope?"

"A little lonely, but not that bad. I can't wait until you come home—not that I'm saying I want Great Auntie Cheng to die or anything."

Sabine laughed. "Don't worry, I know what you mean."

Marinette twirled the phone cord in her hand, letting the giddiness get to her head. "I, uh, I made a new friend," she said. She knew bringing it up in such a way would leave her mother incapable of resisting her curiosity.

"Oh? Who is it?"

Marinette looked over her shoulder as if she expected to find someone standing there eavesdropping, then lowered her voice. "Adrien Agreste."

Her mother's squawk was priceless. A loud commotion ensued—it sounded a lot like a phone being dropped—then Sabine was back. "Marinette, is there something you want to tell me?"

"No! Oh my God, maman. We're just talking." In the bakery, after hours, in secret. "His best friend has a crush on Alya and I'm supposed to meet him today. You know, to see if it's a good match?"

"Alya can find her own boyfriend. Focus on convincing Adrien that you're wife material. Have you been feeding him? I want grandchildren, Marinette."

"I'm hanging up now," Marinette said.

"Wait!" She lifted the receiver again. "Will you please put out the signs reminding our customers that we'll be closing in two weeks?"

Bakeries in Paris were required by law to close for one month, and the Dupain-Chengs had their turn in August. Before the design competition had been announced, Marinette worried she would have nothing to do during her vacation. Now she'd be lucky to get out of the house at all. She thumbed through the stack of papers on the desk, then pulled open the nearby filing cabinet. The laminated signs were tucked into a folder labeled Vacation. "Found them," she said.

"Thank you, sweetie. We'll Skype on Sunday, okay?"

"Sure thing."

"Invite our new son-in-law."

"Bye, maman!" Marinette hung up and let out a high pitched giggle. She wouldn't hear the end of it now, but she couldn't help herself. She had Adrien's phone number. A direct line right to him! And legitimate excuses to text him!

Thanks to her mood, the next few hours flew by. Her morning shift employee, a college-aged girl
named Sophie, arrived and they went to work setting out the day's bread and pastries. Her cell phone chimed at exactly 6:45.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
RE: 2015
Just Now

*Good morning, buginette! Isn't it a beautiful day to sit back, relax, and pawnder entering Gabriel Agreste's design competition? Don’t you agree that your few scraps of free time would best be spent listening to your dearest friend Chat Noir talk you into it? "Chat Noir?" you ask. "Isn't that guy full of great advice that should be taken one hundred percent of the time? Also, aren't his jokes hilarious? And isn’t he, like, stupidly handsome?"

*Aww shucks, Ladybug, you're making me blush!*

x.x.x

"What's so funny?"

Marinette looked up at Sophie, her hand pressed to her mouth. "Nothing, just a stupid joke someone posted on Facebook."

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
RE: 2015
2 minutes ago

*Don't freak out.*

*You aren't hallucinating.*

*This is a message from me in the morning.*

*Now that I've done all the gushing for you, maybe you can respond like a normal person?*

*There isn't even a set date for the competition yet.*

*Calm down.*

x.x.x

Adrien stared at his phone. The bathroom faucet ran. Half his face remained slathered in shaving cream. And there was an email from Ladybug on his phone *before noon.*

When he'd seen her message about the design competition the previous night, he had tried very, very hard to remain sane. As far as Chat Noir responses went, last night's rated high on the tame scale. This morning's, not so much. He attributed that to the hours in between, which he'd spent staring at his bedroom ceiling, wide awake, as chaos unfolded in his mind.

Ladybug was considering entering his father's design competition.

The real, flesh and blood Ladybug.
The woman behind the name.

Meeting her in person was not a "maybe" anymore, it was a certainty—well, as long as she got far enough in the design competition, but in Adrien's mind Ladybug had already won it. He'd seen her work. Hers were the kind of designs that forced his father to acknowledge his pleasure with a monotone hum.

Adrien cut off the sink and continued shaving. What would the real, flesh and blood Ladybug think of the face staring back at him in the mirror? If she referred to his father as her hero, she must have known who Adrien was. A shiver ran through him. Ladybug had potentially seen his face before. But why was that so surprising? His face had been plastered on billboards and magazine ads for years.

Plagg walked into the bathroom, stood beside him, and meowed. Adrien rinsed his face before picking him up and tucking him under his arm on the way to the closet. He'd gotten this far. He'd risked his life by pissing off his father and lived to tell the tale. Ladybug had to enter the competition, especially when next year's competition hinged entirely on his performance this year. He flipped through his clothing options while Plagg purred against his side.

**Ladybug. In the flesh.**

He sighed a lovesick sigh. *God, I'm pathetic,* he thought happily.

The bedroom door swung open, startling Plagg, who squirmed until Adrien dropped him. The scent of expensive perfume reached Adrien before Chloe appeared in the closet doorway, her hand on her hip. Adrien let out a falsetto scream. "Chlo! I'm naked!" he cried, covering his bare chest with his arms.

"Oh, shut up. It's nothing I haven't seen before." She shoved him aside, ignoring his grin, and scanned his closet. "Let's see, it's a press conference so you want something that says I'm-a-model-but-I-can-run-a-business-too. If you look young and innocent they'll forgive your mistakes. But if you look too young and innocent they won't take you seriously. You can drop the towel, by the way. I know you've got boxers on under there."

"Yes Mom," Adrien said just to irritate her.

Chloe rolled her eyes. "What are you so happy about? It's too early in the morning to be happy."

"How would you know? You're never happy." She shot him a severe look. He smiled innocently and swooped in to kiss her cheek. "I appreciate the help."

"Of course you do."

"If you must know"—he caught the pair of pants she threw at him—"I am trying to hook Nino up with an entertainment reporter."

Chloe made a disgusted noise. "Sounds like they're perfect for each other already."

"It was love at first sight! For him. Possibly for her, too, but she doesn't know it yet."

She turned and pressed a shirt into his arms, then moved past him to the rack of silk ties. "Adrien," she said, "the hopeless romantic thing was cute when we were kids, but you have relationship experience now. It's okay to admit that love is a sham and sex isn't that great."

Adrien slipped the shirt on and put a hand on Chloe's shoulder. "I will pray for you, Chlo."
She shrugged him off. "Whatever." She turned, held two different ties up to his shirt as he buttoned it up, then tossed one behind her and slung the other around Adrien's neck. "How are you feeling? Nervous?" He nodded. "Don't be. You're gorgeous and you're in charge. Keep repeating that to yourself and you'll be fine."

Adrien gave her a goofy smile. "Why aren't we dating again?"

"Because we drive each other insane." She patted his cheek and nearly tripped over Plagg on her way out of the closet. Her temper exploded. "Move, you hideous mongrel! Why haven't I had cats banned from this city yet? Good for nothing, flea-bitten, fur-shedding, disease-spreading…!"

Adrien followed Chloe into the hallway, where they found the secretary Colette on her way to tell him everything was going according to schedule and his car was downstairs. "You're a lifesaver," he said to her, because he'd realized early on that Colette wasn't used to hearing praise and reveled in it.

"How do you put up with her? She's like a puppy," Chloe said when they were out of the house. She used to say those things to people's faces, but during her brief stint as Adrien's girlfriend he'd begged her to be nicer to others—it was part of the reason they broke up. He was glad to see some of it stuck. "We're going to Tom and Sabine's, right?" she asked.

"After we pick up Nino."

Chloe stopped walking. Adrien hooked his arm through hers and continued to pull her along. "Come on," he said. "I'll buy your coffee."

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
5 minutes ago

I'm insulted that you think I wouldn't respond like a normal person.

By the way, would you like a summer or winter wedding? I'm quite partial to spring.

x.x.x

Marinette slipped her phone back into her pocket. Why did she even bother with him?

At 8:15, the shop door opened and Adrien walked in with Chloe Bourgeois—his usual Wednesday company—and a man Marinette didn't recognize. Dark skinned, glasses, dark brown hair that looked like an attempt had been made to comb it, a little taller than Adrien, and a smartly coordinated outfit. He wasn't bad looking. Cleaner cut than she expected a professional DJ to be, but they were headed to a press conference. And—bonus points—he seemed to be having an argument with Chloe.

"…and all I'm saying is you don't have to be such a massive bitch every minute of every day. There's this thing called human decency—"

"Adrikins, are you going to let him talk to me like this?" Chloe simpered. She latched onto Adrien's arm and shot the man, who Marinette guessed was Nino, a scathing glare. "I can have you arrested, you troglodyte."

"Ooh, nice one. Did you pick that up from a word-of-the-day calendar?"
Adrien politely extracted Chloe from his arm. "Why don't you two order first?" He pointed at the dessert case. "I'm going to browse."

"Gladly." Nino leaned against the counter with a charming smile. "Good morning, mademoiselle. I would like to try your pain au chocolat." He jabbed a thumb in Chloe's direction. "And she'll have anything as long as there's alcohol in it."

Marinette definitely liked him.

Chloe shoved Nino out of the way. "I will have my usual," she said, "prepared by you, Marinette, because none of your employees seem to know exactly how I like it."

Marinette reached beneath the counter and produced a coffee cup, lidded and plugged. "It's extra hot. I made it a minute ago."

Chloe blinked, clearly taken aback by her efficiency, then picked up the coffee cup. "Yes. Well. Adrikins is buying," she said as she headed for their usual table. Marinette watched her go, wondering what it would take to get a thank you out of her.

Nino stepped back up to the counter with bills in hand. "I'll pay separately for mine," he said.

"You don't have to do that." Adrien stood by his side now, pulling his own wallet out of his back pocket. "I'm paying for Chloe's, I might as well get yours."

"Dude, you're kind of my employer."

"My father is your employer."

"It's weird!"

"Then don't think about it."

Marinette watched them volley excuses back and forth. She had to admit she was enjoying herself. It was one thing to have her crush standing in front of her, and another to watch him interact with his best friend. You could tell a lot about a person by how they treated their best friend, which in this case was poking him in the chest and threatening to fire him if he didn't let him pay for breakfast.

Sophie held out a plate with Nino's pain au chocolat. He took it and pressed the money into Sophie's palm before Adrien could stop him. "Keep the change."

Adrien scowled at him as he passed. He shook his head and sighed, then looked at Marinette, his expression hopeful. "So what do you think? Does he pass inspection?"

Marinette checked to make sure Sophie had wandered away. Then she reminded herself for the hundred-thousandth time that morning that she had Adrien's phone number. Confidence surged through her. "Still need more data," she said. "I'll swing by your table before you leave." She noticed the only thing he ordered was a plain buttered croissant; he must have been nervous about the press conference. She rang him up, retrieved the croissant, and handed it to him with a smile. "Good luck today," she said.

Adrien blinked, mildly surprised, but he smiled back. "Thank you."

I have your phone number, she almost told him as he turned around and she let herself go weak in the knees.
There were two more customers after Adrien, then Marinette left Sophie in charge of the register and stepped out into the dining area. She went around greeting her regulars—who expressed their dismay at the bakery's upcoming closure —accepting compliments, and meeting new customers. When she reached Adrien's table, Chloe's face was bright red with rage, Adrien had his face buried in his hands, and Nino looked perfectly happy. Clearly an argument had just ended. "How is everything?" Marinette asked.

Nino pointed to his half-eaten pain au chocolat. "Dude," he said, "now I know why Adrien risks his personal trainer's wrath to come here three times a week. This is delicious. It's like I've never had pain au chocolat before today."

"My father will be so happy to hear that! It's his recipe," Marinette said.

Adrien surfaced from his hands. "Marinette's parents are in China taking care of a sick relative."

"I got a call from maman just this morning. She passes on her greetings."

Nino swallowed another bite of his pastry. "If everything here is as good as this, I'm going to have to tag along more often."

"Please don't come on Wednesdays," Chloe hissed.

"I will come on Wednesdays just to spite you."

"I will make your death look like an accident."

Adrien arched an eyebrow at Marinette. She nodded once, and got a repeat performance of his brightening expression from the day before. It was like watching the sunrise. She turned to Nino. "I do hope I'll see you again soon, err, what was your name, monsieur?"

"Nino Lahiffe." He held his hand out and she shook it.

"Marinette Dupain-Cheng. It's very nice to meet you." She stepped away from the table. "Monsieur Agreste, Mademoiselle Bourgeois, always a pleasure to see you two."

Chloe grunted and lifted her hand in a sort-of wave. Adrien was much more cheerful about his.

Marinette walked back to the counter, wondering what he would do now that she'd signaled her approval to start the matchmaking. She had her own role to play, of course. If Nino screwed up his first impression it would be up to Marinette to tell Alya he'd been perfectly nice to her. And rude to Chloe. Alya hated Chloe. The enemy of her enemy must be boyfriend material—wasn't that how the saying went?

Marinette's phone chimed a few minutes after Adrien left. She checked the screen and her eyes nearly popped out of her head.

One new text from Adrien Agreste:

**You're the best! :)**

Marinette ran into the kitchen where she could squeal and stamp her feet in private.

---

*Ladybug*
**RE: 2015**
**3 minutes ago**

*How about a summer wedding in the country?*

*By the end of the day, we'll both be hot and bothered.*

x.x.x

"Dude, you all right? Your face is super red."

Adrien stuffed his phone into his pocket. "Fine. I'm fine. More than fine. Phew, we here already? That was fast. Let's get this press conference over with!" He was out of the car before Nino could ask any more questions. Surely Ladybug hadn't—she didn't *really* mean—her intention was not to flirt with—oh boy.

Lucky for him the conference was being held at Agreste HQ, where things like romance and happiness and sexual excitement went to die.

The woman at the front desk greeted Adrien, Chloe and Nino with the stoic professionalism his father demanded from all his employees. As they walked down the hall, Nino leaned closer to Adrien. "Do you think she's here yet?"

Adrien shot him a sly look. "You're not going to run away on me, are you?"

"Of course not." Nino fidgeted with his shirt cuffs. "But what do I say to her? I mean, what if she doesn't even remember me? What if I choke?"

"Then sitting next to her for half an hour is going to be pretty uncomfortable."

Nino stopped walking. "You didn't." Adrien shrugged. "Please tell me you didn't."

He had. The seat reserved for Zag Weekly's Alya Cesaire was conveniently located beside the seat reserved for Director of Music Nino Lahiffe, and it was occupied. Adrien clapped Nino on the back as he stood petrified in the doorway of the conference room. "You've got this," he whispered.

Chloe shoved Nino forward. "You're blocking the entrance, you oaf."

"Manners, Chlo."

"Please get your ass out of the way."

"Close enough," Adrien murmured as he walked over to join Colette and Nathalie, who waited for him at the back of the room. He'd done all he could: strategic seating assignments, obtaining Marinette's permission, and clothing advice. It was up to Nino to take care of the rest.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
**RE: 2015**
**28 minutes ago**

...  

*Who are you and what have you done with the real Ladybug?*
The competition would not deviate from the formula of its predecessors. Submissions would be
accepted from the first of August to the end of the second week. A team of people would then
weed out submissions that didn't meet the posted criteria, and the rest would be sent to a panel of
judges who were intimately acquainted with Gabriel Agreste's tastes. Each judge would choose
their top designs, leaving ten entrants in the competition. Those ten would then be assigned a male
and female model who they'd have to dress in entirely new designs for the finale, a runway show
held at Agreste HQ. Gabriel Agreste, live and in person, would choose the winner from among
them.

Adrien was in charge of putting the competition together, strictly behind the scenes. He would not
be on the judge's panel. The most contact he'd have with any of the contestants would be to hand a
bouquet of flowers to the winner and congratulate them.

No, his father had not passed the reigns to Adrien because he was secretly battling some illness.
No, Adrien had not been put in charge due to Gabriel's waning interest in the competitions.
No, his father was not available for comment; he was a busy man.

No further questions.

The press conference lasted only half an hour, and by the end of it Adrien wanted nothing more
than to go back to sleep. But his schedule didn't allow for it. Next he had a meeting-slash-
brainstorming session with the designers in charge of setting up the stage for the finale, followed
by a meeting with the caterers for the after party, then dinner, then a Skype call with one of the
judges: a high maintenance designer from Milan who had a list of demands to be met upon his
arrival in Paris.

If Adrien's father had been trying to teach him a lesson, he'd succeeded.

On his way out of the conference room he glanced in Nino's direction and found him chatting with
Alya, his expression slightly panicked, hers friendly. What Adrien wouldn't give to be able to
eavesdrop. Nathalie and Colette were in the hall waiting for him. "How did I do?" he asked.


Nathalie's answer was to hold up her tablet. Its screen displayed Gabriel Agreste, his expression as
neutral as his assistant's. In the background, the New York City skyline went on forever. "Hello
Adrien. That was a competent performance."

Adrien's posture instinctively straightened. "Thank you," he replied, though he wasn't sure if it was
meant as a compliment.

"You look surprisingly refreshed for having just conducted your first interview as our brand's chief
representative."

Now he allowed himself to puff his chest out, his smile turning smug. "Some people work better
under pressure."

"I see. Then you shouldn't mind a few added responsibilities," Gabriel said.

He deflated. "Uh..."
"During the first week of August we will be filming a commercial for our newest men's fragrance at Chateau Margaux. The staff has been informed. Colette will take over your competition duties until your return and forward you anything that needs to be read and signed. Nathalie shall accompany you."

"But—"

"It should be no trouble for someone who works so well under pressure," Gabriel said, his voice like steel.

Adrien suppressed a sigh. Why did he do that? Why did he have to showboat when he knew it would only end in punishment? "No trouble at all," he said.

The call ended without a goodbye on either side. Adrien turned in time to see Nino walking out of the conference room alone and excused himself. He had five minutes to get a full report. "Hey," he said as he approached, "how'd it go?"

Nino shrugged. "Oh, you know, better. I was able to talk to her this time. She remembered me from the other day."

"Did you ask her out?"

He slumped back against the wall. "No." He took off his glasses and swept a hand over his face. "I chickened out. And anyway, just because she's willing to hold a conversation with me doesn't mean she's interested." He groaned. "This sucks, dude. She's even cuter up close."

Adrien gave him a pitiful look. "Maybe the setting was all wrong. That's my bad. A professional reporter wouldn't flirt on the job."

"Well, it's not like I have an excuse to meet her in a casual setting," Nino grumbled.

Adrien's eyes widened. An idea struck him with the speed and force of a lightning bolt. He resisted the urge to hug Nino. "A casual setting," he repeated with a growing smile.

Once again his new scheme depended on Marinette's participation. But if he could get her in on it, a casual setting would be the easiest thing in the world to obtain.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

**RE: 2015**

51 minutes ago

*If you can't take the heat, stay out of the kitchen.*

*(The real Ladybug is up on Cloud Nine, having the party of a lifetime. Please leave a message after the beep. Beeeeeep.)*

Chapter End Notes

Forgot to mention last chapter: the reason for my two month delay was school. Two short stories, a 75 page novella and a 12 page essay on the relationship between the...
four main genres will do a number on your sanity. I did get straight A's, though.

Come bother me on Tumblr at geek-fashionista. (I have an entire month's worth of MariChat drabbles and a Winter Sonata AU going on over there!)
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Adrien's got an offer Marinette won't be able to refuse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Ladybug**
*RE: 2015*
7 minutes ago

tfw you're texting new people and have no idea what to say.

(Please end me.)

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
*RE: 2015*
Just now

Like back when you first started emailing me and you sounded so uptight and formal? Ah, those were the days!

Just be yourself, buginette. Someone as charming as you shouldn't have a problem.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
*RE: 2015*
Just now

Nope.

End me.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
*RE: 2015*
2 minutes ago

I refuse. :D

Waaaait. Are you texting a guy?

x.x.x
Marinette sighed and checked the time. Five minutes to six. She'd sent her very first text to Adrien that morning listing the day's desserts. It had taken her no less than six different drafts: did she say hello or wish him good morning? Did she say nothing at all and just send the menu? Would he be bothered if she texted him so early? Did she write out the list of desserts or send him a picture? Would sending a picture the very first time she texted him be too weird?

Twenty minutes of agony later, she'd hit send. He'd replied almost immediately with a request for a slice of Charlotte cake and his thanks.

Marinette sighed again. Manon nudged her. "What's up? You've been glued to your phone all day."

And then there was Chat Noir. Now that she was emailing him during her work shift, she couldn't say why she'd never done it before. It helped the time go by, and despite the fact that he was a complete dork—perhaps because he was a complete dork—his messages did wonders for her anxiety.

She didn't even know what she had to be anxious about. Making a good first impression on Adrien? They were past the point of first impressions; texting shouldn't have been any different.

Manon waved a hand in front of Marinette's face. "Hello? Anybody home?"

"Huh?" Marinette looked at her.

"It's six," Manon said. She untied her apron and pulled it off. "If you're zoning out this hardcore, it's either Adrien or the design competition. Right?"

The design competition. Marinette groaned. She'd watched the press conference on her computer while eating dinner the night before and almost made herself sick with nerves.

It wasn't even the first time she'd considered entering one. In her mind's eye she saw twenty-four-year-old Marinette in a sunny apartment, seated on an orange couch, sketching furiously. The preliminary outfits were ready, the final designs came next. Then she felt movement behind her. A hand on her shoulder. A kiss on her cheek. She lifted her head, complexion rosy from the high of creativity and being in love—

Marinette slammed both palms on the counter, startling Manon. "That reminds me, I finished Jacquelyn's outfit! Wipe down the rest of the tables and I'll be right back."

She hurried upstairs. Both Jacquelyn and Tikki were dressed in new fall clothes, posing together on her desk. Their jackets had come out so nicely that Marinette made a note to make one for herself when she had the time. She carefully picked up both dolls and carried them downstairs.

Manon gasped when she saw Jacquelyn. "I love it," she said. "Seriously. This is the most gorgeous outfit you've made yet. How are you too scared to enter the design competition? You're a genius."

"Only when it comes to dolls," Marinette insisted. She made room for Tikki on a shelf where her mother kept decorative flower arrangements and shifted the flowers around to frame her. "There we go! It's been a while since I had Tikki down here." With the bakery's month-long break approaching, she had to promote her little doll clothes side business. The extra money never hurt.

Manon left shortly after, still thanking Marinette for Jacquelyn's outfit. Marinette boxed up the leftover pastries—she'd set Adrien's aside earlier in the day—and handed them off to the homeless shelter volunteer who came by ten minutes later. It occurred to Marinette that she ought to charge Adrien for the cake if it wasn't technically a leftover. Then she realized her mother would never forgive her if she did.
She finished cleaning up the kitchen and sat in the office chair by her father's desk, staring at Chat Noir's penultimate message. *Just be yourself.* What he really meant was "just be Ladybug." Her confident online persona wouldn't stutter or otherwise embarrass herself in front of Adrien. But was Ladybug all that different from plain old Marinette? And if so, what made them different? Marinette never said anything to Chat Noir that she wouldn't say to any of her other friends.

Marinette didn't have an enormous crush on her other friends, though.

She sighed and switched back to his latest message.

---

**Ladybug**

*RE: 2015*

*Just Now*

Maybe.

---

Adrien's fist hovered in front of Marinette's door, poised to knock. In his other hand he held his phone. "Maybe?" he grumbled. He shook his head, slipped the phone into his back pocket, and knocked on the door. He'd worry about that later. Nino's happiness was at stake.

Marinette answered the door with the barely suppressed smirk of a kid caught mid-prank, which then bloomed into a full, pink-cheeked smile. Adrien blinked, temporarily disarmed. He wasn't blind—he knew Marinette was attractive, but it was the first time he'd noticed. What was a girl like her doing cooped up in a bakery six days a week?

Marinette's smile wavered. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes," Adrien said, then, "Hi." He rubbed the back of his neck. "So I kind of didn't think yesterday through enough."

Marinette stood aside to let him in. "What do you mean?"

"I mean your friend Alya is a professional." Adrien stepped over the threshold and most of his tension peeled away instantly. He'd never get tired of that. "I should have predicted relationships would be the furthest thing from her mind while on the job."

"You'd be surprised about that." Marinette skipped ahead of him and produced a beautiful slice of Charlotte cake on a small plate. "But you're right, she doesn't flirt during interviews. Your friend would have to run into her somewhere else." She handed Adrien the plate. "That'll be three euros," she said with a straight face.

Adrien stared at her. "Really?"

"No." She grinned.

"Because I can—"

"It was a joke!" Marinette motioned for him to follow her into the dining area and he went, amused at her playfulness. She must have been more comfortable around him now if her usual timidity had left her. But he still approached his next words with the same care and caution he took when addressing his father.
"About Nino running into Alya somewhere else," he said as they sat at the table, "he and I both realized that after the press conference. Of course, he doesn't know that I'm actively scheming to make it happen."

Marinette leaned forward. "You sound like you have a plan."

"I do. But I need your help."

"Okay."

Adrien hesitated. "It's kind of embarrassing because it's so old school, but it's the best I could come up with on short notice."

Marinette didn't even blink. "It can't be that bad."

"You and I have to go on a date."

Silence.

By the way her eyebrows disappeared into her bangs, he guessed this particular plan didn't have her approval. But he pressed on for Nino's sake. "The idea is, I ask you out on a casual date, you say yes on the condition that you can bring your best friend in case we run out of things to talk about, I hop on the bandwagon and invite my best friend, and knowing Nino he'll do whatever he can to make sure we're alone together, which means he and Alya will be alone together."

It was like someone had pressed the pause button on Marinette. She just sat there, eyes wide, lips slightly parted. Adrien looked away. "But if you're not comfortable with that—"

Marinette abruptly came back to life. "I love it."

"What?"

"The plan. I love it. Alya will also drag Nino away at every possible opportunity to give us some privacy." Marinette waved a hand. "You know, because she's my best friend and wants me to make it to the second date."

Adrien understood perfectly. If he told Nino he'd asked a girl out, the guy would lose his mind. "So we're doing this?" he asked.

"We're doing this," Marinette replied, then gasped. "We should go to the movies. There's that new zombie film out and I read in a magazine somewhere that if you do something scary or exciting on a date, the adrenaline rush will trick your brain into thinking you like the other person more. I mean, we don't want to trick our friends, but it'll help them get past the initial awkwardness faster."

Adrien grinned. "Hold on, I'm the one asking you out. Shouldn't I be making the suggestions?"

Marinette's cheeks went pink again. The shyness was back. "Right. What do you think?"

"I think we should do exactly what you said." He held out his hand and she reached for it, but instead of shaking it, he clasped hers in both of his and put on a sober expression. "Marinette, would you like to go to the movies with me on Sunday?"

"Yeees," she said with a sugary smile. He waited. She caught on. "But if it's all right with you, I'd like to keep it casual for now. May I invite my friend Alya? You've met her twice already. She's a reporter."
"What a great idea. I'll invite my friend Nino—I believe he and Alya were acquainted during yesterday's press conference." Both Adrien and Marinette snickered. He let go of her hand and picked up the dessert fork she'd provided him. "I'll check the show times on the zombie movie and we can decide on the best one tomorrow. That way you'll have witnesses to me asking you out."

"Because you're not technically here right now," Marinette said.

"Exactly." He took a bite of the Charlotte cake and sighed through his nose. "I'm going to miss this place next month." That was an understatement. With the additional work his father had scheduled him for, he wasn't sure how he'd make it out of August without these moments of peace.

Marinette tapped her chin. "Hmm, I do like to experiment with new recipes during the break." He lifted his head hopefully and she giggled. "I take it you wouldn't object to taste testing?"

"You'd let me do that?"

"Sure." She looked down at the hands she'd withdrawn into her lap. "We're friends, aren't we?"

Warmth spread through Adrien's chest. "Yeah," he said, "friends."

Was it silly of him to be so happy about that?

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
RE: 2015
15 minutes ago

Hmm.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
RE: 2015
Just now

?

"Hmm"?

That's the response I get?

No "BUT MY LADY I THOUGHT WHAT WE HAD WAS SPECIAL"?

No "I BITE MY THUMB AT THEE SIR"?

I'm a little disappointed, chaton. :) :

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
RE: 2015
2 minutes ago

Please, Ladybug, I'm a gentleman. Just because I have a romantic interest in you doesn't mean I have the right to force my wishes on you.
Besides, you wouldn't be talking to me if it was that serious.

X.X.X

Marinette, lying sideways on her bed, frowned at her phone. "What's that supposed to mean?" She peered into the darkness of her room and blinked the afterimage from her eyes. It was almost 11PM, but her heart had yet to stop skipping gleefully around her chest.

She had a date with Adrien. A fake date, but a date nonetheless. If this upward trend continued she'd never be able to sleep again.

Only now she couldn't sleep because she was annoyed at Chat Noir. What was he trying to say, that he believed things wouldn't get serious with Adrien? She had a (fake) date with the guy! She hit reply and started to tell Chat Noir about it just to spite him.

But maybe he meant that Marinette wouldn't need to talk to him if she found the right guy.

She stopped typing.

What did that make Chat Noir, then?

Marinette deleted her response, rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. No more thinking. No more talking. She needed sleep, and a lack of response would be sufficient enough to let Chat know she was bothered. She closed her eyes.

Hmph. Like she'd stop talking to him just because she got a boyfriend.

She opened her eyes and picked up her phone.

X.X.X

Ladybug
RE: 2015
Just now

Sometimes, you really bug me.

Good night.

X.X.X

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
Just now

Sweet dreams, My Lady.

X.X.X

The next day at around noon, Marinette stood in the bakery's back kitchen with her phone pressed to her ear, rubbing her temple. She had a headache. Chat Noir may as well have put a curse on her. All night she'd been plagued by stupid dreams where she came to school on the day of an exam, found out she'd skipped the entire semester, then had to sit through the test while her phone kept buzzing with emails from him.

She'd retaliated by not answering his cheerful good morning message. If he was going to annoy her
in her sleep, he could wait a few hours to hear from her.

"Hey girl, what's up?" Alya answered on the third ring.

"You need to come here and pinch me."

"...why?"

"Adrien asked me on a date."

There was a beat of silence, then Alya screamed. Marinette ripped the phone from her ear but could still hear Alya's "it's about freaking time" from an arm's length away. Once she was certain there wouldn't be any more screams, she brought the phone back. "Oh my God, Marinette. Are you okay? Do you need a doctor? Are you feeling any dizziness, lightheadedness or chest pain? There are legit tears in my eyes right now. I'm so happy for you! Tell me how it happened. Do you even remember what happened? Are you sure you don't need a doctor?"

"I am surprisingly calm. Is that a symptom of shock?"

"I'll Google it. But in the meantime, spill everything."

So Marinette told her the fabricated story she and Adrien had come up with earlier. He'd walked into the bakery for his morning croissant, and when she went to check on him like she did with her other regulars, he asked her if she wanted to see a movie on Sunday afternoon. Naturally, she'd said yes, but…

"What do you mean you invited me along?" Alya demanded, her tone shifting from overjoyed bestie to murder in a heartbeat. "You've been after Adrien's goodies for months and the first chance you get to make out with him in a dark movie theater, you invite me?"

Marinette fidgeted. "We aren't going to make out in the theater."

"Yeah, because you cockblocked yourself!"

She leaned back against the sink. "Can you please just come along for moral support? I'm really nervous. I don't feel nervous because I'm in shock but trust me, I'm there."

"Oh, I'm coming. I want to witness the start of this beautiful relationship firsthand. But if you expect me to hang around feeding you every single word—"

"I don't."

"Good."

They exchanged goodbyes and she hung up the phone, then sent a text to Manon in all caps. The deception wouldn't be complete until Manon knew about it. Then she opened her inbox and glared at Chat Noir's email. Well… it was lunchtime.

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: 2015
40 seconds ago

Busy morning.
Question:

Does seizing an opportunity for personal gain make me a bad person?

---

Adrien read Ladybug's email and breathed a sigh of relief. Somehow he'd annoyed her last night, and even though she sent a pun to let him know the offense was a minor one, her silence had worried him. But in typical Ladybug fashion she changed the subject instead of telling him what he'd done wrong.

"I can't believe you hid a crush on Marinette from me." Adrien looked up at Nino. They were at his apartment, officially having a meeting on the design competition's musical score, but in reality just goofing off. "Is that the reason you're always on your phone these days? Have you secretly been texting her all year?" Nino asked, darting a suspicious glance at Adrien's phone.

"Glad to see your imagination's intact." Adrien wrote a quick response to Ladybug, then put his phone away.

"It's just that you've never mentioned it before today. Forgive me if I'm a little skeptical."

"It's a recent development," he said, digging into the salad he'd picked up for lunch on the way over. "Marinette's nice, attractive, and fun to talk to."

"And she can bake."

"And she can bake," he agreed. All good points, and all true points. Marinette would make someone a very happy man.

Nino studied him for a moment, then shrugged and picked up his water bottle. "All right then. If you need me there, I'll be there."

"Great. Alya's coming too."

He spit his water out. "Dude!"

Adrien handed him a napkin. "What? You wanted a casual setting."

"You can't just do that!"

He gave Nino the same innocent smile he gave Chloe whenever he either pissed her off or needed a favor. "But I'm gorgeous and in charge. Chloe said so yesterday."

"I hate you so much right now."

---

Chat Noir

RE: 2015

3 hours ago

Yes it does. But I do it all the time, so you're in good company. ;)

---

On Saturday evening Alya showed up at the bakery right before closing with containers full of
food. "Mom came to visit and went overboard as usual. She's not-so-secretly trying to feed you."

"Tell her I appreciate it," Marinette said. Alya's mother was a chef at a high-class restaurant. Whenever she saw Marinette she complained that she was far too thin for a young woman in childbearing years—which Madame Cheng heartily agreed with. "Here." Marinette handed Alya her house key. "Take it upstairs and put it in the fridge. I've got some stuff to do."

Earlier in the day Alya had promised to help Marinette choose an outfit for her date. To her benefit, Marinette had plenty of outfits to pick from. To her detriment, she had too many outfits to pick from.

She closed the bakery at exactly six and took her time cleaning. Alya wandered back downstairs with a glass of water she'd helped herself to. "Your living room's a mess. You going to wait until your parents come home to straighten up?"

"No," Marinette said. She cut Alya a look. "Maybe."

"You're hopeless. What if things get hot and heavy with Adrien tomorrow and you need a place to bang?"

"I'll get a hotel room… wait, what exactly do you think is going on between me and Adrien?"

Alya arched an eyebrow at her. "He asked you on a date. In the adult world, that means he's interested. And seeing as you're interested in him, there's a thirty percent chance of tomorrow ending"—she indicated behind her—"upstairs."

"It's a casual date," Marinette said. She shook the crumbs out of the bread baskets. "We're just getting to know each other. Besides, you know I like to take things slow."

"Oh yeah. You didn't move in with Nathanael until, what, two years after you guys started dating?"

She paused. "Something like that."

Her tone must have shifted enough. Alya sucked in a breath. "Sorry," she said. They were both quiet while Marinette finished upending the bread baskets and putting them back. "You don't still check on him, do you?"

"No." She made a face. "The last time was in February, I think. But only because I saw something about a comic book convention and… anyway, I don't do it anymore. It's counterproductive." She grabbed a nearby broom and swept the bread crumbs into a dust pan.

Alya took a sip of her water. "I still want to punch him in the face."

"That's counterproductive too," Marinette said. "Let's talk about your love life instead."

"Oh gee, I would, but I just got an earful of it from my mother." Alya affected her voice in imitation of her mother. "You focus too much on your career. The longer you wait to have children, the harder it's going to be. Find a nice man! Settle down! Then worry about being a great reporter."

She rolled her eyes. "It's like she thinks my eggs are going to dry up tomorrow. And here's a revolutionary thought: What if I don't want kids?"

Marinette dumped the trash in a bin. "You don't?"

"I do. It just annoys me that my mother won't consider other possibilities."
She watched Alya drink the rest of her water and suddenly remembered that she, as matchmaker, had a part to play. "You know," she said, "Adrien's friend is kind of cute. The DJ?"

Alya frowned, but it was a contemplative one. "You met him?"

"On Wednesday. He came in with Adrien and Chloe before the press conference." She kept her voice level. Any hint of excitement would make Alya suspicious. "Chloe threatened to kill him, it was pretty funny."

"What? Why?"

"I don't think they like each other much. When he got to the register he said she'd have anything as long as there was alcohol in it."

Alya laughed out loud. "That's hilarious. Remind me to shake his hand tomorrow."

Marinette waited. She didn't dare bring up the subject of his attractiveness again. If it was going to happen, it had to happen organically.

Alya stepped forward. "Yeah," she said, "I guess he is kind of cute." She slung her arm over Marinette's shoulder. "But tomorrow is all about you, so if you're done sweeping the ashes out of the chimney, Cinderella, your fairy godmother has to get you ready for the ball."

x.x.x

Adrien Agreste: What does a guy bring a girl on a first date?

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: Flowers are customary. But to a movie theater?

Adrien Agreste: I'm stumped. ):

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: How about snacks that can be snuck into a movie theater?

Adrien Agreste: You should be ashamed of yourself. (Is chocolate okay?)

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: I'll go put myself in time out. ;) (Chocolate is perfect.)

x.x.x

"Alya, oh my God you did not just send that text," Marinette shrieked, reaching for her best friend's neck with fingers curled into claws. Alya leapt out of the way.

"If I hadn't pressed send you'd have spent another five minutes giggling about how you shouldn't," Alya snapped. "Don't even try to defend yourself. You're an overthinker and you know it!"

Marinette whined and collapsed onto her bed, crawling and wriggling until her head was under the pillow. "Go home. Leave me here to die. I'm never coming out of my room again."

"Oh for—it is not the end of the world. Technically he's the one who started the flirty texts. Yours was an act of retaliation." Alya lay across Marinette's back while Marinette continued to whine. "Step your game up, girl. He needs to know you're more than just an awkward, stuttering mess."

"I am?" Marinette moaned.

"Yes! You're Marinette Dupain-freaking-Cheng: savvy business owner, fashionista, and the best
"Alya hummed. "Joking around, sure. But if you're in a committed relationship, maybe you shouldn't be confiding in another guy about the serious stuff? Intentionally or not, that's how cheating starts."

"But what if he's your best friend?"

"Then you could just date him." She sat up. "Why do you ask?"

Marinette stared at the wall, worrying at her bottom lip. "Just curious."

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
9 minutes ago

MY LADYYYYY! You awake?

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: 2015
Just now

You're lucky I have insomnia or I'd have thrown a boot at you, you dumb tomcat.

What's up?

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
Just now

Not much. Had to go rescue my favorite alcoholic and her other bff from a night club, so I'm sitting up with them to make sure they don't choke on their vomit.

Tomcat, huh? Shall I break out the bass and start singing?

IS YOU IS, OR IS YOU AIN'T MY BABYYYY? (or would it be "Lady" in this case?)

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: 2015
Just now

I changed my mind.

You're getting the freaking boot.

Chapter End Notes

Two things.

First, what Chat Noir is referencing in that last email is a scene from an episode of the cartoon Tom and Jerry. You can find it on YouTube by searching "Is You Is, Or Is You Ain't My Baby."

Second, this story has received both a lovely fan edit and fan art! You can find them here:
http://toriitori.tumblr.com/post/145494552506/binge-read-lucky-us-by-geek-fashionista-been

Come bother me on Tumblr at geek-fashionista!
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Adrinette and DJ Wifi go on a date.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Adrien sat in a chair, arms crossed, head tilted back, eyes closed, deep breathing interrupted by the occasional snore.

"Ah-hem."

His eyes snapped open and he jerked forward, wincing at the incredible ache in his neck. In front of him stood Mayor Andre Bourgeois, expression flat with the exception of one raised eyebrow. Behind the mayor stood his loyal butler. The butler's face betrayed nothing, but Adrien had been around long enough to recognize when he was laughing on the inside.

"Good morning, Your Excellency," Adrien muttered in a voice still thick with sleep.

"Good morning, Adrien," the mayor replied. His gaze shifted to the four-poster bed to the right, where Chloe and her best friend Sabrina lay sleeping in a complicated knot of limbs, runny makeup, and sequins. Their high heels had been removed and lined up neatly beside the bed, and a blanket pulled up over their legs to protect their modesty. "I take it my daughter had an interesting evening?"

Adrien rubbed his eyes. "All I understood from her call was 'my father will hear about this.'" He'd already gone to bed the night before, but he and Chloe had a deal: she'd tell him when she was going out, and he'd keep his phone on, ringtone turned to the highest setting, in case she needed him. He tried to check the time and discovered his phone's battery had drained overnight. Ladybug would have to wait for her good morning email. "What time is it?"

The butler whipped out a pocket watch. "9:21, monsieur."

"Thanks." He stood from the chair and winced as his neck screamed in pain. "And I suppose," he said as he moved towards the window, "there are a bunch of gossip columnists down there waiting to ask me why I spent the night at a hotel with two drunk women?"

"Correct, monsieur."

Adrien groaned. He didn't have time for this. "Can we sneak me out the usual way?"

"Room service has been notified, monsieur."

He knew he'd always liked that butler.

With a stretch and the audible pop of something in his back, he walked over to the bed and leaned over Chloe. "Hey, Chlo. I'm leaving now."
She let out a low moan.

"You're welcome," he said. He pulled strands of hair out of her face. "You and Sabrina feel better soon. Drink lots of water."

She moaned again.

"I know, but if you want to convince people you don't have a problem, you have to get up sometime. Promise me you'll get up?"

She flipped him off.

"I love you too." There was a knock on the door. The butler pulled it open, revealing two maids standing outside with a room service cart covered in a floor length tablecloth. Adrien straightened. "That's my ride," he said. "Text me when you're conscious."

Mayor Bourgeois had his fingers pressed to his temples, massaging in circular motions. "Are you sure I can't convince you to marry her?"

"Sorry, I have a date today," Adrien said. He pushed aside the tablecloth and ducked onto the cart's lower shelf, folding his long legs under him. Once he'd settled, the cart began to move.

Elevator doors opened. Closed. His stomach dipped as they descended to the first floor of Le Grand Paris. Doors opened. The steady murmur of conversation grew as they neared the restaurant. Adrien had dismissed the Gorilla the night before with instructions to return at eight in the morning and wait in the usual place, so he hoped the car would be parked near the back door. He grinned to himself, remembering Marinette saying he didn't look like a rebellious kid. How surprised would she be to learn the full extent of his sneaking around?

The cart came to a stop and Adrien heard another door open. "The coast is clear, Monsieur Agreste," one of the maids said.

Adrien climbed off the cart, wincing at the pain in his neck, and fixed his clothes. The kitchen staff didn't even blink at the sight of him. It wasn't the first time he'd beat a hasty retreat through the back door, and it sure as hell wouldn't be the last. He got the names of the maids, shook their hands and promised to send them thank you gifts, then slipped out into the humid summer morning, checking for any reporters before he strolled to his car.

"Sorry, my phone died," he said to the Gorilla.

"You're good."

Adrien plugged his phone into the backseat charger as they pulled away from the hotel. He stared out the window with a thoughtful frown. If the paparazzi had nothing better to do than follow him around on a Sunday, someone was bound to notice him taking the local baker's daughter to the movies…

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
Just now

Happy Sunday, buginette! Isn't it a gorgeous morning? Well, you're probably going to sleep through the whole thing, but trust me when I say Paris was pawsitively aglow when I sent you this
message. As a matter of fact, it's far too nice to stay cooped up indoors. I think I'll go out on the prowl. ;)

X.X.X

Marinette tossed her phone onto the sofa with a grin. It was a beautiful morning, wasn't it? She'd cracked the windows open to let some fresh air circulate through the house and further uplift her spirits. Her laptop, signed into Skype and waiting for her mother's call, blared jazz music.

"Is you is, or is you ain't my baby? Way you're acting lately makes me doubt. Yooouse is still my baby, baby. Seems my flame in your heart's done gone out..."

Damn cat. It was going to be stuck in her head all day.

The music faded and the Skype phone call jingle took its place. Marinette hurried to the sofa to answer it.

Sabine Cheng appeared on screen, her hair a little grayer than the last time Marinette had seen her. "Good morning, sweetie! You look lively for a Sunday."

"Hi maman. You think so?" Marinette checked herself out in her webcam window. She practically shined. "Alya and I have plans this afternoon," she said.

Sabine stuck out her bottom lip. "Really? And here I was hoping you'd snagged Adrien into a date."

A blush rose straight from Marinette's neck to her hairline. "I told you we're just talking! It's a little soon for a date." At that exact moment, as if conspiring against her, her cell phone buzzed.

Adrien Agreste: On a scale of 1 to 10, how eager are you to have your name in the tabloids?

"Nonsense. That boy's been hanging around at the bakery for a year now."

An enormous torso filled the background. "What boy?" Tom Dupain stooped and waved his large hand at the webcam. "Bonjour, Marinette!"


"The one Marinette can't form sentences around?"

"The very same."

Marinette snatched up her phone while her mother got her father up to speed. **Are negative numbers an option?** She hit send. With all the sneaking around they'd successfully pulled off, she had almost forgotten that Adrien was a person of interest to the paparazzi. If someone saw them together, her name would be printed in every gossip rag in Paris by the middle of the week.

"...pressure her, Sabine. Perhaps Marinette isn't ready to put herself out there yet."

"Nonsense. She's too pretty to hide in the house forever." Sabine turned back to the computer. "Which reminds me, Marinette, your father and I are coming home soon."

Marinette gasped. "What? When?"

"September at the earliest. Your great aunt's children finally turned up to do their share of the caretaking." Sabine sighed. "I've had a lovely time here, but I can't wait to get back to you and the bakery. We have some new recipes to unleash on our customers."
Marinette's phone buzzed.

**Adrien Agreste: That MIGHT be a problem.**

**Don't worry**, she wrote, **I have a solution.**

"Marinette? Who are you texting?"

"Alya," she said. "Just trying to hammer out those plans!" *Buzz.*

**Adrien Agreste: Sorry :)**

Marinette fought back an excited wiggle. He was so considerate.

"Uh-huh." Sabine arched an eyebrow, clearly suspicious, but she chose not to comment. "We'll let you get to your plans, then. You take care of yourself and have a nice week. Also, clean up the house."

"What makes you think I haven't?" Marinette said defensively as she pushed the pile of stuff on the couch further out of the webcam's viewing range.

"Clean it," Sabine ordered.

"Yes *maman.*"

They said their goodbyes she ended the call. Jazz music came rushing back in to fill the silence. Marinette jumped up from the sofa, dancing her way to the stairs to make last minute outfit adjustments, and joined in with the singer in her best English.

"Is you is, or is you ain't my baby? Maybe baby's found somebody new… or is my baby still my baby true?"

X.X.X

**Ladybug**  
RE: 2015  
5 minutes ago

*Sorry to disappoint, chaton, but I'm wide awake.*

*Got plans for today so I'll be out on a prowl of my own.*

*(Do ladybugs prowl?)*

*Try to stay away from me, though.*

*I don't need any of your bad luck rubbing off on me.*

X.X.X

"How is it that you can spend all night sleeping in a stiff chair and still look airbrushed in the morning?" Nino asked as Adrien strolled into his bedroom. He'd made himself quite at home on Adrien's couch; he had Plagg in his lap, moving his front paws back and forth to make it look like Plagg scratched an invisible turntable.

Adrien winked at him. "Trade secret." He took off his rumpled shirt and threw it at Nino on his
way to the bathroom. Plagg jumped out of Nino's lap and ran after him. "I'm a little worried about Chloe," he confessed. "The drinking thing used to be an act of rebellion, but now? I think she might actually have a problem."

"Dude, she's actually had a problem for six months."

Adrien kicked out of his pants and twisted the shower knob. "She doesn't even like being drunk."

"She doesn't like being sober either," Nino called out as Adrien got under the water and yelped. Too hot. "You should talk to her about getting professional help. For her depression, I mean."

"Aww, you really do care."

"Yeah, because unlike her, I'm a decent human being."

Adrien tilted his head to let the hot water hit him right where his neck hurt most. Plagg blinked at him from a safe distance.

"By the way," Nino said, "you sure you're okay with going to see a horror movie?"

Adrien froze. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because last time we watched one you screamed like a little girl, threatened to dismember me for making you watch it, and said 'fuck this I'm leaving' more than once."

"I'm a grown man, Nino."

"It was two years ago."

Adrien reached for a shampoo bottle. "I'll be fine," he said none-too-convincingly. "And even if I'm not, I can at least control myself enough to not threaten Marinette with bodily harm."

"I think you should watch the new Disney movie instead."

"I think you should shut up." He did want to see the new Disney movie, but that was beside the point. They had to watch the zombie movie. In the interest of science.

Nino took the suggestion to shut up literally, so Adrien allowed his thoughts to wander to Ladybug. She'd be out and about Paris that afternoon, too. He wondered what kind of plans she had, and how she would react if he told her he was going on a date. His shoulders slumped. She'd probably be happy for him.

Or would she?

Adrien sighed. He didn't know what to make of Ladybug emailing him earlier in the day. He didn't know what to make of the rare occasions on which she reciprocated his flirting. And he most definitely didn't know what to make of her annoyed reaction to his suggestion that she'd dump him if she got into a serious relationship.

He was, of course, biased. His mind immediately jumped to the conclusion that she had feelings for him, which just wasn't true. If he knew Ladybug—and he liked to think he knew her pretty well—she'd want to meet him in person before she allowed that to happen. His Lady was all about control.

He stepped out of the shower and Plagg ran for cover, paws slipping and sliding on the tile floor. "Hey Nino, you know those aviators of mine you've been dying to borrow?"
"Paparazzi?"
"Yup."

Adrien saw a streak of color run past the bathroom door: Nino headed straight for his closet. He shook his head. This was why they were friends.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
**RE: 2015**
25 minutes ago

But what if I'm in need of your good luck? Where am I going to find a horseshoe or rabbit's foot at this hour of the day? What's the point of us even being friends if you won't cancel out my misfortune with your good fortune? I thought we were a team!

I had to Google it, but to answer your question: Yes, ladybugs do prowl. Your blood is also toxic to other insects. And birds. Why are you so violent?

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
**RE: 2015**
4 minutes ago

Sounds like you need to get acquainted with some horses and rabbits.

Attached is a hastily drawn self-portrait.

I don't mean to brag, but I think I've really captured my essence.

x.x.x

Adrien laughed. Hysterically. He laughed so hard that pedestrians sent him weird stares and Nino, startled, pried his phone out of his hand to look at the screen.

On it was a picture of a pencil-drawn, ax-wielding ladybug standing on a mountain of bird and insect corpses, belting out a savage battle cry.

Nino handed the phone back to him. "I don't even want to know, dude."

Adrien wiped tears from his eyes and slipped his phone into the pocket of his bomber jacket. With his reflective sunglasses, plain white t-shirt, faded jeans, and boots, he'd been hoping to draw attention away from himself. He'd even styled his hair differently. But according to Nino, the only thing he'd accomplished was making himself devilishly handsome, as opposed to clean cut handsome.

They made a quick stop at a gourmet candy store for the best chocolate money could buy, then headed for the theater. Adrien was nervous for several reasons. He hadn't been on a date in years. He couldn't even count his last relationship, a carnal affair with a model who was more interested in sleeping with him than getting to know him. He'd taken Chloe on dates but that was when he was what, nineteen? How did one go about dating? How did one go about *fake* dating?

He was also nervous on Nino's behalf. One glance at his best friend showed Adrien he was well on
his way to becoming petrified by fear. Would he be able to loosen up enough to talk to Alya? Would the whole effort be rendered meaningless by self-sabotage?

The threat of paparazzi kept him looking over his shoulder, too. The last thing he wanted was to inconvenience Marinette by making all of Paris think they were romantically involved.

They crossed the street. The theater loomed ahead, a small group of people hovering outside while they waited to purchase tickets. Adrien checked the time on his phone. They were five minutes early. As he looked up from his screen a flash of color caught his eye. Strappy white sandals, a peach colored A-line skirt, white chiffon blouse, floral printed headscarf wound around loose black hair, and sunglasses perched on a freckled nose. Adrien grinned. Marinette had totally gotten into the disguise thing.

Beside her, Alya wore high-waisted shorts, a tank top, and a tribal printed kimono jacket. Nino elbowed Adrien in the ribs as they drew closer. "Legs!" he hissed. "Her legs!"

Adrien clapped his back. "It's going to be okay."

"Yo," Alya greeted them. "Nice to see you two again." She smiled at Nino. "Are you my date this afternoon?"

Nino giggled helplessly. Adrien shook his head and stepped closer to Marinette, who looked at him over the top of her sunglasses. "You look nice," he said.

Now it was Marinette's turn to giggle. "Did you bring my chocolate?"

"What chocolate?" he asked innocently, then patted the front of his bomber jacket. He offered her his elbow, which Marinette took after only a moment's hesitation. "Sorry again for the whole incognito thing."

"D-Don't worry about it," Marinette said. She smoothed down her headscarf. "I made this ages ago and hadn't had a chance to wear it before today."

Adrien's eyes widened behind his sunglasses. "You made it?"

Her shoulders hunched. "I made the whole outfit… except the shoes."

"No kidding!" He stood back to admire the ensemble again. It looked professional. Expensive, even. "Marinette, have you considered entering my father's design competition?"

"Oh my goodness, please convince her," Alya said. "I've been barking up that tree for days and the most I've gotten out of her is an 'I'll think about it.'"

"Alya!" Marinette's face reddened.

"The girl lives and breathes fashion. You should see the outfits she designs—"

"—for dolls," Marinette cut in. "I take commissions for doll clothes. My employee Manon is a collector and asked me to make some things for her dolls, then I kind of got carried away and started a side business…"

"You should make something for Adrien sometime," Nino suggested. "If the media doesn't ask him where he got it first, his father will."

"That's a really good idea," Alya said, raising her eyebrows at Nino appreciatively. Progress.
Marinette laid her hands on her pink cheeks. "No, I couldn't. That's... ah—oh, look, it's our turn in line!"

Adrien went ahead to pay for the tickets. So Marinette was a designer, too, and a talented one if her outfit was anything to judge by. If she did enter the competition she could give Ladybug a run for her money. Wouldn't that be something? But who did he cheer for in that situation: Marinette, his friend and co-conspirator, or Ladybug, the faceless woman who'd stolen his heart?

He distributed the tickets and they entered the cool, dark theater. Nino went to buy popcorn since Adrien and Marinette had gourmet chocolates to share. Alya went with him. Adrien noticed the two of them speaking in low voices, sending occasional glances his way.

"So," he said to Marinette as she slipped her sunglasses into her purse, "you like zombie movies?"

She looked up at him, blue eyes wide with excitement. "Love 'em. You?"

He blanched. "T-They're all right. It's been a while since I've seen one in theaters, though"

"What? But that's the best way to watch them," Marinette said. "In the dark with the surround sound, so when a zombie pops up and the orchestra does their thing you get authentically scared, not laugh-it-off scared. You know what I mean?"

"Yup," Adrien squeaked. He cleared his throat. "Absolutely."

Marinette had reached up to unwind her headscarf, but now she paused, and leaned forward to get a better look at him. Adrien kept his gaze fixed on a poster for an upcoming film. "Oh my God." She lifted a hand to her mouth. "You're afraid of zombie movies."

Busted. "What matters is that we're doing this for Nino and Alya," he said.

"You should have told me!" Marinette stuffed the scarf into her purse. "I wouldn't have suggested it if you weren't okay with it. Come on, we can still change the tickets. Do you want to watch something else?"

Adrien put both hands on her shoulders. "Marinette. I'll be fine. What matters is that we're doing this for Nino and Alya."

"You said that already."

"I know. I'm still talking myself into it."

Her expression went flat. "We're changing the tickets."

"No we're not." Adrien dropped one hand and slid his arm over her shoulders, then pulled her towards the theater before she could object. "Let's find some seats. Nino, we're going ahead!"

Nino waved at him from the concession stand, then ducked his head to listen to Alya.

The middle rows of the theater were filling up fast. Adrien spotted two empty chairs between a couple and a group of friends and led Marinette to them. "This way," he said as they sat down, "they'll be forced to sit away from us." He removed the chocolates from the inside pocket of his jacket and offered them to her. She glared at him. "What?"

"You don't have to push yourself," she said. She took the bag and admired the assortment of chocolates within. Then she saw the name on the bag and gasped. "These are from—but that costs
"Consider it a thank you for all the delicious pastries," Adrien said. "I'd have baked you something myself, but I probably would have burned my house down."

Marinette picked up a chocolate bonbon. "You can't cook?"

"Nope."

"Hmm." She held up her index finger. "He doesn't cook." She raised her middle finger. "He doesn't do horror movies." Her ring finger. "And he makes me disguise myself to go out in public with him." Her smile turned coy. "If this was a real date, you'd be in serious trouble right now."

Adrien pointed at the bonbon. "Try that and I guarantee you'll be willing to overlook my many flaws."

She did try it, and immediately closed her eyes in pure bliss. She lifted a hand to her cheek, hummed with delight, and wiggled from side to side. Then she straightened up and wiped the smile from her face. "You're forgiven. For now."

Adrien saw Nino and Alya enter the theater. He waved at them. Nino raised an arm in a "what the hell" gesture and Adrien lifted both of his in the universal "sorry bro, nothing I can do about it." Alya tapped Nino on the shoulder and pointed at the back of the theater. She started up the stairs. Nino trailed after her in a stupor.

Adrien and Marinette sank in their seats, giggling. He held his fist out and she bumped hers against it. Mission accomplished.

The theater lights dimmed.

Adrien faced the screen, his good humor gone. Right. There was a zombie movie to survive. Marinette poked his arm and offered him a bonbon. "It worked for Harry Potter," she said.

He managed a smile. "If this was a real date, you'd have scored major points for that."

She pressed her lips together and turned back to the screen, saying nothing.

Adrien did well for the first twenty minutes of the movie. Unfortunately, the first twenty minutes of the movie were the tamest. By the one hour mark he was five shades of white and gripping the arm rest for dear life, sending prayers to all the saints he could remember, promising to be a better person, to get Chloe the help she needed, to stop posting shitty memes on Twitter and spend more time with his father. His only consolation was that he hadn't screamed yet.

Marinette's hand covered his. He nearly jumped out of his skin, but she kept her eyes on the screen. "How do you think Nino and Alya are doing?"

Adrien swallowed. "Ho-Honestly? She probably had to carry most of the conversation at first, but by now he's remembered how to talk."

"But he was so smooth when he spoke to me the other day."

A horde of zombies burst onto the screen. Marinette's fingers squeezed. Adrien took a deep, steadying breath. "Nino's only awkward when it comes to women he's attracted to. Makes for bad first impressions and why the hell do these zombies run so fast? Aren't they supposed to be decomposing?"
"Well, at least Alya thinks he's cute."

"She does?" Adrien closed his eyes as the protagonist bashed a zombie's head in with the butt of a rifle, splattering the camera with blood and gore.

Marinette squeezed his fingers again. Adrien flipped his hand over so he could hold hers properly, and hoped he didn't accidentally crush it next time someone almost got their face chewed off. "Yeah, I asked her yesterday," she said. "We can't plan the wedding yet, but it's better than complete apathy. You're doing great, by the way."

"That's debatable," Adrien said. He let out a strangled noise and she turned his head away from the screen to look at her.

"I used to not be able to watch these movies either. But it helps to remind yourself that they're just a bunch of actors playing tag in costumes." Marinette tilted her head to the side. "Can you imagine how silly they looked while filming this? It's hilarious when you think about." Adrien did think about it, but in the context of modeling. How easy it was to get annoyed when he had to stand under a hot spotlight in heavy makeup for hours. At least there weren't lines to memorize. Or coworkers to chase around while pretending to get shot. Perhaps Marinette was right and he was overreact—nope, a zombie had just been struck by the getaway vehicle and exploded into bits of rotting meat.

Marinette snorted.

Adrien saw her shoulders shaking. "Are you laughing at me?" he asked. She doubled over. "You're laughing at me!"

"I'm sorry, your face was just…!" She couldn't finish her sentence.

Some of the color returned to his cheeks in a blush. "You know what? I want my hand back." He tried to pull it out of her grasp but she held on tight, still laughing.

"I'm sorry!"

As much as he wanted to look offended, he couldn't. Her quiet squeaks got him laughing too. "Give me my hand. And my chocolates. You've lost your chocolate privileges." He reached for the bag but she twisted her legs away and leaned against his arm.

"Really," she said, though she couldn't wipe the grin off her face. "I feel terrible."

"Liar." Adrien sank into his seat again and put on a petulant frown. She squeezed his hand. He squeezed hers back.

For the next hour they shared the chocolates and made jokes about the movie whenever Adrien's fear threatened to spill over. He was surprised at how easy it was to slip into Chat Noir mode around Marinette. Normally it took months for him to get that comfortable with a new person. But there was something altogether pleasant about her, as if she wore the peace and security of the bakery like perfume. He didn't feel the need to put on a performance around her. She didn't seem to care that he wasn't Gabriel Agreste's perfect son.

He really couldn't have picked a better fake dating partner.

When the movie ended, Adrien breathed a sigh of relief. He'd survived. He would have nightmares for a while, but it was a small price to pay for Nino's prospective happiness.
Marinette let go of his hand. "How do you think it went with those two?" she asked.

Nino and Alya were on their way down the stairs. "We're about to find out," Adrien said. Both he and Marinette stood and stepped over the legs of people loitering through the credits. As soon as he was within range, Nino threw his arms around him.

"You're alive!" he cried.

Adrien hugged him back. "You owe me," he whispered through clenched teeth, then pulled away. "How did you guys like the movie?"

"It was sick!" Alya said, slapping Marinette a high five. "I especially liked the part where the zombie's head exploded."

"Wasn't that hilarious?" Marinette gushed. Adrien sent her a betrayed glare.

"Did you see when his eyeball hit the screen?" Nino asked Marinette.

"Et tu, Nino?" Adrien yelled. He hated all of them.

"We should do this again sometime," Alya said, nudging Nino in the side as they walked out of the theater. "Well, the two of us can. Adrien and Marinette will have to watch a different movie."

Adrien caught Marinette's eye, excited by Alya's implication. Their plan was working. He opened his mouth to suggest they go out for dinner and keep the party going, but Nino beat him to the punch. "What say we grab food somewhere?" he asked. He checked his phone. "It's a little early for dinner, but that shouldn't be a problem."

Marinette sighed. "I'd love to, but I have to get going. Someone called in a big order for tomorrow afternoon and I want to prepare all the ingredients ahead of time."

It hadn't occurred to Adrien that she might be busy. "Sorry, I'm not keeping you from anything, am I?"

"No! Not at all. I needed the break." Her expression was so genuinely warm that he almost forgot she was pretending to like him. "How about we have dinner next weekend? After Saturday the bakery will be closed until September. Can't think of a better way to celebrate my freedom."

"I'm game," Alya said.

"Me too," Nino added.

Adrien would be leaving Paris the following day for Chateau Margaux. The least he could do was manage one more act of matchmaking before fate took its course. "Sounds good to me," he said. "Where do you want to go?"

Marinette slipped her hands behind her back and brought her hips forward in what was clearly a flirtatious move. Oh, she was good. "Can I think about it and let you know during the week?"

Adrien did his part and broke out the megawatt model smile. "Of course."

They said their farewells outside the building, Marinette having put on her headscarf and sunglasses again, then she and Alya went off in the direction of the bakery while Adrien and Nino turned the other way. Adrien regretted that Marinette had work to do; it really was a gorgeous summer afternoon.
"So…" Nino began, drawing out the last syllable.

"So… what?"

He practically shoved Adrien into the street. "How was your date, man?"

"Gee, considering she wants to go on another one, how do you think it went?" Adrien shoved Nino back. "How about you? It wasn't an official date, but Alya doesn't seem to mind the idea of hanging out with you again."

Nino sighed. "She's amazing," he said. "Spirited, driven, exciting… and a little crazy. I think I'm afraid of her, but somehow that just makes me want to get to know her better."

Adrien shook his head. "You've got it bad."

"Oh, like you don't? Agreeing to go to a zombie movie so you could cling to Marinette the whole time? Too obvious, dude. She must really like you if she let you get away with that shit."

Adrien had to laugh at that. Nino could reach his own conclusions; Adrien would let him roll with it as long as his real motive remained hidden. Besides, Nino wasn't wrong about him having it bad. He just had no way of knowing that thoughts of a different woman kept his best friend up at night.

And for now, Adrien wanted to keep it that way.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
RE: 2015
44 minutes ago

*This is the most significant drawing in the history of mankind. I'm taking it to the Louvre tomorrow and demanding they hang it up immediately.*

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
RE: 2015
Just now

*I knew you'd recognize my artistic genius.*

*Speaking of…*

*You still think I should enter Gabriel Agreste's design competition?*

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
RE: 2015
Just now

*Yes.*

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
That's it?

Just "yes?"

---

**Chat Noir**
RE: 2015
Just now

I'm terrified that showing more enthusiasm might frighten you into changing your mind. (Happens to me a lot.)

---

**Ladybug**
RE: 2015
Just now

Why is this so important to you?

---

**Chat Noir**
RE: 2015
Just now

Because it's important to you. :D

---

**Ladybug**
RE: 2015
Just now

Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuugh.

I'm going to bed.

Good night, Chat Noir.

---

**Chat Noir**
RE: 2015
Just now

Good night, My Lady.

---

**Ladybug**
Actually, I went on a fake date with my crush today (long story).

It was nice.

I think the two of us will be great friends.

But you know how you told me to just be myself around him?

I did that.

I put aside my awkwardness and became "Ladybug."

And then I couldn't stop thinking about what it would have been like if I'd gone to the movies with you instead.

x.x.x

Marinette highlighted the entire email, deleted it, and went to sleep.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

In which there is a whole lot of Ladynoir.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
12 minutes ago

Good morning, my Lady! As promised I am outside the Louvre, waiting for someone to come open the door so I can give them your drawing. I stayed up all night making my case for why it should be hung up beside the Mona Lisa. I also prepared a separate case for why this is no laughing matter, and another for why they shouldn't have me escorted from the premises.

Well, okay, I'm not outside the Louvre, but you know where I wish I was? In bed. Shouldn't I have become a morning person by now? Teach me your ways.

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: 2015
Just now

Good morning, Chat Noir.

I'd like to hear your case for my drawing.

Type it up and send it to me as an attachment by the end of the day.

Double-spaced, 12 point font, Times New Roman.

Only then will I teach you the secrets of being a morning person.

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
3 minutes ago
Attachment: TheCaseForLadybugs

Sorry this took me so long. I typed it up on a Word document and was about to send it when I realized that if I emailed it to you as an attachment, my real name would show up as the author of the file. So I copied the text onto a new document on one of our work computers and sent it from there. Incidentally, do you know how hard it is to lie to a no-nonsense secretary who's known you for years and is very good at her job?
The things I do for love.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
RE: 2015
Just now

But you didn't do it for love.

You did it for my morning person secrets.

Which I will now share with you because I was KIDDING about the essay and I feel like a complete asshole.

**Ladybug's Secrets for Being a Morning Person**

1. Stop staying up until midnight to email me.

2. Wake up early enough to watch the sunrise. Give it your undivided attention.

3. Exercise (but not on an empty stomach).

4. This is all a load of crap.

5. There are no secrets.

6. You're either born a morning person or you aren't.

7. I'm so sorry.

I loved your essay. How were you able to come up with all that so-called social commentary?

