Hop to It

by lpofdestiny

Summary

Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jaclyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Notes

I know, I know. Ugh. An OC. But hear me out! The love square remains very much intact and she (hopefully) isn’t a Mary Sue. It’s just…when I write fanfic, I’m always afraid I’ll
disrespect canon characters if I try to write from their perspective, so it’s best if my main character is my own creation so I don’t screw anything up. And I know something like this has probably been done before too. This is just a plot bunny (ha! I’m punny) I was chasing, so, please enjoy yet another entry into…the American Miraculous AU? I guess? I don’t know…pretty new to the fandom.

If my French is wrong, let me know! It’s all the result of Google Translate. (Unless, of course, it's supposed to be wrong...)

She didn’t think much about the faint flapping of gossamer wings at first. At home, when someone was Akumatized, it was by a swan feather floating in the wind. But then she caught sight of the familiar dark energy flickering out of the corner of her eye and was instantly on her feet, her tears forgotten.

It was a butterfly, black with translucent purple spots, and it was coming right for her.

It had to be Trumpeter Swan who had sent it. There was no one else. He must have escaped. But how had he even found her? The only one who knew where she had gone was…She squeezed her eyes shut. Diego. She knew she should have never have left him. She should have found some way to have remained by his side, or else given up her Miraculous to someone else. But her Kwami insisted she keep it. She was Rabbit, with or without her powers.

“Jack!”

Jack’s eyes snapped open at the sound of her Kwami calling her name and she jumped back just before the butterfly entered the rabbit’s foot keychain in her hand. The butterfly shuttered and then began to move faster, abandoning stealth now that it had been spotted. But Jack wasn’t some helpless victim. She knew how to deal with Akumas, whether they were feathers or insects.

“Mimmi!” she said, punching the sky with her right arm. “Hop to it!”

Her Kwami stretched and got sucked into her old-fashion wristwatch, turning the leather strap white and changing the clock face so it measured five minutes instead of twelve hours, the single hand stuck in an upright position. The transformation continued from there, crawling down one arm, across her chest, and to the other. A large flat throwing ring, a chakram, appeared in her hand, which she moved across her face in a circular motion, her white domino mask appearing. Tossing her weapon into the air, she yanked two rabbit ears into existence out of the back of her head and magically smoothed her caramel-colored hair into a perfect side fishbone braid. Jack then caught her chakram and swung it down as she kneeled, the transformation reaching her toes. Now she was entirely dressed in a white skintight suit weaved out of hexagons. She had opera gloves with the tiniest of claws, more for aesthetic purposes than to actually scratch anyone, and heavy knee-high combat boots that packed a wallop whenever she kicked someone. As if to demonstrate, she stood back up and preformed a few low air kicks and a side kick. She ended by swinging one leg in a perfect circle, her shin level with her eyes at one point, before slamming it down just as her little fluffy tail appeared. To be honest, Jack could do without the tail, but it came with the bulletproof costume.

“You’re done, Akuma!” Jack said, drawing her chakram back with both hands. It responded accordingly, the hole in the middle of the ring closing like a camera lens and opening again to reveal a pool of pale yellow light. “Time to de-evilize!”

Jack raced up to the butterfly and swatted it. She should have known better than to let her negative emotions getting the better of her, but the Akuma would be dealt with soon enough. As the butterfly passed through her chakram though something strange happened.

Nothing.

The Akuma came out the other end unchanged.
Jack stumbled back, her confidence evaporating as the light from her chakram faded. Her purification always worked! What was going on? But she didn’t have time to think. The Akuma had picked a new target to infect and was diving at her Miraculous. With no other choice, Jack turned tail and ran, using her powerful legs to jump. She easily cleared the fence around the park, rising forty, maybe fifty feet, and landed on the roof of the surrounding row houses. She looked over her shoulder expecting to still see the Akuma flitting about near the ground, but it was right behind her.

She wished Mimmi were around to give her advice. What had she done wrong? As she ran as fast as she could, leaping from rooftop to rooftop in order to shake the butterfly, her mind raced for answers. All the other times she had purified an Akuma just fine. Yes, normally she had to battle an Akumatized victim first and destroyed the item the Akuma infected with Lucky Strike, but—

Lucky Strike! Jack never really thought about it before, but maybe the only reason she could de-evilize an Akuma was because she had weakened it first. She wondered what her special superpower would conjure up. A bug zapper? A flyswatter? It didn’t matter. She just needed to take care of this butterfly, and fast. Despite trying to escape it at breakneck speeds, it was still right on her tail.

Jack leapt across a street and grabbed onto the ledge of a window, dropping down to the one below it and the one below that in rapid succession until she was safely on the ground. She heard the gasps and voices of a few pedestrians who had seen her, but she didn’t have any time to worry about them. She took refuge in an alley, hoping she was far enough away from the Akuma that she could preform Lucky Strike without getting interrupted. She couldn’t hear the flap of its wings, so she took her chances.

“Lucky…Strike!” she shouted, throwing her chakram into the air.

Usually, when her chakram reached its zenith, it would float there, spitting out rays of light like a sun through clouds as it spun like a gyroscope; faster and faster, adjusting it’s size if needed, until an object appeared within it. Then they would fall down into Jack’s outstretched hands or she would jump up and get them if she was feeling impatient. But that didn’t happen this time. Once the chakram got as high as it could go, it spit out two beams of golden light instead. They entwined and shot straight down at Jack. Yelping, she tried to dodge, but they homed in and struck her. They didn’t hurt, but they left her surrounded with an unearthly glow. As her weapon clattered on the ground next to her, she stared at her hands. Something about this looked so familiar…

Jack’s rabbit ears perked up as they caught the faint pitter-patter of wings. She looked up to find the Akuma coming around the corner. Grabbing her chakram, she bounded out of the alley as fast as her legs could carry her. Behind her, she heard the distinct sound of concrete cracking. It followed her out, but she was so afraid of the Akuma catching her that she didn’t notice at first.

But then people starting screaming. Car alarms went off. Water mains burst, spraying a fine mist into the air. Light bulbs and windows shattered, showering innocent pedestrians with glass.

Confused, Jack skidded to a halt, kicking up pavers. She steadied herself with an extra step, cracking the sidewalk. Looking over her shoulder, she saw a line of destruction leading up to her. The sidewalk had been torn up. Trees were uprooted. People were fleeing in absolute terror, at least the ones who could. Some had gotten hurt and were calling out.

*Aidez-moi!*

Help me.

“No, no, no, no, no, no…” said Jack, backing up slowly. She looked at her glowing hands again. These weren’t her powers. These were Diego’s. These were Perro Negro’s.
She glanced at her watch to see the little hand counting down. For the next five minutes she would continue to destroy everything around her unless she slowed down or changed back, but neither of those were options. Not with an Akuma chasing her. Even now she could see it flitting about twenty feet away from her through the wrought iron bars of a fence that had curled in on itself. Destroying the city was bad, but being controlled, having her Miraculous taken from her—that was much worse.

Jack squeezed her eyes shut again. How did everything come to this?

* * *

"Bonjour. Mon nom est Jaclyn Smith," Jack said to the sidewalk. She winced at the words. French was a language that was supposed to flow, not get stuck in her mouth. She tried again, softer this time. "Bonjour. Mon nom est Jaclyn Smith. Je vais par Jack."

She held out her hand for an imaginary handshake but noticed a pedestrian giving her an odd look. Jack shoved her hand into the pocket of her board shorts, but internally panicked. Did Parisians not shake hands? Did they all do that cheek-kissing thing instead? No, wait…what was she thinking? If she had moved to another state rather than halfway across the world, she wouldn’t be trying to shake her new classmates’ hands or kiss them. Parisian teenagers couldn’t be that much different from American teenagers.

That thought calmed her for all of five seconds. Then she remembered P’yong Ye Jun, a boy in her class last year who had moved to California from South Korea. Even though he spoke English just fine, he had a thick accent and a lot of people made fun of him.

Jack felt like she was going to throw up. She ran into the nearest alley and ducked into a doorway before opening her beach bag.

“I’m P’yong Ye Jun!” she cried into it.

The little white Kwami at the bottom looked up with her luminous amber-colored eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, but Jack’s mind was going a hundred miles a minute.

“No, I’m not even P’yong Ye Jun! At least he was fluent. I’m…I don’t even know what I am! But I can’t do this, Mimmi. I can’t.”

Mimmi floated up, her furry cheeks matted from being squashed by Jack’s books. The two long hairs poking out of each of her rabbit ears quivered as she grabbed the front of Jack’s tank top with her little nubby arms and yanked her forward with a surprising amount of strength. “Pull yourself together, Jack!” she squeaked. “You can and you will! Be positive!”

Mimmi was always aggressively motivational.

“I know, I know…!” said Jack quickly. Sometimes her Kwami frightened her, even though the little thing meant well.

Mimmi let Jack go, allowing the girl to sink to the ground. She smacked her head against the door and groaned, her hands combing through her hair. She pulled it to one side and started to braid it into a fishtail. Why did she take Spanish? Well…she knew why. She just wished she had taken French as well. But how could she have predicted that her dad would get transferred to Paris for his job? As soon as he announced it, her mom bought them books and tapes so they could learn French as a family, but Jack was the only one who used them. To be honest, she was the only one who needed them. Her dad was working for an American company. Her mom was telecommuting from a little
office she had rented. They only needed to know enough French to go to the grocery store. But Jack had to go to school with native French speakers. Sure, they all knew English too, but they weren’t going to speak it just to make things easier for her. Her parents were convinced her classmates would help her along though, so they saw no problem with throwing her in a local school within days of arriving. Jack knew about enough French to vacation in Paris, not learn history or write book reports.

“Well, Cracker Jack, they say the quickest way to learn a new language is to immerse yourself,” her dad had said, sounding a lot like Mimmi. “If you go to school, you’ll be fluent in no time!”

Jack finished tying off her braid, disappointed by how messy it turned out. Whenever she transformed into Rabbit, it was perfect, but she guessed that was magic for you.

Mimmi flew down to Jack’s wrist and tapped her watch. Jack liked the look of her Miraculous, an old-fashioned analog timepiece with a soft leather strap and a white face where the numbers were simply lines of silver. Because it was magic, it was waterproof and unbreakable. And when your hobbies included surfing and Ultimate Frisbee, those things were important.

“What about the time! You don’t want to be late,” the Kwami said. “Now, what are you going to say when you meet one of your new classmates?”


“Comment tu t’appelles?” added Mimmi.

Jack nodded. “Right. That.” She was pretty sure that was French for, ‘What’s your name?’ but it sounded like ‘Come on cheetah pell.’ Either way, she had to get a move on. According to the packet Principal Damocles—or was he a Headmaster?—had given to her a few days ago, one of her new classmates was supposed to meet her in front of the school a 8:30 sharp to make her feel welcomed before class started at 8:45.

Mimmi slipped back into Jack’s bag as she got up and shouldered it. She looked out between the buildings, her eyes settling on the Eiffel Tower. Sometimes it didn’t feel real, living in the 21th arrondissement of Paris, but then she would look up and see that monument rising up above the buildings and realize that she definitely wasn’t in Los Angeles anymore. The air was clean, for one. And there was certainly less traffic. But all joking aside, seeing the Eiffel Tower filled her with awe. Anyone would be lucky to see it in person.

The problem was, Jack didn’t feel very lucky.

But that was her fault.

She set out again, passing a theatre and a hotel before turning down Gotlib Street. Along the way, she rehearsed her stockpile of French phrases that she was definitely going to need for the day.

“I don’t understand.” (Je ne comprends pas.)

“Can you please slow down?” (Vous pouvez parler moins vite s’il vous plaît?)

“Could you please write it down?” (Est-ce que vous pouvez l’écrire?)

And then the one she wasn’t supposed to use:

“Can I speak to you in English, please?” (Puis-je vous parler en anglais s’il vous plaît?)

But with her hair in her signature side fishbone, Jack was feeling a bit more confident. She
approached her new school, Collège Françoise Dupont, with her head held high. Some students were standing in a knot on the front steps, talking and laughing. They paid no attention to Jack as she looked around. Since there was no one else besides them, she hesitantly approaching them. One of them had to be the classmate she was supposed to be meeting.

“I’m looking for—” They all turned to Jack just as she realized her mistake, feeling her tanned cheeks turn bright red. Her worse sunburn couldn’t even compare. French. She had to speak French. Everyone was staring. But words escaped her. “Chloé Bourgeois?” she asked weakly, trying to muster a French accent. When there was no answer, she wondered if she was pronouncing it wrong, but tried again, searching their faces. “Chloé?”

The students shook their heads, murmuring negative answers from what Jack could gather before resuming their conversation. Jack was a little shaken, but went to the top step by the double cherry wood doors to sit. It looked like Chloé wasn’t there yet.

While Jack waited, she rubbed the rabbit’s foot keychain attached to her beach bag between her fingers and checked her watch constantly. 8:31. 8:35. 8:38. Other students, maybe even her classmates, passed her on their way inside, sometimes throwing her a curious glance, but no one stopped. At 8:40, the group Jack had tried to talk to slowly made their way into the building. She thought about following them inside, but decided to wait for Chloé just a little while longer. Maybe she was running late. After all, this girl was probably her best chance at making a friend today and she didn’t want to ruin it. But with two minutes before class was to start, Jack got up and entered the building, racing across the blacktop courtyard to the locker room. With no time to waste, she undid her lock, tossed her brown bag lunch inside, and headed to the staircase, taking the steps two at a time to the second floor. Mimmi was right—she didn’t want to be late on her very first day. She had enough going against her.

Even though Mr. Damocles had pointed out Jack’s classroom to her earlier, she still had a fleeting moment of panic that it was the wrong one when she first entered. The tittering of two girls by the door—a slender blonde and a bespectacled redhead—didn’t help matters.

“Qu’est-ce que tu portes?” (What are you wearing?) wondered the blonde, putting heavy emphasis on the first word. She stretched out her letters, sounding vaguely like a valley girl. It didn’t suite her, with her tapered face and sophisticated clothes.

Jack looked around before realizing the blonde girl was speaking to her. She pointed to herself just to make sure. The blonde girl nodded as she leaned back and covered her mouth with one hand. She spoke rapidly, at one point calling Jack a ‘clochard.’ Jack didn’t know what that was, but the blonde said it with such disgust that Jack knew it couldn’t be anything good, especially when the girl wrinkled her nose. The only part Jack could understand was the end, when the blonde pointed out the window: “La plage est à trois heures de cette façon!” (The beach is three hours that way!) Then her and her friend tossed their heads back and laughed again, much louder this time. Jack felt something inside her cracking, but she tried to smile. Maybe it wasn’t as insulting as it sounded. Maybe it was just some good-natured ribbing. Be positive, she told herself, repeating Mimmi’s mantra.

“Oh! Hé!” cried someone to Jack’s right. Jack turned to find a short girl with a messy bob dyed dark pink bounding down the steps from the upper end of the classroom. She was nearly breathless with excitement as she reached Jack. “Étes-vous un patineur???”

Patineur. Skater. From the looks of Jack’s clothes, she could see why the pink-haired girl had assumed that.

Jack shook her head. “Non. Surfeur.” It was one of the first words she had looked up. But maybe she
wasn’t one anymore, considering there was no place in Paris to do it.

The pink-haired girl’s face immediately turned into a scowl, as if Jack had somehow betrayed her. She spoke dismissively, but Jack couldn’t make out what she was saying. She was speaking way too fast. Behind her, the blonde and the redhead were laughing again. Jack felt like the world was spinning around her. How did she ask for someone to slow down again? She couldn’t remember.

The homeroom teacher, Miss Bustier, saved the day by entering the room and clapping her hands together, announcing something in French. Or, at least, Jack thought Miss Bustier had saved the day until she realized all her classmates were taking their seats, leaving her standing by herself. The people who hadn’t noticed her before were noticing her now, murmuring to their friends and staring at her. Jack looked around desperately for direction. Did she stay where she was? Did she go find a seat? There were two empty spaces in the back. One was next to a large boy with heavily lidded eyes who nearly took up the whole two-person bench by himself. The other was next to a slight boy with tomato red hair who was scribbling in his notebook. She moved in his direction, getting about halfway up the stairs before Miss Bustier called her back.

“Jaclyn!”

Jack winced as she turned around to see her teacher waving at her to stand front and center. Jack had met the woman when she met Mr. Damocles and made it very clear she went by Jack, but it seemed she had forgotten. It felt like a walk of shame going back down to her.

Miss Bustier went about introducing the class to Jack. The mention of Jack’s last made some students giggle. While her first name was French, her last name—Smith—was definitely not. It was probably the most American last name ever.

“Jaclyn, pourquoi ne pas nous dire sur vous-même?” (Jaclyn, why not tell us about yourself?) asked Miss Bustier.


It was hard to concentrate with whispers running rampant through the class, and Jack distinctly heard ‘Américain’ being tossed around like a bad word. She tried to keep calm, but she could feel heat creeping up into her cheeks again. Why did she have to blush so much? Especially when it brought attention to her chipmunk cheeks? Her mom had told her that her baby fat would go away when she was older, but here she was at fifteen and it had refused to leave her face. Maybe it was better if she just ended this sooner rather than later.

“J’espère qu’on peut être amis.” (I hope we can be friends.) On a whim, she decided to end her introduction politely by thanking her classmates for listening. “Merci beau cul.”

At these words, the class erupted in laughter. Confused, Jack looked to Miss Bustier for help.

“Merci beaucoup. Beaucoup,” said the teacher, a little frantic.

“Beau cul,” repeated Jack. Isn’t that what she had just said? But everyone only laughed harder.

“You’re saying ‘nice butt,’ to put it politely!” cackled the blonde girl from her seat in the front row in near-flawless English.

In that moment, Jack would have done anything to have a hole appear in the floor beneath her and
swallow her whole. It didn’t even have to be a hole. Anything would do—a sudden tornado, an Akuma attack, an alien abduction. Jack wasn’t picky. She just wanted to escape, to vanish and never be seen again, but she couldn’t even bring herself to run out the door. She just stood there, frozen, until Miss Bustier thanked her and told her to take a seat. She followed the teacher’s instructions on autopilot, stumbling up the steps to the last bench, the sting of hot tears blurring her vision. She fought them back though. Crying never solved anything. Besides, she was stronger than that. It was like Mimmi always said: Fall seven times, stand up eight.

Jack placed her beach bag carefully on the floor for Mimmi’s sake and slid into her seat as Miss Bustier started roll call. Her deskmate didn’t even look up from his drawing, his hair obscuring half his face.

“Hé,” she whispered to him, leaning over. “Comment tu t’appelles?”

He paused and glanced up at her briefly before turning ever so slightly away from her and continuing his work.

“Bourgeois, Chloé?” rattled off Miss Bustier.

Jack looked up so fast her neck cracked. Her friend! But her heart sank as she watched the blonde girl who had laughed at her earlier throw out her hand as if waiting for her nails to dry.

“Présent,” she said.

Jack groaned, putting her head down on her desk. This was all just too much.

For the rest of the morning, Jack just focused on deciphering the words coming out of Miss Bustier’s mouth. Jack thought her French comprehension wasn’t that bad, but now she realized that no amount of testing herself with quizzes on the Internet could have prepared her for sitting in that classroom trying to learn. She tried to change her school-issued tablet to English, but gave up in favor of flipping through her well-worn French-English dictionary, much to Nathaniel’s annoyance. That was her desk mate's name, by the way. Nathaniel Kurtzburg. And the only reason she knew that was because of roll call since he had refused to volunteer it himself. It looked like the stereotype was true. French people really were snobby.

Jack shook her head. Be positive, she told herself. Maybe Nathaniel was just shy.

At one point Jack looked up the word ‘clochard.’ Chloé had basically told her she looked like a homeless person. Looking down at her clothes, she was starting to realize that maybe board shorts, a tank top, and a holey sweatshirt weren’t the best choice for her first day at school. Even Alix, the pink-haired skater girl from before, dressed in fashionable sportswear, her cute shorts edged with lace. Jack looked up the French word for ‘sloppy.’ Chloé had called her that too.

At the desk across the aisle sat two girls. Jack couldn’t remember what Miss Bustier said their names were, but they looked nice enough. As soon as their class was dismissed to go to the library, Jack stepped over to the cheery blonde one with a pixie haircut and doe eyes that reminded her of Mimmi’s.

“How do you call yourself?” Jack asked.

“Rose! Rose Lavillant!” said the girl gaily. She turned to her tall, solemn-looking friend. “Et cela est Juleka Couffaine!”

“Rose...et Juleka,” said Jack, trying to cement them in her mind.
Jack wanted to tell Juleka that she was jealous of her fuchsia ombre bangs and long, silken dark hair. Jack’s own hair was so dried out from all the salt and the sun that it didn’t take well to dye and was always peppered with split ends. But she didn’t know how to say all that, so she stuck with what she knew.

“J’aime tes…cheveux…?” she said.

Juleka tugged at her hair, almost unsure on whether to smile or not.

“D’où viens-tu?” asked Rose as the three of them walked out of the classroom together. So far, so good.

“California. Los Angeles.”

Rose gasped. Jack was surprised to find that her eyes could, in fact, get wider. “Los Angeles!?” The girl grabbed Jack’s forearms and shook her. She started to talk rapidly. Jack caught the word ‘Hollywood,’ but the rest was a verbal blur.

“Er…Vous pouvez parler moins vite s’il vous plaît?” Jack begged, but it was almost as if Rose couldn’t hear her, the girl was whipped up into such a state of frenzied excitement. One moment she was clasp her hands to her heart. The next, she was running around Jack and flinging her arms up. Juleka watched with quiet bemusement. The two began to converse.