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
RE: 2015
Just now

You'd be surprised by all the bullshit I can come up with on the fly. ...actually, no you wouldn't.

Don't be so quick to dismiss your own advice, my Lady. I've never tried any of these things before, so who's to say one or more of them aren't legit? We must put it to the test.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
RE: 2015
Just now

"We" is one person too many.

(You do mean every suggestion but the first, right?)

x.x.x
Tuesday evening found Marinette waiting for Adrien as she put away the remaining dishes. He'd texted her that he was running an hour late, which suited her just fine. The last week before closing always saw an increase in customers—mostly regulars who were desperate to get their final fix before they had to spend August at another bakery. More customers meant more dishes. A small price to pay for the freedom at hand.

She could see herself already: waking up late, spending her mornings up on the balcony with her flowers, her sketchbook, some music, and a handful of snacks. She could go out for breakfast. She could go out for lunch. She could wear her pajamas from sun up to sun down if she felt like it.

But first she had to endure a few more days of relentless teasing from Manon, who'd been outraged that Adrien hadn't kissed Marinette during their movie date and had a whole list of seduction techniques for her to try on their second date.

Marinette couldn't tell her it wasn't like that between them. Adrien was… funny, sweet, good company, and unfairly handsome even when dressed like Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*. But he wasn't interested in her. He hadn't shown any indication of it beyond what was required for their little ruse.

Then again, she may not have been reading the correct signals, considering the one guy who did show interest in her was painfully obvious about it.

A knock on the door. Marinette put down her stack of plates and hurried to let Adrien in.

"Sorry," he said as soon as she had the door open. He wore a suit jacket and tie that had come mostly undone sometime during the day. In his hand he carried a plastic bag from which emanated the unmistakable aroma of food. Marinette's mouth watered. "Back to back meetings and half of them ran late. I think I'm starting to understand why my father would rather be feared than liked. It makes people punctual." He sighed, then held up the bag of food. "So I brought us dinner."

Marinette stared at him as he walked past. "Us?"

"You haven't eaten yet, have you?" he asked.

She hadn't. Marinette blushed and whipped off her apron. "That's very sweet of you."

"It was the least I could do for making you wait." Adrien flashed her a quick smile. "Hope you like Lebanese."

A few minutes later they were seated at his favorite table, food containers open and framing a list of potential date restaurants. Adrien pointed at the third name on the list. "I've been to this place a number of times with my father. Great food, perfect atmosphere, and the staff treats you like royalty."

"Do they charge you like royalty, too?"

His cheeks reddened. "Right. Forgot about that."
Marinette smiled around a bite of food. She looked over the rest of the names. She'd only been to two of the listed restaurants before, and neither had the sort of atmosphere that inspired romance. "Alya's mom works here"—she pointed at the fourth name on the list—"but if she even suspected Alya was going on a date, she'd put on enough pressure to make Alya sabotage her chances with Nino out of spite."

"If it helps, Nino isn't that easily deterred," Adrien supplied.

Marinette's phone buzzed and she lifted it out of her lap. A text from Manon. She dropped it again. Chat Noir had been sending her ridiculous cat memes all day, so she'd retaliated with an elaborate story about how she'd been interviewed for a news article on her way home, and linked him to the website so he could see what she looked like.

The link, of course, led straight to Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up."

Stupid cat deserved it.

"Oh!" Marinette grabbed her phone, pulled up her internet browser, and typed in a name. "I just remembered this place I went to with my boyfriend a few years ago. Decent prices, delicious food, and all the atmosphere you could ever want."

Adrien smirked at her. "Boyfriend, huh? Should I be fake jealous?"

"Hmm… considering he was marriage material, sure, if I bring it up on our date." Marinette held her phone out to him so he could check out the restaurant's website. Adrien took the phone, but didn't look at it.

"So what happened?" He'd dropped the smile in favor of caution. Marinette was amazed at his ability to physically appear ready to apologize. She smiled, but it was more tightlipped than she wanted it to be.

"Nothing extraordinary," she said. She waved at the phone. "Go on, tell me that place isn't perfect."

Adrien reluctantly lowered his eyes and examined the screen, swiping it with his thumb. His brows shot up. "Wow. It's just a picture and I feel seduced."

Marinette could confirm that the seduction was more powerful in person, but she wasn't about to bring up the past again. Today, she was all about the future. She took her phone back from Adrien. "So when should we meet there? Sunday at, say, seven o'clock?"

He rubbed his chin. There was a bit of stubble there, Marinette noticed, and before she could stop her mind from wandering she imagined what that stubble would feel like against her cheek, her neck, her—"How about six instead? I'm going out of town the next day and need to be up pretty early. Six gives us time to do something afterward, in case Alya and Nino really hit off."

Marinette crossed her arms. "You're going out of town? When were you planning to tell your fake girlfriend?"

"Well I meant to tell you last Sunday, but you had places to be." Adrien arranged his face into a serious expression. "Marinette, I'm going out of town next week. You'll have to fly solo on the matchmaking front for a while, but I promise to provide as much back up as I can."

Marinette collected the empty food containers and carried them to the trash. "Where are you going?"
"We're filming a commercial for the new Gabriel men's fragrance at Chateau Margaux," he said, but he didn't sound very excited about it. Marinette dropped the containers in the bin and walked back to the table. "Lots of standing around in the sun, lots of trying to look airbrushed instead of sweaty, lots of pointless shots of me staring pensively at the horizon."

Marinette clasped her hands together. "Can I see?"

Adrien raised an eyebrow at her, but he turned to the curtained window and did his best impersonation of someone who was thinking very hard about something very important. Marinette burst out laughing. "See?" he yelled, his cheeks coloring. "It's stupid!"

"How is it stupid? You just convinced me to buy five bottles of cologne, and I don't even know five men," Marinette said. Adrien pretended to sulk, which left her to wonder: Did Adrien dislike his job? He'd been modeling since he was a preteen, and he was excellent at it, without a doubt. But he never talked about his job. He wasn't too thrilled to be filming a commercial. He came to her bakery to get a moment's peace away from his hectic life.

She wanted to ask about it, but ultimately decided not to. He hadn't pursued the subject of her ex-boyfriend, so she wouldn't pry into his affairs either.

"So," Adrien said, "Sunday at six. Yes or no?"

Marinette nodded. "It's a date."

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
Just now

You suck.

YOU SUCK, LADYBUG.

YOU.

SUCK.

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: 2015
Just now

You're the one who fell for it, chaton. :-)

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
Just now

You know what? I don't have to take this. Consider our friendship over.

I'm going to wait for some other random girl to email me. A girl who won't Rick Roll me. A girl
who respects me.

X.X.X

*Ladybug*
RE: 2015
Just now

Aww come on, don't be like that, babe! I was only kidding!

Babe!

Baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaabe!

X.X.X

"So, promise you won't judge me. I'm a reporter and I just can't help myself. You know that."

Alya threw herself onto Marinette's sofa and kicked off her shoes. Marinette waited until she settled down to continue sketching. It was Friday night, and they'd gathered to plan her outfit for Sunday, since Marinette was throwing a party for her employees on Saturday evening. They'd all worked hard the past year without Tom and Sabine; they deserved to celebrate the achievement.

"Let me guess," Marinette said, "you internet stalked Nino."

Alya held up a finger. "Only because his business handle sounded familiar." She turned to Marinette with wide eyes. "Did you know he was invited to South by Southwest last year?"

"Am I supposed to know what that is?"

"It's a big music festival in the United States."

"So… no."

"Would it kill you to get in touch?" Alya flopped over with a dramatic sigh. "I'm going to ask him for an interview. Since he's working on the music for the fashion competition, I may be able to get some insider information."

"Why don't you just ask Adrien for insider information? He's putting the whole thing together." Marinette added some beads to the bodice of her dress. Once her parents came home she'd have more time for sewing, and she planned on taking full advantage of that. Homemade Christmas presents for everyone, whether they wanted them or not.

Alya picked up Marinette's yo-yo. "Please, what time is Adrien going to have for interviews when he's spending his free hours trying to seduce you?" She grinned. "Not that he has to try very hard."

Marinette didn't even grace her comment with a look. "Just because I'm attracted to him doesn't mean I'm desperate to get him in bed with me."

"You're right. A beautiful specimen like Adrien Agreste should be enjoyed slowly. And passionately."

"Alya!" Marinette whacked her with her sketchbook. Her phone, which sat on the armrest for easy access, let out a chime.
Chat Noir
RE: 2015
2 seconds ago

I hit my funny bone on the edge of my closet door and I think I'm dying. My whole arm is tingling. I'm worried it's going to spread to my heart and cause it to explode. Should I lock myself in the bathroom to spare Plagg the gruesome sight of his beloved father's chest bursting open in a fountain of gore?

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: 2015
Just now

No.

But you could put some ice on it and stop being a baby.

x.x.x

Adrien rubbed his elbow and gasped in pain. No pity from his Lady, eh? At least she was consistent.

"Dude, are you crying?" Nino asked from the sofa.

Adrien shot him a tearful glare. "No." He continued kneading his bruised skin as he searched his closet for what to wear on his second pretend date. Marinette had excellent fashion sense and knew how to dress herself well. He couldn't stand next to her looking like a slob. "Now what was so important that you had to come over immediately?"

"Alya texted me."

Adrien turned away from the closet. "You couldn't tell me that the moment you walked in?"

"I had to let the mystery build." Nino waved his phone over his head. Adrien went over and took it. "She asked if she could interview me. What the heck does that mean?"

The text was straightforward enough. Adrien read it one more time, then pressed the phone back into Nino's hand. "It means she went to the trouble of looking you up online and discovered what a stud you are," he said. "This is the same woman who interviewed the legendary Jagged Stone last weekend. She thinks you're on par with him."

Nino hummed, unconvinced. "But an interview is strictly professional. She won't be thinking of me as boyfriend potential."

"Then put the moves on her before the interview. You have a show coming up, right?"

"Wednesday, yeah."

Adrien swung himself over the top of the sofa and landed beside Nino. "Invite her," he said. "Give her a VIP pass or something. Let her see what you can do in person. Then when she's super impressed with how talented you are and primed to say yes to a date, ask her to dinner. And no chickening out just because I won't be there in person to run interference!"
Nino made several long, drawn out thinking noises. Plagg emerged from under Adrien's bed. He sat at the foot of the sofa and stared at Adrien, tail swishing back and forth. Adrien moved over. Plagg hopped onto the space between him and the armrest and wedged himself there, purring. At least somebody cared that he'd whacked his elbow hard enough to see the ends of the universe.

"I don't know," Nino said.

"What if you invite Marinette? I can ask her for a favor. She'll help make you look good." Adrien picked up his phone to email Ladybug.

"Nah, don't bother your girlfriend over stupid things like that."

He blinked. "My what?"

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
**RE: 2015**
**1 minute ago**

*I don't think you understand how hard I hit that door. I saw stars, buginette. I thought those kinds of things only happened in cartoons.*

x.x.x

"Who are you texting?" Alya asked.

Marinette put her phone down. "No one." Technically true: she was sending an email, not texting.

Alya crossed her arms. "Uh-huh. So you just happened to be staring at your phone with a lovesick smile for no reason," she said, then gasped. "You're texting Adrien, aren't you?"

Now that their fake dating status made such a thing plausible, Marinette could easily go along with Alya's assumption. "Sure am. We're hammering out all the details for Sunday. Making sure we know where we're going and, uh, making reservations. Yeah." She paused. "Wait, did you say lovesick?"

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
**RE: 2015**
**Just now**

*You saw stars?*

*Get yourself to the emergency room!*

*When they ask you why you're there, tell them you have a booboo and you need a kiss to make it better.*

x.x.x

"Marinette isn't my girlfriend," Adrien said. "We're just getting to know each other better."

Nino tilted his chin towards Adrien's phone. "You've been texting her all night."
"No I—" Adrien stopped himself before he could spill the beans about Ladybug. Why not go along with Nino's assumption? It saved him the trouble of coming up with a new excuse. "I haven't been texting her all night."

"What's the big deal? If you're that into her, just let her know you want to be exclusive."

"It's not that easy." He gestured vaguely to the extravagance of their surroundings. "Dating me comes with… complications. I don't think Marinette wants that kind of attention drawn to herself. Plus, she'll have to win my father's approval and, well, you've met my father." The thought unexpectedly depressed him. Marinette was a nice, pretty girl, the kind his mother would have fawned over. But Gabriel Agreste saw nice, pretty girls with smaller incomes as gold diggers in sheep's clothing. Even Marinette wouldn't be safe from his scrutiny.

And neither, in theory, would Ladybug.

Nino frowned. "So what then, you're just going to marry Chloe because she's the only girl your father doesn't scowl at?"

"At least when Chloe has me assassinated for the insurance money it won't come as a surprise to anyone."

Nino shoved Adrien into Plagg, who glared at the both of them for interrupting his nap. "You're killing me, dude! When did you become such a pessimist?" He stood from the sofa. "I'd rather see you enter the priesthood and swear celibacy than marry Chloe, so if you don't tell your pops about Marinette, I will."

Adrien scooped Plagg into his arms and leaned in close to his ear. "He wouldn't." He looked at Nino. "You wouldn't!"

Nino folded his arms over his chest. "Try me."

They glared at each other. Plagg, still half asleep, started purring again. Nino sighed and checked the time on his smart watch. "I have to go. Can't spend all my time trying to convince a grown ass man to stand up for himself."

"Yeah," Adrien grumbled. He waved Nino off and sagged back against the sofa with a sigh. Nino talked big, but he was just as scared of Adrien's father as everyone else was. If he did make good on his threat, it'd take him a while to gather up the courage to do it. Adrien figured he had until he got back from Chateau Margaux to come clean about his fake relationship.

On the bright side, telling his father he met a nice, pretty girl at a bakery would be much easier than admitting he was in love with someone he met on the internet and had never seen in person.

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
Just now

Only if you're the one doing the kissing. (Hey, my lips are kind of bruised too…)

x.x.x

"See? There you go again," Alya said.
Marinette whined and slapped her cheeks, which were admittedly a little warmer than they needed to be. "It's not a lovesick smile, it's an entertained smile. There's a difference." She shoved her phone between the couch cushions so she wouldn't be tempted to look at it again.

"I don't get what the big deal is. If he's texting you that much, he's definitely into you. Why not tell him you want to be together? Or better yet, just plant one on him." Alya let Marinette's yo-yo unravel. It refused to come back up and spun in circles over the floor. "If you need me and Nino to conveniently disappear during your date, I can arrange that."

"Yeah, I bet you…" Marinette trailed off as the brilliance of the plan struck her. Alya and Nino, disappearing together. Bonding over their little scheme. Meanwhile she would be left alone with Adrien, having a perfectly nice time together. "You'd do that for me?" she said to Alya.

Alya wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "Have I ever not had your back? Just say the word and we're gone."

Inwardly, Marinette rubbed her hands together and cackled. Outwardly she leaned into Alya's embrace and did her best to keep the smirk off her face. "You're the best," she said.

---

**Ladybug**

*RE: 2015*

*Just now*

*Doesn't it embarrass you to say that to someone you've never seen?*

*What if I look like a hag?*

---

**Chat Noir**

*RE: 2015*

*4 minutes ago*

*People with beautiful souls are incapable of being ugly. It's scientific fact.*

*Oh, hey, I wanted to tell you ahead of time that next week is going to be busier than normal for me. If I can't reply to emails during the day, don't freak out. I'm not dead, just working. You'll be bored to tears without your constant source of amusement, I know, but be strong, my Lady! I'll be back to wooing you on the regular next weekend.*

---

**Ladybug**

*RE: 2015*

*Just now*

*Thanks for letting me know.*

*Since all I do is sit around waiting for you to email me, I can finally go grocery shopping.*

*It's been so long since I've eaten…*
Adrien grabbed his computer monitor with both hands. "She's entering?" He pushed his chair back from the desk and launched himself out of it. "She's entering!" he yelled. He let out a triumphant laugh, yanked Plagg off the bed, and ran a lap around his room with a startled cat. "She's entering the competition!"

Sure, there was still no guarantee that he would get to see her. He knew that. Only the best of the best would make it to the final round, and Adrien wasn't the one judging.

But even so, he felt like she was that much closer to him. He didn't know how he'd be able to sleep the next four weeks knowing that the fate of their meeting was to be decided by a panel of prissy designers.

He put Plagg back on the bed and jogged over to his abandoned computer chair. His hands shook with excitement as he typed the most normal response he could muster.

If you don't follow me on Tumblr, you probably don't know that I'm a graduate student in a creative writing program. I wanted to let y'all know updates will remain slow until... next month? The reason being that I'm writing a 65,000 word novel that I have to have finished before November. Fear not! This fic won't be abandoned.

Come bother me on Tumblr at geek-fashionista! (But if you harass me about updates, I will eat you.)
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

In which Marinette is tipsy and Adrien is amused.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ladybug

RE: 2015
27 minutes ago

Lately I've been really into interior design.

Interior design, and pseudoscience.

I'm going to attempt feng shui.

At this point putting something purple in the southeast corner of my bedroom is the only get rich quick scheme I haven't tried.

x.x.x

Adrien walked into Le Grand Paris at three o'clock in the afternoon. A security guard greeted him at the elevator and accompanied him to the floor where Andre and Chloe Bourgeois made their residence. Adrien thanked the guard, strode over to the third door on the left, took a deep breath, turned the handle, and entered the apartment.

He marched past the foyer. Ripped open the first set of plum colored curtains. Stopped by the bathroom to fill the tub with hot water. Resumed his march. Ripped open the second set of plum colored curtains. Lingered at the side of the four-poster bed for a peaceful moment before ripping the sheets away to reveal a sleeping Chloe.

"Get up," he said, "we're going shopping."

Chloe curled up into a ball. "Go by yourself," she spat.

Adrien leaned over and shoved his hands under her until he could scoop her into his arms. Chloe flailed and screamed all the way to the bathroom, where Adrien dropped her into the tub, pajamas and all. Water splashed over the side and ran in every direction.

"We're going shopping," he repeated. "It's nonnegotiable."

He walked out of the bathroom smiling as Chloe hurled verbal abuse after him. He had a fake date tomorrow. Ladybug had decided to enter the design competition. It was going to be a beautiful day.

An hour and a half later they strolled arm in arm through a shopping mall. Chloe, still fuming, glared at anyone who dared to look at them while Adrien took his pick of designer stores. "Do you think Father will kill me if I walk out of the house in Gucci?" he asked.
"I think you and your father need to drop whatever petty war you're fighting and talk to each other like grown men," Chloe replied. "But yes, Gucci will do."

Adrien stared at her. "Are you sure you're not my mother?"

She rolled her eyes. "Adrikins, as much as you try to make these little excursions about me, you're really not fooling anyone." They entered the store and she stroked a leather handbag hanging off the arm of a mannequin. "When was the last time you were truly happy? Don't"—she put a finger over his lips—"answer that, because you're going to say something stupid and I'm going to hit you."

Adrien blinked at her.

"You haven't been yourself since your mom passed away," she continued. "You rebel against your father even though you never bother to tell him why you're unhappy. You're stuck in a career you don't particularly care for. You run a parody Twitter account of yourself to broadcast your cries for help to the internet by laughing at how ridiculously rich and unhappy you are."

"I thought you liked my fake Twitter account," Adrien said.

"I hate your fake Twitter account! All it does is remind me that you're depressed!" Chloe snapped. She jabbed him in the chest. "Talk. To. Your. Father!"

Adrien pushed her hand away and rubbed the crease out of his shirt. "I'm not depressed," he said. Chloe glared at him. "Unhappy, yes, but nothing quite so drastic as mental illness." He didn't add that he wasn't the one being pulled out of bars completely wasted every other weekend. Which reminded him…

He followed Chloe as she wandered over to a display case full of watches. "How did your doctor's appointment go?"

Chloe's eyes narrowed. "Fine."

"Tests came out negative?"

"I said it went fine, didn't I?"

"You slept in until three," Adrien said. He nudged her arm. "People don't normally do that when they receive good news."

"What the hell does good news matter when your body's a ticking time bomb?" Chloe summoned an employee over and pointed out a rose gold watch. "Oh sure," she said, "we celebrate the negative tests now. And in the future, when some part of my body lights up like the Eiffel Tower, who's going to be the one laughing? Me." She snapped the watch into place around her wrist and held it out for Adrien to see. "How does it look?"

"A little big," he said. He wanted to argue with her, to tell her there was no guarantee that she would get sick again, that if she was so afraid of dying she shouldn't have been killing herself with alcohol. But ninety-nine percent of the time those arguments got them nowhere. Besides, he didn't think he was qualified to lecture someone on how they should feel about dying. He pointed out a different watch. "Try that one instead."

Chloe handed the watch back to the employee. "So are we out shopping for a reason, or are you just randomly trying to piss off your father?"
Adrien leaned against the display case. "Actually, yes, there is a reason. I have a fake date tomorrow and I want to make a good impression."

"A fake—" Chloe stopped and glared at him. "What?"

"Remember how I told you I'm trying to hook Nino up with a reporter?" Chloe made a disgusted noise. Yes, she remembered. "Turns out said reporter is Marinette's best friend."

"Marinette… from the bakery?"

"The very same," Adrien said. "We had to find a way to get them together outside of a working environment so they could get a chance to get to talk. I proposed fake dating, Marinette went along with it." He pointed to the second watch. "That's the one."

Chloe stared at him. She stared for such a long time that Adrien became keenly aware he had said something wrong, but for the life of him he couldn't figure out what. Then, Chloe smacked his forehead. "Stupid!" she snapped. "Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

Adrien knocked her hand aside. "What did I do?" he cried.

"If you have to ask, you're even stupider than I imagined!" She hit him once more for good measure, then unclasped the watch so the employee could ring it up for her. Adrien rubbed his forehead.

"Is there some reason I shouldn't be fake dating Marinette?" he asked. "Because she's been pretty cool about the whole thing so far."

"Gee, I wonder why," Chloe said, sarcasm dripping from every word.

Adrien followed Chloe to the register, thinking. There was an insinuation in her response, and it took him a moment to figure out what it was. "Oh," he said, "you think Marinette likes me."

"It is obvious that Marinette likes you."

Adrien crossed his arms over his chest and mulled it over. Marinette liked him. Marine" liked him? He considered her flustered expressions, her unwillingness to talk to him in the months leading up to their friendship, her clumsiness. But she wasn't that shy anymore. If she had a romantic attraction to him, wouldn't she still be nervous when they hung out together? All signs pointed to awkwardness around strangers, not romance. "I think you're wrong about this one, Chloe."

"And I think you're a moron," Chloe said as she took her purchase from the store employee.

Adrien grinned. "But you love this moron."

"I really wish I didn't."

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: 2015
30 minutes ago

Have you tried selling drugs? I hear that can be pretty profitable, but I wouldn't recommend it unless you want to end up dead in an alley somewhere.
Hey, isn't this email thread getting kind of long? We're almost eight months into 2015. Methinks it's time for a new one.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

Summer
Just now

Better?

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**

RE: Summer
Just now

I give it an A for effort.

Random Question: How do you tell if a woman is attracted to you?

x.x.x

Marinette stood in the bakery kitchen with her phone in hand and a perplexed look on her face. She put her other hand on her chest, then moved it to the back of her neck, puzzled by the wave of dread that had crashed over her a moment ago.

Manon's head appeared in the doorway. "You want to come out here and help us, boss? There's a line."

"Just a sec." Marinette hit reply.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

RE: Summer
Just now

Depends on the girl.

Some may act quiet and shy.

Some may put the moves on you directly.

Some may kidnap you, take you to an undisclosed location, and force you to wed them at gunpoint.

Why do you ask?

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**

RE: Summer
2 hours ago

My best friend's convinced that one of our mutual acquaintances has a crush on me, but I think she's just projecting her desire for me to be happy onto random people, which isn't fair to our
mutual acquaintance. What do I do if she starts trying to set me up with her?

Scratch that. She would never try to set me up with anyone.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
*RE: Summer*
*1 hour ago*

*Is she (the mutual acquaintance) cute?*

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
*RE: Summer*
*Just now*

*Well, yes. But you know my heart belongs to you. :)*

x.x.x

Adrien groaned as he crossed a busy intersection seconds before the traffic signal changed. Why did he have to be such a Casanova? Why couldn't he keep his figurative mouth shut? He glared at the email he'd sent, willing it to disappear. Hopefully Ladybug would take that as more of his typical banter and wouldn't detect the truth lurking behind his words.

Hold on. Why did Ladybug want to know if Marinette was cute?

He forced that thought train to a grinding halt. No. He would not go down that path. Ladybug had teased him about finding a girlfriend before. This was nothing new.

After dropping Chloe and her shopping bags back off at the hotel, Adrien had decided to take a walk around Paris. An unexpected meeting cancellation freed up the rest of his afternoon, but without the work, he found himself bored. Nino had gone to visit his parents. Chloe, still disappointed by his incredible ignorance, claimed she didn't feel like looking at him anymore…

Which left Marinette, the subject of the afternoon's dispute.

He checked his phone. The bakery had closed two hours ago, and Adrien already regretted not visiting on the last day before its August break. Would Marinette mind if he dropped in to see her outside of their usual schedule? Should he text her first? He was already close enough to the bakery; it'd be weird to stand across the street waiting for a reply.

The lights in the bakery were still on when Adrien approached. He saw movement inside: Marinette's employees, all dressed in nice clothes, holding champagne glasses and laughing. Adrien smiled at the happy picture, already taking a step back. Far be it from him to interrupt their—

Manon spotted him. "Hey, it's Adrien!" she cried.

Whoops. All the employees turned their heads to look. Adrien waved at them sheepishly. "Adrien!" they cried, raising their glasses in his direction. Manon ran to the front door and unlocked it.

"You're just in time to come celebrate with us," she said as soon as it was open, and pulled him in without waiting for a yes or no. "We need empty stomachs. See, we made Marinette a cake to
thank her for being an awesome boss, but it turns out she'd made *us* a cake, so now we have two cakes and not enough people to eat it all." Manon gestured to a table, where a cake shaped like Marinette's head sat next to a chocolate torte decorated with colorful berries.

Adrien looked around, but he didn't see Marinette anywhere. "Are you sure? I wouldn't want to impose…"

"We're positive. Look at all this cake! And anyway, we owe you for bringing in so much new business," Manon said.

A male employee, whose name Adrien couldn't recall, pressed a glass of champagne into his hand. "Have a drink, Monsieur Agreste! You're working hard on the design competition, right?"

"Do we know if Marinette's entering yet?" another employee, Sophie, asked as she poured herself a drink. "I love her but she sells herself way too short. Have you, like, *seen* the coat she made that doll of hers?" She pointed up at a shelf Adrien hadn't noticed before. "It's crazy detailed."

Adrien stared at the doll, remembering that Marinette had mentioned taking commissions for doll clothes. The ensemble *was* detailed: leather jacket, scarf, even a pair of knee-high boots. It looked like something out of a fall fashion magazine.

If Marinette entered his father's competition, not only would she give Ladybug a run for her money, but she might stand a chance at winning.

A clatter came from the kitchen, along with some colorful profanity. Marinette stumbled in from the back of the bakery wearing a polka-dotted party dress and heels. She carried a Bluetooth speaker in one hand and a drink in the other. "Alright guys, the music has arrived! Now we can officially get this party start—" Her eyes met Adrien's.

Adrien lifted his own drink in greeting. "Hi?"

"Look who we found standing outside!" Manon said, which made Adrien cringe. She made it sound like he'd been stalking the place.

Marinette handed the speaker off to one of the other employees and walked up to Adrien, wobbling a little. Was it the heels, or…? He looked at the drink in her hand. Ah. There was the culprit. "Oh my God," she said, "did they kidnap you? Are they holding you hostage?"

"No, I was just in the neighborhood," Adrien replied as Marinette turned him around to inspect him for injuries. "Didn't know you were having a party."

Marinette released him to play with the ends of her hair. "It's more like a small get together."

"You called it a party a minute ago."

"Did I?"

Adrien took a sip of champagne and willed his inner Chat Noir to stand down. He wanted to mess with her *so bad*. Unfortunately, his inner Chat Noir didn't feel like listening to him. "Gee, Marinette, if I'd known weekends at the bakery were so exciting I would have started dropping by on Saturdays earlier,"

Marinette let out an unladylike snort. "Why *are* you here on a Saturday?" she asked.

"Like I said, I was in the neighborhood." Adrien hesitated. "And bored," he admitted with an
apologetic smile. "I was bored."

Marinette knocked back the rest of her drink. "Well, you have come to the right place." She put the glass on a table and motioned around the room with a broad sweep of her arm. "We have music, alcohol, and cake. The three most important food groups."

"Music is a food group?" Adrien asked.

Marinette stuck her chin out defiantly. "If pizza can be a vegetable then music can be a food group. You should try the torte, by the way. I completely outdid myself."

Adrien's smile widened as Marinette wobbled her way over to the cakes. Manon sidled up next to him. "So, Marinette says you two are getting to know each other better."

"That's right," he said. Had Marinette told her about the fake dating thing?

"Did she tell you she used to babysit me when I was a kid?" Manon leaned in as if she were divulging a big secret. "Between you and me, her babysitting skills? Not that great. But she still tried," she said. "Marinette's the kind of person who always gives a hundred and ten percent. That's why all of us like her so much."

She and Adrien watched Marinette cut a slice of both cakes and heap them onto a plate. "We want to see her happy, not just getting by, you know?"

A routine life where everything is safe and familiar... It's stifling, isn't it? Some days I can hardly breathe.

Adrien did know.

When was the last time you were truly happy?

He had plenty of firsthand experience with just getting by.

You're killing me, dude! When did you become such a pessimist?

"Yeah," he said to Manon. He stared at what was left of his champagne for a moment, then drank it down.

Marinette returned with enough cake for all three of them. "Manon, I hope you're not over here telling Adrien anything embarrassing."

Adrien's inner Chat Noir jumped back in the game, determined to push his blues away. "What's this about you being a crappy babysitter?" he asked.

Marinette groaned. "I was fourteen," she said. She handed him a plate and a dessert spoon. Manon wandered off to join the other employees, presumably to let them be alone together. Smooth, Adrien thought. "At fourteen the only thing you're supposed to be good at is sleeping and playing video games," Marinette complained.

"I don't know, when I was fourteen I was pretty good at fencing. And piano. And Chinese, and basketball, and modeling, and sleeping..." Adrien dug his spoon into the chocolate torte. "But I sucked at video games."

Marinette put a hand on her hip. "Hey, handsome boy, the cost of making the rest of us look bad is more expensive booze."

"Yeah!" Manon chimed in around a mouthful of cake.
"Yeah! Whatever Marinette said!" the male employee crowed from across the room.

Adrien raised an eyebrow at Marinette. Handsome boy? Her lips pulled up into a smirk and he almost forgot the cake in his desire to think up an adequate comeback. But instead he sampled the chocolate torte and nearly wept as the cocoa and berries came together in a glorious symphony of flavor. "This is delicious," he said.

Marinette's cockiness turned into a flush of pleasure that, to Adrien's tired eyes, seemed to make her entire body glow. "Really?"

Adrien took another bite. "Absolutely."

She bit down on her smile and tapped the corner of her mouth. "You got some on your face."

"Hmm?" Adrien swiped at his cheek with his finger. "Where?"

Marinette put a hand on his shoulder, leaned in, and kissed his cheek.

Adrien's eyes shot open.

"Putting on a show, fake boyfriend," she whispered. She drew back, winked at him, then turned and walked to her group of employees with only a slight wobble in her step.

Adrien resisted the urge to laugh out loud. Of all the things he would have expected from Marinette, that was not one of them. Did he blame the alcohol? No. Perhaps it helped, but he'd seen hints of impishness in her before. In fact, he almost would have said that Marinette had an inner Chat Noir of her own.

Which would make tomorrow's fake date endlessly entertaining.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

RE: Summer

17 minutes ago

You have got to stop saying that.

Speaking of happiness, how are you these days?

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**

RE: Summer

5 minutes ago

Me? I'm doing well. Better. Busier than ever, but maybe all I needed was to feel more productive?

I don't know. It's hard to say. Things aren't perfect (if they were, I'd be dating you by now) but they're not terrible either.

…which is exactly how I would have answered this question two months ago.

How about you?

x.x.x
**Ladybug**  
*RE: Summer*  
*Just now*

*Considering that I am seriously thinking about feng shui?*

*My approach to life has officially changed from "keeping a low profile" to "winging it."*

*(With mixed results, I might add.)*

X.X.X

**Chat Noir**  
*RE: Summer*  
*Just now*

*Hey, as long as you're winging it, you want to go out to dinner next weekend? :D*

X.X.X

**Ladybug**  
*RE: Summer*  
*Just now*

*Nice try.*

Chapter End Notes

The first draft of my thesis novel is complete! Thank you for your support, everyone.  
It means a lot to me.

Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista)!
Marinette lay flat on her back, staring dismally at her bedroom ceiling. There was a trapdoor over her head that led to a balcony where she'd spent much of her time as a teenager, sunbathing on sunny days, tending her little rooftop garden, hanging out with friends, or just plain thinking. At her current level of regret, she envisioned herself climbing through the trapdoor, up to that balcony, and taking an enthusiastic leap off the roof of her house.

She had a fake date with Adrien that night. Adrien Agreste, who she had kissed on the cheek and called handsome boy not even twenty-four hours ago. A date during which her best friend planned to ditch her so she could be alone with Adrien, whose cheek she had kissed, whose appearance she had complimented. To his face. In a brazen display of her inability to hold her alcohol.

She groaned.

It had taken a monumental effort not to run screaming to Chat Noir after it was all said and done. She'd wanted to, but guessed he wouldn't like hearing about how she'd kissed a guy who wasn't him. She picked up her phone and glared at it. What was the point of having a best friend she couldn't tell everything?

Not that anything was stopping her. She could tell him.

And after that she could admit that the reason she had ended up tipsy in the first place was to cope with her irrational fear of losing him to some cute acquaintance.

Her urge to jump off the roof intensified.

Determined to keep her sanity intact, Marinette turned her thoughts away from the night before. There were better things to dwell upon, like the fact that she didn't have to go to work the next day, or the next day, or the day after that. She untangled herself from her bedsheets and climbed down from the loft. Her right foot landed on top of a wadded-up piece of sketch paper.

Oh. Right. There was the design competition, too. Her bedroom floor was a minefield of discarded ideas, but their sacrifice had not been in vain. On her computer were two designs, one male and one female, finalized and ready to submit as soon as the contest opened. No turning back. No chickening out. The worst they could do was confirm that she wasn't as good as the other designers, which didn't necessarily make her bad, just not best. She let out a weak laugh. If only she had the confidence to believe that.

Marinette washed her face while she waited for her phone to turn on. She hadn't always been so shaky. Her younger self charged into every activity, every competition with enough confidence for ten people. She never let minor setbacks determine how she felt about herself. Alya used to call her
fearless.

But the Marinette of the past did not know pain like the Marinette of the present did. She didn't know what it was like to be kissing the sky one moment, then hitting the cold ground and shattering into a million pieces the next.

Lucky her.

The phone chimed with an email notification.

X.X.X

**Chat Noir**
*RE: Summer*
*2 hours ago*

_It should be illegal to work on Sundays. Wait…_*

_Good morning, buginette. It should be illegal to work on Sundays._

As I write this, you're probably sleeping in like I wish I was. Please enjoy it for the both of us. In fact, please sleep an extra four hours for me. Perhaps the power of my undying love for you will forge a connection between us and allow me to feel rested.

I'm so tired, I'm going to cry.

X.X.X

**Ladybug**
*RE: Summer*
*Just now*

_You don't usually work on Sundays._

_Did you change jobs?_

_(Good morning, by the way.)_

X.X.X

**Chat Noir**
*RE: Summer*
*Just now*

_I didn't. It's part of the preparation for this upcoming week, which will be insanely busy. Sorry again for any and all future absences. If only I could email you for a living…_

X.X.X

**Ladybug**
*RE: Summer*
*Just now*

_What do you do for a living, Chat Noir?_

X.X.X
Adrien's face warmed. He stowed his phone and schooled his expression into one of professional interest as the director of the fragrance commercial continued briefing his team on his grand vision.

Ladybug wanted to know what Chat Noir did for a living. Okay. No need to freak out. Never mind that this was the same woman who insisted they shouldn't share personal information with each other, now asking him for personal information. It didn't mean anything. Just like her curiosity about Marinette didn't mean anything.

"Is something amusing, Monsieur Agreste?" the director asked.

Adrien hadn't realized he was smiling. "Nope."

His phone buzzed again.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

RE: Summer

Just now

*Sorry. You don't have to answer that.*

x.x.x

Marinette paced the length of her small kitchen. "Oh God, what's wrong with me today?" she whined. She dumped the phone on the counter and went to the refrigerator in search of breakfast.

Of course Chat Noir hadn't replied to her email. He, too, probably wondered what had gotten into her, and at this point she welcomed his speculations. Marinette grabbed a tub of yogurt, a carton of orange juice, and the mixed berries she'd used for her chocolate torte. A nice, healthy smoothie would fix her right up.

It was all Adrien's fault. If he hadn't come to the bakery last night, he wouldn't have been dragged into the party, she wouldn't have been tempted to kiss his cheek, and she wouldn't be prying into Chat Noir's personal life to distract herself from the fact that her *lips had touched Adrien Agreste's body* and he hadn't called to cancel their fake date yet.

Her phone chimed. Marinette handled it the way she might have handled a grenade.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**

RE: Summer

4 seconds ago

*I work in marketing.*

*You?*

x.x.x

Adrien tapped his fingers on the table. His co-star for the commercial, another famous French model named Ange Simon, spared him a glance. Marketing. Not far from the truth. He used his body to market his father's products to the young and beautiful people the advertisements targeted. Ladybug hadn't asked for specifics.
But lobbing the question back at her had been a risky move. His heart raced in anticipation of her reply. Would she tell him outright? Would she get mad at him for volunteering the information when she told him not to?

His screen lit up. Adrien waited until the director's back was turned to sneak a glance at Ladybug's email.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

RE: Summer
21 seconds ago

Sales.

x.x.x

Sales. Marinette laughed at her own joke as she waited for the blender to finish obliterating her smoothie. She *was* a salesperson. Every day she woke up at dawn, baked a ton of pastries, then charmed customers into buying them.

She imagined Chat Noir working at some nice company, dressed in a suit. A nine-to-five kind of guy who carried a briefcase and drank no less than four cups of coffee a day. She imagined him, jaded and tired, sitting at a conference table, sneaking emails to her with a discreet little smile on his face.

Her heart skipped a beat.

How did Chat Noir imagine her? With an answer like "sales" he'd probably drawn a mental picture not unlike hers: a young woman who worked for a company and drank no less than four cups of coffee a day. Or, considering her interest in fashion, he might have pictured a boutique employee. Marinette wouldn't have minded working in a boutique—one that sold her own designs, of course.

Her phone chimed as she poured her smoothie into a glass.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**

RE: Summer
13 seconds ago

Sales, huh? I can see that. We've known each other for what, a year? You could have sold me a private jet two months into our acquaintance.

Wait a minute... we've known each other for a year. A YEAR. Ladybug! Do you know what this means? We have an anniversary to celebrate! It might have passed already, but I still think we should do something special.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

RE: Summer
Just now

Aren't you supposed to be busy?
We could always watch another movie together.

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Only if I pick the movie this time. Your taste in films makes me question my feelings for you.

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

Rude.

By the time the meeting ended, Adrien had an extensive list of foods he wasn't allowed to eat for the next few days—the price of being a model—and a burning desire to run from his responsibilities. He spent the ride back to the mansion fantasizing about buying a motorcycle and driving far, far away, his Lady's arms wrapped around his waist...

A noise from Nathalie's tablet pulled Adrien out of his daydream. "Your father wishes to speak with you," she announced.

Just what he needed. "Let me guess: right this minute?"

"That is correct."

He wondered if his father had found out about the Gucci purchases. Then a more horrifying idea struck him: what if Nino had made good on his threat to tell Gabriel about Marinette? The car stopped for traffic and Adrien considered opening the door, somersaulting into the street, and making a break for it. He'd buy the motorcycle, ask Ladybug if she wanted to elope with him, pick her up, wait until the mansion was abandoned to sneak in and rescue Plagg, then hightail it to Italy, where he and his Lady would change their surnames to De Luca and live off grapes and bread until he got a stable job as an eccentric-yet-lovable painter—

Or he could go talk to his father like an adult.

When the car pulled into the Agreste mansion's formidable garage, Adrien climbed out and attempted to straighten his tie. Chloe was much better at tying them. The temptation to call her whispered in his ear, but knowing Chloe, she'd hang up on him the moment she figured out he was trying to get out of a conversation with his father.

He marched into the house with grim determination. Colette stood in the foyer.

"Good afternoon, Monsieur Agreste," she cried, her voice shrill in the way many peoples' voices were after a personal encounter with Gabriel Agreste. "All the arrangements for this week's meetings have been made. You have a Skype conference with the after party's caterers as soon as you complete shooting tomorrow, then the following day—"

Adrien cut her off with a hand on her shoulder. "Colette, isn't it Sunday? You should be at home
with your family."

She darted a nervous glance from him to the door behind which his father undoubtedly waited. "But…"

"If the arrangements are done, just email the schedule to me. I'll look it over this evening." Adrien gave her shoulder a reassuring pat, then kept walking. Let that be his last good deed before his father killed him.

He opened the door to Gabriel's office and was surprised to find the desk vacant. He turned his head. His father crouched beside one of three mannequins that inhabited his office, scrutinizing a gown Adrien had never seen before.

"How was the meeting?" Gabriel asked without looking at him.

Adrien closed the office door. "Great," he said, then added, "the director's vision is… something else."

This time Gabriel leveled him with a don't start glare. "He is the best in the business. Please take his instructions seriously."

Adrien clucked his tongue to avoid reminding his father that he always took his mind-numbing, soul-sucking job seriously. He didn't want to risk pissing Gabriel off further if Nino had indeed dropped the Marinette bomb. Adrien gathered up his courage and moved straight to the point. "Is that all you wanted to know?" he asked, keeping his tone casual.

Gabriel's frown relaxed. "Yes and no," he said, and Adrien braced himself for the question. "Do you have plans this evening?"

That… was so far from what Adrien had expected that the air whooshed out of him as if someone had poked a hole in his stomach. Gabriel continued. "I thought that since you will be gone this week, and I will be gone next week, perhaps tonight we can have dinner and discuss the progress of the design competition."

Business dinner. Thrilling. Adrien mentally kicked himself and tried to see the situation from an outside perspective. Chloe would have called this progress, an opportunity to have an honest, one-on-one conversation with his father that involved neither games nor passive-aggressive comments.

Marinette's playful smile flashed through Adrien's mind. He winced. Chloe was going to kick his ass. "I'm sorry, father. I already made plans for this evening."

Gabriel paused in his work. "Ah," he said. "Well, I suppose it was rather last minute."

A storm of guilt brewed in Adrien's stomach. He hated that instantaneous response to disappointing his father. It made him feel like he was fifteen again, grieving and scared and anxious to please so he wouldn't be left alone in that enormous house with all his mother's belongings and none of her.

He shook it off. Dinner or no dinner, this was still an opportunity. If Nino hadn't told Gabriel about Marinette, then Adrien had a chance to break it to his father before he learned it from someone else. He took a deep breath. "It's just that you've always stressed the importance of making good first impressions…" Perfect start. Flatter his father first to soften the blow.

Gabriel looked up, blinking in the way that signaled to Adrien that he'd been lost in Designer Land. "What?"
Adrien made a note to apologize to Marinette later. Apologize and bring her flowers. And chocolates. And maybe a new car. "I'm going on a date," he said.

The Designer Land haze left his father's eyes, soft and malleable blue turning to steel. "A date," he echoed. A statement, not a question. "With who?"

Adrien summoned his most charming model smile. "It's not serious, if that's what you're worried about. We're just getting to know each other right now—testing the waters—and trying to decide if it's anything worth—"

"With who, Adrien?"

He sighed. "Her name is Marinette Dupain-Cheng. She's nice."

Gabriel stood from his crouch. Even though Adrien had grown to match his father's height, he'd become so used to Gabriel towering over him that his perception had never caught up. Whenever they were in the same room together, Adrien felt like the shorter man. "And where did you meet this woman?"

"Her parents own the bakery on Rue Gotlib," Adrien said. "But they're abroad taking care of a sick relative, and Marinette has been running the business since."

"A baker," Gabriel said, his mouth twisting around the word as if it tasted sour.

"It's a perfectly respectable trade."

"Of course it is. But have you stopped to ask yourself what a baker's daughter might want from you?"

Adrien felt the insult on Marinette's behalf. "I'm the one who asked her on a date," he said, "and if I'd had the slightest suspicion that she was after my money, I wouldn't have. But it's nice to see how little faith you have in my judgment."

"You're absolutely right I have no faith in your judgment, considering your last relationship was a fling with a woman you didn't even care about," Gabriel snapped. "You may resent me if you damn well please, but for God's sake, don't hurt yourself just to prove a point."

"All it does is remind me that you're depressed."

Adrien flinched. The fight went out of him. All of the sudden, he couldn't look his father in the eye.

"May I be excused?" he asked.

He could feel Gabriel's gaze on him. A long moment passed. "You may go," Gabriel said.

Adrien left the office without another word.

x.x.x

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: Hey, I'm sorry if I crossed the line with the fake flirting yesterday. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable.

Adrien Agreste: No lines were crossed. Actually, I thought the whole thing was pretty funny.
Marinette Dupain-Cheng: Are you sure?

Adrien Agreste: Positive. We're still on for tonight, right?

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: Right. I'll see you then.

x.x.x

Marinette put on the off-shoulder blouse that Alya had threatened her into wearing for her date and stood back to admire the ensemble. High waisted skinny jeans, heels, freckled shoulders exposed, and sensible earrings. She pinned her hair up into a messy bun. Perfect.

The restaurant Marinette had chosen was romantic, but not too high end. She and Nathanael had often gone there to celebrate the completion of art projects. Their favorite table had a view of the kitchen door, so that Nathanael could do quick sketches of the wait staff’s expressions before they fixed their fake how-may-I-help-you smiles back into place. Marinette would watch over his shoulder as his pencil dashed across the page, amazed by his speed, proud that she could call someone so talented her boyfriend…

She caught herself staring blankly at her reflection and put on a fake smile of her own. None of that. Tonight was about her and Adrien—Alya and Nino. She sighed. Whoever it was about, it didn't include Nathanael.

Marinette checked her phone. Chat Noir hadn't emailed her back, so whenever he got around to it, he’d have to wait for her response. She hoped he'd gone home and taken a nap.

She left the house at a quarter to six. The summer heat rolled off the ground and warmed her body, rejuvenating her. Now that she had time to spare, she needed to get out of the house more often. All of Paris waited to be explored. She'd become frightfully pale over the cold months; a dip in a swimming pool would fix her right up. Or a trip to the beach. Her eyes lit up with mischief. Would Adrien be interested in dragging Alya and Nino to the beach with them? She'd have to run it by him sometime during dinner.

She rounded a corner and found herself on a familiar street. She kept her eyes focused ahead of her, determined not to look up at the windows of the apartment she and Nathanael had once shared. The fact that it was on the way to the restaurant had completely slipped her mind.

Memories came back anyway. Sunny afternoons in the kitchen making dinner together. The time she'd made a suggestion that inspired him so much he pulled her off the couch and waltzed her around the living room. When artist's block struck one or both of them and they threw drawing prompts at each other until it cleared.

They'd been the picture of domestic bliss, too good to be true. And now all that remained was an empty apartment.

Marinette picked up her pace and cleared the street before her traitorous eyes could search the face of the building.

The restaurant came into view. She checked the time on her phone: a couple minutes early. Alya's plan was to send a text pretending to be running late, then she would invent some emergency to keep herself away from the restaurant.

A car pulled up to the curb ahead. Marinette recognized the enormous silhouette of Adrien's driver and a nervous flutter started up in her stomach. The passenger door opened. Adrien climbed out
wearing a dress shirt, slacks, and the nicest shoes Marinette had ever seen in her life. He leaned over to say something to his driver, then straightened and waved him off.

Her chest tightened when Adrien spotted her. How could any one person be so ridiculously attractive?

"You look nice," he said, and smirked at her. "Going on a date?"

Marinette giggled. "Something like that." She followed Adrien over to the restaurant window so they could talk without interrupting pedestrian traffic. "I really am sorry about yesterday," she said. Even though she had his assurance that he hadn't been put off by her tipsy boldness, she felt the need to say it again. And again. And again, but that might have gotten on his nerves. "I have this bad habit of… over-drinking when I'm upset."

"Could be worse," Adrien said. "You could have a bad habit of over-drinking when you're perfectly fine." He tilted his head. "Why were you upset?"

Marinette froze. Crap. She should have known he would ask. No way in hell was she going to tell Adrien about Chat Noir when she hadn't even told Alya. Or her parents. "I'm always a little sad to see the bakery close, even if I am grateful for the month off," she said. It wasn't the truth, but it was a truth.

Adrien nodded in acceptance of her excuse. "You're such a hard worker, Marinette. If I got a month off from my job, I'd probably spend it on an island somewhere." He frowned. "Then again, I might go stir crazy if I had nothing to do. Have you decided whether you're going to enter the design competition?"

The million-dollar question. "I am definitely entering," Marinette replied. She put on a stern expression. "And don't you dare push me into the finals just because I'm your fake girlfriend."

Adrien huffed. "You prissy designers and your need to do things the hard way." He grinned at her. "Don't worry, even if I was in a position to do such a thing, I wouldn't insult your talent like that." He withdrew his phone from his pocket and glanced at the screen. "Just got a text from Nino…"

Marinette felt her phone vibrate and took it out of her purse. Alya's phony excuse text, right on schedule. To her surprise, Adrien laughed out loud. He held out his phone so Marinette could see the message.

Nino Lahiffe: Got accosted by Alya on the way to the restaurant and long story short you're on your own. Good luck bro!

"Let me guess," Adrien said, "you just got a similar text from Alya?"

Marinette tried to envision Nino getting accosted by Alya on his way to the restaurant. She imagined her best friend leaping out from behind a bush and dragging him off the street—which, knowing Alya, was entirely possible.

"I admit that I knew this was coming," Marinette said. "Alya hatched this little scheme the other day. I almost discouraged her from it, but then I realized that if she and Nino were off somewhere giving us privacy, they'd have a chance for some privacy of their own."

"So they planned to play us, but really they played themselves." Adrien's smile widened. "Marinette, you continue to amaze me."

"It wouldn't be a date if I wasn't doing my best to amaze," Marinette said. She channeled her tipsy
self for boldness and looped her arm through Adrien's. "Now let's get some food. Alya's going to want to spy on this evening from a safe distance. I guarantee she and Nino are somewhere nearby, making sure our date goes well."

They walked into the restaurant and claimed their reservation. When Adrien told the host the rest of their party wouldn't be joining them, they were led to a table for two in a cozy, candlelit nook that made Marinette's heart beat faster. Romantic atmosphere. Attractive, playful and flirtatious date. Perhaps Alya's plan could work in her favor.

Marinette watched Adrien as he picked up the menu and flipped it open. If only he wasn't so hard to read. That cheerful attitude of his seemed impregnable.

After only a few seconds, Adrien closed the menu and put it down again. Marinette was surprised to find his smile had vanished. "Before we order a potentially insufficient amount of wine, I need to apologize to you, too."

Alarms sounded in Marinette's head. "Umm… why?"

"I told my father I was going on a date tonight, and he didn't take it very well."


Adrien looked embarrassed. "It's my fault. I haven't been very smart about my past relationships, so he assumes I'll screw the next one up—which is likely, if I'm being completely honest—but you and I aren't even in a real relationship. It was wrong of me to direct his anger towards someone who doesn't deserve it. I only told him because Nino threatened to tell him for me, and that would have been worse."

"And it never occurred to you to tell him that this is a fake date?" Marinette asked, her voice bordering on hysteria.

"Knowing my father, he would have taken that even worse. He's never really approved of my friendship with Nino."

Some of Marinette's panic gave way to pity. She could understand a parent disapproving of a friend if they weren't a good influence, but from what little time she'd spent with Nino, she found him to be a perfectly nice guy. Nice enough to approve of him wooing her best friend, who Marinette would have killed for. "It can't be helped," she said. "I'm only your fake girlfriend, so if your father doesn't approve of us being together it's… no great loss." She wondered if that sounded as hollow to Adrien as it did to her. "I'm happy to take the bullet if it means our friends have a chance at something real."

Adrien stared at her, his expression pained. "Are you sure?" he asked.

The only way she could see it being a problem was if she won the design competition, and if that happened, being selected by Gabriel Agreste ought to be proof enough that she had won his favor. "I'm absolutely positive," Marinette said. "Call me martyr for the cause of true love."

Adrien reached across the table and took her hand. "Even though you're not my real girlfriend, I've done nothing to deserve you."

Marinette felt the blush rise to her cheeks and cursed it for not taking the hint. Her chances with Adrien had been destroyed before she'd even gotten the chance to destroy them herself. And yet, she didn't feel as disappointed about it as she could have. No matter what happened, she still had his friendship, and that was every bit as important as a romantic relationship—though a romantic
relationship would have been nice. Very nice. Even now she felt a pang of regret when he let go of her hand.

After they'd ordered their food, Marinette decided to break the silence with a personal question. "You said you haven't been smart about past relationships. What does that mean?"

Adrien cringed. "It means I've been with a grand total of two women, and dated both for all the wrong reasons." He unfolded his cloth napkin and spread it on his lap. "I dated Chloe because she asked me to. Renée… because I wanted to piss off my father, and she offered to help me with that. Among other things." He took a hasty sip of water.

Marinette observed his nervous behavior and the meaning of "other things" clicked into place. "Ah," she said. Her surprise must have registered on her face because Adrien hurried to clarify. "It was two years ago," he said. "A younger, stupider me."

Marinette leaned forward. "You haven't been with anyone in two years?"

"Who has the time?" Adrien dragged his finger through the condensation on his water glass. "Most days I'm surrounded by other models, and the ones I know all love a good party. Younger me would have loved that. Chloe and I used to hit those parties every week, before…"

He trailed off and Marinette tilted her head, waiting for him to continue. There was an odd look on his face, like his thoughts had stranded him in the middle of a vast lake. Then he smiled at her, and happy Adrien was back, just like that. "Anyway, I decided the parties weren't worth the hangovers and cleaned myself up. It's hard to meet people when you don't inhabit their same social circles, but it is what it is."

"Have you tried online dating?" Marinette asked.

Was it her imagination, or did Adrien blush? "No. I haven't. A lot of people swear by it, but I doubt my father would approve."

Marinette started piecing together the puzzle of Adrien Agreste in her mind. He didn't seem happy with his job. He rebelled against his father, but also sought his approval. He snuck away to bakeries after hours for some peace of mind.

And he'd never been in love. Marinette's heart swelled with pity. Her life may not have been going the way she wanted, but at least she could say she'd experienced love before.

She watched Adrien draw circles on his glass and a picture came to mind: a boy growing up in the public eye, walking in his father's shadow, head down, committing small acts of rebellion—a friend here, a pastry there—in an attempt to carve out his own life.

"Adrien?"

He lifted his head. "Hmm?"

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Adrien let out a short laugh. She'd caught him off guard. "Are you serious? Twenty-six isn't considered grown up?"

Marinette waited.
His smile faded a little, but he managed to catch it before it slipped away entirely. "I'm a model," he said.

"Yeah, so you've probably got another year left in you before you get retired to department store advertisements for middle aged men—no offense," Marinette said. She leaned forward, determined. He'd deflected her question. Could it be that no one had ever asked him? "When you're done with the model scene, what will you do?"

"I'll... help handle the business end of the Agreste label?"

She narrowed her eyes. "You don't sound very sure about that."

Adrien stared at her helplessly. "I mean, I have a master's in business administration. That seems like the most logical course of action."

"But...?"

He laughed again. Shook his head. Averted his gaze. Drummed his fingers on the table, then caught himself doing it and curled his hand into a fist. "When I was working towards my degree, my coworkers used to joke that I was too smart to be a model," he said. "They said it wasn't fair that I'd been blessed with good looks and intelligence, but really I just spent most of my free time studying. Math and science were my best subjects."

Marinette frowned. "Why didn't you come to the bakery years ago? I could have used your help."

"Wow, a girl who's only interested in me for my brain. That's a first," Adrien joked, and the two of them laughed together. He took a sip of his water, then set the cup down. "I did tutor some of the other models when they needed help. I had fun doing it, and they told me I was good at it, so... I kind of toyed with the idea of being a teacher for a while."

"A teacher," Marinette said. She could see that. He'd be the one that all the students adored, that the older female teachers either fell head over heels for or tried to set up with their young daughters.

"Yup. Then I remembered that the sight of me in a tweed jacket would more than likely kill my father, and that was the end of that." Adrien shrugged. "But modeling and business aren't bad alternatives. I have firsthand experience with the fashion world that others trying to land a job with my father's company don't have, and that's nothing to be ungrateful about." He gestured to Marinette. "Your turn. What do you want to be when you grow up?"

The waiter swung by and filled their wine glasses as invisibly as possible. "You really don't know?" Marinette asked.

"I do, but you must have a plan."

"My plan is to enter your father's design competition and win it." She surprised herself with the confident declaration, considering how little confidence she had to spare. "And if that fails, I don't know. I pat myself on the back for trying and become a pastry chef."

"You'd make a good pastry chef," Adrien said. "However, at least one of us should get to have our dreams come true, so I'll be cheering for you." He picked up his wine glass and held it out to her. Marinette picked hers up as well. "A toast to Marinette Dupain-Cheng: fashion designer."

"A toast to Alya and Nino, who have hopefully taken advantage of this evening we have so graciously provided for them," Marinette said, if only to get the attention off herself. Still, she
could do nothing about the rush of excitement that traveled through her body. *Marinette Dupain-Cheng, fashion designer.* She loved the sound of it more than she was willing to admit.

They stuck to neutral topics for the rest of dinner: fashion trends, weather, favorite foods, Nino and Alya, work. Adrien ranted about the director of the fragrance commercial with such passion that Marinette was in hysters by the end of the meal. But she also couldn't help feeling sad for Adrien, using his good humor to mask how much he didn't want to do the commercial. He reminded her of herself, smiling as her relationship crumbled, pretending it was okay when leaving was the exact opposite of what she wanted.

The sun had set by the time they stepped out of the restaurant. They set off towards the bakery together, Marinette's heart growing a little heavier with each step. A summer night, a handsome guy.

No chance at romance.

In another life, she and Adrien were on a real date. One that had gone incredibly well. One that would end on her doorstep, where a warm breeze would push them together and their lips would meet and fireworks would burst across the sky, either before or after a romantic song and dance number. Then he would quit modeling and fulfill his dream of becoming a teacher. Cue the happily ever after.

But this was not that life. They did end up on her doorstep, but no warm breeze encouraged him to close the distance between them. They stood, as friends, on opposite sides of a conservative gap.

Until Marinette caught Alya and Nino ducking behind the building at the end of the alley.

"We were followed," she whispered.

Adrien started to turn. "What?"

"Don't look!" Marinette hissed, and he turned back around in a hurry. "Alya and Nino are spying on us. They're standing around the corner."

Adrien's eyes lighted with mischief. "We should bust them."

"Absolutely," Marinette said.

"But first…” Adrien lifted a hand to her cheek, leaned in, and planted a kiss right beside her mouth. To a nosy couple standing at a distance it would have looked like a real kiss, and though the whole thing was an act, the way Marinette's eyes fluttered shut in that moment was one hundred percent genuine. Adrien turned his head to whisper in her ear. "Putting on a show, fake girlfriend."

A ridiculously high pitched giggle burst from Marinette's mouth. She cleared her throat, snapped on a frown, and looked past Adrien. "Hey, you two! Aren't you ashamed of yourselves, stalking your best friends like this?"

"We're not here," Nino's voice answered back, followed by an "Oww!" then a much quieter "Where are we going…?"

Marinette shook her head and sighed. "He is so dead."

A car horn honked. She and Adrien recognized his driver parked at the other end of the alley, waiting. Adrien took a step back. "Guess I'd better go. Tomorrow will be a long day," he said.
Marinette fiddled with the strap of her purse. Her cheek still tingled from his kiss. "You can text me," she offered. "If you're bored or something. And I expect pictures of Chateau Margaux. You can't just go to a place like that and not take pictures."

Adrien nodded. "I'll do that. See you when I get back in town?"

"Yeah," she said. She watched his retreating figure, thinking of how she used to see him: glamorous, unattainable, walking out of her mundane life and into the dazzling sun where she'd never be able to reach him. "Adrien."

He looked back at her.

"It's not too late for your dreams to come true," she said, "so I'll be cheering for you, too."

He stood rooted to the spot for a few seconds, then the corners of his mouth turned upwards. He lifted his hand in a wave. She waved back, and waited until his car pulled away before unlocking the door and stepping into the bakery.

The kitchen was clean and silent, the storefront beyond it dark, curtains drawn over every window. Marinette removed her heels and walked up the stairs to her front door. She let herself into the quiet house, switched on the lights and dropped her shoes beside the umbrella stand. Then she raised a hand to her cheek.

There may have been no chance for romance, but it didn't stop her from celebrating the little things.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

RE: Summer

1 minute ago

*Oh God oh God oh God I can't do this*

**CHAT NOIR I CAN'T DO THIS.**

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**

RE: Summer

Just now

*It's midnight, so I assume this is the design competition you're freaking out about. Ladybug. Take a deep breath. Have you filled out your entry form? Are the files attached?*

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

RE: Summer

Just now

*Yes.*

*I can't do this.*

*Why did I ever think I could do this?*
Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Because you know deep down that you can. Because you believe in yourself as much as I believe in you.

Breathe, Ladybug. Click submit, then go to sleep and fur-get about it! You'll be fine.

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

I'm going to throw up.

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Throw up if you must, but not before you CLICK SUBMIT. Do it right now. Do it as soon as you read this. Don't let it wait until morning. Don't put it off for one more second.

If your next email doesn't read "I did it" I'm going to ignore you... for like half an hour, if I even last that long.

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

I did it.

I'm going to go throw up now.

Good night, Chat Noir.

(And thank you.)

Adrien smiled at his phone and set it down next to his open suitcase. Plagg, who sat loafing on the other side of the suitcase, stared at the phone with mild disinterest. "I know what you're thinking," Adrien said, "and the answer is no, you cannot beg the kitchen staff for camembert while I'm out of town. I've left strict instructions for them."

Plagg blinked at him. Adrien scratched under his chin. "I'll be back on Friday." He packed the rest of his clothes and flipped the suitcase shut with a sigh. "Who am I kidding, you don't know what Friday is. Just please don't die of loneliness while I'm gone. It'd be very histrionic of you."
He zipped up the suitcase and lowered it to the floor, then picked up his phone again and sat next to Plagg. His bedroom was silent except for Plagg's contented purring. Adrien laid back, closed his eyes…

…and saw Marinette standing by her door with her earnest expression and freckled shoulders.

*It's not too late for your dreams to come true, so I'll be cheering for you, too.*

He closed Ladybug's email and opened his messages.

X.X.X

**Adrien Agreste: Good luck with the competition, Marinette. You're going to be great.**

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Chapter End Notes

Just found out that I got straight A's again this semester! Thank you everyone for your support. You have no idea how much it means to me.

Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista).
Marinette woke up a little after eight in the morning. She almost panicked, thinking she'd slept through her alarm and forgotten to open the bakery, but then she remembered that it was August. One entire month of government ordained vacation for every bakery in her district. Doubtlessly there were others like her, sleeping in—or at least trying to. Or maybe they'd packed their families into their cars at the crack of dawn and headed for the nearest beach. Not a bad idea.

Marinette rose, stretched, popped open her skylight and climbed out onto the balcony. The morning sun warmed her face, filling her with unbridled joy. She went through an entire yoga routine. Watered her flowers. Watched the pedestrian traffic below until her stomach nagged at her to go indoors for breakfast.

Her phone vibrated with an email from Chat Noir the moment she turned it on.

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
1 hour ago

Good morning, Ladybug! Have you stopped throwing up yet? I hope so, because maintaining such a high level of anxiety while waiting for the results doesn't sound healthy. Your heart can't stop beating before I steal it from you. ;)

Jokes aside, this may be the only free time I have to email you until tonight, so have a beautiful day, my beautiful bug. I'll be with you in spirit.

Disappointment stung Marinette in the heart. What was the point of having all the time in the world to email Chat Noir if he was too busy to talk?

Oh well. She had other things to do. For starters, the apartment needed to be scrubbed from head to toe because her mother would have a heart attack if she found out how much dust Marinette allowed to accumulate on the furniture. Second, she had to go grocery shopping, because now that she had the time to cook she planned on trying out all the recipes she'd been adding to her Pinterest board.

And third...

She opened her text message inbox and cringed.
Alya Cesaire: OH MY GOD ADRIEN KISSED YOU

Alya Cesaire: WHY THE HELL AREN'T YOU TEXTING ME FREAKING OUT RIGHT NOW

Alya Cesaire: I SWEAR IF YOU'RE ASLEEP I'M GOING TO END YOU

Alya Cesaire: Sorry, I just remembered the design competition. You entered it right? Are you dead?

Alya Cesaire: MARI IF YOU'RE ALIVE PLEASE TEXT ME

Marinette sent a reply to confirm that she was, in fact, still alive, but she said nothing about Adrien. She wasn't trying to be coy, she just didn't know what to tell Alya.

Yes, Adrien had kissed her. A fake kiss. Although, how fake could a kiss be if his lips actually touched her skin? Real kiss, then, but not the kind of kiss Alya thought, and no sentiment conveyed beyond friendship and playfulness. *Putting on a show, fake girlfriend.* Marinette hid her flushed face behind her hands. How dare he turn her own words against her?

He'd also sent her a text sometime last night, but she'd turned her phone off after emailing Chat Noir so she had no way of knowing what time he'd sent it. She smiled as she typed out a quick thanks and hit send, hoping Adrien wasn't in the middle of something important. Then she left her phone on the kitchen counter, determined to get her chores done without interruption.

It was the first day of her adult summer vacation. Work now, play later.

x.x.x

Adrien entered a dimly lit room with all the seduction and power of a big cat on the prowl. A few feet away, on a large and luxurious bed was Ange Simon, reclining on her elbows with one perfectly tanned leg bent at the knee, allowing her dress to ride up her thigh just enough to tease. Her smoky eyes burned into his. Her lips parted invitingly, beckoning him forward, and he obeyed.

He reached up and undid his tie with practiced ease. His other hand lighted on Ange's smooth thigh and traveled up, up, up as he crouched over her, and her half-lidded eyes became hazy with desire, and her chest heaved from the sheer force of his masculinity—

"Cut!"