Wanting to keep up, Jack dug through her bag for her French-English dictionary. She accidentally poked Mimmi in the head before the Kwami handed it to her. As she flipped around trying to decipher what they were saying though, they had walked along ahead of her. They disappeared into the library, leaving her by herself.

Jack stood there for a moment, thrown, before hanging her head. She pulled her hair out of its fishtail with one hand as she handed her dictionary back to Mimmi with the other.

“They just left me here,” she told the Kwami.

“Be positive! I’m sure they didn’t mean it,” insisted Mimmi, her voice slightly muffled. “Now go in there and join them!”

With a sigh, Jack trundled forward, pushing the door open and nearly smacking a boy from her class with it. He jumped back in surprise, but then smirked when he saw whom it was, running ones of his hands through his sharp quiff.

“Hé, Américain,” he said. “Beau cul.”

A couple of their classmates overheard and snorted. Mortified, Jack walked passed him as if he were a bookshelf and tried to find a seat. To her dismay, Rose and Juleka were already sitting with Alix and a fourth girl with colorful dreads. Chloé and her redhead friend ruled over the only open table left. Chloé noticed this immediately. She whispered something to her friend and they both put their book bags on the two empty chairs next to them. Jack approached them anyway.


“Yeah, I know what it means,” said Jack.

“Well, whatever. There’s no room for you here, so why don’t you scurry on back to whatever little hovel you came from.”
Jack glared. Without breaking her gaze, she pushed Chloé bag off the chair. Makeup, books, and about a million compacts spilled out onto the floor. Chloé made a noise that sounded like a disgruntled mouse.

“How dare you!” (How dare you!) she cried while her friend quickly picked up the mess Jack had made. “You Americans are all the same: Rude! Not everything belongs to you, you know!”

A stern voice asked a question behind them. Jack turned to find a severe-looking man with a bad comb-over lording over them—the librarian. Chloé, her crystalline blue eyes suddenly welling up with practiced tears, spoke to him in French. Jack didn’t know what kind of sob story Chloé was giving, but she knew it was far from the truth. The librarian listened, then turned to tell Jack something about being more respectful to her peers or she would find herself in the principal’s office. Jack gritted her teeth, but nodded. There was nothing else she could do.

Defeated, Jack headed to a corner, far away from the rest of her classmates, and sat down, making a little nest for herself using her sweatshirt. She tried to read the short story they had been assigned, but it was a struggle. Her French-English dictionary certainly got a workout, but she had only gotten about halfway through the story by the time Miss Bustier asked them to send in their work and dismissed them for lunch. Jack approached the teacher and asked for more time to finish.

“Of course” said Miss Bustier with a kind smile. At the very least, she understood.

Jack trailed after her classmates to their lockers, trying her best to remain positive. Lunch was the perfect time to try and make new friends. Maybe they could laugh about her poor pronunciation skills, or she could ask the girls for some fashion advice.

“You packed your lunch?” said Chloé, pausing while she passed when she noticed Jack pulling a brown paper bag out of her locker. “You really are homeless, then.”

Jack wasn’t going to play this game. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m not surprised. Allow me to explain: They’re in the process of building a new cafeteria, not that I’d be caught dead in it. Everyone’s been going home for lunch.”

This took Jack off-guard. “Wait…everyone?”

“Yes, everyone.” Chloé flipped her hair. “Except you, of course. Enjoy eating alone!” And, with that, she sailed out of the room as if she were Queen of the Nile, leaving Jack blinking in her wake.

Jack couldn’t go home for lunch. Both her parents were at work and had yet to have a locksmith make an extra key to their apartment. So the only thing Jack could do, really, was watch helplessly as the other students surged around her towards the courtyard. The large boy who sat in front of her accidentally knocked her when he rushed passed, sending Jack’s lunch flying out of her hands. Her peanut butter and jelly sandwich, her cheese stick, her apple—everything fell out, people trampling them by accident. By the time Jack rescued everything and examined the damage, everyone was gone. Jack slammed her locker shut as hard as she could, hoping to get rid of some of her frustration, but all it did was bring Mimmi out.

“You’re not eating alone, you’re eating with me!” the Kwami insisted, beating her chest. “How about at that park we passed on the way to school? It’s a beautiful day to be outside.”

Jack nodded, but it was like someone had padded her ears with cotton—Mimmi’s words sounded distant and quiet. They were all Jack had to hold on to though, so she did as the Kwami suggested, dragging her feet the whole way.
On the next block over from the school was a peaceful little square almost completely surrounded by row houses. In the middle was a fenced-in park lined with trees that could just be glimpsed from the street. Jack made her way past an empty statue base to the two-tiered fountain in the middle. She sat down on one of the surrounding benches and noticed a lovingly restored carousel at the main entrance. Jack thought it would be crawling with kids, but it was empty. In fact, the whole park was empty. The only sounds were the birds chirruping to each other in the trees and the splash of the fountain. Apparently, everyone was at home eating lunch.

Except Jack.

And, suddenly, she was crying.

She tried to force herself to stop. Crying never solved anything, which was why she never did it. During this entire process, from her dad announcing the move to saying goodbye to Diego to today, she never once cried. The closest she came was earlier that day in class when she had embarrassed herself. But now the floodgates had been opened and it was impossible to shut them. Her tears ran in rivulets down her cheeks, her flyaways sticking to her face. The breath in her body felt constricted, only coming out in short little gasps. Other than that though, she didn’t make a sound, which was why it took Mimmi so long to realize something was wrong.

“Don’t cry!” said the Kwami, punching Jack in the shoulder. “You’ll get through this! I know you will. You’re only a failure if you give up! So don’t give up! Don’t give in!”

But Jack swatted Mimmi away. What did she know, with all her platitudes and intense optimism? She hadn’t been made fun of, treated poorly, ignored, and left behind by her new classmates. She wasn’t the one missing her extended family, friends, and boyfriend.

Just the thought of Diego made Jack cry harder. She yanked her lucky rabbit’s foot keychain off her bag and held it to her heart. It was her fault they were separated. If only she had listened to Mimmi, but she was too headstrong.

* * *

Jack realized that she had once again not listened to Mimmi. If only she hadn’t given up and given in to her negative emotions, the Akuma might not be after her now. She had brought this all on herself, like always.

The Akuma was ten feet away. Now five. Jack tossed her chakram at it, but it dodged with a deft wing. Jack was forced to jump back, the ground cracking beneath her feet, as she waited for her chakram to return. As soon as it was in her hand again, she ran once more, blazing a trail of destruction wherever she went. She tried her best to avoid people, turning down alleys to skip busy streets, but it was impossible. Their screams and shouts of terror followed her. Jack grabbed her rabbit ears and held them down to dampen the sound.

Suddenly, there was a flash of black overhead in the blue sky.

Jack’s breath hitched. Diego?

But it was someone else, a blonde boy with piercing green eyes who landed in front of her with a silver baton in one hand. He spun it and held it out in front of him.

“Arrêt!” he cried. (Stop.)

Jack swerved to avoid him, but the pavement she ripped up sent him sprawling anyway. She looked over her shoulder, not sure she had seen what she thought she saw. It looked like he was dressed like
Perro Negro, leather suit and all, but with the ears and tail of a cat instead of a dog—like he was a Miraculous holder. But there were only seven Miraculouses, and a cat wasn’t one of them. Still, he had leapt out in front of her. An ordinary person in a funny costume wouldn’t be able to do that.

“Ici, lapin.” (Over here, bunny.)

Jack looked to her left to find the boy in black running alongside her, struggling on all fours to keep up. Even so, he gave a rueful smile at her shock. He jumped at her, claws out, but she sidestepped him.

“Non! Non...toucher...moi!” shouted Jack in broken French as she stumbled to a halt. She slipped her chakram onto her wrist and shrunk it until it was the size of a bracelet to show that she didn’t want to fight, holding out her hands to prevent him from coming any closer to her. She doubted she had said the correct words, but she had to at least try and warn him. Touching her while she was in this state was dangerous and she didn’t want to hurt him.

The cat boy stared at her, flummoxed, but Jack’s left ear twitched at the sound of the Akuma approaching and she knew she had to keep moving. She took off again, but only made it a few yards before something tripped her up. She fell face-first into the pavement, sliding forward until a curb stopped her. The ever-present sound of butterfly wings roused her quickly though. She grabbed the edge of the curb and flipped up onto the sidewalk before the cement shattered in her hands, her landing kicking up more pavers. She could see now that the cat boy had extended his baton to sweep her feet. As their eyes locked, he gave some pithy one-liner in his roguish French and ran at her. Jack dodged, but the cat boy came at her again, and again, claws out and baton swinging. She evaded him, eventually back flipping out of the way. When Jack landed though, she landed hard, creating a small crater.

The cat boy ran up to the lip of the hole and tried to smack Jack with his staff. She grabbed it, expecting it to break apart in her hands, but it simply vibrated instead. Taking her chances, Jack swung the staff as hard as she could, flinging the cat boy away.

A quick glance at her watch told her that she only had three minutes before she was forced to change back; she had to hurry. Clambering out of the crater, Jack saw an open alley and took it, but, in her haste, she let her guard down. She felt something grab her arm only for a powerful force to knock it back. Jack turned just in time to see the cat boy get flung into a wall so hard that he dislodged bricks. Jack knew from experience that their superpowers protected them from getting hurt, but it didn’t stop them from feeling pain. As the boy reeled with it, Jack reeled with guilt, holding her hands to her mouth in horror.

“Sorry! Désolée!” she cried, not knowing what else to say. She ran forward a few steps, but then forced herself to hang back. “Je suis désolée!”

The boy spit on the ground, clutching his right hand as he flicked his tail and tried to stand. “Je ne te laisserai pas prendre mon Miraculeuse!” (I will not let you take my Miraculous!) he hissed, glaring at her with the ferocity of a feral animal.

Jack gave a small start. So he was a Miraculous holder! But how—?

The cat boy suddenly slammed his baton on the ground and, with a mechanical whirr, extended it towards her. Jack winced as she tried to block her face. She should have never let her guard down like that! But the staff just missed her, jabbing the wall behind her instead. Only then did Jack hear the pathetic flapping of a tiny wing against stone. She turned to find the Akuma that had been chasing her pined to the brick. As long as someone braced the staff against the ground, it wasn’t going anywhere.
Speechless, Jack turned back to the boy. He seemed just as shocked as her. He spoke to her, apparently realizing she was not an Akumatized victim under someone named The Butterfly’s control. Hearing this granted Jack some semblance of relief—Trumpeter Swan had nothing to do with this. Another Miraculous holder with similar powers must have sent the Akuma after her.

“Mais si vous n’êtes pas contrôlé…pourquoi êtes-vous en train de détruire Paris?” (But if you are not being controlled…why are you destroying Paris?) the cat boy wondered.

“I was…uh…” Jack didn’t even know where to begin in French. She sighed, embarrassed. “Pouvez-vous parler en anglais, s’il vous plaît?”

And then came the kindest words Jack had heard all day.

“Sure thing.”

Jack was stunned. “Are…are you positive?”

“I don’t carrot all, lapin. Whatever’s easiest for you.”

“Rabbit,” amended Jack, choosing to ignore the pun. “I’m Rabbit, a Miraculous holder from America. And I’m sorry for all the damage I caused. It was an accident. I was trying to attack the Akuma with my special power, Lucky Strike, but I ended up using Dogstruction, my partner’s—”

The boy laughed. “Dogstruction? Really? That’s a terrible pun!”

“This from a guy who just said ‘I don’t carrot all’?”

“Even I have standards.” The boy switched the hand he was using to brace his staff so his right one was free. He held it out. “I’m Chat Noir, by the way. Protector of Paris.”

Jack was grateful for the gesture but backed away, so he turned it into a formal bow.

“I’m still dangerous until I change back,” she explained to him. “But it’s nice to meet you, Black Cat.”

The boy shook his head, tousling his messy hair even more. “If I have to call you Rabbit—” He pronounced Jack’s name Rab-BEAT, which she rather liked. It sounded fancy, like there was an accent over the ‘i.’ “—Then the least you can do is call me Chat Noir.”

“Cat Noir. Got it.”


This was like merci beaucoup all over again. “Isn’t that what I said…?”

Jack’s watch rang, letting her know that she had only a minute left. Cat Noir’s eyes flicked to it.

“You about to change back?” he asked.

“Well, I did use an ability, even if it wasn’t mine.” Jack glanced back at the butterfly still struggling to escape. “But I am a little worried leaving you here alone with that thing. You can’t hold it forever. I used to be able to de-evilize Akumas, but it didn’t work when I tried.”

“Don’t worry! My Lady can do it. She should be here soon.”

“Your…Lady…?”
“My crime-fighting partner, Ladybug!” Cat Noir explained. A dreamy expression crossed his face. “My bugaboo, my one and only, the love of my life…”

But the moment Cat Noir said his partner’s name Jack had stopped listening. Ladybugs were good luck and black cats were bad luck, just like rabbits were good luck and black dogs were bad luck. She and Ladybug could purify Akumas, but Perro Negro and Cat Noir couldn’t. And she doubted the similarities ended there.

“Why don’t you stick around?” Cat Noir suggested. “You can explain to my Lady what happened.”

“But I’m about to change back.”

“C’mon! What’s the harm?”

Any playfulness in Jack’s voice vanished. “A lot, actually.”

Cat Noir seemed to think she was joking at first and gave her a cheeky grin, but when she refused to return it, his smile faded and he began to fidget. “I’m not going to tell anyone…”

“I’m not saying you will, but didn’t your Kwami ever warn you to keep your identity a secret? It’s for a good reason. I found that out the hard way.”

“What are you talking about?”

Jack sighed, not altogether willing to tell this story. But there was no point in hiding it from him either. “Back home, I had a partner like you. His name was Perro Negro. We sort of…fell for each other and decided to reveal who we were to one another. That’s when my bad luck started and I was forced to come here. Perro Negro had always been unlucky, and it rubbed off on me.”

“You can’t be Sirius.”

“This isn’t a joke, Cat! It’s true. The destruction I caused just now is proof. I used his power. I shouldn’t be able to do that. So who knows what would happen if I revealed myself to you? My bad luck might get even worse.” The boy hung his head and Jack felt a little guilty for snapping at him. But then something occurred to her that made her hang her head as well. “I… I don’t think I should be Rabbit anymore. It’s too dangerous.”

Cat Noir’s head shot back up. “What!? But you’re a hero!”

“You thought I was a villain five minutes ago.”

“Yeah, but… there’s got to be some way to fix this…”

But Jack shook her head. She really had to go. Time was running short. “It’s okay, Cat Noir. Really. I’ll find some other way to be a hero. Now that I know that there are Akumas here, I’ll try my best to prevent negative feelings around me so… The Butterfly? Is that his name?”

“Yeah.”

"Not a good villain name at all. I'm gonna call him..." Why was she doing this now? She was running out of time. "...The Moth. No! Hawk Moth." Those buggers were creepy.

"Nice!" said Cat.

"Hawk Moth will have no one to target if I try to prevent negative feelings around me. But my days as Rabbit are over.”
“But—”

Jack almost took off running but remembered that Dogstruction was still in effect. She walked away instead. At the end of the alley though, she paused. “Good luck out there,” she told Cat Noir over her shoulder. “And if you and Ladybug ever have plans to reveal your identity to each other…don’t.”

Then she took the corner and vanished from his sight.

*   *   *

It took Jack forever to get back to the park. She had to trek through all the streets she had damaged, picking her way through the downed trees and heaps of rubble. There was a lot more ruin than she had originally thought. It had all passed by so fast while she was running, but now she was forced to notice the buildings she had made structurally unsound and the people she had injured as they were hoisted onto stretchers and carried towards the flashing blue lights of waiting ambulances. She spotted a news crew doing a report on the carnage from down the street and decided to cut across a market square to avoid them.

Pigeons were pecking at Jack’s lunch by the time she arrived. She chased them away to find everything half-eaten, save for her cupcake, which had stayed protected in a plastic container. The cupcake went to Mimmi though so she could get her energy back. The rest went into the trash. It was just as well since most of it had been kicked around on the ground.

“That was a close one!” said Mimmi as she munched on cake, purple frosting painting her left cheek. She spoke as if Jack had almost gotten caught in the rain without an umbrella, rather than almost corrupted by dark forces.

Jack collapsed on a bench and rubbed her face, her stomach growling. “Mimmi, what is going on? Why did I use Dogstruction? And I thought you said there were only seven Miraculouses.”

“I thought there were too, but I guess I was wrong. I’m sorry, Jack. I wish I had answers for you. But it’s okay! We’ll figure this out. Cat Noir is right! You can’t let this setback stop you from being Rabbit.”

Jack sighed and looked at her Miraculous, sure she would never use it to transform again. But then she noticed the time and tightness constricted her chest. “I’m late!” she cried, running off. Mimmi was forced to shove the last bit of cupcake into her cheek and fly after Jack, going intangible to get back into her beach bag.

Jack burst into her classroom five minutes later completely out of breath. A quick look around the room told her she was tardy—very tardy. She had interrupted a quiz.

“Jaclyn!” said Miss Bustier, rising from her desk with a tight smile. “Où étiez-vous?” (Where have you been?)

“Uh…Je l’ ai…perdu du temps?” Jack didn’t know how to say she lost track of time, so she settled for saying she lost time. Behind her, a few of her classmates snickered.

Miss Bustier spoke slowly, letting Jack know that such behavior was unacceptable. She decided to let Jack off with a warning since it was her first day, but she wouldn’t be so lenient next time. Jack was forced to ask the woman to repeat herself several times until she understood. Then she returned to her desk to finish reading the short story she had failed to finish earlier that day.

Jack didn’t know how she made it through the rest of the day, but, by keeping to herself, she saved herself from any more misery. Even when they went down to the lab for Chemistry, Jack made no
attempt to find a lab partner. It was easier to reason that she was alone because she hadn’t tried to find one, rather than be turned down. Her class seemed like a tight-knight group. Knowing her luck, they had probably known each other since kindergarten, or whatever the French equivalent was.

By the end of the day, Jack was hungry and exhausted. She would be happy if she never saw her French-English dictionary again. She headed to the bathroom first before going to her locker though. It was mostly empty, save for a fair-haired girl applying pink lipstick in the mirror and two of Jack’s classmates. The one with auburn hair and a flannel shirt tied around her waist was talking animatedly as she pulled out her phone to show the other a video. Jack caught the tinny sound of TVi’s news jingle as she passed.

“Paris est aujourd’hui en ruines après une autre attaque Akuma dévastatrice…” (Paris is in ruins today after another devastating Akuma attack…)

Jack froze. The classmate watching the video, a half-Chinese girl with bright blue eyes, seemed to notice, so Jack pushed her way into one of the bathroom stalls and locked the door behind her. She balanced herself atop the toilet, hugging her knees to her chest as she eavesdropped. She didn’t understand everything the news report was saying, but, from what she could gather, the media had dubbed her ‘Jack Hammer,’ after her rabbit appearance and the destruction she had caused. A million dollars worth of destruction, apparently. Then the news anchor mentioned Ladybug and the voice changed to someone who was younger and filled with righteous indignation. Jack caught words like ‘damage,’ ‘innocent people,’ ‘hurt,’ and ‘heartless.’

Fumbling through her beach bag and ignoring Mimmi’s worried glance, Jack grabbed her own phone and searched for the news report herself. She turned the sound off and the English captions on, skipping forward in the video until the tiny screen filled with a young masked woman wearing a red outfit with large black polka dots. Her dark hair, a true black that shone blue in the sunlight, was styled into two low pigtails and finished off with long red ribbons that seemed to float on the air, giving the appearance of antennae. Curious to know what was going on, Mimmi flew up and sat on Jack’s shoulder to watch.

It makes me sick, seeing what Jack Hammer did, Jack read in the light gray boxes that popped up at the bottom. It’s more than just the damage. Roads can be repaved, trees replanted, buildings rebuilt—but the innocent people she hurt…If she wasn’t some poor soul who had been Akumatized, I’d never be able to forgive her for it. Men, women, children—no one was spared. The Butterfly is a truly heartless individual.

Jack’s tears returned, just as silent as before. It was clear Ladybug hadn’t talked to Cat Noir yet, but, once she did, any pity she had for Jack would vanish.

But don’t worry, assured Ladybug. Once I purify her Akuma, I can use Miraculous Ladybug to put everything back to normal.

Jack shook her head rather violently. So she and Ladybug shared that power too. The only problem was that it only undid the work of an Akumatized villain. There was no easy fix for the things Jack had done.

For once, Mimmi’s optimism was quashed and she was quiet. She turned her ears down and tried to dry Jack’s cheek with her arm, but she was fighting a losing battle. Ladybug continued to talk, but Jack shut off her phone and buried her head in her arms. She just wanted to go home. Not to the walk-up her family was currently renting, but to her real home in California, to the old blue Victorian with the black trim. She wanted to go to Echo Park and throw a Frisbee around with her friends. She wanted to sneak out at night and patrol the rusted out streets of Los Angeles with Diego. She wanted things to make sense again.
Jack’s stomach growled and she knew she had to get something to eat, but she didn’t dare leave the safety of her stall with a tear-streaked face. So she decided to wait until she stopped crying or everyone left, whichever came first.

Voices faded and steps receded. Lockers slammed shut. Eventually, everything was quiet. Bleary-eyed, Jack took a peek out of her stall and then out of the bathroom. The locker room was empty.

She was alone.

“Jack…you gotta turn yourself around!” said Mimmi. “You got your tears out, and that’s okay. But now you gotta be positive or Hawk Moth will send another—”

Jack unfastened her watch, her Kwami vanishing. She knew Mimmi meant well, but Jack just didn’t want to hear it right now as she dropped her Miraculous on the floor. Instead, she focused on opening her locker and finally putting her books away. When she turned to leave though, she collapsed on a nearby bench. She simply didn’t have the strength to go on. Everything had gone wrong today. Everything. Jack knew she was in danger of getting Akumatized, but maybe she should just let it happen. Get it over with. For a brief time, she’d get what she’d want. And Ladybug and Cat Noir could defeat her and reverse all the damage she had caused. She didn’t care that it was dangerous, that she could lose her Miraculous. Anything seemed preferable to her current pain and guilt. All those people in the hospital because of her—Ladybug was right. She was heartless. She had put her own fears above the safety of others.

Somewhere in the room, Jack swore she heard the echo of flapping papery wings. She didn’t even try to run, ready to accept her cursed fate.

“Oh, pardon!”

Jack nearly jumped out of her skin. She looked to see one of her classmates standing in the doorway and tried to recall his name. She hadn’t even attempted to talk to him since he looked like the popular type—good-looking, fashionable, perfect smile. Unless Jack wanted to embarrass herself, she had planned to stay out of his way. Too late now. He noticed her tears immediately and bit his lip, his brow wrinkling. He ran his fingers through his feathery blonde hair.

“Qu’est-ce qui ne va pas?” (What’s wrong?) he asked as he approached her. The concern in his voice seemed genuine.

Jack’s mind rushed. Even though she was caught off-guard, she still tried to speak in French. “Je… Aujourd’hui était…difficile. Me manque…er…uh…” No, she had to say what she missed first before saying she missed it. She felt like an idiot. No doubt the boy thought so too. But if he did, it didn’t show on his face.

“Why don’t we talk in English?” he suggested without any kind of prompting. “You know, until you get the hang of speaking French. It must be hard for you.”

Jack blinked at him, sure he was joking or something.

“It’s Jack, right?” he said.

“Y-yeah…” Jack managed.

“I don’t think we ever officially met. I’m Adrien Agreste.”

“What…” Jack hurriedly wiped her face. “What are you doing here? Didn’t you leave?”
Adrien gave a sheepish grin. “Forgot my history book. But I’m glad I did. I don’t want you to get Akumatized! It’s a pretty common occurrence around here. You heard about that, right?”

“Yeah, I…uh…heard about it on the news.”

Adrien sat down next to Jack. Whatever cologne he was wearing smelled slightly like sour milk, or maybe cheese. Instead of being grossed out, it put Jack at ease. Maybe he wasn’t so perfect after all if he couldn’t tell what smelled good.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked, his pale green eyes searching for answers.

Jack looked down at her mismatched flip-flops. “What’s there to say? I want to go home. I miss it and everyone here hates me.”

“That’s not true!”

Jack gave him a look of utter disbelief.

“But I know how hard it is to be new in school and trying to make friends,” he conceded. “I just started here this year myself and—”

“Really?”

“…Why do you sound so surprised?”

“I don’t know…you just seem like that guy everyone knows. I thought you’ve been going to school with everyone else for a while.”

“Nope. I was homeschooled all my life. And when I first got here, I only knew Chloé—”

“You’re friends with Chloé!?”

Adrien looked away, his face falling slightly. “Why does everyone always say that?”

Great. Adrien had the potential to be a new friend and Jack had just insulted him. “No, no! It’s fine!” she said, her voice raising an octave. “It’s just…she’s…uh…”

“She’s mean. I know. Not to me, but I get it. This probably won’t come as a surprise to you, but being friends with Chloé made it difficult for me to make friends with everyone else at first. I know it’s not the same as not speaking the same language as everyone, but still—It was rough. I just wanted someone to give me a chance. And Nino did.”

Jack realized Adrien was talking about his desk mate, a lanky kid with brown skin and glasses who liked to use finger guns for emphasis. Maybe she should have tried talking to him.

“No one hates you, Jack,” assured Adrien as he got up. “They just haven’t gotten to know you yet. And I’m guilty of that too. I should have come over and talked to you, but I didn’t. I hope that we can be friends though.”

“But Adrien laughed, pleased. “Of course we can be friends!” said Jack, a little too quickly. She could feel her cheeks burning again, so she looked away, berating herself for not playing it cool.

“Sounds perfect!”

“Of course we can be friends!” said Jack, a little too quickly. She could feel her cheeks burning again, so she looked away, berating herself for not playing it cool.

“Great! I have to run—I’ve got Chinese—but maybe we could hang out after school tomorrow? Nino and I could show you around.”
The boy went over to his locker to grab his history book. Jack followed him. “Thank you,” she said, meaning it with every fiber of her being. “You don’t know how much this means to me.”

“No big deal.” He noticed something on the ground next to him and scooped it up. “Hey, isn’t this yours?” he wondered, holding up Jack’s watch.

“Oh!” cried Jack, feeling guilty. Poor Mimmi deserved a better Chosen One than her. She quickly took her Miraculous back. “Sorry. I must have dropped it.”

“It looks important.”

“It is.” Jack hesitated, not sure how much she could allow herself to say. She settled on the basics. “My grandma left it to me in her will.”

“Oh. I’m sorry for your loss…” Adrien closed his locker with a light hand, empathy etched in his face. “Was it recent?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know her that well. Her and my mom didn’t get along, so she really wasn’t a big part of my life.” Jack physically waved the thought away. “Anyway. Tomorrow?”

Adrien flashed a stunning smile, like he was a model in a catalogue or something. “Yeah. See you then!”

He ran off, clearly late, leaving Jack alone again. She looked around. Either she had imagined hearing the Akuma or Adrien’s kindness had chased it away. Either way, Jack was glad. Now that she had calmed down, things didn’t seem so bleak anymore. Mimmi would be proud.

“Mimmi!” Jack remembered, fastening her watch back on her wrist. A white beam of light shot out from the clock face and a sphere appeared with Mimmi inside of it. She was in a trance, but it broke the moment the sphere vanished.

“Jack!” the little creature cried, flying over and hugging the girl’s cheek and pushing with enough force to cause Jack to stumble. “You’re okay! Don’t scare me like that!”

Jack pinched the Kwami’s tail and pulled her back. “I’m sorry. I was upset,” she explained. “But I feel much better now. I made a new friend. His name is Adrien. We’re hanging out tomorrow.”

“A friend? Oh! I knew you could do it! Looks like your luck is beginning to turn. Just stay positive!”

Jack couldn’t help but laugh. In that moment, she really did feel lucky. Lucky to have a new friend like Adrien. Lucky that Mimmi was so forgiving. Maybe there really was a basis for all of Mimmi’s positive mumbo-jumbo.

“C’mon,” Jack told her, grabbing her beach bag. “Let’s go home.”

* * *

Jack sat in front of her laptop in her bedroom as she wolfed down a bowl of popcorn. She had finally unpacked all her boxes, but even with her Hawaiian-print duvet on the bed and posters of famous surfers hanging from the walls, it still didn’t feel like home. The room was too small, the windows too tall. She had opened one of them to let in a breeze, but the latch holding back one of the splintering shutters was broken, so it kept on slamming open and shut. The smells wafting through were completely unfamiliar, and Jack still hadn’t decided if she liked them or not. The view wasn’t bad though. She could see a little bit of the Seine, though her view of the Eiffel Tower was blocked.
Spinning in her desk chair a few times just for fun, Jack returned to the email she was writing to Diego about her day. She was worried—if her powers weren’t working right, then his might not be either. She wanted to call him and talk to him, hear his lively voice as he distract her with ridiculous stories, but it was 10:00 AM in the morning in California. He was at school. Fourth period. Gym. His favorite.

“Are you sure you don’t remember a cat or a ladybug Miraculous?” Jack asked Mimmi, who was tightrope walking along the top of the screen to keep herself entertained.

Mimmi sat and shook her head. “There were only seven at the lab—a firefly, a mantis, a dragonfly, a swan, a chameleon—”

“A dog and a rabbit…I know, I know. But are you sure there weren’t more in another room?”

The Kwami’s eyes widened. In her sudden burst of excitement, she flew up and preformed a loop-de-loop. “I’ve got it! Why don’t you ask Cat Noir and Ladybug about their Miraculouses the next time you see them?”

“Uh…I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“I’d have to do it as Rabbit.”

“So?”

“So!? Do you really think it’s a good idea for me to show my face after everything I’ve done?”

“Only guilty people have reason to hide. It was an accident, Jack. Prove to the people of Paris that you’re not the villain they all think you are. As long as you don’t try to use Lucky Strike again, I’m sure you’ll be fine!”

Jack sighed and pushed off from her desk. She crossed her arms to sulk. “But Ladybug hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you! She just…needs to get to know you. Then she’ll realize that you’re a good person. You’ll see.”

Jack tilted her head. Adrien had said something similar about her classmates. Could it really be that simple? She guessed only time would tell. For now, sleep beckoned her, so she sent off her email to Diego and crawled into bed.

She dreamed of the ocean, of crashing waves churning brown with sand, washing all sorts of Miraculouses up on the beach. Jack walked along, searching for hers. When she finally saw the watch, it was getting sucked back by the tide. She ran towards it only for a particularly large wave to smash into her. Jack awoke with a jerk, surprised to find her cheeks slick with tears and her heart pounding. It was the middle of the night, but she found herself unable to go back to sleep. She could only stare up at the ceiling, suddenly terrified by the noises of the night. Every flap of pigeon wings, every creak in the floorboards was an Akuma coming to get her.

*Be positive,* she thought, over and over again. *Be positive.*
Chapter Summary

Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jaclyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Chapter Notes

Well, I hope all *looks back at view count* 84 of you were pleasantly surprised when you decided to read an OC story! But in all seriousness, thank you so much for reading, even if it’s just a little bit because I know my chapters are long. You might not think it's much, but it is. You’re the best! Yes, you! I will now reward you with more Ladybug and actual Nino this chapter. And Adrien being a cinnamon roll, but that goes without saying.

Special shout out to stopthattimerave for leaving a bookmark. I don't know how to answer those, but I'm glad you love it! Here is another chapter!

Jack tapped her foot rapidly, unable to contain her excitement for her tour of the town with Adrien and Nino. Her watch had ticked down the seconds left in the school day and now there were only sixty left.

As far as days went, it was a mixed bag, but far better than the one before. Chloé made fun of her clothing choice again (cargo shorts and a T-shirt Jack ripped the sleeves off of), but Adrien greeted her in English with a big smile. Nathaniel ignored her, but Rose and Juleka invited her to be a part of their group for a history assignment. She was forced to eat lunch in the park with Mimmi again, but no Akuma interrupted them.

“Pourriez-vous arrêter?” (Could you stop?) said Nathaniel, annoyed. His eyes darted to Jack’s leg and he rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Jack did stop, but only because she was shocked he had actually spoken to her.

Miss Bustier dismissed them for the day, but Jack suddenly found herself hesitant. She fiddled around with her tablet while everyone else filed out of the room. Now that she thought about it, it did seem a little impossible the most popular boy in class wanted to hang out with her. Adrien hadn’t mentioned anything about their afterschool plans to her all day. What if he hadn’t meant them? What if he was playing a cruel joke on her!? He had said he was friends with Chloé, after all. She could just picture the two of them laughing and high-fiving each other in the back of Chloé’s limo, celebrating Jack’s misery.
“Be positive!” squeaked Mimmi from Jack’s bag, almost as if she could read Jack’s mind.

Jack tried, but it was a little hard when she reached the locker room and Adrien and Nino were nowhere to be found. Grimacing as she searched the room, she caught Chloé’s eye on accident and looked away, busying herself with her books. A minute later, a pair of feet appeared next to her. Jack was expecting Chloé’s black-and-white striped heels, but they were loafers.

*Sabrina Raincomprix,* realized Jack, recalling Chloé’s friend’s name from roll call that morning. She looked up to find the redhead lording over her, arms crossed as she glared behind her tortoise frame glasses.

*“Quelque chose que vous voulez dire? Oh! I’m sorry, Américaine. Let me speak in a way you understand.”* She cleared her throat and began to speak slowly, exaggerated her vowels to an absurd degree. “Sooooomethiiiiing yooooouuuuuuu waaaaant toooooo saaaaay?”

Jack felt a spike of anger, but bit down on her tongue. “Nothing,” she said, going about her business.

“Really? Because it looked like you were looking at Chloé and Chloé didn’t like the way you were looking at her.”

“So she sends her little flying monkey at me?”

Sabrina gasped, tears springing into her eyes. Jack immediately regretted what she had said. She thought the girl would be tougher than that.

“This is why no one likes you!” Sabrina shouted, running towards the girl’s bathroom.

Jack halfheartedly reached out to stop her, but Sabrina’s hasty insult cut deeper than Jack would have cared to admit. Her arm dropped, swinging at her side like it was useless. Without another word, she shut her locker, gathered her things, and hurried away, wrapping her fingers around her lucky rabbit’s foot keychain. Blinking to stave off any tears, she stared down at the floorboards as she walked, and then at the concrete of the courtyard.

There was the sound of fluttering and Jack looked up, petrified. An Akuma! But it was a boy fanning out the pages of a book to show his friend something. Jack gave a shaky sigh of relief, but worried that it was only a matter of time before a butterfly came for her. She needed to cheer herself up. She thought of all the things that made her happy—attending baseball games with her dad, eating hamburgers, the feel of the Pacific ocean lapping against her skin, Diego’s chip-toothed smile—but they only made her feel homesick. She contemplated calling Diego, but school had just started for him in Los Angeles. Maybe he had answered her email though and it was waiting for Jack at home. This thought propelled her into a speed walk. The sooner she got home, the safer she would be.

“There you are! What took so long?”

Jack froze and looked up into the glare of the afternoon sun. Adrien was standing on the school steps waiting for her. Nino stood closer to the street, half-turned away as he looked down at his phone, his red baseball cap shading his face.

“Don’t tell me you forgot,” said Adrien, giving her a light smile to show that it was okay if she had.

A small spark of happiness exploded in Jack’s chest, though it was tempered by her guilt. How could
she think so poorly of Adrien? He was a good guy. With a bit of effort, she returned his smile and joined him.

“I didn't forget…” she insisted.

“Ready?” he asked her.

Jack gave an enthusiastic nod. “I’ve been looking forward to this all day!”

Adrien turned to Nino as well, expecting an answer, but his friend rolled his eyes. He muttered something in French as he put his phone away and adjusted the strap of his yellow messenger bag.

“Ah…we talked about this, remember?” Adrien turned to Jack to give her an apologetic glance before going over to put his arm around Nino’s shoulders. “We’re going to talk in English to make things easier for Jack.”

Nino heaved a sigh, rolling his shoulders to get Adrien off of him before walking away. “Whatever, dude. Let’s just go.”

Jack could tell how embarrassed Adrien was over his friend’s behavior, so she tried her best to pretend like she hadn’t noticed anything was amiss. It wasn’t too hard. She was elated to be walking around with her classmates instead of walking home alone.

“Be positive,” she muttered.

They headed north along the bend in the Seine. When they walked by the bakery next to the school, Adrien pointed it out. Jack had passed it before, but never noticed it, too wrapped up in her own thoughts. It was painted white and yellow, the large arched windows engraved in gold with the store’s specialties and decorated with wheat stalks. The three panels above the entrance read ‘La Tom & Sabine,’ ‘Boulangerie,’ and ‘Patisserie’ respectively in bold capital letters.

“Marinette’s parents own this place,” Adrien explained. Jack nodded, recognizing the name of one of their classmates but unable to match it to a face. “They live right above it.”

Nino perked up a bit. “Best bakery in all of Paris, hands down.”

The door opened with a jingle as a customer left the shop with a cake box, the sweet smells of cinnamon and fresh baked bread wafting out after him. Through the tinted windows, Jack saw rows of macarons in every color of the rainbow and croissants stacked high in pyramids. Further in were bell jars packed with candy sticks, and glass display cases filled with éclairs bursting with filling and donuts glistening with sugar.

“Do they sell cupcakes?” Jack asked, thinking of Mimmi.

Nino gave her a look of annoyance and turned away.

“Er…no,” said Adrien, rubbing the back of his neck. “You’d have to go to an American bakery for something like that.”

Jack could feel a bit of heat creep into her cheeks, but she managed to brush her embarrassment aside and they continued on. They passed by the park with the carousel and Le Grand Paris, a luxurious five-story hotel, the glass doors guarded by a smartly dressed bellhop. According to Adrien, it was
one of the several pieces of property owned by business tycoon André Bourgeois, the mayor of Paris.

“Wait…Bourgeois!?” realized Jack in pure horror. “Chloé is the mayor’s daughter!?”

Suddenly, everything made sense—not only why Chloé seemed to be on a constant power trip, but also why no one tried to stop her. Still, she looked to the boys hoping one would correct her. Maybe Bourgeois was a common surname in Paris.

No such luck.

“They live in the penthouse of this hotel, actually,” said Adrien.

Jack felt bad for Marinette, having to live so close to such a bully.

The three of them took a right at the next street and soon found themselves in a public square marked by a large fountain. A monument rose up out of its waters, a column topped with a golden goddess raising her arms in victory. At first Jack thought Adrien was going to talk about the history of the fountain, but he instead pointed beyond it, to a huge limestone mansion covered in ivy, surrounded by a matching high walls topped with black spikes.

“That’s where I live,” he said.

Jack was startled for a moment, but then she smirked. He almost had her, but no way was Adrien rich on top of being kind, handsome, and popular. That would be overkill. “Yeah. Right.”

“No, I’m serious.”

“For real!??” Jack stared at the imposing compound, unable to comprehend how it was a house and not, say, a small university. “You and how many other people?”

“Just me and my father.”

“And your father’s assistant. And your bodyguard. And your private chef—” said Nino as he began to tick off his finger. Adrien shoved him good-naturedly.

“They work there. They don’t live with us.”

“That’s crazy,” said Jack. Adrien was so down-to-earth. She never would have guessed that he was the son of a billionaire. “What does your dad even do?”

“He’s a fashion designer.”

“Oh.” Jack tried to hide her disappointment. “Cool.”

They continued on, Adrien leading the way towards a bridge. Before they reached it though, Jack made the poor decision to look to her right and froze as she caught sight of the corrugated neon green and gray blockades that had been set up far down the street. Flashing arrow signs directed people away. The road was impassable. Because she had made it that way.

“…Jack?” Adrien noticed something was amiss and followed her gaze. “Oh…” he said, disheartened. “Did you see what happened on the news?”
Jack nodded, mute. She had managed to make it through most of the day without thinking about yesterday, but it was hard not to be crushed by her guilt when her mistakes confronted her like this.

“They say it was an Akuma attack,” said Adrien. “But I’m not so sure.”

“Dude, how can you not be sure?” wondered Nino, crossing his arms. “A girl in a bunny suit destroyed an entire neighborhood! If that doesn’t scream Akuma, I dunno what does.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t fight Ladybug and Chat Noir for their Miraculouses.”

“So? Maybe she’s biding her time.”

“The…the people. Who got hurt.” Jack cleared her throat. “Where were they taken?”

“I think the news said Hôtel-Dieu,” said Adrien. “Why?”

Jack wanted to go visit them. Apologize. She knew it didn’t make any sense. She was just desperate to let them know it was a mistake. She hadn’t meant to hurt them.

“I used to volunteer at a hospital back home…Thought I might pick it up here,” she said instead, moving on as fast as she could.

The tour resumed on the other side of the Seine. Adrien pointed out museums, shops, and restaurants—most way out of a normal teenager’s budget, not that he would know. It was actually a bit endearing. On the Avenue des Champs Elysées, the three of them passed by window after window filled with mannequins dressed in colorful jeans, sharp blazers, and trendy tops. Jack kept on lingering to look at them. She wanted to buy some new clothes, but she didn’t even know where to start. Maybe the windows could give her a few ideas.

“It’s going to take us a week to reach the Arc de Triomphe at this rate,” Adrien joked when he and Nino were forced to return for her. Nino groaned, not even trying to hide how bored he was.

Jack stared up at a magenta romper, wondering where she would even wear it. School? A party? Around the house? “I don’t get fashion,” she decided, turning away so they could continue on down the street.

“Me either.”


“So? If I could wear the same outfit every day, I would.”

“You’re a model…!??” cried Jack.

Adrien tucked his chin back like a turtle trying to retreat inside its shell. “Just print campaigns,” he muttered, trying his hardest to act like it wasn’t a big deal.

Jack threw up her hands in mock frustration, laughing at the ridiculousness that was her friend’s charmed life. “Geeze, Adrien. Anything else you want to tell me while we’re at it? You have a pet monkey? You’re dating a movie star? You’re a certified genius with an IQ of—”
She caught sight of a dark green advertising column, plastered from top to bottom with Adrien’s face as he showed off a pair of orange high-tops. Jack had seen those shoe ads all over Paris, but never once made the connection that the model who looked like Adrien with smoothed back hair was actually Adrien with smoothed back hair. She slammed a hand to her face and shook her head. She felt so stupid. He wasn’t just any model—he was the teen face of Paris. He was famous! If Jack knew anything about fashion, she might have recognized him.

“Are you sure you want to be caught hanging around a fashion disaster like me?” she wondered, picking at the loose threads on the armholes of her shirt as they waited at a light to cross the street.

Adrien wrinkled his brow, his eyes filling with concern like they had the day before. “Jack…”

“At home, I wore a uniform to school, so I really didn’t have to worry about what I wore, but here… I want to dress like the other girls. I do. I just…don’t know how. All I have are beach clothes… which really don’t make sense anymore…”

The boy brightened. “I know a girl who might be able to help you.”

Distant screams pierced the air. Someone was gunning a roaring engine and laying on their horn. Jack heard it in the back of her mind, but she didn’t think anything of it, she was so used to the traffic of L.A. The light changed as her and Adrien began to cross.

“Really?” she asked. She had won the friendship lottery with this guy. “Who?”

“Adrien! Jack!” shouted Nino.