Adrien pulled his hand away from Ange's leg so fast that he nearly hit himself in the face with it. She arched an eyebrow at him. "Sorry," he whispered. "It's not you, it's me."

Ange laughed. "Every time I hear that from a guy, he's dumping me for another man."

"You should probably stop dating models, then." Adrien helped her into a proper sitting position as the makeup crew descended on them to fix his tie and touch up Ange's face. They were both exhausted; a six-hour drive to the location followed by a day of filming with a very picky director was enough to make anyone insane. The only thing keeping them from being at each other's throats was the knowledge that none of this was their fault.

The director gestured vaguely. "Let's do it again. Quickly, before we lose the lighting."

Adrien walked back out into the hall and wished for the millionth time that he could email Ladybug. A few encouraging words from her and he'd be able to spend the next five hours filming
without complaint. But he'd left his cell phone behind in his room, knowing the temptation would be too great if he had it with him while working. He may not have liked his job, but he wasn't going to half-ass it.

Once again, Adrien strolled through the door in his best imitation of every Hollywood heartthrob he'd ever watched seduce a woman on screen. Ange, ever the professional, lured him in with the finesse of a femme fatale, touched him as if she hadn't truly experienced life before she'd gotten her hands on his body.

Adrien couldn't help but envy his character a little. He lived a beautiful fantasy in an exotic locale, longed for a woman who longed for him, and at the end of the day he got to love that woman. Plain, simple, easy.

When was the last time Adrien had felt truly desired? When was the last time a woman had wanted him, not because he could do something for her, but because she genuinely wanted to be with him? Then again, when had he ever let a woman other than Chloe get to know the real him? Ladybug didn't count because she had no idea who he was.

Well, there was Marinette—

"Cut!"

Adrien snapped out of his thoughts and looked at the director, praying that he hadn't broken character while his mind wandered. But the director wore a pleased smile, and nodded his approval of the scene. "Perfect. Great job today, everyone. We'll resume tomorrow, bright and early."

Adrien let Ange off the bed. She stood and lifted the strap of her dress back onto her shoulder. It was a nice shoulder; Adrien felt a little guilty that he hadn't enjoyed kissing it as much as another man would have.

"You want to get a drink?" Ange asked him.

Adrien already has his sights set on the elevator. "Huh? Oh, sure. I just need to grab my phone…"

He went up to his room, retrieved his cell phone, and hurried down the stairs while he waited for it to turn on. His phone buzzed immediately: several texts, including one from Marinette, social media notifications, and an email from Ladybug.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

RE: Summer

8 hours ago

*I have stopped throwing up.*

*And now I'm bored.*

*Bored bored bored bored bored bored bored bored bored bored bored bored bored bored bored…*

*You get the picture. :-)*

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
My Lady! I hope this message hasn't reached you too late. I hear boredom can be fatal—and you were already weakened by anxiety last night. How do you fare? Shall I drop everything and away to your side?

x.x.x

"Girl, I knew you'd crash and burn eventually, but this is just pathetic."

Marinette glared at Alya and trudged her way back to the sofa, where she'd been for the last few hours, catching up on all the boring daytime television she hadn't missed. "Cut me some slack," she said. "I've gotten so used to being busy that I've forgotten how to relax."

Before she worked full-time at the bakery, she'd a boyfriend to spend time with, and before that she was in university. Marinette couldn't remember the last time she'd been alone with so much free time on her hands. She threw herself on the sofa with a groan. "Alya, am I a boring adult?"

Alya grabbed a decorative pillow and chucked it at her. "How can you even think of saying that? You kissed a model last night." She put her hands on her hips. "Does Adrien Agreste, son of your favorite fashion designer, ring any bells in your mopey little head? How many women in Paris can say that they've kissed Adrien Agreste?"

"From what he told me, at least two," Marinette said.

"You do not get to pretend this isn't a big deal." Alya sat down next to her. "Unless he was a terrible kisser. Is he a terrible kisser?"

Marinette grabbed her yoyo and let it drop, then snatched it back up. Better. Still not as fast as she used to be, but with a little more practice she'd have the hang of it again. "A lady does not kiss and tell," she said to Alya. Not that she had anything to tell. "What about you? You spent the entire night with Nino, using your reporter skills to stalk us."

Alya flipped through the channels on Marinette's television. "Yeah? So?" she muttered, a little too defensively.

Marinette knew that tone of voice. She sat up straighter, a cheeky smile working its way to her face. "So…?"

Alya shoved her. "You were the one on a date, not me!"

"You like him!" Marinette crowed. She threw her arms around Alya's shoulders and squeezed as hard as she could. "You like him, you like him, you like him!"

Alya endured the hug with a roll of her eyes. "Maybe? Yes? I don't know." She sighed. "He's a good-looking guy with an interesting job and a great sense of humor…"

"Exactly! What's not to like?" Marinette gasped. "And he wears glasses. I know you have a thing for guys with glasses."

"I am a sucker for guys with glasses, it's true," Alya said. She fiddled with the remote control. "It's just… I don't know. Is it a good time for this? Do I want to get into the whole dating thing now? Because I'm pretty sure he likes me, so if I drop hints this is going to happen fast and you know my mother will make a huge deal out of it and—"
"Alya," Marinette said, "if you keep waiting around for some perfect time, you're never going to be ready. I mean, look at me. I entered that design competition and do you think I feel ready? No. I'm scared out of my mind. I've barely eaten today because of it. But I made a move." She wrapped an arm around Alya's shoulders. "Look, you don't even have to date him right away. Just do what me and Adrien are doing. Invite him somewhere, spend more time with him, and see if he's someone you want to pursue a relationship with."

"And my mother?"

She grinned. "I won't tell her if you won't."

Alya laid her head on Marinette's shoulder. "Well, he has a show at a nightclub on Wednesday and both of us are invited, so if you were worried about being a boring adult, here comes your chance to shake it off."

"It has been a while since I've gone dancing," Marinette agreed. They sat in peaceful silence for a while before Alya sighed.

"You're dying of excitement, aren't you?"

Marinette nodded several times. "I'm just really happy for you." And as soon as Alya left, she'd share the news with a certain other interested party.

x.x.x

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: Attention Special Agent Model Behavior. The Zookeeper's Daughter has caught a fever. Do you copy? Over.

Adrien Agreste: Umm.

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: Never mind. Alya is officially interested in Nino! :-D

Adrien Agreste: OH. In that case, commence the next phase of the operation. You'll be flying solo this time but I trust your judgment, Special Agent Flour Girl.

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: (You forgot to say over.)

Adrien Agreste: Over. Over.

x.x.x

"You texting your girlfriend?"

Adrien blinked at Ange, who sat beside him with a glass of wine in her hand. "Huh? No, I'm not."

"Bullshit." She smirked. "You have that look on your face that all men get when they're talking to their lovers." She shifted closer to him. "Ooh, Marinette? What a cute name! She must be a pretty girl."

Adrien laughed, picked up his phone, and leaned into Ange. "She is a very pretty girl," he said, "but she's not my girlfriend." He held his phone in front of them for a selfie. Ange poked Adrien's cheek and stuck her tongue out.

"Do you like her?" Ange asked as soon as the screen flashed.
Adrien lowered his arm and sent the picture to Marinette, along with a shot he'd gotten of the vineyard earlier that afternoon. Ladybug hadn't emailed him back yet. He was starting to think she really had died of boredom. "Yeah, I like her. She's a good friend."

"But not girlfriend material."

He frowned. "I wouldn't say that."

"You just wouldn't date her yourself."

"Actually, I would date her," Adrien said. If he hadn't been emotionally unavailable, he'd jump at the chance to date a sweet, playful girl like Marinette. She'd come up with a punny codename for him. If that wasn't romantic, then he didn't know what romance was.

Ange squinted at him. "I don't get it. Is she married?"

"Nope."

"Dating someone?"

Adrien took a sip of his wine. "Nope."

"A lesbian?"

"I don't think so."

"So you're friends with a very pretty single woman, who you say you would date, but you're… not dating her?" Ange asked.

Adrien grinned at her. "Look at it this way: you just described yourself, and I'm not dating you either," he said, and laughed when she whacked his arm. "Men and women can have platonic friendships. That's all this is. And as you saw this afternoon, between modeling and meetings I hardly have time to breathe. A romantic relationship would be a disaster."

"That sounds like an excuse," Ange said.

Adrien's phone vibrated on the bar. An email from Ladybug.

X.X.X

**Ladybug**

RE: Summer

Just now

*If I said yes, what would you do?*

X.X.X

**Chat Noir**

RE: Summer

Just now

First, I’d put on a long black riding cloak because I’m Chat Noir, and it’s an essential part of the brooding male lead’s wardrobe. Then I’d take a dramatic swing onto a waiting stallion and ride all night (even if it only takes half an hour to get to your place; I’ll ride around the block until sunrise). You’ll either be on your death bed—in which case I’ll take your hand and smooth your
hair away from your damp forehead, lovingly—or I'll have arrived too late, and your apparition will haunt me for the rest of my miserable days.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**  
_RE: Summer_  
2 minutes ago

You know when you start laughing, but you open your mouth too wide or whatever and you can't control yourself and you laugh so hard that you start sobbing?

Yeah.

That happened.

_I missed you today, chaton._

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**  
_RE: Summer_  
Just now

_I missed you too, Ladybug._

x.x.x

Adrien managed to stay awake for two whole hours before he his body demanded sleep. It pained him to say good night to Ladybug when he'd hardly gotten to talk to her at all, but he had another early morning the next day, and he felt as enthusiastic about that as he might have felt about getting a cavity drilled.

Unfortunately, right as he was sinking into a deeper slumber, his buzzing phone jolted him awake. He lifted it and peered at the screen.

_Father._

Adrien sat up in a hurry. His father wouldn't be calling him at two in the morning if it wasn't an emergency. He pressed the phone to his ear. "Father?"

"Adrien. Sorry to wake you." A sigh. "It's your cat."

Adrien's heart jumped into his throat. Oh God, Plagg. Had he died on him after Adrien specifically told him not to? "What happened?"

"He is outside my bedroom door making these hideous noises," Gabriel said, and a moment later Plagg's mournful meowing became audible.

Adrien collapsed back on the bed, torn between laughing and crying. His cat was alive. He almost sobbed with relief, but then remembered his father was on the line, and he'd be damned if he cried in front of him. "He's just lonely," Adrien said. "Open your door and let him in."

"Let him in—? He's your cat."

"And I'd be more than happy to help him myself, but I'm six hours away."
Gabriel was silent. Then he sighed again. "This will make him stop yowling?"

"Yup." Adrien rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. "I mean, yes."

He listened. A moment later, he heard the creak of a door opening, followed by, "Wait, get back here—I didn't say you could—he ran under my bed."

Adrien had to try very, very hard not to laugh. He couldn't keep the shit-eating grin out of his voice, though. "He does that."

"How do I get him out?" Gabriel demanded.

"Well, I used to use one of Mom's old hair dryers, but I don't think his little geezer heart is able to tolerate scares like it used to."

"This is not funny, Adrien."

On the contrary, Adrien was having the time of his life. "Just give him a few. He'll come out on his own when he's hungry," he said.

"I can't wait that long. I have to be up early tomorrow."

"What a coincidence, so do I."

He could practically see his father taking off his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose like he used to when he had a complex problem to solve. Adrien hadn't seen that gesture in a while. He hadn't seen much of his father in general. His mind brought him a memory of the Christmas after his mother's death: Gabriel walking into Adrien's bedroom first thing in the morning with an open box in his arms, and in that box had been Plagg, young and scruffy and full of mischief.

Adrien smiled at the memory. "Put me on speakerphone," he said.

When Gabriel responded, his voice sounded farther away. "Now what?"

"Plagg, come on out of there, buddy. Father needs to sleep." He waited. "Did he get out?"

"No. He's just staring at me."

"Plagg, I'll give you some camembert if you get out from under the bed."

"He made a strange chirping sound."

"Come on, Plagg. You're too old to be acting like a baby. Go back to my room and sleep there."

Seconds passed. Gabriel came back on, his voice close again. "Never mind, let him do what he wants. There's no point in both of us losing sleep. Good night, Adrien."

"Good night, father." Adrien ended the call and put his phone down. He shook his head. Either Gabriel would end up bonding with Plagg, or the next call Adrien got would inform him of his cat's tragic death. He closed his eyes, thinking of Christmas, how happy his father had looked as Adrien scooped Plagg out of the box and held him to his chest.

Oh, what the hell. He'd give him the benefit of the doubt and vote for bonding.

x.x.x
On Tuesday, Marinette made better use of her time. She woke up, ate some fruit, and went for a jog around the nearby park. She took the greatest shower she'd had in months. She painted her fingernails and toenails, then danced around the apartment with foam wedged between her toes, trying to pretend she wasn't lonely without Chat Noir to email. Around noon, she put on one of her favorite summer dresses and went to lunch with Alya. On her way home, she hit up the craft store for fabric. Then she sat down to completely redesign her doll website.

Halfway through her redesign, her phone vibrated.

**Adrien Agreste: I'm bored. :)**

Marinette closed her eyes and breathed deeply to steady her heartbeat. Adrien was her friend now. Friends texted each other when they were bored all the time. It didn't mean anything special.

Rather than text him back right away, she searched the web for a decent picture of Jagged Stone, opened it with Photoshop, added the text "YOU should be working," then emailed it to herself, saved it on her phone, and sent it to Adrien.

Friends sent each other memes too, right?

x.x.x

Adrien burst out laughing.

And immediately clapped a hand over his mouth.

The director, Ange, and the film crew stared at him. They'd been in the middle of a take, one that had been going quite well until Adrien decided to guffaw all over it. He hid his phone behind his back and sent them a sheepish smile, still snickering.

He knew he should have left the phone upstairs.

x.x.x

**Adrien Agreste: OMG did you make that?**

**Marinette Dupain-Cheng: I whipped it up in two minutes, just for you. Now stop slacking off or I'll send it to you again.**

**Adrien Agreste: Fiiiiiiine.**

Marinette held onto her phone, sorely tempted to keep texting Adrien anyway. It was bad enough not having Chat Noir to email. But no, she was an adult. She shouldn't bother Adrien during filming and risk getting him in trouble just because she was lonely.

And she was lonely. As much as she wanted to deny it, as much as she tried to push it to the back of her mind, Chat Noir's emails had become such a huge part of her routine that without them, she felt like something essential was missing from her day. She'd only gotten to talk to him for two hours the night before. It hadn't been nearly enough.

Marinette opened her email app and glared at her response to his good morning email, which had so far gone unanswered. Maybe it was just bad timing: her first week off work coincided with a busy work week for him, and in her vulnerable state his absence affected her deeper than it should.

She put the finishing touches on her website, then wandered into the kitchen with one of her
Pinterest recipes. Whatever the case, if she couldn't talk to Chat Noir until evening, then she'd just have to make herself a ridiculously complicated dinner to pass the time.

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
15 minutes ago

Due to a canceled meeting, I have been granted thirty minutes of freedom. I'm going to use it to catch up on all the latest memes (and email you, of course). Hope you're having a purrfect day!

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

Are you still there?

Sorry, I was making dinner.

My day's been going well. How about yours?

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Oh, you know, as well as a busy day at work can go. Accidentally botched something earlier, but seeing as I'm not in the habit of making mistakes, I got off with a warning.

Un-fur-tunately, my thirty minutes of freedom are over. I'll talk to you tonight, my Lady. Say a prayer for my sanity, as I'm not sure it's going to last the week. We cats are not accustomed to so much hard work.

x.x.x

Marinette sighed and dropped her phone on the table. Her ridiculously complicated dinner sat in front of her. She clasped her hands together and closed her eyes. "For Chat Noir's sanity," she murmured. "And Adrien's."

She picked up her fork and dug in, hoping Adrien had found a way to cure his boredom. She ought to make him something when he came back. She'd promised to let him try out her new recipes, and it might be a decent incentive for him to work hard that week. Plus, it would be nice to sit across a table from him again. She already missed their little Tuesday and Thursday routine.

Marinette put down her fork and lowered her head to the table with a frustrated whine. Chat Noir. Adrien. Chat Noir and Adrien. Adrien and Chat Noir. Chat Noir or Adrien. Adrien or Chat Noir. She had no idea what to make of her feelings. Chat Noir was her best guy friend, and she cared for him deeply, but she didn't know him. She didn't know his name, what he looked like, where he lived, where he worked, what he did with his spare time other than email her and enjoy internet memes. She had no solid foundation on which to develop romantic feelings for him, and yet…
Then there was Adrien. Nice, funny, handsome, and smart Adrien who Marinette had never imagined she'd become friends with. She knew his name, what he looked like, where he lived, where he worked, and some of what he did with his spare time. She also knew what it felt like to hold his hand in a dark movie theater, what his laugh sounded like, the warmth of his lips against her cheek. The only issue there was that he had no romantic feelings for her whatsoever, and Marinette wasn't about to make a fool of herself trying to seduce him. And yet…

She thumped her head against the table. What she needed to do was go dancing tomorrow night and forget about both of them for a while, because until the universe pointed a big flashing sign in either direction, she had no intention of moving.

x.x.x

At the end of the day, Adrien fell onto his bed wishing his stomach was full of pizza instead of the healthy meal he'd had for dinner. He unlocked his phone and grinned at Marinette's motivational poster, which he'd set as his wallpaper to discourage him from getting distracted and interrupting another take.

Chateau Margaux was beautiful, but Adrien wanted to go home. He missed Plagg. He missed Nino. He missed Colette. He missed Chloe. He missed his bed and his city and decent cell phone reception and junk food. Definitely junk food. He'd have killed for one of Marinette's pastries and a half hour to just sit in the bakery and talk to her after such a long day. He missed Marinette. She had this uncanny ability to make him feel better about everything and damn if he didn't need that in his life—

Adrien bolted upright. He frowned at the wall. Frowned at the wardrobe. Frowned at the television. Frowned at his phone.

*You have that look on your face that all men get when they're talking to their lovers.*

"Nope," Adrien said, and opened his email inbox. "Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope."

x.x.x

*Chat Noir*

RE: Summer

*Just now*

They say that absence makes the heart grow fonder. Do you think that's true?

x.x.x

*Ladybug*

RE: Summer

*Just now*

Been wondering about that myself.

Chapter End Notes

If you'd like to see the meme Marinette made for Adrien, it was made by my
wonderful friend six whole months ago:

I don't expect to crank out another update before year's end, so I hope y'all have a safe and happy New Year! Stick with your friends and family, and if you plan on drinking please either appoint a designated driver or use a free ride service to get yourself home!

Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista).
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Adrien and Alya experience a healthy dose of feelings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Adrien and Nathalie walked out of the room he'd been using for Skype meetings that week. One more down, a handful to go. He bid Nathalie a temporary farewell, then set off to find Ange. There were ten minutes left of lunch before Ange was scheduled to be filmed running, breathless and carefree, through the vineyard—in slow motion of course—and Adrien had a score to settle with her.

He dodged workers and members of the film crew lounging around smoking cigarettes. He peeked in a few rooms, but they were empty. Finally, he walked outside and found Ange chasing down her lunch with some bottled water. He approached her.

Ange lowered the water bottle. "How was the meeting?"

"Fine." Adrien raised a hand. "Listen," he said, "Marinette is my friend."

A slow blink. A hint of a smirk. Ange crossed her arms and leaned back against a column. "Yes?"

"I wanted to make sure that was perfectly clear."

"To whom, exactly?"

Adrien's frown deepened. "Don't—" He cut himself off. "Just, don't."

He walked away.

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: Summer
6 hours ago

Did I tell you I picked up my old yo-yo?

Turns out I still had it stashed in a drawer.

Almost gave myself a couple black eyes, but I'm getting better.

Be proud of me. :-) 

x.x.x

After eating his own lunch, Adrien called his father.
"Is everything all right?" Gabriel asked, a hint of suspicion in his voice.

"Yes." Adrien had found himself a comfortable sofa to sit on, complete with more pillows than any one sofa probably needed. He reclined against it. "The director's in a good mood, so I think everything is going the way he wanted it to."

Gabriel made a satisfied noise. "I look forward to the finished product," he said. "And Nathalie, has she been helpful to you?"

"Nathalie is always helpful. You know that," Adrien leaned forward to scratch an itch on his back.

"Indeed." Gabriel paused. "I have received many comments on your performance regarding the business end of things. Our associates are pleased. You have conducted yourself well."

Now it was Adrien's turn to be suspicious. Was that a compliment? An authentic compliment, devoid of sarcasm and the promise to make things even harder on him? "Thank you, father," he said, trying not to sound uncertain. He tucked his phone between his face and shoulder so he could scratch at the backs of his arms, then remembered the purpose of his call. "How's Plagg doing? Has he stopped crying?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes. I found that if I leave the office door open, he comes in and sits for a while without causing trouble. I expected him to knock things over and shred the curtains, but aside from the crying he is a well-behaved cat."

"Are you sure we're talking about my cat?" Adrien asked as he scratched the back of his neck. Knocking things over and shredding curtains sounded exactly like Plagg.

"Perhaps he misbehaves around you because you let him get away with it," Gabriel suggested.

Adrien shrugged. That was a fair assessment. Plagg could have dragged a dead body into his room and he'd have hired the best lawyers for—why the hell was he so itchy? He stood up and stared at the sofa pillows. Something white poked out of one of them. Adrien pulled on it.

And dropped it with a gasp.

A feather.

"Adrien?"

"Yeah so if everything is fine then I guess I'll call you later, father. Bye!" Adrien ended the call and ran to the nearest mirror, scratching all the way. He yanked his shirt off, ignoring the gaping stare of a startled female worker, and swore under his breath. His back was covered in swollen, itchy bumps.

This would be fun to explain to the director.

X.X.X

Adrien Agreste: Status report, Special Agent Flour Girl. Over.

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: Preparations have been made and we are on schedule. Though I'm not sure how much dancing I'll be able to accomplish in these heels. Over.

Adrien Agreste: Speaking of pain, want to hear something funny?
Marinette covered her mouth and let out a murmur of sympathy. "Adrien had a bad allergic reaction to feathers," she said to Alya, who stood in front of Marinette's mirror curling the ends of her hair.

"Adrien's allergic to feathers?"

"Looks like it." Marinette cringed. "He says his whole back broke out in a rash and the director had a cow when he saw him. Poor thing. He can't catch a break, can he?"

Alya turned around, curling iron in hand. "You know, what you should do is drive out to Chateau Margaux and spend the night tending to his wounds."

Marinette stared at her. "You think rubbing anti-itch cream on Adrien's back is romantic?"

"It could be? Give me a break, I'm improvising." Alya wrapped another strand of hair around the iron. "And don't act like you don't want to feel up Adrien's back muscles."

"I do," Marinette said, "just not when they're covered in hives." She checked the time. One hour left until Nino's show, and she hadn't heard a peep from Chat Noir all evening. Normally he would have messaged her by then. Was he working even later today? Had he fallen asleep the moment he got home? She put her phone down and sat on her hands so she wouldn't give into the temptation to email him again.

"I will do something nice for Adrien when he comes back," she said. "I found this recipe for a cinnamon roll cheesecake that sounds so good my mouth watered while I read the ingredients."

"You're going to share that with your best friend Alya, right?" Alya asked.

"I'll save two slices: one for you and one for Nino, so you'll be forced to deliver it to him," Marinette said with a grin. She'd refrained from harping on Alya for most of the day, but now she couldn't help herself. Tonight, she would have a front row seat to the Alya and Nino show, and she was going to enjoy every minute of it.

Though she felt a little sad that Adrien wouldn't be able to enjoy it with her.

Marinette pushed her feet back into her heels and stood with only the slightest wobble. She'd practiced walking in them for most of the afternoon, including up and down stairs, which she only did because she knew Alya was coming over and would discover her body, should she trip and plummet to her death. She wasn't bad at walking in heels, she just hadn't done it in a while. Sensible shoes were bakery standard.

But why even bother with heels? The point of them was to make her legs look long and sexy, and she didn't feel like attracting that kind of attention. She was going dancing to forget guys, not find new ones.

Adrien and Chat Noir. Chat Noir and Adrien.

Marinette checked her phone one more time, but her email inbox remained empty.

"—could there be feather pillows on the property when Monsieur Agreste specifically mentioned Adrien's allergy to avoid this very—"
"—think he needs medical attention? His back looks redder than earlier—"

"—can digitally insert dead celebrities into Star Wars films, then removing a rash from a television commercial should be no—"

Adrien lay on his stomach, trying to tune out the voices shouting over him and staring at his phone in dismay. With all the people surrounding him, he hadn't been able to email Ladybug. What if she was worried about him? What if she thought he was ignoring her? What if she got mad at him for not replying?

"I don't need medical attention," he said, if only to resolve one of the ongoing arguments in the room. He hissed in surprise and relief when Ange draped a wet cloth over his burning back. "Thanks."

"I disagree," Nathalie said, and Adrien buried his face in his arms. Of course she did. "Had your father been here, he would have—"

"My father isn't here and he doesn't need to know about this. It'll only piss him off."

"We do not want to piss off Monsieur Agreste," the director agreed.

"He'll be angrier if we don't tell him now," Nathalie insisted, and the argument started up anew.

Adrien sighed. Frankly, he didn't care what they did as long as they got out of his room so he could email Ladybug before the night was over. He closed his eyes and thought of pleasant things: Plagg's purring, plush blankets, hot chocolate in winter, warm croissants from Marinette's bakery, Marinette's smile—

Adrien lifted his head and glared at his phone. If that's where his thoughts were taking him, then forget thinking. He'd rather ask Ange to knock him unconscious with a blunt object.

He had nothing against Marinette. He just wasn't the type of guy who got his feelings tangled up in two women at once. If he was interested in Ladybug, he couldn't be interested in anyone else. No complications. No surprises. No headaches, no heartbreaks, no mess.

The only reason he was even thinking about Marinette in such a way was because Ange had suggested it.

It had nothing to do with Marinette's beauty, her great sense of humor, her kindness, the way her eyes had sparkled in the restaurant lighting the other day, or the cute nose-scrunching thing she did sometimes. Nothing whatsoever.

"Ange, could you do me a favor and hit me as hard as you can with that decorative vase over there?"

"Nope," Ange replied, "but I can get you some anti-itch cream." She gave his shoulder a comforting pat and wandered out of the room while Nathalie and the director continued to shout over each other.

With everyone distracted, Adrien grabbed his phone and opened his email inbox.

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Late night. Couldn't email any sooner, but I'm here now. Your favorite tomcat is at your service!

If you're still awake, that is.

x.x.x

The club was already packed when Marinette and Alya entered. Many people were out on the dance floor, but just as many seemed to be getting drinks while they waited for DJ Bubbler to come on. Marinette stuck to Alya's side, watching her step to make sure she didn't snag her heels on anything and wipe out before the night even started.

She'd received Chat Noir's email, but with Alya standing right next to her, she couldn't reply. Hopefully he'd assume she had gone to sleep, not that she was mad at him for not emailing her sooner. At this point she might as well wait for morning. She had to monitor the situation between Alya and Nino, and keep Adrien informed of the evening's events. Chat Noir would only distract her.

Alya nudged Marinette. "Is that Chloe Bourgeois?" she yelled over the music.

Marinette searched the semi-darkness. Sure enough, Chloe Bourgeois sat at a high table, wearing a short sequined dress, staring straight at them. Marinette waved at her. Chloe raised a hand and beckoned them closer.

"I think she wants us to go over there," Marinette said.

"What? Why?"

She shrugged, but she was already moving forward. Alya made a noise of protest and followed after her. Chloe and Adrien were friends, and Adrien was a good person, so Chloe must have been a decent human being under all her bad temper. Right? Marinette tried not to let her doubts show as she approached the table.

Chloe's eyes shifted from her to Alya and back again. She didn't look the least bit impressed.

"Hi Chloe," Marinette said, scrambling for something to say. "I'm kind of surprised to see you here."

"Why would you be surprised?" Chloe asked.

Because judging by their interactions at the bakery, Chloe and Nino seemed to get along about as well as a snake and a mongoose. "I didn't think you and Nino were such good friends," Marinette said.

Chloe's expression twisted in disgust. "We're not," she spat. "But I love DJ Bubbler's music almost as much as I love that coffee you make me. The fact that he just happens to be Nino is a detail I'm forced to overlook."

"What's so bad about Nino?" Alya asked.

Marinette panicked. Alya must have known better than to trust Chloe's opinion of someone, but she'd still asked, meaning she wasn't fully sold on the idea of Nino as a love interest yet. Marinette understood and even admired Alya's cautious approach to romance, but it also made her want to rip her hair out.
Chloe scrutinized Alya for a long moment. "You must be the reporter." She uncrossed and re-crossed her legs. "Nino," she said, "is far too nice. Too committed to his work. Too laid back, too trusting, too good to Adrien, and too confident in his sense of humor. Which is fine if you're into that sort of thing, but I find it appalling."

Marinette's shoulders sagged under the weight of her disbelief. Had Chloe just disguised a compliment as a complaint? Judging by the blatantly shocked expression on Alya's face, she had.

Chloe waved her hand at Alya in a shooing motion. "Now go away. I need to talk to Marinette."

Marinette straightened, suddenly feeling like a schoolkid that had been summoned to the principal's office. Alya arched an eyebrow at her, but Marinette nodded. She'd be fine. It was just Chloe, sitting by herself in a crowded dance club with no drinks to toss in her face. Her fake nails could do some damage if she decided to attack, but…

Chloe waited until Alya had walked off into the crowd to gesture at the empty chair across from her. "Sit."

Marinette sat. For as long as she could remember, Chloe had never wanted to talk to her one-on-one. In fact, Chloe had always made a point to speak to her as little as possible, even when ordering something from the bakery. The only thing that had changed was Marinette's relationship with Adrien.

She could guess what Chloe wanted to talk to her about.

Chloe maintained her posture, looking like a queen upon her throne staring down at a lowly servant. "I hear you're fake dating my Adrikins," she said.

Marinette mimicked Chloe's regal demeanor. She refused to be intimidated. "He told you that, huh?"

"He tells me everything. We're best friends." Chloe crossed her arms over her chest. "But it's obvious to anyone who isn't as stupid as he is that you have your eye on him, so I wanted to make sure you understood the difference between your little play act and reality."

"No need to go through so much trouble. I know Adrien isn't interested in me," Marinette said. She hated that those words still tasted bitter in her mouth.

Chloe tilted her head. "And you're okay with that?"

Marinette frowned. "I'm not hanging out with Adrien to get in his pants, if that's what you're thinking. I'm hanging out with him because I like him, and I like being friends with him. He's a good guy."

Chloe stared at her. Uncrossed and re-crossed her legs again. She lowered her eyes to the empty table. "Adrien is a good guy," she said. "He's too good for his own good. You'd think being sheltered his whole life would have made him wary of strangers, but no, he'd be friends with everyone if he could." She shook her head. "I like that about him. I want him to stay that way. He's already depressed enough that if someone stabbed him in the back—"

"I would never do that to him," Marinette said.

Chloe slid out of her chair. "You'd better hold onto that promise," she said, "because if you hurt him, I'm going to make it my personal mission to ensure no one ever eats at your little bakery again."
Marinette Dupain-Cheng: Nino's set is about to start. How's your back?

Adrien Agreste: Burning less, but still ugly. I wish I was there. :) 

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: Hmm. Hold on a sec. 

Adrien's phone buzzed in his hand: Incoming call from Marinette. He stared at the phone as if he'd forgotten how to use it, then tapped the screen and lifted it to his ear. A burst of noise came through, followed by Marinette's voice. 

"Hey! Can you hear me?" she asked. Music blasted in the background.

Adrien propped himself up on his elbows. "Y-Yeah. Can you hear me?"

"For the most part. I've got the volume turned up all the way. Anyway, I figured since you can't be here in person, I might as well put this technology to good use so you can enjoy the show, too."

His heart did a little somersault in his chest. "Thanks, Marinette. That's very sweet of you."

"What?"

"I said thanks!" he repeated, a little louder.

"You're welcome. I'm holding the phone up now."

Adrien put his phone on speaker and lowered the volume so it wouldn't disturb anyone outside the room, then laid back down with his head on his arms and a smile on his face. The sound quality wasn't the best, but he knew Nino's music well enough to get the gist of what was happening. He wondered if Alya was enjoying herself. He knew Chloe was enjoying herself.

And if he closed his eyes, he could almost pretend he was there, standing beside Marinette, watching her react to the music while he toyed with the idea of reaching for her hand…

…so he wouldn't lose her in the crowd. That was a thing that happened in clubs.

Adrien sighed through his nose. *Absence makes the heart grow fonder.* He'd told Ladybug as much the night before. There was no doubt in his mind that the moment he saw Marinette in person again, all thoughts of being interested in her would cease. As a matter of fact, he was so sure of himself, that he decided he'd put it to the test as soon as he returned to Paris.

He'd drop by the bakery, say hello, verify that he did *not* have a crush on her, and everything would go right back to normal.
Marinette could only describe the look on Alya's face as dazzled. She stared at Nino as if she'd stumbled upon buried treasure: lips parted, a growing smile, her body fidgeting with the desire to jump up and down. And Marinette, an expert on all things Alya Cesaire, could safely say that she had never seen her best friend look at a guy that way.

At the end of the set, the club burst into wild applause. Marinette brought her phone back to her ear. "You still there?" she asked Adrien, afraid that he might have fallen asleep on her. She hadn't planned on calling him, but Chloe's reminder that he was unhappy, coupled with his own sad text message, had filled Marinette with the desire to do something nice for him. Even if it had kept him up until three in the morning.

"I'm still here," Adrien confirmed. Marinette pressed a hand against her other ear so she could hear him better. "Tell Nino I said it was a kick-ass show."

"Will do. But hey, I'm going to have to let you go. I think Alya has it bad for Nino—like, really bad—and I need to do some follow-up prompting. I'll text you the details later, okay?"

"Got it. Good luck, Flour Girl."

Marinette grinned. "Talk to you soon, Model Behavior." She ended the call and slipped her phone inside the hidden pocket she'd sewn into her dress, then hurried to Alya's side. "Well?"

"That was…" Alya shook her head and looked at Marinette, still as dazzled as before. "I mean, if he was invited overseas he must be good, but I wasn't expecting him to be that good."

Marinette spotted Nino headed towards them, a pair of orange and blue headphones around his neck, shaking hands and slapping high fives as he went. She grabbed Alya by the arms. "Look who's coming this way!"

Alya's eyes widened. "Shit. What do I say?"

"Tell him that the only thing better than hearing his music would be marrying him," Marinette said, all thoughts of subtlety thrown to the wind. Alya ripped her arms away from her just as Nino reached them.

"Good evening, ladies. Saw you two out there dancing, so I take it you liked the show?"

"Liked it? We loved it!" Marinette cried. "Isn't that right, Alya?"

Alya nodded, looking so uncharacteristically shy that Marinette had to refrain from squealing. Oh, this was a very good sign. "It was amazing," she said over the noise of the crowd. "And the firsthand experience will help me write a great article." She smiled. "You're incredibly talented."

Marinette, sensing this as her cue to leave, jumped into the conversation. "And I am incredibly tired. I think I'm going to head home, but why don't you two stay here and have a drink?"

"Marinette," Alya hissed.

Nino caught on. "Sure, I'd love to buy you a drink," he said to Alya. "If you're up for it."

"Oh. Yeah! Absolutely."

Marinette backed away from them, winked at Nino, then turned and pushed through the crowd toward the door, giggling the entire way.
As she walked, she sent Adrien a series of text messages that she hoped were somewhat coherent, then tucked her phone back into her dress and followed the light flow of pedestrian traffic towards home. Giddiness made her lightheaded. She breathed the warm Parisian night into her lungs and resisted the urge to twirl. What a wonderful evening! She'd gone dancing for the first time in months, Adrien would be pleased with the day's developments, she'd been threatened by the mayor's daughter, and her best friend was in love—or very strongly infatuated. Either was good.

Marinette walked along with a spring in her step and music in her heart. It was almost as if the world had turned into a place where dreams came true. Sometimes. When they felt like it. She even had the courage to believe that maybe she'd make it to the finals of Gabriel Agreste's design competition. Or at least that the next time she picked up her yo-yo, it wouldn't hit her in the face.

She cut through the park beside her house and reveled in the scent of grass and trees and water from the nearby fountain. If there hadn't been a police officer on duty, she might have climbed in and splashed around in the water to soothe the dull ache in her feet.

Instead, Marinette tilted her head up to the sky and smiled as wide as she could. What was this? A familiar feeling, but one she hadn't felt in a while. One she hadn't allowed herself to feel in a while.

She was happy.

Suddenly, the world was a friendly place again. Her future sparkled with possibilities. Soon her parents would return from China and she'd be able to start taking hesitant steps toward a destination unknown. But it didn't scare her like it used to, it thrilled her.

Maybe it was silly of her to feel that way just because one good thing had happened, but maybe it wasn't silly at all. Tonight was the culmination of many small good things, all coming to a head. When she looked back on the past year, she was amazed by what had transpired: She'd met Chat Noir, she'd taken over the bakery and hadn't driven it into the ground, she'd made new friends, she'd overcome her anxiety and reached for her dreams. And even though she had no guarantees about her future, she couldn't help but think that she just might turn out all right in the end.

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**Ladybug**  
RE: Summer  
5 minutes ago

Good morning, Chat Noir.

Sorry I missed your email last night.

I turned in early and woke up late, and now I have a headache.

Two more days until your hell week is over. Hang in there!

---

**Chat Noir**  
RE: Summer  
Just now

Good morning, buginette! It would seem we are opposites today: you turned in early and woke up late, I stayed up late and woke up early.
Marinette winced as she stepped out of the supermarket, bag of groceries in hand. Did the sun have to shine directly into her eyeballs? She could have stayed home; she'd woken up at almost noon, which guaranteed that she'd be useless for the entire day. But since Adrien would be back in town tomorrow, she wanted to make sure she had the ingredients for the cinnamon roll cheesecake on hand. She reminded herself to message him asking when would be the best time for him to swing by.

She'd sent Alya a text that morning, but hadn't gotten a reply yet. Now she knew how Alya felt when she hadn't messaged her immediately after Adrien's fake kiss. Had anything happened? Were feelings confessed? Did they agree to go out on a series of dates to get to know each other better? Had they spent the rest of the night making out on a bar stool? These were important questions that Marinette needed answers to.

She crossed the street and stifled a yawn, wondering what to do with the rest of her day. She'd received a few commissions for doll clothes, so getting those done as soon as possible sounded like the best use of her time. Plus, it meant more money in the bank, which never hurt to have.

As she approached the bakery, Marinette noticed someone standing at the front door, staring at the closed sign. Must have been a tourist if they didn't know all the bakeries this side of the city were on holiday until September…

Only, it couldn't have been a tourist, because she recognized the length of his legs, the width of his back, the skinny build and the hunch in his shoulders and that red hair, filling her vision, her ears, her head until she was blind and insensible of everything but him.

And her shoes must have scuffed the pavement, because he turned at the sound, and when his sea green eyes met hers she was twenty-four again, standing in his sunlit apartment with her broken heart bleeding all over her sleeve—smiling, but not understanding.

Chapter End Notes

Oh hey, Nathanael's back.

Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista).
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

A rainy evening in France.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Marinette."

There was a time in Marinette's life when she couldn't seem to do anything but imagine hearing Nathanael Kurtzberg say her name again.

She'd thought up all kinds of scenarios. Accidental meetings. Purposeful meetings. Some wildly different from the others, some carbon copies with minor tweaks like the weather, the time of day, the shoes she wore. She drilled them into her head, wrote mental scripts that she rehearsed constantly, so that she would be prepared when the inevitable happened.

But here was the inevitable, happening, and she was unprepared.

She blamed the cream cheese. None of her scenarios had included a grocery bag full of cream cheese.

Nathanael pointed at the sign on the bakery door. "Sorry. I could have sworn you guys closed in July," he said with a sheepish smile.

It was the smile that did her in, that yanked Marinette back into the present by the front of her shirt. "Nath," she breathed. "Oh my God!" She closed the distance between them and threw her unoccupied arm around his shoulders. "What are you doing here? Have you come back to Paris?"

Nathanael returned the hug with a gentle squeeze. "Not permanently. I had some time off so I decided to visit my parents. I've been here since Sunday night." He pulled away, but held her at arm's length. "You look great, Mari."

"So do you!" she cried, giving his shoulder a playful whack. "That California air must be doing you good, huh?" Then she remembered the cream cheese. "Oh shoot, I need to put this stuff in the fridge. Do you want to come inside? I can whip up some coffee…"

He let go of her. "No, don't worry about it. I only stopped by on my way home," he said with a vague wave behind him. "But maybe we can have dinner or something before I leave on Saturday?"

Marinette nodded a couple of times before she realized she hadn't said anything. "Dinner sounds great! My, uh, phone number hasn't changed, so… you know where to reach me." She smiled. Hugged him again. "It's so good to see you!" she said, then stepped back, toward the bakery, toward safety and normalcy and the fragile happiness she'd held in her hands just the night before.

"You too," Nathanael said in that warm and gentle voice that used to send tingles down her spine. He also took a step back, putting distance between them, and it occurred to Marinette that there had
been distance between them even in their embrace. She was always being caught off guard by his uncanny ability to be miles away while standing right next to her. He lifted his hand in a wave. "I'll call you."

Marinette smiled and waved back. Like a beauty pageant queen. Like the winner of some awful prize.

She smiled and waved and watched him go and wondered why two years later she was still the one smiling and waving and watching him go.

She walked into the bakery. Up the stairs. Through the front door. To the refrigerator. The house was silent.

Marinette put away the cream cheese, shut the refrigerator, laid back against it, and slid to the floor.

She sat on the floor for a long time.

x.x.x

At the beginning of the week, Adrien had been convinced he was at the height of his misery. He now knew that he was a complete moron. Filming a commercial with a crabby director couldn't hold a candle to filming a commercial with a crabby director, a headache, and a back covered in hives, during an unexpected summer rainstorm.

According to the filming schedule, Adrien was supposed to be outside chasing Ange through the vineyard right now. Instead, he was indoors, on his phone, with the director cursing Mother Nature on one side of him and his father cursing in his ear.

"—told them to get the feathers off the property—"

"How long is this infernal storm supposed to last?" the director bellowed.

Adrien sent Ange a miserable look from across the room. She nodded sympathetically. He pointed at his temple and opened and closed his hand in a throbbing gesture. She tilted her head towards a catering table and mimicked shoveling food into her mouth. Adrien grinned, then decided his father's rant had gone on long enough.

"At any rate," he interrupted, "the damage has been done. I'm not in danger so there's no need to take action against—"

"Not in danger? Suppose you had decided to lay your head on those pillows instead, Adrien."

"But I didn't, father. Please don't make a big deal out of this. The last thing I want is people blowing the story out of proportion and calling me a spoiled brat," Adrien said. Though being called a spoiled brat was nothing new to him. He'd gotten into his fair share of trouble in the past, had a few unpleasant headlines in gossip columns dedicated to him. But at least back then he'd deserved it. "Seriously, I feel fine. Ask Nathalie if you think I'm making it up. She'll vouch for me."

He got no reply, and mentally prepared himself for another round of arguing. His father could argue for days. But after a moment of silence, Gabriel sighed. "You're certain?"

"If it'll make you feel better, I'll go to the hospital as soon as I get home tomorrow," Adrien said. He rubbed his temple in circular motions. The only consolation he had was knowing he shared a
headache with Ladybug. It made him feel closer to her, in a strange way.

"Fine," Gabriel said. "I will… trust your judgment."

Adrien almost let the phone slip out of his hand.

"In this matter alone. And you will schedule an appointment with your doctor upon your arrival."

He must have had an odd look on his face, because Ange mouthed "are you ok?" at him.

His father, trusting his judgment. It was nothing short of a miracle.

"Thank you, Father," he said. "I'll be sure to do that." There was an awkward lapse in conversation.
"Is Plagg still hanging out in your office?"

"Yes," Gabriel replied. "He chirps at birds. I didn't know cats did that."

Adrien smiled. "I didn't either when we first got him. Doesn't he sound kind of like a typewriter?"

"That's the word I was looking for. The sound reminded me of something, but I could not place it… hmm. He's been crying at the refrigerator, too, but the kitchen staff warned me not to give him any cheese."

"Definitely don't give him cheese. He's lactose intolerant," Adrien said. The thought of his cat begging his father for camembert filled him with unexpected joy. "Oh, it looks like the rain's letting up." The director had resumed barking orders. The camera crew wheeled expensive equipment out the front door as fast as they could, and Ange stood from her seat, stretching.

"Don't strain yourself. If you feel uncomfortable, let someone know," Gabriel said.

"I will." Adrien hesitated. Despite its rough beginning, he could count on one hand the amount of pleasant conversations he'd had with his father, and he was reluctant to let it end. "Call me before your flight tomorrow?"

Silence. Perhaps, Adrien thought, his father felt the same way. "I'll do that," Gabriel said.
"Goodbye, Adrien."

"Bye."

Adrien ended the call, sighed, then impulsively checked his email. Nothing new from Ladybug. She hadn't messaged him at all since that morning, which was strange, considering the time of day. He reminded himself that she, too, had a full-time job, and probably snuck her messages to him when she wasn't supposed to be emailing anyone.

But he couldn't shake the feeling of strangeness that settled over him on his way out the door, like the whole world had shifted two inches to the left and waited patiently for him to notice. In the end, he blamed the pleasant conversation with his father. How sad that he considered such a thing extraordinary.

x.x.x

Marinette's phone chimed several times in a row: texts from Alya. She scrolled down the wall of text with a smile as Alya dished every detail of her post-show drink with Nino. Had there been flirting? Yes. Were they dating? No. Were they going to hang out again sometime in the near future? Absolutely. It wasn't a relationship, but Marinette considered it a victory. Alya's gushing
was proof enough that the romance was on the way.

Marinette hadn't told her about Nathanael. She hadn't told anyone. She'd spent the afternoon distractedly sewing doll clothes and replaying every second of the encounter in her mind. Why should she ruin Alya's day over a trifle? Why worry her parents while they were half a world away, unable to help her?

She was fine. She could handle it.

She stood from her desk and climbed up to her loft, thinking some fresh air might do her good. But she couldn't find the energy to make it to the balcony, and ended up sprawled on top of her unmade bed.

Marinette stared blankly at the wall. The desire to look Nathanael up on social media reared its ugly head. Just a peek, to see what he'd been up to. She grabbed her phone. Her thumb hovered over her internet browser icon.

She opened her email instead.

x.x.x

It rained on and off throughout the day. Adrien took advantage of the breaks to text Nino so he could fill in the gaps of what happened after Marinette left the club.

According to Nino, Alya had accepted his offer to buy her a drink, then they'd launched into an animated conversation about the music. It gave Nino the chance to show off a little—which he'd worried would annoy her, but she'd listened with keen interest and asked a ton of follow up questions, like any great reporter would. He'd left an open invitation for her to come by and see his recording set-up. She'd promised to take him up on it. Then he'd suggested they all go out again once Adrien was back in town, and Alya had casually commented that they didn't have to invite Marinette and Adrien, and Nino was still smiling like an idiot more than twelve hours later.

Adrien wondered if Marinette had heard the same story from Alya. She had yet to text him about it. Should he text first? He groaned, chiding himself for feeling nervous over a first text. This was Marinette, his friend, and whatever delusions he had about her would be put to rest in twenty-four hours.

His phone vibrated. Ladybug, RE: Summer.

Adrien smiled and tapped on the notification to open his email. Was it sad that he'd felt deprived of his Lady's attention, even though he wouldn't have been able to reply to her if the weather had been cooperative?

It took longer than usual for the email to load, and when it did, Adrien's eyes widened.

In place of Ladybug's usual one-line paragraphs was a wall of text.

His smile faded as he scanned the first few lines. He looked up at Ange, who was glued to her own phone a few steps away. "Hey," he said, "I'm going upstairs for a bit. Text me if it stops raining?"

"Sure," Ange said.

Adrien left the crowded foyer and walked up the stairs. He found a seat in an empty room, made sure there were no feather pillows around, and sat down, his heart racing as if he'd run the entire way. He reopened Ladybug's email.
Ladybug
RE: Summer
4 minutes ago

You know what one of the worst and most overlooked things about a breakup is? Surprisingly, it's not the crippling loneliness, though that part sucks too. Every part of a breakup sucks. But there's one aspect of it that'll do you in for years, and that's the complete and total destruction of your confidence.

I know I told you about my ex before, the one who left me and went off to America to pursue his dream. But that story's kind of vague, don't you think?

A few years ago, I was on the cusp of graduating college with my degree in fashion and textiles. And—you might find this hard to believe—I was a hopeless romantic. Worse: I was a hopeless romantic who had never been in love before. There were one or two guys in high school, but that's high school, right? Nothing serious. Anyway, I was about to graduate college and I had this idea in my head that it was finally my turn to find love. Except that I hadn't found love in college, and time was running out to do it the traditional way.

So I decided to look online. And in a matter of days, I had a match.

We talked for a couple of weeks before we decided to meet each other in person. I was terrified that the magic was going to wear off, but wouldn't you know it, he was even better than I imagined. Good-looking, quiet, funny, with a passion for art that matched my own. By the end of that first date, I was smitten. When my friends and my parents gave their approval, I lost my mind with love.

We were together for almost two years before I moved in with him. He had this gorgeous apartment with all these windows, and every afternoon it became a paradise of sunlight. When we weren’t working, we were there, creating and offering each other constructive criticism and building our little kingdom of happiness. He even talked me into entering Gabriel Agreste's design competition. Filled my head with all this nonsense about how I'd blow everyone out of the water. I must have sketched more than a hundred designs before I settled on the ones I'd enter come August.

Well. That summer, his agent contacted him. Some Hollywood bigshot wanted to make a movie adaptation of one of my boyfriend's graphic novels. Naturally, he was thrilled. I was thrilled for him. We celebrated for like a week straight while his agent and publisher negotiated the details. This was huge for us. A dream come true. He wouldn't just be moderately successful anymore. This was IT.

I had all these fantasies that we'd get married and move to the United States, and I'd open my own boutique and he'd have his graphic novels and that would be our happily ever after. And I could see in his eyes that he had some ideas of his own. It never occurred to me that they might be different from mine.

Then one bright and cheerful afternoon, he comes home for lunch and tells me he wants to talk to me. I correctly assume that it's about our future, but once again, I have happily ever after at the forefront of my mind.

So we're standing in the living room and I'm excited and he looks me dead in the eye and says, "I know you want to get married, Ladybug, but I'm not ready for that. I won't be for a long time. And it isn't fair of me to keep stringing you along."
Take a moment to picture the look on my face, chaton. It was pretty freaking priceless.

At this point, I swear I'm plummeting right to the center of the earth and any moment now I'm going to hit its magma core, but of course I'm still standing in the living room, frozen, staring at him like an idiot. And all I can hear in my head is screaming because doesn't he love me? Doesn't he want a future with me? I mean, what is he saying? You don't tell someone you're madly in love with that you don't want to marry them "for a long time." Like, why not? Is there something wrong with me? Am I not good enough to stand beside him during this new and exciting chapter of his life—which I thought was our life?

But you know what I did, Chat Noir? Instead of yelling all these things at him?

I smiled.

I smiled and I told him I understood when I didn't understand at all.

And as soon as he went back to work, I packed up all my things and left. I just went home. And I never spoke to him again.

I tried to be mad at him. I wanted to be. But when I thought about it—and I did think about it, obsessively—I couldn't. What right did I have to be angry at him when all he'd done was tell me the truth? Most guys wouldn't have gone to the trouble. It was kind of him, really.

But by now you're probably wondering what all of this has to do with confidence.

The day after we broke up, I was walking home from the grocery store when some idiot across the street cat-called me. You'd think I would have gotten in his face about it, or at least flipped him off. But I didn't. I kept walking, asking myself all the while: Why did that man whistle at me? You whistle at people because you think they're attractive, and if I'm so attractive, why didn't my own boyfriend want me? Why couldn't I make him ask me to stay? What's so desirable about me? Nothing.

I didn't enter Gabriel Agreste's design competition that year. Or the year after that. It took me until now to even consider it, and I still have that question echoing around in my head: Why would Gabriel Agreste, or anybody else, want me? What the hell is so good about me?

So yeah that's why breakups are fucking awful haha.

How's your day going, Chat Noir?

x.x.x

It took every ounce of Adrien's willpower not to throw his phone at the wall. He sat in the empty room shaking until a text from Ange informed him they were wanted back on set. He stood up, stared at Ladybug's email a moment longer, then turned off his phone.

He needed to think.

x.x.x

Marinette woke up to raindrops splattering against the trapdoor to the balcony. She sat up slowly, disoriented. Had the weather said anything about rain that evening? She tried to recall, then her encounter with Nathanael came rushing back and she realized she hadn't watched the news that day. She hadn't eaten lunch, either. Her stomach growled at her, demanding food despite her lack of appetite. She crawled out of bed.
Once she had a decent meal cooking, she reached for her phone, only to remember she'd left it upstairs.

A spark of fear ignited panic in her body.

She'd emailed Chat Noir.

At the height of her emotional distress.

She'd practically sent him her life story.

"Oh God," she whispered, running for the stairs. Five minutes with her ex-boyfriend and she'd lost her damn mind. Five lousy minutes had managed to undo one and a half years of sanity. Ladybug was supposed to be her competent adult persona; the Marinette that she aspired to be. The Marinette who went through a bad breakup, shrugged it off, and didn't let it affect her self-esteem.

Which sounded totally unrealistic, but she was allowed to have an ideal, damn it.

Marinette climbed up to her bed and dug through the sheets until she found her phone. No reply from Chat Noir. She couldn't decide whether to freak out or be relieved. Either way, it was time for some damage control. She perched on the edge of her bed and tried to imagine the best way to make herself sound like an emotionally stable human being.

Then her phone chimed. Chat Noir, RE: Summer.

Marinette's heart pounded in her throat. The steady rain filled her ears like static. She opened the email.

---

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
12 seconds ago

What the hell do you mean you don't have the right to be angry at him? You have every right to be angry at him. I'm angry at him, and I don't even know him. I want to break his fucking teeth.

Sorry. I went for a walk hoping it would calm me down. It didn't work.

Your ex-boyfriend's an asshole.

You don't do that to people. You don't let a relationship go on that long without making your intentions clear. You don't let the person you love walk away feeling like they aren't good enough for you.

I'm so pissed off.

And I know this isn't about me, but I just... I don't understand this guy. I can't understand him. You and I have only known each other for a year and we're not even dating but damn it, Ladybug, I can't even begin to imagine my future without you. If I had to leave the country to take some awesome new job opportunity, I wouldn't step one foot into an airport if you weren't right there next to me.

You're one of the most important people in my life. And I HATE that I can't be there for you right now. I hate that I can't be anything for you other than a bunch of well-meaning words from some
stranger on the internet.

But for what it's worth, I think you're amazing. You're a talented and funny and beautiful person with an extremely unfortunate taste in movies, and you made me feel like my stupid parody of a life is worth living.

That's what the hell is so good about you.

x.x.x

Marinette stared at her phone until Chat Noir's words stopped making sense.

It took a rumble of thunder to revive her. She gasped, reached up and wiped her wet cheeks with the heel of her palm, and stood from the bed. She'd left the food on the stove.

Thankfully, it hadn't burned. She carried her dinner to the living room sofa and ate with the television on, volume down low. When she'd finished, she laid her head back on the couch and looked out the rain-spattered window at the gray summer sunset, feeling agitated.

"Stupid cat," she murmured.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
RE: Summer
Just now

Shut up about my taste in movies, Chat Noir.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
RE: Summer
Just now

Never.

(Are you mad at me?)

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
RE: Summer
Just now

I'm not mad at you.

I'm mad at myself for making you worry about me.

But… I'm okay, I promise.

I just had a weird day and I wish it was over but it's too early to go to sleep.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
Well, you don't have to tell me about your day if you don't want to, but if you're still up for talking, I'm up for listening.

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

I know.

Thank you.

And for what it's worth... I couldn't imagine my future without you, either.

Chapter End Notes

My classes start tomorrow, so this is the last of the regular updates until I figure out what my new schedule looks like. The good news is I have no writing classes this time around, which means I may be able to update more often than last semester. But we'll see.

In the meantime, come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista).
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

RIP Adrien Agreste
1989 - 2015
"He tried."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Ladybug**
RE: Summer
Just now

What is this annoying light shining through my window…?

Omg, it's the sun.

THE SUN IS RISING, CHAT NOIR.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
RE: Summer
Just now

Why does that surprise you? Between the two of us, you're the morning person. Now please stop yelling. It's too early for yelling.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
RE: Summer
Just now

You didn’t have to stay up all night talking to me.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
RE: Summer
Just now

But you know what, Ladybug? I did anyway. And in a couple of hours, I will face the consequences of that decision like a man. (Cat? Cat-man? It's also too early for jokes.)

x.x.x

Adrien put his phone down and rubbed his eyes. Outside, the sun rose over the vineyard, splashing
gold across the landscape. He couldn't regret staying up all night talking to Ladybug, not when it had taken a few hours of stupid jokes just to get her sounding like herself again.

Something had happened to her. She hadn't divulged any information, and he hadn't probed, but it wasn't hard to figure out. Ladybug liked to keep space between them at all times. For her to get so personal with him so suddenly, she must have gone through something that reopened her old wounds. And while part of him was happy that she'd opened up to him, a much bigger part of him hated that she'd been hurt to the point that she could hardly lift her head up anymore.

So he'd been brutally, embarrassingly honest with her about the impact she'd had on his life. Would that make a difference? He didn't know, but he hoped so.

Adrien stood up and stretched. He was exhausted, and his headache was back with a vengeance, but he had a six-hour drive ahead of him once filming wrapped up. Plenty of time to recuperate from his all-nighter before he dropped by the bakery to say hi to Marinette.

In his desperation to make Ladybug feel better, he'd forgotten to text Marinette about Nino and Alya. But she hadn't messaged him either. Or maybe she had messaged him, and due to his spotty cell phone reception, he hadn't received it. In any case, it was too early to text her now.

Adrien showered and got dressed, taking care not to aggravate his sensitive back, then checked his phone again. No new emails from Ladybug. She must have finally fallen asleep. "Sweet dreams, my Lady," he said as he slipped his phone into his pocket and made his way out the door.

Just a few more hours of filming, and he'd be on his way home.

x.x.x

Marinette had not fallen asleep. She'd been happily working on a response to Chat Noir when a phone call from Alya interrupted her.

"I'm going to tell you something, because you deserve to hear it from someone you love before you find out on your own," Alya said in a tone of voice so grave that Marinette immediately knew what the phone call was about. "On my way to work this morning… I saw Nathanael."

Marinette rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. So much for not ruining Alya's day. "I know," she said. "He came by the bakery yesterday."

"And you didn't tell me… why?" Alya demanded.

"Because you were happy about Nino and I didn't think it would be fair to bother you with my problems?"

"Marinette Dupain-Cheng, I am your best friend! I don't care if I just won the freaking lottery, if you have a problem you come bother me with it right away! Especially one as big as Nathanael. Geez! What did you do, spend all of yesterday drunk? Never mind. I'm coming over for lunch and you're telling me everything, so wash your face and put on some clothes. Don't worry about food, I'm buying."

Marinette hung up, feeling a lot better knowing that Alya was on her way. She should have called her as soon as Nathanael left instead of wallowing in misery alone all afternoon. But if she had called Alya, she wouldn't have emailed Chat Noir, and…

You made me feel like my stupid parody of a life is worth living.
Marinet's heart hammered in her chest. Who the hell said things like that to people they'd never met?

She stared at her phone. Imagined a man in an office building struggling to keep his eyes open after staying up all night to make sure she was okay. She wanted to bring that man breakfast. And then she wanted to hug him.

Marinet climbed out of bed and went through her morning routine: yoga, tending the flowers, fruit for breakfast, and then a shower. Her lack of sleep made her head swim. She should have told Alya to bring coffee. Better yet, she should have taken a nap. A nap sounded wonderful. But just as she began seriously considering it, her phone rang again.

A local number. One that she'd committed to memory years ago in the event of an emergency. She answered it. "Hello?"

"Hey," Nathanael said, his voice full of good cheer. "I didn't call too early, did I?"

"Not at all," Marinette replied. The fact that Nathanael knew she liked to get up early went unspoken between them.

"Oh, good." He sounded genuinely relieved. "I figured I'd ask you if you had any particular restaurants in mind for dinner, seeing as they opened some new ones."

"You know Paris. Can't go more than a few weeks without opening a new restaurant." Marinette said, then cringed. She really needed that nap. "Actually, there's this Lebanese place I've been meaning to check out. A friend brought me dinner from there a while back and it was divine." A picture of Adrien standing at her door holding a bag of takeout floated to her mind.

Adrien. Today was his last day of filming. She'd forgotten to message him yesterday, but he hadn't messaged her either. Was their fake relationship over now that Nino and Alya were on their way to becoming an item?

"Lebanese sounds great," Nathanael said. "Should we meet at the restaurant, or meet at your place first?"

"Well, I'd send you directions, but you suck at those—"

"I have a GPS on my phone, you know."

"—so we'd better meet here at seven, just to be on the safe side," Marinette concluded. Nathanael was the kind of person who'd get hopelessly lost and blame it on the GPS. She smiled at the thought of him wandering around California, glaring at his phone, then the surrounding street signs, then back at his phone. "I'll see you tonight?" she said, wanting to end the call before anymore fondness could stir up in her chest.

"Seven it is," Nathanael agreed.

They exchanged goodbyes, and Marinette dropped her phone on the sofa, heart racing. So much for her nap.

x.x.x

Marinet Dupain-Cheng: Today's your last day of filming, right? Good luck! :-)

Adrien Agreste: Thanks. By the way, Nino is ridiculously happy.
Marinette Dupain-Cheng: Oh my gosh, so is Alya. She's coming over for lunch and I'm going to try to get more information out of her.

Adrien Agreste: I admire your dedication to the cause. :) Whoops, gotta go.

x.x.x

Alya showed up at eleven o'clock on the dot. "I made up a family emergency so I could leave a couple minutes early," she explained. She breezed into the apartment, set down a bag of pastries and two cups of iced coffee on the kitchen counter, then turned to inspect Marinette. "You've been crying," she said.

"Well… you're not wrong." Marinette grabbed the cup labeled with a letter M and took a long pull of coffee. Leave it to Alya to know that she needed it without her having to say anything. "But if you're referring to my bloodshot eyes, I kind of stayed up all night," she said.

"Couldn't sleep?"

Her cheeks warmed. "Something like that."

Alya took one of the pastries out of the bag and leaned back against the kitchen counter. "So what happened?" she asked. "Did he just show up? Did he call first? Was there any warning?"

Marinette briefly went over the main event of the previous morning. She left out most of her afternoon wallowing-in-despair, knowing that it would only upset Alya further. When it came to Nathanael, Alya was about as unforgiving as a wildfire. Marinette concluded her story with the nail in her coffin: her acceptance of Nathanael's invitation to dinner.

"You couldn't turn him down?" Alya asked. "Better yet, you couldn't kill him and then turn him down?"

Marinette leaned on the counter and sighed. "I thought about it," she said. "Turning him down, not killing him." Between emails with Chat Noir the night before, she'd weighed her options carefully. She knew she didn't owe Nathanael anything, least of all her kindness. But she also knew she would never move on if she didn't talk to him about their breakup. "I need closure," she said. "If this is the only chance I get to make my feelings known, then I'll take it."

Alya twisted her mouth to the side, but she didn't object. "Have you told Adrien?"

Marinette frowned. "Why would I tell Adrien?"

"You're dating him, remember?"

Right. The fake relationship. "Yeah, but I don't want to upset him over nothing," Marinette said, hoping she sounded convincing. "It's not like I have feelings for Nathanael and I'm going to dinner with him to try and rekindle our passion."

Alya's eyebrows shot up. "So you wouldn't get back together with him if he asked you?"

"If this had been a year ago, maybe," Marinette said. "After a lot of groveling, of course." She smiled and poked at the ice left in her drink. "What Nathanael and I had was great, and rare, and magical, but if he and I weren't meant to be together then it can only mean that there's something greater and rarer and more magical on the way." Her mind flew unbidden to a faceless stranger receiving a wrong email. "And I wouldn't miss out on that for the world."
"Wow," Alya said, "you must really have it bad for Adrien." She walked over and wrapped Marinette up in a hug. "I'm proud of you, you know that?"

Marinette returned the embrace. "Yeah."

"And if you need me to come to dinner with you so I can kill Nathanael immediately following the meal, I'd be more than happy to tag along."

"I appreciate it, but I'd rather you stay out of prison," Marinette said. "I need you free as a bird so I can tease you about Nino whenever I want."

Alya let go of her. "Don't you dare start."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I can't help it that you were making googly eyes at him through his entire set," she said, and made googly eyes at Alya to demonstrate.

"If you're in a good enough mood to be making fun of me, then my work here is done." Alya picked up her iced coffee and headed for the door. She stopped. "Was I really looking at him like that?"

"Girl," Marinette said, "you have no idea."

x.X.x

The filming wrapped up at noon, and Adrien, more than ready to go home, held in a joyful shout. In hindsight, the experience hadn't been that bad: he got to kiss a supermodel while being pampered by a staff of people whose job it was to make sure he was comfortable. If he'd tried to complain about that to Nino, he would have gotten glared at. But maybe his excitement to leave had colored the entire week with rose-tinted glasses. Now that it was over, he couldn't remember why he'd complained so much.

*First world problems*, a voice whispered in the back of his mind, which he dutifully ignored.

"Adrien!"

He turned in time to open his arms and receive an enormous hug from Ange, who looked happier than he'd seen her all week. There, proof that he wasn't the only one desperate to go home.

"Thanks for making this week bearable," she said as she pulled away. "If I ever hear of a job you might be interested in, I'll give you a call."

"I appreciate that," Adrien said.

"You deserve it for being one of the nicest guys I've ever worked with." Ange squeezed his shoulder affectionately. "Oh, before I forget, I'm throwing a birthday party in October. Should just be a few close friends, nothing too crazy. You want in?"


"I will." Ange turned away from him. "And don't worry, your good friend Marinette is invited, too," she said.

Adrien's smile dropped faster than a piano in a black-and-white cartoon.

Filming was over. In a little over six hours, he'd be back in Paris, walking up to Marinette's door, ringing the buzzer, waiting for her to open it and verify that she was just his good friend and
nothing remotely resembling a crush.

What would he say when she opened the door? Surprise? He was just in the neighborhood—again? He'd decided to tell her he was back in person because she was his fake girlfriend and that came with fake girlfriend privileges? What if she asked him what those fake girlfriend privileges were? Permission to touch him whenever she wanted?