Jack almost didn’t recognize Nino’s voice, it was so full of panic. She and Adrien turned to see pedestrians fleeing, but Nino still stood on the curb, his amber eyes blown wide as he shouted at them and frantically pointed up the street. Jack turned to see a gigantic monster truck, black with actual purple flames licking the sides of it, barreling down the road towards them. It was nearly as wide as the street it was ripping up, pushing cars and buses onto the sidewalk, into buildings, shattering windows. With its ridged tires as tall as a fully-grown man, belching acrid smoke from two exhaust pipes off the back of the cabin, and a grill made up of shiny chrome fangs, it looked like a demonic force sprung from the underworld.

And it wasn’t slowing down.

Adrien reacted first, shoving Jack towards Nino and stumbling back in the process. Nino caught Jack by the arms and yanked her onto the curb as the monster truck raced by and took a sharp left down Champs Elysées, the ground roiling underneath it. The scream of its skid was so piercing that Jack and Nino covered their ears, the pain shooting through their eardrums bringing them to their knees.

Jack stumbled to her feet as soon as she could and spun around to see the street hadn’t just been ripped up, but transformed into a cresting wave of asphalt at least fifteen feet high on the side street and even higher on Champs Elysées. Since it was curled over at the top, it was completely impassable.

“Adrien!” she shouted, but if he answered her, she couldn’t hear him over the ringing still going on in her ears. She could barely even hear herself. “Adrien!” she shouted again, louder.

There was a flash of red overhead and Jack looked up to see none other than Ladybug swinging by on a string. She landed on top of the road wave and pulled, a yo-yo returning to her hand, before
racing off in hot pursuit of the monster truck.

“What are you doing, Jack?” said a voice by her ear. Mimmi had flown up and was hiding in Jack’s hair. “Transform!”

Visions of yesterday’s destruction swam through Jack’s mind. “No!”

“But you can help Lady—”

Jack grabbed the Kwami and shoved her in her beach bag, turning to check on Nino. He stood up, but his equilibrium was off and he stumbled to the left. He righted himself with Jack’s help.

“You okay?” he asked.

Jack nodded. “Thanks.”

“Did Adrien…?”

Jack bit her lip, unable to answer.

“Jack!? Nino!” came a call on the other side of the wall of asphalt. A wave of relief passed through Jack as she recognized Adrien’s voice. The tension she hadn’t realized she had been holding in her shoulders released.

“Adrien!” called Nino, running forward a few steps. “We’re fine. You good?”

“Yeah, but I’m stuck on this side! Take Jack someplace safe and I’ll meet up with you later, okay?”

Nino made a fist and nodded, a man on a mission. “You got it!” He turned to Jack, jerking his head for her to follow. “C’mon.”

They ran, weaving between the cars, vans, and compact SUVs that now littered the sidewalk. Most of them were empty, the occupants having fled, but a few, like a bus on its side or a fuchsia hatchback sandwich between a tree and a lamppost, still had trapped passengers. Jack slowed down, wanting to help them, but Nino called out that they had to keep going. The monster truck might come back.

“Akuma attacks are insane,” Nino explained. “Totally crazy, you know? I found it’s best just to keep running until Ladybug—Ahhhhh!!”

They had taken a corner only to stumble across a sinkhole. Jack had stopped in time to keep from falling into it, but Nino was not so lucky. He vanished over the lip, his red cap flying off his head. It wasn’t so deep that it was impossible to climb out of, but the boy landed on his feet and, with a sickening crunch, his right ankle twisted at an unnatural angle. He fell forwards into a muddy puddle of stagnate water settled at the bottom with a splash, yelping with pain.

Jack got down on her hands and knees as she looked over the edge. The vibrations from the monster truck must have caused parts of the sewers to collapse because she noticed concrete, tubes, and metal piping.

“Nino!” she cried. “Are you okay?”
“Aïe! Pas cool, pas cool!” The boy pushed himself up and held his foot as he rocked back and forth, his face twisting in pain as color drained from his mud-spattered face. He had lost his glasses somewhere in the muck. Jack abandoned her bag and immediately scrambled down the pipes to reach him as he muttered dark words in French she didn’t recognize. “I think…I hurt…my foot…” he managed in English.

“Can you get up?”

“Uh…”

Jack squatted and grabbed Nino’s wrist, pulling his arm around her shoulders. “Brace yourself,” she told him, standing as a weightlifter would. Nino clenched his teeth, but, with most of his weight on his good foot, he managed to stand. He hopped around at Jack’s side before leaning against the wall of the hole and looking up. He swallowed, one of his eyes twitching.

“Yeah…I don’t think…Dude, I’m not climbing out of here.”

Jack glanced down at Nino’s foot. His muddied jeans covered the swelling, but from the way it hung there, she could tell it was bad. If not for endorphins rampaging through Nino at the moment, he probably would be curled up in a ball crying. She knew she would be.

“Okay. Yeah. Yeah, you’re right,” she said. “Let’s call for help. Do you have your phone? I left mine up top.”

Nino took his out of a sopping wet pocket. “Soaked,” he complained. He hit the home button several times, but the screen remained black. He held the phone to his forehead. “Aw, man, my pops is gonna kill me.”

“Don’t worry.” Jack grabbed the lowest pipe. “I’ve got it.”

She was almost at the top when Nino called out to her.

“Yo, Jack!” Jack looked down at the top of his head. He didn’t seem too keen to meet her eye as he ran a hand through his bristly dark brown hair. “Sorry I was such a jerk to you today. I was annoyed Adrien wanted us to hang with you. His old man doesn’t give him a lot of free time and I guess I was kind of upset he wanted to spend the little he had on you, you know? But you’re pretty cool.”

“Thanks…I think.” Jack paused. “J’espère qu’on peut être amis.” (I hope we can be friends.)

Nino looked up at her with a squint, but a smile spread across his face and he used finger guns in her general direction. “Chya!” But then he almost fell over and grabbed the pipe next to him for dear life.

Dragging herself back onto street level, Jack reached for her beach bag. Mimmi appeared, holding up the fabric with one paw and dragging Jack’s phone out with the other. The little Kwami shook her head, pushing a button to reveal the flashing icon of a red battery on the screen before it went black like Nino’s.

“Ugh! I’m such a idiot…” Jack said to herself. She had forgotten to charge it the night before. Again.

“What was that?” wondered Nino. “Don’t leave me hanging here!”

“I’m sorry, Nino! My battery’s dead!” What was she going to do now? The sinkhole was dangerous.
She couldn’t leave her friend down there—it might cave in, or the Akuma might return. Jack yanked at her hair and began to braid it into a fishbone again. When she realized what she was doing though, she froze.

She knew what she needed to do.

“I’ll be right back, Nino!” she told her friend, swinging her bag onto her shoulder as she stood up. “I’m going to go see if I can find any help!”

She ran further down the street, Mimmi slipping out of Jack’s bag and flying alongside her. “Are you going to do what I think you’re going to do?” Jack’s sullen silence was all the answer Mimmi needed. She clapped her little paws together. “I knew you would come around!”

“This is only to help Nino and that’s it,” Jack insisted, ducking behind some construction barricades. The street was empty, but it was better to be safe than sorry. “Mimmi, hop to it!”

With a smile on her face, Mimmi held up her arms like she was enjoying a rollercoaster as she got sucked into Jack’s Miraculous.

One transformation later, Jack returned to the sinkhole. She rearranged her face in hopes that it showed surprise and concern as she looked down at Nino.

“Hey! Are you okay?” she asked him.

Nino looked up and did a double take before stumbling away from the wall. His foot gave way and he fell over backwards into sewage. “J-J-Jack Hammer!”

Jack frowned. Of all the names the Paris media could have saddled her with, it was a pun on her own name. Cat Noir would probably be rolling on the ground laughing in delight if he knew.

“I see you watched the news yesterday…” She closed her eyes, pained, and sighed. “It was a mistake. My powers got out of hand. But I’m not a bad person. You have to believe me.”

Nino stared at her.

“Here.” Jack leaped down into the sinkhole, landing in a splash of muddy water. When it hit her suit though, it slipped right off, not even leaving a stain. She shoveled Nino into her arms before he could protest and jumped right back out, making sure to put him down on his good leg. “There.”

“Whoa…” Nino steadied himself against a building. “So you’re, like…the American Ladybug?”

“Hey! Ever think that maybe Ladybug is the French version of me?” she said, pretending to be offended. Then she grinned. “Nah, you’re probably right. I’m Rabbit.” She shook his hand, even though he hadn’t offered it.

Jack’s ears suddenly twitched, turning in the direction of Champs Elyséesce. People were calling for help in all sorts of languages. She caught some English. *Help! Someone help! We’re down here!*

Now that Jack thought about it, she doubted only one sinkhole had opened up. They were probably all over the area.

“Sounds like more people need my help,” she told Nino. She saluted him and took off, easily jumping over the road wave and the matching one on the other side with a single bounce. As she
soared over the destruction, the wind playing with her braid, everything felt so right. Why hadn’t she wanted to transform again? She couldn’t remember.

She found the next sinkhole nearby, filled with innocent shoppers. Most were tourists who didn’t recognize her, but a few Parisians drew back in terror. Once they realized she had come to help though, they softened and allowed her to hop them out, though they remained wary.

When Jack finished, her ears picked up on a little girl crying down the street. She saluted the shoppers and jumped on top of the road wave, racing down it until she came across a six-year-old wandering the sidewalk by herself. Not wanting to frighten her, Jack called out first with a friendly wave, but the girl was ecstatic to see her, naturally assuming she was a friend of Ladybug and Cat Noir. She took Jack to where a woman in a coral cardigan was trapped facedown beneath the rubble of a collapsed section of the road wave.

“Maman!” the child cried, taking up her mother’s hand. “J’ai trouvé Lapin! Elle est là pour vous sauver.” (I found Rabbit! She is here to save you.)

The woman struggled to look up, her face streaked with dirt. Upon seeing Jack, her pupils dilated and she started to struggle. “Non...non!”

Jack’s face fell. Even so, she couldn’t let this woman’s reaction keep her from helping. Getting down on her side, she began to kick at the layers of asphalt at on upwards angle, dislodging them in huge chunks while the woman cried like she was about to be tortured. Her daughter kept on trying to comfort her. The last few slabs Jack grabbed by hand and threw off, taking satisfaction in watching them crack when they smacked the ground. The woman finally managed to crawl out and grab her daughter, holding her close as she gasped for breath.

“Merci, Lapin!” said the little girl, her smile bright.

“A-Allez-vous...en...!” (Go away!) begged the mother, cowering.

Jack did as she was told. A salute and then she was gone, but at least she had one little fan.

Continuing on down the path of destruction caused by the monster truck, Jack saved as many people as she could, kicking in windows of vehicles and hopping the injured over fissures in the sidewalk so they could reach ambulances. Even though many people feared or despised her, her drive to make up for the day before prevented her from turning her back on them. One man bleeding from the head even spit on her, saying something about his wife being in the hospital, but Jack still calmly kicked a hole through the road waves so he and others could duck through to the other side. Maybe it was a good thing her French comprehension wasn’t better—it prevented her from understanding the creative curses people were shouting at her.

She had just rescued a baby from the backseat of a car teetering on the edge of a sinkhole when a figure in black smacked into the top of the road wave. Jack watched Cat Noir bounced off and hit the ground next to her, rolling to a stop on his back, the bell around his neck jangling. She peered down at him in dismay, but when his eyes flicked open and he saw her, his mouth stretched into a rubber band smile.

“Heyyyyy! Rabbit!” he drawled. “What are you doing here? I thought somebunny said they were done being a hero.”

“I’m not here to fight any Akumas, if that’s what you’re thinking,” said Jack, pulling him to his feet.
“I’m just helping out innocent civilians.”

“Sure I can’t tempt you? Ladybug and I could really use your help on this one. Calls himself Road Rage.”

Jack turned and walked away, her throat constricting. Her voice came out sounding unnaturally high. “I doubt Ladybug would be happy to see me based off what she said about me yesterday.”

“…You watched the news.” There was the scuff of boots on pavement and Cat Noir got in front of Jack. He stood perfectly straight with his arms glued to his sides and his head bowed. “I’m sorry I couldn’t get to her before the media did,” he said, rushing his words but meaning every bit of them. He paused before he glanced up, tentative. He flicked his tail. “But once I explained everything to her, she understood. What else could you have done? If you had been Akumatized, it would have been so much worse. So…” He elbowed Jack gently in the ribs “No hard feelings, eh? She’d be happy to see you. So let’s go save Paris!”

It was impossible not to smile around Cat Noir. Jack tried to hide it and be serious, but she only half-succeeded. “All right. If you really think so…I guess I can see what I can do.”

“Parfait!” (Perfect!) he cried, extending his baton and vaulting on top of the road wave. “Follow me!”

Jack jumped up after him and bounded to the other wave. They ran along the tops of them, matching each other’s speed step for step as they headed towards the greenery surrounding the Grand Palais campus. Jack didn’t mind going a little slower. Diego wasn’t as fast as her either. If she focused on Cat Noir’s suit, she could almost pretend she was running alongside her boyfriend again and the constant ache of homesickness deep in her sternum eased a bit.

They skidded to a stop at what once had been a roundabout, but had since been transformed into a small arena, with the pavers pushed up into walls. The smashed remains of vehicles littered the ground like discarded pieces of trash while the monster truck turned donuts in the middle. Ladybug, who had managed to latch onto it with her yo-yo, was being swung about. The g-force ended up being too much for her though and she went flying. She hit one of the walls feet first and front-flipped off of it. Cat Noir extended his staff so that she landed on the tip. She was a little caught off-guard at first, but with the monster truck gunning down on her, she ran right up it to join them.

“Sorry, My Lady. I got thrown into next Sunday! Sunday! Sunday!” Cat Noir told her, mustering his best monster truck rally announcer voice as he shortened his baton and spun it. Jack snorted, but covered her mouth when she noticed Ladybug frowning at her. Cat Noir did not. “On the plus side, looks who I found!” he crowed, holding out his arms to present Jack.

“Hello, Rabbit,” Ladybug said with a polite nod, her English sounding clipped. Jack doubted it was her accent, judging by how fast she pulled her partner away. “Chat, can I speak with you for a moment in private?”

He grinned like an idiot and waggled his eyebrows, but his smile soon faded as he and Ladybug got into a heated discussion right in front of Jack in French. Jack’s rabbit ears drooped as she realized how unhappy Ladybug was that Cat Noir had brought her. Cat Noir defended Jack though. She caught the word héros—hero—many times, among other things that went by too fast for her to comprehend.

“Uh…guys…?” wondered Jack as she noticed the monster truck accelerating towards them. A battle
was still going on here. “Um…uh…Attention! Faire attention!”

The two Parisian heroes turned to see the oncoming vehicle moments away from ramming them. Behind the purple-tinted windshield, Jack could make out the gargantuan figure of a beefy man in a black crash helmet, his eyes glowing purple behind the visor, before she jumped away. Ladybug was right behind her, throwing out her yo-yo and snagging a light pole to swing to safety. Cat Noir vaulted off in the opposite direction.

The monster truck hit the road wave at full speed, decimating it as it launched into the air. The wheels stayed level with the ground as the chassis flipped around and rocked from side-to-side. Jack realized the truck was made to be impossible to upend as it landed down the street with a heavy clunk.

“Chat tells me you want to help,” said Ladybug, grabbing Jack’s attention. “And its good to know there are other heroes around. But…you’re dangerous, Rabbit.”

Dangerous. The word stuck in Jack’s head like a nasty burr. Part of her, the logical part, acknowledged that Ladybug was right, but the rest of her was wounded by the verbal slap. She had once been a hero. Now, she was a risk.

“I-I won’t use my powers! I promise.”

But Ladybug shook her head. “That’s a chance I can’t take. If you want to help, get people to safety. Chat and I…” She swung her yo-yo and it latched onto the chimney of a nearby building. She tugged and it dragged her upwards. “We have this handled!”

Jack stared at the spot where Ladybug had vanished over the road wave, feeling stunned and a little lost. The roar of Road Rage’s engine brought her back to her senses though and she bounced off a lamppost and flipped onto the dome of a boutique. The monster truck passed on the far sidewalk, the searing purple flames leaving a scorch mark along the side of a white embassy across the street while kicking up pavement slabs and overturning a bus stop. Road Rage stuck his head out of the open window, hollering at Ladybug and Cat Noir as they ran alongside him on the rooftops.

Cat Noir gave Ladybug a boost, flinging her at the truck, while she latched onto his arm with the string of her yo-yo and pulled him along with her. They were able to land on top of the cab, but Road Rage banked a hard left, rolling his vehicle. Since Cat Noir was still looped with Ladybug, he yanked her towards him and grabbed her before extended his staff, shooting them upwards so they didn’t end up trapped beneath the truck. It still kicked the staff out from beneath them, but they landed on their feet.

When Road Rage’s truck settled, he went right back to trying to run them over. Jack watched the two heroes split, trying separately to get on top of the truck again to no avail before circling around and teaming back up again. To Jack, it felt like some kind of surreal dream, the kind where she was outside herself and everything felt familiar but nothing was the same. A red suit instead of a white one. Different colored hair. Champs Elyséesce replacing Rodeo Drive. But it was her and Diego fighting an Akuma, their teamwork the only thing standing between a villain who manipulated others for his own gain and their Miraculouses.

Her hand went to her side in search of her lucky rabbit’s foot, but she was Rabbit, so it was not there.

At some point in the fight, Cat Noir vanished. Ladybug kept Road Rage occupied, zipping around the roundabout on her yo-yo using the streetlights, egging him on to chase her in a large circle as if
she could somehow outlast him. The monster truck was spitting up dirt now and building the walls that surrounded them even higher, until they blocked the trajectory of Ladybug’s yo-yo. Upon realizing this, Ladybug broke out into a run, fast, but not fast enough to outstrip the truck’s wheels. It gained on her as she scrambled up one of the walls.

“Maintenant!” (Now!) she cried.

Cat Noir came vaulting over the wall, holding onto his staff with one hand while he held the other out. It sparked and crackled, tiny black bubbles emanating from it. He fell towards the truck.

But Road Rage hadn’t decided to ram Ladybug like both had predicted. Instead, he squealed his tires and drifted to the right. Ladybug covered both her ears. Cat Noir winced, unable to do the same as his cat ears went flat against his head, but he remained focused on the monster truck. He jumped off his staff to compensate for the sudden change in direction, a desperate reach, but he missed it by a hair, his hand hitting the ground and causing a rift instead. Jack assumed it was his superpower. Knowing him, he probably called it something punny, like Catastrophe. But knowing Miraculouses, Cat Noir now only had five minutes before he turned back.

Cat Noir’s power seemed to have faded as he helped Ladybug to her feet. They escaped to the top of a building covered with a billboard of Adrien’s face. Road Rage busted through the wall of the roundabout arena after them though and rammed the structure, causing them to wobble. He threw his monster truck in reverse and tried again, and again. The pair made a break for it before he brought the whole building down, joining Jack on her roof across the way. A beeping sounded from Cat Noir’s hand and Jack noticed one of the glowing green toes on his paw print ring vanish.

“You only get one chance,” Jack said to him. It was more of a statement than a question, but Cat Noir answered it anyway.

“Cataclysm? Yeah.” He shook out his hand “We’ll never be able to destroy his truck now.” He paused, the gears in his mind turning. “Unless…” He looked at Jack, his mischievous green eyes finishing the sentence for him.

“Non! No!” said Ladybug, catching on.

“I’m with Ladybug,” said Jack.

“You are?” asked Ladybug and Cat Noir in unison, surprised for different reasons.

“I’m not going to use my powers, but…I do have an idea.” She had been forming one since she had watched Road Rage stick his head out the window. She had considered it only idly, but now it was time to act. “Once I get into position, could you guys get Road Rage to drive passed me?” She pointed down an empty side street, flat and untouched, almost devoid of vehicles.

“You want to use us as bait?” realized Ladybug, her bluebell eyes widening beneath her mask.

“Well, when you put it like that, it sounds risky…”

“Because it is risky, Rabbit!”

“How is it any different from what you were doing earlier?”

“I’ll do it!” volunteered Cat Noir, throwing up a hand.
“Chat, no!” argued Ladybug. “You’re about to change back.”

“Then we better hurry.”

“Right!” Jack leaped off the building, shouting over her shoulder. “See you down there!”

There was no time to think, only go. She bounded down the street, looking left and right until she found a balcony that was the height she needed. She jumped up to it and gripped the railing in her hands, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet in anticipation. Craning her neck, she heard the monster truck before she saw it, a black and purple monstrosity taking up the entire street, mowing down everything in its path and gaining on the small figure of Cat Noir. He made the poor decision to look over his shoulder and yelped when he noticed one of the tires licking at his tail. He ran harder. Ladybug swung overhead, going further down. Jack took her position, jumping atop the railing and sitting like a frog.

Jack wanted to jump, every muscle in her body a poised and loaded spring, but she forced herself to wait until Cat Noir passed her, until it felt like it was too late. Just like throwing a Frisbee or catching a wave, it was all about timing. When the moment was right, she launched herself at the passenger side door, grabbed the top of the cab, and swung herself in through the open window. In one smooth motion, she kicked Road Rage with enough force to send him flying out the driver’s door and found herself sitting in his seat, the door flapping open next to her. Over the wheel, she could make out Cat Noir throwing his hands up in victory. She laughed. The trick hadn’t been to get the monster truck away from the man, but to get the man away from the monster truck!

But Cat Noir’s foot suddenly got caught in an innocuous pothole and he faceplanted on the ground.

“Cat!” Jack cried, drenched in terror as she tried to slam on the brakes, but her feet couldn’t reach the pedals, the interior built to accommodate a much larger man. She stretched and searched, but it was like there was nothing there. He slipped out of her view.