The Gorilla pulled up to the chateau's front drive and Adrien sprang down the steps, leaving poor Nathalie in his dust. The faster he got back to Paris, the better.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
*RE: Summer*
2 hours ago

*Next time I ask you why I don't take naps in the middle of the day, please respond with the following: headaches, stomachaches, disorientation, crankiness.*

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
*RE: Summer*
Just now

*Did you not have work today?*

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
*RE: Summer*
Just now

*You thought I would go into work without sleep?*

*I'm only human, Chat Noir.*

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
*RE: Summer*
Just now

*Shame on you. Here I thought you were Ladybug the Morally Upstanding, but now I'm forced to see you as the kind of girl who ditched school whenever it tickled her fancy.*

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
*RE: Summer*
Just now

*What do you know about ditching, Mr. I-Was-Homeschooled? :-P*

*If it makes you feel better, I only skipped class when it was a matter of my health and wellbeing.*
I used to go to school no matter what, but then one day I found myself sobbing on an exam because I had period cramps severe enough to kill a grown man.

Some things just aren't worth it.

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Fair enough. I wouldn't want you out in the world if you weren't feeling well. (You are feeling well, right?)

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

Other than the headache, stomachache, disorientation, and crankiness, yes.

I need to get back on a regular sleeping schedule.

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Well I'm sorry for keeping you up all night.

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

Don't be.

Six hours of uncomfortable and frequently interrupted naps later, Adrien woke from a doze to find himself back in Paris. He sat up fast. They hadn't passed Rue Gotlib yet. "Before we go home, I need to make a stop at the Dupain-Cheng bakery," he said to the Gorilla, who nodded and changed their course. Adrien caught Nathalie's stare in the car's side mirror, but if she had a comment, she didn't offer it.

Adrien could have gone home, greeted Plagg, freshened up, and then made his way to the bakery, but he was operating on pure determination and limited courage. If he went home now, he'd lose his momentum.

The closer they got to the bakery, the clammier his palms became. His heart insisted on beating at a tempo much faster than normal. He swallowed a nervous laugh. How was he supposed to meet Ladybug in person when the thought of seeing Marinette, a mere friend, made him feel like his
sanity was unraveling? It had only been five days, for crying out loud. How much could a person change in five days?

A block from the Dupain-Cheng's, it occurred to Adrien that he did not want an audience for whatever was about to happen. "Here's fine," he said. "I'll walk the rest of the way. Feel like stretching my legs."

He got out of the car without daring to look at either of his father's employees. It had been another day of periodic rain: the air was humid, scented with damp, and puddles remained in spite of the sun's attempts to dry them. He sidestepped a few before turning into the alley beside the bakery.

And there was Marinette.

Adrien froze. He hadn't expected to find her standing outside. He had hoped for the opportunity to knock on her door like a gentleman would, but there she was, locking the bakery up on her way out, wearing a floral print belted shirtdress with ballet flats, her hair braided over her right shoulder and secured by a bright red ribbon.

She was beautiful.

He couldn't move.

Marinette was beautiful, and he couldn't move.

She dropped her key into her clutch and turned from the door, smiling—that smile—at a man who stood a few feet away. A man who Adrien hadn't noticed at all until he was the lucky recipient of Marinette's smile. A man, he thought with a dizzying sense of irony, who wasn't him.

Adrien considered leaving. He felt out of place, like he wasn't supposed to be there, like he'd deviated just a few steps from the clearly outlined path his life had been headed down and now he couldn't find his way back.

But the man—red hair, shorter than Adrien, thinner build—had already noticed him, and said something to Marinette too quiet to be heard from a distance.

Marinette turned her head.

Adrien's heart slammed against his ribcage. He imagined it opening a little door, hopping out of his chest, and leaping into Marinette's arms.

"Hold on," she said to the red-haired man, then jogged over to where Adrien stood, dress fluttering, braid tapping her shoulder with each step. Up close, he noticed her fingernails were painted the same shade of red as the ribbon in her hair. Her earrings were red, too. How delightful.

Adrien untangled his tongue. "I'm back," he said.

Marinette's smile widened, showing teeth, crinkling the corners of her eyes. "Welcome back, Adrien." She glanced over her shoulder. "I wasn't expecting you."

Adrien's body filled with the perfect blend of horror and embarrassment. "Yeah, I-I know. I was on my way home and thought I'd say hi first." The red-haired man came to stand behind Marinette at a distance that, to Adrien's eyes, seemed a little too close.

Marinette gestured. "This is my friend, Nathanael. He's visiting from out of town. Nathanael, this is —"
"Adrien Agreste," Nathanael said. He stuck his hand out in greeting. "I recognize you from the *Gabriel* advertisements. Has anyone ever told you that your facial structure is aesthetically pleasing?"

"They have now," Adrien said as he shook Nathanael's hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"He's an artist," Marinette explained. Her cheeks were bright pink. "Umm, Nathanael and I are going to grab dinner at that Lebanese place. But I'm so glad you stopped by! I meant to text you earlier and ask when you'd be able to come over because I found this *amazing* cheesecake recipe and—well, you'll see."

Adrien nodded. A thanks-for-stopping-by and no invitation to join them for dinner. The dismissal could only mean one thing:

Marinette was going on a date. A *real* date.

"Sure," Adrien said. He took a step back. "I'll text you once I figure out my schedule this week."

A real date, with a guy who was genuinely interested in her, not using her to set his best friend up with her best friend.

"Oh! How's your back doing?" Marinette asked, her smile replaced by a concerned frown. "Are you okay?"

What right did Adrien have to stop his fake girlfriend from trying to find a real boyfriend?

He smiled at her. "I'm fine," he said. His favorite, most time-honored lie. He took another step away. "I won't keep you two. It was nice meeting you," he said to Nathanael again, then turned and headed back the way he'd come.

The car remained parked where he'd left it, the Gorilla staring out the window, Nathalie speaking into her phone. The same as always. Nothing had changed. Adrien walked down the damp street, expecting to find that clearly outlined life path he'd deviated from along the way.

He didn't find it.

He climbed into the backseat and shut the door, giving no explanation for why he'd felt the urge to stop by a closed bakery. Neither Nathalie nor the Gorilla asked him why, either. They remained the same. The car remained the same. The city of Paris remained the same.

But Adrien did not. No matter how hard he tried, he could not go back to seeing Marinette the way he used to see her. Or rather, he couldn't go back to *not* seeing her. He closed his eyes and there she stood, headscarf and A-line skirt, asking if he'd brought her chocolate. There she stood with her freckled shoulders and messy bun, wishing him luck. There she stood with her shirtdress and braid, on her way to dinner with a man who wasn't him.

Adrien pulled his phone out of his pocket. He opened Ladybug's latest email and hit reply. Then he stared at the blinking cursor for a long moment before he closed the email app and turned his gaze out the window instead.

Well. So much for that.
Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista).
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Marinette takes two steps forward, Adrien takes three steps back.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Marinette had spent the better part of her waking hours imagining many different outcomes to her dinner with Nathanael. She imagined sitting at the table with him, ordering water, splashing that water in his face, then leaving—it was by far the easiest way of making her feelings known. She imagined standing on the table and calling him a cad before a group of witnesses. She imagined crying. A lot.

She hadn't expected to enjoy herself.

Time, absence, and the fallout of their breakup had tainted her memories of Nathanael. She'd forgotten how gentle he was, how easily he could make her laugh. She'd forgotten how alike they were in their art habits and how different they were in their temperaments.

He wasn't some dastardly villain who'd gotten close to her, ripped her heart out, and run off cackling into the sunset. He was just a guy who hadn't been ready to get married. A friend who'd disappointed her.

"Marinette?"

She looked up. Their dinner plates had been cleared away, and outside the restaurant, little daylight remained. Concern hid in the corners of Nathanael's smile. "You zoned out on me."

"Sorry," Marinette said. A strange feeling permeated her being, one that she hadn't been able to shake since she'd seen Nathanael standing in front of the bakery. Her past in her present. A dream come true after more than a year of waiting. The moment that she'd longed for, prayed for, had finally arrived.

And all she wanted to do was go home and email Chat Noir and move on with her life.

"I'm a little tired," she confessed. "I had a midday nap that took more energy out of me than it gave back."

"Ah," Nathanael said, "shall we get going, then?"

Marinette nodded and stood from her chair. The strangeness lingered on her way out the door, a sense of guilt for cutting a pleasant evening short. As they walked away from the restaurant, she snuck a peek at Nathanael, took in the height and the shape of him, remembered countless evenings where they'd done just this: walking together through the streets of Paris, searching for ever-elusive inspiration.

It didn't feel the same. It wasn't the same. Too much wreckage lay between them. Without the initial shock, Marinette looked at Nathanael and all she felt was odd. She'd loved this person once
upon a time, loved him so much that leaving him had turned her into someone she never wanted to be. Where had all that love gone?

"So… you and Adrien Agreste, huh?"

Marinette blinked. "What?"

Nathanael smiled at her. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious."

Heat rushed to Marinette's cheeks. "Oh, no, Adrien and I aren't dating," she said. "He's been coming to the bakery since last year. We're friends, that's all."

"Really?" Nathanael crossed his arms and turned a contemplative gaze skyward. "The way he looked at you, though…"

"What about the way he looked at me?" Marinette cried.

He shook his head. "Poor guy."

She smacked his arm. "Nath!"

"Careful, that's my drawing arm." He continued to grin without answering the question. Marinette stared ahead of her with a distressed frown. What about the way Adrien looked at her? If anything, he'd just seemed surprised to see her with another guy, which she would have to explain to him later. He probably went home thinking she was on a date or something.

"In any case," Nathanael continued, "I'm glad to see that you've been doing well."

Marinette stopped walking.

Nathanael looked back at her.

"Doing well?" she echoed.

Suddenly, the strangeness lifted from her mind like fog, taking the sleepwalking Marinette with it. Her protective shell of cowardice and complacency cracked open, and the old Marinette, hotheaded and unafraid, clawed her way to the surface, alive with anger.

"You know what, Nath?" she said. "I haven't been doing well. I haven't been anywhere near well in a long time."

His smile faded.

"And it's not because we broke up. People break up all the time. We weren't meant for each other, and that's fine." Her hands shook at her sides. "But you and I were best friends. You knew me. You knew that I wasn't going to be okay, but did you bother to come and talk to me? No. You didn't even try." She looked at him. "Do you know how that made me feel?" she asked. "Do you understand the kind of toll that takes on someone? I've spent the last year and a half trying to convince myself that there's nothing wrong with me, acting like every little setback is the end of the world and being too scared to move forward. Does that sound well to you? Does that sound like the Marinette you remember?"

Nathanael came towards her. "Mari…"

She raised both hands to stop him. "Don't." She took a deep, calming breath. "I'm fine," she said. "It took me a while, and it was a lot of work, but I am finally fine. I just… needed you to know that I
didn't get this way overnight."

He stared at her, his expression pained. They stood only a few steps away from each other, but to Marinette, it could have been lightyears. A mountain of hurt stood between them, and she knew deep down that if she wanted to, if he wanted to, they could climb that mountain together and strive for something new.

The very thought of it exhausted her.

"I'm sorry," Nathanael said. "You're right. We were best friends, and I didn't treat you like it." He reached for her hand. She didn't stop him. "You were always so strong, Mari. Practically superhuman. When you left without saying anything, I just assumed that strength would get you through it."

Marinette stared at their hands. "Looks like I'm only human after all."

Nathanael sighed and pulled her into an embrace. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry."

She stood in his arms, unable to move, frozen in place by bitterness. She could have shoved him away. He wouldn't have held it against her. But bitterness was not a part of her. Marinette didn't hold petty grudges against people who apologized, and she refused to let that become part of her identity, old or new. So she returned Nathanael's embrace, and allowed the Marinette of two years ago to have her moment before she went away for good.

Nathanael let go of her. "Are we going to be okay?" he asked.

Marinette nodded. "I think so." She managed a tired smile. "I want us to be okay."

"So do I," he said.

She gave his shoe a light kick. "Then you'd better invite me to the movie premiere."

"Oh, for sure." Nathanael offered her his arm. "Your friend Adrien can come, too."

"Oh my God," Marinette groaned. She hesitated for a moment, then accepted his arm. It was fine. She was fine. They would never go back to the way they used to be, but they were friends, and they were going to be okay.

They walked another couple of blocks together before they parted ways, Nathanael heading off in the direction of his parents' house, Marinette towards the bakery. But she couldn't resist looking over her shoulder at him before he walked out of sight. Same back, same gait, same guy.

She faced forward. Took her phone out of her clutch. Opened Chat Noir's latest email and hit reply. Tears dripped onto her screen.

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

Why do goodbyes have to be so sad?

x.x.x
Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Hold the phone, my Lady. Not all goodbyes are sad! There are happy goodbyes ("good riddance") and ambivalent goodbyes, too.

And what about all the sad hellos?

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

There are sad hellos?

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Of course. I said one just this afternoon.

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

Ugh, as if sad goodbyes weren't bad enough, now we have sad hellos to deal with.

I don't want to be sad anymore, Chat Noir.

I want to do something nice for you instead.

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Something nice for me? …do you need ideas? Because I can write a list.

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

How about this:

During your lunch break on Monday, go to the café across the street from Zag Magazine's headquarters.
*Ask them for the Ladybug special.*

*It'll already be paid for.*

---

Marinette hit send, stepped into the bakery, closed the door, and leaned back against it with an impish smile. If that didn't make Chat Noir's entire night, she didn't know what would.

She took in her familiar surroundings and wiped her misty eyes. She couldn't wait for her parents to come home. On a night like this, she could have used their company: a wide shoulder to lean on, some comforting words of advice. Someone else's strength instead of her own.

But despite her lingering sadness, she couldn't help feeling excited. An unresolved chapter of her life had finally come to an end. The restless part of her soul had been appeased. Perhaps now, she thought, her transformation could begin in earnest.

And this time, she would become someone she could be proud of.

---

Adrien Agreste woke up Monday morning with a smile on his face and a raging case of denial.

As far as he was concerned, he was the happiest man in Paris. His back had almost fully recovered from the hives, he'd gotten to sleep in for once, he was home with his beloved cat—who had hardly left his side since he returned—and Ladybug was buying him lunch.

But most importantly, after spending his weekend alternating between silently staring at a fixed point for hours at a time and pretending nothing was wrong with him, he'd realized something. That whole "Marinette thing" had been one big mistake. How could Adrien trust himself to make any kind of rational decision involving his feelings when he hadn't gotten proper sleep the night before? No wonder he'd been so confused!

Therefore, he wouldn't worry about it. Today was about one thing and one thing only: Ladybug, buying him lunch.

This was a huge step forward in their friendship. Until that point, Ladybug had been nothing but a presence on the internet. Now there would be concrete evidence of her existence, other people who had seen her and spoken to her and accepted currency from her and could confirm that there was, indeed, a woman behind the screenname.

Adrien felt giddy enough to kiss someone.

Like Chloe, or Nathalie. Not Marinette.

He dressed in his nicest suit, had breakfast at home, then headed to Agreste HQ for the first meetings of the day. His megawatt smile visibly distressed the receptionists, who were so used to working with his father that they probably hadn't seen a happy human being in years. Adrien considered getting them gift baskets.

Preparations for the design competition's finale were well underway. The venue had been chosen. The press had been invited. The provider of the flower bouquet for the winner of the competition had been chosen. And, Adrien knew, the music was in good hands. He couldn't have been more pleased. His *father* would be pleased to hear that everything was running smoothly. If there was one thing Gabriel Agreste hated more than a disaster, it was a disaster that could have been
avoided if he'd been in charge.

Still, Adrien couldn't help the nervous flutter in his stomach when he thought of the judging process. While he dealt with every other minute aspect of the competition, a panel of professional strangers held both Ladybug and Marinette's fates in their fickle hands. Perhaps it was better that way; Adrien would have done away with the competition altogether and hired both women if the decision had been up to him. He wasn't a designer, but he knew excellent work when he saw it. He knew excellent people when he saw them.

By the time eleven o'clock rolled around, Adrien was practically manic with glee. He opened his email inbox and found a new message from Ladybug.

X.X.X

**Ladybug**
10 minutes ago
Just now

*Just so we're clear, I am nowhere near the café, so you can dismiss any fantasies you had about meeting me today.*

X.X.X

**Chat Noir**
RE: Summer
Just now

*How do I know you're not lying? How do I know you aren't sitting among the patrons with a newspaper covering your face, watching and waiting to jump out and surprise me?*

X.X.X

**Ladybug**
RE: Summer
Just now

*Do you really think I'm that nice?*

X.X.X

**Chat Noir**
RE: Summer
Just now

*...good point. You are cruel, Ladybug, but that is one of the many things I love about you.*

What would be so bad about us getting together for lunch? We could sit down face to face and have any of the stupid conversations we normally have over the internet, in person. It'd save our hands a lot of trouble.

Though I'd like to think that if we met in person, we'd hardly talk and our hands would be troubled, anyway. ;)

X.X.X
Adrien grinned and slipped his phone back into his pocket so he could pay attention to where he was walking. At this point he kind of wished she'd win the design competition just so he could hand her the flower bouquet, whisper "Congratulations, buginette," into her ear, and watch the shock take over her face. Surprise! He'd been there all along.

Zag Magazine's offices weren't far from Agreste HQ. Adrien approached the building, wondering if Alya was inside, and if she was lost in daydreams about Nino. He couldn't blame her if she was; once Nino's confidence kicked in, he could be smoother than glass. Adrien's smile widened. Yet another reason to be happy: his best friend was in love.

Yes, Adrien could say with certainty that everything was right with the world. Except for maybe the daytime temperature. It could have been a little less hot.

He looked across the street, searching for the café in question. He'd never had lunch anywhere on this street before and wasn't sure of his destination. But soon enough his eyes landed on a small business with a sign written in almost illegible cursive: Café Reflekta. It was the only one on the block.

Adrien crossed the street at the traffic light and headed towards the café, more nerves than rational human at that point. He had to calm down. Ladybug wouldn't even be there in person. It was just a drink. A drink that his Lady had taken the time to arrange for him to receive, because she wanted to do something nice for him.

Who was he kidding? There would be no calming down.

Adrien stopped in front of the café, took a deep breath, and opened the door.

He froze.

The interior of the café was a gothic nightmare. Darkness and black lace and skulls and antique mirrors. So many mirrors. Mirrors everywhere. Even the café staff was dressed in gothic Lolita. They looked like dolls.

Adrien took a wary step inside and let the door shut behind him. Some of the patrons were dressed in gothic Lolita too, but others wore normal clothes, which made him feel a little less uncomfortable. But not by much. A quick survey of the room revealed that he was the only guy in the place, and the only person wearing business attire.

He walked up to the counter. A white-faced woman dressed in a bubblegum pink outfit dotted with what appeared to be eyes stood behind it. "Welcome to Café Reflekta," she murmured.

This couldn't be right.

What had Adrien just told Ladybug? That she was cruel? Who was to say this wasn't some elaborate prank, like the time she had Rickrolled him? His nerves abandoned him. He smiled sheepishly at the woman behind the counter. He almost ran. But at the last minute, he decided to stand his ground. He was Adrien-freaking-Agrese, gorgeous and in charge, and if this was an
elaborate prank he would take it like a man.

"Hi," he croaked, then cleared his throat. "I'd like the Ladybug special."

The woman looked him up and down. She had large pink circles painted around her eyes that reminded Adrien of a raccoon. Then, just when he thought she'd ask him what the hell a Ladybug special was, the woman smiled. "Awesome," she said, and walked off without another word.

Adrien let out a sigh of relief. It wasn't a prank. Ladybug had been here. He took in the décor and tried to imagine her as a gothic Lolita enthusiast, but seeing as he had no idea what she looked like, he didn't even have time to decide how tall his imaginary Ladybug should be before the pink woman returned. She handed Adrien a red mug with black polka dots balanced on a saucer, filled to the brim with coffee. A ladybug had been drawn in the cream with an expert hand. Two ladyfingers accompanied the drink, as well as a red envelope.

Adrien took the mug and saucer and envelope from the hostess. "Enjoy," she said without a hint of emotion.

He navigated his way to the table with the least amount of skulls around it, set everything down, then slid into the waiting chair. His leg shook. He had no idea how to proceed. Logic told him to eat the cookies and drink the coffee. Emotion told him to cry. Curiosity screamed at him to open the envelope, and called him an idiot, which wasn't very nice but Adrien didn't care because this was happening.

He grabbed the envelope. Written on the front, in the most beautiful calligraphy he'd ever seen, was the name Chat Noir. His smile widened. File that under details about his Lady: she knew calligraphy. Adrien opened the envelope as carefully as he could. Inside was a single sheet of stationery. The moment he unfolded it, he laughed out loud. She'd drawn an email window around her entire message.

"Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
Consider this my way
of saying thank you
for one year of friendship
and laughter and fun,
(and yes, even every
last awful pun.)

You're pretty pawsome
as far as friends go,
So here's to our future:
a happy hello.

P.S.: In case you were wondering why I sent you here, I designed every costume in this café."

Adrien's face hurt. He couldn't stop smiling. He read the letter again, then grabbed his phone, then changed his mind and stood from the table, hurrying over to the woman in pink. "Do you have a pen I can borrow?"
Marinette sat on her balcony, curled up on the lawn chair with her sketchbook and colored pencils, enjoying the sunny afternoon. She had just put the finishing touches on Flour Girl and Model Behavior's secret agent outfits when her phone chimed. She leaned over to pick it up off the balcony floor. An email from Chat Noir.

Rather than text, the body contained an image: an empty mug, her folded note, and a napkin on which he'd simply written "thank mew" alongside a doodle of a black cat.

"You're welcome, kitty cat," she said warmly.

Truth be told, she'd been tempted to go to the café. Hang out. Hide in plain sight. Wait for someone to enter and order the Ladybug special. Get an eyeful of that person. Leave without saying anything to them.

But in the end, she'd decided against it. The weekend had left her too emotionally exhausted to deal with the stress of seeing Chat Noir in real life.

Marinette flipped back a couple of pages in her sketchbook to the designs she'd been toying with in case she advanced to the final round of the design competition: a ladybug motif for the male model, a black cat motif for the female model. She tapped the page with the eraser end of her pencil and rested her chin in her upturned hand.

If she advanced.

*If* she advanced, she would reveal herself to Chat Noir in the loudest way possible.

Chapter End Notes

Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista).
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

This chapter started off so happy, too...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
1 hour ago

Good morning, Ladybug! It's not even ten o'clock and I can already tell it's going to be disgustingly hot. These are truly the dog days of summer.

Coincidentally, do you know why they're called the dog days of summer? It's because Sirius, the dog star, rises at the same time as the sun this time of year, and makes it so miserable outside that no one wants to do anything productive—myself included.

Perhaps if the ancient astronomers had been smart enough to give us a cat star instead, it would have been too lazy to make the weather hot, and we'd all get a bit of a reprieve.

x.x.x

Marinette stood before a lineup of small cheesecakes. In front of each she'd written a list of ingredients with the differences marked in colored pen; beside each was a dessert spoon. "All right," she murmured, "which one of you lucky cakes will Adrien get to eat?"

She picked up the first dessert spoon, took a healthy portion out of the first miniature cheesecake, and popped it into her mouth. After a moment of consideration, she shook her head. "Too much cinnamon." She moved onto the next. The original recipe had yielded a tasty cake, but the person who developed it knew nothing of concinnity: the ingredients all competed for Marinette's attention without once settling into a whole product. She'd tasted cream cheese, vanilla, and cinnamon, but never a cheesecake. It was the culinary equivalent of a band whose members started playing the same song at different times.

"Not this one," she said to the second cheesecake, then the third. The fourth one made her pause, lift a hand to her cheek, and wriggle with delight. She marked it as a maybe, then sampled the last two. Nope, definitely the fourth.

With that matter settled, she sent Adrien a text message. She hadn't spoken to him since Friday and, fake dating or not, she didn't want to leave him with the wrong impression about her and Nathanael. She was a faithful fake girlfriend.

She eyed her phone. Well. Faithful for the most part.

She took another bite of the fourth cheesecake while she considered how to respond to Chat Noir's email. Did Chat Noir like cheesecake? Did he have a sweet tooth like her, or was he partial to other kinds of food? She'd never asked him. It was one of those perfectly safe conversation topics that
had somehow managed not to come up in actual conversation.

Marinette spun her phone around on the kitchen counter with her little finger. The things she knew about Chat Noir could probably be summed up on one sheet of paper, and she had no one to blame for that but herself. Ladybug had been the one to impose restrictions on what they could talk about. She didn't even know when his birthday was. In the one year that they'd been friends, she'd had a birthday, he'd had a birthday, and they'd both been none the wiser.

Marinette picked up her phone.

*What kind of desserts do you like?*

She imagined sending him to her bakery on the first of September.

Delete. Delete. Delete.

*When is your birthday?*

She imagined herself standing at the register, waiting for the man who wrote her stupid jokes and cheesy declarations of love, who sent her pictures of his cat in the morning because he wanted to be the first person to make her smile that day.

She imagined him looking right through her, thanking her for the dessert, and walking away.


---

**Ladybug**

*RE: Summer*

1 hour ago

*I don't think science works that way, chaton.*

*But a cat star would be nice.*

---

**Chat Noir**

*RE: Summer*

Just now

*Fun fact: There actually was a cat constellation for a while.*

*Another fun fact: It was invented by a Frenchman named Joseph Jerome Le Francais de Lalande, who may or may not have been me in a past life.*

---

**Ladybug**

*RE: Summer*

Just now

*Fascinating.*

*Do you keep these fun facts on hand, or are you just Googling them for my benefit?*
Adrien slipped his phone into his back pocket and returned to the business at hand. With his only meeting of the day concluded, he'd been about to return home when Marinette sent him a text inviting him over. Well, he couldn't turn up at her place empty handed, so he'd changed course and headed to the nearest craft store.

Adrien felt good about seeing her. Confident, even. He'd made a mistake and overreacted last week, but now that he'd rested sufficiently, he had no doubt in his mind that the moment he saw Marinette, she would be nothing more than a friend to him.

A friend, and a fake girlfriend. What was the perfect gift for a fake girlfriend? Fake flowers, of course.

He walked to the section of the craft store that sold plastic flowers for table arrangements and took his time choosing. He wished he'd have thought to bring Ladybug a gift the day before, something he could have passed along to the pink woman to give to her. But what sort of gift would he have gotten Ladybug? She was a designer—a sketchbook, maybe? A personalized sketchbook with a handwritten message inside, professing his undying love and affection? Perhaps something that would have been less embarrassing for a random stranger to peek into?

Ten minutes later, he left the craft store with a bouquet of random white and pink flowers. No roses, nothing red. No reason for Marinette to think that it meant anything more than it did. Because it didn't mean anything. It was a friendly gesture. An inside joke. Surely she would appreciate that.

Adrien took the metro across town to get to the bakery faster, smiling at the cleverness of his own joke. But as he stepped out into the sweltering afternoon—dog days of summer, indeed—his smile slipped. He looked at the flowers in his hand and his thoughts took a turn for the forbidden. Instead of dwelling in the comfort and safety of his denial, he pictured Marinette, her t-shirt dress, her red fingernails, her braid. He imagined her on a date with that redhaired guy, laughing and flirting and hoping it went well because why shouldn't she want it to go well? She was young and beautiful and technically available.

A crack formed in Adrien's denial, widening with every step he took, until he found himself in front of the bakery's side door, too afraid to knock.

Because the sane, rational adult side of him knew that no amount of denial would make it to the end of this encounter.

And the sane, rational adult side of him desperately wished he'd gotten Marinette real flowers instead.

He knocked on the door.

She answered almost immediately, her hair pulled into pigtails so unexpectedly cute that heat
rushed to Adrien's face. His mutinous eyes shifted downwards. Shorts. *She was wearing shorts.* Suddenly he understood why Nino had almost ceased to function at the movie theater.

"Hey," Marinette greeted him with all the warmth and pleasantness of a long bath. The scent of cinnamon drifted out of the bakery behind her. "I hope you're ready for this cheesecake, because it's—those for me?"

Adrien stared dumbly at her for a moment before he remembered the flowers in his hand. The joke. The meaningless gesture. "They're fake," he said. "You know, fake flowers for my fake girlfriend?" He threw in a grin, all the while praying for a sinkhole to open up and swallow him. Losing his mind over a pair of shorts when he'd seen her legs several times before—he was in trouble.

Marinette clasped her hands together and swooned against the door. "How romantic," she cried. She stepped backwards. "Come on in, make yourself at home while I find some fake water for those."

"Yup," Adrien said. Pretty *and* funny. Did he say he was in trouble? What he meant to say was he was screwed.

He held the flowers out to Marinette and almost jumped when her fingers brushed his. Worse than screwed. He'd somehow managed to shave ten years off his current age and land right back in smitten schoolboy territory.

In the time it took for him to get from the threshold to the bakery's sitting area, he mentally treated himself to every insult he knew. At least now he could tell Chloe he understood why she'd called him stupid. Stupid didn't even begin to cover it. He was a certified imbecile with a dash of two-timer and he deserved neither Ladybug nor Marinette. He was an embarrassment to his sex. A cad masquerading as a gentleman. A good-for-nothing tomcat.

"So I wanted to apologize for Friday," Marinette said from the kitchen, snapping Adrien out of his frantic thoughts. He couldn't see her, but he heard the refrigerator door close, plates clatter.

"Nothing to be sorry about," he said. Friday came back to him in a rush. The redhaired guy. The ribbon in her braid. The obvious dismissal. "You were going on a date, weren't you?"

Marinette poked her head out of the kitchen. "Absolutely not!"

Adrien blinked as she disappeared again. Absolutely not? As in, no date? As in, judging by her tone of voice, there was no way in hell she'd been on a date with that Nathanael guy? An inappropriate amount of happiness flooded Adrien's brain, followed closely by the parade of insults: *Two-timer. Idiot. Tomcat."

"I realized after the fact that you might have interpreted it that way," Marinette said. She walked out of the kitchen, this time carrying a dessert plate in each hand. "But no, I wasn't on a date. Nathanael's an old friend of mine. He just wanted to talk some personal things over, which might have been awkward to do in front of a stranger..." She shrugged. "Otherwise I would have invited you in a heartbeat."

In a heartbeat. Adrien fought off a grin.

He thanked her as she set the plate down in front of him. A handsome slice of cinnamon cheesecake sat on it, perfectly centered, drizzled with some kind of sauce. His mouth watered. He forced himself to look at Marinette as she took the chair across from him, her beautiful blue eyes
already searching for a reaction to the dessert. He cleared his throat and said, "I guess I figured that since we aren't really dating, you might want to keep your options open."

Marinette wrinkled her nose. "No way," she said. "I'm a hundred percent committed to our cause. It'd look suspicious to Alya if I suddenly started dating other guys, right?"

"Right," Adrien said. There was that inappropriate happiness again. He stamped it down with words straight out of Marinette's mouth: she only did it because it would look suspicious to Alya if they "broke up." A real romantic interest was out of the question.

But what did that matter when he was in love with Ladybug?

Did the name Ladybug ring any bells? Sweet, mysterious Ladybug, who'd bought him lunch the day before?

Oh God. He'd let Marinette treat him to lunch the day after he let Ladybug treat him to lunch. Would his villainy never cease?

"Are… you okay?" Marinette asked.

Adrien had the dessert spoon in his hand, but he hadn't gotten any closer to trying the cheesecake. Instinct told him to run. Flee the country. Shave his head and become a monk until he mastered his emotions and detached himself from his worldly desires.

But it would be rude to refuse such a beautiful cheesecake.

"I'm fine," he said. The lie came easier every time. "Just trying to decide which direction I should attack this thing from."

Marinette picked up her own spoon. "Most people start from the front," she said. She scooped the tip of the cheesecake, lifted the spoon to her mouth and—

Adrien looked away. Good boys didn't need to see what pretty girls did to spoons.

He went for the tip of the cheesecake as well, dragging it through the sauce before taking his first bite. A symphony of flavor erupted on his tongue. The cheesecake's ingredients had been blended so perfectly that he couldn't even describe what he was tasting as food. He felt as if he'd taken a bite straight out of the holidays. He looked at Marinette with wide eyes. She covered her hand with her mouth and laughed.

"Good, right?" she asked.

"Oh my God," he replied. He went for another bite.

Marinette smiled. "I got the recipe online, but it needed some tampering with, so I made a couple small ones with different ratios of ingredients until this cheesecake happened," she said. "But my parents could probably do a better job of perfecting it."

"You mean this isn't perfect?" Adrien asked.

She paused with her dessert spoon stuck in the cheesecake. "You think it's that good?" She considered it. "I mean, I wanted to propose this as a menu item for the autumn months, but my Mom and Dad have ridiculous standards. They'll need to taste it themselves, then they'll probably want to add a thing or two…"
"Tell them I said it's perfect," Adrien said, "and if they don't think so, then Chloe's father will hear about it." That got Marinette laughing, which sent butterflies knocking around in Adrien's already happy stomach. He focused on the cheesecake. If all else failed, he could elope with that instead.

Marinette spent the next ten minutes filling him in on the week's events: her boredom, Nino's show, the development of his relationship with Alya. "I can't decide on a cute couple name for them," she complained. "Ninalya rolls off the tongue nicely and it doubles as something they can call their future daughter, but Alyino is much more fun to say."

"You think they'll get married?" Adrien asked. "Isn't it a little early for that?"

"All I know is I've never seen my best friend look at anyone the way she looked at Nino last week," Marinette said. "Sure, they're not even officially dating yet, but it happens sometimes, you know? People find their soulmates and they click in such an instant and profound way that they get married almost immediately."

"My parents were like that," Adrien said, surprising himself. He hadn't thought about his parents' relationship for a long time. "They were in a fashion class together and it was pretty much love at first sight. But instead of asking her on a date, my father asked Mom to model one of his designs. And when he was too nervous to ask her out after that, Mom took the initiative in front of the entire class. They got married six months later." He remembered his mother giggling as she told him that story. She'd warned Adrien not to be like his father, that if he liked a girl he ought to come out and say it.

Which he had done. With Ladybug. And Ladybug hadn't taken him seriously.

"That's so sweet," Marinette said. Her eyes practically sparkled. "I always wanted my relationships to turn out that way." She gestured around them. "Obviously, they haven't."

"Someday," Adrien said, "one of them will."

"Someday," she agreed.

He smiled at her and wondered who would come into the bakery and sweep Marinette off her feet.

It wouldn't be him. People developed small crushes on new acquaintances all the time. Whatever infatuation he had with Marinette wasn't permanent. It couldn't be, because he wasn't a two-woman guy. Either his feelings for Ladybug would go away—which was unlikely—or his feelings for Marinette would go away once he got to know her better.

But did it make sense for him to hold a candle for Ladybug when she'd been turning him down for months?

Marinette collected the empty dessert plates and carried them into the kitchen. "We should hang out with Nino and Alya next week, just to make sure things are running smoothly," she said. "After that we can decide if we want to keep this charade going or come clean."

"Tired of me already?" Adrien asked. He said it jokingly, but the panic alarm blared in his head.

"No," Marinette came back in and joined him at the table again. "But we can't keep faking it forever. Next thing you know, we'll be staging a fake wedding. Going on a fake honeymoon."

"Adopting a fake kid?" Adrien suggested.

She laughed out loud. "And by then it'll be too late to come out and say it was all just a plot to get
them together. We'd be stuck with each other."

Chat Noir reared his devilish head. "Getting stuck with you wouldn't be the worst thing in the world," he purred.

Marinette's eyes widened. Was... was that a blush? She leaned forward. "Because I make delicious pastries, right?"

"Exactly," he said. Adrien wished Chat Noir was a physical entity—an imp on his shoulder, a terrible wingman—so he could drag him into the alley and punch his lights out. "But you're right. We should call it quits on the fake dating soon, preferably once we're sure Nino and Alya will get along fine without us." The thought of not dating Marinette made him sadder than he wanted it to.

"It'll be an amicable, mutual decision," Marinette said. "In the end, we just weren't right for each other." She put on a stern frown. "But we're still friends, so you'd better not start avoiding me afterwards. I need a guinea pig to feed all my baking experiments to."

"At the risk of getting murdered by my personal trainer, I will happily be that guinea pig," Adrien said. And then he had to explain that no, Nino had not been joking when he'd mentioned Adrien's personal trainer, and that he had one because if there wasn't someone threatening him to exercise he'd probably get fat. Not that he would mind getting fat if it meant he could come to the bakery every day—as a regular customer, not a stray cat that slunk in after hours for scraps and chin scratches from a beautiful woman.

Adrien left the bakery some twenty minutes later with Marinette's promise to come up with a scheme to get the four of them hanging out again. He staggered down the street, feeling the heat rise off the pavement in an attempt to cook his legs, and patted the seat of his jeans until he found his cell phone. He called Chloe.

"What is it?" she snapped the moment she picked up, which meant that she was either in the middle of a meal or getting some kind of spa treatment done.

"Breakfast tomorrow. I need to talk to you," he said.

Chloe was silent for a moment. "Sure. Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine." Adrien winced the moment the words left his mouth. If there was one surefire way to raise a red flag in Chloe's mind, it was by telling her he was fine. "I'll pick you up at the usual time." He paused. "And Nino's coming too. Bye!" He hung up before Chloe could yell at him, then scrolled down his contact list, called Nino, and repeated the message.

He needed help. The Ladybug-Marinette situation had unsettled him. He couldn't keep bottling things up anymore, couldn't keep sneaking around behind his best friends' backs and then never talking about the things that upset him. It wasn't healthy, and it wasn't fair of him to worry them.

Tomorrow, he would get Chloe and Nino up to speed on the past year of his life.

He stared at his cell phone screen. The wallpaper was still set to the meme Marinette had sent him. He changed it to a picture of Plagg, then told himself to stop procrastinating and opened his email inbox.

There was someone else he had to come clean with.

x.x.x
Ladybug
RE: Summer
2 hours ago

Are you sure we don't need to talk about the anime phase?

Because I kind of want to talk about it. :-)

X.X.X

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Oh boy, would you look at that? It's time for me to change the subject!

You remember when I told you about that acquaintance of mine? The one my best friend was convinced had a crush on me? Well, she definitely doesn't have a crush on me.

But I might have a thing for her.

X.X.X

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

Seriously?

X.X.X

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Yes. And I know you and I aren't dating or anything, but it doesn't sit well with me, flirting with you the way I have and then developing feelings for someone else. I swear to you I'm not that kind of guy.

X.X.X

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

Okay.

X.X.X

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Okay? It's not okay. I feel like an ass.
**Ladybug**  
RE: Summer  
Just now

You said yourself that we aren't dating, so what do you want me to do about it?

Give you permission?

"Chat Noir is free to like whoever he wants to like because he's a grown man." Signed, Ladybug.

If you need my permission to get married to Cute Acquaintance, let me know so I can give it to you ahead of time.

**Chat Noir**  
RE: Summer  
Just now

I'm being serious.

**Ladybug**  
RE: Summer  
Just now

And you think I'm not?

Whatever, Chat Noir.

Do what you want, it's no skin off my nose.

**Chat Noir**  
RE: Summer  
Just now

Then why are you so upset?

**Ladybug**  
RE: Summer  
Just now

Because your little victim act is annoying.

If you're going to like someone else, then like her.

And don't bother me about it.
Marinette shut her phone off, threw it across the sofa, got up, and marched towards the stairs. She had designs to work on.

Chapter End Notes

Uh... Happy Valentine's Day?

Announcement! I got my thesis novel back from my advisor, so this story is officially on hiatus while I work on the second draft. It might take a couple weeks, it could take less. I may update if my work load isn't too bad. The point is, don't bother me about updates, or I'll kill you.

But you can bother me about everything else on Tumblr (geek-fashionista)!
Chapter Summary

I wrote this chapter in one day because I love you guys.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Marinette woke up the next morning with her left arm slung above her head, completely numb. She groaned, used her right arm to drag it down, and let it flop to her side, useless. A quick glance at her skylight told her the day would be gray, but not rainy. She felt around with her good hand until she found her cell phone. She turned it on. Her left arm began to tingle as she waited for her lock screen to appear.

Part of her wanted to believe that she'd dreamed her fight with Chat Noir, and that when she opened her inbox she'd find his usual chipper greeting and none of the unpleasantness of yesterday. But judging by the amount of dread currently braiding her stomach into a professional grade knot, she doubted that would be the case. She unlocked the phone and tapped on the email icon.

Nope. The fight had definitely happened.

Marinette whined. It wasn't her first time fighting with Chat Noir, but the misery that came in the wake of it left her feeling like a hundred-pound sack of crap. She sighed. Considered apologizing.

But I might have a thing for her.

She sat up. Her sleeping arm thwacked against her side as she pushed herself off the bed and came down from the loft. Whatever. She had doll clothes to ship. Business emails to answer. A whole day ahead of her to spend however she wanted.

And Chat Noir's crush had nothing to do with her.

x.x.x


He sighed. So much for hoping his argument with Ladybug had been nothing more than a bad dream.

He turned his head and found Plagg curled up on the pillow beside him. Adrien got up slowly, not wanting to disturb him, and made his way to the bathroom. It wasn't the first time he'd fought with Ladybug, and it probably wouldn't be the last, but as he grabbed his toothbrush he couldn't help thinking that something was different about this argument. That Ladybug's anger had nothing to do with him playing the victim.

If you're going to like someone else, then like her. And don't bother me about it.

Adrien stared desolately at his toothbrush. Ladybug wasn't the kind of person who kicked others
when they were down, but she was the kind of person who turned petulant when her feelings were hurt.

He'd hurt her feelings. She would never admit it to him, but the truth was as plain as day. Adrien smeared toothpaste on his brush and stuck it in his mouth, wishing he could be happy about the implications of Ladybug's irritation. He couldn't. He wanted nothing more than to apologize, to make her feel better, to take back everything he'd said and profess her his one and only love.

But he couldn't do that, either. Like it or not, his feelings for Marinette were there to stay, and he'd have to deal with it. But at least he didn't have to deal with it alone.

Adrien showered, dressed, and tried not to check his phone every five minutes to see if Ladybug had emailed him. He refilled Plagg's food bowl on his way out. The Gorilla waited for him out front with the car running. Since the Dupain-Chengs were closed for the month, Adrien had a back-up bakery that Chloe swore was almost as good, though they both agreed that nothing could top the service and quality of Tom and Sabine's.

When they arrived at Le Grand Paris, Chloe stood outside in a striped top, a pair of white jeans held up by a studded belt, her favorite yellow jacket, and Adrien's sunglasses perched on top of her head. The look she gave him when she slid into the car beside him could best be summarized as unamused.

"I'm not sorry," Adrien said. He leaned in to kiss her cheek, then pulled the sunglasses off her head and tucked them into his shirt collar. "You and Nino are my best friends, so you're just going to have to suck it up."

"I wasn't going to complain," Chloe said, her tone defensive.

"You were complaining with your eyes," Adrien told her. She grunted and stuck her phone out for a selfie. He held up two fingers behind her head. She shoved him away. "I have to say I'm proud of you, Chlo. You haven't partied since before I left."

Chloe took another selfie, then lowered her arm. "I'm saving it up for a special occasion," she said. "What's up with you this morning? You look enlightened."

Adrien blinked. "Do I?"

"Well, decidedly less stupid than usual." She tucked her phone into her purse. "Did you finally wise up to the fact that Marinette likes you?"

"Marinette doesn't like me," Adrien said, to which Chloe snorted. "And no amount of snorting will change my opinion." It would be nice if Marinette liked him, he thought, but he wasn't about to get his hopes up. She wanted to end their fake dating, not prolong it. And now that she'd stopped being nervous around him, it was easy to see that Chloe had misinterpreted her shyness. Marinette was his friend. She enjoyed being his friend—he supposed, given that she wanted him to keep coming around.

The car pulled up to Nino's apartment building. Chloe climbed over Adrien's lap and pushed him into the middle seat, then crossed her arms and looked determinedly out the window. Adrien rolled his eyes as Nino dropped into the seat beside him.

"Nice to see you too, Chloe," Nino said.

"Please don't start," Adrien warned him. He'd forgotten how exhausting it was to deal with the both of them at the same time. "Trust me when I say I wouldn't have put any of us through this if it
could be avoided. As it stands, I needed my best friends."

Chloe turned her head and stared at him.

Nino's jaw dropped. "Dude. Are you sick?"

"You're hilarious," Adrien deadpanned.

"Sorry, it's just that usually by the time you ask us for help, you're in deep shit. You'll have to forgive me if I'm a little suspicious."

"Can we wait until we've eaten before we have this conversation?" he said. Nino shrugged and focused his attention on his phone. Chloe stared at Adrien a bit longer, then turned her gaze back to the window. Adrien checked his email. Nothing new. He put his phone away.

When they arrived at the bakery, they found it crowded. Nino secured them a seat while Adrien and Chloe ordered, and once they'd had a few bites of their pastries—which were not as good as Marinette's, and that fact settled between them like a fourth guest at the table—Adrien took a deep breath and leaned forward to get their attention.

"There's something I haven't told you two," he said. Chloe sighed. Adrien looked at her. "What?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking that if you were coming out of the closet, you wouldn't have chosen this location." She waved her hand at him. "Go on."

Adrien's eyes narrowed. "Anyway..." He tapped on the side of his dessert plate with his thumb. "I'm going to ask that you please reserve judgment and questions until I'm finished speaking."

"Can't make any promises, bro," Nino said.

Adrien shifted his glare to him. "Last year," he began, "a message arrived at my private email address. The one that I use to run my Twitter account and don't give out to anyone. You can imagine my surprise—and panic. But it turned out to be a mistake. Whoever it was that sent the email had been trying to get in touch with someone else, and got me instead." He drummed on the dessert plate faster. "Her screen name was Ladybug, and for whatever reason, I ended up talking to her all day... and all day the next day... and all day the day after that." He smiled a bit at the memory of that first week, the excitement of talking to someone new. "We've been emailing each other ever since. It was never anything too personal, just random anecdotes about our day, or neutral topics. Ladybug established early on that we shouldn't share our identities or meet in person, so I have no idea who she is, and she has no idea who I am.

"But because I am an idiot, as Chloe is so fond of telling me, I kind of fell in love with her despite knowing nothing about her besides her favorite color, the fact that she's a designer, and that she used to be a yo-yo champion when she was a kid." Adrien paused to let that sink in, then plowed on. "I don't make a secret of it, either. I've been flirting with her for months, and she shoots me down every single time. Can't really blame her for it; there are all kinds of whackos on the internet these days. So nothing's changed between us. We remain best friends and that's that.

"Now here's where it gets messy." Adrien didn't dare look at Chloe and Nino. He kept his eyes on his half-eaten Danish and hoped they would go easy on him. "A couple weeks ago, Ladybug told me to do something to shake myself out of the funk I was in. I happened to be hungry at the time, so I decided to go to Tom and Sabine's bakery. After hours." He let out a nervous laugh. "Marinette not only put up with me that first day, but encouraged me to keep coming back if I needed to get away from my life for a while. Which I do. Frequently. As you both know. So that became my
Tuesday and Thursday afternoon routine. Then Nino, you developed a crush on Alya, and I'm going to ask you to forgive me here because I convinced Marinette that the best way to get the two of you together was to pretend we were dating and invite you out with us. Funny thing is, I now have a very real crush on Marinette, she isn't remotely interested in me, and when I told Ladybug that I have feelings for someone else, she got mad." Adrien finally lifted his eyes. "And… that's the situation, as of yesterday."


Then Nino burst out laughing.

Adrien buried his face in his hands. When he looked up again, Chloe's expression had changed to one that mirrored Adrien's whenever he expected something from his father and got let down—a combination of "why do I bother?" and "I can't believe I got my hopes up for this."

And then he collapsed into hysterics again.

Adrien gave Chloe an exasperated look. "Can you please stop staring at me like that?"

"I honestly wish I could," she replied.

Adrien pushed his chair back from the table. "That's it, I'm leaving."

"Wait!" Nino grabbed him by the wrist and took several deep breaths. "Aww man, I have a cramp. Hold on." He wiped the tears from his eyes. "Bro, I love you but how stupid can you get?"

"Thank you for putting that into words," Chloe said.

"You're welcome," Nino replied. "You think Marinette isn't remotely interested in you? Adrien. Marinette has a huge crush on you. Like, bigger-than-the-Eiffel-Tower huge."

Chloe reached for her coffee mug. "I tried to tell him that, but he didn't believe me…"

"Trust us. This is straight from her best friend's mouth. You coming to Tom and Sabine's was the highlight of Marinette's day. She was just too shy to talk to you." Nino laughed out loud again.
"Man, I would have paid money to see the look on her face when you showed up at the bakery that first time!"

Chloe added nothing. She merely shook her head and took a refined sip of her coffee.

Adrien stared at them, waiting for the punchline of the joke, the "gotcha!" moment. But when Nino continued to snicker and Chloe kept looking at him like she'd finally given up all hope of living, their words began to sink in. _Truly_ sink in.

Marinette had a crush on him. A bigger-than-the-Eiffel-Tower crush. That was why she'd readily agreed to fake date him, why she kept feeding him when she didn't have to. He thought back on the past year, of all the times he'd seen Marinette at the bakery, hiding behind her parents or ducking into the kitchen the moment he walked in. How she'd screamed when he surprised her, and stammered and blushed through their brief conversations.

Because she had a crush on him.

Adrien blinked. "I…” His face felt warm. _She had a crush on him_. He picked up the rest of the pastry and crammed it into his mouth, just to have something to do.
"Now he believes it," Nino said to Chloe.

Adrien swallowed the pastry. "Okay," he said, "okay. Let's pretend for a moment that what you're saying is true."

"What we're saying is true," Chloe verified.

"What do I do about it?"

Nino leaned as close to Chloe as he was willing to get. "Is he serious?"

Chloe, whose good humor tended to last longer when she dealt with Adrien, exploded. "For crying out loud, do we have to do everything for you? Go to Tom and Sabine's, knock on the door, and when Marinette answers, ask her out on a date!" She pounded her fist against the table. "Dear God in heaven, why did I have to get stuck with the stupidest boy in Paris for a best friend? Was it a charity case?" She looked at the ceiling. "Did You feel bad for giving him only half a brain before You sent him to Earth?"

Nino nodded in her direction. "As much as I hate to say it, Chloe's right. You need to ask Marinette out. Today if you can manage it."

Adrien panicked. Ask Marinette on a date? Today? It was too soon! "But what about Ladybug?"

"Ladybug is probably some three hundred pound, middle aged farmer living in the countryside!" Chloe snarled. "You said you didn't give this person any of your personal information, right?"

"I don't think—"

"—that Ladybug's a man, Chlo."

Nino drained the last of his coffee and held up a hand for silence. "If I understand correctly," he said, "you've been throwing yourself at this Ladybug girl for months, yeah?" Adrien nodded. "And she hasn't returned your feelings?" Adrien nodded again, slower this time. Nino shrugged. "There's your answer. If you keep holding out for a girl who doesn't want to meet you in person, well… Marinette doesn't strike me as the kind of woman who'll wait for you forever."

Adrien leaned back and stared out the bakery window. Ladybug wasn't going to change her mind. He knew that. As much as he wanted to believe that her buying him lunch, leaving physical evidence of her existence, meant that she'd opened up a little more to the idea of their meeting in person… he couldn't keep up that line of thinking. He'd dangle on that thread of hope for years.

And meanwhile, there was Marinette, holding his hand in a movie theater, sending him memes, sitting across the table from him with her hopeful smile.

"You're right," he said.

Chloe threw her arms in the air. "Finally!"

Nino clapped Adrien's shoulder. "She'll say yes for sure. And then we can go on a real double date," he said. "And if the demon in Chloe ever gets exorcised, she can find a guy who tolerates her and join us."
"Piss off," Chloe snarled.

"See? She likes the idea."

Adrien laughed at that. But even as the conversation turned from hooking Adrien up with Marinette to demanding to know why he'd kept a whole other human being secret from them, he couldn't shake the heaviness that settled over him. In his mind, he understood that asking Marinette out was the next logical step.

His heart, however, drove him to kept glancing at his silent cell phone.

x.x.x

Marinette stepped out of the post office and cringed as the humidity struck her with the force of a brick wall. These are truly the dog days of summer. She'd have to find out when the dog days ended so she could stay indoors for the rest of them.

It was a little past noon, and Marinette had already accomplished a small list of chores: paying bills, shipping doll clothes, fixing the bakery door's squeaking hinges, and getting in some exercise. She'd resolved to dedicate a few hours to her yo-yo; the repetitive motion would bring some peace to her troubled mind.

She knew she ought to apologize to Chat Noir. No amount of annoyance justified the way she'd treated him the day before. He'd only tried to do the right thing. How was he supposed to know that acting like a gentleman would only worsen the blow of his declaration?

But I might have a thing for her.

Marinette tightened her grip on her purse strap. What had she expected? She'd been turning Chat Noir down for months, too focused on Adrien and too scared of another Nathanael incident to take his feelings seriously. It made perfect sense for him to move on, to give his heart to someone he might actually have a chance with.

She walked the familiar path back to the bakery and wondered what Chat Noir's cute acquaintance might be like. Was she a tall, buxom beauty? Or a short, mousy little thing who brought him coffee at his desk and made him laugh when work dragged on? His flair for the dramatic aside, Chat Noir had a good head on his shoulders. If another woman had managed to catch his eye, she must have been something special. Intelligent. Pretty. A great sense of humor.

Whoever she was, Marinette thought, she got to see Chat Noir face-to-face. She got to talk to him, laugh with him, inhabit the same space as him. She got to feel his body heat.

Well, she definitely doesn't have a crush on me.

And she was blind to it all. To her, Chat Noir was just another person. Everything that Marinette thought special about him meant nothing to his cute acquaintance, and the knowledge of that infuriated her. Why should Ladybug, who Chat Noir claimed to love, have to share a space in his heart with a woman who didn't want to be there?

Marinette reached the bakery and fished her key out of her pocket. Stuck it in the doorknob. Leaned in until her forehead touched the warm surface of the door, and stared at her own two feet, her chipping red nail polish.

Then she dug into her purse for her phone.
Hey.

I'm sorry for being such an ass yesterday.

You didn't deserve that.

All is forgiven, buginette. You know I'm incapable of staying mad at you.

Ugh, I wish you would stay mad at me.

It'd teach me a lesson.

Fine, then. I'm mad at you. Don't talk to me. Who do you think you are, stomping all over my little feline heart, then acting like you're entitled to a do-over? I only have six of my nine lives left. I can't afford to let myself be treated like crap.

I thought you had five lives left?

You might be right about that.
Say, can we limit any and all future fights to once a year? I've noticed that it takes a lot out of me, which negatively affects my work performance, and I'm under way too much scrutiny to let that slip.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
**RE: Summer**
**Just now**

Fair enough.

We'll stockpile our grievances until next August and let them all out in a hideous screaming match.

I really am sorry, chaton.

You were just trying to be nice.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
**RE: Summer**
**Just now**

Don’t sweat it, Ladybug. Did you have a nice morning?

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
**RE: Summer**
**Just now**

No.

But the rest of my day is looking up. :-

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
**RE: Summer**
**Just now**

Heh. Mine too.

Chapter End Notes

Still on hiatus. Just wanted to get this out of the way because next time on Lucky Us, I'm going to destroy the children.

Come bother me on Tumblr! (geek-fashionista)
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

I have waited nine months to write this chapter. Consider it my baby.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Adrien did not bring up the subject of his crush on Marinette again. Although Ladybug had apologized and spent the rest of the day talking to him like normal, she hadn't returned to the topic, so Adrien assumed she didn't want to hear about. Which suited him just fine; he'd discussed it enough with Chloe and Nino during breakfast to make him slightly queasy. The only downside was that he couldn't ask Ladybug for advice. He could ask Chloe, but considering her jaded outlook on love in general, he had a feeling she wouldn't be much help.

Between the giddiness of finding out Marinette liked him and the euphoria of making up with Ladybug, Adrien's day flew by. Midnight snuck up on him; he wasn't the least bit tired. But rather than keep Ladybug awake, he bid her good night and took the opportunity to stew for a while.

He was going to ask Marinette on a date. If it turned out that she wasn't the right person for him and they were better off friends, fine. If it led to something more… he couldn't think about that just yet.

Because inevitably, gaining Marinette meant losing Ladybug, and Adrien wasn't prepared for that.

But he couldn't keep running back and forth between the two of them, "playing the victim" as Ladybug had indelicately put it. Something had to change. He'd been in moratorium for far too long. If his first impulsive act had led him to Marinette, he would keep walking down that road and see how far it got him.

Adrien looked around his bedroom, suddenly realizing he hadn't heard a peep out of Plagg in a while. He searched his immediate surroundings, then got up from his desk and checked the bathroom. No cat. "Plagg?" he called. He wandered out of his bedroom. In a house as big as the Agreste mansion, Plagg could be anywhere, but at this time of night he hardly ever left Adrien's side.

No cat in the kitchen. No cat in the foyer. "Plagg?" Adrien called out again. This time he heard an inquisitive meow in response. He followed the sound and found Plagg parked outside of Gabriel's bedroom. "Plagg, what are you doing here?" he asked.

Plagg got to his feet and shook his tail in a let me in gesture. When Adrien approached him, he let out a long meow.

"No, buddy. Father isn't home. He's in Milan," Adrien said. He picked Plagg up and tucked him under his arm. Plagg made a noise of complaint. "Don't worry, when Father comes back I'll be sure to tell him you want to hang out with him, okay?"

His father. Another hurdle in Adrien's way. The very idea of Marinette had fouled Gabriel's temper,
but surely meeting her in person would change his opinion, right? Marinette was agreeable in every sense of the word, and she'd have something to talk about with him. A common interest. Five minutes in her company would have Gabriel reconsidering his lack of faith in Adrien's judgment.

And besides, Gabriel could hardly give Adrien crap when *he'd* married a woman he'd fallen in love with at first sight.

Adrien dropped Plagg on his bed, then collapsed next to him with a heavy sigh. Tomorrow. He'd worry about everything tomorrow, *after* he asked Marinette out.

X.X.X

**Chat Noir**  
*RE: Summer*  
*Just now*

*Good morning, Ladybug! Beautiful day for a walk, isn't it? I've resolved to use my lunch hour to take a stroll around our fair city of Paris and laze in the shade of a national monument or two. What are your plans for the afternoon?*

X.X.X

Marinette grinned as she successfully unwound her two yo-yo strings without missing a step in her routine. She couldn't remember the whole thing, but for more than ten years of no practice, she wasn't doing too shabby.

Compared to the day before, she felt wonderful. She'd patched things up with Chat Noir—though she had a feeling he suspected the real reason she'd gotten mad at him—and some overnight rain had left the atmosphere outside a little more breathable. Plus, her old yo-yo tricks were coming back to her. If she managed to swing it around her entire body the way she used to without hitting herself or any furniture, she'd brag to Chat Noir about it.

Marinette's smile faded. The tone of Chat Noir's good morning email had been suspiciously cheerful. She wondered if he'd seen his cute acquaintance, or if he would be seeing her later in the day.

She'd stayed clear of that particular conversation the day before because she really didn't feel like talking about it. But curiosity overwhelmed her. How often did he see his cute acquaintance? What did he like about her? How serious were his feelings for her? How much time did he spend with her? What made him so sure she didn't have a crush on him?

She could grill him about it, take on a teasing tone and pester him like a nagging older sister. Would that be enough to throw him off the trail of her jealousy?

Jealousy. Marinette laughed, but there was no humor in it.

She picked up her phone and paced the living room while trying to come up with a way to approach the subject without making Chat Noir suspicious. After some consideration, she hit reply.

X.X.X

**Ladybug**  
*RE: Summer*  
*Just now*
Laze in the shade, huh?

Why not invite that cute acquaintance of yours to laze in the shade with you? :-) 

I'm at work.

Not all of us can afford to be so relaxed, you know.

x.x.x

The email made Adrien pause in front of Agreste HQ. After avoiding the subject all day yesterday, Ladybug had finally brought up Marinette, and she'd done it first. Which meant that a decision had been made in regards to how she felt about the situation.

Judging by the winking emoticon, she felt fine.

Or she was pretending to be fine, but Adrien had resolved to put an end to that line of wishful thinking. He checked the time as he walked away from the building. About an hour before his next meeting. He'd go talk to Marinette, then get something to eat, because he didn't think he could eat in his current state of emotion.

It seemed ridiculous that he could be this nervous when a little over a week ago, he'd kissed Marinette's cheek as if it were nothing. In fact, wasn't this all happening too fast? Shouldn't he slow down and really think his feelings through? Or was he just trying to talk himself out of asking her out?

Because when he thought about it, Marinette had interested him long before he'd started talking to her. Often when he visited the Dupain-Cheng bakery over the past year, he had noticed her hiding behind the counter and wished he could make conversation with her, draw her out of her shell. And when they had become friends, Adrien wasn't blind to her attractiveness. Hadn't he told himself several times that Marinette would make someone a very happy man? Why couldn't that be him?

He laughed. So that's how it was, then. He'd liked Marinette for weeks—his mind was just now catching up to his heart.

He pulled up Ladybug's email and tried not to feel guilty as he typed out his reply.

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Actually, I was thinking of inviting her. "Will she say yes?" is the real question.

x.x.x

Pain speared Marinette's heart. He was going to ask her out?

No, no! This wasn't happening. It was too fast. She shook her yo-yo off her finger and paced the living room again, scrambling for a response, something to deter him. "Stupid cat," she murmured. "Stupid, stupid, stupid cat! Stupid me!" She hit reply.

x.x.x
**Ladybug**
**RE: Summer**
**Just now**

Oh my!

That's awfully forward, don't you think?

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
**RE: Summer**
**Just now**

Maybe, but I'll never know how she feels if I don't ask her, right?

It really is a gorgeous day. If you can get away from work for a few minutes, I highly recommend spending it outside. You won't regret it.

x.x.x

He'd changed the subject.

Marinette stared at her phone as anxiety laid waste to her mind. What did it mean, his changing the subject? He didn't want to talk to her about it? He knew what she was trying to do and he wouldn't allow himself to be deterred? Was he trying to shut her out?

Marinette's hands shook as she typed her response.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
**RE: Summer**
**Just now**

Fine, fine.

What spot do you recommend for optimum sun-soaking?

x.x.x

Marinette waited. She paced, and she waited, and she kicked herself half a dozen times because she was making this more complicated than it needed to be.

If she wanted to stop Chat Noir, all she had to do was be direct.

Don't ask her out. I don't want you to be with someone else. I don't want to lose you.

It wasn't that difficult.

You said you loved me. Doesn't that mean anything to you? Because it means something to me.

She could reply to his email and tell him right now.

Ask me instead. I'll meet you, wherever you are, and we'll laze in the sun together.
She opened her inbox.

*Don't give up on me, Chat Noir. I—*

Her phone chimed. A new email from Chat Noir appeared at the top of her inbox. She tapped on it.

Instead of text, she found an image.

The first thing she noticed was the hand. Chat Noir's hand, giving a thumbs-up. A physical part of him. Marinette was so shocked that she could only stare at it. How strange, she thought, that she'd never seen his hand before. That it could be so plain.

Then she looked past his hand to the thing he granted his approval.

Notre Dame.

Marinette lifted her head, looked out her living room window.

Notre Dame.

Chat Noir was across the river.

Marinette ran.

She grabbed the nearest set of keys, threw open the front door, tore down the stairs. She burst through the bakery door and out into the alley, stumbling in her house slippers. Horns honked at her as she sprinted across the street. She ignored them. Dodged surprised pedestrians on the bridge. Ran as if her life depended on it.

Notre Dame loomed ahead. Notre Dame and Chat Noir. Marinette began searching faces: school children, an old couple, a group of tourists, an Asian woman, three girls posing for a photograph. She slowed as she approached the plaza in front of the cathedral. A painter, a middle-aged man in a motorcycle jacket, some preteens in school uniforms, a married couple with a baby. She turned in a circle, panting hard, searching for... for...

She didn't know.

"*Marinette?*

She had no idea what Chat Noir looked like.

Marinette ran a hand through her hair, struggling to get air into her lungs. People stared at her. She stared back, ruled them out, and moved onto the next face. He could have been anyone. The guy in ripped jeans with a skateboard stuck under his arm. Any of the three men in business suits, walking away. One of the several photographers trying to get a good shot of the cathedral.

"*Marinette!*

But what if he wasn't there anymore? What if he'd only paused to get a picture of Notre Dame and kept walking? What direction had he been traveling in? What if he was halfway down the block already? What if she'd passed him on the bridge?

She wanted to call out to him, to scream his name and see who stopped walking, who turned around, who came running to her. She tried, but all she managed was a whisper, like a child too afraid to yell for her parents in the middle of a thunderstorm.
He's getting away, she thought. Desperate. Frustrated. He's getting away. She took a step towards the bridge. I'm going to lose him.

A hand closed around her arm, spun her around.

And Marinette came face to face with Adrien.

Wide eyed and slightly out of breath, he stared at her, completely bewildered. He put both hands on her shoulders as if to keep her from escaping. "Marinette?"

Marinette stared back at him, uncomprehending.

"Are you okay?" Adrien asked, his voice laden with concern. He'd been calling her. He must have seen her running towards Notre Dame like a crazy person and hurried to intercept her. How did she respond to that?

I'm not okay. The man I love is getting away.

Ah.

"I…"

She was in love with Chat Noir.

"I'm fine," she said.

Adrien's eyebrows came together. "You're outside in your pajamas."

And she was in love with Chat Noir.

Marinette nodded absently. "Yeah," she said, then realized that wasn't a proper explanation. "I was looking for… a feather." She nodded again, satisfied with that. "You see, I was at home working on a pigeon-inspired derby hat, and of course a pigeon-inspired hat needs a feather. But I didn't have any feathers, so I ran out here in my pajamas because I was so inspired and I just really needed that feather…"

She took a deep breath.

And burst into tears.

x.x.x

Adrien froze. One moment Marinette had been talking to him—albeit in a dazed and confused sort of way, and quite obviously lying through her teeth—and the next she'd started sobbing. Full-on, heart-wrenching sobs that made her fold in on herself like she'd been kicked in the gut.

His mind processed the scene at lightning speed. Marinette stood crying in front of Notre Dame in her pajamas. He stood in front of her, stammering. About a dozen spectators watched, their expressions ranging from concern to suspicion to anger, and it dawned on him that this looked nothing like whatever it was and everything like a domestic dispute. His conclusion: He needed to get Marinette home, and fast.

"What's going on here?" a male voice boomed. Adrien turned, already trying his best not to look guilty, then relaxed when he saw who it was: Officer Raincomprix, Sabrina's father. "Oh, it's you, Adrien," he said. He hooked his thumbs into his police uniform belt. "Is everything alright?"
"No, not exactly," Adrien said. The best way to get out of this was to be honest, and to throw on as much charm as he needed to remind Officer Raincomprix of how many times he'd gotten his drunk daughter home safely. "This is my friend, Marinette. She lives across the street and, as you can see, she's very upset, but I don't know why. I'd like to walk her back to her house and find out."

Marinette sniffled. "I'm s-sorry for worrying you," she said miserably.