A flash of red and Ladybug swung down and grabbed Cat Noir by the tail mere moments before he became road kill. Jack craned her neck to make sure they were both okay, but then she remembered the road. She snapped forward only to see the gaping blackness of a gigantic sinkhole that had opened up in the fast approaching crossroads. Just before the front tires slipped over the lip, Jack tucked and rolled out the door.

The monster truck upended as it went down, it’s hood crunching as it lodged itself against the far wall. The engine roared like a dying beast one last time before it went dead. Its last cloud of black exhaust dissipated into a faint smoke and the back wheels slowed their spin. A ticking echoed through the silent shopping district as the monster truck cooled. Shaking, Jack stared at it as if it were only going into hibernation, as if the slightest move on her part would wake it. Memories of pain she had suffered in the past haunted her bones. She would have survived the crash fine, but she was relieved she had gotten out in time.

Jack heard the now familiar zip and pull of Ladybug’s yo-yo and the electronic whirr of Cat Noir extending his staff behind her. She looked up to see the two of them standing on the top balcony of the artisan bakery across the street. They stared at the smashed monster truck before their eyes traveled to her. Cat Noir clapped his hands and cheered, but Ladybug pointed at his ring. He leaned in close to say something to her, but she grabbed him by the shoulders and spun him around as she spoke, giving him a gentle shove. Jack could pretty much guess what she was saying—Go refuel. The battle’s not over yet. Cat Noir gave Jack an energetic wave and took off.
Ladybug watched him leave with a look of fondness, but it hardened into something icy and sharp as she turned back to Jack. It was the look of Jack’s mother when Jack got suspended for missing too much school. It was the look of Diego when Jack told him she was moving, and, no, she wasn’t going to find a way to stay. Disapproval. Condemnation. Reproach. Jack withered beneath the weight of it. Cat Noir could have been killed because of her and she knew it. Rabbit ears drooping again, she back away, then turned tail and ran. Ladybug didn’t need to say a word—Jack knew she wasn’t wanted.

_Dangerous._ That’s what she was. Even without accidentally using Diego’s powers. Ladybug and Cat Noir were better off without her.

Halfway down Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, Jack realized she didn’t have a destination and slowed to a stop. Her rabbit ears twitched and she turned them searching for sound. She finally understood the phrase, ‘the quietness was deafening.’ It seemed the entire area had been evacuated and it showed. Jack felt like she had stepped onto the set of a post-apocalyptic film. There was no one for Rabbit to help, not that she was much help.

_Help_, she suddenly remembered, closing her eyes with a groan. She was supposed to get Nino help and had never returned. The idea of worrying her new friend made her feel like she was going to be sick. She had to get back to him, now.

“Mimmi. All hopped out.”

A mysterious gust of wind blew up from beneath her, unbraiding her hair. Pale yellow light zipped from her feet to her head, her suit vanishing. Mimmi was tossed out of Jack’s watch without much ceremony.

“What are you doing!?” the little Kwami demanded, knotting her brow as she floated right in front of Jack’s face. She waved all of her limbs. “The Akuma is still out there!”

Jack started walking. “Ladybug will take care of it.”

“Alone?” Mimmi zoomed after her. “You know as well as I do how hard it is to do that!”

A shiver went down Jack’s spine. She ignored it. “Cat Noir won’t be gone long. She’ll be fine.”

“But—!”

Jack threatened to take her watch off, silencing Mimmi. Satisfied, she started to jog down the road, peering down side streets until she found the one she was looking for, the one with the construction barricades. As soon as she saw them, she broke out into a run. Mimmi realized what was going on and hid in Jack’s bag.

“Nino?” Jack called out. She looked into the sinkhole even though she knew she wouldn’t find him there. There was nothing but a red baseball hat floating in the muck at the bottom. “Nino!”

“Yo, Jack!” There was some movement at the end of the street where the buildings opened up, ending in the road wave. Jack faked surprise before sprinting the rest of the way. Nino was sitting in the seat of an abandoned moped, balancing with his good foot. The mud had all but dried on his skin. Without his glasses, he was forced to squint. “Dude, I’ve been waiting for you _forever_. Thought something bad had happened…”
“How did you—?”

He held up his hands as if to calm her. “Don’t trip, but it was Jack Hammer.”

Jack gave a small start.

"Relax!” said Nino. "Turns out the chick is totally chill. She’s a superhero, like Ladybug or Chat Noir. Calls herself Rabbit. Jumped me right out of the hole. It was pretty sweet."

He struggled to stand, so Jack went over to help. He put a little weight on his broken foot and hissed, pain paling his face.

“Easy, easy…” she told him. “Maybe…hop?”

Her friend gave a weak laugh, put his lanky arm across her shoulders, and tried his best. It was wobbly and awkward, but it seemed to work, so they headed back the way Jack had come, Nino taking one hop for every two of her steps.

“I’m not as good as Rabbit…” he admitted, biting his lip to ward off his discomfort.

It took Jack a moment to formulate a proper response. “Are you sure she’s a hero? She sent a lot of people to the hospital yesterday…”

“I guess her powers got out of hand. But she was running around here today rescuing people.” He paused, deep in thought. “You know…it’s pretty cool of her, if you think about it. Like, everyone is scared of her or angry with her, but that didn’t stop her from being a hero.”

There was no way Nino could have known the impact of his words, the guilt that caused Jack to freeze. He was used to their rhythm of the hop-step-step by that time and ended up jumping without her, losing his balance and crashing to the ground. As Jack muttered apologies and tried to help Nino back up, the faint wail of an ambulance’s siren resounded. She left him gripping a signpost while she ran on ahead to search for the flashing blue lights, flagging down the emergency vehicle as it passed.

“Aidez-moi!” she yelled, having her arms. No, that wasn’t right. She didn’t need the help, but it got the job done. The ambulance pulled up to the curb next to her and two paramedics popped out of the back. “Mon ami a besoin d’aide! Son pied…” (My friend needs help! His foot…) Jack motioned to her foot so they would get the general idea since she ran out of words. They grabbed a stretcher and she led them to Nino.

“Dude, good ears!” he told Jack as she approached, holding up his hand for a high-five. She gave him a halfhearted one, her mind elsewhere.

Nino talked to the paramedics, finding out what hospital he was being taken to and how there was no more room for Jack in the back of the ambulance. They would radio in her location to the police though and they would be able to take her to the hospital too, or something like that. Jack was only half listening, even when Nino explained everything to her in English. She trampled after him as he was lifted into the packed ambulance, at least three others crammed onto the side bench nursing various injuries. One was the man who had spit on her earlier, holding a bloodied towel to his head wound. It was strange to see no malice in his eyes when he tilted his head towards her. There was only empty curiosity.
“Don’t sweat it,” assured Nino, misreading Jack entirely. “Once Ladybug beats the baddie, she’ll use Miraculous Ladybug and BAM! Everything will be fixed, including my foot. You’ll see.”

The paramedics nodded to Jack and closed the doors together. Siren shrieking, the ambulance took off, rounded the corner, and vanished.

“Mimmi?” Jack said once she was sure she was alone. The little Kwami peeked out of Jack’s bag, one of her ears folded down. She looked unsure, but Jack was not. “We’re going back.”

Mimmi shot straight up into the air and pumped her arm, squealing with delight. She zoomed towards Jack’s Miraculous almost before she could finish telling her Kwami to hop to it.

Wall-kicking up to the rooftops, Jack searched for the greenery of the Grand Palais complex, the faint outline of a Ferris wheel at the end of it, to orientate herself. Road Rage and Ladybug couldn’t have gotten too far. She set off, bouncing from chimney to chimney, racing along balconies and scurrying up and around dormer windows. Upon landing on the balcony where she had last seen Ladybug, she twisted her ears and listened for anything out of the ordinary. There were the pigeons cooing, and, further, the rustle of the wind through leaves, and…deep throaty laughter that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up on end. Jack vaulted over the railing and followed the sound down the street. She soon found herself in the park surrounding a strange circular building labeled with the words ‘Theatre Marigny,’ its shape reminiscent of a circus tent. Jack jumped twice to reach the top and peered around the decorative artichoke that crowned the cupola.

There—a brush of red, in a section of the park across the street with a broken fountain and divots marring the grassy lawn. The hulking figure of Road Rage, sporting an ornate leather jacket trimmed with fringe, had pinned Ladybug down by the neck with one gargantuan hand, her yo-yo lying just out of her reach. She struggled to escape as he tried to grab one of her ears, but his fat fingers missed when she jerked her head to the side at the last moment. It dawned on Jack that Ladybug’s Miraculous had to be her earrings, and while she was doing all she could to keep them from being taken, it wouldn’t be long until Road Rage was able to yank them off.

Jack flung herself off the theatre and bounded across the street, but upon realizing time was of the essence, whipped her chakram as hard as she could. It whizzed between the trees, striking the Akuma right between the shoulder blades. He lurched forward as it bounced off him and back into Jack’s outstretched hand. Growling, her turned to see who had attacked him.

A neon lavender outline of a moth suddenly appeared, floating an inch from Road Rage’s face. Jack was a little taken aback, but she had seen Trumpeter Swan do something similar to his Akumatized victims. Hawk Moth had to be communicating with his minion.

“Mais elle m’a frappé!” (But she hit me!) rumbled Road Rage, tossing Ladybug away without a second thought as he took a couple of thunderous steps towards Jack. He stumbled a little, holding his head as if suffering from some terrible migraine, but he fought through it, barreling at Jack like a linebacker.

Every instinct Jack had screamed at her to move, to run, to dive out of the way—Road Rage was much larger than she had anticipated. But she ignored all of them, her entire body vibrating with pent up fight or flight response. Instead, she stared Road Rage down, her own round face mirrored in the visor of his crash helmet. All that was visible of him were his bared teeth.

At the last moment, Jack hopped straight up, landing briefly on Road Rage’s helmet and then jumping over him. He had built up too much speed to stop and, with a splintering crash, ran
headlong into a tree. Jack didn’t turn to look back though, instead making a beeline for Ladybug.

“Etes-vous bien?” she asked, offering the girl her hand. She knew that wasn’t the right way to ask someone in French if they were okay, but the thought was there.

Ladybug stared up at Jack in disbelief. “You…you came back.”

“Yeah.” Looked like it was okay to speak in English. “Lucky you, huh?”

This managed to elicit a smile. Ladybug accepted the help and Jack pulled her to her feet.

“Thank you,” she said. “If you hadn’t showed up…” A shiver. Jack knew the feeling all too well. It was surreal to be on the other side of it for once.

A roar shook the ground beneath their feet, interrupting their reunion. Ladybug and Jack turned to see Road Rage wrap his arms around the tree he had crashed into and yank it out of the ground, roots and all. Asphalt and dirt went flying, and when he tugged the trunk free from its roots, they snapped back like whips. One struck Jack across the cheek, causing her to flinch, but her mask protected her face.

With a mighty heave, Road Rage swung the tree down on top of Jack and Ladybug. They rolled to the right to dodge, but he was far from done. He took the tree up like a baseball bat and swung. Ladybug preformed several back flips to get out of the way, but Jack geared up and jumped straight up, as high as she possibly could, easily clearing a hundred feet. From the safety of the air, she reasoned she would be able to throw her chakram at him a few times.

But the air proved to be the wrong place for Jack to be. Enraged he had missed, Road Rage tossed the tree at her. In the air, there was no place to go, no way to dodge. Her chakram, though powerful, would not be able to split the thick trunk in two. Maybe if she was braver she would have taken the hit, but she was not brave. She panicked and tossed her chakram up instead.

“Lucky Strike!” she cried, knowing exactly what would happen.

Like the day before, her chakram sent two beams of intertwining light down at her. They struck her mere moments before the tree smacked into her, but thanks to her glow, it broke apart as soon as it touched her. It was like she was a knife slicing through warm butter. Gravity continued to drag Jack down none-the-wiser though, faster and faster. Seeing the ground approach, Jack huddled into a ball and squeezed her eyes shut, willing what was sure to happen next to not happen at all, but her wish wasn’t granted. She landed with so much destructive power and force that the ground seemed to melt beneath her.

Jack was afraid to survey the damage at first, but she couldn’t keep her eyes closed forever. They fluttered open and she found herself in a deep pit with narrow walls. By making herself as small as possible, she had minimized the damage. Body still shaking, she stood and looked up to find Ladybug staring down at her, a look of disappointment on her face. But a friendlier face soon joined her.

“Désolé de vous faire attendre, Ma Dame,” (Sorry to keep you waiting, My Lady) said Cat Noir. “Qu’est-ce que j’ai raté?” (What I miss?)

Ladybug gestured to the pit. Only then did he notice it. He peered down at Jack with a grimace.
“Looks like we’ve hit rock bottom…”

“Ha. Ha.” Though Jack appreciated the effort, she wasn’t in the mood.

“I’ll dig us out,” Ladybug assured in English.

Thunderous steps shook loose the dirt around Jack. Both Ladybug and Cat Noir looked to their left.

“Why don’t you distract Road Rage?” Ladybug suggested to partner.

A sweeping bow. “It would be an honor.” Cat Noir vanished.

Ladybug swung her yo-yo around, having retrieved it at some point, probably after Road Rage had thrown his tree.

“Lucky…Charm!” she cried, flinging her yo-yo straight up into the air. It went maybe ten feet before the string went taut and it began releasing sparks of pink energy. They quickly transformed into what Jack at first thought were small red hearts. On second look though, she realized they were large ladybugs. They swarmed into an upward spiral and joined together. In a flash, they vanished, leaving behind a red can covered with black spots.

Ladybug caught the can as it fell and gave it a hard look, as if trying to divine its secrets. Jack stared. She knew she shouldn’t be surprised. After all, Cat Noir and Perro Negro both had the power of destruction, and Hawk Moth and Tumpeter Swan were able to transform and control others, so it only made sense she and Ladybug would share the power of creation. Still, it was unnerving to watch someone else use what looked like her ability, an ability she could no longer preform. Maybe it was jealousy or nostalgia or some bizarre mixture of the two, but Jack’s heart felt heavy.

Ladybug’s focus shifted. She looked to her right, towards a fight Jack couldn’t see, then to the area around Jack, then to Jack herself, then finally back to the can. Mind set, she nodded.

“What’s your ability? Destruction?” she asked Jack.

“Er…Dogstruction.” Jack blushed.

“Really!? I thought Chat Noir was joking! Okay, well, can you use Dogstruction to create more of these pits?”

“You…you want me to make more…!?”

“Oui. Exactly. I’ll mark where I want them. Can you do it?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Don’t worry. Any damage you cause will be fixed by Miraculous Ladybug this time.”

A small spring of confidence welled up within Jack, one that had gone dry yesterday when she was unable to de-evilize the Akuma. All of Mimmi’s mantras played through her head. You’re a hero with or without the mask. Fall down seven times, stand up eight. Be positive.

Jack saluted. “You got it. More holes, coming up!”
She sprung, not going nearly as high as before, but high enough that their section of the park spread out beneath her like a map. There were two black figures in the corner, a large hulking one and a small quick one, locked in battle. There were the remains of the tree she had split, like two jagged sticks of charcoal. And there was Ladybug, drawing X’s on the ground by swinging her yo-yo and digging up the grass. Jack aimed her feet towards the closest X and curled into a ball as she hurled towards it. She could feel the spray of dirt along the sides of her face as she ploughed into the ground. When everything went still, she looked around to find herself in a hole like the first one.

Two down, more to go.

Jack continued until there were no more X’s to mark the spot, the holes lining up in a crescent shape so if one was sidestepped, you would end up falling into another. Ladybug dragged Jack out of the last pit with her indestructible yo-yo, slow and careful, since Jack was essentially a motion-sensor bomb.

“Chat!” Ladybug called over her shoulder as soon as Jack reached the surface. “Se retirer!”

Jack assumed Ladybug had told Cat Noir to retreat, since he scrambled to his feet where Road Rage had tossed him and raced towards them, leaping over the holes. Meanwhile, Ladybug pulled the tab on the can she had summoned using Lucky Charm. It started to issue forth pink smoke as she lobbed it over Cat Noir. Jack realized it was a smoke bomb. It worked fast, covering the whole area with a thick blanket of fog. Road Rage roared and barreled right through it, toward them.

He never came out the other end.

When the smoke cleared, Road Rage was stuck in a pit. It was barely large enough for him to fall into, but since it narrowed at the bottom, he only fell in to about his shoulders. His neck twisted as he strained and grunted, but even with his prodigious strength, he could not break free.

Ladybug ran up and flipped over Road Rage, tearing his helmet off in the process and smacking it hard against the ground in one smooth motion. It cracked, releasing a familiar black butterfly with translucent purple spots. Jack’s insides curled at the sight of it, but Ladybug simply held up her yo-yo and ran a finger down it. It split open like a pair of ladybug wings, revealing a pool of pink light. She spoke in French as she did this, dropping her yo-yo to her feet and swinging it around. Spinning, she struck a heroic pose and threw her weapon towards the fleeing Akuma. Upon capturing it, she yanked her yo-yo back. Tapping it, the wings opened again and released a pure white butterfly.

“Bye-bye, petit papillon!” she told it with a wave. Then she picked up the spent smoke bomb discarded at her feet and tossed it into the air with a shout of ‘Miraculous Ladybug!’ It returned to its true form of pink energy and ladybugs, which split into eight swarms and sped off to the four corners of Paris. Jack imagined them flattening the streets, closing up sinkholes, returning cars to the road. At a hospital somewhere, they healed Nino’s foot.

There was a tickle at Jack’s ankles and she looked down to see one swarm fixing the divots at their feet and the fountain nearby. She grinned as the sound of splashing water returned to the park.

But any joy she felt short-lived when the ladybugs vanished without completing their work. The pits remained. The pulled roots, the tree trunk cut in two halves, the lamppost one of those halves had bent over backwards, it’s bulb shattered on the ground—all the destruction Jack had caused stayed, a permanent mark. Like a small child who had broken something important, she looked around in desperation for a way to hide what she had done, but she couldn’t use a rag to hide an elephant. Ladybug saw everything. At first she was surprised, backing up as her eyes darted around the area,
but it morphed into resigned regret. She locked eyes with Jack. The word was there. The word was always there.

Dangerous.

Road Rage bellowed one last time, stealing both girls’ attention. He was a furious sight—tire tread marks tattooed across his cue-ball face, his eyes literal purple flames—but as the dark power boiled away, all that remained was a mild-mannered man, slight and balding. A few miles away, his monster truck had probably turned back into a nondescript white sedan. Now that he was much smaller, he nearly fell into the pit, but was cognizant enough to grabbed onto the edge. Cat Noir darted over and pulled him to safety.

“Rabbit.”

Jack turned to Ladybug, a tightness building in her chest. Ladybug’s face was impossible to read.

“I’m sorry,” she said, dropping her eyes.

“Y-you’re sorry!?” sputtered Jack.

“I thought Miraculous Ladybug would fix everything. I was wrong.” A pause. “It was also wrong of me to treat you like I did earlier. You’re new here and there is something strange going on with your powers and you’re just trying to do your best. I should have been more understanding of that. You’re a good person.” Another pause. “But...”

She didn’t even have to finish. “I’m dangerous. I know.” Jack balled her hands into fists, staring at one of the gaping holes in the ground to the left of Ladybug’s feet.

“You promised you wouldn’t use your powers, but you did anyway. It’s not that bad if we can use it to our advantage, like today, but I don’t want a repeat of yesterday. People could get hurt, and you cause so much damage. If only you could control it...”

Jack blinked, Ladybug’s words prompting her to recall all the times Diego ran, jumped, took her up in his arms—after he had used Dogstruction. He didn’t rip up roads or create craters. He never hurt innocent pedestrians. Maybe it was because they were his powers, but Jack couldn’t help but wonder if he knew some sort of secret when it came to handling his destructive abilities.

“What if I did? Learn to control it, I mean?” wondered Jack.

“Then Chat and I would love the extra help from time to time, but we can’t risk it until then. Comprenez-vous?”

“That’s fine. You won’t see me fighting Akumas again.” Her watch rang, and she jumped a little, the ground crackling beneath her feet. She thought she had more time. “Ah! I’ve...uh...I’ve got to go, but there was something I needed to know about really quick.” She looked around for cover to change back. The theater would have to do. “Walk with me?”

Ladybug nodded and called over her shoulder to Cat Noir, probably telling him she would be back, as her and Jack headed towards the circular building. It took all of Jack’s willpower not to turn their stroll into a speed walk. She only had a minute, so she cut right to the chase.

“I’m not sure if you talked to your Kwami about me or not, but mine didn’t recognize your
Miraculouses,” said Jack.

Ladybug apparently thought Jack was going to ask her about something else, because she relaxed and touched her earrings. They originally had five dots apiece, but they were now down to two each. “I don’t know much, but I know mine is very old,” she said. “There were many Ladybugs before me, going all the way back to ancient Egypt—maybe even further.”

“Oh…” Jack stared at her watch and rubbed the glass face with her thumb. She couldn’t explain it, but she felt a little disheartened. “Mine became a Miraculous thirteen years ago.”

“Became…?”

“Yeah. My Kwami was created in a lab with six others and she chose to bond with this watch. I think…” She couldn’t believe she was saying this. “I think she might be a clone of your Kwami.”

“A clone!?”

“I mean, it’s a little odd, isn’t it? Rabbit, Ladybug—both lucky? I used to have the power of creation too, called Lucky Strike. It’s a little different from Lucky Charm, but still…”

“I’ll talk to my Kwami about it. Something weird is definitely going on here.” Ladybug paused to chew on her lip, deep in thought. She pulled open the door to the theatre and held it for Jack as her earrings began to beep. “But…maybe that’s why your powers have gone haywire, why I can’t undo the damage you cause.”

“Huh? Why?”

“You don’t possess a true Miraculous.”

*   *   *

Jack entered the waiting room feeling exhausted. It had not been a short trek to the hospital that admitted Nino, but at least she had ample opportunity to practice her French by asking pedestrians for directions. This was the last time she went to bed without plugging in her phone. Or traveled without an emergency cupcake for Mimmi. As Rabbit, the trip would have taken ten minutes, tops. But maybe it was for the best Jack Hammer wasn’t heading to where the injured were recuperating, even if she hadn’t been the cause this time.

She gave the room a quick sweep, spotting Nino, foot completely healed. Miraculous Ladybug had even returned his hat and glasses to him. He was playing keep-away from Adrien with a teen magazine. The former must have been able to contact the latter and let him know where he was. Jack exhaled. Words could not express how glad she was to see them both safe. They were her friends. As long as she had them, the Akumas were sure to stay away.

Upon seeing Jack, they both froze, a little sheepish, before jumping up and running over to her.

“There you are!” said Adrien.

“Dude! What took you so long?” wondered Nino. “We were like, ‘Should we stay? Should we go look for her?’ We didn’t know!”

“The police never came to pick me up,” Jack lied, switching her beach bag to her other shoulder as
she played the part of a disgruntled civilian. “When everything returned to normal, I decided to start walking.”

Adrien frowned and ran a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, Jack. This isn’t how I thought today was going to go.”

“Not your fault,” said Jack with a shrug. She snuck a glance at her watch to check the time. “Besides, the day’s not over yet! My parents aren’t expecting me home until seven. Maybe we could continue the tour?”

The three left the hospital to do just that, Adrien recounting what happened to him after he was separated from her and Nino. By his own admission, it wasn’t as exciting as Nino falling into a sinkhole and being rescued by Rabbit, but he did see her helping people get to safety. Jack couldn’t recall seeing Adrien, but she had been a little preoccupied at the time.

“What do you think of her?” Jack couldn’t help but ask.

“This guy?” wondered Nino, throwing an arm around Adrien’s shoulders and pointing at his face. “Dude is the biggest superhero fanboy this side of the Seine. Especially of Ladybug.” He wagged his eyebrows.

Adrien gave his friend a good-natured shove, trying to hide is embarrassment. “Anyone who helps my friends is all right by me.”

“A lot of the class has been Akumatized,” Nino said to Jack by way of explanation. “Including me.”

“That’s crazy!”

But before Jack could find out more, Adrien’s phone began to buzz. He pulled it out of the pocket of his jeans and deflated before Jack’s eyes. Nino seemed to know that look all too well.

“Votre vieil homme?” (Your old man?) he asked.

Adrien turned away as he took the call. The voice on the other end was too quiet and quick for Jack to distinguish any words, but she could tell it was harsh. Her friend winced at the sound of it. He tried his best to speak, to defend himself against the onslaught, but it seemed he couldn’t get a word in edgewise. Nino shook his head, his amber-colored eyes pooling with a mixture of pity and compassion.

“Je suis s-désolé, Père, je—...Non, je l’ai dit à Nathalie que je ne savais pas comment long—...Er, oui monsieur…Oui, monsieur…Je comprends. Non, ceci—ceci ne se reproduira…” (I am sorry, Father, I—...No, I told Nathalie that I did not know how long—...Er, yes sir…Yes, sir…I understand. No, this—this will not happen…) Adrien pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at the screen. Jack could hear the dial tone. “…plus.” (…again.) For a moment, he was lost. Then he realized his friends were looking at him. He gave a rather convincing smile. “Pardon—er, I mean, sorry about that. My father wants me home. Are you guys going to be okay without me?”

“No worries. I can give Jack the lowdown on the town,” assured Nino.

“See you tomorrow?” asked Jack.

Adrien nodded. Satisfied, he got back on his phone, calling for someone to come pick him up.
“You weren’t kidding when you said his dad didn’t give him a lot of free time,” Jack muttered to Nino as they made their way back towards the 21st arrondissement together.

“He wouldn’t even let Adrien have a party for his birthday. Dude is cold.” He shivered for emphasis. “Super overprotective too—hardly lets him leave the house without his bodyguard.”

“Bummer.”

Though Jack would never say so, Nino turned out to be a better tour guide than Adrien. Nino was a DJ in his spare time and mixed music at some of the hottest teen clubs in the city, and had extensive knowledge of the best concert venues. As they talked music, they were surprised to learn they shared similar tastes, an eclectic mix of genres that included everything from electronic to Jagged Stone.

Eventually, Nino led the way back across the Seine using a pedestrian bridge called Pont des Arts. The railings and grates on either side weighed with padlocks in golds and silvers. When Jack asked about them, Nino explained couples wrote their names on the locks or had them engraved. They then attached them to the bridge and threw the key into the river below as a gesture of eternal love. However, a few years ago, the bridge began to collapse beneath the weight of the locks and some were removed. The bridge was in the process of being redesigned so locks couldn’t be affixed to it at all.

“That’s so sad…” said Jack, leaning over the railing to look into the tranquil gray waters below. She played with one of the locks, the chipped names Steve and Staci written on it in whiteout. For half a second, Jack considered clipping her rabbit’s foot keychain to the grate. After all, Diego said he would wait for her to return. As long as it took.

She closed her eyes, keeping the pain and the pinprick of tears at bay. At times she was able to distract herself from her heartache, but it kept on roaring back, as incessant as Road Rage’s monster truck. Maybe things would get better. Maybe someday she wouldn’t feel like she was walking on a balance beam with unsteady legs. Her memories of Diego would fade and she wouldn’t miss him so much. But the thought of forgetting him—his raucous laughter, his stoic stance, his wild hair—made her chest tighten. She could not let him go. She wouldn’t. But as long as she felt the way she did, she would always be in danger of being Akumatized. She could adjust to her new life, make friends, learn French, do everything she could, but she would never be happy in Paris without him.

The wind picked up and, again, Jack swore she heard the flap of an Akuma’s wings. She panicked, but it was a candy wrapper stuck in the grate flapping in the breeze.

“Whoa. You okay, Jack?”

She turned and saw Nino with his head tilted and an eyebrow raised. Though she appreciated his concern, she wasn’t going to burden her new friend with her homesickness.

“I’m fine,” she said, hugging herself. “It just…really cooled off. I knew I should have brought my sweatshirt.”

* * *

Jack read Diego’s email for the eleventh time, hearing his hyperactive voice behind the words. Everything was fine. There was nothing wrong with his powers. There hadn’t been a single Akuma attack since they captured Trumpeter Swan. The city of Los Angeles was safe. Even better, Diego
had confronted the Chief of Police about his role in obstructing the hunt for Trumpeter Swan and even convinced him to come clean at a press conference. Diego linked Jack to it and she watched as the man she had formally trusted explain that someone had threatened to hurt his family unless he made sure Trumpeter Swan was never found. He suspected that other police officers had been compromised as well, though he didn't know who. He finished up by tendering his resignation and turning himself in to the proper authorities.

It was everything Jack had hoped to hear.

…But a small sliver of her was jealous. It seemed while Diego’s bad luck had rubbed off on her, her good luck had rubbed off on him. She didn’t want him to suffer, but she didn’t want to feel alone in her suffering either. She took solace in the fact that he was worried about her though, and missed her like crazy. He wanted to video chat with her as soon as possible since he had questions about Ladybug and Cat Noir. The problem was, when she finished school for the day, he was starting, and when he was finished with school, it was the middle of the night for her. Maybe over his lunch hour, right before she went to bed…

“They’re talking about you again,” said Mimmi across the bedroom. She jumped up and down on the remote, raising the volume of the TV Jack had playing softly in the background.

Jack watched as the now familiar footage of today’s Akuma attack played, but also included were several first person amateur videos people had taken of Jack using their smart phones. There she was, leaping someone out of sinkhole or kicking in the window of a mini. Then it switched to a reporter with the words in the lower third translating to ‘Jack Hammer AKA Rabbit: Hero or Menace?’ As the reporter conducted man on the street interviews, Jack could tell from the tone of people’s voices what they thought. She didn’t care to translate them, even if a few were positive.

“I have to learn how to control Dogstruction like Diego,” she told her Kwami as she spun around in her chair to face her computer and began to write her reply to him. She was going to need his help.

“That’s the spirit!” said Mimmi, flying over to put an encouraging paw on Jack’s shoulder. “Practice makes perfect!”

“Yeah, but I can’t practice just anywhere. I don’t want to put anyone in danger or cause property damage or anything like that.”

“You’ll find a place. Don’t worry. Be—”

“Positive,” finished Jack with a wry smile.
Femme Defamation

Chapter Summary

Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jaclyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Chapter Notes

I’m really shocked anyone is still reading this. Thank you, thank you! I appreciate every little bit of encouragement so much! If I could, I would bake you all cupcakes. But all I can really do, I guess, is write another chapter and hope you continue to enjoy it? So I did. And if you do like it, please share with other people in the fandom!

This chapter we have Marinette being jealous ‘Volpina’ style, Plagg convincing Adrien to do something he shouldn’t, Sadrien AND feed Adrien 2k16, and an Akuma I wish I could draw, but sadly cannot.

Special shout out to spitfire402 for the extra kudos. Sorry I’m a couple days later on this update than I promised! But still pretty close ;-)

Jack climbed the steps of Collège Françoise Dupont feeling pretty proud of herself. Not only was she early to school, but she also had enough time to stop in at the bakery Adrien and Nino had pointed out to her yesterday and bought herself a croissant. Nino was right. As she munched on the buttery pastry, still warm from the oven, she felt like nothing in Paris could compare. Only Sprinkles Cupcakes back home was better, but, then again, she was bias.

“Jack!” called out Adrien the moment she stepped foot in the building. Students were milling about waiting for class to begin, but she spotted her friend across the basketball court, waving her over. He was standing with a girl who sat two rows in front of Jack, the one with midnight hair and the impeccable fashion sense. Today she was wearing a pair of high-waisted shorts with a polka dotted blouse, two things Jack didn’t think went together until just now. She looked down at her own clothes and tried to brush the crumbs off her oversized baja jacket as she shoved the last bit of croissant in her mouth. It was no use though. They were now ingrained in the thick, woven material. With a sigh, she gave up and went over to join them, wiping her buttery fingers on her leggings.

“Jack, you know Marinette, right?” Adrien said.

Jack gave a small start, finally putting a name with a face. So she was the one who lived above the patisserie. Now that Jack thought about it, she did look an awful lot like to the smiling, heart-shaped face woman who rang her up. It must have been her mom. “Oh! I was just at your house!” Jack said.
Marinette wrinkled her brow. “Er…uh, that came out weird. I mean, I was just at your parent’s bakery and I brought a croissant and I ate it and it was delicious.”

Marinette said nothing, but Adrien laughed. Jack noticed Marinette’s eyes dart over to him and then back to her again.

“Hey, remember yesterday, when I said I had a friend who could help you with the whole ‘fashion’ thing?” asked Adrien. “I was talking about Marinette. She’s an amazing fashion designer.”

The girl blushed and looked away, tucking a stray piece of hair behind her ear. She sputtered something in French.

“Yeah?” wondered Jack eagerly.

“Yeah! She was just telling me she could make an outfit for you.”

Marinette looked up as if someone dumped a bucket of cold water on her. She threw her arms about as if looking for something to grab on to but found nothing. “Sa!? Mais je pensais…Mais vous avez dit…” (Her!? But I thought…but you said…) She looked frustrated and upset and a little crazed, but then she froze and forced an uneasy smile, a nervous laugh spilling from her lips. She snapped back to a normal posture, though her eye twitched. “Bien…sûr!” (Of…course!) she said, as if it were suddenly difficult for her to speak. Jack didn’t know what she said after that, but she heard her name in there somewhere.

“Uh…Pouvez-vous répéter cela?” (Can you repeat that?) Jack asked, the words thick and jumbled in her mouth. Poo-vee-vu ray-pay-tis cell-ah.

“She said she can’t wait to get started!” said Adrien, thumping Jack on the back. “Thanks, Marinette,” he told the girl. “I knew I could count on you.”

The sound of a dribbled basketball echoed through the courtyard. Lê Chiến Kim called out to Adrien with a tone of challenge in his voice, puffing out his chest and raising an eyebrow as he held up the ball. Adrien beamed as if his classmate had complimented him, rather than, as Jack suspected, talked smack.

“Looks like Kim wants to play some ball,” he told them as he excused himself. “But I can’t wait to see what you’re going to come up with, Marinette. I know it’s going to be great! Jack’s going to love it.”

He jogged off, the girls watching him leave.

“Thanks for doing this, Marinette,” Jack said, turning back. “I mean, really. I wasn’t expecting a whole outfit! I just thought we could go shopping together or…” She drifted off, realizing Marinette wasn’t even listening. She was too busy staring at Adrien as he stole the basketball from Kim and made a layup, her eyes dreamy and far away. A small sigh escaped her lips. “Uh…Marinette?” Jack shook the girl’s shoulder.

Marinette flinched, disgruntled. She said a few curt sentences in French, Jack catching the words ‘venir’ (come), ‘ma maison’ (my house), ‘mesures’ (which sounded like measures, so maybe measurements?), and ‘quinze heures’ (15:00, or 3:00 PM).

“Er… Est-ce que vous me invitez plus…?” (Did you invite me…?) Jack couldn’t figure out how to
say ‘over’ and left the question dangling. She was tempted to ask Marinette if they could speak in English, but decided against it. Adrien had been speaking to Jack in English the whole time. If Marinette hadn’t joined in then, Jack got the feeling she wasn’t going to change her mind now.

Marinette nodded, then called out to her deskmate Alya and joined her friend along the wall. The two began to whisper, Marinette’s eyes darting in Jack’s direction from time to time.

Jack felt bad. She really did. When Adrien asked Marinette if she would be willing to make an outfit, she probably assumed it would be one for him to model. Designing something for Jack was far less glamorous. Of course she was disappointed and upset. Jack would be too. She wondered if maybe she should tell Marinette to forget about it.

“Ew, what are you wearing? A rug?” came Chloé’s grating voice as she and Sabrina walked passed her. “Did you find that on the side of the road or did you actually search through the garbage for it?”

On second thought, Jack was desperate. Even if Marinette was unhappy, she still seemed willing. Who knew? Maybe Jack could get the girl to warm up to her and they could be friends.

*   *   *

The morning ended with foreign language. Most of the class had elected to take Spanish as their third language, including Jack. For once, she was on even footing with everybody else, or maybe even a little bit better thanks to Diego. It was nice. When Miss Bustier dismissed them, Jack was almost disappointed, but she wasn’t going to say no to getting out of school early. She loved that Wednesdays were a half-day in France.

Jack’s plans for that afternoon included eating her lunch in the park for the third day in a row and doing homework in the library until it was time to go to Marinette’s. She wasn’t thrilled about it, but it could be worse. When she stepped outside though, she took note of the overcast sky. The air smelled like rain and she had forgotten her umbrella. Maybe she would be eating in the library too.

“Are you eating in the park again?” wondered Adrien, spotting the brown bag as he passed her on the schools steps.

Jack felt heat seep into her cheeks as she looked down at the crumbled paper clutched in her fist. Her new friend was rather observant. “Uh, yeah…my parents haven’t made me an extra key for our place yet. Even if they had, they wouldn’t be home anyway.”

“My dad is never home either. I always end up eating alone too.”

“That stinks…” Jack paused, turning his words over in her head as an idea developed. “Did…did you want to eat in the park with me?”

“Huh? Oh! Uh….” He looked over his shoulder, at the silver town car idling by the curb. He jammed a thumb in its direction. “Can’t. My ride is here. I’d invite you over for lunch but…my father doesn’t like it when I have guests over, especially when he’s not around.”

“Right. Um…in that case…I guess I’ll see you tomorrow then. Au revoir.”

Jack walked away as fast as she could, the sidewalk unsteady beneath her feet as her hand automatically went to her rabbit’s foot keychain. She wondered why it felt like she was always standing on a cliff now, her feet halfway over the edge. Every day was a battle not to fall, to not
become an Akuma’s target. It was exhausting. She was fighting against the wind of her own emotions, which didn’t even make sense half the time. She had no reason to be upset by Adrien’s rejection—he had good reasons and she had asked him super last minute anyway—yet she was hurt. When did she become so sensitive? It was like it was a side effect of moving.

About halfway down the block though, she heard Adrien shout her name and ask her to wait. He jogged up to her, busy adjusting one side of his jacket.

“I changed my mind,” he said. “Why don’t you come over for lunch?”

Jack blinked at him. “But you just said your dad—”

“It’s not like he’ll be home to find out. Besides, you can’t stay that long anyway. I’ve got basketball practice.”

Jack may have only known Adrien for less than three days, but even she was shocked by how unlike him that sounded. From what she could tell, he was a model son and citizen, so for him to be willing to lie to his father by omission was jarring. It was almost as if someone had come along and talked him into bending the rules a bit.

“I don’t know…” Jack admitted, biting her lip.

A horn beeped and they both turned to see Adrien’s car had pulled up next to them. “Here, I’ve got an idea,” said Adrien suddenly, going over to the front passenger side window. He knocked on the mirrored glass. After a moment, it rolled down. A stern woman, her dark hair slicked back into a rigid bun, peered out at them through her narrow glasses. She was pretty, with a fun red streak in her hair, but looked like she was sitting on something painful.

“Qu’est-ce que c’est?” (What is it?) she demanded. Jack instinctively drew back, but Adrien held his ground, his face bright.

“Nathalie, ceci est Jack,” (Nathalie, this is Jack) he said, gesturing to her. She stayed rooted to the spot, too mortified to move. “Jack, this is my father’s assistant, Nathalie Sancoeur.”

“Il est agréable de vous rencontrer, Ms.—Mme. Sancoeur,” (It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Sancoeur) said Jack, remembering her manners.

The woman barely looked at Jack, her attention diverted to the tablet in her lap. “Un plaisir.” (A pleasure)

Her chilly response didn’t deter Adrien in the least. He launched into his story, explaining how Jack was new in class, having moved to Paris from America. She wasn’t fluent in French yet, so he had agreed to tutor her. This last bit was news to Jack and she was a little thrown, but she had the presence of mind to keep her mouth shut.

It didn’t seem like Nathalie was listening, but she said something back. Adrien put a hand to his chin as he mulled over her words.

“Pourquoi pas maintenant?” (Why not now?) he suggested. Jack would find out later that he was counting on Nathalie to remind him of his packed schedule and wonder where tutoring could be added into his activities so he’d have a valid reason for having her over.
This was enough for the woman to put down her tablet for a moment. “…Pendant le déjeuner?” (...During lunch?)

Adrien nodded.

“Avez-vous vérifié avec votre père?” (Have you checked with your father?)

“Il est le travail scolaire. Voulez-vous vraiment le déranger avec ça?” (It’s schoolwork. Do you really want to bother him with that?)

Nathalie considered Adrien’s words before heaving a sigh and muttering something. But though it didn’t seem all that encouraging, Adrien responded otherwise.

“Merci!” he said. “She wants more of a warning next time,” he explained to Jack as he opened the back door for her.

Jack rubbed her rabbit’s foot keychain and looked around the street, as if searching for a reason not to climb into the car. She tried to tell herself that it was the vague notion that Mr. Agreste would be displeased, but she knew that was a lie. But Adrien was waiting, so she slipped into the sedan and he slammed the door shut behind her before going around to the other side.

As Jack settled in, she noticed a great hulking figure of a man in the driver’s seat. For one terrifying second her breath went short and her heart rate increased—Road Rage! But then she saw the muttonchops and realized her mistake. The two only looked similar, but this man was not Akumatized. She shuttered to think what would happen if he were though. He was gargantuan.


The man grunted.

“Er…he doesn’t talk much,” Adrien explained as he slipped in beside her and buckled up. Jack wondered if this was the bodyguard Nino spoke of.

Nathalie saw something on her tablet that made her curse and she whipped out her phone to call someone as they pulled away from the curb. Her rapid words were impressive as she gave a tongue-lashing to whoever picked up on the other end. Something about something not arriving on time.

Jack and Adrien tried not to listen in awkward silence all the way to the Agreste mansion. The instant they pulled into the garage, they escaped, Jack following Adrien into the house and up the stairs.

She stopped dead when they reached the cavernous black-and-white marbled foyer. It was even grander than the lobby of The Peninsula in Beverly Hills, where she used to meet her grandmother for tea. But Jack’s first thought wasn’t how expensive it looked, but how cold and empty it was, like a mausoleum. The gigantic portrait of Adrien and (she assumed) Mr. Agreste dressed in all black that loomed at the top of the staircase only added to the effect—they looked like they were in mourning. And maybe they were, since it was just the two of them. Adrien had said only him and his father lived here.

Adrien noticed Jack stop and turned to face her. He fidgeted. “So…this is my house…”

Jack couldn’t help but burst out laughing, the sound echoing until it no longer sounded like itself. Here she was, standing in the middle of a mansion wearing clothes she had taken from the Venice
Beach lost and found at the end of the tourist season, and her friend was the one who was embarrassed. Her laughter smoothed out the lines of worry on his face and he led the way into the dining room. Jack was glad to escape the judgmental gaze of Mr. Agreste’s portrait. It was like his piercing blue eyes were following her.

The dining room was just as ridiculously large as the foyer, with a table long enough to fit an entire extended family—parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents. Jack doubted that was what it was used for though; it was so perfectly polished. The only scuff marks were down at the end where they stood.

“Wait here,” Adrien told her. “I’m going to go talk to the chef.”

The moment he vanished through the double swinging door in the back, Mimmi escaped Jack’s bag, flying right up into her face.

“You’re all tense! What’s the matter?”