Officer Raincomprix's expression softened, his inner father shining through. He nodded at Adrien. "Very well. You take care of her."

Adrien smiled. "Thank you," he said, then laid his hand on Marinette's back and turned her towards the bakery. "Let's get you indoors."

They set off across the bridge. Marinette sobbed once or twice more, but mostly she sniffled and took shuddering breaths. Adrien moved his hand up near her shoulder and kept it there. Fear ran rampant through his mind. What could have made her cry like that? Had something happened to her parents? God, he hoped not. While he was, unfortunately, equipped to handle such a scenario, he would rather not see Marinette go through what he had when his mother passed away.

By the time they made it to the bakery, Marinette's crying had subsided. She unlocked the front door and stumbled inside without asking whether Adrien would stay or not. He walked in after her, noticing for the first time that she wore fuzzy pink house slippers. He stood in the middle of the seating area while she leaned over the counter, produced a plastic-wrapped packet of paper napkins, ripped it open, and helped herself to a handful.

Adrien took a cautious step forward. "Hey," he said. She looked up at him. Her eyes were bloodshot, her face flushed and wet. His heart gave a painful squeeze. "Why don't you sit down? I'll get you some water."

Marinette stared for a moment, then nodded. She shuffled towards his usual table with napkins in hand while he walked past her, into the kitchen. He looked around helplessly. Water. Did they have a filter for the sink? He opened the refrigerator on the off chance he'd find something there and breathed a sigh of relief when he spotted a row of water bottles. He grabbed one and made his way back to the storefront.

Marinette stared for a moment, then nodded. She shuffled towards his usual table with napkins in hand while he walked past her, into the kitchen. He looked around helplessly. Water. Did they have a filter for the sink? He opened the refrigerator on the off chance he'd find something there and breathed a sigh of relief when he spotted a row of water bottles. He grabbed one and made his way back to the storefront.

Marinette had her phone in her hand, but her eyes were focused on Notre Dame. Adrien set the bottle of water in front of her. He sat down, waited until she'd taken a drink, then spoke. "So… am I allowed to know what you were really crying about?"

She winced, screwed the lid back on the water bottle and held it against her face flushed face. "It's stupid," she murmured.

Adrien offered her a tentative smile. "If it upset you this much, I doubt it's stupid," he said. And if she could call it stupid, then it wasn't something as serious as a death in the family, for which he was incredibly grateful.

Marinette lowered the water bottle to the table. Rolled it between her hands. Her eyes glassed over again, and when she blinked, a tear dripped onto her forearm. "Well," she whispered. Her bottom lip trembled. She raised her head and wiped stray tears off her cheeks, smiled, let out a shaky laugh. "I, uumm, I have this friend." She looked out the window. "Best friend," she amended. "And... I think I'm in love with him."

Adrien's tentative smile faded.
Marinette picked up a napkin and used it to dab at her cheeks. "I want to say it snuck up on me, but it didn't." She shook her head. "I've been trying to ignore it for months. I didn't think I was ready to fall in love with someone again, not this soon after my last relationship… but I guess my heart knew better than I did."

Adrien nodded. Was it just him, or was it suddenly harder to breathe?

"I told you it's stupid," Marinette said. "I was so surprised, I just ran out of the house without thinking. I wanted…" Her face crumpled. "I wanted to find him and tell him how I felt right away. But things are so complicated between us, and he has feelings for someone else, and he's my best friend and I don't want to lose that friendship over something like this." She started crying again. "I'm so afraid of losing him…"

Adrien's body felt like lead. He willed himself to act, to do anything to comfort Marinette, because they were friends and she'd just bared her soul to him and he couldn't move.

"I'm sorry," Marinette sobbed. "I shouldn't be dumping all of this on you."

With tremendous effort, Adrien reached out and put his hand over hers. "It's okay," he said. "I know how shocking it is, suddenly realizing how much you care about someone." It took far too much energy to sound like his usual cheerful self. "But if your feelings are this strong, maybe you should tell him? I mean, what if he feels the same way? You'll never know unless you ask."

Marinette pressed her wadded up napkin against her eyes and nodded. She turned her hand over so she could hold Adrien's properly, and the warmth of it, the way it fit into his so perfectly, made his heart ache even more. "I'm sorry," she said again, "I claimed to be committed to our fake relationship, and here I am crying over someone else…"

"It's not important," Adrien said. "In fact, I kind of let the cat out of the bag yesterday, so Nino knows we aren't really…" Together. He didn't have the heart to finish the sentence.

Marinette blinked. "Oh."

He shrugged and forced himself to laugh. "It kind of just came up," he lied. His smile weighed a thousand pounds, but he held it firmly in place. "We don't have to keep pretending if you don't want to."

A weak smile flitted onto Marinette's face. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"I'm setting you free," Adrien corrected. "What was it that you said on our second fake date…? 'Call me a martyr for the cause of true love.'" He threw in a wink for good measure, and Marinette's smile gained strength. Thank goodness, he thought. He didn't think his heart could take anymore of her crying. "Your friend…" he said, "he must be a great guy."

Marinette looked down at her phone. "Yeah. He really is." She drew in a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. "I feel bad that our fake relationship is ending this way, though."

"Don't," Adrien said. "I bounce back fast. I'll probably have a new fake girlfriend within the week."

That got a genuine laugh from her. "If you bounce back that fast, I'll be offended," she said.

He stared at her hand for a moment, savoring the feeling of holding it, then squeezed her fingers and released them. "I should go. My lunch hour only lasts, well, an hour, and I intended this to be a short stroll." He stood from his chair, but lingered beside it. "Is there anything I can do for you? Bring you dinner? Ask Nino to tell Alya to come see you?"
Marinette shook her head. "I'll be all right," she said. "I'll talk to Alya later."

Adrien hesitated, torn between the desire to leave and the desire to cancel every single meeting he had that afternoon to stay by Marinette's side. But comforting her wasn't his job. She had someone else—a best friend who she loved—to confide in. A part of her life that Adrien didn't know about. He took a step towards the door. "Text me if you need anything," he said. "I'll come running."

"I appreciate it," Marinette said, and sent him a devastating smile. "Thank you, Adrien."

He grabbed the door handle. "Anytime."

The bell over the bakery door chimed as he stepped outside. He stood in front of the building, unsure of where to go. His entire reason for walking across town had vanished. He remembered thinking he'd get lunch after he spoke to Marinette, but his appetite had abandoned him. The logical course of action was to return to Agreste HQ and finish the work day. He'd do that, then.

Adrien set out in the direction he'd come, across the bridge to Notre Dame. He paused when he reached the cathedral and looked back, over his shoulder at the bakery in the distance. He lowered his head. Under his shoe, ruffled and dirty, was a feather.

He walked away.

X.X.X

*Ladybug*
*RE: Summer*
*52 minutes ago*

*Notre Dame!*

*I live on that side of town.*

*Can guarantee that it's a great spot for lazing.*

X.X.X

*Chat Noir*
*RE: Summer*
*Just now*

*I'll have to try it another day, then. Didn't get as much lazing done this afternoon as I would have liked.*

X.X.X

*Ladybug*
*RE: Summer*
*15 minutes ago*

*I take it you didn't ask your cute acquaintance to join you?*

X.X.X

*Chat Noir*
*RE: Summer*
She shot me down, actually. Turns out there's a cooler cat in her life.

Ladybug
RE: Summer
27 minutes ago

Oh...

I'm sorry, Chat Noir.

That really sucks. )-:

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Eh. Nothing I can do, so there's no point in being sore about it.

Ladybug
RE: Summer
9 minutes ago

Be sore about it.

You can't help the way you feel, and it's better than bottling your emotions up.

(Which, by the way, is a bad habit of yours. You told me so yourself.)

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now.

You really do know me, buginette.

I'll be sore about it, then. But only for a couple of days. Moping is a transient state of being and I'm a depression risk. Or so my best friend tells me.

We should look on the bright side of life: the dog days of summer are finally over. Maybe now we can go outside without suffocating or being roasted alive. Or would that be too much to hope for this early in August?

I'm going to turn in and see if ten hours of sleep will help me shake this disappointment off—it always seems to work for Plagg.

Good night, Ladybug.
Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

Sleep well, minou.

And if it makes you feel any better, you're the coolest cat I know.

Chapter End Notes

Hiatus starts for real this time. No asking about updates!

Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista).
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

In which there is physical contact.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Ladybug*

*RE: Summer*

*1 hour ago*

*Good morning, Chat Noir.*

*I hope you're feeling better.*

*I was thinking about the dog days of summer, and I realized they take place right in the middle of Leo's reigning period.*

*What's up with that?*

x.x.x

Marinette lay in bed, staring at her bedroom ceiling with her pillow clutched to her chest, eyes wide, butterflies tumbling around in her stomach.

So. She was in love with Chat Noir. Now what?

For starters, she could apologize to Adrien properly. She'd been less than coherent the previous afternoon and he might have left feeling like she'd become unhinged. Which wasn't far from the truth, when she thought about it. She was in love with a guy she'd never met in person. Many people would call that insane. Still, Adrien had been worried about her, and she wanted to show him that she was okay and that she appreciated his support during her meltdown.

The next step would be meeting Chat Noir, which would solve most, if not all of her problems. But rather than exciting her, the thought of seeing him in person now terrified her far more than it used to. She wouldn't just be introducing herself to her longtime friend, she'd be introducing herself to the man she'd fallen in love with.

And what if he didn't like her? What if she didn't like him?

Marinette whined, wrapped her arms and legs around her pillow, and rolled onto her side. She should have sucked it up and met him before things became this complicated. "Stupid," she grumbled at no one in particular. Her cell phone vibrated.

*Alya Cesaire: Meet me at the park at noon. Carousel. SUPER IMPORTANT.*

Marinette frowned. What could be so important that Alya couldn't tell her over a text message? And was feeling disappointed when a notification wasn't Chat Noir going to become a thing for her
now? She hoped not, but it seemed inevitable.

Marinette blew out her bangs and climbed out of bed, leaving her pillow behind. Being in love sucked. For starters, she had a surplus of affection that she didn't know what to do with. Every sappy, simpering song that wandered across her Pandora station made her want to cry into a tub of ice cream. She'd watched some black and white film on the free movie channel the night before and spent at least thirty minutes of it imagining how nice it would be to kiss and be kissed again. And when she'd finally gone to sleep, her bed felt too big. She'd spent the whole night tossing and turning and wishing for a warm body to snuggle with.

Nathanael used to jokingly call her lovebug—now she understood why. Marinette Dupain-Cheng in love was a menace.

She went through her morning yoga routine, showered, dressed, and checked her phone. This time there was an email from Chat Noir, which would have made her happy if she hadn't remembered he was currently heartbroken over another woman.

X.X.X

**Chat Noir**

RE: Summer

19 minutes ago

*Couldn't tell you. Although if I had to posit a theory, I'd say that it was far more difficult for academic groups to come to agreements on these sorts of things before the invention of the internet. Not only were they often born hundreds of years apart, they also had to travel to other countries on foot. Wearing sandals. In lands full of serpents and highway robbers.*

*Am I feeling better? No, I'm feeling mortified. How come no one ever talks about how embarrassing rejection is?*

X.X.X

**Ladybug**

RE: Summer

Just now

*I think if more people knew, it would discourage them from falling in love in the first place.*

*The love industry needs people to fall so they can get hooked on falling, and therefore keep pumping money into diamonds and teddy bears and greeting cards.*

*And time shares.*

*It's pretty sordid, Chat Noir.*

X.X.X

Adrien got a chuckle out of that. Leave it to his Lady to make him laugh when he didn't feel like laughing.

The only thing that kept him from calling in sick that morning was the knowledge that his father returned from Milan that evening. Adrien didn't want Gabriel poking around in his fresh, bleeding wounds. He didn't want anyone poking around in them, including Nino, who'd texted him to meet him at the park by Marinette's bakery to discuss an "urgent matter." Adrien would keep the details
to himself, at least until he felt better.

He sighed as he switched from his secret email to his personal email to his work email. So much noise. What would he do after the design competition ended?

*I'll be cheering for you, too.*

Adrien opened a new tab and typed the name of the local university into his search bar. Then he snorted, closed out the internet window, and stood up. He had a meeting to attend.

---

**Chat Noir**

RE: Summer

12 minutes ago

Normally I'd be the first person to defend love against any accusations that it's nothing more than a money-hungry corporation, but I'm not in the mood today.

(Are you sure moping is supposed to be cathartic? Because I just feel like a used napkin.)

---

Marinette smiled at her cell phone screen. She knew the feeling.

If she'd sucked it up and met Chat Noir before all of this had happened, they could have been having this conversation at a bistro somewhere. He'd sigh all over his food, she'd offer him advice, and maybe a comforting hand on the shoulder, or an even more comforting hug…

Or, she thought, they wouldn't be having this conversation at all. They'd be walking through Paris, hand-in-hand, searching for a place to have lunch and sneaking kisses on street corners.

"Oh God," she groaned before she grabbed her purse and marched downstairs. Two days into her newly awakened feelings and she already couldn't stand herself.

The Parisian sky had a distinct haze that afternoon, but the day remained warm. Since she was only going to see Alya, Marinette hadn't put much thought into her ensemble: a tank top, shorts, high ponytail, and the nicest sandals she had to make it look like she'd carefully considered her outfit.

She locked the bakery door, dumped her keys in her purse, and crossed the street. There were a good number of people at the park, mostly students on summer vacation. One of her regulars, Monsieur Ramier, sat on a bench with a bag of bread crumbs in hand and a small gathering of pigeons at his feet. He waved at her as she passed by.

The carousel was at the opposite end of the park, tucked into a corner. As Marinette drew closer to it, she caught sight of Alya, business casual in a pantsuit and her favorite satchel. But she wasn't alone. Beside her stood Nino, rubbing the back of his neck, and perched sideways on one of the carousel horses was Adrien, dressed in a suit, looking for all the world like Atlas carrying the world on his shoulders. Marinette got the impression that if he'd been holding an ice cream cone, he would have been letting it drip all over his fingers.

Then Adrien lifted his head, spotted her, and straightened up with an embarrassed smile, which gave Marinette's presence away to Alya and Nino as well. She approached the carousel with caution. "What's going on?" she asked.

"Nice of you to join us," Alya said in the frosty tone that Marinette recognized as her you're-in
trouble voice. She gestured to the carousel horse behind Adrien's. "Please, have a seat."

Marinette looked at Nino. He mouthed an apology. Embarrassed Adrien, apologetic Nino, annoyed Alya. Marinette knew exactly what this meeting was about. She dropped her purse at the foot of the horse, which turned out to be a unicorn, and climbed up onto it, letting her legs dangle over the side.

Alya stared at her. "Fake dating," she said. "At our age? Really?"

Marinette, having years of experience with her best friend's wrath, decided the easiest thing to do in this situation was to throw Adrien under the bus. She pointed at him. "It was his idea."

Adrien's jaw dropped. "Thanks, Marinette!"

"Hey, I only agreed to go along with it," Marinette said. She threw Adrien a playful smile. "You didn't say anything about sticking around if we got caught."

Adrien didn't seem to know what to say to this. He opened and closed his mouth, then looked away. Alya, on the other hand, was not finished speaking. "I don't know you very well, Adrien, so you're off the hook. But you, Marinette! I expected better from you."

Marinette grinned. "Then that was your first mistake. You know I love playing matchmaker," she said. Alya rolled her eyes; she did know that. "What does it matter, anyway? You and Nino are, uh, together? Seeing each other? Whatever you are, you're happy about it, right?" She put her hands behind her head and leaned back, forgot there was nothing to lean against, and had to flail forward to keep from falling. "Mission accomplished."

Nino put a hand on Alya's shoulder. "She's got a point. I'm kind of grateful that they went to the trouble," he said.

Alya's chin jutted forward, a clear indication that she still wanted to be angry, but when Nino smiled at her she visibly softened. Marinette would have squealed if she hadn't been in the middle of getting scolded. "Okay," Alya said to her. "You get a pass. But only because your birthday is this week."

Adrien's head swiveled around. "What?"

Marinette checked the date on her phone. In all the excitement of the design competition and discovering her feelings for Chat Noir, she'd completely overlooked her own birthday. "Oh," she murmured, "it is, isn't it?"

"When—?" Adrien coughed. "When is it? What day?"

"Tuesday," Marinette said. She habitually checked her email despite the lack of notifications, and rolled her eyes at her own disappointment. Was this her chance? Could she tell Chat Noir about her birthday, and ask about his while she was at it? Or would he find her sudden willingness to divulge personal information suspicious?

Well. She had until Tuesday to decide.

"Marinette has a nice dinner with her parents every year," Alya said, "but since they won't be back for another couple of weeks..." She stepped up onto the carousel and threw an arm around Marinette's shoulders. "What say we throw you a party instead?"

Marinette made a face. "A party on a Tuesday? Who would even show up? Manon and most of my
employees skipped town the moment the bakery closed…"

"The three of us would show up," Alya cried.

Nino raised his hand. "Why don't we have the party at my place? I've got a sweet music setup, Marinette wouldn't have to worry about cleaning afterwards…"

Marinette smiled at him. A thrilling prospect, and offering to host the party would score him major gentleman points with Alya. "That doesn't sound like a bad idea," she said. "And I'm fine if it's just the four of us." She looked at Adrien, but he seemed unusually engrossed in his carousel horse.

"Great," Alya said. "Then it's decided. Nino, you bring the music. I'll bring the food. Adrien, bring your fake girlfriend a present. And Marinette, you bring yourself." She whipped out her phone and checked the time. "I have to get back to the office." She pointed her phone at Marinette. "But we'll talk more about this fake dating thing later."

Nino gestured at Alya's retreating figure. "I'll, uh, walk her there."

Marinette shook her head. Of course he'd used that as an excuse to avoid facing her and Adrien's combined wrath. And speaking of Adrien, she watched as he slid off his carousel horse, sighed, and turned to face her.

"Sorry," he said. "If I hadn't told Nino about our arrangement, Alya wouldn't be mad at you now."

"I don't think she's mad," Marinette said. "I mean, she might be a little mad. She had high hopes for our relationship."

Adrien stooped over, picked up Marinette's purse, and handed it to her. "She wasn't the only one."

Marinette blinked. "What?"

"Nino," Adrien clarified. "He was bummed to hear the whole thing was a charade." He held his hand out to Marinette with a warm smile. She accepted it, and slid off the carousel unicorn as gracefully as she could. Her thighs had gotten stuck to the damn thing. "On that note…" Adrien said as they fell into step on their way out of the park. "How did things go with your friend yesterday?"

Marinette squawked. "M-My friend? What about him?" She pressed her hands against her rapidly warming cheeks.

Adrien nudged her with his elbow. "Did you confess?"

Marinette took a deep breath. Get a grip, she thought. She was supposed to be apologizing to Adrien for scaring him. But it also occurred to her that Adrien was the first person she'd ever told about Chat Noir—although she hadn't actually told him anything specific—and the unburdening made her heart feel so much lighter. "I can't confess to him now," she said. "Not when he has feelings for someone else. I mean, it'd be tasteless, right? 'Nice weather we're having lately. Oh by the way, I'm in love with you.'"

When she got no immediate response from Adrien, she looked over at him. He looked up from the ground and smiled at her. "You're right," he said. "Completely tasteless. You should at least make it sound like you considered the timing."

"Right," Marinette agreed, though she couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong with him. "But at the same time, I can't wait until he's standing at the altar to come barging in on his
wedding like some soap opera heroine."

"I don't know." Adrien stroked his chin. "You might convince him to marry you if you pull off such a dramatic entrance."

"Or I might convince him to call the police and have me hauled out of the church," Marinette said. She left out the part where Chat Noir was a total stranger to her and barging in on his wedding would, in all likelihood, get her thrown out. She'd be forever remembered as the random, hysterical woman who tried to sabotage his wedding for no good reason. She sighed. "I will tell him, though. I will. When the timing is right. But in the meantime, I want to apologize again for freaking you out yesterday."

Adrien shrugged. "You were distressed. There's nothing to apologize for."

"Let me make it up to you," Marinette said. She stepped in front of him and walked in reverse, hands clasped behind her back. "Come over Sunday. I've got another recipe I want to try out, and it'll take me a day or two to tinker with." He could keep insisting she had nothing to make up for, but she knew that he wouldn't pass up an invitation for free dessert.

Sure enough, he gave her a look that bordered on suspicion, but then his eyes flickered past her shoulder and—

"Watch out!"

—Marinette suddenly found herself pressed flush against Adrien's body. She blinked once. Twice. Heard skateboards breeze past and a halfhearted apology from a kid she couldn't see because the only thing she could see were Adrien's shirt buttons, up close and personal. The surplus of affection in her brain told her this was a good thing. A nice thing. Hadn't she been sorely craving a person to snuggle into just the night before? Couldn't she simply close her eyes and pretend that—


Adrien seemed determined not to look at her. "Don't mention it," he said.

Marinette pressed her lips together. Was he shy about physical contact? Pretty unexpected from a guy who'd had no qualms about kissing her cheek when they were fake dating.

They resumed walking, this time reaching the end of the park without incident. Marinette whirled on him before he could escape. "So you'll come over on Sunday, right?" she asked. "Because if you don't, I'm going to have to eat that whole cake by myself, and I know it doesn't look like I can, but trust me, I can."

"If it'll keep you from eating yourself into a coma, then yes, I'll come over," Adrien replied. "What time?"

Marinette thought about it. Even with the bakery closed for the month, she still liked sleeping in on Sundays. "Better make it two-ish," she said. That would give her enough time to prepare the cake and let it sit for a while.

They said their goodbyes and parted ways. Marinette stood on the side of the road, waiting for a break in traffic so she could cross to the bakery. She ran her hands over her arms. The phantom warmth of Adrien's body lingered on her bare skin.

With a frustrated whine, she ran across the street. If she didn't do something about Chat Noir soon,
the lovebug was going to drive her insane.

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

It takes a little while for the catharsis to kick in, I promise.

You're doing great.

"Used napkin' is a step above "old flag flapping in a thunderstorm," so remember that it could be worse.

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Thank you, Ladybug, for that su-purr-emely unhelpful attempt at encouragement.

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

Hey!

Wait, you made a pun.

YOU MADE A PUN.

CHAT NOIR IS ON THE MEND.

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

I suppose I did get a little wind in my sails this morning. And jokes aside, I appreciate your attempts to cheer me up. Though it's funny how when I'm in a good mood, you're always the first to rip into me. Why is that, Ladybug?

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

Because I'm the only one who's allowed to make you feel bad. :-)

x.x.x
Adrien shook his head. If she kept flirting with him like this, he was going to get the wrong idea.

He checked the time on his phone and looked down the street. Right on schedule, a limousine rounded the corner. He waved at it as it approached, and once it pulled up beside him, he opened the door and climbed in.

Chloe sat on the other end of the seat, drink in hand. "This better be good. I had to reschedule my full-body massage, and you know I get cranky when I haven't been rubbed down by a handsome massage therapist."

"I thought you were cranky all the time," Adrien said, and smothered his smile when she glared at him. He picked out a water bottle from the limo's mini fridge. "Thank you for coming on such short notice."

"Get to the point."

"Marinette's birthday is on Tuesday. I need to buy her a present. Will you help me look for one?"

Chloe's lip curled. "What are you, twelve? Do it yourself."

"Come on, Chlo, I'm trying to make a good impression here," Adrien thought about pouting to win her favor, then realized that was exactly the sort of thing a twelve-year-old might do.

"What kind of good impression do you expect to make if I pick the gift out for you?" Chloe asked. She signaled to the driver to keep moving. "Besides, you know Marinette better than I do. I'd say to get her a diamond ring"—Adrien choked on his water—"but she seems like the type who'd be happier with something homey, like oven mitts." She shivered. "By the way, have you had lunch yet? We're getting lunch."

Adrien wiped his mouth. "I'm not getting her a diamond ring. Or oven mitts." He sighed and leaned back against the seat. "But it can't be just anything, either," he murmured. He caught Chloe staring at him. "What?"

"Something happened," she said.

Crap. Adrien forgot Chloe could smell changes in his mood the way most people could smell a coming rainstorm. "No," he said, his voice weak and high pitched, "not really…"

"Spit it out."

"Marinette's in love with someone else."

"What?" Chloe yelled so loud that Adrien's ears rang.

"But," Adrien interrupted before she could explode, "but she hasn't told him how she feels about him yet, and according to her, he's interested in someone else, so I still have a chance." He held his hands out in front of him in case Chloe decided to turn the glass she held into a projectile. Her face was bright red.

"That's impossible," she snarled. "I talked to her not even two weeks ago!"

"And she told you that she liked me?" Adrien asked tentatively. Damn the stubborn part of him that still hoped. When Chloe didn't look him in the eye, he sighed. "Right," he said. "So I want to get her something that stands out, something that will always make her think of me. In a good way."
Chloe let out a distracted murmur and tossed back the rest of her drink. Adrien could tell she was still trying to figure out what the heck had happened, and honestly, he wouldn't have minded the answer to that question himself. How could Chloe, Nino, and Alya have been so certain that Marinette had a crush on him unless she'd said something to them? How could all three of them have gotten it so wrong?

The limo pulled up to the front of Le Grand Paris and the doorman rushed forward to help them out. Chloe ignored his offered hand. Adrien waved it away with a polite smile.

"Alright," Chloe said as the doorman ran past them to open the lobby door, "I'll help you. But don't take that as an admission that I was wrong, because I wasn't wrong."

Adrien patted her on the back. "Whatever you say, Chlo."

"Ugh! What's he doing here again?" Chloe snapped.

Adrien looked past her. Jagged Stone, as flamboyantly dressed as ever, stood in the lobby with his pet crocodile Fang, having what appeared to be a tense conversation with the concierge.

"What do you mean it's closed?" Jagged shouted.

The concierge managed to keep a professional expression. "I'm terribly sorry, Monsieur Stone. According to Paris law, the bakeries on this side of the city must close for the month of August—"

"Yeah, I heard you the first time!" Jagged tugged Fang away from an unsuspecting woman's skirt. "Unbelievable. I spend weeks talking this Dupain-Cheng girl up and the moment we return to France, the bakery is closed! Where am I supposed to take my Penny for our anniversary dessert?"

Adrien grabbed Chloe by the arms. "Excuse me," he said, then gently moved her out of the way before nearly tripping over himself in his hurry to get to the concierge desk. He kept a wide berth of Fang, but still managed to enter the scene with his model charm cranked as high as it could go. "Hello there, Monsieur Stone. I couldn't help but overhear your dilemma, on account of the fact that you were yelling loud enough to broadcast it to the entire lobby. You know, I happen to be a close friend of Ms. Dupain-Cheng's. This is Marinette Dupain-Cheng we're talking about, right?"

Jagged sized him up with a wary glance. "Yeah. Her friend interviewed me here last month and brought me some killer samples from her bakery." He produced a business card from his leather jacket. Sure enough, it bore Tom and Sabine's logo, phone number, and Marinette's name written in what must have been Alya's handwriting.

"As you should be," Jagged said.

"I couldn't help but overhear your dilemma, on account of the fact that you were yelling loud enough to broadcast it to the entire lobby. You know, I happen to be a close friend of Ms. Dupain-Cheng's. This is Marinette Dupain-Cheng we're talking about, right?"

Jagged sized him up with a wary glance. "Yeah. Her friend interviewed me here last month and brought me some killer samples from her bakery." He produced a business card from his leather jacket. Sure enough, it bore Tom and Sabine's logo, phone number, and Marinette's name written in what must have been Alya's handwriting.

Adrien tried to keep his smile from becoming manic. "What if I told you that I can talk to Ms. Dupain-Cheng for you?"

Jagged crossed his arms. "I'd say you'd better not be lying to me, kid."

Adrien turned to Chloe, who stood near the door with the same disgusted glare as before. "Hear that? Jagged Stone called me kid." He cleared his throat and forced himself to subdue the fan boy. This was it. The birthday present of the century, the gift Marinette would never forget. "Will Sunday at two o'clock work for you and your wife, Monsieur Stone?"
Chapter End Notes

Still on hiatus, but trying to get some fan fiction time in for my sanity.

Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista).
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Today is Lucky Us's birthday and one year anniversary. So what could be better than a chapter containing a birthday present and an anniversary?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ladybug
RE: Summer
4 hours ago

Good morning, Chat Noir.

I know what you're thinking: "What's Ladybug doing up early on a Sunday?"

I had every intention of sleeping in.

My anxiety had other plans.

It sat on my chest and hollered THE DESIGN COMPETITION FINALISTS WILL BE ANNOUNCED THIS WEEK until I got out of bed and tried to drown it with coffee.

Only now I've had three cups of coffee, I'm a jittery mess, and my anxiety is even worse than before.

Go figure.

x.x.x

Adrien looked at himself in the mirror: dress shirt, dark jeans, nice shoes. Easy. Sensible. Innocent enough to keep Marinette from killing him, maybe. He resisted the temptation to sweep his hair into a choir boy 'do and stepped out of the bathroom just as Plagg walked in from the hallway. Adrien crossed his arms.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the traitor," he said. Plagg ignored his scornful tone and rubbed himself against Adrien's legs. "Oh now you want to cuddle, huh? You spend all night with Father and then think you can just waltz in and demand affection from me?"

Plagg chirped at him. Adrien stooped over and gave him a vigorous rub-down. "You're lucky I love you so much," he grumbled. He placed a kiss on the top of Plagg's head and straightened again.

Ladybug wasn't the only one who'd been woken up by anxiety. The moment Adrien opened his eyes that morning, he'd been assaulted by doubt. No one would argue that bringing a girl's favorite celebrity to her home was an awesome birthday present, but was it an appropriate gift for someone he'd known for just about a month? Even Chloe's diamond ring suggestion had started to sound good after a while.
But it was too late. Jagged Stone and Penny Rolling-Stone would be at the bakery at two o'clock, and Adrien had to make it there before them to give Marinette at least a little bit of warning. What if she was still in her pajamas? Would Marinette hang out with him in her pajamas? What kind of pajamas did she wear, anyway? She must have looked cute in pajamas…

Adrien shook his head free of the thought and left his room. In the foyer, he encountered Gabriel.

"Heading out?" his father asked.

"Yes. I have a, uh, meeting this afternoon," Adrien said in his best attempt at nonchalance.

Gabriel's slow blink could have rivaled Plagg's. "Then I won't keep you," he said. "But we should get together for dinner soon. I'd like to hear about the design competition."

Just a few weeks ago, Adrien would have suspected that his father only wanted to talk about the competition so he could feel pleased with himself at having swamped his own son with work. But hearing those words now, spoken mildly and with a tone of genuine interest, Adrien felt reassured. "How about tonight?" he asked. "This meeting shouldn't take more than a couple hours."

Gabriel seemed surprised, but he nodded. "Tonight, then."

"Great." Adrien gestured to the door. "I need to…"

"Right," Gabriel said.

Adrien hurried down the foyer steps. He had ten minutes to get to Marinette's place before Jagged Stone did, and it took about ten minutes to get there.

"Adrien."

He paused at the door and looked back at his father. "Yes?"

"Have a nice day," Gabriel said.

Adrien smiled at him. "You too."

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Are you nervous? Excited? Nervously excited? Excitedly nervous? Because I am nervously excited for you! I have no doubt in my mind that you will make the finals, buginette, and I'm not just saying that.

Is Jittery Ladybug anything like Drunk Ladybug? Because Drunk Ladybug is a hoot.

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

I am nervously nervous.
But at least the jitters have died down.

Now I'm just awake.

Wide awake.

I think my third eye is open.

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

What do you see with your third eye?

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

A black cat and a ladybug meeting in person for the first time.

…but that could be years from now. :-)

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

You're hiss-terical.

Marinette stood back and admired her beautiful creation. The cake was three layers high, wrapped in meticulously smooth frosting that started off white at the top and ended in a pastel orange at the bottom. Her parents had trained her in the art of gradient frosting shortly after she started working at the bakery, and it was, without a doubt, one of her sharpest skills. On top of the cake she'd created three large frosting roses: orange, peach, and red.

She snapped a few pictures with her phone—such an artistic cake needed to be captured for posterity—and sent one to Alya. Knowing her, she'd be screaming for Marinette to save her a slice.

If only she could send Chat Noir a photo, too. But that would divulge too much of what she did in her free time. He'd guess that she might be a baker by trade and visit every bakery in Paris looking for her. Of course, with her pretending she was still at work during the day, he'd assume she worked at a bakery on the other side of Paris, which would throw him off her trail for months.

She sighed. She'd been so tempted to send the meeting email without the second line. How would he have reacted to aloof and mysterious Ladybug suddenly wanting to put an end to the distance between them?

A rapid knock on the back door startled her. Marinette whipped off her apron and jogged over to
Adrien stood on her doorstep, hopping from one foot to the other. "Are they here yet?" he blurted out.

Marinette blinked. "Is who here yet?"

"Okay, good." Adrien stopped hopping, stepped into the entryway, and put both hands on her shoulders. "Marinette, I'm going to tell you something and you're going to listen and then, hopefully, you will neither freak out nor never forgive me."

The anxiety provoked by three cups of coffee ricocheted through Marinette's body like a runaway champagne cork. "I don't like where this is going..." she murmured.

Adrien took a deep breath. "On Friday, I—you have flour on your cheek."

"I do?"

He reached up and rubbed it away with his thumb. "Got it."

Heat rushed to Marinette's face. Her skin tingled where he'd touched her for several seconds after he'd removed his hand. She definitely needed to do something about that surplus of affection—maybe visit an animal shelter and cuddle with every animal they had.

Adrien looked over her shoulder and made a high-pitched noise.

Marinette looked as well.

A limo was parked in front of the bakery, passenger door open, and emerging from it was none other than Jagged Stone. Marinette watched, anxiety growing exponentially with every passing second, as Jagged extended a hand, which was accepted by his wife and manager, Penny Rolling-Stone. The two turned towards the bakery.

Marinette turned towards Adrien.

He crossed his arms, uncrossed them and put his hands on his hips, then crossed his arms again.

"Is that Jagged Stone?" Marinette asked, though she already knew the answer. Adrien's head bobbed up and down once. "Is he coming here? Like, right here? Right now?" Another nod. "Is there a specific reason that he's here at this particular moment?"

Adrien shrugged. "Happy birthday?"

Marinette started hyperventilating. "Oh no. Oh no oh no oh no oh no."

"Don't freak out!" Adrien cried, though it was clearly too late for that. "Listen, he wanted to bring his wife here for their anniversary and he was very upset that the bakery's closed for the month so I told him I could talk to you—"

"But you didn't talk to me!" Marinette hissed. Mixed emotions threw her mind into a panic. Jagged Stone was here! She loved Jagged Stone! She was going to kill Adrien!

"Hold that thought," Adrien said, as if he'd seen the murder in her eyes. He drew himself up, put on a charming smile, and left the kitchen.

Marinette watched in disbelief as he walked to the bakery's front door, unlocked it as if he owned
the place, and stood aside to let Jagged and Penny in. "Good afternoon," he said. "Ms. Dupain-Cheng is incredibly thrilled that you two are here. She's just putting the finishing touches on the presentation, and promises to join you shortly. Please, sit anywhere you like."

Marinette pressed her back against the wall and slowed her breathing. The reality of the situation sank in: Jagged Stone and Penny Rolling-Stone, two high profile customers, were in her parents' bakery, and though she hadn't expected any high-profile customers in the middle of her summer vacation—except Adrien, of course—she just happened to have a cake on hand. So when Adrien walked into the kitchen, she grabbed him by the sleeve and yanked him in front of her.

"Since you seem to know exactly what you're doing, I'm putting you to work," she said.

Adrien's eyes went wide, but he nodded.

"There's a cabinet by the staircase in which you will find decorations. Set a tablecloth, offer them something to drink, then grab the dessert plates and forks and wait for me here."

And with that, Marinette ran out of the kitchen, up the staircase, and into the house. She yanked off her plain sneakers and socks and took the stairs two at a time to her room, where she proceeded to rip off the rest of her clothes, grab a dress out of her wardrobe, and throw it on. She tied her hair up into a bun on her way to the loft. Shoved open the hatch door to her balcony. Picked up a nearby pair of garden shears and snipped the biggest, most beautiful roses in her planter.

Then she dropped onto her bed, ran down the stairs, slipped into a pair of heels, spritzed herself with perfume, rode the rail into her kitchen, stole the vase from the fake flowers Adrien had gotten her, filled it with water, dunked the roses in, and ran out the front door.

By the time Marinette returned to the bakery kitchen, Adrien stood with the dessert plates and forks in hand. He did a doubletake when he saw her, clearly surprised at how fast she'd changed her clothes and acquired fresh flowers. "Follow me," Marinette said.

*Spirit of the business owner, don't fail me now*, she thought as she put on her winningest smile and marched forward.

"Monsieur Stone, Madame Stone!" she cried in her best imitation of her mother's you're-our-favorite-customer voice. "I'd heard from my friend Alya Cesaire that you enjoyed the desserts we sent you. It's a shame you couldn't make it back before the bakery closed." She set the flowers down in the center of the table and offered her hand to Penny first. "Marinette Dupain-Cheng. I am temporarily in charge of this bakery while my parents, Tom and Sabine, take care of a sick relative."

"Nice to meet you," Penny said with a warm smile. "Sorry for interrupting your vacation like this. Jagged couldn't stop talking about this place while he toured across Europe. I hope we haven't caused you too much trouble." She gave Jagged a pointed look.

Marinette offered her hand to him next. "Not at all. I'm only too happy to serve one of my favorite musicians. I grew up with your music, Monsieur Stone. It's an honor."

Jagged shook her hand enthusiastically. "You've got good taste, Ms. Cheng." He nodded in Adrien's direction. "I thought this guy might be pulling my leg when he said he could call in a favor."

Marinette merely smiled at this. "Will Monsieur Fang be joining us today?" she asked.

"Nah, Fang thinks romance is gross," Jagged said. "He can't stand being around us when we're celebrating our anniversary."
Marinette spent a moment trying to figure out how a crocodile conveyed its displeasure at romance. "How unfortunate," she said.

Jagged nodded. "We set him up with a Crocodile Dating Profile a while back, but the last girl broke his heart. He's been bitter ever since."

Marinette looked at Penny for verification. Penny merely shrugged with the tired expression of someone who'd come between a man and his crocodile and had to live with the consequences. "Well," Marinette said as Adrien set the dessert plates on the table, "we here at Tom and Sabine's condone celebrations of love both big and small. Adrien, would you be so kind as to bring out the cake?"

Adrien bowed and made his way back to the kitchen, his willing obedience almost persuading Marinette not to kill him after all. He returned with the cake on its stand and set it before the roses.

"It's gorgeous!" Penny cried.

Even Jagged looked impressed. "How'd you know orange was my Penny's favorite color?"

"Ms. Dupain-Cheng did say she was a big fan of yours," Adrien piped up, and gave Marinette a discreet wink as he handed her the cake knife.

Marinette narrowed her eyes to let him know he shouldn't push his luck just because she'd reconsidered murdering him. She cut two enormous cake slices for Jagged and Penny and safely transferred them to their plates. "We'll leave you to your celebration. Happy anniversary," she said, then jerked her head to the side to signal Adrien to start walking.

Halfway to the kitchen, Jagged screamed something about the cake in English and Penny made a noise of pure delight. Marinette smiled and forced herself not to look back.

The moment she and Adrien were in the kitchen, she whacked his shoulder. "That's for bringing a celebrity to my bakery without telling me!" she whispered.

"I tried—"

She threw her arms around his neck, silencing whatever excuse he had prepared. "And this is for the incredible gift," she murmured into his shirt. She didn't dare look at him, but she felt the tension leave his body before he returned her embrace with a gentle squeeze. To hell with it; her surplus of affection demanded she let herself enjoy this, and who was she to say no? Adrien had given her the opportunity to meet Jagged Stone and get on his good side. She pulled away from him with a nervous smile. "Your friends must hate you at Christmas."

Adrien blushed at that—or had he already been blushing? "I don't spoil them all the time."

"Right, just on Christmas and birthdays," Marinette said, and poked him in the ribs with her elbow. "Seriously, thank you so much." She couldn't wait to tell her parents. Her mother had been excited enough when Marinette told her Jagged Stone liked the samples she'd sent him last month.

Adrien smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm glad you're happy," he said.

A small voice that sounded suspiciously like Chloe Bourgeois whispered in Marinette's ear: He's depressed.

Marinette took a step back, her excitement fading. Was Adrien hiding something from her? He'd
been strange since he came back from Chateau Margaux. More reserved. A little sad. But before she could ask, he nodded towards the doorway. "You should get back out there," he said. "They must be craving another slice."

"Right," Marinette said, and steeled herself for round two of customer interaction. If there was something wrong with Adrien, she'd get it out of him later. For now, she had a celebrity couple to impress.

x.x.x

By the time Jagged and Penny left—with multiple reassurances that they would come back during their next stop in Paris—Marinette felt ready to pass out. Her three cups of coffee had worn off, leaving her exhausted and wondering if the events of the afternoon had truly transpired. It wasn't until her phone began blowing up with notifications that she was forced to accept it: not only had Jagged Stone been in her bakery, he'd Tweeted his endorsement to his millions of followers. The bakery's Twitter account was getting slammed.

Marinette sat across from Adrien at his favorite table, a hand draped over her forehead like a swooning actress. "What's going to happen when this place reopens?" she murmured.

Adrien dug his fork into his slice of cake without a care in the world. "You hire more employees to help you with the influx of customers until your parents come back."

"What if we don't live up to their expectations?"

"Not going to happen," he said.

"What if they think our desserts are overrated? What if they don't come back?" Marinette's eyes widened. "What if they do come back and we're stuck with more customers than we can handle and this place turns into an overcrowded sty and no one wants to come because the lines are always backed up to the door?"

"Marinette."

She closed her eyes. "Sorry."

Adrien chuckled around a mouthful of cake. "You really do know how to panic over everything, don't you?" he asked.

"I'm a professional worrier." Marinette leaned forward and winced at the ache in her temple. She needed more coffee. "I can't believe you brought Jagged Stone here," she said. Her phone let off a series of chimes. Adrien pointed to it.

"If you need proof, there it is," he said.

She knew she ought to turn the phone off, but she'd be upset if she missed an email from Chat Noir. She switched it to silent instead. "Guess I'd better stick a Help Wanted sign in the window," she said. Her phone let off a series of chimes. Adrien pointed to it.

"If you need proof, there it is," he said.

She knew she ought to turn the phone off, but she'd be upset if she missed an email from Chat Noir. She switched it to silent instead. "Guess I'd better stick a Help Wanted sign in the window," she said. Her phone let off a series of chimes. Adrien pointed to it.

"No way," Adrien cut in before she could complete her sentence. "I only eat the food. If I tried to prepare it, it'd be an unmitigated disaster."

Marinette laughed. "If a teenager like Manon can do this job, then so can you. Minimal baking involved. All you'd have to do is stand up front and look pretty." She rested her chin in her hands. "And besides, it'd be good for business. A famous supermodel serving pastries? The line would
Adrien shook his head sadly. "I knew it was only a matter of time before you started wanting me for my looks," he said. While Marinette rolled her eyes, he leaned forward and pulled his phone out of his back pocket. It vibrated in his hand. "Text from Nino," he explained. "He wants a slice of the cake."

"I'll have Alya bring it to him tomorrow," Marinette said, her gaze automatically following Adrien's phone as he lowered it to the table and—

Her body went cold.

A strange weightless feeling settled in her chest.

"Still playing matchmaker after we've been found out?" Adrien asked.

Marinette's eyes remained glued to his phone.

To the picture of Plagg set as his wallpaper.

"Marinette?"

The same picture Chat Noir had sent her weeks ago.

She tapped on his phone. Forced herself to smile. "Is this your cat?" she asked.

Adrien stared at her. "Yeah." He frowned. "You… knew I had a cat, right?"

"You told me you were a cat person. You never said you had a cat." She lifted her gaze, the smile fixed on her face, and looked at him. Really looked at him.

Adrien's mouth fell open. "Oh my God." He pulled his phone back toward him and began navigating screens. "I can't believe I never told you about Plagg."

Marinette's heart throbbed.

Adrien pushed the phone back in her direction and she found herself confronted with an entire gallery of Plagg. Pictures she'd seen. Pictures she hadn't seen. She tapped on the first one and flipped through the album just to be polite. Her mind had stopped processing information.

Plagg was Adrien's cat.

"Maybe it's a good thing I didn't tell you about him because I am one hundred percent one of those weird, gushing pet parents. If I had a plastic photo holder in my wallet, it'd be full of pictures of him," Adrien said. "He's my baby. I've had him since I was fifteen."

"That long, huh?" Marinette murmured.

"Father got him for me after my mother died." Adrien shook his head. "I spoiled him rotten for the first few years so now he's a total brat."

Marinette handed the phone back to him. "You're lucky," she said. "I wish I could have a pet."

"When you're a famous fashion designer and no longer living above a bakery, you can have all the hamsters you want," Adrien said with a smile. He checked the time on his phone. "Now, as much as I'd love to hang out for the rest of the afternoon, I promised my father we'd have dinner tonight."
"Oh sure, leave me with all the dishes," Marinette complained.

Adrien stood from the table. "I'll make it up to you, princess."

She waved him off. "Don't worry about it. The birthday present more than makes up for a couple of dirty dishes." She stood up and walked him to the door though it was only two steps away. Her face hurt from smiling. "See you Tuesday?"

"Tuesday," Adrien confirmed.

Marinette watched him walk away.

She closed and locked the bakery door. Picked up the dishes. Carried them to the sink. Washed them carefully. Dried them. Put the tablecloth back in the cabinet. Grabbed her phone.

She walked up the stairs and through the front door but she couldn't bring herself to take a step further. She leaned back against the door. Opened Chat Noir's latest email and stared at it.

_You're hiss-terical._

Her hands were shaking.

A dozen scenarios crossed her mind. Half a dozen wild hopes. Half a dozen doubts.

Because the fact of the matter was that anyone could pretend to be Adrien Agreste with a few stolen photos and the mask of anonymity.

And Marinette Dupain-Cheng just wasn't that lucky.

x.x.x

_Ladybug_

_RE: Summer_

_Just now_

_Have you ever lied to me?_

x.x.x

_Chart Noir_

_RE: Summer_

_Just now_

_Yes._

_A few weeks ago, when I wrote you that poem and I said it took me half an hour to come up with the last line? I lied. It took me five minutes. (But my heart was completely in it.)_ 

x.x.x

_Ladybug_

_RE: Summer_

_Just now_

_Haha._
Listen, I'm going to be super busy for a while.

I may not be able to email you at all.

Talk to you later?

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Oh... yeah, sure! I'll miss you, though.

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Draft

I'll miss you too.

x.x.x

Marinette's trembling thumb hovered over the send button.

She closed the email app and shut off her phone.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, a reveal. That's what could be better than a birthday present and an anniversary. :D

Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista).
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Important conversations are important.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Twenty minutes after turning off her phone, the buzz of the intercom jerked Marinette out of her stupor. She sat up on the sofa, certain the throw pillow she'd been resting her head on left marks on her cheek, and smoothed her hair down. Had the horde of new customers brought on by Jagged Stone's tweet already come for her? Couldn't they read the sign on the bakery door that said "We'll Be Back September 1st!" with the cheerful smiley face she'd drawn when she was seven years old?

Marinette walked to the intercom beside the front door and pressed the talk button. "Who is it?"

Alya's voice burst out of the speaker. "Marinette, why the heck is your phone off? Do you know how long I've been trying to call you? Open the door! I brought dinner!"

Marinette stared at the intercom. Of course Alya must have seen Jagged Stone's tweet. How could Marinette not have expected her to come rushing over to celebrate? She left the front door cracked, descended the winding staircase to the alley door, and pulled it open.

Alya stood holding the kind of enormous bag delivery boys used to keep pizzas warm. "Sorry," she said, "as soon as I told Mom I was coming over she filled like twenty plastic containers with food and shoved them into this…” Her sentence died on her tongue. She leaned closer to Marinette, eyes wide. "What's wrong?"

Marinette blinked. Tears rushed down her cheeks. "Umm," she said as her eyes filled with more.

Alya safely lowered the food bag to the floor and immediately pulled Marinette into her arms. "Oh no… oh sweetie, it's okay!"

Marinette opened her mouth, but all she managed was a squeaky breath and a loud, heartbroken wail. She wrapped her arms around Alya, sagged against her, and filled the quiet bakery with her sobs.

x.x.x

Adrien sat at his father's right hand, picking at the food on his plate. One course into several and he'd already lost his appetite.

But it wasn't his father's fault this time. Part of it had to do with the delicious cake he'd eaten not even an hour ago. The rest had to do with Ladybug's sudden and strange departure from his life. A temporary departure, sure—she'd promised she would get in touch with him later—but he couldn't help his anxiety.

*Have you ever lied to me?*
Why would she ask him that out of the blue? He had no qualms about answering honestly; other
than his identity he wasn't trying to keep anything from her, and in a perfect world he wouldn't be
hiding that from her either. But for her to just disappear after such a strange response…

He wanted to email her. His heart screamed at him to email her.

"Adrien?"

He looked up from his plate, hoping his years of perfecting expressions had kept the mounting
panic off his face. "Yes?"

"Is the food not to your liking?" Gabriel asked.

Adrien shook his head. "Admittedly, I may have had dessert before dinner," he said with an
embarrassed smile.

"Ah," Gabriel said, then, "at the bakery on Rue Gotlib?"

For a split second, Adrien couldn't remember how his father knew about it. Then he recalled telling
him about Marinette before he left for Chateau Margaux. Gabriel was under the impression she
was his girlfriend. "Yes," Adrien said. "I volunteered to be a taste tester of new recipes while the
place is closed for the month. But don't worry, Marinette and I are just friends."

Gabriel looked surprised. "The dating situation didn't work out?"

Adrien thought of Marinette standing in front of Notre Dame, crying her heart out for another guy.
He speared a salad leaf, but made no move to eat it. "Thought you'd be relieved about that," he
muttered.

Gabriel's jaw tensed and Adrien braced himself for the argument. So much for a nice dinner. If
Chloe had been sitting beside him, she'd have slapped him upside the head and made him
apologize. But rather than snap back at him, Gabriel put his utensils down and motioned for the
waiting servers to leave the dining hall. Once they were gone, he spoke again, his voice level.

"While you were away filming the other week, I had many chances to observe your cat," he said.
Adrien frowned, not sure how they'd gotten from Marinette to his cat. "Plagg?"

"Yes." Gabriel kept his gaze fixed on the center of the table. "After a day or two in his company, I
concluded that Plagg is a healthy, well-adjusted animal—something he would not have been in the
care of an incompetent owner." He breathed in deeply. "Which led me to think of you, Adrien, and
the image of the irresponsible son I had crafted of you in my own mind. When your friend Ms.
Bourgeois was diagnosed with cancer, you put your whole life on pause for her until she recovered.
There are not many who would do such a thing. I did not do such a thing when it was your mother
who fell ill. Instead, I buried myself in my work so that I would not have to witness her suffering."

Adrien stared at his father in shock. He remembered those days, remembered the resentment he felt
towards Gabriel for not being there when his mother needed him.

"After she passed away, I gave you Plagg so that you would not be defeated by despair," Gabriel
said. "So that every morning you would wake up and know you couldn't stay in bed all day,
because there was a living creature that completely depended on you. A creature that only knew
how to love you, and wouldn't understand why if you suddenly began to neglect it. But that same
lesson never sank in for me." He shook his head. "In my grief, I neglected you, Adrien, and yet
because of who you are, you still put your whole life on pause for me."
"Father—"

"And I had the nerve to take that for granted, to get angry when you realized you'd had enough and started to rebel. I retaliated against you instead of wondering why an otherwise good and responsible child would suddenly turn on his own father." Now Gabriel did look at him, and his expression was so pained that Adrien couldn't meet his eyes. "I'm sorry, Adrien. You've held yourself back for my sake for far too long, and I see now how it has affected you."

"I'm fine," Adrien said weakly.

"You are not fine."

He sat staring at his plate, shoulders slouched. The salad leaf remained stuck to his fork, uneaten. "Yeah," he whispered, "okay. You know Chloe still thinks she's dying?" His grip on the fork tightened. "She's convinced her life is already over, that it's just a matter of time before she gets sick again, so obviously I didn't do shit for her." He laughed. "I'm still modeling. I'm so tired of modeling. Everyone's out there chasing their dreams, and I'm making out with women I don't have feelings for to sell cologne. And you know, I finally like this nice girl and I can't stop trying to hook her up with someone else because I want her to be happy?" He smiled at Gabriel, but when he spoke again he had to fight to get his words past the lump in his throat. "So maybe I'm not fine—but what's going on with your life, Father? How are you doing?"

Gabriel stood from his chair, walked over to Adrien's side, and wrapped his arms around his shoulders. "I'm so sorry," he said.

And Adrien, who couldn't remember the last time his father had embraced him, burst into tears.

x.x.x

Marinette sat on her living room sofa, swaddled in a plush blanket, an open container of food in her lap. She chewed her dinner slowly as Alya paced the length of the room, processing all the information Marinette had given her.

She hadn't held back. She'd started with the first email and ended with the pictures on Adrien's phone, and though Alya couldn't keep the I-can't-believe-you-were-emailing-a-stranger-for-a-year-and-didn't-tell me expression off her face, she only interrupted Marinette when she needed to clarify something.

And truthfully, Marinette wished she'd told Alya everything before. She knew why she hadn't: her reasons for talking to Chat Noir in the first place were rooted in the devastation she'd felt after breaking up with Nathanael, and the last thing she'd wanted at the time was more pity from anyone, including Alya. But when her feelings for Chat Noir had crossed the threshold into love, she should have told her. The lecture on stranger danger would have been worth it for some practical advice.

Alya stopped pacing and turned to face her. "I guess the question is… do you think this Chat Noir guy is Adrien?"

Marinette poked at her food. "I think anyone could pretend to be Adrien with some pictures and a subscription to Zag Weekly," she said.

"That's true. But Marinette, you were the one who accidentally emailed him, not the other way around. And why would he keep his identity secret if he was pretending to be Adrien? Wouldn't he lead with that to try to impress you?"
Her eyes widened. "What if he isn't pretending?"

"That's what I'm saying," Alya cried.

"No, I mean what if he legitimely thinks he's Adrien?"

Alya threw her hands up in the air, exasperated.

"What if I've been talking to a sick person all this time?" Marinette hissed. She pressed a hand to her forehead. Chat Noir was such a nice guy, too. Did she tell him to seek professional help?

Alya sat down next to Marinette, stole her food container and her fork, and picked at her leftovers. "Okay. Let's attack this from a different angle," she said. "Is there any evidence that Chat Noir and Adrien could be the same person? Something other than the cat? Hobbies, birthdays, verbal ticks?"

"Chat Noir makes cat puns," Marinette said desolately.

Alya stared at her. "Cat puns?"

"Like 'paws-itivity' and 'meowch' and 'fur-get it'—"

"Okaaaay," Alya said, wrestling a bite of food onto her fork. "I don't think we've heard Adrien make cat puns."

Marinette lay back against the sofa and thought back on every conversation she'd ever had with Chat Noir. It would have been easier to sift through them on her phone, but she didn't think she could handle looking at his emails without crying. Then she remembered another occasion where she'd been crying, and asked Chat Noir for advice on reducing the swelling around her eyes. "He has an alcoholic best friend," she said. "A girl that he's always rescuing at bars."

Alya held her hand in front of her full mouth and flailed her free arm. "Chloe!"

Marinette groaned. "But that's public information. Everyone knows Adrien and Chloe are best friends. It's all over the tabloids."

Alya's shoulders sagged. She returned to her food while Marinette sorted through the events of the last few weeks.

Marinette sat up straight. "The week that Adrien was filming the advertisement in Chateau Margaux, Chat Noir was too busy to talk during the day," she said, then deflated again. "But that was public information, too. Saw a report about the commercial on one of those celebrity gossip shows." She stole the food back from Alya. Alya handed her the fork.

"There has to be something else. You've been talking to this guy for a year," she said.

"But I've only been talking to Adrien for a month," Marinette reminded her. "He just showed up at the bakery after closing time one day…" She let her sentence dangle as a memory stepped forward amidst the chaos in her mind. "Wait," she said, and felt around for her cell phone. "Wait." She found it half buried under the throw pillow she'd been resting on earlier.

"What is it?" Alya asked.

Marinette turned her phone on, waited as the loading screen took far too long to give way to the home screen, then pulled up her inbox. She ignored the Summer email thread and clicked on 2015 just below it. There were hundreds of emails. She scrolled through back to mid-July and
scanned the first lines until she found the one she was looking for.

"Listen, Chat Noir."

"Whoever you are."

"It may not seem like it, but I know how you feel. A routine life where everything is safe and familiar? Never taking risks, chasing after your own ambitions? It's stifling, isn't it? Some days I can hardly breathe.

"But strange and wonderful things still happen to sleepwalkers like us."

"I accidentally emailed you, and rather than let it go, I took a risk and we became friends."

"It's time for you to take a risk."

"Sweet dreams."

Marinette checked the date. She'd sent it the Monday before Adrien had turned up at the bakery for the first time, looking for a moment's peace. She scrolled down to the next day and opened one of his replies.

"I a-paw-logize for my out of character behavior yesterday. You must have been worried if you stopped rejecting me long enough to offer advice. And very sound advice, I might add. I followed it to the letter and the universe rewarded me for my obedience. I'd like to think it was a gift from you, buginette. That your good luck rubbed off on me and made my day just a little brighter."

Marinette looked up from the phone. He'd been talking about her.

The risk he took was visiting the bakery after hours. The reward was the cheesecake and her company.

She stood from the sofa, and would have knocked the food container over if Alya hadn't caught it in time. "Marinette, what is it?"

Chat Noir had practically begged her to enter Gabriel Agreste's design competition, had been ecstatic when she finally decided to do it. Adrien was in charge of the whole damn thing.

"Mari, what?" Alya cried.

Marinette looked out the living room window. Notre Dame stood across the river, bathed in the light of the setting sun.

The cute acquaintance. The woman Chat Noir had unrequited feelings for. He'd gone to ask her on a date and she'd shot him down because she was in love with someone else.

He'd been in front of Notre Dame because he was on his way to ask his acquaintance out.

Marinette ran across the river to find Chat Noir and found Adrien instead.

Adrien, in front of Notre Dame, on his way to ask her, Marinette, on a date.

And Marinette told him she was in love with her best friend.
"Adrien is Chat Noir," Marinette said.

It was Adrien who'd walked into Café Reflekta and asked for the Ladybug special. Chat Noir who'd brought her fake flowers. Adrien who'd stayed up all night emailing her when she was upset about Nathanael. Chat Noir whose hand she'd held in a dark movie theater. Adrien who'd sent her cat puns and poetry and internet memes. Chat Noir who'd kissed her cheek to play a trick on their best friends. Adrien who'd told her she made him feel like his stupid parody of a life was worth living.

Marinette turned to Alya with her phone pressed against her chest. "I'm in love with Adrien," she said, and the force of those words, the warmth of them seemed to fill every inch of her body. "Oh my God, I fell for him twice."

Alya looked ready to cry. "I so need a picture of your face right now."

Marinette smiled. She suddenly couldn't stop smiling. "That..." She ran a hand through her hair. "That... that little sneak!" she yelled as realization after realization began piling up on her. "Join the competition, buginette! It's important to me because it's important to you! Don't mind me, I'm just running whole the thing!" I can't believe him!"

"He calls you buginette?" Alya screamed.

Marinette grabbed a throw pillow. "He told me he works in marketing! Stupid cat!" She buried her face in the pillow and let out a loud whine. "And of course he's a supermodel! Of course he is! He's not just unbearably smug about his looks, he actually has the looks to be smug about!"

"I dare you to tell me how that's a problem," Alya said.

"Oh, I hate him. I hate him I hate him I hate him!"

"Yoo-hoo! You just said you fell in love with him twice, remember?"

Marinette squeezed the pillow with all the strength she had left. "And why is Adrien Agreste on the internet sending cat puns to women he's never met?" she cried. Then she gasped, and the pillow slid out of her hands. "Alya."

"Yes?"

"Alya."

"Yeah, Marinette?"

"Adrien's in love with me."

Alya sat back with the food container and picked up the fork again. "I'm just going to get comfortable and watch you sort all this out," she said.

"I mean, I think he's in love with me. He's in love with Ladybug and I'm Ladybug but lately he's had a crush on me but a crush is just a crush, you know? It's not love." Marinette pressed both hands to the sides of her face. "He thinks he's cheating on me with me."

Alya snorted, doubled over, and howled with laughter. "Oh my God, please let me be the one to tell this story at your wedding!"

Marinette grabbed her by the shoulders. "This is no time for laughing! What do I do?" she cried.
But even as she waited for Alya to calm down enough to speak, she knew she already had the answer to her question:

She had to tell Adrien who she was.

It all seemed so simple. Before, she'd worried about telling Chat Noir how she felt about him because she'd never met him in person. She hadn't known what to expect. But now?

Now Chat Noir was Adrien. The humor, the confidence, the kindness, the loyalty, the consideration for her feelings—it all made perfect sense. How could he have been anyone else? Another enormous smile lit up her face as she imagined Adrien wishing he could spend the whole day talking to her, Adrien sending her flirtatious messages, Adrien swiping wine from his father's cellar to drink a toast to her big fat mouth...

"Earth to Marinette," Alya said. She waved a hand in front of her face. "Are you listening?"

Marinette ripped her giddy mind away from the memory of Adrien's body pressed against hers earlier that day. "Huh?"

"When are you going to tell him you're Ladybug?"

Marinette pulled her hair out of her bun and wrapped it around her finger. "Uh... if it's truly meant to be, he'll just look at me and know?"

Alya made an x-shape with her arms. "Wrong answer," she said.

Marinette collapsed on the sofa again, amazed at how she could be so tired when she wanted to climb out onto her balcony and sing a song of joy for all of Paris to hear. "I don't know," she said. "I decided that if I ended up a finalist in the design competition, I'd use that to tell Chat Noir who I was."

"But that was before you knew Chat Noir is a guy you fake dated to hook me up with his best friend."

"Let it go, let it go," Marinette sang.

Alya grabbed her face and squished her cheeks together. "Seriously. Why don't you tell him on Tuesday? Because if I have to invent an excuse to get Nino out of his own apartment, I will."

Marinette's eyes widened. Tuesday. The party. One moment alone with Adrien and she could drop a hint, or whisper it in his ear, or grab him by the shirt collar and scream it at him before yanking him in to kiss that ridiculously handsome face of his.

Oh. Kissing.

That was a thing that could happen. She'd forgotten about kissing. What would that be like: her, Marinette, kissing Chat Noir, who was not only beautiful in spirit but in body as well? She let her imagination take the fantasy for a spin and pictured herself throwing him a come hither look—did she even know how to make a come hither look?—which would lead to him sitting her on the counter beside the cash register—wait, how did they get back to the bakery from Nino's? It wasn't important. What mattered was Adrien and the aching desire in his resplendent green eyes as Marinette played with his shirt buttons and murmured a "here, minou" that drove him to tangle his hands in her hair and—

"I've lost you again, haven't I?" Alya said.
Marinette sighed as the fantasy fled to some other, darker corner of her mind. She had to focus. Plenty of time to think about kissing Adrien later. "I'm nervous," she said. "What if he doesn't believe me?"

"Then you show him the emails, rip off your dress and say 'here is your buginette, take me, handsome boy!'"

"Alya!" Marinette shrieked.

Alya shrugged. "It's quick, it's painless, and it gets you both right where you want to be." She draped an arm over Marinette's shoulders and pulled her closer. "I get it, though. You fell for him twice, he fell for you twice. Some people would say it's meant to be. But what happens when the novelty wears off and you realize you shotgun-married a guy who makes cat puns?"

"I'm not going to shotgun-marry him."

"Are you sure? Because you don't get a chance with the gorgeous and filthy rich son of your fashion idol every day. Just saying."

Marinette snorted. "Losing my head is what got me in trouble last time, remember?" She thought of her relationship with Nathanael, how high she'd flown and how far she'd fallen because she'd been too blinded by love to see the warning signs. "I don't want to mess this one up," she said. "It's too important to me." She closed her eyes. "Chat Noir—Adrien—is too important to me."

Alya squeezed her tighter. "Then take it easy. You'll know what to do when the time comes." They sat together in companionable silence. Alya drummed her fingers on Marinette's shoulder. "So..." she said, "can I read his emails?"

"Absolutely not."

Chapter End Notes

A lot of people have asked me whether the bakery closing thing is true. First of all, why not just Google it yourselves? Second of all, yes, it's true. In the summer, half the bakeries in Paris close one month and the other half close the next month. The French are very serious about their vacation time, but the people still need their bread.

Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista)!
Monday afternoon, Adrien met Chloe for lunch at Le Grand Paris.

"Why aren't we doing our usual Wednesday breakfast this week?" she complained as she waited for Adrien to finish browsing the menu.

"Because," Adrien said, "Wednesday is Announcement Day."

All improperly formatted entries to the design competition had been weeded out. Marinette and Ladybug's fates now rested in the hands of Gabriel's chosen judges, and in two days, those judges' decisions would be broadcast to the entire fashion world. If Adrien hadn't given up nail biting years ago, he'd be down to nubs.

Chloe rolled her eyes and stuck her leg out to stop Adrien's from jiggling. "Cut it out. If Marinette and your Ladybug friend aren't good enough to make the finals, then they certainly aren't good enough for you."

"That doesn't make me feel better," Adrien said. He put his menu down and a waiter immediately appeared to take their order. He blinked. How the heck did they do that?

"I'm kind of surprised Marinette didn't kill you for your little birthday stunt," Chloe said once the waiter had vanished with their menus.

"She wanted to. I could tell; I saw the murder in her eyes." Adrien smiled, remembering the feeling of Marinette's arms around his neck, her body against his body, small and warm and soft and scented with perfume. "But I guess she decided I'm too cute to die."

"Ugh." Chloe rolled her eyes. "Hook up or shut up. You're nauseating me."

Adrien laughed. He turned his gaze to the restaurant window, watching cars pass on the street, people walk by on their way to or from work. "I talked to my father yesterday," he said.

"And let me guess: you want to get a tramp stamp now."

"Not exactly." He physically felt Chloe's eyes burning a hole into the side of his head. "We had a conversation. About life. And the competition. And... you know, stuff." He glanced at Chloe and saw that the perpetual annoyance had vanished from her face. He gave her the most reassuring look he could. "We decided to get help," he said. "Professional help. For me and for him. As a family."

Chloe pursed her glossed lips together. Adrien caught the unmistakable glisten of tears in her eyes before she tossed her head back and blinked rapidly. "It's about damn time," she said.
Adrien handed her his napkin. She took it and dabbed at her eyelids. She never would let any tears fall in public—not the genuine ones, anyway. "I'll be good for us, I think," Adrien said. "We have a lot of stuff to work through and I'm not sure we could manage it alone."