Jack learned a long time ago that she couldn’t hide anything from the Kwami. “I feel like I shouldn’t be here,” she admitted.

“Why not? You’re Adrien’s friend and he invited you over! And Nathalie said it was okay. Are you afraid his dad will find out?”

“Kinda. But…it’s more than that. I mean, look at me. Look at this place! Why is he even friends with me?”

Mimmi scrunched her face up, ready to give a roaring pep talk, but then a door squeaked in the foyer and she was forced to hide. Jack peeked out and watched Nathalie pass by, her high heels clacking against the marble with brutal efficiency. She cross the floor and entered the room opposite the dining room.

“Sorry about that,” said Adrien, returning. “Food will be out in a bit. I put in a special order just for you.”

He took a seat at the head of the table. Jack wrestled to pull out the chair next to his and join him, but they were heavier than they looked.

“You really didn’t have to do that,” she told him, giving up and climbing into the chair instead. Her old gym shoes left dirt marks in the light fabric.

“It’s the least I can do to thank you for coming over.”

Jack threw her arms up into the air in mock frustration. “There you go again, being all nice. I don’t get you, Adrien Agreste. At all.”

“Huh…?”

“Like, when I first met you, I had no idea that you were rich or a model or anything like that.”

“I’m actually kind of surprised you didn’t know I was a model. It’s not like it’s a secret.”

“Yeah, but you don’t brag about it.”
“What’s there to brag about? It’s not like modeling is a skill. I can’t mix music like Nino or design like Marinette or surf like you. I just…stand there while someone takes my picture.”

“Oh, hey, don’t sell yourself short! You have to have confidence to model. I think that’s a skill. I could never do it.”

Adrien still didn’t think it was that hard and they got to talking about how his photo shoots went—about the makeup and the clothes, the posing and directing. Jack found it all pretty fascinating. Then they flipped, with Adrien wanting to know all about surfing. They were interrupted by the arrival of the chef, a meek man who wheeled a little cart out of the kitchen that held two dome plate covers. He placed one in front of Adrien and one in front of Jack before lifting them both at the same time with a flourish.

“Et voilà,” he said, revealing sumptuous burgers and mountains of golden French fries in a cloud of steam. He then bowed his head and took his leave.

Jack stared at her plate, not comprehending what she was seeing. Maybe it wasn’t real. But the tantalizing smell of the charred meat filling the room told her otherwise.

“I know you’re homesick, so I thought this might cheer you up,” Adrien explained, but when Jack said nothing, he grew anxious. “Is that a stereotype? That all Americans love hamburgers?”

“No—I mean, yes—I mean…Burgers and fries are my favorite.”

“Oh, good! I’m on a pretty strict diet, but I’m sure one wouldn’t—gah!”

Jack leapt out of her chair and tackled Adrien with a hug. She just couldn’t contain herself. The poor guy was taken off-guard, giving a high-pitched yelp that didn’t sound like him at all, but she didn’t know how else to express her happiness as she squeezed the living daylights out of him.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” she told him.

“It’s just…food…” He patted her arm, so she released him.

“You don’t understand,” she said, returning to her seat. “Adjusting to life here has been hard for me, but you’ve made it so much easier. Honestly, if it weren’t for you, I’m pretty sure I would have been Akumatized by now.”

“Oh, come on.”

“I’m serious!”

“Well…Ladybug would have saved you if you were.”

“I know, but Hawk Moth would have just targeted me again. Ladybug is great and all, but its people like you who help with the root of the problem.” Jack started munching on a French fry. It was salty crispy heaven. “You’re the real hero.”

Adrien looked down in his lap and scratched the back of his head. Just as he opened his mouth to probably protest though, the front doors burst open. Jack flinched, but Adrien leapt straight out of his chair as if it had become electrified. They both watched, frozen in horror, as a familiar man with a
pompadour wearing a tailored three-piece suit came storming into the house, his ear glued to his phone as he spoke a mile a minute. Jack and Adrien both seemed to be thinking the same thing: Maybe, just maybe, if they didn’t move, Mr. Agreste wouldn’t notice them.

“Juste un moment.” He pulled the phone away. “Nathalie!? Nathalie!” When the woman did not materialize within a matter of seconds, his frown grew disdainful. He muttered to himself as he looked around. “…Où est cette maudite—?”

Mr. Agreste looked in the direction of the dining room, his eyes locking on to Jack’s. They were every bit as cold as the ones glaring out from the portrait, sending shivers down Jack’s spine. Adrien took a step to block her from his father’s sight, but, not only was it too little too late, it would have never fooled him. As he came marching in their direction, Adrien sputtered a bit before finding proper words.

“Père! Je peux expliquer—” (Father! I can explain—)

“Nathalie!” Mr. Agreste yelled again. This time his assistant came rushing out of the other room. He gestured to Jack as if she were a muddy spot on the floor and said something to Nathalie Jack couldn’t understand.

The woman adjusted her glasses, ruffled but trying to remain professional and composed. She posed an innocent question, so Mr. Agreste jabbed a finger in Jack’s direction again as he spoke. She wished she knew what they were saying so she wouldn’t feel like a dog being reprimanded for no reason.

Adrien tried to come to Nathalie’s rescue. “Père, c’est Jack. Je lui tutorat en Français—” (Father, this is Jack. I’m tutoring her in French—)

“Je ne parle pas à vous.” (I am not talking to you). His voice was needle-sharp, cutting his son off. Jack winced as Mr. Agreste returned to interrogating Nathalie. She tried her best to explain herself.

“Pour être tutoré? Ou à avoir déjeuner?” (To be tutored? Or to have lunch?) challenged Mr. Agreste when she finished. He turned and gave the incriminating hamburgers an accusatory glare.

“J’allais donner des cours particuliers elle!” (I was going to tutor her!) argued Adrien.

But his father shut him down. Jack caught phrases like ‘the rules,’ ‘behind my back,’ and ‘this is unacceptable.’ As she watched Adrien droop, beaten down by his father’s words, she desperately wanted to defend him somehow, but she couldn’t even follow along with what was being said, much less speak. But the last bit came in loud and clear.

“Dites à votre ami de quitter.” (Tell your friend to leave.)

“…O-Oui, Père…” Shaken and pale, Adrien turned to Jack, but she refused to allow him to do that.

“It’s okay,” she told him as she swung her bag onto her shoulder. “You don’t have to say anything. Thank you for inviting me over anyway.” She turned to Mr. Agreste. She had some choice words for him. “Bonne journée.” (Have a nice day.)

Her sneakers squeaked against the marble floor as she headed to the front door. She slid a little as she heaved it open and slipped outside. The cloudy sky had darkened and she felt a drop of rain on her head. Luckily, she was only three blocks away from school.
Mimmi appeared, outraged. “Have a nice day? Have a nice day!?”

“You think picking a fight with Adrien’s dad is going to change anything?” wondered Jack. She loved her Kwami, but sometimes she was worse than Diego when it came to choosing battles. “Besides, I don’t know how to say what I wanted to say in French anyway.” She kicked a stone in frustration. “Ugh!”

The front door opened and slammed shut just as Jack reached the gate, causing Mimmi to gasp and hide. Jack looked over her shoulder, expecting to see Mr. Agreste or at the very least Nathalie calling her back. What kind of man kicked a kid out of his house into the rain? But maybe she shouldn’t have been surprised when she saw Adrien instead, tearing down the stairs after her, nearly tripping on the last one.

“Adrien, what are you doing?” Jack wondered when he caught up.

“Where are you going? I’ll walk you there,” he said.

“Just back to school, but—”

“Please.”

It dawned on Jack that this was Adrien’s way of apologizing for what had just happened, even though she thought he had nothing to be sorry about. In fact, she felt sorry for him. She couldn’t imagine having a father like Mr. Agreste. While her’s worked too much, he also taught her how to surf and called her Cracker Jack and insisted all their hugs be ten seconds long because he once read that it was the optimum length of a hug in terms of stress relief.

“Okay,” she said.

They set off, the raindrops becoming more and more frequent. Adrien was silent and Jack had no idea what to say to him in either language. Would it be best if she pretended it all never happened? She wished Diego were there. He had a knack for cheering people up. Or maybe Cat Noir. He seemed like he’d be good at it too.

About a block away, a familiar silver town car pulled up alongside them, slowing to a crawl. As the window rolled down, Adrien looked hopeful, but his face fell when he saw that it was just Nathalie.

“Adrien, entre en la voiture,” (Adrien, get in the car.) she said, sounding tired and frustrated. Rounding up a teenager was probably the last thing she wanted to deal with at the moment.

Adrien attempted to ignore her, but it just wasn’t in his nature. After a few more steps, his shoulders started to shake and he stopped. He glared down at the wet-spotted ground. Jack recognized that look—the feelings of helplessness, of wanting to change the way things were but also being resigned to fate. It was how she felt when her dad told her they were moving. Diego, of course, wanted to fight. He always wanted to fight. But there were some battles where fighting only made things worse.

“You should go,” Jack told Adrien, tucking her now damp hair behind her ear. “I don’t want you to get in even more trouble.”

“A-are you sure?”
Jack reached up behind him and grabbed his shoulders, steering him in the direction of the car as it stopped. “You’ll catch a cold in this rain and you’ll have to stay home from school and then we won’t be able to hang out.” Nathalie opened the car door and moved over so Jack could shove Adrien inside just as light sheets of rain began to fall. She grabbed the windowsill and leaned against the door, closing it in his shocked face. “That would be the worst,” she added, trying to keep things light. She was miserable standing out in the rain, but she didn’t want Adrien to feel bad.

Nathalie leaned forward, observing Jack as she wiped water off her face with her sleeve as it dripped down her chin.

“You too,” the woman said in English.

“Huh!?” There was a low rumble of thunder, so Jack wasn’t sure if she had heard Nathalie properly.

“Get in,” she said, searching through her designer tote bag and pulling out her tablet. “Before I change my mind.”

“Nathalie! Merci!” cried Adrien as he pushed the door back open and made room for Jack.

As Jack crawled in, she saw Nathalie wrinkle her nose at the earthy smell Jack’s wet baja jacket brought into the car, but she did not take back her offer.

“Eh bien, Adrien?” (Well, Adrien?) Nathalie asked. “Es-tu aller à précepteur votre ami ou non?” (Are you going to tutor your friend or not?)

“Dans le deux blocs à l’école?” (In the two blocks to school?) wondered Adrien.

Nathalie’s answer was too complex for Jack to follow, but she saw a grin spread over Adrien’s face as Nathalie then looked up to address the driver. He grunted.

“I’ve got some time before basketball practice, so we’re taking the long way to school,” Adrien explained as they drove right passed Collège Françoise Dupont.

Stunned, Jack looked at Nathalie. The woman held up her tablet to block Jack’s view, but it was too late—Jack had seen her small, pleased smile. She wasn’t nearly as heartless as she made herself out to be. Jack decided she would have to think of something special to thank her. Did she like cupcakes? She struck Jack as a dark chocolate raspberry kind of person.

As Adrien started to tutor Jack, the rain pounding on the roof as the blurry streets of Paris slipped by, she could think of no place she would rather be than in the back seat of that town car. They worked on pronunciation since Jack’s thick American accent made things difficult, then moved on to conjugating verbs. At one point Jack swore she heard Adrien’s stomach grumble despite his instance that it was nothing, so she pulled out her lunch and split it with him. It wasn’t much compared to the burgers they never got to eat—just another peanut butter and jelly sandwich, cheese and crackers, and a bruised mandarin—but the way Adrien ate it, it was like it was a five course meal. He refused to eat her cupcake though even when she offered. Jack thought about saving it in case Mimmi needed to recharge, but then remembered she wasn’t going to be turning into Rabbit anytime soon. She finished it in three bites.

“Okay, looks like you have the basics down,” said Adrien, taking a sip of bottled water. “But those are all easy verbs. How about…être?”
Jack groaned. Être could die in a fire for all she cared. But it wasn’t like she hadn’t studied it. ‘To be’ was one of the most used of all French verbs. “Je suis. Tu…es. Um…Il est. Nous sommes. Vous…sotes…?”

“Non. Vous êtes.”

“Êtes!? Oh, come on! That doesn’t make any sense!”

“It’s an irregular verb.”

“I know, but…Ugh, I can’t imagine how hard être will be in present perfect…”

“It’s actually just été the whole time.”

Jack crossed her arms and pretended to pout. “…That’s not even fair.”

Adrien laughed. “Languages don’t have to be fair. Just look at English. I mean, ‘I am, you are, he/she/it is’ from ‘to be’? And don’t even get my started on Mandarin—”

The driver gasped and slammed a foot on the breaks, throwing Jack, Adrien, and Nathalie forward against their seatbelts. Everything else, like Nathalie’s tablet and Jack’s beach bag, went flying, hitting the backs of the front seats and falling to the ground while the tires squealed beneath them. The town car glided a bit over the slick pavement before coming to an abrupt stop, throwing everyone back again. Not even a second later, the car behind them rear-ended them, causing them all to lurch forward.

While Jack leaned forward to gather her belongs and surreptitiously check to see if Mimmi was okay, Nathalie started to yell at the driver, but he ignored her, his beady little eyes busy squinting out the windshield, craning his neck as he looked towards the sky. Jack couldn’t see around him, but Adrien leaned a little to the right to get a better view.

“It looks like some kind of traffic jam…” he said.

Jack noticed the women in the lane next to them vacate her car in a hurry. A couple ran across the street in front of them hand-in-hand, but the woman tripped. Though her partner seemed tempted to leave her were she was, he turned back to help her to her feet. They both took a moment to glance up, and then dove to the left.

Alarmed, the chauffeur bolted from their car, leaving his door wide open as many small dark shapes pelted the windshield, startling Jack, Adrien, and Nathalie and leaving behind a spider web of cracks.

“What was that!?” Jack asked Adrien.

“I don’t know.” The boy unbuckled his seatbelt and pushed himself between the front seats to get a better look at what had struck the car, as they were now scattered all over the hood. “Looks like a bunch of rocks…”

The door next to Jack opened, the chauffeur nearly yanking it off its hinges as he usher them out. Behind him, people were screaming as they fled in the direction their car had come.

“Que se passe-t-il?” (What is going on?) Nathalie wondered, but she herded them along anyway.
Adrien and Jack exchanged uneasy glances as they shuffled out of the car.

There was only one explanation.

Akuma attack.

Out on the sidewalk, the rain had let up a little, now just a drizzle. A woman floated above a knot of cars not far from them. Her jet-black hair covered half her face, cascading down around her shoulders in loose luxurious curls. Her skin had been turned gray, but there was black around her eyes, like a panda. She wore an impossible dress, one that defied the laws of gravity and looked to be made of newspaper, short in front but with a long train in the back. The gladiator sandals that climbed up her calves to her knees, also made of newsprint, and her black opera gloves (or was it her skin?) completed her look. She was equal parts terrifying and beautiful as she swooped around and screamed at people, her voice smoky and dark.

“What’s she saying?” Jack wondered to Adrien.

“She’s upset about the things people have said about her,” he relayed, backing away as he prepared to flee. “She wants to make everyone pay.”

Stones of varying sizes appeared around the Akuma in flashes of pale blue fire. They rained down on the vehicles below, but something strange happened when they struck a person. Jack watched one man not far from her hunch over as the rock glanced off the top of his head. He began to convulse as he flopped over on the ground and started to wriggle around. To Jack’s horror, she realized he had been transformed into a worm.

The Akuma glided over to a group of terrified women next, hissing at them in French. Jack recognized only one word, vieux, but it was enough. She watched as the women tried to escape, only for two of them to get struck by the Akuma’s rocks. They aged into ninety-year-olds before Jack’s very eyes, their old leathery faces depressed with so many wrinkles that they no longer looked human. They moaned, though in pain or horror at their transformation, it was hard to tell.

Old. The Akuma had called them old and they became old. She must have called that other man a worm. It appeared she had the ability to make her insults literal.

“Jack, come on!” insisted Adrien, grabbing her wrist and following Nathalie and the chauffeur. They joined the stream of people on the sidewalk who were running away from the Akuma.

But the Akuma wasn’t about to allow anyone to escape her wrath so easily. She flew down the block in a graceful arc to cut off their route, reversing the flow of people as they tried to flee. Someone smacked into Jack’s shoulder before she even had a chance to turn around, ripping her from Adrien’s grasp and sending her spinning to the ground. She almost got trampled, but managed to crawl off the sidewalk to safety. Squatting in a rain puddle between an abandoned van and the curb, she scanned the area, but in the mass of humanity and chaos, she couldn’t find Adrien, or even Nathalie or Adrien’s bodyguard, anywhere.

Jack felt a tug on her hair.

“Transform!” insisted Mimmi in her ear.

“No!” It was yesterday all over again, but Jack had more than one reason now not to become Rabbit. “I promised Ladybug she wouldn’t see me fighting any more Akumas.”
“But Ladybug isn’t here.”

“Jack!”

At the sound of Adrien’s voice, Mimmi vanished back into the confines of the beach bag and Jack looked around. She caught sight of the boy’s black and red windbreaker in the crowd.

“Over here!” she called, standing up and waving an arm at him.

Adrien’s face flooded with relief upon seeing her, but then he noticed the Akuma bearing down on them, flinging her insults left and right. He darted towards Jack and pulled her around the van to hide. They bunched together behind the wheel well and waited with baited breath, Jack squeezing her rabbit’s foot keychain so hard she thought she was going to crush it. She realized her and Adrien were both thinking the same thing again: Maybe, just maybe, if they didn’t move, the Akuma wouldn’t notice them. It hadn’t worked with Mr. Agreste, but maybe this time they would be lucky.

Oh, who was Jack kidding? She didn’t have that luck anymore. They were toast.

“Adrien!”

Across the street, hidden in an alley, was a frantic Nathalie. She gestured to them to come to her, but Adrien shook his head. The Akuma was right behind them, so they couldn’t move now without being spotted, but Nathalie couldn’t see that from her position. Judging by the thin line her mouth had become, she only thought Adrien was being difficult.

“Adrien Agreste, venez ici cet instant!” (Adrien Agreste, come here this instant!) she hissed.

There was something unsettling about the moment that followed. Jack couldn’t quite put her finger on why though until a voice like the eye of a storm spoke up.

“Adrien Agreste...?”

A shadow fell over them.

Now that the Akuma was in spitting distance, Jack realized the black around her eyes was less ‘panda’ and more ‘high fashion,’ with marks beneath that resembled mascara that had been smeared with tears. Jack also noticed the newspapers that made up her outfit included some pictures, all of the same woman with raven hair and sultry good looks. With a jolt, Jack realized it was the Akumatized victim herself. The most startling part of her though was her eyes. They reminded Jack of Cat Noir’s, but she had red sclera and scarlet irises as dark as blood, rather than Cat’s friendly green.

The Akuma smirked at Adrien as she lowered herself to the ground. “Mon, ma, mes...Si il est ne pas Paris’s favori petit mannequin.” (My, my, my...If it isn’t Paris’s favorite little fashion model.)

Jack spotted something large come towards them out of the corner of her eye and Adrien’s bodyguard threw himself between them and the Akuma. He snarled at her and tried to grab her, but she deftly floated away from his grasp. With a look of disgust on her face, she spoke, a rock forming over her left shoulder.

“Descendre!” (Get down!) cried Adrien.
The chauffeur dodged the first stone, which broke the window of the van behind him, showering
Jack and Adrien with glass, but the Akuma had formed a second one behind her back. It shot around
her, striking the driver in the stomach and knocking the air out of him. He crouched, knuckles to the
ground, shuddering as his skin turned black and hairy. Now a well-dressed gorilla, he fled, his mind
that of a frightened and confused animal. The Akuma dusted off her hands as she watched him go.

She turned back to Adrien. “Permettez-moi de me presenter.” (Allow me to introduce myself.) She
curtsied. “Mon nom est Femme Diffamation.”

Diffamation sounded like defamation, the action of damaging the good reputation of someone, which
made sense, but she was no femme, no lady. A femme fatale, maybe. Femme Defamation. If Jack
were Rabbit, she would kick the Akuma into the next building, but there was little she could do in
her civilian form.

Adrien stood up slowly, taking a protective step in front of Jack like he had with his father. It looked
like Jack was going to have to add stupidly noble to his list of positive traits too. Where were
Ladybug and Cat Noir when you needed them? Now would be a great time for them to appear.

“Qu’est-ce que tu veux avec moi?” (What do you want with me?) Adrien asked the Akuma.

Femme Defamation began to wax poetic. From what Jack could gather, she was reminiscing about
when she was young and beautiful, but her voice grew more and more bitter the longer she talked. In
a flash, her hand shot out and she grabbed Adrien’s by the chin, her blackened fingers digging into
his cheeks. He struggled to pull away, but it was no use. She was too strong.

“Quel joli visage que vous avez, garçon.” (What a pretty face you have, boy.) She leaned in close to
him. Jack imagined her breath reeked of ink and florals. “Ce serait une honte si quelque chose devait
arriver à il!” (It would be a shame if something were to happen to it!)

In one smooth movement, she flung Adrien over her shoulder as if he were a sack of flour.

“No!” cried Jack, jumping up and grabbing her friend’s ankle with both hands. She tried to tug him
down, but Femme Defamation had an iron grip Jack couldn’t break.

Annoyed, the Akuma glared down at Jack, her eyes pitiless as her husky voice cut through the air.
Jack didn’t understand much more than the word fille—girl—but she was forming her rocks. But
even when they rocketed at Jack’s face, she refused to let go. If she could just get Adrien free, then
whatever became of her was worth it as far as she was concerned. She still flinched though,
expecting pain, or at least something, but there was only the sound of the rocks hitting the pavement
and skittering across it. Jack’s grip slackened in shock when nothing happened to her, and Femme
Defamation managed to pull away, rising higher into the sky. Adrien thrashed about, but he paled
and went still when he saw how far away the ground was.