"Trying to manage it alone is what made you idiots this thickheaded in the first place," Chloe snapped. She reached across the table and took Adrien's hand. "But I'm happy for you."

Adrien stroked her fingers with his thumb. "You know what'd make me happy?" he asked. "If you got help, too."

Chloe heaved a sigh and pulled her hand back.

"I mean it, Chlo," he said. "Watching you self-destruct hasn't exactly been fun for me." He could sense her withdrawing, slamming the storm shutters down over her heart. "You think I like seeing you drunk and miserable? You think I like it when the tabloids call you stupid and spoiled and weak? When they turn you into the laughingstock of Paris?"

"Who cares what they think?" Chloe muttered.

"I do!" Adrien practically shouted, startling her. "I used to look up to you. My fake Twitter account pisses you off? Well guess what? Your victim complex pisses me off. And I'm tired of feeling like I'm not allowed to say anything because I'm not the one who almost died. Go see a therapist and get over it already!"

Chloe glared at him from across the table. Adrien glared back. He knew she could keep them there all day if she wanted to; Chloe Bourgeois had a knack for getting her way. But to his surprise, her lips pulled up into a smirk.

"Stealing Marinette away from some other guy, growing enough of a backbone to stand up to me… I like this new side of you, Adrikins," she said. "It almost makes me regret breaking up with you."

Adrien narrowed his eyes. "Don't be gross."

Chloe let out a sharp laugh and folded her arms over her chest. "I have been thinking about it lately," she admitted. "Not getting therapy, exactly, but shaking things up a little."

"Oh? You going to tell Nino you're in love with him?" Adrien asked.

Chloe stared out the window. "Please. I'm not that cruel."

Adrien smiled at that, though he couldn't help but think of what things would have been like if Chloe had allowed herself to be nice to Nino. He'd have been good to her, good for her. But Adrien knew the last thing she wanted was to make someone else endure what she'd put him through. "Well," he said, "whatever you decide to do, I'll support you. As long as it's not more self-destructive than alcoholism."

"Can it be less self-destructive than alcoholism?"

"Chloe."

"It was a joke, oh my God."

X.X.X

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: So I just realized I don't have your boyfriend's address.
Alya Cesaire: Oh yeah lol. Hold on a sec.

Alya Cesaire: Wait, he isn't... WE aren't...


x.x.x

Adrien Agreste: HAPPY BIRTHDAY MARINETTE!

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: Thank you! :D

Adrien Agreste: How does it feel to be 27?

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: Slightly more bewildering than being 26. But hey, we're the same age now!

Adrien Agreste: Noooo, we aren't.

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: Omg. Am I OLDER THAN YOU?!

Adrien Agreste: My birthday's in September, so yeah.

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: O M G

x.x.x

Marinette pressed her phone against her heart and sighed as she made her way out of the bathroom. *I'm older than him,* she thought with a grin. She imagined Chat Noir's indignant response to learning that his Lady had him beaten by two months. It seemed like the kind of thing he'd have a complex about—or at least pretend to have a complex about. Curse her decision to pretend she was too busy to email him! Not being able to tease him made her days so much longer. Adrien's text made her happy, but the time stamp on it made her even happier: midnight. He'd sent it to her right at the start of her birthday. He'd *waited* until midnight, stayed up when he could have been sleeping, just to send her a birthday text.

If she hadn't already been in love with him, that little detail might have pushed her over the edge.

Marinette climbed up to her bedroom and left her phone on her desk before turning to her wardrobe. Alya had sent her Nino's address, and since she didn't feel like sitting around at home waiting for her own birthday party to start, she figured she'd show up early. It wasn't like they planned on surprising her. She doubted anyone would object.

But now Marinette faced an old hurdle with a new twist: What did she wear to maximize her feminine charm around Adrien, also known as Chat Noir? She dropped her towel and stared at herself in her full-length mirror, twisting from side to side. She had plenty of good physical qualities: toned muscles, cute butt, a decent-sized bust. She could pick one asset to accentuate, or she could throw caution to the wind and accentuate all of them.

But it was her birthday, and she wanted to be festive, too.

She walked over to her wardrobe and grabbed a strapless blue dress with the fullest skirt she owned. She stuffed herself into it, tied some matching ribbon to a pair of heels and wrapped them
up her calves, used the leftover ribbon to make a hairbow, then stepped back to admire her
handiwork.

"Hmm. Something's missing," she murmured. She approached her desk and pulled open one of its
drawers, moving magazine clippings and spare fabric aside until she found what she was looking
for: a handmade and well-loved good luck charm she'd put together in middle school to get her
through yo-yo competitions. She tied the colorful beads around her wrist and smiled. Perfect.

One quick makeup application later, she stepped out into the hazy summer day and set off in the
direction of Nino's house. According to the address, he didn't live far: just a couple streets down
from the bakery, which Marinette silently thanked him for. As used to heels as she was, she didn't
feel like walking across Paris in them.

Her heart fluttered as she walked along, and she alternated between unstoppable smiles and
nervous sighs.

Adrien was Chat Noir. She'd spent her entire Monday going back through their emails from the
first to the last, looking for signs. The earliest ones were the most telling. Before Adrien had gone
full blown Chat Noir on her, he'd been much more reserved. Friendly, but distant. He'd been the
same way at the bakery the first couple of times he'd visited. Then once they'd fallen into the
routine of emailing each other, he'd started joking around more, loosening up, until Marinette had
the eyebrow-waggling tomcat delivering fresh professions of adoration to her inbox every morning.

She had to admit that she missed the professions of adoration, and not just because she was in love
with him. To her, they indicated a happier, more relaxed Chat Noir, and if the recent tone of his
emails were anything to go by, he hadn't been happy or relaxed in a while.

Marinette wanted him to feel better. She wanted to throw her arms around him and tell him how
much she cared for and appreciated him. She wanted to give him a kiss for every time he'd made
her smile.

Her phone chimed, indicating that she'd reached her destination. She looked up…

…and found herself staring at the front gate of an enormous mansion.

She checked her phone again. Hadn't Alya told her that Nino lived in an apartment building? With
Marinette's history of mixing numbers up in email addresses, it was entirely possible that she'd
gotten this one wrong, too.

"Marinette?"

Or, she thought as her heart jumped into her throat, it was entirely possible that she'd been set up.

She turned around. Adrien stood a few feet away, still in his work clothes. Marinette's eyes roamed
over the suit, the tie, and the shoes, then skipped back up to his face. Chat Noir's face. Chat Noir's
stupendously handsome, chiseled, supermodel face, complete with glowing sun hair, glittering
green eyes, and utterly kissable mouth. She pointed at the gate. "Is this Nino's house?"

"No," Adrien said slowly, "it's mine."

Marinette looked back over her shoulder at the mansion, its wrought iron gate and imposing walls
and numerous windows and close-up view of the Eiffel Tower. She smacked her forehead. "I'm
going to kill Alya," she said.

"She sent you here instead of Nino's place?" Adrien guessed.
Marinette nodded, but then realized her best friend's attempts to hook her up with Adrien may have been too transparent, and backtracked. "She must be trying to keep me from showing up to the party early."

Adrien chuckled and darted an adorably nervous glance at the mansion. "Well, in that case, would you like to, uh, come in for a while?"

Marinette's eyes widened. "I-In there?" she asked, pointing at the mansion again.

"I'm just going to change my clothes. Unless you don't mind me showing up to your party in my birthday suit," Adrien said. He froze. His smile fell and the color in his cheeks rose simultaneously. "I mean the suit I'm wearing. Not naked. Why would I come to your birthday party naked?" He coughed. "You know what? That was a stupid joke. Would you like to wait inside while I change so that I can escort you to the proper party location?"

Marinette couldn't help herself: she burst out laughing. Adrien was Chat Noir. Adrien could not have been more Chat Noir if he tried. And the fact that his face had grown even redder just made her laugh harder.

"Okay, it wasn't that funny," he said, but she could tell he was trying not to laugh, too.

Marinette contained her giggles and wiped a tear from her eye. "Sorry. If the offer still stands, I'll wait inside. It's hot out here and I don't think my shoulders need any more freckles."

Adrien's gaze slid from her face downwards, then immediately shifted to the gate. "Right," he said. "I'll just..." He walked up beside her and punched a code into the keypad on the wall. The gate swung open noiselessly. He gestured towards the house. "After you."

Marinette pinched the sides of her skirt, dipped into a curtsy, then walked ahead of Adrien and through the front gate. She tried not to gawk at the paved walkway that led up to a small flight of stairs which in turn led to the front door. "Nice place you got here," she said.

Adrien, who'd caught up to her side, looked embarrassed. "It's alright."

"Makes me wonder why we're having the party at Nino's place when we could have had it in this gargantuan mansion with no less than fifty of my closest friends."

Now it was his turn to snort. "I would have offered, but my father isn't the type to host parties... or approve of parties being hosted in his home," he said. "And seeing as I'm trying to make nice with him, any arguments at this critical stage in our development could have set us back a decade." His smile turned playful. "Otherwise, I'd have been more than happy to throw you a party, fake ex-girlfriend."

Marinette barely held in a swoon. Curse that charm of his. "You are so sweet," she said.

They walked up the stairs and Marinette stood back as Adrien withdrew his housekey and unlocked one of the massive front doors. Once again, he motioned for her to go in ahead of him, and once again she slid past him and had to make a concentrated effort to keep her face from going slack.

The inside of the mansion was all black and white, marble and steel. An intricate black design decorated the floor of the foyer, and beyond that spanned a wide staircase beside which stood a waiting area—an actual waiting area. But what caught Marinette's eye was the portrait hanging above the staircase's first landing: a younger Adrien standing beside his father, both dressed in black, unsmiling.
Adrien took two steps forward before he noticed Marinette wasn't following him. He looked at her, then followed her gaze to the portrait. "Ignore that," he said, "we're getting rid of it."

"Okay," Marinette said, hoping she didn't sound as intimidated as she felt. Because it had suddenly dawned on her that she was not only in Adrien-slash-Chat Noir's house, but in Gabriel Agreste's house as well, and she'd been admiring Gabriel Agreste's work since the age of ten.

"My room is this way," Adrien narrated as he resumed walking and Marinette scampered after him. "That door on the left is Nathalie's office. She should be in there. The dining hall and kitchen are that way. The garage is that way. And I think we have a laundry room somewhere but I've never actually seen it."

Marinette stared at him. "Really?"

Adrien laughed. "No. Don't be so gullible, Marinette."

She shoved him. "You said it with such a straight face!" she cried. They walked up the staircase together and veered right at the landing. "Do you have a waiting area up here, too?" she asked, and had the pleasure of watching the tips of his ears turn red.

"Nope. Just my bedroom."

"Ah, just your… oh." Marinette felt her heart wedge itself in her throat. She had no doubt it would dive out of her mouth the next time she opened it, so she pressed her lips together and said nothing instead.

Adrien stood in front of a black door decorated with a silver sunburst. "I would like to preface this with a disclaimer. None of what you are about to see was my idea." He paused. "Except the foosball table."

"Where exactly are you taking me?" Marinette asked.

Adrien gave her a solemn look, then held the door open for her. She squinted against a ridiculous amount of sunlight as she walked into the room, blinked to clear her vision, then gasped.

The bedroom was two stories high, one wall comprised of nothing but windows. A bookcase towered before her, so tall that it had its own ladder. In the center of the room, a white couch faced a seventy-inch television, and beyond that was the foosball table Adrien had mentioned in his disclaimer. Marinette turned slowly, spotting a luxurious bed, a workspace with three identical computer monitors lined up beneath a larger fourth, a display case full of fencing and basketball trophies, a walk-in closet, and a spiral staircase that wound up to the second level of the room, which housed even more bookcases.

She looked at Adrien, who rubbed the back of his neck and seemed to be trying to see the room through her eyes. He cleared his throat. "If you think this is bad, you should have seen it when there was a skate ramp, a basketball hoop, a rock climbing wall, and a zip line in here."

Marinette didn't even try to close her mouth.

Adrien's hand dropped to his side. "I'll just… be over there. Getting dressed. Why don't you have a seat on the couch? Do you want anything? A drink? Fresh fruit? Complimentary gift basket?"

"I'm fine," Marinette said, a little too loudly. She fiddled with her purse. "This is a very nice room."

"Thanks." Adrien reached up to undo his tie. "Uh, make yourself at home. Plagg is around here
somewhere, though he might be with my father, so…” He shrugged and walked off in the direction of the closet, leaving Marinette to stare unabashedly at the proud display of wealth surrounding her.

Without Adrien there to ease the tension—or make it worse—she wasn’t sure what to do with herself. Did she sit on the couch? That sounded logical enough. If she sat at his desk he'd think she meant to pry into his business, and if she sat on his bed he’d think she meant to seduce him. Which she did. At some point. Eventually. Maybe? But right now the only thing that appealed to her was regaining her composure and not acting like she’d never been in a fancy house before.

Because she had been in fancy houses before. They just never belonged to anyone she knew personally.

Marinette ambled towards the couch, dress swishing around her thighs, her eyes still soaking in the bedroom and all its furnishings. Chat Noir lived here. These were Chat Noir's belongings: top of the line, cutting edge, pristine, tasteful.

She never would have put the two together.

In her mind, Chat Noir lived in a small apartment that he barely spent time in. He fell asleep on the couch sometimes with Plagg curled up on his chest. He left clothes on the floor and his bathroom mirror was splattered with toothpaste and shaving cream. He had a small stack of books piled on the coffee table, one of them a book of poems. Romantic and a little hopeless.

Marinette veered away from the couch and walked toward the towering bookcase instead. She plucked Chat Noir out of the dingy bachelor pad of her imagination and placed him in Adrien's room. She pictured the unsmiling boy in the portrait hanging in the mansion's foyer. Homeschooled. Isolated. Growing up in the public eye with a famous father. She scanned the books on the shelves and placed them in his hands: Chinese textbooks, literature, comics, business manuals. She lingered on one book titled *Healing After Loss* and adjusted the Chat Noir in her head further: a grieving teenager with no one to talk to, surrounded by everything he could ever want and nothing he truly needed.

Sending cat puns to a stranger on the internet suddenly made a lot more sense.

Marinette used her relationship with Chat Noir as an escape from rejection, pity, and the reality that her life had been thrown completely off course. But Adrien used his relationship with Ladybug to be somebody he couldn't be in public. Someone who could say exactly what he felt. Someone who was allowed to complain without being told he didn't have the right.

Marinette moved away from the bookcase, determined to stop prying. But before she could reach the couch, her gaze snagged on a spot of red in the otherwise black, white, and gray room. She listened for Adrien's footsteps. Nothing but the sound of running water—had he snuck into the shower while she'd had her back turned? She approached his bed, keeping enough distance from the mattress to ward off inappropriate fantasies that she could have had at home.

On the bedside table, next to a faded globe dotted with pushpins, was an envelope. *The* envelope. She picked it up, sweeping her thumb across the *Chat Noir* that she’d painstakingly written in her best calligraphy. The envelope showed no sign of tearing; Adrien had opened it with care. He’d left it somewhere he could see it the moment he woke up in the morning.

And it struck her, in a dizzying moment of clarity, that Adrien loved Ladybug. He *loved* her. The compliments and the showboating and the declarations weren't just parts of the online persona he'd crafted, they were his honest feelings.
You made me feel like my stupid parody of a life is worth living.

Marinette’s eyes filled with tears.

I hate that I can’t be anything for you other than a bunch of well-meaning words from some stranger on the internet.

She put the envelope back in its place and caught her tears before they smeared her mascara.

If I had to leave the country… I wouldn’t step one foot into an airport if you weren’t right there next to me.

She got a firm grip on her emotions and turned around.

A fluffy black cat stood by the door, staring at her with wide green eyes.

The grin that took over Marinette's face could have startled a serial killer. "Plagg!" she breathed.

Plagg inched his nose forward and smelled her from a safe distance, then opened his mouth and let out the whiniest meow she'd ever heard. No wonder Adrien always talked about him complaining.

Marinette took one cautious step towards Plagg. She knew how skittish most cats were, but he stood his ground and raised his tail like a mailbox flag. Marinette held her hand out for him to sniff. "Hi baby!" she whispered.

Plagg thoroughly examined her hand before pushing his head up into it. Marinette crouched down and rubbed behind his ears, then down his back, her heart swelling at the sound of his purr. "Oh my gosh, you are too cute," she cooed, and scratched his chin with her other hand. "I'm Adrien's friend, Ladybug," she whispered, "but you can't tell him that, okay?" Plagg's only response was to angle his head towards her for more petting. "Can I hold you?" Marinette asked, already sliding her hands under him. But Plagg squirmed out of her grasp before she could lift him off the ground, scampered a few feet away, and shook himself off. "Okay," Marinette said, "no holding. We're not at that level of friendship yet. Got it."

Plagg sat down and stared at her. Marinette, still crouched at his level, wrapped her arms around her knees and tilted her head. "For the record, I'm on your side. I've been trying to convince him to give you some cheese for months now. It's not my fault he's such a responsible parent."

The bathroom door opened and Plagg immediately ditched Marinette to go whine at Adrien, who'd changed into a more casual outfit of jeans and a dress shirt, yet still managed to look like he belonged on a yacht in the Mediterranean.

"What is it?" Adrien asked Plagg, who meowed and shook his tail in response. "Did you say hi to Marinette? I hope you aren't being mean to her." He stooped over, picked Plagg up, and tucked him under his arm before looking at Marinette. "Is he bullying you?"

She stood up. "Uh, no?"

Adrien nodded, satisfied, and carried Plagg over to her. "I like to pretend he gets upset when I don't tell him people are coming over, but his little peanut brain is probably just thinking of food." He kissed the top of Plagg's head. "We have to control his portions or he'll get fat, isn't that right, buddy?"

Marinette giggled and stroked Plagg behind the ears to distract herself from the fresh-out-the-shower supermodel standing within kissing range. The deliciously spicy cologne scent that came
off him did not help. "How would you be able to tell he's fat under all that fur?" she asked.

Adrien's eyes met hers. "Well, if he's too heavy to tote around like this, he might be fat."

Marinette's breath caught in her throat. It really was unfair. He wasn't supposed to be prettier than her. He wasn't supposed to be a gorgeous man who lined the insides of his smile with sorrow and loved her so much that he kept her letters by his bedside and swore he wouldn't leave the country without her, even though he'd never seen her before.

She thought that meeting him in person would calm the tempest in her heart, but now that she had the whole picture, she loved him more. Impossibly more. She'd tried to fall in love with someone else and had ended up right back in his arms.

*I'm Ladybug,* she thought as they continued to stare at each other for two heartbeats too long. *Look at me,* chaton. *I'm right here."

But Plagg apparently decided he'd had enough and began squirming to be put down. Adrien blinked, then leaned over and set him on the floor. "Sorry, buddy. I'll get you some food in a second," he said. He looked down at his fur-covered shirt. "Right after I find the lint roller."

"We should get going," Marinette said as Adrien rummaged in his desk drawer. "Alya and Nino are probably imagining all kinds of things happening between us."

Adrien swept a lint roller over his shirt with practiced efficiency. "Wouldn't want them getting the wrong idea." He winked at her. "It'll be more confusing for them when you start dating someone else, right?"

Marinette did her best not to flinch as his words cut into her chest. "Right."

She could tell him. It was the perfect time: the two of them in his room, alone together, their best friends already expecting them to show up late to the party. All she had to say was *it's me, Chat Noir* and watch the sun rise in his eyes...

Someone knocked on the door. A moment later, Gabriel Agreste walked into the room. "Adrien, are you—oh."

Marinette's mouth ran dry.

Caught in Adrien's bedroom by her number one fashion idol, who also happened to be his father. And the room smelled unmistakably humid from a recent shower. *And* she was dressed like a present.

It had been weeks since she'd last prayed to get struck by lightning, but now would have been an excellent time to die any of the quick deaths she'd envisioned for herself.

A blur of black fur streaked past her as Plagg ran over to greet Gabriel by wrapping himself around his legs. Gabriel acknowledged the cat with a glance before his eyes returned to Marinette, but by then, Adrien stood beside her again.

"I was just on my way out," he said. He placed a reassuring hand between Marinette's shoulder blades and guided her forward, which was kind of him, considering she couldn't have moved on her own if she tried. "Father, this is my friend, Marinette Dupain-Cheng."

"The baker," Gabriel said, but his gaze was fixed squarely on Marinette's outfit. He held his hand out to her. "My son has told me much about you."
Marinette recovered from her shock, channeled the spirit of the business owner, and gave Gabriel her firmest handshake. "It's an honor to meet you," she said. "I'm a huge fan of your work."

"Marinette's a designer," Adrien chimed in from somewhere over her shoulder.

"I see that," Gabriel said, his gaze returning to her ensemble and lingering on her good luck charm. "You have a keen eye, Ms. Dupain-Cheng, and skilled hands."

Marinette almost asked Adrien to pinch her to make sure she wasn't dreaming. "Thank you, Monsieur Agreste."

"We're heading over to Nino's for the afternoon. Did you need something from me?" Adrien asked his father.

"Colette called. She needs your signature on some paperwork, preferably before the end of the day. Ask Nathalie for it when you return. She'll fax it right over," Gabriel said. He nodded at Marinette. "It was nice meeting you."

He left the room with Plagg on his heels. Marinette turned around and grabbed Adrien's arm, trying to speak and only managing a cross between a whimper and a squeak.

"Do I need to carry you to Nino's?" he asked.

"N-No, I'll manage." Her legs may have felt like pudding, but if Adrien carried her anywhere the rest of her body would turn into mush as well. So she settled for holding onto his arm as they walked out of the room and down the stairs to the entryway. But she didn't let go of his arm once they were outside, and he didn't try to take it back from her. They stepped out into the hazy day together, looking for all the world like a happy couple.

X.X.X

While Nino did not live in a mansion, he did live in a gorgeous studio apartment with a loft, tall ceilings, and a state of the art sound system. Alya waved at Marinette from the couch, which was set up in front of a large entertainment console. "What took you guys so long?" she crowed.

Marinette blushed, but Adrien jumped in to provide an excuse. "It was my fault. I decided to walk to work today without checking the weather first and ended up sweating through my suit," he said. "Couldn't turn up at a party like that, could I?"

Marinette said hi to Nino and complimented his apartment, then walked over to the couch and sat beside Alya, smoothing down her dress skirt. Alya shot a glance towards the kitchen. "Did you tell him?" she whispered.

"No," Marinette whispered back. "His father interrupted us. But," Marinette said with a huge smile, "I got complimented by Gabriel Agreste, so it wasn't a total loss." She still hadn't come down from cloud nine about that. Her favorite designer thought she had a keen eye and skilled hands. Never mind that he also probably thought she'd slept with his son in broad daylight. "And Adrien has the letter I wrote Chat Noir last week, so he's definitely him."

"What are you guys whispering about over there?" Nino asked.

Marinette looked over her shoulder and smiled. "I was just telling Alya she ought to reapply her lipstick so it won't be totally obvious that you two were making out."

Adrien snorted and covered his mouth with his hand. Nino's cheeks darkened considerably. Alya
wiped the bottom of her lip with her finger.

"Anyway," Nino said, "we gave a lot of thought to what sort of entertainment we could provide the birthday girl with. Alya told me you're a fan of terrible movies."

Marinette nodded. "I am a fan of terrible movies. Especially the ones with really bad special effects."

Nino picked up a small remote from the kitchen counter. "Then you are going to love my movie collection." He pressed a button and the entertainment console's cabinets slid open, revealing row upon row of classic horror films, black-and-white science fiction, and the entire collection of The Twilight Zone.

"Nino went through a filmmaking phase a few years ago," Adrien said as Marinette abandoned the couch to get up close and personal with the movies.

She didn't know where to begin. There were so many she'd seen, but just as many that she hadn't seen. She even found the one she'd forced Chat Noir to sit through: The Horrificator.

A devious idea struck Marinette. She plucked the movie off the shelf and held it over her head. "Can we watch this one?"

"No!" Adrien cried at the same time Alya and Nino said, "Sure."

"Is there something wrong with it?" Marinette asked innocently.

"Yeah," Adrien said, "that movie sucks."

"That's kind of the point, dude," Nino said, then gave him a look that even Marinette could interpret: You want to put aside your preferences and make the girl you like happy, don't you?

She turned back to the console with an impish grin. If Chat Noir couldn't let go of her love for The Horrificator, then she'd just have to make him watch it again. That ought to teach him a lesson.

While Nino and Adrien brought over the food, Marinette caught Alya up to speed on the movie situation. Alya laughed out loud. "You are evil, and I am so proud," she whispered.

"I learned from the best," Marinette said. "Which reminds me..." She pinched the skin of Alya's elbow. "You sent me to Adrien's house?" she hissed.

"I was doing you a favor!" Alya hissed back. "And I'm about to do you another one." Then, before Marinette could question her, she jumped up from the sofa and squeezed into a recliner with Nino right as Adrien sat on the couch beside Marinette. Marinette glared at her. Payback's a bitch, Alya mouthed.

"First a zombie movie and now this," Adrien said as the copyright warnings played on the television screen. "I'm starting to think you and I have vastly different tastes in films."

The innocence returned to Marinette's voice. "I like Disney movies, too."

"Everyone likes Disney movies," Adrien grumbled. "They're well-made, fun, and their monsters have backstories that make sense."

She giggled and grabbed a slice of homemade pizza. Forget the movie, watching him sulk through the whole thing would be far more entertaining than high school kids being encased in pink goo.
But as *The Horrificator* played on and Adrien only seemed exhausted by the terrible acting, the stilted dialogue, and the unimpressive monster, Marinette had a change of heart. She did love him, after all. He should have been having fun on her birthday, too. So she excused herself to the kitchen to grab a drink and, keeping her cell phone out of sight, she opened her email inbox.

x.x.x

*Ladybug*

*RE: Summer*

*Just now*

*CHAT NOOOOOOOOOOOOIR!!*

*Hi. :-D*

*I missed you.*

*But I'm back now, so feel free to hit me with every pun you've come up with in my absence.*

x.x.x

When Marinette returned from the kitchen with her drink, Adrien's sour expression had been replaced by a warm, barely concealed smile.

Chapter End Notes

Chloe's in love with Nino, but if you've been visiting my Tumblr (geek-fashionista), you knew that already. You will have also seen all the lovely fan art being done for this story! Please, if you haven't dropped by, come browse my Lucky Us tag so you can get in on the fun too. :D
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

In which there is much correspondence.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After a marathon of hilariously bad movies, one too many drinks for Alya, and several slices of delicious cake devoured while listening to some of Nino's works in progress, Marinette's party wound to a close. She offered to help clean up, but everyone protested.


Adrien, who'd had at least two drinks himself, saluted her. "Yes, Captain!"

Marinette shook her head. Even inebriated, Alya couldn't stop trying to get her and Adrien alone together. She thought about retaliating, but decided that being hungover at work the next day would be punishment enough for her best friend. So she thanked Nino again, accepted a clumsy hug from Alya that lasted twenty seconds longer than it needed to and included a miniature speech about how much she loved and appreciated her, then followed Adrien out of the apartment.

Once on the street, Adrien struck up a jaunty whistle. Marinette looked up at him. "You're in a good mood," she observed.

"Who, me?" Adrien grinned. "Of course I am! There's nothing better than spending the day with friends."

"You sure it has nothing to do with the alcohol?"

"Alcohol is a depressant. The only thing it'd make me do is drag my feet and talk like my tongue is swollen. Besides, I didn't have that much." Adrien leaned in closer to her. "You want to hear a secret?"

Marinette's eyes widened. A secret? What kind of secret? A big secret? Had he somehow figured her identity out by the timing of her email? Was he going to confess to her, right here and now? She nodded, her heart beating faster.

"I can't whistle when I'm drunk," Adrien said.

Marinette deflated. So much for figuring her out. "You can't?"

"Nope. Chloe thinks it's the funniest thing in the world." He shook his head. "I pucker my lips and blow but nothing comes out. Except for air. And a little bit of saliva. It's very attractive."

Marinette giggled. "I bet." They stopped on a street corner and waited for the traffic signal to change. "There's a fuzzy memory in my head of one of your drunken exploits. Something that was
all over the tabloids. I think it had to do with a prince?"

Adrien let out a weak chuckle and scuffed the pavement with his shoe. "Yeah, I convinced the visiting Prince Ali to slide down a fire escape with a mixing bowl on his head and nearly caused an international incident," he said. "There are times when being best friends with the mayor's daughter comes in handy... for things like staying out of prison." The signal changed and they stepped out onto the street. "Prince Ali had fun, though. He and I keep in touch."

"Well darn, that beats every single one of my drunk stories," Marinette said.

"As entertaining as it was, it's not something I'm proud of." Adrien stared at the ground as they walked. "I did most of those stupid things because I wanted to get back at my father. I'd spent so many years being a dutiful son, staying on my best behavior, never causing a scene so I wouldn't make him or the company look bad. And when that did nothing to improve our relationship, I snapped." He paused. "Sorry, I didn't mean to dump all of that on you."

Marinette held up her hands. "It's okay. If you want to talk about it, I'd like to hear about it."

Adrien gazed at her for just long enough to make her heart race again, then smiled and looked ahead. "I started out big. Those drunken nights of debauchery with Chloe—"

"And Prince Ali."

"And Prince Ali, yes," he said. "Then something terrible happened that made me reconsider pulling dangerous stunts to get my father's attention, so I made stupid decisions with women instead."

"What was that supermodel's name?" Marinette asked. When Adrien's eyebrows went up in surprise, she shrugged. "Alya was interning at Zag Weekly back then. She fed me all the gossip." She smirked. "I wasn't one of those fangirls who kept up with everything you did, if that's what you're thinking." Which was true; before Adrien walked into the bakery the previous year, he'd barely been on her radar. Just another privileged rich kid blowing his fortune and making bad choices.

Adrien rubbed the back of his neck. "I wasn't thinking that," he said, though his tone suggested otherwise. "Anyway, Renée Leroux. She was very... long."

"Long?"

"Her face, her hair, her torso, her legs. It was like being in bed with Slenderman."

Marinette stifled a laugh. "That is so mean!"

"I'm not saying it to be mean," Adrien cried. "The first word that popped into my head was 'spider' and that would have been even meaner, so I went for Slenderman instead. In any case, I appreciated her spindly limbs at the time. But... our relationship had no substance." The sadness returned to his smile, tempting Marinette to smooth it away. "We were just two cold people trying to get warm," he said.

Marinette imagined taking his hands, rubbing them between hers, blowing warm air on his fingers—because if he needed heat, she had plenty to give. But she kept her hand at her side, swinging not one foot away from his. A little bit closer and her knuckles might have grazed his, and her pinky may have snuck out and wrapped itself around his pinky, and he might have taken a chance and slipped his hand into hers, and she might have threaded their fingers together...

"But you don't do that kind of stuff anymore," she said.
"I don't," Adrien replied. "It accomplished nothing and didn't do me any good. Besides, my father and I are finally talking things out."

"Yeah?"

"He asked me what my plans were after the design competition."

Marinette's eyes widened. "That's great!" she cried. "What did you tell him?"

"I said I didn't know." They rounded a street corner and the bakery came into view. She almost regretted living so close, even though her feet throbbed in her heels with every step. "The design competition is the busiest I've been in a long time," Adrien said. "It's interesting work, and I'm not bad at it, but I doubt I could keep it up the way my father does."

"You didn't bring up the teaching thing?"

He shook his head. "I'll wait and see how things play out over the next couple of weeks before I break it to him. He knows I'm tired of modeling, but I think he still hopes I'll take interest in the label and run the business side."

"You'd get to wear a suit and tie every day," Marinette said.

"Yeah, and I'll make all my friends call me Monsieur Agreste."

"Did you get my text, Monsieur Agreste?" she asked in a playful tone.

Adrien straightened, slipped his hands behind his back and did a frighteningly good impression of his father's severe expression. "Why yes, it was quite humorous. I believe the colloquial term is l-o-l."

Marinette snorted. "Okay, you do that a little too well."

"I've had years of practice," Adrien said with a mischievous smile that suited him far better than the stern look.

*It brings out the Chat Noir in him*, Marinette thought, and felt the giddiness of knowing who he was all over again. As they approached the bakery, she realized that she had the perfect chance to tell him who she was. Her palms began to sweat. She couldn't keep the secret forever. She didn't want to. Why not tell him now that she had him alone?

They reached the alley door. Marinette pulled her housekey out of her purse, took a deep breath, and turned to face Adrien. His smile perked up a bit. Damn it, did he have to look at her like that? "W-Would you like to come in?" she asked before her courage could fail her.

Adrien's brows drew together. "Any other time, I would," he said, "but I have to get back to the house. Tomorrow's a busy day and my secretary needs those papers signed."

Marinette mentally kicked herself. She'd forgotten about the papers. "Right."

For a moment, he looked like he might decide to come in anyway. Marinette willed him to come in anyway. She'd offer him a Ladybug special. But then Adrien took a step back, as if he needed the distance to resist the temptation of her offer, and Marinette had to hide her disappointment. "Did you have a fun day?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, "it was a great birthday. Thank you, and Nino, and Alya. I really appreciate it."
Adrien bowed at the waist. "Well, if ever you are in need of a good time, I am more than happy to entertain you."

He laid the innuendo on so thick that Marinette stood waiting for him to sprout cat ears and a tail. But he merely wished her a good evening and set off down the alley with that same jaunty whistle. Marinette rolled her eyes, unlocked the bakery door, and went inside.

Not even two minutes later, her phone chimed.

x.x.x

*Chat Noir*
RE: Summer
Just now

*How did you do it?*

x.x.x

*Ladybug*
RE: Summer
Just now

*Umm... how did I do what?*

x.x.x

*Chat Noir*
RE: Summer
Just now

*How did you infect the girl I like with your horrible taste in movies? Tell me your secrets so that I can make you pay for your sins!*

x.x.x

*Ladybug*
RE: Summer
Just now

*I don't know, Chat Noir.*

*Maybe you just have horrible taste in women. :-P*

x.x.x

*Chat Noir*
RE: Summer
Just now

*LIES. LIES AND SLANDER.*

*APOLOGIZE, VILLAIN.*

x.x.x
Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

You’d think I would remember how much of a dork you are when I go a while without talking to you.

Am I setting my expectations too high?

Looking back on our emails through the rose-tinted lenses of nostalgia…?

(I appreciate your silliness, chaton.)

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

I know you do, buginette.

So what have you been up to?

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

Oh, you know, stuff.

There were some things that required my undivided attention.

How about you?

Did you score with your cute acquaintance?

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

"Score" is such a rude term. Why would you use "score" when there are so many nicer words? "Did you successfully romance your cute acquaintance? Did you woo her? Did you sweep her off her feet?"

The answer is no on all accounts.

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

Bummer.
Adrien woke up in the middle of the night.

He checked the time on his phone: two in the morning. He rolled over and went back to sleep…

…and woke up in darkness.

He checked the time. 3:47. He went back to sleep.

And woke up at 5:12.

"Okay, I give up," he groaned.

Adrien slid out of bed—gently so as not to disturb Plagg—and walked into his bathroom. There would be no restful sleep on Announcement Day. Even though he wasn't the one being judged, he still felt semi-queasy. He showered, shaved, brushed his teeth, combed his hair, then spent ten minutes trying to decide on the best suit for the occasion and wishing he'd consulted Chloe on Monday. Or Marinette the day before.

He surprised the kitchen staff by appearing in the kitchen well before seven. "Don't worry," he said, "I'll get my own food."

Then he stared at a bowl of fruit for a full minute before someone recommended an apple, for which he shot them a grateful look.

Adrien's restlessness wouldn't let him sit and eat, so he wandered the mansion. Nathalie's empty office stood bare of most decorations, but on her desk he discovered a few keepsakes: a crystal butterfly paperweight his father had given her for Christmas a while back, a desktop calendar of Monet paintings, a framed photograph of Nathalie's brother with his wife and son, and another framed photograph of a much younger Adrien beaming between his smiling parents with Nathalie and the Gorilla on either side of them. A sticky note on the corner of her computer monitor read "Reminder—girls' night with Colette, Sept. 2nd."

Adrien moved on to his father's office. Framed photos from Adrien's past model shoots occupied one wall. Behind a large desk hung a painting of the late Mrs. Agreste, dressed in and surrounded by gold.

"You're up early."

Adrien turned. His father stood in the doorway, fully dressed and neat as a pin despite the hour.

"I couldn't sleep much," he confessed.

Gabriel considered his words, then nodded. "You are apprehensive about this afternoon. Don't be. The only judge who should give you any trouble is De La Cruz, and the best way to put an end to his tantrums is to ask him how his horse Bonita is doing," he said with a smile that bordered on sinister.

Adrien wondered, not for the first time, whether his father was a fashion designer or some kind of mafia boss. "Okay," he said slowly. "I was more worried about the people who entered. There's going to be a lot of brokenhearted designers out there today."

"Ah." Gabriel straightened. "You should not concern yourself over that. They knew what they were getting themselves into when they entered this competition. Any designer worth their salt would
have developed a backup plan to keep their career moving forward in the event that they did not advance.” He raised an eyebrow. "The fashion industry is a never-ending competition. You compete against your fellow designers to see who sets the trends. It certainly isn't all there is to it, but it is a major component of it, and an aspiring designer who cannot bounce back from a loss will not make it far in this line of work."

"You know, I think if I hadn't been your son, I never would have guessed how scary the fashion industry is," Adrien said.

A hint of a smile touched the corner of Gabriel's mouth. "Well, I am glad that you are my son," he said.

Adrien knew that. He'd always known that. But he couldn't stop the grin that overtook his face anyway.

When he left his father's office, he dumped his apple core in the nearest trash bin and took his phone out of his pocket. Almost 6:30. He opened his inbox and pulled up Ladybug's email thread. They'd stayed up late talking to each other the night before, catching up on what little noteworthy information they could share—namely, Adrien's love life and the amusement Ladybug derived from it.

He'd taken the opportunity to ask her about the guy she'd been crushing on a while back: Mr. Impossibly Handsome and Out of Her League. She'd cryptically replied that he wasn't as out of her league as she thought.

Adrien sighed. It had nothing to do with him. He had feelings for Marinette. He'd chosen to pursue Marinette. She just happened to be in love with someone else, and any day now she'd act on that love and that would be the end of that.

He'd almost told her the day before. In his room. With her standing so close, looking up at him with those wide blue eyes like she wanted something from him.

But perhaps he'd just imagined that.

\[x.x.x\]

**Chat Noir**

*RE: Summer*

2 hours ago

*Good morning, buginette! I got little sleep last night and today is scheduled to be exhausting, so if you're in a generous mood and feel like buying me another coffee, this bag of bones (and fur) would greatly appreciate it.*

\[x.x.x\]

Adrien entered the main conference room at Agreste HQ and fought back a scream. Sitting around the large oval-shaped table were ten assistants of all sizes and nationalities whose blank expressions mirrored Nathalie's. Each assistant held a tablet on which the faces of the guest judges were displayed in varying states of emotion. Some already appeared to be bickering with each other.

Adrien recognized most of the designers from previous competitions, fashion weeks, and other social events. He approached the table, keeping in mind that he was his father's son and should therefore be able to handle a group chat with the most powerful names in the industry.
"—stole the design from me and everyone here knows it!"

Or not.

A silver-haired woman wearing dramatic makeup, who Adrien knew simply as Cristine, leaned back in her office chair with a smirk. "It's not my fault you can't help boasting after a few glasses of wine, De La Cruz," she said. "Maybe next time you won't try to seduce one of your competitors."

"Bambini, please," the Italian Gianmarco Leuzzi cut in, "why don't we all hold our tongues and let our chosen do the fighting?"

"I'm confident that my pick will outclass the rest of yours, seeing as I have the best taste at this table," an American designer named Edgar Ills said, then graced Adrien with a look. "No offense to your father."

Adrien lowered himself into the chair at the head of the table. He'd always wondered how his father had gotten a group of designers who hated each other to work together on his design competition, and now he knew: he'd sold it to them as yet another way to compete over who had the better eye.

"Adrien, you look fantastic. It's like staring into the past and seeing Gabriel in his early years," the elderly French designer Madame Gusteau said from her tablet screen.

"Thank you," Adrien said, because he didn't know what else to say.

"Both of you, always kissing up. It's disgusting!" De La Cruz shouted.

"Oh, shut up already. Let the boy speak," Leuzzi said, and the table fell silent.

Adrien took a deep breath and summoned Chloe's mantra to the front of his mind. Gorgeous and in charge. Gorgeous and in charge. "On behalf of my father, I thank you all for your contributions to this year's competition. He greatly values your input and trusts in your knowledge and experience."

Adrien heard what sounded like an "of course he does" from the general direction of Edgar Ills.

"He invites all of you to the competition's finale next weekend so that he may deliver his thanks in person," Adrien said. He took a deep breath to steady his nerves. "So without further ado, please present your chosen finalists."

He fought back another scream when the assistants, in one synchronized movement, produced envelopes from behind their tablets and passed them forward. The designers began to chatter and take verbal swipes at each other again, but Adrien heard none of it. His entire focus zeroed in on the ten envelopes that Colette leaned forward to collect.

Adrien watched her open each envelope, read from the paper inside, then type something into her tablet before moving to the next. His mouth went dry as the number of envelopes in the pile diminished until none were left. He drummed his fingers on the table impatiently as Colette turned and tapped on her tablet a few more times.

Then the large viewing screen at the head of the conference room flickered to life, and ten names appeared under ten designs.

Adrien exhaled forcefully.

*Marinette Dupain-Cheng.*

There she was, along with her design for an outfit that took inspiration from both traditional French and Chinese clothing, on display for the greatest designers of the world to see.

"…dreadful taste, as usual."

"I've got this one in the bag."

"Shall we place a friendly wager on that, Edgar?"

Adrien tuned the judges out and stood from his chair. "Colette, send the names to our web team and have them email the finalists," he said with a smile. "We'll drop the official announcement at noon."

X.X.X

designcompetitionatbutterfly
*Competition Finalist*
29 minutes ago

*Dear Ms. Dupain-Cheng,*

*We are pleased to announce that you have been selected as a finalist…*

X.X.X

Alya Cesaire: IS THIS EMAIL THAT YOU FORWARDED ME WHAT I THINK IT IS

Alya Cesaire: MARINETTE OH MY GOD

Alya Cesaire: I AM UGLY CRYING AT MY DESK RIGHT NOW

Alya Cesaire: I AM TOO HUNGOVER TO BE CRYING LIKE THIS

Alya Cesaire: I SENT IT TO MOM AND NOW SHE'S CRYING TOO

X.X.X

Manon Chamack: I'M SSCWEREAMING MARINETTE YEEEEEES

X.X.X

Nathanael Kurtzberg: You did it, Mari!

X.X.X

Nino Lahiffe: Yo! Congrats, Marinette!

X.X.X

Adrien Agreste: Congratulations, Marinette. I knew you could do it. :)

X.X.X
Marinette hung up from a video chat with her parents and wiped her eyes. Her phone hadn't stopped vibrating since the announcement went live on Gabriel Agreste's website. She'd been in shock when she first forwarded the email to Alya, but when she told her parents the news and saw the joy on their faces, the shock wore off and her tear ducts went into overtime.

She grabbed her yo-yo and pulled up her internet browser, staring at the email again.

A finalist. She was a finalist. One of the most famous fashion designers in the world had singled her out among a crowd and decided she had what it took to win. And now everyone had their eyes on her, waiting to see what she would do next.

Marinette flicked her yo-yo out and pulled it back into her hand. Her heartrate hadn't been normal since the moment her sleep-crusted eyes landed on the email that morning. But now it sped up for a different reason.

She'd promised herself. No more hesitation. No more fear.

She took a screencap of the email, cropped out her name and everything but the congratulatory paragraph, then opened Chat Noir's good morning message and hit reply.

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now
Attachment: NotCoffee

No can do on the coffee.

Will you accept this image instead?

x.x.x

Adrien stopped walking in the middle of the hallway, causing Colette to almost collide with him.

"Are you all right, Monsieur Agreste?" she asked.

Adrien stared at his phone. At the image Ladybug had sent him. At the paragraph congratulating her on her advancement in the design competition. A message that only ten people had received that morning.

Ladybug was a finalist.

He immediately switched back from the email to his father's website, where the names of the finalists had been posted an hour earlier.


One of them was Ladybug.

But who?
My first short story, "Carter Lake," has been published over at Flash Bang Mysteries! Just type it into your Google search bar. You can read it for zero dollars and zero cents.

Come bother me on Tumbr (geek-fashionista)!
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

The final countdown begins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Ladybug. LADYBUG. LADYBUG.

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

I take it you accepted the image, then? :-) 

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

(THE SOUND OF ME BEING SPEECHLESS.)

x.x.x

If anyone at Agreste HQ expected Adrien to be productive, helpful, or even remotely present that day, he had terrible news for them. His brain flipped back and forth between the Ladybug and Marinette channels, rapidly and without cease, screaming at the top of its lungs.

Marinette was a finalist. Ladybug was a finalist. Both of them would be in that very building—standing in the very same room—the following afternoon.

He didn't know whether to laugh or to throw up.


Oh no.

Adrien closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He had to calm down. The spreadsheets in front of him made no sense. He needed them to make sense. But the Ladybug and Marinette channels in his brain had started to blur together and something was trying to break the surface and a panicky
feeling took hold of him because what if... what if...

What if Marinette was Ladybug?

No. She couldn't be. If Marinette was Ladybug, she would have had a stronger reaction to finding out about Plagg. She would have said something to Adrien in the bakery that day.

Adrien leaned back in his office chair, spreadsheets momentarily forgotten. He tapped his fingers against the desk.

Marinette wasn't Ladybug.

Was it wrong of him to be disappointed about that?

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
RE: Summer
Just now

*I have rendered Chat Noir speechless.*

*It is a momentous day.*

*I can't exactly tell what you're speechless about, though.*

*Is it disbelief that I've made the finals?*

*Or are you perhaps freaking out because now you know my name?*

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
RE: Summer
Just now

*All of the above, though I never once doubted your talent.*

*You have a beautiful name, Ladybug. (Even if I don't know which name it is.)*

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
RE: Summer
Just now

*Hmm...*

*Would you like a hint?*

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
RE: Summer
Just now
…would my Lady be so kind?

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

*RE: Summer*

*Just now*

*It has the letter A in it.*

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**

*RE: Summer*

*Just now*

*You're SO FUNNY. -.-*

x.x.x

When Adrien returned to the mansion that evening, he was a bit surprised to find Nathalie out in the foyer. She looked up from her tablet, and although her expressions seldom varied, Adrien had grown well-versed in the many moods of Nathalie Sancoeur over the years. This particularly flat expression raised a red flag in his mind. Something wasn't right.

"Your father wishes to speak with you," she said. "Immediately."

Adrien pointed at Nathalie's tablet. "Is he online?"

"He is in the dining room."

Something definitely wasn't right. His father should not have been home. Adrien muttered a weak thanks and turned towards the dining room. What could have caused his father to deviate from his schedule? Nothing short of a disaster would have made Gabriel change his plans. Had he fallen ill? Had somebody else fallen ill? Had Plagg fallen—

A whining meow from the other end of the foyer answered that question. Plagg emerged from a dark corner and rubbed up against Adrien's leg. Then he ran and stood in front of the dining room entrance, shaking his tail.

"What?" Adrien stepped around him. "You don't need my permission to come in here."

Plagg merely darted ahead and crawled under the table.

Gabriel sat at the head of it.

For all the progress they'd made in the last couple of days, Adrien still couldn't help feeling like a five-year-old whenever his father summoned him. He stood at the other end of the table, not sure whether he should sit there or pick a closer seat, or whether he should sit at all.

"You wanted to see me?" he asked.

Gabriel looked up from his tablet screen, and Adrien suddenly remembered how his mother would scold him for working at the table. A plate of food remained untouched beside his father's arm. He wondered how long it had been there.
"Yes," Gabriel said. He stared at Adrien for a moment without speaking, then took a deep breath. "We need to talk about the competition finalists."

Adrien felt a familiar wave of panic swell within him. He grabbed the nearest chair for support. "Should I be sitting down for this?" he asked.

"If you'd like." His father's tone remained neutral. Adrien pulled back the chair, making sure he didn't accidentally hit Plagg, and fell into it. Gabriel set his tablet aside. He folded his fingers together. "I see that your friend, Ms. Dupain-Cheng, made it into the top ten."

Adrien went on the defensive. "I had nothing to do with that."

"I know," Gabriel said. "I choose my judges carefully. They are not the type of people to be bribed, nor are you the type of person to bribe them. There is no doubt in my mind that Ms. Dupain-Cheng earned her spot in the finals."

"So what's the problem?" Adrien asked.

"You brought her to our house."

He wanted to argue that he hadn't, in fact, brought Marinette to the house. She'd been standing at the gate when he came home for lunch. But he had invited her inside. Any attempt at arguing would have made him sound as immature as he felt.

"And not only did she come into our house, but she met me in person." Gabriel sighed. "You know that I take care not to meet any of the entrants until the finalists have been chosen. We have those rules for a reason."

Adrien couldn't meet his eyes. "To prevent conflicts of interest," he said.

"Precisely."

He thought of Marinette, at home just a few streets away. She hadn't replied to his congratulatory text. He could only imagine how busy she must have been, preparing for the final round of the competition, making plans for her afternoon at Agreste HQ the next day. "Are you going to disqualify her?" he asked.

Because that would be wonderful, really, having to tell the girl he had feelings for how his lack of thought had robbed her of a shot at her dream.

"No."

Adrien lifted his head.

Gabriel removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "I have spent the day monitoring news and social media feeds. No one seems to have linked Ms. Dupain-Cheng back to you yet. But I would advise you not to make contact with her until after the competition ends. Any sign of partiality and both her reputation and ours could be in serious jeopardy."

Adrien stared at his father in disbelief. Just a few weeks ago, he would have disqualified Marinette in a heartbeat. But he'd taken time out of his schedule to make sure the situation didn't sour while Adrien was at work, to be available in case he had to defend his son. A smile almost found its way to his face. Almost.

"Wait," he said, "but I'm supposed to meet with the finalists tomorrow to go over the details of the
last round. How do I avoid Marinette then?"

"Simple. You're fired."

Adrien's jaw dropped.

Gabriel put his glasses back on. "Effective tomorrow, Nathalie will take over your duties as head of the competition. Have all your work submitted to her by morning." He gave Adrien a look that he would have interpreted as stern, had it not been for the slightly raised eyebrow which, for Gabriel Agreste, indicated amusement. "You must understand, Adrien, that I do not tolerate such careless mistakes from any of my employees. It would be unfair of me to treat you differently because you are my son." He leaned a bit closer to Adrien. "Therefore, I strongly recommend you start looking into alternative career paths. Is that clear?"

Adrien gawked at him.

"Do you understand what I am telling you?" Gabriel asked.

His father had fired him. Cut him loose. Set him free of his obligation. He'd essentially given Adrien his blessing to pursue a career outside of the family business by declaring him unqualified to work in the family business.

"I understand," Adrien said. "I made a careless mistake that could have tarnished your good name. It was my oversight, and I take full responsibility for it."

"That is very mature of you," Gabriel said.

Adrien stood up and gestured towards the doorway. "I'll just… go send Nathalie all that work, then. She's got a lot to catch up on." He looked under the table and found Plagg crouched near his father's feet, staring at him with wide eyes. "You coming or no?"

Plagg blinked at him.

"That's what I thought," Adrien said. He straightened up and walked to the dining hall entrance, hesitated, and turned back around. "Oh, and no business at the table, Dad. You know Mom hated that."

Gabriel's eyes widened. Adrien grinned at him. He snorted and picked up his dinner plate. "I suppose I should reheat this," he said.

Adrien shook his head and walked out of the dining room. Nathalie waited for him in the foyer, looking quite unrepentant about taking his job. Adrien knew that she knew how much his father's dismissal meant to him, and he almost hugged her for looking, in her own way, like she was more than happy to take the work off his hands.

But it wasn't until he sat at his computer desk gathering all the necessary files to send to Nathalie that a thought kicked him in the head:

If he was no longer in charge of the competition, he wouldn't have the security clearance to get near the contestants.

Which meant he wouldn't be able to see Ladybug until the competition finale.

Adrien lowered his head to his desk and thumped it against the surface. Repeatedly.
Marinette’s afternoon had been eventful, to say the least. Between teasing Chat Noir and receiving praise from everyone she knew—including people that she hadn't spoken to since high school—she'd responded to the competition email, touched up her final designs, ate two hasty meals, and then entertained half of her employees, who'd shown up at the door with booze and cake and their most heartfelt congratulations.

"We have to pick a place to watch the competition finale. They're streaming it online, right?"

"There's room for everyone at my place!"

"Oh my God, Marinette, you're going to showcase your work to Gabriel Agreste. Can you believe it?"

"I always knew you would make it. Didn't I say I always knew you'd make it? I did. Shut up. The rest of you can fight me."

And so on.

Now, warm and happy and full of dessert, she lay on her chaise with one leg over the side swinging back and forth. The next afternoon, she'd be in Agreste HQ with her fellow finalists, getting briefed on how the rest of the competition would proceed. She wondered if the other women were friendly. No doubt there would be a few who weren't interested in making friends with their competition—and she'd be just as cutthroat with them as they were with her.

She grabbed her phone and opened Chat Noir's latest email. Adrien's latest email. She wondered how he felt knowing that both she and the mysterious Ladybug were in the competition together. Who would he cheer for? And how would he react when he found out that he'd really only been cheering for one person?

Marinette pushed her anxiety aside and tapped reply. She had already taken the first step beyond the point of no return by sending him the email snippet, so she considered her words carefully as she took the next.

---

**Ladybug**

*RE: Summer*

*45 minutes ago*

*Sorry chaton, I couldn't resist!*

*Truthfully, I've given it a lot of thought…*

*And I don't think it'd be very nice or fair of me to keep my identity a secret from you after this. You'll know I'm one of ten people in the competition, but not who? What's the point of that?*

*If you're going to support me during this competition, I want you to support the real me. What happens after that is up to the both of us.*

---
Adrien, sitting on his couch, bent over his phone, heard nothing over the sound of his heart pounding in his ears.

Was she about to tell him her identity? Just like that?

He stared at his television and tapped his phone against his mouth, half in rapture, half in agony. Did he want to find out this way? He whined, wrote a short response, and hit send.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**

*RE: Summer*

*Just now*

Ladybug… are you sure?

x.x.x

Marinette sat at her computer desk and opened her web browser.

*You can do this*, she thought as she made her way to her inbox.

*You can do this.* She pulled up Adrien's email and attached a file to it.

*You can do this.*

She took a deep, calming breath, and pressed send.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

*RE: Summer*

*Just now*

*Attachment: LuckCollection-Final*

I'm sure.

x.x.x

Adrien put his phone down and stood from the couch. He walked a full circuit around his bedroom, but it wasn't enough to clear his thoughts, so he left and took a stroll through the entire mansion. Plagg followed him for half the journey before he realized Adrien wasn't going to the kitchen to give him camembert, then settled for waiting for him under one of the seats in the foyer.

Eventually, Adrien returned to his bedroom and stared at his phone as if it were ready to explode. Then he went to the bathroom and brushed his teeth. Then he returned and stared at the phone some more.

"It's okay," he told himself. He picked up the phone. "It's okay." He unlocked it and came face-to-face with Ladybug's email, the unclicked attachment. He bounced from one foot to the other. "It's okay," he insisted.

He tapped on the attachment.

An image file opened on his screen. In the middle of a white canvas were two designs, and Adrien had to look away and tell himself it was okay another half dozen times, because the designs were
not just any designs, they were ladybug and black cat designs. The female model was draped over a chaise lounge, dressed in a strapless black gown with jagged, vibrant green claw marks that started at the top left and trailed diagonally down the length of the dress. Around her neck, she wore a thin choker with a tiny bell. The male model, who bowed at the waist and placed a kiss on the female model's hand, wore a vibrant red tailcoat with a gauzy white inside lining that imitated wings, and black slacks.

Adrien couldn't think straight. Warmth spread through his body. The designs Ladybug had chosen to show the entire fashion world were designs inspired by their relationship.

Oh, he hated himself. He hated being so unbelievably happy and confused at the same time. It wasn't fair. How could she do this to him? And he wouldn't be able to see her the next day, when he would have given anything to find her and throw his arms around her and lift her off the ground? He fell back on the sofa with a groan, but he couldn't stop smiling.

He loved Ladybug. He loved her. Romantic love, platonic love, it didn't matter. He didn't care. He loved her. It was as simple and as complicated as that.

Adrien laughed out loud, saved the image on his phone, and closed it so he could reply to her email. "I am in such deep shit," he said, and kept right on laughing.

Security clearance be damned. He was going to see Ladybug. Tomorrow. No matter what.

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

They're beautiful, buginette, and so are you. Have I ever told you that? I think I must have told you that already, but I feel like saying it again. You are the most beautiful person I've ever met.

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

I had a feeling you'd like them. :-)

Now if you'll excuse me, I must be going to sleep.

Important day tomorrow and all that.

Don't stay up too late contemplating my beauty.

Marinette shut her phone off and tucked it onto the shelf above her bed. She stared up at the skylight, eyes wide open, her heart beating a thousand beats per minutes.

By the end of next week, Adrien would know who she was, and there wasn't a thing she could do to stop it.
Nino Lahiffe: Good morning Marinette! You're probably wondering why I'm texting you so early hahaha

Nino Lahiffe: Long story short, Adrien's father fired him from the design competition and he's not allowed to talk to you until it's over. He wanted me to let you know. And to say sorry on his behalf.

Nino Lahiffe: So, Adrien's sorry.

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: WHAT

x.x.x

"What do you mean his father fired him?" Alya asked.

Marinette walked beside her with slouched shoulders and a grim expression. Up ahead, Agreste HQ stood tall, proud, and menacing, casting its shadow over the street. "He got in trouble for letting me into his house, knowing that I was entered in the design competition," Marinette said. She'd sent many an incoherent message to Nino that morning but no amount of reassurance had taken away her guilt. "Apparently if people find out he and I are friends, it could call the integrity of the whole competition into question."

"Oh my God," Alya said.

"I know."

"No, I mean, oh my God, your relationship is forbidden now. That's kinky." She threw a wink in Marinette's direction. "Are you sure you aren't a ladybug? Because you seem to be having all the luck lately."

Marinette laid her head on Alya's shoulder. "Be my eyes. I need to finish moping before I walk into the building."

Alya pushed her back upright. "Be your own eyes. And quit overreacting! Nino said Adrien didn't seem very broken up about it, yeah?"

Marinette sighed. Chat Noir's good morning email had been perfectly cheerful, but she knew from experience that Adrien could hide his feelings well both online and in person. If she could just get a look at him, she'd have a better idea of his emotional state. Unfortunately, Gabriel Agreste had just made looking at him impossible.

"In any case—and you're only ever going to hear me say this once—you don't have time to worry about Adrien now." Alya gestured to Agreste HQ. "This is your future. Your rise to stardom starts today. So what are you not going to do?"

"Worry about Adrien," Marinette said. She straightened her posture and stared at the building ahead. Alya was right. From the moment she walked inside, the first impressions would begin. She needed to be confident. She needed to carry herself like someone who'd been hand-selected by one of the world's top fashion designers, like someone who deserved her spot.

Adrien would be there at the end of the week.

And he would know she was Ladybug, but she couldn't worry about that either.

"Why don't you go in ahead of me?" Marinette suggested. "You're press, so we'll have to split up
anyway. And I wanted to send a quick email to Mom and Dad. Promised I'd keep them updated."
"You sure?"
"Yeah. We'll see each other soon." She gave Alya her most confident I-will-do-my-best-not-to-humiliate-myself smile.

Alya shrugged, then threw her arms around her shoulders and squeezed. "I am so, so, so proud of you," she said.

Marinette squeezed her back. "Please don't make me cry. I spent way too long on my makeup this morning." She let Alya go and waved at her as she crossed the street, then she reached for her phone. Her parents weren't the only ones she'd promised to keep updated.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**  
*RE: Summer*  
*Just now*

*I'm at the Agreste building.*

*And I'm freaking out.*

*Help.*

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**  
*RE: Summer*  
*Just now*

*Deep breaths. You are one of the chosen. Until the competition ends, you are on equal footing with the other nine women on that list. And because Gabriel Agreste's employees don't know who his next protégé is, they will bend over backwards for each and every one of you.*

*Do you feel better now?*

x.x.x

**Ladybug**  
*RE: Summer*  
*Just now*

*Yes.*

*Thanks, minou.*

*Give yourself a scratch behind the ears and pretend it's from me.*

x.x.x

"More coffee?"

Adrien looked up into the pink racoon eyes of Café Reflekta's owner and smiled. "No, thank you. I need to get going," he said. He'd been hanging out at the café for about an hour, enjoying a light
lunch and pretending he wasn't about to cross town and sneak into his father's building.

He'd devised a simple plan: go in through the back, act like he was supposed to be there, and avoid security for as long as humanly possible. He only needed to be inside long enough to get a good look at the competition finalists, anyway.

Ladybug. Marinette. Ladybug and Marinette and his no-good, two-timing heart.

The café owner, whose nametag read Juleka, collected Adrien's empty coffee mug. "Big day," she said.

Adrien blinked at her.

"For Ladybug," she added.

His heart did a somersault in his chest. "Y-Yeah! It is!" He fiddled with his phone, wondering why the hell he felt so shy talking about Ladybug with someone who knew her. "She's really nervous," he said. Juleka nodded at that, but ventured nothing further. Adrien wondered how far he could push his luck. "So how did you meet Ladybug?" he blurted out before she could get away from him.

Juleka paused. "Middle school," she said at length.

"Wow, then you've known each other for a while." He couldn't tell how old Juleka was under all her makeup, but she looked around the same age as him. "Was she always interested in fashion design?"


Adrien watched Juleka walk away. He reached up and felt his face. An ear-splitting grin. If Chloe had been there to witness that exchange, she would have called him pathetic, and she would have been one hundred percent right. He was pathetic, but that didn't seem to matter nearly as much as the fact that Ladybug was cute.

Had he ever doubted Ladybug's cuteness? Of course not. He'd called her the most beautiful person he'd ever met just the night before. But he could say it all he wanted and still not know for sure. Now he had proof. And if he didn't get moving, he would miss his chance to see for himself.

He left Café Reflekta and took the metro to his father's building. Normally he would have gone by car, but Gabriel had ordered the Gorilla to accompany Nathalie to Agreste HQ, leaving Adrien stranded. Luckily, no one had been home that morning to notice how dressed up he was and question where he might be headed.

For Adrien, after what felt like an hour of debate, had chosen the outfit Nino claimed capable of inciting a riot: the pale blue Oxford shirt, white slacks, and navy blue blazer with the sunglasses he'd finally stolen back from Chloe. And if the numerous stares he attracted from the women at Café Reflekta, on the train, and on the street were any indication, he'd made the right choice.

He arrived at his stop and quickly made his way above ground. Agreste HQ stood one block away. Adrien took the long way to reach the back of the building, tiptoed to the door, and swiped his employee ID to unlock it. He felt a bit guilty; his father must have trusted him enough to follow his instructions if he hadn't removed him from the system yet. But his excitement quickly overwhelmed his guilt, because for what may have been the first time in his life, he was in the same building as Ladybug.
Adrien collected himself, rounded the nearest corner, and started off down the hall at his usual saunter. *Act natural,* he thought.

A female employee did a doubletake as he passed. "Good afternoon, Monsieur Agreste. We thought you weren't coming in today."

Crap. "I wasn't," Adrien said, "but I, uh, remembered I left something in my office." And he hurried away from her before she could ask any more questions.

More people than usual clogged the hallway, no doubt following orders to see to the whims of both the competition finalists and the reporters there to get pictures of them. Adrien's heart sped up as he came upon the first large conference room. Laughter and chatter reached his ears and he stopped beside the door, straightening his jacket to give off the appearance he had some business with the people within. Then, once the hallway had momentarily cleared, he leaned over, peered into the room…

…and saw Alya standing with a group of reporters, holding a cup of coffee. Her eyes blew wide open at the sight of him.

*What are you doing here?* she mouthed.

Adrien could think of nothing else to mouth back, other than *Where is Marinette?* He needed to be where Marinette was.

Alya held up two fingers and pointed to the left. Adrien nodded. Two conference rooms down.

A hand closed on his shoulder and spun him around.

The Gorilla.

Adrien stared up into his bodyguard-turned-bouncer's face, horror stricken. One of the only people in the building who knew he wasn't supposed to be there, and he'd caught him two rooms away from the competition finalists. Adrien had years of experience trying to reason with this man. He also had years of experience to tell him that there was no reasoning with this man. But he could still try.

"Have I ever told you that you're one of my favorite people?" he said.

The Gorilla narrowed his eyes at him.

Adrien broke down.

He discarded all thoughts of charm and grabbed his bodyguard by the sleeves of his suit. "Please," he said, "just give me five minutes. *Five minutes.* Have I ever asked you for anything in my entire life? Wait, don't answer that. But it's really important this time. Possibly the most important thing that has ever happened to me and if you can't pretend for four-and-a-half measly minutes that you never saw me, there is a ninety percent guarantee that I will never be happy again."

The Gorilla stared.

"*Please,*" Adrien whispered.

A tense silence passed. Then the Gorilla removed Adrien's hands from his sleeves, smoothed the wrinkles out of his jacket, looked back at Adrien, held up three fingers, and walked away.
Two conference rooms away, Marinette held a cup of water in her trembling hands and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She wasn't the only one fidgeting: the other nine women in the room with her moved around, sighed, picked at the finger foods delivered by the caterers, tossed back wine, and made attempts at small talk before lapsing back into silence. Soon they would be addressed by the head of the competition, and Marinette couldn't help but wonder how that would have gone down if Adrien hadn't been fired.

Would he have been able to concentrate knowing that Ladybug was watching him? Would he have dropped a hint that he was Chat Noir in front of everyone, or played it infuriatingly cool?

Marinette sighed and brought the water cup to her lips. *Guess I'll never know*, she thought as she glanced at the door—

—and choked on her water when she saw Adrien on the other side.

Marinette coughed into the crook of her elbow. What the hell was he doing there? Was he even allowed in the building? How had he gotten past security?

Adrien lifted his hand and wiggled his fingers at her in greeting. He seemed genuinely happy to see her, and she would be lying if she said she wasn't happy to see him, too. Especially in that blue suit. Marinette would have to figure out how an outfit that looked so good on a human being could make her want to rip it off of him.

But then Adrien's eyes slid past her to the rest of the women in the room.

And Marinette forgot how to breathe.

She had never seen such naked anticipation, such wild and desperate hope on someone's face before. She almost couldn't bear to keep watching.

Because that was her Chat Noir, searching for his Ladybug.

Searching for *her* with the expression of a man drowning in the depths of his love.

"Oh my God, is that Adrien Agreste?"

Marinette blinked out of her stupor. Of course her coughing had drawn the attention of the other finalists, and now all nine women stared back at Adrien, too stunned to do much else. But when the shock wore off, it wore off for all of them simultaneously, and the room burst into a frenzy.

"Oh my God, he's even more handsome in person!"

"How does my hair look?"

"Do you think he's coming in here?"

"Should one of us, like, invite him inside?"

"Crap, crap, crap, I knew I should have worn the other dress!"

"Does that mean Gabriel Agreste is here too?"
Marinette raised her water cup and took a sip, both to soothe her throat and to keep from saying something ridiculous like *Adrien is mine and the rest of you can go jump off a cliff*. She had to admit she felt a little smug knowing that she'd bested them in that category before they'd even gotten a chance.

But just as quickly as the fun began, it ended: Adrien's bodyguard appeared behind him, grabbed him by the arm, and dragged him out of sight. Marinette shook her head as the other women let out disappointed whines. So he'd snuck his way into the building, then. All that trouble for one glimpse of the girl who called herself Ladybug.

She knocked back the rest of her water, hoping it would cool the fire in her blood and erase the image of Adrien's hope-filled face from her mind.

Because her kitty cat had no idea how mutual the feeling was.

Chapter End Notes

Remember when I said I was on hiatus? Yeeeolah. But that's over now! School is over!
And so too will this fic be, very soon.

Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista).
Chapter Summary

Accidents happen.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**Ladybug**

*RE: Summer*

*Just now*

*I have never had so many pictures of me taken in my life.*

*In.*

*My.*

*LIFE.*

*And my parents love a good family photo, let me tell you.*

*We have pictures from every vacation we've ever been on.*

*But this?*

*This was excessive.*

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**

*RE: Summer*

*10 minutes ago*

*That's what happens when you became famous, buginette! You're one of the hottest names in the fashion world right now, and you haven't even won anything yet. Promise you won't fur-get about your dearest, most handsome friend Chat Noir when you're at New York Fashion Week...!*

*Excessive photography aside, how was everything?*

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

*RE: Summer*

*Just now*

*Exciting?*

*Terrifying?*
I met Gabriel Agreste's personal secretary and she never once cracked a smile, which didn't help my nerves at all.

She took our final designs to get them approved by Monsieur Agreste.

Then we were herded like doomed farm animals into the press room, where the excessive photography happened (I swear I still have spots in my vision).

After that, we got our designs back and were each assigned our own private offices with special security cards so none of the other finalists can get in and try to sabotage our work because apparently that's happened before?

And tomorrow we get to meet our models!

Hmm... I guess I'm more excited than terrified.

This is the fun part where I get to go crazy designing without worrying about the cost of fabric.

But I'm sure the terror will return come Judgment Day.

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

I know I might as well be telling the sun not to shine, but try not to worry about it too much. You're going to do great. I believe in you.

So... when do I get to see your gorgeous face in all the fashion magazines? ;)

x.x.x

"Adrien."

Adrien took a distracted sip of his Italian soda. All he got from the straw was air and a few stray droplets of flavored water from ice that had melted a long time ago. He put the cup down.

"Adrien."

It was Friday afternoon, and across town Ladybug and Marinette were meeting their models for the first time. Adrien knew quite a few of the models. Good friends of his. If he asked them, they'd probably tell him which of the finalists had entered the ladybug and black cat designs. But he wouldn't ask them. That was cheating. Ladybug would hate him if he took such a shortcut to learning her identity. Although technically, he'd orchestrated the entire competition so he could meet Ladybug, but it wasn't like she wouldn't get anything out of the bargain—

Someone flicked cold water in Adrien's face. He looked up. Chloe leaned over the café table, her manicured nails shiny and wet.

"Chlo? What are you doing here?" he asked.

Chloe jerked her head at Nino, who sat across from Adrien with a concerned look on his face. "He called me. Said you were practically comatose."

"Thanks for coming," Nino said.
Chloe grunted and took the empty chair between him and Adrien. "I wouldn't have had to come if you had the guts to slap him around a little." She dropped her purse on the table, crossed her arms, then crossed her legs. "Spill, Adrikins. What's going on?"

Adrien sighed and reminded himself to apologize to both of them later—Nino, for spacing out on him, and Chloe, for forcing her to spend time in Nino's company. He rolled his empty cup between his hands. "Ladybug is one of the competition finalists," he said.

Chloe's eyebrows shot up. Nino's mouth fell open. Chloe dug into her purse for her cell phone and pulled up her web browser while Nino recovered from his shock.

"You mean one of those ten women is Ladybug?" Nino asked. Chloe shoved her phone under his nose and he grabbed it, then turned it around for Adrien to see. It was a press photo of the ten finalists taken the day before. "One of them?"

"One of nine of them. She isn't Marinette," Adrien said.

Nino's shoulders sagged. "Oh. How do you know?" he asked, sounding disappointed.

"Ladybug knows about Plagg. I've sent her pictures of him. But when I told Marinette about Plagg, she had a completely normal reaction." Adrien tapped his cup with his thumbs. "If she was Ladybug, she'd have said something, right?"

"Maybe she is Ladybug, but since she's in love with some other guy, she's trying to figure out how to let you down gently," Chloe said.

Adrien lowered his head to the table.

"You're not helping," he heard Nino whisper to Chloe.

"I can't be his mother all the time," Chloe hissed back.

Adrien felt a hand clasp his shoulder. "So Marinette isn't Ladybug," Nino said in his best attempt at a comforting voice. "Which means—"

"I'm screwed," Adrien grumbled. He lifted his head. "Ladybug sent me her final designs so that by the end of the competition, I'll know exactly who she is. And I have no intention of letting her walk away without introducing myself at least. But Marinette will be there, too…" He sighed. "Am I a horrible person?"

Chloe rolled her eyes. "I'm a horrible person, and you're nothing like me. Give me your phone. I want to see those designs."

"You told us that you were in love with Ladybug," Nino said as Adrien surrendered his phone to Chloe, "but how can you be sure? You've never met her, and up until now she hasn't seemed very interested in meeting you."

"It's not that she wasn't interested. She was scared," Adrien said.

Chloe gasped at his cell phone screen. "That little hussy! Oh, she is so trying to get into your pants."

"You're really not helping," Nino said. Chloe held the phone out to him. He took one look at the screen and whistled. "On second thought, that's a pretty bold move."
Adrien snatched his phone back. "Thanks a lot," he said. He stared at Ladybug's designs, even though he'd already stared at them long enough to commit them to memory. A ladybug and a black cat. Their relationship, on display for everyone to see. "I do love Ladybug," he said to Nino and Chloe. "Talking to her has helped me in ways I didn't even know I needed. She's fun and smart and talented. Her emails can turn my entire day around." He smiled. "But who knows? Maybe when I meet her and we've spoken face-to-face, I'll realize she's just another dear friend and none of this will be an issue anymore."

Chloe stole Nino's drink and took a sip from it. "You'll go after Marinette, then?"

Nino stared at her. "Dude!"

Adrien thought back to the day before. After the shock of seeing him had worn off, Marinette had been the only girl in the room who hadn't giggled and gotten flustered over his presence. Why would she when she was in love with someone else?

He envied the lucky guy who held her heart in his hands.

"I guess we'll see," he murmured.

Nino tried to take his drink back from Chloe, but she somehow managed to stuff it down her shirt without spilling it. He sighed. "Adrien, if you really want to know who Ladybug is, you can just ask me. I'll be at Agreste HQ on Monday."

For a split second, Adrien had no idea what Nino was talking about. And then he remembered that he'd hired Nino to do the music for the competition finale and the after party. He was supposed to meet with the finalists that week so he could compose something based on their final designs.

Nino would get to meet Ladybug on Monday.

Adrien half-stood from his seat, then dropped back into it. "No," he said. "No, it's okay."

Nino's eyes widened. "You sure?"

Chloe loudly slurped the last of Nino's drink.

"Tricking my father into going through with the competition so I might have a chance at meeting Ladybug was sneaky enough," Adrien said. He tapped on his phone screen. "If this is how she wants me to find out who she is, I'll do my best to respect her wishes." Then he met Nino's dubious expression with a sober one. "But if you want to give me a hint, I wouldn't hold it against you."

Chloe slammed the cup into the table and stood up. "Adrikins, I love you, but you're boring me." She shoved her purse up onto her shoulder. "And you should get better taste in Italian soda flavors," she said to Nino, then walked off without another word.

Adrien and Nino watched her go.

"I don't know why, but I suddenly have a very bad feeling," Nino said.

"You know exactly why," Adrien replied. They'd both been acquainted with Chloe long enough to recognize her moods. "My employee identification card won't work after the stunt I pulled yesterday, so if you see Chloe in the building, please stop her from doing something stupid."

Nino grimaced. "Taking down Chloe is a tall order," he said, then shrugged. "But my best bud's happiness is a cause I am willing to die for."
Models were tall.

As an aspiring fashion designer, Marinette knew this well. But she never got over the surprise of having to lift her head to talk to them. At five-foot-short, she felt like a bird circling a skyscraper as she took their measurements.

"It's a shame we can't do this pose on the runway," her male model, Henry, said as he admired Marinette's designs. "I never pass up a chance to kiss the beautiful Alexa."

Alexa, Marinette's female model, held still as Marinette wrapped a tape measure around her waist. "Stop it, you. If you keep hitting on women like this you'll never get a boyfriend."

Henry lifted a hand to his chest. "Hitting on? Am I not allowed to compliment a woman without my intentions being misconstrued? What is this world coming to?"

Marinette laughed. They'd been arguing from the moment they walked into the room, which made her nervous at first, but after a few minutes it became clear that bickering was a part of their banter. Henry and Alexa were the best of friends—and, much to her delight, they looked incredible together.

"Do you have a boyfriend, Marinette?" Henry asked.

Marinette felt heat creep into her cheeks. "No boyfriend," she said. Just a supermodel black cat who snuck into buildings to try and catch a glimpse of her.

"No way! A pretty girl like you?"

Alexa rolled her eyes. "See what I mean? He can't help himself. I have to go with him to the club or else he'll spend all night hitting on girls."

Henry made a face at her. "Just you wait. I bet my soulmate is out there compulsively complimenting every girl he sees, too."

"Done," Marinette said. She took a step away from Alexa and scribbled the measurements on the margin of her design sheet, then straightened. "I want to thank you both ahead of time for modeling my designs. I've been super nervous about all this, but I feel much better now that I have people to envision them on."

Alexa laughed. "You don't have to thank us for doing our job, Marinette."

"You don't have to thank Alexa. I'm not opposed to a little bit of gratitude," Henry leaned over and kissed Marinette's cheek. "You're very welcome. And if you don't have a boyfriend now, guys will be falling all over themselves for a chance at you after this competition."

"Especially when they find out she can bake. " Alexa pointed at the macarons Marinette had brought for them. "These things are so dangerous. Don't hold it against me if I never come to your bakery. I have no self-control for someone who needs to watch her figure."

"Then you won't mind if I take the rest of them home?" Henry asked.

Marinette watched them fight over the macarons on their way out of the room, then turned from the door. In the silence left in her models' wake, she walked around her private little slice of Agreste HQ. She had everything she needed in that room: sewing machine, thread in every color
imaginable, a couch for napping, room to stretch and pace, and a tablet with which she could order any fabric she might need and any food she might crave. Gabriel Agreste did not do things by halves.

Marinette walked over to the window, snapped a photo of her view of the city, made sure her reflection couldn't be seen anywhere, and emailed it to Adrien. She'd been sorely tempted to drop his name the night before, but had decided against it. She didn't want to tease him anymore. Not like that.

She pushed her thoughts of Adrien aside and turned her back on the window, facing her arsenal of supplies with determination. "Time to get to work," she said.

She had a potential employer to impress.

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

I was thinking...

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

You can do that?!

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Ladybug, please.

I was thinking that after this whole competition business, you might be hungry (assuming that stress makes you hungry, as it does me). And it just so happens that I have the perfect solution for your future hunger—namely, I have a job, which pays me money, which can be exchanged for food. So I figured, "Ladybug is going to be hungry and I have money to buy her food with." Do you see where I'm going with this?

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

Hmm.

Spell it out for me.
Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

I'm asking you to lunch. Or dinner. Whatever your preferred meal and time of day.

x.x.x

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

I am quite partial to dinner.

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Then dinner it is.

x.x.x

Marinette wasn't the only one with a potential employer to impress. On Saturday and Sunday afternoon, she conducted interviews for the four new bakery positions she and her parents had agreed to open: two assistant bakers and two cashiers. She thought the excitement from Jagged Stone's Twitter shout-out would die down, but one week later the landline phone still rang off the hook and the bakery's Twitter account continued to gain followers. If she was going to survive reopening week, she needed more staff.

Luckily, Manon had come back from vacation and offered to train the new cashiers so Marinette wouldn't have to take time off the competition. One of her assistant bakers, Sophie, also offered her help in acquainting the newbies with Tom and Sabine's baking practices. Marinette thanked them both profusely. She would have gone insane without the help.

Monday afternoon found her back at Agreste HQ, working on her Chat Noir gown. She measured out the electric green cloth for the claw marks with butterflies in her stomach.

Adrien had asked her on a date.

She could have laughed at herself for her silliness. Adrien had asked her on dates before. Play dates. Fake dates. Dates where the only thing at stake was their best friends' happiness. And how many times had he asked her out as Chat Noir, only for her to turn him down with a lighthearted rebuff? No, she wasn't a stranger to being asked out by Adrien Agreste.

But this was different. Her agreement to go to dinner with him was further proof of her trust in Chat Noir. Not only would he get her identity, he'd get the opportunity to sit across from the person he'd been emailing for over a year and decide, once and for all, what he thought of her.

Marinette ran her fingers along the green fabric and willed herself to focus. She needed to be present. The last thing she wanted was to make a careless mistake and have to start over.

A knock on the door startled her. She looked over her shoulder. Nathalie Sancoeur stood behind the glass, her face impassive. Marinette hurried to open the door, and was surprised to find not only
Nathalie in the hall, but Nino as well. He waved at her.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Dupain-Cheng," Nathalie said. "We're sorry to interrupt you during the creative process. This is Nino Lahiffe, our Director of Music. We have asked him to compose tracks inspired by each of our talented finalists' designs to better set the atmosphere for the runway show. Do you have time for a quick interview, or shall we come back at a later hour?"

Marinette moved out of the doorway. "Now is perfect!" she cried, relieved to have a familiar face to look at. Then she remembered that Nathalie didn't know she was acquainted with Nino, and quickly offered him her hand. "Nice to meet you, Monsieur Lahiffe."

"Oh. Uh, nice to meet you too," he replied.

Nathalie's phone rang. She glanced at her screen and her frown deepened. "Please excuse me," she said as she retreated down the hall to take the call.

Nino stepped into the room and Marinette left the door cracked to give Nathalie some privacy. "Busy woman, isn't she? I wonder if she ever takes a vacation."

"In five years, I don't think I've ever heard of her taking a vacation," Nino replied. He had a tablet tucked under his arm and, despite being in Agreste HQ, was only slightly more dressed up than usual in a crimson shirt and dark jeans. "How you been, Marinette?"

"Good," Marinette said. "Nervous, but good. And missing Adrien. A lot."

Nino's smile widened. "Really?"

Marinette's cheeks warmed at his insinuating tone. "He gives good pep talks! I could use one or two of those right about now."

Nino laughed and pulled his tablet out from under his arm. "I'll be sure to let him know. Oh, hey, maybe you and Alya can come over to my place and we can get Adrien on the phone. That way you won't show up in each other's call history, and he can give you all the pep talking you need."

Marinette sighed. "I am so glad you're dating my best friend."

"Me too," Nino said. He drew a complicated design on his tablet screen to unlock it and walked towards the table where Marinette's half-finished dress rested. "Now, I'm not going to take up too much of your time because if the other finalists are anything to go by, you guys are under crazy amounts of stress and oh my God, you're Ladybug."

A chill ran down Marinette's spine.

She looked at Nino, at his wide eyes and fading smile and dawning comprehension, and squeaked out an intelligent, "Huh?"

Nino turned to face her. "You're Ladybug," he said. "The girl Adrien's been emailing. It's you."

Marinette took a step away from him. How did he know? Well, it wasn't hard to guess that Adrien must have shown him the designs. Nino was his best friend. Why wouldn't Adrien tell his best friend about Ladybug?

"B-But he thinks—" Nino had entered full stammer mode. "He thinks you can't be Ladybug! He's convinced that it's someone else! Marinette—wait, oh my God, you didn't know Adrien was Chat Noir, did you? Oh my God. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to—"
"Shh! Nino! Shh!" Marinette flailed her arms in front of him, desperate to calm him down. "It's okay. I already know Adrien is Chat Noir."

Nino was silent for a moment. "Because of Plagg."

"Because of Plagg."

"And you didn't tell him."

"I didn't know!" Tears sprang to Marinette's eyes. "I mean, I did know, but I thought—look, it's a long story, one that I will be more than happy to fill you in on later, but I need you to promise me that you won't tell Adrien. Please don't tell Adrien. I want to tell him myself." She put her hands on Nino's shoulders. He hadn't stopped gawking at her. "Nino, please promise me that you won't say anything to him."

Nino's jaw worked as he grasped for words, then a muffled commotion drew his attention towards the door. Marinette was forced to look as well.

"...know who I am? Mayor Andre Bourgeois is my father! You lay one hand on me and I will have you collecting your severance package before you can say 'Please forgive me, Mademoiselle Bourgeois!'"

Chloe appeared in the doorway.

Her eyes landed on Marinette first, then followed Marinette's arms to Nino, then focused on the unfinished dress behind them.

And her face contorted in unadulterated loathing.

"You," she snarled.

Several things happened at once: Chloe shoved the door open and ran at Marinette. Nino ran at Chloe. A terrified security guard rounded the corner along with an annoyed Ms. Sancoeur. Marinette staggered backwards, hit the table, and brought her hand down on an extremely sharp pair of scissors.

She gasped and ripped her hand away. Blood trickled from her middle finger and a longer, deeper cut on palm. She lifted her head.

Nino had managed to restrain Chloe and get her halfway to the door, but she still thrashed in his arms, clawing at the space between them and Marinette. "Let go of me!" she screamed. But Nino only continued to drag her towards the hallway, where Ms. Sancoeur and the security guard waited, presumably to escort Chloe off the premises.

He looked back at Marinette, who stood bleeding and bewildered with her injured hand cradled against her chest. "Man," he said, "I hope you have a really good explanation for this."

As soon as he and Chloe were out of the room, Ms. Sancoeur rushed in and immediately assessed Marinette's hand. "We must stop the bleeding," she said. "Come along downstairs. We have a first aid station, but depending on how deep the wound is you may want to seek treatment at a proper medical facility."

"I need to put the dress away," Marinette said, her voice faint.

Ms. Sancoeur's expression softened. "I will handle it, Ms. Dupain-Cheng. You do not want to get
blood on your gown. Removing the stain will cost you even more of your precious time," she said. "Please." She gestured for Marinette to go ahead of her. "Your wellbeing is of the utmost importance to us."

Marinette nodded. She left the gown, certain that it would be taken care of, and walked down the hall toward the elevators, dripping blood and tears the entire way.

Chapter End Notes

"Wow PK, didn't you update earlier this week?" Try and stop me, you fools.

If you haven't noticed, Lucky Us will officially end on Chapter 30. I hope. I'll try.

Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista) or Twitter (PrinKitt).
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Adrien breaks the rules.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Adrien had a date with Ladybug.

Not that he'd asked her to dinner with the intention of making it a date, though offering to pay for her meal had pretty much made it a date. The only thing on his mind was an evening of friendly conversation. Nothing else. If Ladybug turned out to be the love of his life, it would be a happy coincidence.

But what did he wear on a not-date with Ladybug? He stood in his closet, staring at rows of perfectly ironed shirts, suit jackets, sweaters, and ties in every color of the rainbow. Sure, he still had a week to think about it, but starting now gave him time to get second opinions and maybe have a panic attack.

Oh God, did he bring her flowers? Chocolates? A corsage? What was the protocol for meeting a pen pal? Was there a protocol for meeting a pen pal? Could he Google it?

Adrien walked out of his closet and face-planted on his bed. He'd managed to come across as calm, cool, and collected in his emails, but the reality was that he was a complete mess, and he somehow had to pretend he wasn't a complete mess when he went to therapy with his father the next day. A family counseling session was no place to have a meltdown over Ladybug.

Or Marinette.

He lifted his chin and glowered at his phone, missing the bakery and the peace he always felt there. They'd be open again the following week, and he'd be back to his Monday-Wednesday-Friday routine of popping in at 8:15 for whatever pastry appealed to him at the time. But would things be the same between him and Marinette after the competition? Could he still sneak over after hours to spend a quiet, relaxing evening with her? Or would she get up the courage to confess to the object of her affections and no longer have time to entertain him?

Everything was changing so fast: his relationship with his father, his career trajectory, his relationship with Ladybug. And if Marinette won the competition, things would change for her as well. Life would step between them, and before Adrien knew it his friendship with her would dwindle down to the occasional text.

He didn't want that.

He rolled onto his back, closed his eyes, and listened to the distant sound of Plagg crunching his cat food across the room.

Sunday couldn't come fast enough.
"I don't know about this, Mari. You should go home and get some rest. Come in early tomorrow."

Marinette stood beside Alya in front of Agreste HQ. The anesthetic the doctor had used before stitching her palm was beginning to fade. A dull ache pulsed in her hand like a heartbeat, and the small cut on her middle finger stung. But she had work to do. An injured hand would slow her down, and she'd already wasted an entire afternoon.

"I'll be fine," Marinette said. She patted her purse. "The painkillers will help. I'll take one as soon as I get upstairs."

Alya rolled her eyes. "I'm not just talking about your hand."

Marinette had spent her time at the clinic filling Alya in about the afternoon's proceedings, from Nino discovering her identity to Chloe's calamitous exit. She left out the part where Chloe had unwittingly caused her injury to avoid throwing more dynamite into an explosive situation. She knew her best friend. Alya would wring Chloe's neck.

"I'm okay. Really," Marinette said, and even managed to smile. "I'll get a couple hours of work in and then I'll head home. I promise if I start feeling sick or panicky or faint, I'll call you right away."

Alya nodded, though Marinette could tell she didn't like the idea one bit. But for once she chose not to pursue the subject, and gave her a quick, careful hug instead. "Don't let it get to your head, girl. This doesn't mean anything. It's bad timing, not bad luck."

Marinette pulled away from her. "You know what? I'm starting to think that the only unlucky people are the ones who give up at the first sign of trouble," she said.

Alya grinned. "Now there's a philosophy I can get behind. Just take care of yourself, okay?"

They exchanged goodbyes, then Marinette headed into the building. She stopped by Ms. Sanoeur's office, told her everything the doctor said and announced her intent to stay in the competition, then took the elevator upstairs. Her blood had been cleaned off the floors, leaving no trace of the harrowing afternoon.

When Marinette entered her office, she found the dress stowed in a safe location, as promised. She carefully removed it from its storage, laid it on the table, checked to make sure no blood had gotten on it, and through her physical and emotional exhaustion, she continued to work.

---

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: I'd like to talk to you and Chloe today.

Nino Lahiffe: I'll pass her the message. How's your hand doing?

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: It's seen worse.

Nino Lahiffe: I'm really sorry.

Marinette Dupain-Cheng: I know. Meet me at Thai After Thai at noon?

---

*Chat Noir*
Good morning, buginette! I hope you're doing well. I'm trying not to distract you from your work this week, so don't reply to this if you're busy.

x.x.x

Good morning.

Don't worry about distracting me.

I'll just text back during one of my many pacing sessions. :-) 

x.x.x

Designing is hard, huh?

x.x.x

I'm so glad I'm doing this for the rest of my life.

x.x.x

Marinette arrived at the Thai restaurant a few minutes before noon, ordered food, and took a seat by the window.

Normally, she'd have waited for Nino and Chloe to arrive so they could all order together. But while her injured hand was not her dominant hand, it still pestered her enough to hamper her progress; she'd need all the time she could get if she wanted to complete her designs before the finale's dress rehearsal on Saturday.

A limo pulled up to the curb outside the restaurant. Marinette watched as Nino climbed out on one side and Chloe emerged from the other. Before they entered the restaurant, he stopped her and said something that she rolled her eyes at. He spoke again. She crossed her arms and tapped her foot impatiently. He crossed his arms right back. Then she had an outburst and Nino smiled, pulled the door open for her, and ushered her inside.

Marinette waved them over and tried not to let herself be intimidated by Chloe, who stared her down in a completely different way than she had the night they'd spoken at the dance club. Back then, Chloe had at least been open to the idea of Marinette dating Adrien. Now she had no pity to spare, and probably would have launched herself across the table and strangled Marinette if Nino hadn't been there, looking embarrassed and wincing like someone with a massive headache.
"Thanks for meeting me here," Marinette said once they were both seated across from her. She nodded at Nino. "I promised you the whole story, and that's exactly what you're getting. I might take a break to eat, though. I don't have a lot of time."

She gathered her thoughts and, with her bandaged hand, laid her cell phone on the table. When she looked up again, she caught a flicker of something like guilt on Chloe's face, but it was quickly smothered by anger.

"I accidentally emailed Adrien last year," Marinette said. "Probably a month or two before he came into the bakery the first time. Of course, I didn't know it was him because his email profile listed his name as Chat Noir, and he didn't know it was me because my profile lists me as Ladybug. I only found out who he was last week when I looked at his phone and his wallpaper was a picture of Plagg that he'd sent me as Chat Noir."

"And you didn't say anything," Chloe snapped.

"Because I wasn't sure." Marinette flexed her aching hand. "I thought, what if Chat Noir was someone pretending to be Adrien? What would have happened if I'd called Adrien Chat Noir right then and there, and he had no idea what I was talking about?" She looked between Chloe and Nino. "I loved Chat Noir," she said. "I loved him so much. If he'd turned out to be nothing more than a liar… I don't know what I would've done." She smoothed down the edges of the bandaid around her middle finger. "So I didn't say anything to Adrien. It wasn't until I talked everything out with Alya later on that I realized Chat Noir couldn't be anyone else.

"But I was still too scared to tell Adrien right away. If it was so easy for me to doubt him, then it would be just as easy for him to doubt me, especially since I'm entered in his father's competition," Marinette said. "When I found out I'd made the top ten, I realized the finale would be the perfect time for everything. We'd be too busy to talk to or even email each other right away. It would give him enough time to think things through and decide if he believes that I never meant to trick him."

She looked directly at Chloe. "A few weeks ago, I told you I had no intention of hurting Adrien, and I wasn't lying. I just had no idea how complicated the situation was."

Nino glanced at Chloe. Chloe kept her arms folded over her chest, but she'd started jiggling her foot.

A waiter came by with Marinette's plate. She left it untouched, waiting for Nino and Chloe to say what they would.

Chloe uncrossed her legs. "So you got over your big, stupid crush on Adrien because you fell in love with Adrien?" she asked.

Marinette fought back a smile. "Yes."

"And out of all the girls Adrien could have crushed on besides Ladybug, he ended up crushing on Ladybug herself?" Nino said, more to himself than anyone else.

"Morons," Chloe said. "I should have known the only girl on the planet who'd fall for my idiot best friend would have to be as big of an idiot as he was. And you fell for each other twice? Dear God, it's a match made in heaven. Do they sell alcohol here? I need alcohol."

Marinette, unsure of how to interpret Chloe's reaction, decided to cut to the chase. "So… are you going to tell Adrien?" she asked.

Nino gave her a reassuring smile. "Your secret's safe with me. You sent him your designs so it's
obvious you intend for him to find out. And considering that he knows that I know who Ladybug is, and he doesn't want me to tell him, he'd be pretty upset if we blew your cover. Isn't that right, Chloe?"

"I don't owe you anything," Chloe snapped.

"You messed up her hand," Nino reminded her.

She let out a frustrated growl and started pushing Nino out of the booth. "Move it. I'm calling Sabrina and seeing if I can salvage what's left of my day." Nino hurried to his feet. Chloe slid past him, stopped, then turned back to Marinette. "I'm sorry about your hand," she said, "but I still don't trust you. The only reason I'm letting this go is because Adrien should get to deal with you himself."

Marinette watched Chloe walk away, feeling like she'd narrowly avoided getting gored by a raging bull. Nino rubbed the back of his neck and sat across from her again.

"Don't worry," he said, "she'll come around as soon as she sees Adrien happy."

Marinette nodded. "I want him to know so bad," she said. "I almost told him the other day, when Alya tricked me into going to his place instead of yours. It was right on the tip of my tongue." She picked up her silverware and poked at her food to make sure it hadn't gone completely cold. "But sometimes it feels too big for words."

Nino chuckled. "Yeah, I kind of knew when I saw your designs," he said. "Whoever this Ladybug girl is, she's crazy in love with Adrien.' And I think he knows it, too. He's going to flip when he finds out. In a good way."

Marinette smiled and speared a piece of chicken. "I sure hope so," she said.

Nino pointed at her bandaged hand. "Listen, I didn't tell him anything about what happened yesterday. Do you want me to…?"

Marinette looked at her hand as well. Although she didn't want to worry Adrien more than necessary, he'd gone to the trouble of telling her about his allergic reaction to the feather pillows at Chateau Margaux. It only seemed fair to tell him about her hand. "Sure," she said. "Just be gentle. Adrien can be a little…"

"Dramatic?" Nino suggested. "There's a reason he and Chloe get along so well."

Marinette smiled at him. "I'm really glad you're dating my best friend," she said.

Nino smiled back. "Hey, hopefully in a week or two I'll be able to say the same thing to you."

x.x.x

Nino Lahiffe: BROSEPH. I got news. You're not going to like it though so I need you to promise you won't do anything reckless.

Adrien Agreste: Damn it, Nino! You know I can't make promises like that.

Nino Lahiffe: Worth a shot. Marinette hurt her hand.

Adrien Agreste: WHAT
Parisian nightlife had just begun to stir when Adrien rounded the corner into the alley beside Tom and Sabine's bakery. Although there were no signs of paparazzi around his house when he left it, he'd still taken a complicated network of streets and back alleys to get to the bakery, and wore a hoodie for good measure. After a stressful and exhausting counseling session the day before, he had no desire to get caught and destroy the tentative happiness between him and his father with a scandal.

But he couldn't stay away, either. He cared too much about Marinette to not go see her.

Adrien raised his eyes to the second story windows. The lights were on. He took a few steps forward, then somersaulted across the alley, ran the rest of the way to the door, and pressed the intercom button.

"Who is it?" Marinette's voice came from the speaker, and Adrien's heart skipped a beat.

"Definitely not Adrien Agreste," he answered.

A pause. Then a crackle of static followed by a "hold on." Adrien checked both sides of the alley to make sure he really hadn't been tailed. He heard the door open. A hand emerged from within, grabbed the front of his hoodie, and yanked him into the bakery with such force that he had to flail his arms to keep his balance.

Marinette stood before him with a hand on her hip. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

Adrien stared at her. She wore sweatpants and a tank top and slippers, and had her hair done in a braid that threatened to fall apart at any moment. Even with the day's makeup still on, she looked exhausted: bloodshot eyes engaged in a losing battle with gravity and bags that her concealer couldn't hide. Then her question sank in and he remembered his purpose for being there. His gaze drifted down the arm dangling at her side…

…and Marinette moved it behind her back. "Adrien?"

"Nino said you got hurt," he said. He took a step towards her and gestured to her hidden hand. "May I?"

Marinette fidgeted. "It's not that bad. I mean, it's kind of bad? But it could have been worse. If it had been my right hand instead of my left, then I really might have had to quit the competition. Not that I would have."

Adrien reached for her arm. She turned her head, but she didn't stop him.
"It looks worse than it is," she mumbled as he carefully opened her fingers.

The first cut, a shallow one on her middle finger, had already scabbed over. But the second cut, right in the center of her palm, had been stitched closed, and the skin around it remained an angry red. Adrien let go of her hand, afraid he would cause her more pain. "What happened?" he asked.

Marinette shrugged. "I tripped and hit the table and my hand landed on a pair of scissors. It's my fault for not putting them away, knowing how clumsy I am." She smiled at him. "But don't worry about it! The doctor gave me some strong painkillers to take the edge off the pain. They make me a little lightheaded and I'm working slower than I'd like to be, but it's way better than nothing."

Adrien was too good at faking cheerfulness to fall for Marinette's charade. "I'm sorry," he said, "you must be so frustrated."

Sure enough, she gazed at him for a long moment, then dropped her smile and flexed the fingers of her injured hand. "It is frustrating," she said. "Feels like every time I take a step towards following my dream, life screws me over." Determination filled her face. "But I can handle it. If I quit because of a setback this tiny, then I'm not cut out to be a fashion designer. And I'm tired of giving up on the things I care about. So if life wants to keep throwing lemons at me, fine. It'll just make me look better in the end."

Relief took the tension out of Adrien's body. If she had that much energy, she would definitely be fine.

"How are you doing?" Marinette asked him. "It's been a while."

"Yeah. Sorry about that, by the way." Adrien did his best to look sheepish, since he didn't exactly regret inviting her into his house. "I'm... tired," he said. "My father and I had our first therapy session yesterday and it went so well that I slept until noon this morning."

Marinette grimaced. "Yikes."

"Not that I expected rainbows and sunshine after one day. I know it's a process, but damn, it's a difficult one." Adrien shook his head. "Ten years' worth of emotional baggage is pretty heavy."

"I can imagine," Marinette said. "But think of how much better you'll feel when it's all dealt with."

"I'm looking forward to it." He nodded towards the bakery's sitting area. "Looking forward to this place being open again, too. Though I guess with all the publicity you've gotten, I'll have to be here right at seven o'clock to avoid spending an hour in line."

"I'll make a VIP line for regular customers, like they do at airports."

"Really?"

"No." Marinette patted his shoulder with her good hand. "Tough luck, handsome boy."

Adrien made a face at her, but the words handsome boy zipped directly to his brain and drove him distracted. She thought he was handsome. She thought he was handsome! Sure, he may have made a living off being handsome, but handsome was in the eye of the beholder. Though now that he thought about it, hadn't she called him that when she was tipsy that one time? Was his attractiveness something she was aware of but did her best to ignore?

"But," Marinette said, putting an end to his errant thoughts, "if you decide you want to keep visiting after hours, I won't rat you out."
"You won't, but my gut will."

"What gut?" Marinette smacked his abs with the back of her hand. "If this is what qualifies as a gut nowadays, there's no hope for the rest of us. You models and your impossible beauty standards."

Adrien ran a hand through his hair and tossed his head back. "Yes, well now that I've been forced to retire, perhaps I'll finally start looking like the rest of you mortals."

Marinette curled her lip and pushed him towards the door. "Get out of here! You're going to get us both in trouble."

Adrien let himself be pushed, but before she could shoo him out he lifted her injured hand and kissed the back of it. "Farewell, Flour Girl. May the only stitches that give you trouble be the ones in your clothes."

"Oh yeah," Marinette said, "I guess I can't keep calling you Model Behavior, huh?" She opened the door and stood back as he stepped out into the alley. "We'll have to think of a new codename for you."

Adrien lifted his hood over his head. "I've always been fond of Chat Noir," he said in the most casual tone he could muster. Then he looked back at Marinette to gauge her reaction.

She leaned against the doorframe and a warm, dazzling smile spread across her face. "Chat Noir it is," she said.

Adrien could have sworn he physically felt the thud of Cupid's arrow striking him through the heart. Shit. Shit. He'd messed up. He liked hearing Marinette say Chat Noir way more than he thought he would. "See you Sunday, Marinette!" he squawked before turning and walking out of the alley as fast as possible.

Much to his dismay, his feelings for Marinette were alive and well.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

*RE: Summer*

*Just now*

Barely managed to have the ladybug suit ready for today's fittings.

But now all that's left is putting the finishing touches on both outfits and I'm good to go!

It's too bad I have work next week.

I could use a five-day nap.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**

*RE: Summer*

*Just now*

You'll catch up on all of your beauty rest soon, My Lady (and smite me where I stand with one look, I'm sure).
Saturday found Marinette standing in a backstage dressing room with her nine fellow contestants, twenty models, and a nervous woman named Colette who held onto her clipboard and tablet like her life depended on it—and considering that she worked for Gabriel Agreste, it probably did.

Marinette stifled a yawn. That night would be the first night since the previous week that she'd have time to sleep adequately, but she knew she wouldn't. The events of the next day would decide the rest of her future. Who could sleep with that kind of pressure on their shoulders?

"The order in which your models will be walking is alphabetical by designer's first name," Colette said. She read down the list for their benefit and Marinette forced herself to wake up and pay attention. "Ms. Dupain-Cheng," Colette said, "will be seventh."

Marinette shot Alexa and Henry a huge smile. Lucky number seven for the Luck Collection. Perhaps the night wouldn't be a disaster after all. She ran to join her models as soon as Colette dismissed them to get ready for the practice run.

"Seventh place!" Henry cried. "Not first, not last, and not the boring middle. I knew it was a good idea to bring my rabbit's foot with me."

"He bought it yesterday to go along with the theme," Alexa said.

"And it worked." Henry rolled his eyes. "Don't be such a bore, Lexie. After what happened to poor Marinette's hand, I decided we needed some supernatural intervention. Is that such a crime?"

Marinette unzipped the garment bags containing the black cat dress and ladybug suit. They'd been brought to the venue by an elite security team and would apparently be guarded by that same team overnight. No unauthorized personnel allowed. Not even the contestants themselves.

She helped Alexa into the Chat Noir dress and walked circles around both her and Henry to make sure nothing was out of place. For outfits put together with only one fully functional hand, they looked good. Better than good. Determination and spite towards her terrible luck had caused her to produce her best work in years.

And love, she thought. Love might have had a little to do with it.

Marinette followed the other contestants out into the audience, where they sat in a section marked VIP. They would remain backstage and onstage throughout the actual runway show, but for the
time being, they were given a chance to rest. Marinette spotted Nino up in the sound booth; he gave her a thumbs-up before launching into the music.

Though all the lights remained on and busy staffers ran around preparing the venue, Marinette could almost picture the way the room would look the next day. She heard the audience's applause over Nino's compositions—which suited each designer's work perfectly, including her own—and had to keep from applauding herself when Alexa and Henry brought her designs to life on the runway.

She imagined Adrien seeing those designs for the first time. What kind of face would he make when the host said her name?

She slipped her hand into her purse and held onto her phone for reassurance.

She sure as hell hoped he would smile.

Chapter End Notes

Next time on Lucky Us... the finale.

Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista) or Twitter (PrinKitt).
Marinette's Sunday morning began like any other: she woke up early, did yoga, ate fruit for breakfast, then changed out of her pajamas and walked downstairs to the bakery.

After a month of being closed, some cleaning was in order. Marinette hauled supplies out of storage and spent two hours getting dust off every surface in the storefront and the kitchen, then she wiped the windows both inside and out. At one o'clock, Manon and Sophie came in and helped her with the chores her injured hand wouldn't let her do. At three, her other assistant baker, Olivier, came in to help Sophie prepare dough for opening day. Marinette took the opportunity to slip upstairs for a shower.

The cleaning had kept her preoccupied, but when left alone with running water and hair she didn't know what to do with, her anxiety returned. In a few hours, Gabriel Agreste would be judging her best work.

And Adrien would be judging her.

She untangled and dried her hair, then twisted it into an elaborate updo that required one too many hairpins and took much longer than she planned thanks to her stitches.

The outfit she'd put together ahead of time: a black strapless jumpsuit with elaborate gold designs inspired by the logo she'd created for her parents' bakery years ago, an accompanying golden laurel hairpiece that she tucked into her updo, and matching gold laurel wrist cuffs. Whether she won the competition or not, no matter how far she made it in the fashion world, she wanted everyone there
to know where she'd come from.

To avoid spending the next few hours running around in stilettos, Marinette shoved a pair of three-inch heels into her handbag and put on a pair of flats. The last thing to go into her bag was her lucky charm bracelet. She didn't plan to wear it, but if Henry could carry a lucky rabbit's foot around for her sake, then she'd add to the luck pile with an object of her own.

Marinette checked her ensemble in the mirror to make sure nothing was out of place, then sighed. She wished her parents could have been there. They had a flight back to Paris that Wednesday, but she could have used their presence at the competition; seeing her parents never failed to calm her down.

When she walked downstairs, Manon, Sophie, and Olivier's mouths dropped open simultaneously. "Who is this goddess and what has she done with our Marinette?" Olivier cried.

"Come here so I can smear some flour on your cheek. They might not recognize you otherwise," Manon said.

Marinette rolled her eyes, but she scurried forward to give each of them a hug. "Thanks for holding down the fort for me. I couldn't have done this without you guys."

"As if we were going to let you blow your chance at stardom," Olivier said. "We're having a watch party at my place tonight, so we'll be there with you in spirit. Feel free to imagine us somewhere in the crowd, screaming and embarrassing the hell out of you."

"Will do," Marinette said. Then she hugged each of them once more for good measure before she forced herself to leave the bakery, lest she chicken out and decide to spend the evening hiding in her bedroom instead.

The contestants were due at Agreste HQ at five o'clock. From there, they would be transported by limousine to the venue where the runway show would take place. More press interviews, celebrity arrivals, a final rehearsal, and a last-minute touch-up of outfits and makeup later, the runway show would begin at exactly eight o'clock.

As soon as Marinette found a seat on the metro, she whipped out her cell phone.

x.x.x

*Ladybug*

RE: Summer

Just now

I don't know how singers do what they do.

Don't they get nervous having to perform in front of so many people?

And multiple times at that?

Anyway, I'm on my way to Agreste HQ.

Wish me luck.

x.x.x

Adrien's Sunday morning did not begin like any other. After a night of tossing and turning, he slept
through his alarm clock, got woken up by Nathalie, catapulted out of bed, threw on the first decent outfit he had, then met his father for Sunday brunch at Le Grand Paris.

From there, he accompanied Gabriel to Agreste HQ, where they were given the schedule of the evening's events—a schedule that Adrien had come up with and should have known like the back of his hand, but his thoughts were so scattered he couldn't remember half of it. He sat through two meetings completely distracted, then got sent home for a break because his father was convinced he'd come down with a fever.

Which wasn't far from the truth. It took more of Adrien's usual self-control to not spend the whole afternoon emailing Ladybug. She was, after all, in a more nerve-wracking position than he was.

So he used his phone to cast a spotlight on his bedroom floor and made Plagg chase it around. Then he took a shower, changed into a black blazer with a green tie, panicked because it was too obvious, switched the green tie for a black tie, groaned because he looked like a host, then went for the green tie again and forced himself to stick with it.

It didn't matter. He wasn't trying to hide from Ladybug. When he walked up to her after the runway show, he wanted her to know exactly who he was.

At four o'clock, he stopped by the venue where the runway show would be held to deliver Nathalie some food—he knew she had the bad habit of not eating on days where she had to work an important event—then returned to Le Grand Paris to pick up Chloe.

He found her in her bathroom, dressed in a short body-hugging yellow dress and knee-high black boots, gluing on fake eyelashes. "You look good, Adrikins," she said before he could even ask. "Like a teenager about to go on his first date at a sit-down restaurant."

Adrien slumped against the wall. "Should I change?"

"I'm joking," she said. "Your precious Ladybug will love it."

Adrien picked up on her irritated tone immediately. "You know something, don't you?" he asked. When she didn't answer him, he walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. "Thanks for not telling me."

Chloe shrugged him off. "Whatever. I'm trying to apply mascara here." She batted her eyelashes at her reflection, then turned around. "You know you can talk to me if you need anything, right?"

Adrien smiled at her. "I know."

"Good." She grabbed her purse off her bathroom counter. "Then let's go."

x.x.x

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
12 minutes ago

Of course singers get nervous. You haven't heard of the ones who spend an hour before their concerts throwing up in the bathroom? It's never easy being the center of attention. Anyone who tells you that you'll stop being nervous with experience is a liar.

x.x.x
Marinette shoved her phone back into her purse. Earlier she'd bid her little office farewell, mourned the loss of her unlimited access to free fabric, then turned in her security clearance badge. If she won the competition, she'd be getting another one soon enough. For the time being, she waited with the rest of the contestants for Colette to return so they could have one final group photo taken before being charted across town.

The photographer, a crabby Italian man who couldn't stop talking about spaghetti, posed them this way and that, ordered them to change places, hummed unhappily, then ordered them to change places again. "Relax a bit! Why so stiff? Pretend you are starving and in front of you is a plate of spaghetti. Give it a sultry look—*sultry* I said, not hungry!"

In the end, Marinette channeled her inner Ladybug for the confidence necessary to pull off the sultry look. But she didn't dismiss Ladybug when the photoshoot was over. She kept her front and center, wrapped protectively around the core of her that remained nervous and scared. Because Ladybug wasn't a separate entity, hanging out in some corner of her mind and writing emails while Marinette slept. Ladybug *was* Marinette, and Marinette was Ladybug, and tonight more than ever, she had to own that.

Colette gave the contestants brief instructions on where to go when they arrived at the venue, then accompanied them to the waiting limousine. Marinette changed out of her flats and into her heels as the limo made its way across the city. She ignored the champagne being passed around, because as much as she could have used the confidence boost, she didn't want the accompanying clumsiness. A worst-case scenario of her tripping and falling and taking out at least five other people in a mortifying domino effect played in her mind. She promptly dismissed it.

The limo stopped in front of an upscale nightclub that Marinette recognized as one of the favorites of celebrities both local and foreign. A swarm of paparazzi waited outside. Cameras flashed and cell phones recorded and entertainment reporters stood with microphones in hand, waiting to interview the guests of honor.

Marinette took a breath to calm herself. She'd be fine. Everything would be fine.

The limo driver opened the door. He helped the contestants climb out, one by one so that the reporters had enough time to focus on each individual woman. When it was Marinette's turn, she took the driver's hand and lifted herself out of the limo as gracefully as possible, making sure the bottom of her jumpsuit didn't snag on her heels.

And then she was blinded by photographers.

The limo's tinted windows had caused her to severely underestimate the powerful flash on their cameras. She smiled, trying not to appear as stunned as she felt, and followed the example of the contestants who'd gone before her. Take a few steps. Stop. Pose. Answer a question from one of the reporters on the sidelines. Keep moving. She nearly fainted from pure relief when she saw Alya among the crowd, shouting her name and giving her a thumbs up.

Alya's presence brought a sense of reality back to Marinette's evening. If her best friend was there, it meant she still had both feet on planet Earth, that she hadn't suddenly found herself in another world. No matter how different the atmosphere and the circumstances, this was still Paris, the city she'd grown up in, the city she loved.

"Adrien!"

Marinette and half the crowd turned their heads simultaneously.
Another limo had replaced the one that brought the contestants to the club, and from that limo emerged Adrien, followed by Chloe. He offered Chloe his arm and didn't even flinch at the camera flashes and the multitude of people calling his name. He merely threw them the same handsome smile that had on so many occasions made Marinette go weak at the knees.

Then his eyes met hers.

And for several heartbeats, neither of them moved.

Marinette stared at Adrien. A dangerous combination of panic and excitement swept through her body. She felt hot and cold at the same time because Adrien couldn't just stare back at her like a normal person. He stopped smiling. His eyes widened. His lips parted. An unmistakable flush spread across his cheeks.

He looked at her like he wanted her.

And suddenly, it was all too much.

Marinette turned and hurried into the nightclub. She followed the signs that Colette had told them to follow and caught up to the other contestants on their way backstage. She pressed a shaking hand to her forehead, wondering if she looked as sick as she felt.

Then she fished her cell phone out of her bag and opened her emails.

\textit{x.x.x}

\textbf{Ladybug}

\textit{RE: Summer}

\textit{10 minutes ago}

\textit{I can't do this.}

\textit{x.x.x}

Although Adrien had been fired from the competition planning committee, he'd still done ninety percent of the work, so he arrived at the nightclub eager to see the fruits of his labor. He couldn't help being a little proud of himself. Not only had he slapped the whole thing together, he'd done it in less than two months.

Beside him, Chloe knocked back a second glass of champagne. "Is it bad that I always hope for one of the models to fall over?" she asked.

"Yes," Adrien said. He took the glass away from her. "Please go easy on the alcohol. The reporters will already assume we've gotten back together. I don't want to give them anything else to gossip about."

Chloe snorted. "Those reporters gave up on us a long time ago."

"Oh yeah? And who's the only one who's ever been sober enough to remember getting chased by the paparazzi after picking you up from another bar?" Adrien confiscated the champagne bottle as well. Chloe crossed her arms and scowled at the window. "Don't do that. Your makeup will crease," Adrien said, and poked her between the eyebrows. She knocked his hand away.

The limo in front of theirs moved on and they pulled up to the curb. Chloe straightened Adrien's tie before he stepped out into the assault of camera flashes. He ignored the reporters' shouts for the
time being, and turned to offer his hand to Chloe, who accepted it with a smile that he could have mistaken for genuine if he hadn't known her better. She slipped her arm through his as they started towards the entrance of the nightclub, the rich and golden couple with perfectly rehearsed smiles who walked with the confidence of the absurdly photogenic.

But when Adrien looked up, his years' worth of training abandoned him and he came to an abrupt stop.

Marinette stood by the entrance of the nightclub, staring straight at him.

And if he'd thought her beautiful before, he could not find a single word to describe her now. She stood alone, flanked on either side by photographers, an island in a sea of noise that filled Adrien with the irrational fear that she would vanish if he tried to get closer. She wore a black strapless jumpsuit with a gold print that reminded him of Tom and Sabine's bakery logo, a gold laurel hairpiece, and gold cuffs around her wrists.

Adrien's mouth went dry. His heart made several desperate attempts to escape his body and run after Marinette. And he would have run too, he realized; run and taken Marinette's face in his hands and kissed her until he could no longer breathe.

Marinette turned her back on him and disappeared into the nightclub.

Chloe's elbow rammed into his side.

"Get a grip," she hissed.

Adrien blinked, remembering where he was and what he was supposed to be doing. He forced the smile back onto his face, but his heart did not calm down and his thoughts remained incoherent. He hadn't expected to see Marinette so soon. He hadn't been prepared. It wasn't fair. He couldn't get the idea of kissing her out of his head.

But he held it together. He made it into the nightclub and took a deep breath and reigned in his imagination before he drove himself insane. His cell phone vibrated in his blazer's inside pocket. He reached for it.

"Adrien!"

He turned around. Ange Simon, fellow supermodel and co-star on his father's fragrance commercial, walked towards him in heels that made her at least four inches taller than him. She leaned down and kissed him on both cheeks. "It's so good to see you again!" she cried, then turned and kissed Chloe's cheeks as well. "You too, Chloe. We need to get together sometime soon. I've missed you!"

Chloe flipped her hair over her shoulder. "Of course you have."

Ange gave Adrien a sly look. "So… your cute friend Marinette is a finalist, huh?"

Adrien's cheeks reddened all over again, and he was grateful for the dim lighting in the club. "You're not going to let that go, are you?"

Ange gasped. "He's not denying it anymore." She turned to Chloe. "You should have seen him at Chateau Margaux. He would not admit he liked her."

"Sounds like Adrikins," Chloe drawled.
Adrien threw his hands in the air. "If the two of you are going to stand around roasting me, then I'm going to find my seat. Chlo, don't drink too much. Ange, don't let her drink too much," he said, then hurried off to a sparsely populated corner to check his phone.

A one-line email from Ladybug. His heart sank as he read it, and he hit reply before he even had an idea of what to say to her.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**
RE: Summer
17 minutes ago

What can't you do? Talk to me, Ladybug.

x.x.x

Marinette tottered around in her heels as Henry and Alexa got dressed. They'd each been in makeup for at least an hour already, and from backstage they could all hear the crowd getting louder as more people filled the nightclub.

Marinette scrutinized every inch of her two outfits, making sure nothing was out of place and that neither the dress nor the suit would magically unravel themselves in the middle of the runway show.

"Honey, breathe," Alexa said to her. "You look like you're about to pass out."

"To be fair, so do these other ladies. I think poor Astrid threw up a few minutes ago," Henry said.

Marinette squeaked in surprised when Alexa suddenly wrapped her arms around her. "I swear on my honor as a model that I will not fail you. You just stand back here, let us do our thing, maybe do some deep breathing exercises, and when the moment comes you'll be ready to face that audience. Got it?"

Marinette hugged her back. "Thank you," she said.

If only the competition was the only thing she had to worry about. She hadn't been able to think straight since seeing Adrien outside. Adrien in his black blazer and green tie. Her kitty cat.

When she was satisfied with the state of her designs, she grabbed her phone and snapped a photo of Alexa and Henry fully dressed. Then they pulled her into at least five selfies, which they promised to post all over social media when the show was over.

Once they had gone to talk to the other models, Marinette found a moment to rest and an unoccupied chair to rest in. She had a new email from Chat Noir. Short and to the point. She tapped her phone against her mouth as she thought of a reply, then wrote the only thing that came to mind.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**
RE: Summer
9 minutes ago

I'm scared.
Adrien sighed. Scared. He could handle scared. For a moment he’d been terrified she would run away and forfeit the competition.

He looked at the runway, but couldn’t see anything backstage. No hint of black and gold. No ladybug and black cat outfits. Across the room, Nino waved at him from the sound booth. Adrien waved back.

Someone slid into the chair on his left.

His father.

"You chose this venue well," Gabriel said as he straightened his suit jacket. Nathalie stood on his other side, and handed him his tablet once he’d gotten settled. "I’m proud of all the work you put into this competition."

Adrien smiled. "Thank you, Father," he said. He glanced at his phone to check the time.

The runway show was about to begin.

---

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

If you weren't scared, I'd be surprised! Do you want to tell me about it? Maybe talking it out will help.

---

A burst of music made Marinette jump. Onstage, the host of the competition welcomed the audience. The models ran into position and giggled and tittered excitedly.

Marinette looked back at Adrien's email and hit reply.

---

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

I'm scared that I'm going to lose.

I'm scared that my best won't be good enough.

I'm scared that things are going to change between you and me once you know who I am.

---

Adrien tapped his fingers against his knee impatiently as the host went through a list of sponsor names.

Ladybug was afraid things would change between them.
Naturally, things were bound to change between them. But what kind of change could she be anticipating that freaked her out so bad? He checked to make sure his father was preoccupied, hid his phone behind his blazer, and replied to Ladybug.

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Your best IS good enough. It got you this far, didn't it?
And why would you be afraid of things changing between us? Change can be a good thing.

Marinette stood up and paced the backstage area as the first pair of models walked out onto the runway. She wanted to reply. She needed to reply. She needed for her thoughts to not be a jumbled mess. She caught Alexa and Henry’s eyes and they both gave her a double thumbs up. She smiled nervously back at them, then returned to the email.

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

It can be a good thing, but it can also be a bad thing.
You're one of my best friends, Chat Noir.
I love what we have now.
I don't want to lose this.

Adrien watched as the second pair of models walked onstage. Not Ladybug’s designs. Not Marinette’s designs. Not relevant to him.
He read through the email again. And again. What was Ladybug saying?

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Just now

Would you rather I not know who you were, then?

Marinette shook her head vehemently. Stupid cat. How could she not want him to know?
I want you to know who I am more than anything.

Adrien let out a weak laugh. He was going to hell for this. He might have been in hell already. He couldn't be this happy over an email from one girl when his heart had been seconds away from running off with another.

I want you to know who I am too, Ladybug.

Tears filled Marinette's eyes. She wiped them away before her makeup could smear, but more kept coming. They splashed onto her cell phone screen as she wrote back to Adrien with shaking hands.

I already know who you are.

Adrien checked to verify that the fifth pair of models also weren't dressed in Ladybug's designs, then read the email she'd sent him.

And his heart almost stopped.

I already know who you are.

He stared at the screen.

I already know who you are.

He closed the email, then opened it and read it again.

I already know who you are.

He tapped the reply button.

Chat Noir
RE: Summer
Marinette looked up as the sixth pair of models walked out onto the runway. Alexa and Henry were next. Henry blew her a kiss. Alexa gave her a reassuring smile.

Marinette typed one sentence and pressed send.

Ladybug
RE: Summer
Just now

I'm sorry, Adrien.

Adrien.

She knew.

She really knew.

Adrien stared at his phone so hard that he didn't realize the sixth pair of models had come and gone until the host's voice penetrated his shock.

"The Luck Collection," he announced, and Adrien raised his head, watched the black cat and ladybug clad models walk down the runway, heard the appreciative murmurs from the audience, saw his father begin taking notes—

"By designer Marinette Dupain-Cheng."

Adrien stood from his chair.

A hand closed around his wrist and tugged him back down. Probably Chloe's. Definitely Chloe's. She'd been seated next to him, but…

Marinette Dupain-Cheng.

His father leaned towards him. "Is something the matter, Adrien?"

The Luck Collection, by designer Marinette Dupain-Cheng.

"Adrien?" Chloe's voice sounded so far away.

Marinette was Ladybug.

Adrien leaned back against his seat. He'd lost track of his phone. Where was his phone?

Marinette.

He saw Chloe lean down and pick something up.
Marinette is Ladybug.

His phone. The screen lit up. Chloe sucked in a breath, then slowly placed the phone on his leg.

A large crack split the screen in two. The top half could still be read, but the bottom half was nothing but static.

Ladybug's email was nothing but static.

Marinette's email was nothing but static.

X.X.X

Marinette waited.

One, two, three pairs of models later, no reply had come.

The silence was deafening.

Even in the commotion of the models reuniting with their designers, she felt Adrien's silence in each thudding beat of her heavy heart. Henry and Alexa found her staring blankly at her phone. When she couldn't tell them what was wrong, they settled for embraces and murmured reassurances.

Because the hard part had ended, but the most difficult part was only beginning.

The host of the show called the designers onto the runway. Marinette left her phone and bag behind, asked Henry and Alexa to take care of them. She walked out seventh, following the same order the models had. Wild applause filled her ears. She could hardly see the audience thanks to the darkened club and the bright spotlights.

But she saw Adrien, standing on the runway with the winner's bouquet in his arms.

He didn't look at her. He didn't look at any of them.

And yet, when the host introduced him, Adrien smiled and waved at the audience as if it were any other day.

Then Gabriel Agreste took the stage. His appearance was met by even wilder applause and the clicking of camera shutters from every direction. He wore a placid expression and the reddest pants Marinette had ever seen. The host mock-bowed to him before handing him the microphone.

Marinette tried to catch Adrien's eye. He didn't so much as turn his head in her direction.

"Thank you all for coming out here tonight," Gabriel Agreste said. "It has been a pleasure and a privilege to witness the debut of these promising young designers. Truth be told, the competition almost didn't happen this year. Had it not been for my industrious son, none of us would be here right now."

More cheers for Adrien.

Marinette willed him to look at her.

He didn't.

"Unfortunately, there can be only one winner of this competition. But I can assure every single one
of you that these ten women standing before you are more than worthy of the title. Please, give them another round of applause."

Marinette smiled for the audience along with the other contestants.

Adrien still didn't look at her.

"Without further ado," Gabriel said, and the tension in the club threatened to suffocate Marinette. "The winner of this year's design competition is…"

Marinette's heart hammered in her chest. In the glow of the spotlight, she saw Adrien's fingers tighten around the flower bouquet.

"…Noemie Chapuis."

And she closed her eyes as her dreams were swept away by the audience's thunderous applause.

Chapter End Notes

A couple months ago, I mentioned on Tumblr that I'd made a hard decision about this fic. Well. This is it.

Come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista) or Twitter (PrinKitt). Just don't ask about the ending to this chapter, because answers come to those who wait until next time.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

This chapter is thirty pages long.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Somehow, Marinette made it into one of the cars transporting guests from the competition venue to the club where the after party would be held. She guessed it had something to do with Henry and Alexa, who had changed out of her designs and into regular clothes, and now flanked her protectively, each holding one of her hands.

Her designs would be taken back to Agreste HQ, where they could be claimed the following day at any time. Marinette planned to go during the bakery's usual post-lunch lull in customers. She'd bring home the dress and suit, safe in their complimentary Gabriel Agreste garment bags, and she'd put them... somewhere. She wasn't sure where. A large part of her never wanted to see them again. Another part of her, fighting to be heard over the negative voices in her head, shouted at her to quit being such a coward.

On her lap, her phone lit up. A text from Alya. Marinette extracted her hand from Henry's and unlocked her screen.

Alya Cesaire: Just got to the club. Will be waiting by the door.

There were other messages: texts from her employees, cursing Gabriel Agreste and flooding Marinette with love and support. Facebook and Twitter notifications kept coming in, likely messages of a similar nature.

But there were no new emails, and there hadn't been in the past hour.

Marinette turned her phone off.

When the car reached the club, she spotted Alya immediately, standing beside the door as promised. "You two can go ahead," Marinette said to Henry and Alexa, "that's my best friend right there."

Henry hesitated, then gave her a hug. "We'll see you inside, okay?"

Marinette nodded. She let them get out of the car first, then slipped her phone into her purse and followed. She wouldn't check for anymore emails. She couldn't. The silence hurt too much.

She hadn't taken more than two steps before Alya all but tackled her, wrapping her arms around her shoulders and squeezing. "Oh Marinette," she whispered, "I don't even know what to say."

Marinette let herself be held. What was there to say? She'd worked hard, she'd tried her best, and she'd lost. Plain and simple. She had nothing to regret.

Alya pulled away from her. "How's Adrien taking the Ladybug thing?"
Marinette flinched at the mention of his name. She thought of Adrien onstage, handing the winner's bouquet to Noémie Chapuis, kissing her on the cheek and congratulating her before making a swift exit. He hadn't spared Marinette a single glance. He'd simply darted into the crowd and vanished.

"I don't know," she said. "He won't talk to me." Her throat tightened. "He won't even look at me."

Alya's eyes widened. "Marinette—"

"But it's fine," she interrupted her. "It's fine. I am very tired, and I have a bakery to open tomorrow, and there's probably going to be a thousand people there so I need to have my head in the game." She gestured towards the club. "I'll just find Monsieur Agreste and thank him for the opportunity, then go home. If Adrien doesn't want to talk to me, I won't force him to."

She tried to walk away, but Alya grabbed her arm. "Wait," she said. "Forget about Adrien for a second. You didn't come this far to give up and go back to baking. So you lost one competition. Big deal! That doesn't mean you aren't a great designer, and it sure as hell doesn't mean you're doomed to fail."

Marinette lowered her head. "I know that."

"Do you really?"

"Let me go, Alya. I'm tired."

"Because I don't want you walking up to Gabriel Agreste looking like a dog with its tail between its legs. You heard what he said up on that stage. All of you deserved to win. That means he thinks you're something special, and so does whichever designer picked you for the finals, and so do I, and so do your parents and your friends and everyone out there who saw your work and hoped you would win," Alya cried. "Now I can't tell you what the hell Adrien is thinking, but I know for a fact he was cheering for you too."

Marinette stared at the sidewalk through tears. In her mind, she saw Adrien outside the movie theater, admiring her outfit and asking if she'd considered entering his father's competition. She saw him raising his glass in a toast to Marinette Dupain-Cheng: fashion designer. She saw every encouraging word Chat Noir had ever sent her.

And she saw him running away from her.

"Marinette?"

She faced Alya and wiped her eyes. "You're right," she said. "Monsieur Agreste may not have chosen me for the internship, but that doesn't give me an excuse to act like a loser in front of him."

And neither did Adrien's silence.

Marinette had already wasted too much of her time moping in the past. She'd let her superstitions about bad luck get in the way of her yo-yoing, which she loved. She'd let Nathanael's rejection destroy her confidence in romance, something she'd always wanted. Would she let the outcome of one competition put an end to her dream of becoming a fashion designer?

There would be other competitions.

And as much as it hurt to think, there would be other guys.

Marinette looped her arm through Alya's and pulled her towards the club's entrance. "Come on,"
she said. "I've got a designer to thank."

x.x.x

Adrien moved on autopilot. He shook hands, replied to questions he couldn't remember, and laughed at jokes he hadn't really heard. He stopped to pose for photographs. He even took a selfie with a fan.

And all the while, he couldn't get the words out of his head:

The Luck Collection, by designer Marinette Dupain-Cheng.

He'd lost track of Chloe in the crowd. He may or may not have done so on purpose. He didn't want to talk to her, or Nino, or his father, or anyone. If he'd had his way, the limousine that took him from the competition venue to the after party would have driven him straight home instead. The quiet of the mansion may have depressed him most days, but it was preferable to the lights and the noise and the faces and the sheer effort of having to be a put-together human being when Marinette was Ladybug and nothing made sense anymore.

After verifying the VIP guest list with the club's bouncer, Adrien walked inside and headed straight to the restroom. He stopped at the first sink, twisted the faucet, checked the water to make sure it was cold enough, then splashed it on his face. When that didn't get rid of his shock, he did it a second time. A third. A fourth. The fifth time, he began to come to his senses.

Marinette was Ladybug.

Okay, fine.

Marinette was Ladybug and she'd known that he was Chat Noir and she hadn't told him.

He splashed more water on his face and started over.

Marinette was Ladybug. The girl he'd been emailing for more than a year had been right across the bakery counter from him the whole time. And she knew that he was Chat Noir. She'd said so in her email. She'd been in his bedroom. She'd seen his cat.

And she hadn't told him.

Why?

Adrien paced back and forth in front of the bathroom sinks.

Why? Why? Why?

Hadin't she known how much he wanted to meet her? Hadin't she known how much he cared about her? Hadin't she said that he was one of her best friends? Why keep her identity a secret from him? Why play with his feelings like that? What was she after?

He grabbed a paper towel and wiped the water off his face.

To get into the competition?

No. If it hadn't been for his meddling, there wouldn't have even been a competition that year. That didn't make any sense, but neither did Marinette knowing he was Chat Noir and not saying anything to him.
Was she after his father?

She couldn't be. If that was the case, Ladybug would have told him to go to the bakery months before he stepped foot in it the first time. Marinette would have talked to him sooner. It had taken a year to have a conversation with her that didn't involve pastries.

A person with a scheme would not wait that long to enact a scheme.

Nor would they reveal themselves to him once the scheme had ended.

Because Marinette very well could have kept her identity a secret from him. She didn't have to send him her designs. She didn't even have to tell him Ladybug was in the competition. If all she'd wanted from him was to get into the competition, she could have stopped talking to him the moment the finalists were announced.

But she kept talking to him. She emailed him her final designs so that when the time came, there would be no mistaking her for anyone else.

She'd done all that because she wanted him to know who she was. She wanted him to look at Marinette Dupain-Cheng and see Ladybug.

So he closed his eyes, and he did just that.

He saw Ladybug hiding behind a bakery counter, all nervous smiles and stuttered words as she fumbled for the pastry he'd requested. He saw Ladybug sitting across from him, eating an éclair and talking about Jagged Stone. Ladybug enthusiastically agreeing to fake date him in order to get their best friends together. And there was Ladybug, holding his hand in a movie theater, trying to distract him from the zombies onscreen. Ladybug bragging about the chocolate torte she'd made. Kissing his cheek. Standing by her door, promising to cheer for him. It was Ladybug who'd called him so he could listen to Nino's concert from Chateau Margaux. It was Ladybug in the shirtdress with the red ribbon in her hair, beautiful enough to break his heart.

And it was Ladybug he'd run into in front of Notre Dame, crying her heart out in her pajamas because she was in love with her best friend and terrified of losing him.

Adrien opened his eyes.

That day, he'd sent Ladybug a picture of Notre Dame and told her he was going to ask Marinette on a date. Who did he find at Notre Dame? Marinette. Heartbroken and scared Marinette, crying such earnest tears, in love with a guy who had feelings for another woman.

I wanted to find him and tell him right away.

She'd been looking for Chat Noir.

Ladybug had been looking for Chat Noir.

Adrien remembered the way she'd seemed to stare right through him, how she hadn't even noticed him calling out to her until he grabbed her arm.

She wouldn't have reacted that way if she'd known he was Chat Noir.

Oh God, she hadn't known.

She'd run out of her house looking for someone she couldn't even recognize. And she'd found him.
And she hadn’t known.

Adrien swallowed past the lump in his throat. But if she hadn't known then…

The picture of Plagg on his phone. Of course. He remembered how she'd stared at it, how she'd momentarily gone silent before bringing it up, how she hadn't spoken or joked at all while he navigated to the gallery with the rest of the photos. And he had mistaken that for a normal reaction? He could have kicked himself.

She'd even stopped talking to him after that.

_Have you ever lied to me?

She'd gone radio silent for an entire day because she thought he was lying to her. But she must have realized he wasn't at some point.

Her birthday. He'd left her alone in his bedroom with the very letter she'd written to him for their friendship anniversary. She'd stared at him like she wanted something from him—oh yes, he definitely hadn't imagined that. Then she'd held onto his arm all the way to Nino's apartment. She'd emailed him during the party. She'd invited him into her house afterward.

Because she knew. She'd probably been trying to tell him that very evening, but she hadn't gotten the chance, and the next day she'd found out she was a finalist in the competition.

Adrien choked out a laugh. The unbearable pain in his chest faded, and he had to laugh again because Marinette—shy and beautiful and funny and smart and talented and clever and witty and unbelievable Marinette—was Ladybug.

Ladybug worked in sales as a baker. Marinette had lost all her confidence after being rejected by her boyfriend. Ladybug had blue eyes and adorable freckles and blushed like it was no one's business. Marinette had called spraining her wrist before a yo-yo championship the second greatest disappointment of her life. Ladybug liked Jagged Stone and wanted a pet hamster. Marinette had written Adrien a letter, bought him lunch, and sent him to a café where the staff wore her designs.

And Ladybug…

_He's impossibly handsome and out of my league._

Ladybug was…

_And he's my best friend and I don't want to lose that friendship over something like this._

_Marinette was…

_You're one of my best friends, Chat Noir. I love what we have now. I don't want to lose this._

Adrien's eyes widened.

_I'm so afraid of losing him._

"Shit," Adrien hissed. He threw the wadded-up paper towel into the garbage and ran for the door. "Shit, shit, shit!"

_x.x.x_

The club was so packed that Marinette had to edge her way around a crowd of dancing bodies to
reach the VIP lounges on the other side. She spotted Gabriel Agreste standing with his hands clasped behind his back, the picture of stoic and straight-laced, and envied his ability to not look out of place in the lively nightclub. She strengthened her resolve. *Thank him and leave. Thank him and leave.*

"Monsieur Agreste," she said, and he turned his head towards her.

"Ah, Ms. Dupain-Cheng. It's good to see you."

Marinette held her hand out to him. He looked at it in mild surprise. "I wanted to thank you. For this opportunity. Your judgment was fair and I believe Noémie's designs really were the best of the evening."

Monsieur Agreste studied her for a moment, then shook her hand. "I was very impressed with your designs as well," he said. "Nathalie told me about the accident you had the other day. It could not have been easy putting together two runway-ready outfits with an injured hand."

"If I couldn't do that much, I wouldn't have deserved my place in the finals," Marinette said.

In the dim lighting, she caught the faintest hint of a smile on Gabriel's face. "Do you have a moment? There is someone here who would like to speak with you."

At first, she thought he might be talking about Adrien, and her heart leaped into her throat as he guided her towards the VIP lounge. But the only people inside the neon-lit lounge were designers. Fashion designers. Marinette's eyes widened. Some of the most famous names in fashion sat around the VIP table, holding drinks, scrutinizing her as Gabriel led her forward: Jose De La Cruz, Madame Gusteau, Cristine, Lupe Moreno, and others that she had practically worshipped as a child.

"Oh, is this the young lady who designed the ladybug and black cat eveningwear?" the silver-haired Cristine cooed.

"Fine work, darling. And with a hand injury, no less," Edgar Ills said. "I couldn't have done it. I'm far too much of a baby."

Heat filled Marinette's cheeks. She didn't know whether to faint or cry or thank them or perform a combination of the three, preferably in the right order. But it was a shorter man in his mid-sixties who rose from the table to greet her: Gianmarco Leuzzi, the powerhouse of the Italian fashion scene.

"Marinette Dupain-Cheng," he said, as warmly as if he'd known her his entire life. He clasped her hand in both of his. "My champion. How good it is to meet you at last! This tasteless Gabriel has broken your heart, no doubt, but try not to hold it against him. He has his reasons."

Gabriel reached for a champagne glass. "I can find someone else for my judge's panel next year," he said.

"You wish you could find someone else," Monsieur Leuzzi boomed. He gestured towards the entrance of the lounge. "Come, Ms. Dupain-Cheng. I will speak with you away from these vultures."

Marinette, who no longer understood what was happening, offered the table a quick bow of the head. "It was nice meeting you all," she said, though she hadn't really met any of them. She hurried after Monsieur Leuzzi, who walked ahead with the assurance of someone who knew he would be followed no matter what.
"By now you have guessed that I was the one who chose you for the finals, yes?" he said.

Marinette nodded. "Yes, monsieur. It's a huge honor. I've admired your work for as long as I can remember."

Monsieur Leuzzi preened a bit at that. "It is because you have good taste. With one look at your work, I could tell. 'She is talented, this one!' I said to myself. 'She will go far!' You understand?"

Marinette nodded again. She wished she could will herself to do something other than nod. Like speak, maybe. Speaking was good. But how could she form words when the greatest fashion designer in Italy had just complimented her work?

Monsieur Leuzzi stopped at the threshold of the VIP lounge and turned to face her. "In fact, I thought to myself, 'if that fool Gabriel makes the mistake of choosing anyone else, I will snatch this girl right out of his hands.' Lucky me!" he cried. "Did you know, Ms. Dupain-Cheng, the benefit of earning top ten in this competition? All of us — he waved at the table they'd left behind — "notice all of you. Make a good impression, we remember you for a long time. And you have impressed me, young lady."

Marinette stopped herself from nodding a third time. "I'm incredibly happy to hear that, monsieur," she said.

He beamed at her. "So! Here is what I will do," he said, and removed a business card from his suit pocket. "You take some time, yes? Because other vultures will come after you now, and ultimately it is your choice to make. But you put together your absolute best—portfolio and cover letter. Send it to this email address." He pressed the card into Marinette's hand. "My secretary will forward it to me, and I will see about finding you a place in Milan." Then he clasped her hand in his again. "You are a remarkable young woman, Ms. Dupain-Cheng. But I can make you a goddess."

Marinette stared at the business card. Then she looked into Monsieur Leuzzi's happy face and realized what he was offering her and she had to restrain herself from hugging him and maybe screaming and crying like a lunatic. "Thank you so very much," she said. "I'll send you my finest work! Ah, but it might take a few days—my mother and father are abroad right now and if I'm going to leave Paris I'd really like to discuss it with them first."

"You are a family-minded girl! I like that. Yes, by all means, take your time. But do not keep me waiting forever," Monsieur Leuzzi said.

"I won't." Marinette took a step away from. "Thank you again. Thank you so much, Monsieur Leuzzi. It's an honor to meet you."

He turned back towards the VIP table. "Likewise, my dear!"

Gianmarco Leuzzi wanted to work with her.

She needed to find Alya.

x.x.x

Adrien pushed and pardoned his way through a wall of dancers and nearly tripped over Alya.
Cesaire, who stood close to the edge of the stage. She squawked in surprise when she saw him, then cried out again when he grabbed her by the shoulders without warning. "Have you seen Marinette?" he shouted over the music.

Alya scowled. "That depends. What do you need her for?"

"I have to talk to her," Adrien said. He looked around the area as if speaking about Marinette would make her magically appear. "It's important!"

"Oh, it sure as hell better be," Alya yelled. "What were you thinking, running off on her like that? Do you have any idea how terrified she was to tell you she was Ladybug?"

"Did literally everyone know about this except me?" Adrien shouted.

Alya glared at him a moment longer, then sighed. "She went to talk to your father. You'd better find her quick, though. She's planning to go home after that."

Adrien's heart dropped into his stomach. "Thanks," he said, then he pushed and pardoned his way through the crowd again. If only he hadn't dropped his phone. One email and he could tell her to find her quick, though. She's planning to go home after that.

Marinette saw Alya standing near the edge of the stage and ducked around several dancers to reach her. "Alya!" she cried.

Alya turned around, eyes wide. "Hey!" She pointed off in another direction. "Did you—?"

Marinette grabbed her by the shoulders. "You will not believe what just happened to me!"

"Why's everybody manhandling me tonight?" Alya cried.

"Gianmarco Leuzzi offered me an internship," Marinette shouted before Alya could get another word in. Her best friend's jaw dropped.

"He did?" she screamed, and then they both hugged each other and laughed and jumped in circles. "Girl, what did I tell you? Marinette Dupain-Cheng is off to conquer the freaking fashion world!" Alya said. She abruptly stopped jumping and disentangled herself from the embrace. "You'll have to tell me all about later, though. Adrien's looking for you."

The smile slipped off Marinette's face. "What?"

"He was here like two minutes ago. I sent him towards the VIP lounge because I thought that's where you were!"

Marinette looked back in the direction she'd come from. All she saw were dancers and darkness. She'd thought her heart couldn't beat any faster, but it quickly proved her wrong. Adrien was looking for her. Adrien was looking for her. "Oh," she said. "Oh geez. Alya, what do I do?"

"What do you mean, what do you do? Go after him!"
Right. Go after him. That was the logical thing to do. Go after Adrien. He wanted to see her. "Okay," she said. "Okay. I'll text you when I find him."

"Hurry!" Alya yelled as Marinette began to fight her way through the crowd again.

x.x.x

Adrien burst into the VIP lounge, startling Gabriel and his designer friends. "Has anyone seen Marinette Dupain-Cheng?" he asked.

Cristine hid a smile behind her hand. Madame Gusteau shook her head and chuckled into her champagne. But it was Gianmarco Leuzzi who actually bothered to speak. "I saw her off ten minutes ago," he said.

Adrien's face fell. "Did she go home?"

Gabriel stood from the table and set his champagne glass down. "What is the meaning of this, Adrien?"

"I need to talk to Marinette about something." Adrien looked over his shoulder towards the stage. The stage. With DJ Bubbler performing, he could go up and get a better view of the entire club. He turned back to his father. "Listen, I may step out for a while, and my phone is broken, so…"

Gabriel stared at him the way that he used to before turning down one of his requests. Adrien pleaded with his eyes. He'd sink to his knees and beg in front of all those designers if he had to. His dignity was a small sacrifice to make.

Gabriel's expression softened. "Be back before midnight," he said finally.

Adrien grinned. "Thanks Dad!" he cried, and he took off towards the crowded again.

How to get a message to Marinette without his phone? Too many people blocked the most direct route to the stage, so Adrien stuck to the perimeter until he reached the stairs, all the while keeping an eye out for Marinette. No black and gold jumpsuit anywhere in sight. He couldn't find Nathalie, either. Desperate, he climbed onto the stage, hiding just out of sight while he scanned the crowd.

He needed something, anything that would get Marinette's attention. Preferably without making a spectacle of himself in front of his father, his father's friends, the competition's sponsors, and all the other important people in the club that night.

An idea struck him.

Up ahead, Nino stood at the sound booth, engrossed in the music. When Adrien tapped him on the shoulder, he jumped almost three feet in the air. "Dude! What—?"

"I need you to do me favor," Adrien said.

x.x.x

Marinette got as close to the VIP lounge as she could without drawing attention to herself. She'd made a good impression on the A-list designers and she would not mess that up by letting them see her and think she was a stalker. But a quick headcount of the people inside revealed no Adrien among them, and she faced the crowd, wondering where he could have gone.
Her eyes darted upwards. The nightclub had a balcony; shadowy figures moved with the beat of the music overhead. Had Adrien gone up there to get a better view of the room? Marinette excused her way towards the nearest staircase. She didn't like the idea of climbing up a flight of stairs in three-inch heels, but what choice did she have? The music faded as she crossed the room, the brief pause in dancing giving her a reprieve from dodging people's limbs.

But the moment she put her hand on the staircase rail, a new song began to play. One that made her freeze in her tracks, not just because the slow, jazzy beat was completely different from Nino's set, but because Marinette recognized the song. She'd had it stuck in her head for days a couple of weeks ago.

"I got a gal who's always late, anytime we have a date, but I love her... yes I love her..."

A chill ran down her spine despite the heat of the crowded room.

"I'm gonna walk right up to her gate, and see if I can get it straight, 'cuz I want her... I'm gonna ask her..."

She felt Chat Noir in every note of the song.

"Is you is or is you ain't my baby? The way you're actin' lately makes me doubt. Yououse is still my baby, baby. Seems my flame in your heart's done gone out."

Marinette took her foot off the stairs and turned around. Some of the dancers had abandoned the floor to get drinks, but most had stayed, and now Marinette faced a sea of couples, holding each other and swaying to the music. She walked towards them. If the song was Adrien's doing, he couldn't have been too far away.

"A woman is a creature that has always been strange... just when you're sure of one, you find she's gone and made a change... Is you is or is you ain't my baby? Maybe baby's found somebody new... or is my baby still my baby true?"

Marinette's eyes scanned every face in the crowd as she moved. He wasn't on stage. He wasn't where she'd left Alya. He wasn't in the VIP lounge or on the balcony. She stopped walking. Turned her head to the left.

And there stood Adrien at the edge of the crowd, staring straight at her.

The same thrill of panic and excitement that she'd experienced earlier that evening surged through her body with renewed strength. Adrien's eyes held hers captive. She couldn't look away. She didn't want to look away.

Because for the first time since they met, he was truly seeing her.

He took a step forward.

"Is you is or is you ain't my baby? Maybe baby's found somebody new... or is my baby still my baby true?"

Marinette held her ground. She fidgeted with her purse and shifted her weight to her other foot, but she didn't take her eyes off Adrien, and he didn't take his eyes off her. He stepped around the swaying couples until he stood before her and she had to tilt her head up to maintain the eye contact. And in the brief silence between the end of the song and the beginning of the next, he spoke one word.
"Ladybug."

Warmth bloomed in Marinette's chest. If her heart could have floated right out of her body and into his hands, it would have.

"Hello, Chat Noir," she replied.

She had imagined how he might smile when she first said that to him. Her imagination paled in comparison to the real thing. It was like watching the sun rise on a cold winter morning: his shoulders fell, his mouth stretched wide, his eyes practically glittered. And then he laughed. Helplessly. Adorably. He doubled over with the force of it, and Marinette couldn't help but join in. She covered her mouth with her hand, giggling and silently thanking the darkness for hiding her blush because she couldn't have gone redder if she tried.

Eventually, Adrien managed to contain himself, but his eyes still shone with mirth when he looked at her. Marinette tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

"This is a great party," she said over the music, which had started up again at full volume.

"Thanks," Adrien said. "I planned it."

They grinned at each other. Marinette waved her hand in the direction of the door. "I mean, it's a great party, but I have to go. The bakery reopens tomorrow and I have to be up at five…"

"Oh!" Adrien rubbed the back of his neck. "Right. I almost forgot about that."

Marinette tapped her heel against the dance floor. "But," she said, "I don't feel very comfortable walking all the way across town by myself. It's pretty late, and I'm pretty tired…"

"And there are a bunch of weirdos out there," Adrien added.

"Yes. Exactly. And you Agrestes have been so gracious and accommodating this week. I don't suppose you could spare someone to escort me home?"

He crossed his arms over his chest and put on an expression of deep thought. "I believe all of our usual people are busy right now," he said. "But if you don't mind my company, I would be more than happy to see you safely back to the bakery."

"If it isn't too much trouble," Marinette said, making sure to sound extra concerned over the possibility of inconveniencing him.

"It's no trouble at all," Adrien replied. He motioned for her to walk on in front of him. "Lead the way."

She led the way.

She tried not to be hyperaware of Adrien's presence behind her and failed spectacularly. There might as well have been no one else in the club. All those bodies pressed around her and the only one she could sense was Adrien's, just out of her reach.

The crowd thinned as they approached the door, and once they stepped out into the summer night Marinette slowed down so that Adrien could walk along beside her. For one whole block, neither of them said anything. Her heart hammered against her ribcage. She snuck a glance at him, but he looked forward, his expression neutral. She looked ahead as well.
It wasn't until they reached a crosswalk that Adrien spoke. "I'm sorry about the competition."

Marinette kept her eyes on the traffic signal. "There's nothing to be sorry for."

"If I hadn't invited you into my house…"

"What, I would have won?" She threw a playful smile at him. "Noemie had the better designs. Not everything has to be your fault, chaton," she said. Then the signal changed, and she stepped out into the street, leaving behind a surprised Adrien. He followed a moment later.

"I'm not trying to say that everything is my fault—"

"Oh really?"

"—just that this particular thing may have been my fault." He caught up to her again. "I was the one who told my father that I… that we were…” He trailed off and waved his hand in a circular motion.

"Friends?" Marinette guessed.

He dropped his hand. "Friends. Right."

She knew that wasn't what he meant, but she felt an impish desire to make him sweat a little. He had run away from her, after all. She stretched her arms over her head. "Well," she said, "the competition wasn't a complete bust. Gianmarco Leuzzi made me an offer I couldn't dream of refusing."

Adrien stepped in front of her. She stopped walking. "What do you mean?" he asked.

She studied her fingernails. "I mean he wants me to go work for him." She hesitated. "In Milan."

She looked up in time to see Adrien's face go slack as the reality of her words dawned on him. "Milan," he whispered. Then he put on a determined frown. "You're going, right?"

"I don't know," Marinette said. "I have to talk to my parents about it. The bakery is more popular than ever, and even though I'm sure they'd be able to handle it just fine without me, it's still a major change, and there will be moving expenses and they'll probably want to go with me to help me get adjusted…" She bounced up and down on her toes. "But if Monsieur Leuzzi likes my work, I'm not going to say no to him."

"Of course you aren't!" Adrien cried, and before Marinette could react he'd thrown his arms around her and lifted her right off the ground. She dropped her purse in surprise.

"Adrien!" she squeaked.

"I'm so happy for you!" he said without a shred of remorse. He set her back down gently, an enormous smile on his face. "You've earned it. You know that, right?"

Marinette, still giddy from the hug, did not let go of him. She didn't feel like letting go of him. Instead, she leaned closer, held onto the open ends of his blazer and hid her face in his chest. "But we just found each other," she whined. "It's not fair."

Adrien remained perfectly motionless. And then one of his hands slid up her back to rest at the nape of her neck, and his thumb caressed her bare skin, and she shivered at the light touch. "I know," he said.
Marinette lifted her head and found herself almost nose to nose with him. Her grip on his blazer tightened. He leaned in towards her. She tilted her head ever so slightly…

…and a wolf whistle pierced the night, causing them both to jump away from each other. She'd forgotten that they were on a public sidewalk. And public sidewalks were full of nosy pedestrians.

Adrien glared at the whistler across the street, then cleared his throat. He picked up Marinette's purse and handed it to her. "You dropped this."

"I sure did," Marinette said. But when he met her gaze again, the playfulness took hold of her and she winked at him before turning on her heel and starting down the street. He caught up to her in a few bounds.

"So, Milan," he drawled. "That means you'll have to learn Italian."

"Oh yeah. I can't be wandering around a foreign country without knowing the language," Marinette said. "Have you ever been to Italy?"

"A few times. It's a nice place."

"I bet you know more Italian than I do."

Adrien hummed thoughtfully. "I can say a few phrases. Things like 'where is the restroom' and 'sorry I don't speak Italian.' Ah, and thanks to one of my old photographers, I know more than my fair share of Italian profanity."

"Let me guess: Is it the guy with the weird spaghetti obsession?" Marinette asked.

"The very same."

She laughed as she imagined a younger Adrien trying to follow the photographer's instructions, picking up some swear words along the way. Then it occurred to her that she didn't know much about Adrien's childhood, and her curiosity took over. "So you did a lot of teen modeling, then?"

"I did. It's one of the prerequisites for supermodel, you know."

"There are prerequisites for supermodel?"

Adrien nodded, his expression as casual as if he were discussing the weather. "Height and weight are the most obvious. If you don't meet those standards, you can't even apply for the program."

"I see."

"From there you need eighteen credit hours of juvenile modeling. The rest of your credits are made up of model conduct lessons. For example, how to be better than everyone around you, how to look good from every angle, how not to get glitter on everything, nightclub dance theory…"

Marinette whacked him with her purse. "You are so full of crap!"

Adrien laughed. "I told you you'd be impressed by my bullshitting abilities."

"I am so not impressed," she said.

"You're impressed, buginette. It's okay. I won't tell anyone."

Heat rushed to Marinette's face at the term of endearment. "P-Please. Who'd be impressed by you,
"stupid cat?"

"You, apparently." Adrien smirked at her.

"Oh yes, because there's so much to be impressed with." She lifted the back of her hand to her forehead dramatically. "Ooh, I'm Chat Noir! I banged my elbow against the door and now I'm **dying**! I've been waking up at six in the morning every day for five years and I **still** have the nerve to complain about it! Hashtag boohoo, hashtag first world problems."

Adrien made a noise of indignation. "Oh, is that how it's going to be?" He brought both hands up over his heart. "I'm Ladybug! I'm an extremely talented baker and an amazing fashion designer! Gianmarco Leuzzi and Jagged Stone and Paris's sweetheart Adrien Agreste adore me, but I still don't think I'm special!"

"Those aren't insults," Marinette pointed out.

"Probably because insulting you wasn't on my list of things to do when we met," Adrien said, then pursed his lips together and looked away.

Marinette nudged him with her elbow. "You had a list?" she asked, and had the pleasure of seeing his face screw up with embarrassment.

"Maybe," he said. "But most of it went out the window when I realized you were you."

They came up on another traffic signal and stopped to wait for it. Marinette moved in front of him. "Come on, you shouldn't let my identity get in the way of whatever it is you wanted to do."

"Fine." He held his hand out. "It's nice to meet you, Ladybug. I'm Adrien Agreste."

Marinette shook it. "It's nice to meet you too, Chat Noir. I'm Marinette Dupain-Cheng."

The traffic signal changed. Adrien let go of her hand, but offered her his arm, and Marinette happily accepted it. They crossed the street together. Notre Dame stood two blocks ahead, and the bakery waited just beyond the river.

"What else was on your list?" she asked after a peaceful silence.

"Congratulating you on making the top ten in the competition, which I've already done," Adrien said. "Then I was supposed to tell you how much fun I've had emailing you this past year, and how you've been this huge, positive force in my life, and that some days your emails were the only thing I had to look forward to. Thankfully, that isn't the case anymore, but you got me through a lot of bad days."

Marinette leaned her head against his shoulder. "The feeling is mutual, chaton. And I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

"Oh. Shit. That reminds me." Adrien's hand went into his blazer pocket. A moment later, he withdrew his cell phone and pressed the home button, illuminating a cracked and fuzzy screen that didn't respond to his touch. "I dropped it during the show earlier," he said. "Otherwise I would have emailed you the moment I got my head together."

Marinette tapped the unresponsive screen. "So you're the culprit, then," she said to it. She pulled her own phone out of her purse, remembered it was off, and switched it on. Within seconds her social media, email, and text message apps were flooded with notifications. "I forgot I promised
Alya I'd tell her when I found you."

Sure enough, she had two texts from Alya, the first one normal, the second one not so much:

**Alya Cesaire: Did you find him yet?**

**Alya Cesaire: I'm going to take your silence as a yes. GET IT GIRL**

Marinette closed the message and prayed that Adrien hadn't seen it, but one look at his innocent little smile told her that he had.

He motioned for the phone. "May I?"

Marinette handed it over and watched as he opened her email inbox and typed *Chat Noir* into the search bar. A row of email threads appeared, from "Summer" all the way back to "Meeting Time", the very first.

"You didn't delete any of them," he said.

Marinette shrugged. "Why would I?"

Adrien gave the phone back to her. "I don't know. Why would you keep emails from a random stranger?"

"Because they're important to me." She slipped her phone into her purse and laid her head on his shoulder again. "You're important to me," she added, much quieter. "I just never really thought about how important until you told me you had a crush on some random girl and I got all huffy and mad."

"That random girl was you, by the way," Adrien said.

Marinette whacked his arm. "I know that now!"

They had reached Notre Dame, and Adrien swept his arm towards the cathedral. "So you ran all the way out here to stop me from asking you on a date. And you succeeded! And ripped my heart out of my chest and stomped all over it in the process."

"Well, if it makes you feel better, I dumped you for you."

"God, I hate that guy."

Marinette snorted. "Shut up!" she cried.

"Sorry *buginette*, but if you thought I was bad over email, I'm even worse in purr-son."

She let go of his arm. "That's it. I draw the line at puns," she said, and started walking faster to get away from him.

Adrien matched her pace. "Oh come on, you love my puns."

"Your puns are terrible."

"But you still love them," he said. "They are one of the many quirks that you find endearing about me. I'm even willing to bet that they're your favorite thing about me."

Marinette turned her head to the side to hide her smile. She hated that he was right. "Cat puns," she
said. "Who even takes that much time to come up with so many cat puns?"

"Bored supermodels with secret identities," Adrien replied. "But if it annoys you, I'll stop."

Marinette gave him a dirty look. If she told him not to stop, then she admitted she liked his puns, but if she didn't tell him not to stop, he might go through with it. Thankfully, he seemed to interpret her glare just fine.

"I won't stop," he said.

"And I'll learn to live with it," she said.

And then they were at her door. She stared at the dark bakery, took a deep breath, and turned to face Adrien. "Would you like to come in for a few minutes?" she asked, relieved that her voice didn't waver. "You were kind enough to walk me all this way. The least I can do is offer you a drink."

He smiled. "Sure. It's not like I have anywhere important to be."

Marinette rolled her eyes and reached into her purse for her keys. She would have argued that the party he'd spent a month planning was an important place to be, but knowing her Chat Noir, he'd come up with a ridiculous counterargument and stick to it until she let him win. She unlocked the bakery door and stepped inside, then switched on the lights.

And gasped.

A banner hung across the back wall reading *We love you Marinette!* in bright pink paint. On the counter were several flower bouquets, cards, and boxes of candy. She walked over and picked up one of the cards. It was from Olivier, and declared Gabriel Agreste a tasteless good-for-nothing who wouldn't be able to tell a brilliant design if it kicked him in the crotch. The other cards were full of similar abuse and encouragement from all her employees. She reminded herself to tell them the good news first thing in the morning.

"Somebody's popular," Adrien said.

Marinette stuck one of the flower bouquets into the crook of her arm. "I have very enthusiastic employees," she said. Three bouquets remained. Even without the stitches in her left hand, she wouldn't have been able to carry everything. She looked at Adrien. "Can you help me take these upstairs? I can come back for the banner later."

A silly grin spread across his face. "Anything for my Lady," he said.

She told herself to calm down as she passed him two of the bouquets and one of the candy boxes. The rest she managed to fit into her arms, and she walked towards the back kitchen with Adrien on her heels, switching on lights as she went. A list sat on the prep table: all the pastries they would need for the next day, marked off with Sophie's small and tidy checkmarks.

Marinette couldn't even begin to think about the following morning. She climbed the stairs to her front door, hearing nothing but Adrien's footsteps behind her and her own pulse pounding away. She flipped through her keyring for the house key and jammed it into the doorknob. "Just as a warning," she said, "I haven't had time to clean this week."

"I wouldn't dream of judging you," Adrien said in a tone that suggested otherwise.

Marinette chose to ignore the comment, twisted the knob and pushed the door open with her
shoulder. She walked straight to the kitchen and put down the flowers and candies before switching on the lights.

In terms of cleanliness, the house was passable: no dirty dishes in the sink, no clothes on the floor, and no garbage that should have been taken out days ago. But she had let the dust accumulate again, which her mother would never have forgiven, and there were at least four pairs of shoes in the entryway that she could have taken upstairs. Several of her belongings—sketchbook, magazines, tablet, yo-yo, television series box set—were stacked on the coffee table and leaning precariously to one side.

Adrien hadn't moved from the entrance hall. The Chat Noir cheekiness from moments ago had been replaced by the trepidation of a boy entering a girl's house for the first time, and Marinette couldn't help smiling at how cute and innocent it made him look. "You can put those down anywhere," she said. "I'll take them to the garden later."

She played it casual as Adrien walked past her and into the living area, busying herself with the flowers and pretending she wasn't the least bit interested in his reactions to the house. "You have a garden?" he asked. He stood between the sofa and the occupied coffee table and examined the leaning tower of Marinette's things.

"I have a balcony," she replied. "We keep flowers up there."

Adrien put the bouquets he carried on the shorter segment of the sectional sofa, then reached for something on the coffee table: Marinette's yo-yo. He held it up for her to see. "Yo-yo champion?" he asked.

"Former yo-yo champion," Marinette corrected him. She removed her heels one foot at a time. "Now I'm just a has-been."

"Washed up at the tender age of, what was it, fourteen? Fifteen?" He clucked his tongue. "Sad."

Marinette stuck her feet into her house slippers, walked into the living area and snatched the yo-yo right out of his hand. "Well, thanks to a certain tomcat I've been practicing again," she said. "But if you want a demonstration you'll have to come back during business hours."

His eyebrows went up. "When are business hours?"

"Not today." She set the yo-yo back on the table and turned to face him.

"So if I come back every day," Adrien said, "chances are one of those days will be business hours, right?"

Marinette smiled. "Something like that." She motioned to the sofa behind him. "Have a seat. If I've been on my feet most of the night, then you must have been, too."

He sat down. She occupied herself by straightening the magazines and sketchbooks on the table, if only to keep her hands busy. She had him. Chat Noir was in her house, right where she wanted him, and she couldn't decide what to do with him.

"Tell me about that guy who isn't me."

She looked at Adrien. The wicked gleam in his eye, which she had begun to recognize as her beloved kitty cat, made her heart climb into her throat. But two could play at that game. She clasped her hands behind her back. "What's there to say?"
His smile widened. "I don't know, Ladybug. You told me he's impossibly handsome and out of your league. Can't blame a guy for being curious."

"No, I don't suppose I can." Marinette took a step towards him. "For starters," she said, "he's a supermodel."

Adrien scoffed. "Supermodels are overrated."

"He's blond…"

"A blond supermodel? Must be an airhead."

Marinette stood in front of him. "He has these green eyes I could get lost in for hours…"

"Damn it," Adrien hissed. "There are literally no downsides to having green eyes."

"And—you have to promise you won't judge me for this, but… he likes cat puns."

Adrien narrowed his eyes at her. "Are you sure this guy isn't me?"

Marinette put a hand on his shoulder, brought one knee up on either side of him, and sat directly on his thighs. "What if he is?" she whispered. The stunned look on his face would have made her crack up laughing if she hadn't been so nervous.

He took her hand from his shoulder and kissed her fingers. "Then he must be the luckiest guy in the world."

Marinette sighed. She almost joked that she'd known it would be a bad idea to meet Chat Noir in person, but instead she draped her arms over his shoulders, leaned in and kissed his cheek, giggling when his skin visibly reddened. So good at hiding his emotions, yet still so remarkably transparent. She skipped over his mouth and kissed his other cheek, then drew back to admire her handiwork: one flustered Adrien Agreste, glaring at her as if she was the cruelest person he'd ever met. She snorted. "What?" she asked.

"You know exactly what," he said.

She slid her hand through his hair and his eyes fell shut. "Leave me alone. I'm having fun."

"At my expense," he murmured, making no attempt to hide how completely at her mercy he was. She could get used to that.

Marinette kissed the corner of his mouth. "Sorry, chaton."

His hands came up to rest on her hips. "You're not sorry at all," he said before she pressed her lips against his.

It was a gentle kiss, lasting just a few seconds before she broke contact. Adrien's grip on her hips tightened and she smiled before kissing him again, a bit harder than before. When she pulled away, he lowered his head to her shoulder and sighed, his breath tickling her bare skin.

"Your freckles," he said.

"What about them?" Marinette asked.

His lips brushed her shoulder. "They're cute." He kissed his way towards her neck, scattering her thoughts in the process. "And you have so many of them…"
Tingles ran through her body. She turned her head to expose more skin for him. "Ladybug spots," she whispered as his mouth traveled along her jaw. She felt him smile.

"I should have known," he said. He kissed her freckled cheeks. "Of course it was you." His hands slid up her back and she felt the heat of his touch through the thin fabric of her jumpsuit. "How could my Lady be anyone else?"

Marinette threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled him into another kiss. A deeper kiss. And he wasted no time responding, arching into her touch like the cat he was. She tilted her head and wished her left hand was in the proper condition to get at the rest of him, but she settled for lightly dragging her fingers down his neck and was rewarded with a throaty hum that sent fire through her blood. When she drew back, he cupped her face in his hands and showered it with kisses.

She laughed. "Adrien."

"Adrien's busy," he grumbled.

"Chat Noir, then."

"Chat Noir is even busier."

Marinette stopped him with a finger over his lips. "I have something important to say."

He stared into her eyes for a moment. "Hold that thought," he said, then half-stood, twisted around, and unceremoniously dropped her on the sofa. Marinette yelped in surprise. She went silent a second later when he crouched over her, one hand on either side of her head. "I seem to recall," he said, "that a little over a month ago, Ladybug—that's you—forced me to watch the stupidest movie of all time."

Her eyes widened. "Oh no."

"And last week, that same Ladybug—still you—forced me to watch that stupid movie all over again," Adrien continued. "Altogether that's four hours of my life that I'm never getting back. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Marinette knew there was only one thing to say. "The Horrificator is a cinematic masterpiece."

Adrien attacked her sides with his fingers. She squealed and writhed and flailed her arm out to try and stop him, but he avoided her reach easily, and she ended up clawing at thin air.

"I did you a favor!" she cried between laughter and attempts to squirm away from him. "You should be thanking me—haha—for enriching your life!"

Adrien stopped and turned her head to face him. "You've got some kind of nerve," he said.

Marinette stuck her tongue out at him. "What are you going to do about it?"

He kissed the bridge of her nose. "Many things," he said. "One of which is bound to work."

She pushed his face away. "You're a flirt."

"And you're a tease. We make a nice pair, don't you think?"

She kissed his neck, rendering him temporarily speechless. "We do," she said. And while he was distracted, she grabbed him by the front of the shirt, hooked her leg over his hip and flipped him
under her.

He gaped at her in unabashed amazement. "How are you so strong?" he cried, his voice an octave higher than before.

"What, you think those huge sacks of flour in the bakery haul themselves?" Marinette rubbed her cheek against his with a happy hum. "Your skin is softer than mine," she said. "It kind of pisses me off."

"I'll share my secrets with you if you let me play with your hair," Adrien murmured in her ear.

She didn't need to be asked twice. She reached up and patted the updo that had given her unnecessary trouble that afternoon, then frowned. "Hold on, there's like a million hairpins in here."

She pulled off the gold hairpiece and dug through the rest of her hair for the bobby pins she'd used to keep it together. Little by little, the updo came undone, and her hair tumbled over her shoulders in waves.

"That was only four hairpins," Adrien pointed out when she'd finished.

"Do you want to play with my hair or not?" she asked. "Because I could change my mind."

He lifted his arm and combed his fingers through her hair before she could revoke access, and Marinette forgot just about everything that wasn't him. The look of pure adoration on his face made her stomach tie itself into knots. "Hey," she said.

"Hmm?" His fingertips brushed her scalp and she closed her eyes.

"Nice weather we're having lately."

He pulled her towards him. "It's alright."

"By the way, I'm in love with you."

Adrien froze.

Marinette cautiously opened her eyes. The man underneath her showed no signs of life. She waved a hand in front of his face and, after a few seconds, he blinked at her. Then a bright red blush made its way up his neck and spread all the way to his ears. "I-Is that so?" he croaked.

Marinette laid on his chest and rested her head against his shoulder. "Yes, you dumb cat."

Slowly, Adrien's body thawed and his hand resumed stroking her hair. "Sorry," he said. "It's just that no one's ever told me that before, and it seems too good to be true." He laughed. "All of this seems too good to be true."

She smiled. "I thought the same thing when I found out who you were."

"Really?"

She nodded. "Despite the Ladybug nickname, I've never been a lucky person," she said. "So how could the pun-dropping menace I'd accidentally fallen for turn out to be the infuriatingly pretty supermodel that I had a huge crush on?"

"You did have a crush on me," Adrien said.

Marinette nestled closer to him. "I did. Every time you walked into the bakery, I didn't know what
to do with myself. My brain stopped working. You were so handsome and so nice and you liked our pastries and you spoke fluent Chinese to my mom and then you showed up after closing one day and I had a complete meltdown…"

"You got drunk on a Tuesday."

"I got drunk on a Tuesday," she confirmed.

Adrien let out another quiet laugh. "All of that because of me?" he said. "All that time I spent pining for my Lady, wondering who she was, and the whole time she stood right in front of me, too tongue-tied to say hello?"

"That's the gist of it."

"I love you too," he said, and his words washed over Marinette's body like a spring breeze. "I love you, Marinette. I don't think I've ever been this happy in my life."

She pushed herself up so she could look at him. "Good," she said. "I want you to be happy. And if you aren't happy, I want you to tell me. No hiding things. No pretending you're fine. We'll fix whatever it is together, okay?"

Adrien swept a lock of hair behind her ear. "The same goes for you, buginette. I'm not just a stranger on the internet anymore. If you need me, I'll come running."

The familiarity of those words gave Marinette pause. He'd made that same promise the day he found her in front of Notre Dame, and true to his word, he had been there ever since. He encouraged her when she was chosen as a finalist. He snuck over to the bakery to make sure she was all right after her hand got injured.

And even as Chat Noir, he had been there for her all year, sending her cat pictures and memes and stupid jokes when she was sad, keeping her company when she couldn't sleep, listening to her when she felt like complaining, constantly reminding her that he loved her.

She gazed down at the man she'd never thought she would have, who stared back at her like he couldn't quite believe that she was his, and felt a rush of affection for him. Her pen pal. Her best friend. Her kitty cat. Better than anything she could have hoped or dreamed of.

"I love you, Adrien," she whispered.

Adrien caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. "Come closer," he said. "Please."

She didn't have the heart to deny him. She kissed him with every ounce of feeling that she had for him, and he matched her kiss for kiss, leaving her dizzy and breathless and indescribably happy. She nipped at his bottom lip and felt a tremor run through his body. When she followed that up with her tongue, he pulled her tighter against him. But he took his time with her, exploring her mouth in a languid and patient manner, and she ignored the urgency itching under her skin because there would be plenty of time for urgency in the future.

What she needed now was to kiss him for every email, for every word, for every laugh, for every wonderful day that he'd spent making her fall in love with him. She wanted to take all the happiness he'd given her and pour it back into him until they both overflowed.

Her phone rang.

Marinette and Adrien cast annoyed looks in the direction of the kitchen, where she'd left her purse
when she walked in. "It's not important," she decided, and crushed her lips against Adrien's again. The phone fell silent.

And immediately began to ring.

Adrien broke the kiss with a groan. "It might be important, buginette."

Marinette, determined to ignore it, trailed kisses down his neck. "How much do you want to bet it's not?" she said.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and rolled her back under him, capturing her mouth in a heated kiss. The phone stopped ringing as his hand slid down her leg and behind her knee, and her quiet moan got lost in the sound of the damn phone ringing again.

"Oh for the love of—"

Adrien removed his hand from her thigh and kissed her forehead. "Answer it. I'm not going anywhere," he said.

Marinette reluctantly slid out from underneath him. She walked to the kitchen on rubbery legs and dug her phone out of her purse. The display read Nino Lahiffe. She answered it. "Hello?"

"Put Adrien on," Chloe Bourgeois snapped on the other line. "And don't even think about hanging up because I will keep calling."

Marinette pulled the phone away from her ear, made a face at it, then brought it back. "Sure. Give me just a second." She marched into the living room, where Adrien sat upright on the sofa trying, with mixed results, to smooth his hair into place. "It's for you," she said.

Adrien frowned. "Really?" He took the phone. "Hello?"

Marinette picked up her yo-yo and paced the floor to distract herself from the thoroughly kissed model on her sofa who she wouldn't mind thoroughly kissing some more. Walk the Dog. Forward Pass at an imaginary Chloe's face. Around the World. Under Mount. Braintwister.

"Huh? Oh, sorry. Marinette's doing things with her yo-yo—that is not a euphemism, Chlo." Adrien wiped a hand over his face. "Why do you even have Nino's phone? What—he said before midnight." A pause. "It is?" He checked Marinette's phone screen. "Shit, it is." He sighed. "Fine. See you soon."

Marinette removed the yo-yo string from her finger. "Bad news?"

"I guess I am going somewhere after all," Adrien said. "Promised my father I'd be back at the party before midnight."

"Or what, you'll turn into a pumpkin?"

"Worse: a cat." He winked at her, then stood from the sofa. "Besides, my Lady needs her beauty rest for the grand reopening of Tom and Sabine's tomorrow."

Marinette walked over and threw her arms around his neck. "What if I don't want you to leave?" she asked.

Adrien's expression turned mischievous. "Those are pretty dangerous words."

"They're pretty true words."
He laughed and swooped in for a quick kiss. "I appreciate your honesty. I mean, I really appreciate your honesty. But don't worry, I'll be here bright and early."

Marinette wondered what it would be like seeing Adrien walk into the bakery the next day. No more hiding in the kitchen. No more stammering and clumsy mishaps. No more worrying that people would find out he liked to visit after hours. Just the blissful knowledge that he was hers and she was his and she could jump over the counter and kiss him in front of everybody if she damn well pleased. She grabbed her keys and followed him to the front door. "Are we still on for our date tomorrow?" she asked.

Adrien sucked in a breath. "Listen, Ladybug, there's kind of another woman in my life—"

"I'll take that as a yes." She opened the door for him. He motioned for her to go first. She put her good hand on his stomach and pushed him out, then closed the door behind them. They walked down the stairs together.

"Did you have anywhere in mind for the date?" Adrien asked.

Marinette crossed her arms. "Well, we could always meet here under the pretense that we'll decide in the spur of the moment, then choose not to go anywhere."

He gasped. "Marinette, please! Think of my virtue!"

"Oh, I'm thinking about it, all right."

The moment they reached the landing he gently pushed her against the wall and kissed her senseless. "Behave," he said, and she smiled as he kissed her again. And again. And again. "First, I need to take you on a real date. Maybe buy you some non-plastic flowers if you aren't tired of them. Then, a proper introduction to my father over Sunday brunch… and I'll have to email you the dress code for that."

Marinette straightened his tie. "You'll email it to me?"

"You didn't think I was going to stop, did you?"

She had entertained the thought of their email correspondence dying off now that they knew each other's identities. But she hated the idea of not seeing Chat Noir's name in her inbox anymore. His emails had always been the highlight of her day. "You'd better get your phone fixed soon, then," she said.

"If I know my father, he's already called someone to get it taken care of." Adrien laced his fingers with hers and they walked through the bakery kitchen, into the seating area where the banner still waited to be taken down.

Marinette, exhausted though she was, did not want the night to end. In the morning, everything would be moving forward again. The bakery would keep her busy and tired and stressed until her parents came home. All the correspondence she'd received would take days to catch up with. And then she had a portfolio to think about, one that would inevitably separate her from Adrien, if only in the physical sense.

Suddenly, his escapes to a closed bakery for a moment's peace made perfect sense.

At the door, Adrien kissed her hand before letting it go. "Get some rest," he said.

"I will," Marinette promised. With the competition behind her and her heart safe in his care, she
could probably sleep through the entire month of September without noticing. But she wouldn't. Not when her real life was just beginning. "Good night, Chat Noir."

He pulled the door open, paused, then turned and gave her one last, lingering kiss. "Good night, Ladybug," he said.

A car waited on the curb for him. Marinette could make out the enormous shape of Adrien's bodyguard behind the wheel, and through the window she caught a glimpse of Chloe in the backseat, no doubt waiting to hear all about Adrien's evening.

Adrien opened the car door, but to Marinette's surprise, he turned back. "Oh, and by the way," he said, and an absolutely devilish grin spread across his face. "I told you you wouldn't be able to keep your paws off me."

Marinette cupped her hands around her mouth. "Boo! Go home already, you filthy tomcat!"

Adrien winked at her before ducking into the car and closing the door. She waited until the car crossed the river and disappeared into the distance, then she went inside.

Marinette closed and locked the door and faced the empty room with its stacked chairs, drawn curtains, and empty display cases. In eight hours, the place would be alive again, packed with people curious to see if the young woman they'd heard so much about was as talented as others claimed.

And she would be ready to prove them right.

Chapter End Notes

Told y'all I'm a sucker for happy endings. But wait! We still have one chapter left! Join me next time for the exciting conclusion of Lucky Us.

Don't forget to comment, and then come bother me on Tumblr (geek-fashionista) or Twitter (PrinKitt).
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

We find our heroes in transit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chat Noir
RE: Twenty Sixteen
2 hours ago

Tease me all you want, but I really can't get out of bed this morning. I've made several halfhearted attempts and the covers sucked me right back in every time. This is terrible. I have important things to do today.

Help me, Bugi-nette Kenobi. You're my only hope.

x.x.x

Adrien yawned as he walked to the café table, balancing a caddy of drinks in one hand and dragging his carry-on with the other. The airport was as busy as always: men in suits trying to conduct business in cramped plastic seats, children running circles around their tired parents, people catching quick naps on the floor of their terminal, and security guards keeping an eye on all of them. But at least this morning, unlike so many of his previous trips to the airport, Adrien had friendly faces to look at.

"Here we go. One caramel frappe for Chloe, a regular coffee for Nino, and a soy hazelnut latte for Alya, extra espresso," he said as he lowered the caddy to the table.

Alya, who looked even more tired than Adrien felt, grabbed her drink as if her life depended on it. "Oh thank God."

Adrien passed Nino and Chloe their drinks, then sat in the empty seat beside Chloe and lowered his head to the table. "Wake me up when it's time to leave," he mumbled.

"Quick, now's your chance, sneak us one of those croissants he's got in his bag," Nino said, presumably to Alya.

Adrien pulled his carry-on under the table and tightened his legs around it. "Stay back, you fiends. These are Marinette's croissants," he said. And despite his exhaustion he had to smile at the happy flutter in his stomach, because he would be seeing Marinette in a couple of hours. Marinette, his love, his Lady, who he hadn't seen in almost two months. Earlier that morning, her parents had loaded his bag with pastries, fresh out of the oven and packaged with care, then hugged him as if he was their own son before sending him on his way.

"How long are you staying with her, anyway?" Nino asked. He removed the lid from his coffee cup and blew across the surface. "You didn't pack much."
"Just the weekend," Adrien said. "Last time I stayed the whole week, neither of us got any work done—"

"Gross," Chloe snapped.

"—because we went sightseeing."

Alya laughed. "Is that what they're calling it these days?"

Adrien's cheeks burned. Well, they weren't wrong. "What about you two? As I recall, you're using sightseeing as an excuse to stay in California a few extra days."

Nino choked on his coffee. Alya's cheeks reddened. They'd been together for a year and had only recently made their relationship Facebook official. Adrien could see why Marinette predicted it would take them at least four more years before they realized they might as well get married.

Chloe picked up her phone and checked the screen. "While I'd love to stay and listen to boring couple banter, I have a flight to catch."

"Where are you even going?" Alya asked her.

"For now, to visit my dear friend Prince Ali and be pampered like the royalty I am," Chloe said as she stood from her chair and picked up her bag and drink. "After that, who knows? Maybe I'll seek enlightenment on a mountain somewhere."

Adrien smiled at her. Chloe had been in therapy for several months, and had recently concluded that she needed to leave Paris if she wanted to get out of her own head. He hoped it would do her some good; she'd already come a long way from drinking herself into a stupor every weekend, but she had yet to give up on the idea that her cancer's return was inevitable, and it continued to hold her back.

He stood from his chair and wrapped Chloe up in an enormous hug. "I'll miss you, Chlo," he said. She kissed his cheek. "You know Prince Ali is dying to see you, so don't be a stranger. But if you're bringing Marinette along, do me a favor and wait until after I've left the country."

Adrien rolled his eyes. Chloe claimed that she still hadn't forgiven Marinette for the Ladybug thing, but seeing as she hadn't chased her away from him yet, he imagined that her ill will was at least partially an act. "When are you going to admit that you like her?" he asked.

Chloe pulled Adrien's sunglasses out of his shirt pocket, snapped them open, and perched them on her head. "When hell freezes over," she replied.

"Wait a sec, Chloe," Nino said. He got up and patted his jeans pockets until he reached into one and withdrew a small USB drive. He walked around the table and held it out to her. "Made you a playlist for your adventuring. It's kind of a queen-bee-versus-the-world sort of thing, and unique to you, so try not to leak it online."

Chloe stared at the USB drive. She looked up at Nino. And then she stepped forward and threw her free arm around his neck.

Adrien gasped.

"I don't hate you, you know," she said.
He slapped his hand over his mouth. It was as close to a love confession as she would ever get.

Nino smiled and hugged Chloe back. "Great," he said, "I don't hate you either."

She let go of him, took the USB drive and tucked it into her jacket pocket, then walked off as if she hadn't shown any emotion whatsoever. "I'll see you peasants later," she called over her shoulder.

Adrien, whose heart still raced from Chloe's almost-confession, laughed to himself. A part of him wanted to go with her to make sure she'd be okay. They'd been together for so many years, protecting and defending each other from everything life threw at them, that the thought of her being out in the world by herself made him nervous. But he had to believe that she'd be fine on her own. He couldn't be her knight in shining armor forever.

Nino clapped Adrien on the shoulder. "Alya and I should get going, too. Our flight's about to start boarding. How about yours?"

"Mine doesn't board for another half hour," Adrien said. He checked his phone and perked up when he saw a reply from Marinette in his inbox. "I'll be in Milan just in time for lunch."

Alya got to her feet and pulled up the handle on her carry-on luggage. "I know that you'll probably forget this entire morning the moment you see Marinette, but do tell her that her best friend says hi."

"And her best friend's boyfriend," Nino added.

Alya kissed his cheek. "Yes, the boyfriend too."

Adrien grabbed his backpack full of pastries and slung it over his shoulder, then gave both Nino and Alya a hug. "You two be careful over there," he said. "Alya, keep an eye on him. Don't let him drink too much before his show or he'll go experimental on the crowd."

"Gotcha," Alya said. "And don't you distract Marinette too much. She's a busy woman."

Adrien smiled at her as innocently as he could. "Me? A distraction? Never."

He waved them off as they headed in the direction of their gate, then he checked the nearest flight list for his. It took a little over an hour to get from Paris to Milan by plane. He'd have himself a nice cat nap so he could be fresh and awake for Marinette, though he knew that even without the nap he'd be fresh and awake for her anyway. Nine months into their relationship and the sight of her still left him thunderstruck.

The best part of his trip to Milan? Marinette had no idea he was coming. He'd mentioned having important things to do—certainly nothing could be more important than visiting his Lady—but he hadn't gone into specifics. As far as she knew, he had plans in Paris that weekend.

Adrien found his gate with ease, took up an unoccupied seat, and sent his father a text message letting him know he'd made it through airport security. Then he opened his email.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

RE: Twenty Sixteen

7 minutes ago

* A Star Wars reference?
Really?

Where is my good morning cat pun? )-:

X.X.X

Chat Noir
RE: Twenty Sixteen
15 minutes ago

In my awake brain—which, coincidentally, I left at home.

It’s times like these that make me wish I could send emails to the past. Had this been a year ago, you would have been shocked by your own eagerness for cat puns. I’d have to include a footnote: The Ladybug of the present has fallen head-over-heels in love with Chat Noir, which he warned her she would do, but did she listen? No, she did not. She only has herself to blame for her newfound addiction to comedy.

X.X.X

Ladybug
RE: Twenty Sixteen
Just now

Remember the time I suggested you ought to jump into the Seine?

I’m repeating myself now.

Go jump into the Seine.

So you’ll wake up, I mean.

X.X.X

Chat Noir
RE: Twenty Sixteen
Just now

That’s not what you mean AT ALL, Marinette. You’re so cruel. The cruelest girlfriend I’ve ever had. You snatch my heart right out of my chest, then you leave the country with it. I’m going to go withdraw a ridiculous amount of money from my bank account and use it to wipe my tears.

(I do have to disappear for a bit. Talk to you soon, my Lady!)

X.X.X

Marinette set her phone down with a pout and looked out her office window. Gianmarco Leuzzi was all about the future: he’d stationed his fashion empire in a brand-new skyscraper with views of the entire city of Milan. Marinette couldn’t complain; she loved the view, the office, her job, and her boss—she’d learned more from Gianmarco Leuzzi in the last five months than she had in her four years of university. She loved her tiny apartment and the architecture that reminded her so much of home.

The only downside to Milan was that it had no Adrien.
After just a month of dating, she'd desperately wanted to ask him to go with her. Getting to see her Chat Noir every day had ruined single life for her forever. She couldn't stand the thought of having him at long distance again. But she also couldn't separate Adrien from his father while the two of them were making so much progress on their relationship, so she'd told him to stay.

Besides, it wasn't like they hadn't seen each other on holidays and weekends and whenever else the opportunity presented itself. It kept their relationship in a perpetual state of new. Each meeting, being the first meeting in some time, sparked enough excitement and giddiness to keep them smiling for hours.

Marinette turned back to the designs on her computer screen. She needed to put the finishing touches on at least two more before she went to lunch. She'd promised her friend Lila—a distant cousin of Alexa’s—that she would check out a new restaurant with her.

As she worked, she thought about how she'd break the news to Adrien that she planned on staying in Italy for another year, then looking for work in New York after that. She knew she would go back to Paris eventually, but now that she'd gotten a taste of life abroad, she felt like a snowball rolled off a hill. She wanted to keep moving, accumulating experience and contacts until the grand opening of her own boutique would be one of the most highly anticipated events in the fashion world.

And even though the past year had taught her that her boyfriend was as needy and affectionate as, well, a cat, she still worried. Would he want to stick with her through all that? Would he be okay with their relationship taking a backseat while she pursued her dream?

By the time her lunch hour rolled around, she had successfully thought herself into a funk. She almost sent Alya a message before she remembered Alya was on a flight to the United States. Her mother was an option, but Sabine wouldn't see the message until after the bakery’s lunch rush ended.

So Marinette saved her progress on the designs and grabbed her purse, determined to distract herself with food instead. Her phone chimed on her way out of the office.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**

*RE: Twenty Sixteen*

*Just now*

*I'm hungrryyyy. What's a cat supposed to eat around here?*

x.x.x

**Ladybug**

*RE: Twenty Sixteen*

*3 minutes ago*

*You live in the gourmet food capitol of the world and you're asking me?*

x.x.x

Marinette emerged from the building and stepped into the warm spring sunshine. It was a gorgeous afternoon, so beautiful that she changed her mind about taking the metro and decided she'd catch a bus instead. She made it to the nearest stop just as a bus arrived to let off a few passengers, and
although it was somewhat crowded, she managed to find a seat near the back.

The restaurant Lila wanted to meet at was in the city center. Marinette sent her a text to let her know she was on her way, then checked her email again.

x.x.x

**Chat Noir**  
*RE: Twenty Sixteen*  
*2 minutes ago*

That's exactly why I can't decide. You pick for me, buginette. I don't feel like walking much.

x.x.x

Marinette shook her head, but tried to conjure up a mental map of Paris and its restaurants. She knew of a few good places in the vicinity of the Agreste mansion. She also knew of a few good places around her house. But Adrien had mentioned having things to do that day, so he might have been somewhere else. She frowned and hit reply.

x.x.x

**Ladybug**  
*RE: Twenty Sixteen*  
*Just now*

Are you home or somewhere else?

x.x.x

Marinette admired the city of Milan through the bus window. Although her Italian had improved a lot in five months, she still didn't trust herself to go exploring on her own without getting lost. She couldn't wait for the day when she could wander around the way she did back in Paris, going wherever her whims suited her, discovering new places to eat and hang out. Now that warmer weather was on the horizon, she'd have to find somewhere like her rooftop balcony back home. She'd had some of her best ideas out in the fresh air.

Her phone vibrated, pulling her out of her reverie. The bus slowed as it approached another stop, and Marinette opened Adrien's email.

He'd sent her an image. An oddly familiar image of a comfortingly familiar hand pointing a thumbs up at an oddly familiar cathedral. A cathedral that, if she wasn't mistaken, was the Milan Cathedral.

"I'm gonna kill him," she murmured in French.

Marinette stood up and squeezed past the couple boarding the bus. The moment her feet hit the pavement, she took off running. She could see the cathedral's spires over the tops of the nearby buildings, and pedestrian traffic grew thicker as she drew closer, but she didn't slow down.

"I'm gonna kill him, I'm gonna kill him, I'm going to kill him," she panted as she dodged people walking in the opposite direction and burst into the Piazza Duomo. As usual, it was packed with dozens of tourists snapping photographs of the cathedral, its surrounding structures, and the monument of Italy's first king. Marinette stopped and scanned the crowd. Plenty of blondes around, but…
Standing by himself with a large backpack on his shoulder was her blonde. Her kitty cat. Her ridiculous, pun-loving, surprise-visiting boyfriend. All thoughts of strangling him left her mind immediately.

She could have walked around the square and snuck up behind him, but there was no way she’d miss the look on his face when he saw her. Because even now, nine months into their relationship, it was still the same look: the brightening of his eyes, the general upward motion of everything—brows, mouth, shoulders and chest as he breathed in—and the twitch of his hands, impatient to touch her.

Marinette started across the square. When Adrien spotted her, he slipped his phone into his jacket pocket and strolled leisurely forward, as if he hadn't just flown to another country to visit her on a whim. They met each other halfway.

"You couldn't just get lunch in Paris?" Marinette asked.

"I could," Adrien said, "but everyone else was going somewhere and I didn't want to eat by myself."

She threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, my poor minou," she murmured before he pulled her into a kiss that made fireworks explode behind her eyelids. Would she ever get tired of kissing him? She doubted it.

Adrien drew back with a grin. "Everyone says hi, by the way. And I come bearing gifts," he said, then shrugged his shoulders for emphasis. "I think your parents put one of everything in here."

Marinette gasped and turned him around to dig into his backpack. Sure enough, it was full of things from the bakery. "I have so many people to share these with and I kind of don't want to share any of them," she said. She reached for a tried and true macaron and popped it into her mouth. The sweet strawberry flavor made her taste buds sing.

"Why do I get the feeling you'd be perfectly happy if I left the backpack and went home?" Adrien asked.

"Because it's lunchtime and I'm hungry and you know how I get when I'm hungry." Marinette zipped the backpack shut. "Which reminds me, I'm supposed to be meeting my friend Lila at a restaurant right now. Want to come with me?"

Adrien's growling stomach answered for him. Marinette laughed and pulled him away from the cathedral. "Let's go, chaton."

x.x.x

All throughout lunch and the rest of the work day, Marinette's anxiety made a nuisance of itself in her brain. Even the pastries that she brought to share with her coworkers and munch on while she finished her designs did little to calm her racing thoughts. She imagined Adrien waiting in her apartment, happily unaware of her intent to complicate their relationship with all her plans.

But her plans were important to her. Adrien was important to her. She'd just have to find a way to make both of them work together.

She took the metro home and gathered her courage as she walked up the stairs to her flat. She'd given Adrien the key before they parted ways, so she knocked on the door and waited.
And waited. And waited.

She frowned. Had he gone somewhere? Or, more predictably, had he fallen asleep? She raised her hand to knock again, but the door swung open and she ended up tapping Adrien's chest with her knuckles instead.

"Welcome home, buginette," he said, and gave her a kiss on the cheek before letting her in. Marinette picked up the smell of food almost instantly.

"Were you in my kitchen?" she asked.

Adrien smiled and gestured to her small round dining table with both arms. It was laden with food. "Surprise! Your useless boyfriend learned how to cook! I accept all forms of thanks, but head scratches and kisses are preferred."

Marinette walked over to investigate. She cast an anxious glance towards the kitchen, but found no evidence of a carefully concealed disaster. And when she saw the spread of food, she forgot her worries and let her mouth water. It looked delicious. It smelled delicious. "You learned how to make all this in the two months since I last saw you?" she asked.

Adrien stepped up behind her and removed both her jacket and her purse. "It helps having chefs in the house," he said. "And a best friend whose girlfriend's mother works in a restaurant." He pointed towards the kitchen. "Although Tikki did most of the work."

Marinette looked again and saw Tikki perched on top of the refrigerator wearing an apron fashioned out of a napkin. She laughed, turned around and thumped her head against Adrien's shoulder. "You're too good to me."

"You make that sound like it's a bad thing," he said. She lifted her head stared at him helplessly. He rubbed at her wrinkled brow with his thumb. "How about we eat before we talk about whatever's stressing you out?"

"I'm bad at hiding it, huh?" she asked.

"From other people, no. From me? Yes." Adrien kissed her once, then gave her a gentle push in the direction of the table. Marinette sat down and waited for him to return from hanging up her jacket and purse. She noticed that he walked around her apartment with perfect ease, as if it was his apartment, too, and it felt so right that she almost caved and asked him to move in with her on the spot.

She wanted him there with her. She wanted him everywhere with her.

Adrien sat across from her and gave her his most reassuring smile, but she could tell that he was anxious, and that was no way to feel while eating dinner.

"Adrien," she said as he grabbed his glass of water for a sip, "will you marry me?"

He choked.

It took half a minute for him to stop coughing long enough to speak. "Where did that come from?"

Marinette stared at the table. "Oh, you know, I've been thinking about the future. The past, too, I guess. That got me thinking about the future in the first place. Funny how that works, huh?"

"You're rambling," Adrien pointed out.
"And I was thinking I wanted to stay in Milan a year longer, and maybe go to New York or London after that. The point being that I wouldn't be coming back to Paris for a long time. It's like, you've been in one place your whole life and you finally get out and you just want to keep going, you know? And there's so much that I can learn from so many people in so many places, and having worked for Monsieur Leuzzi, that'll open a lot of doors for me." Marinette paused to see if she'd lost Adrien, but he nodded at her to keep going. She breathed deeply. "There's no doubt in my mind that this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. But you and I are… we found each other during this awkward transitional phase, and…"

"You're afraid that your plans and my plans won't work together?" Adrien guessed.

Marinette nodded and wrung her hands.

He considered her words for a while. "But you asked me to marry you," he said, "which is the opposite of breaking up with me."

"Yes, because I'd hate for you to think that I didn't want our plans to work together," she said. "Being on the receiving end of that… it sucks."

Adrien pushed the dinner plates aside and held his hand out to her. Marinette took it. "You're right. It does make me happy that you considered all of this, because it shows me that you're taking us seriously—not that I ever doubted that." He caressed her fingers with his thumb. "I knew what I was getting into when we started this relationship. I've lived with a fashion designer for twenty-seven years, remember?"

Marinette giggled at that. "I suppose you have."

"And it is complicated. There's no questioning that. But you're committed to making things work and so am I. That's what adults in relationships do." He kissed the back of her hand. "You're becoming someone new, I'm becoming someone new. Even if we settled down in Paris next week and stayed there for the rest of our lives, the change wouldn't stop. So if we're going to become different people no matter what, we might as well do it together, and in the most interesting ways possible."

Marinette smiled at him across the table. "Then you will marry me?"

"Whenever you want," Adrien said.

"Tomorrow?"

"If that's what you want."

"I don't want to get married tomorrow."

He laughed. "Then we won't!"

"I mean, I wouldn't mind, but it's so last minute and trying to get croquembouche during the weekend in Italy… not to mention Alya would kill me if I denied her the pleasure of telling everyone how we met."

"It'd be more trouble than it's worth," Adrien agreed, and his expression was so warm that it upset the butterflies in Marinette's stomach again. "Did you mean it when you said you couldn't imagine your future without me?" he asked.

"Of course," Marinette replied.
"Have you changed your mind?"

She shook her head.

"Then we have nothing to worry about. Now eat your food."

Marinette let go of his hand and picked up her fork. "You know, if you hadn't gone to the trouble of preparing this meal for me, I'd skip it entirely and have you for dinner instead."

Adrien winked at her. "I do make a purr-fect dessert," he said.

Marinette rolled her eyes, but she couldn't deny it. So she ate and basked in the feeling of having Adrien with her again, in the assurance that she would have him with her for as long as they were both willing. And though the future still scared her with all of its complications and uncertainties, she felt better knowing that she would face it with her best friend by her side.

X.X.X

**Ladybug**

Hello

Draft

Yesterday, Chat Noir told me he wished he could send emails back in time, and it really got me thinking:

**What if I could send an email back in time?**

What if, by that same miracle that sent my email to him, this message could reach me, sitting alone at home, worrying that my life is never going to get better?

It bothered me so much that I crawled out of bed early this morning—even though it's Saturday and the weather is springtime chilly and Chat Noir is oh so very warm—to write this email to myself.

Hello.

You're probably feeling lost right now. Rejected. Unloved.

You're probably looking at all your ruined plans and wondering what's going to become of you.

And everyone in your life is probably telling you, in a well-meaning but unknowing sort of way, that things are going to work out. That you're going to be okay. That one lousy setback won't keep you down forever. You want to believe them, but through no fault of their own, their words sound like they've been plucked straight out of a greeting card.

So allow me to tell you from personal experience:

You're going to be okay. More than okay. You're going to be happy.

I'm not saying it'll be perfect or easy. The next two years will be full of doubts and heartbreak and letdowns. You're going to cry and you're going to worry and you're going to lose sleep some nights.

But you will also be courageous. And productive. And successful. Your talent will be acknowledged by people you never imagined you would meet.

And you will be loved the way you've always dreamed of being loved.
So don't give up on yourself. Don't become your own worst enemy. Put your heart back together and keep going, no matter how bleak things look.

Because you're so much luckier than you think.

With Love,

Marinette Dupain-Cheng, Fashion Designer.

The End

Chapter End Notes

It's over! Thank you all so much, from the bottom of my heart. Writing this story has kept me sane throughout grad school, and I've enjoyed reading every single one of your asks and comments. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Coming up next: The extended ML Winter Sonata AU. If you haven't read the original on my Tumblr (geek-fashionista), be prepared for a world of hurt.

Have a great summer, everyone! Until we meet again!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!