“Adrien!” Jack cried out, still a little thrown. She ran forward a few steps, reaching skyward for her
friend, but it was no use. She gave up and hung her head, a pit opening up in her stomach.

If only she had transformed into Rabbit when Mimmi had suggested, then she would have been able
to protect her friend. But there was still time to rescue him. Any reservations she had about
transforming were gone now. It was go time.

Jack was still conscious of her surroundings though. There were people all around her, tending to the
transformed, bemoaning their fates, assessing the damage done to their cars. She was too exposed.
Just around the corner, her ears picked up Nathalie’s no-nonsense voice, now gravely shaken, as she reported Adrien’s kidnapping to his father. “Monsieur Agreste, Adrien a été prise.”

Été.

There être was again, rearing it’s ugly head. Was. Was taken. Adrien was taken. Jack glanced down at her watch, shocked to find out only ten minutes elapsed since she and him had been conjugating verbs in the car. It felt like it had happened hours ago.

She had to hurry. Nathalie would be done with her call soon and she would be looking for Jack, so she took off running, splashing through puddles in search of a place that was set away from prying eyes. She couldn’t find any coverage though.

There was movement in Jack’s bag and Mimmi crawled to the top and popped her head out. “Looking for a place to transform? That’s my girl!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Thank goodness Mimmi never said 'I told you so.'

Jack scrambled up a brick wall. Hopefully everyone was too occupied by the Akuma attack to report her for trespassing.

“Lucky you were able to dodge the Akuma’s attack,” said the Kwami.

“I didn’t.”

“Huh?”

“The rocks. They went right through me.”

Jack landed in the garden of some sort. Even though everything was completely peaceful and still, she still took refuge in a bush.

“Why wouldn’t her powers affect you?” wondered Mimmi.

Jack shrugged. “I don’t know. I couldn’t even understand what she was saying.” She paused, startled. She recalled Chloé calling her a clochard two days ago. The word really hadn’t hurt until she understood what it meant. “Wait, yeah! Her words couldn’t hurt me because I didn’t know what they were!”

Mimmi gasped, flying up and grabbing the front of Jack’s baja jacket, shaking her like a ragdoll. “Jack! You know what this means, don’t you!?”

“I’ve got a leg up on her.” Jack punched the sky. “Mimmi, hop to it!”

There was a brief moment in the middle of her transformation, somewhere between forming her mask and pulling her ears into existence, when Jack felt guilty for going back on what she told Ladybug. But this was an emergency, she reasoned. One of her only two friends in Paris had been kidnapped. By the time she was smoothing her hair into a perfect fishtail, she had come to terms with her decision.

Jack hopped from the ground to the top of the wall to the top of the neighboring building. She
scanned the horizon, spotting a distant black dot that was floating too evenly to be a bird, and too low to be an aircraft. She darted across the rooftops after it, the world becoming a blur around her, the last of the raindrops spattering against her suit. Soon Jack had cut the distance between them in half, to the point where she could make out Femme Defamation’s shape, but the Akuma was rising higher and higher. Jack guessed her destination to be the top of a cylindrical skyscraper that dwarfed the other buildings around it, but she had no way to get that high. Back home she could grab onto Diego and he would use the grappling hooks hidden in his cuffs to take them anywhere Jack couldn’t jump to, but he was halfway around the world. Jack would just have to enter the building at ground level and go up the old fashioned way.

The question of what the skyscraper was used for was answered as Jack approached its base. There was an electronic marquee above a multitude of doors, showing the TVi logo on a blue background. Femme Defamation had flown to the roof of France’s number one TV station.

“That can’t be good…” muttered Jack to herself as she launched herself at the building. As she came in for a landing on the soaked red carpet runner that led to the main entrance though, she heard the zip and the pull of a metallic string. “That’s worse…” she decided as the people began to vacate the area.

“Rabbit!” rang out Ladybug’s voice, full of reproach. She touched down to Jack’s left and marched up to her as her yo-yo shot back into her outstretched hand. “What are you doing here…!? I thought we had an understanding.”

“Er…well, yeah…but then I saw that Akuma take A—” She stopped just short of saying Adrien’s name, realizing it would raise a lot of questions. “—boy. A boy.” She winced at how awkwardly those words had tumbled out of her mouth, but Ladybug didn’t seem to notice, too busy looking up at the skyscraper.

“Yeah. Me too,” she said wistfully. “Poor Adrien…”

“Adrien!?"

Ladybug jerked, a blush seeping out from under her mask. “Ah, je veux dire…!” (Ah, I mean…!) It occurred to Jack that Ladybug recognized Adrien because his face was plastered all over Paris. And, though it was strange to think about since she seemed so mature compared to Jack, Ladybug was a teenage girl like her. She probably went to movies and gossiped with friends and had pictures of her celebrity crush Adrien Agreste hanging in her locker. Maybe she even had a boyfriend as a civilian, which would explain why she kept Cat Noir at a distance.

Where was Cat Noir anyway?

Suddenly, the marquee and the two electronic billboards on both sides of the entrance that scrolled through TVi’s top ranked programs, switched to a live TV feed. Femme Defamation’s face filled all three screens. Her red eyes were even more terrifyingly demonic in high definition. She greeted everyone and introduced herself.

The doors burst open and people fled from the building. As they surged around Ladybug and Jack, Ladybug took a step back to squint at the Akuma’s face. “Attends un peu…” Her eyes widened in recognition. “That’s Simone Sauvage! She’s the Akuma!?”

“Uh…who?”
“The famous French supermodel?” Ladybug searched Jack’s face and found only a blank stare. “No? Vraiment?”

Femme Defamation stepped to the side, revealing Adrien gagged with a giant wad of newspaper and tied to a chair behind her. “Et je suis sûr que tout le monde reconnaît Adrien Agreste, garçon d’affiche de Paris.” (And I’m sure that everyone recognizes Adrien Agreste, poster boy of Paris.)

Ladybug’s hands formed into fists and she glared at the Akuma with so much hatred, Jack was surprised the screen didn’t burst into flames. Femme Defamation paid no heed, of course. She tilted the camera towards her and continued to speak. Jack had no idea what she was saying though. Feeling a bit hopeless, she turned to Ladybug and asked her to translate. It took the girl a moment, but she obliged.

“She’s…she’s talking about how she used to be a part of every marketing campaign in Paris until she was told she was too old. ‘Children like Adrien…have replaced me. Well…when I’m finished with him...’” Ladybug almost didn’t finish translating she was so shaken. “They’re not going to want him anymore’?? Quelle? Non!” She sprinted into the building.

“Ladybug, wait!” cried Jack, chasing after her. She caught up to the girl in the cavernous lobby. It was a fun space, with teal sofas, warm wood floors, and pendant lights in yellow, fuchsia, and gunmetal gray. In the corner was a live soundstage, though it had been vacated in a hurry.

Ladybug spun around and faced Jack, her blue eyes cold. “Go back, Rabbit.”

“What!? Why? I can help!”

“What if you use Dogstruction again? You’ll bring the whole building down. There are still a ton of innocent civilians in here.”

“But I’m not going to use it! I promise.”

“You promised you wouldn’t last time too and you still did.”

“It was reflex. I—”

“I’m sorry, Rabbit. I’m not doing this to be mean. You have to believe me. My duty is to protect the people of Paris and if you care about them at all, you’ll stay out of this.”

Jack struggled to find some kind of verbal rejoinder, but there was no fault in Ladybug’s logic. It was strange, but Jack kept on forgetting she was dangerous. In her mind, she was still the hero. When she was out of costume, she knew she was a liability, but the line became blurred whenever she transformed.

On the TVs in the lobby, Femme Defemation cackled as she said something, sending a rock hurtling at Adrien. It struck him on the chin, a bruise quickly marking the spot. He shuttered as his formerly flawless skin was stricken with a horrifying case of acne. His face was now as craterous as the moon, but it looked like the Akuma was starting off easy on him. She was a model, after all. Showmanship was her game. But whatever she did to Adrien was only going to get worse from there.

Jack’s shoulders sagged and she refused to meet Ladybug’s eye. “Fine.”
It was all the answer Ladybug needed. She was off like a shot, using her yo-yo to hit the up button for the elevator while she vaulted over the turnstiles. “Merci!” she yelled over her shoulder, the elevator doors pinging open just as she reached them.

Jack waited for Ladybug to go before jumping behind the reception desk and crouching low to the ground.

“All hopped out.”

As she changed back into her civilian form with a flash of light and a gust of wind, she tilted her watch face towards her other hand and grabbed Mimmi when the Kwami came tumbling out of it. The little thing was quite passionate and Jack had been her partner long enough to know how she was going to react to what had just happened. It was best to nip it in the bud.

“Before you say anything, I know,” Jack insisted, silencing Mimmi as she opened her mouth. The Kwami left it open, as if reserving the right to start squawking at any moment, but allowed Jack to continue. “I should have told Ladybug that I’m kind of immune to Femme Defemation’s powers. But she’s right, you know. I can be so…so thoughtless sometimes.”

“Jack…” Mimmi murmured, her eyes growing glossy. She rubbed Jack’s thumb warmly, knowing the girl was talking about more than just using Dogstruction.

Ever since Jack’s father told her about the move, she found herself unable to sleep at night, staring up at whatever ceiling she was under and wondering. If she had given revealing her identity to Diego more thought, would she be where she was now? Would she have considered the repercussions and chosen not to do it? And then would she still be in California, using Lucky Strike to fight crime with Perro Negro by her side?

The worst part was, Jack’s thoughtlessness had always been dangerous. Her half-baked plans, while often successful, always had drawbacks she hadn’t considered. She only managed to skate by thanks to Diego, who shouldered the burden and acted as her shield—that’s why fighting without him for all those months had been so difficult.

But she had to remind herself that it was Diego’s idea first. He wanted to show her who he was and hadn’t expected her to do the same.

The problem was when they were both thoughtless.

Jack shook her head violently, trying to dislodge her cobweb of thoughts. There was another harebrained scheme underneath.

She smiled. HAREbrained. She was sure Cat Noir would get a kick out of that one.

“I’ll just help Ladybug as a civilian, so I’m not tempted to use Dogstruction,” she explained to Mimmi, standing up and looking to the elevators. The one Ladybug had taken was just arriving at the 48th floor according to the digital screen above it.

Mimmi phased out of Jack’s hand, hopping around in the air with excitement. “Of course! Ladybug wanted Rabbit to stay behind. She didn’t say anything about Jack! She doesn’t even know who you are.”

“Hero with or without the mask, right?”
“Right!”

It was always fairly easy to get Mimmi’s blessing. You just had to be brave and optimistic and she would be behind the idea one hundred percent, no matter how dangerous or ill-advised it was. The Kwami was a firm believer in sheer willpower always being able to get the job done, no matter the odds. It was both her biggest strength and her greatest weakness.

As the elevator whisked them up, Jack and Mimmi watched the little TV inset in the wall. Femme Defamation had battered Adrien with rocks pretty badly and he was now bleeding from a gash on his forehead. Besides giving him acne, she had enlarged his ears, disfigured his nose, and made him wall-eyed, and was currently picking at his hair wondering out loud the best insult to transform his perfectly coiffed blonde lockes. Her musings were inturrupted by the bang of a door being kicked open though, and Ladybug’s voice rang out.

“Laissez-lui aller, toi a-été!” (Let him go, you has-been!)

A-été. Now there was a form of être Jack could get behind.

Femme Defamation gritted her teeth and snarled. “Vous serez le has-been quand je suis fait avec vous!” (You’ll be the has-been when I’m done with you!) She followed up with a few choice insults, lobbing her stones over the camera in Ladybug’s direction. “Donnez-moi votre Miraculous!” (Give me your Miraculous!)

The sound of something whistling through the air filled the stage, followed by the chalky shattering of stone. In the background, Adrien struggled to escape his bonds. Jack wished the elevator would move faster. It was agony to watch and be unable to help her friend.

Furious that her verbal attack had been so easily deflected, Femme Defamation tried again. The rocks she summoned this time were much bigger than any of her previous ones, about the size of softballs. They shot out of the camera’s frame, one after another like a rapid-fire pitching machine, tracking Ladybug’s movements. As the superhero finally cartwheeled into view, Femme Defamation kept up her onslaught, not letting up for a moment. Jack was reminded of Nathalie on the phone, or Mr. Agreste in person. Like being unable to get a word in edgewise, Ladybug couldn’t even get close to her.

“I wonder what’s holding up Cat Noir?” said Jack, biting her lip. While Femme Defamation had an interesting set of powers, she would be no match for two superheroes. He could easily attack her from behind while she was focused on Ladybug, or vice versa.

“Yeah! He should be there for his partner!” agreed Mimmi from atop Jack’s head.

“He must have gotten transformed by Femme Defamation…” That was the only explanation Jack could think of to explain why he wasn’t at ‘his lady’s’ side by now. With a jolt, she realized she must have been right by Cat Noir when she first laid eyes on the Akuma and hadn’t even realized it.

The screen filled with red spattered with black polka dots as Ladybug dodged in front of the camera. Femme Defamation’s insults had grown to the size of basketballs by this point and an errant one crashed into the camera’s base, tipping it on its side.

Moments later, the elevator arrived to the 48th floor. Jack booked it down the hall, Mimmi grabbing hunks of Jack’s hair to avoid falling off.
The door leading to the sound stage wasn’t difficult to find—it was the only one hanging off its hinges thanks to Ladybug’s epic entrance. Just inside, Femme Defamation stood behind Adrien, her hands clamped onto the back of his chair. Ladybug had managed to wrap her yo-yo string around the boy’s leg and the two were playing tug-of-war with him. All the while, Femme Defamation kept up her barrage of insults and Ladybug continued to dodge, flipping around and jumping off walls. Stones of various sizes littered the area like a rock garden.

Mimmi quickly dropped down into Jack’s bag as Jack rushed into the room.

“Hé! Femme Diffamation!” she cried, trying her best to affect a French accent.

The Akuma looked over her shoulder, recognizing Jack from before. “Toi!” (You!)

“Vous insultez comme un enfant!” (You insult like a child!)

“Un enfant!? Je vais te montrer!” (A child!? I’ll show you!)

Jack lowered her shoulder and ran straight at the supermodel. She spit out all kinds of creative highbrow insults judging by sizes of the stones they created, but each one went straight through Jack as if she were incorporeal. Ladybug, who at first had been horrified and held out her hand in a poor attempt to stop Jack from being stupid, ended up staring in slack-jawed shock instead. Before Femme Defamation even knew what was happening, Jack tackled her and had her pinned to the ground. Ladybug took the opportunity to drag Adrien’s chair over to her and pulled down his gag.

“Ladybug…” breathed Adrien with the utmost reverence. Jack was a little incensed that she wasn’t his first thought, risking life and limb the way she was, but then she remembered what Nino had said the day before about Adrien being a huge fan of Ladybug.

“Lâchez-moi!” (Let me go!) insisted Femme Defamation, shoving Jack off of her.

“Jack!” cried Adrien. He was now free from his bindings, but Ladybug held him back, insisting in French that he escape. “Mais mon ami—!” (But my friend—!) he argued.

“Adrien, just go!” Jack insisted, waving him on. Only then did he allow Ladybug to drag him away.

“You’re an English speaker,” observed Femme Defamation with a quiet sense of triumph.

Jack froze, realizing her mistake far too late.

The Akuma got to her feet. With her statuesque figure, she towered over Jack, casting a shadow across the girl’s face. Jack considered making a break for the door, but she doubted she would make it. Instead, she scooted backwards, hoping to buy as much time as possible for Adrien to get to safety. Hopefully Ladybug would be back soon and rescue her as well.

“You have such funny sayings in your language,” continued Femme Defamation. “One of my favorites is—how does it go again?—Ah, yes. ‘Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.’ How quaint. Well, let me tell you, girl. I can make words hurt a lot, you mangy—” A flash of blue and a rock appeared. “—plebeian—” Another. “—insignificant—” A third. “—Hideous chipmunk-cheeked freak!”

Six rocks in all went shooting at Jack’s head. She held up her hands to protect her face, but the first
one drilled into her left palm so hard that she smacked herself in the nose. A jab of pain pressed into her brain as it cracked and blood began to pour out like a faucet, but she didn’t have to suffer long. The next rock struck her near the temple and suddenly everything went black.

* * *

A faint but familiar voice drifted in and out of Jack’s ears. “Oh! Oh! Elle se reveille.” (Oh! Oh! She’s waking up)

The darkness lifted and Jack found her cheek pressed against the polished floor. Her cheeks! She sat up with a start and grabbed them both, but they didn't feel any different. In fact, her whole face felt fine.

There was laughter to Jack’s left and she turned to see Cat Noir.

“Don’t worry. You were looking pretty hairy there for a while. Get it? Hairy? …But you’re back to normal now,” he told her. “I’m Chat Noir, by the way.”

“I know who…you are…” Only halfway through the sentence did Jack realize that she had never met Cat Noir as her civilian self. Lucky for her, he didn’t realize what she meant.

“Always nice to meet a fan! I bet you would appreciate my joke. It’s in English and everything.”

“Chat…” complained Ladybug across the room as she spoke with Simone Sauvage, but it did little to dissuade him.

“What’s black and white and read all over? Not Femme Diffamation because we defeated her. Ha!”

Jack couldn’t help but snort in the ‘it’s so bad it’s good’ way, but it was enough for Cat Noir. He beamed.

“It’s Jack, right?” he said, helping her to her feet. “My Lady told me what you did. You’re really brave, coming here to save your friend like you did.”

“Oh my gosh, Adrien!” realized Jack. “Is he safe? Do you know?”

“He’s fine,” cut in Ladybug as she joined them. Her words were sharp, like she wanted to hack off any more conversation, with a glare to match. Cat Noir cast her a questioning glance, but decided to let it slide.

“Er…yeah,” he agreed. “I passed him on the way up here. Had a face only a mother—Uh…He’s looked better. But I’m sure he’s back to normal by now. He’s probably waiting for you downstairs.” His ring beeped and flickered. At some point while Jack was knocked out, he must have used Cataclysm. “Whoops! Out of time. Gotta go!” He turned to Ladybug and raised an eyebrow. “You going my way, Bugaboo?”

Ladybug nodded, but she was keyed into Jack for some reason. “Just so you know, I had everything handled. Next time, leave the rescuing to the professionals.”

“O…okay…”

Jack watched them leave, baffled. She could understand why Ladybug was upset with Rabbit, but
not why she seemed to have an issue with her. Jack hadn’t done anything wrong. Maybe because Jack had put herself in danger. Yeah, that had to be it. Ladybug was upset with her out of a sense of concern.

*   *   *

Simone wanted to be alone for a moment before she faced the media. Jack really didn’t think about it at first, but as she rode the elevator down, chatting with Mimmi, it dawned on her that the cameras had been rolling the entire time. The whole battle had been broadcasted live on TV, including her heroics. So maybe she shouldn’t have been surprised when the doors opened to a lobby filled with news reporters, camera crews, and throngs of people. TVi was well represented in the front, with the familiar face of news reporter Nadja Chamack shoving a microphone in Jack’s face before she even had a chance to step out of the elevator.

“Jack. Can I call you Jack?” she asked in English with a thick French accent, but Jack could barely hear her over the cacophony of all the others shouting in English and French alike. They surged towards her like an ocean wave and, for one brief moment, Jack was afraid she was going to get crushed.

“How did you know you were immune to the Akuma’s attack?”

“Qui es-tu?” (Who are you?)

“What was it like, helping Ladybug?”

“Comment savez-vous Adrien Agreste?” (How do you know Adrien Agreste?)

Jack backed away. Even as Rabbit, she wasn’t used to this kind of attention. At home, the police always kept the media at bay. Their helicopters puttered around in the sky instead, trying to film the action from above.

“Uh…ummm…” Her cheeks burned. She didn’t know where to look, but then a ripple in the crowd caught her eye. Someone was pushing through, shoving people forward and to the side. At first Jack thought it might be Adrien, but the figure was much too tall. Maybe her mother or her father? But when the person came crashing through the front lines.

“Mr. Agreste!?” she cried. She realized he must have come running the instant he saw his son on TV.

The fashion designer had lost his jacket since she had seen him last. Some of his hair had come loose from its hairspray and now hung over his forehead. He took a moment to adjust his disheveled waistcoat, and then went off on a tirade against the media. They shrank back in fear.

“Jack! You’re okay! I was worried.”

Jack turned to find that Adrien had followed his father through the mob, his face having returned to flawless. Without really thinking, she swung her arms around him. “You were worried? I was worried! You’re the one who got kidnapped right in front of me!”

Mr. Agreste’s hand shot out and grabbed Jack by the wrist. “Come along,” he commanded, marching forward as if he expected the crowd to part. Jack stumbled trying to keep up, tripping over people’s feet. Adrien brought up the rear of this strange procession, hand on Jack’s back to make
A black town car was waiting for them out on the street. Mr. Agreste ushered Jack and Adrien in without any kind of explanation. It had a custom set-up, with two sets of seats facing each other, and a partition separating the back from the front, like in a limo. Jack and Adrien took the back-facing seats while Mr. Agreste took the one across from Jack. He slammed the door shut and stared at her as if expecting her to speak. Did he want a thank you? Because while she was grateful he had fended off the media for her, it didn’t come close to making up for the way he treated her earlier.

The man turned to look out the tinted window. “…Thank you,” he said. He swallowed and Jack was a little upset that the words were so difficult for him. “…For helping to rescue my son,” he added, as if he thought Jack thought he was thanking her for something else.

He pushed a button and a section of the partition rolled down. Jack looked over her shoulder, but all she saw was the back of the driver’s cap.

“…Well?” wondered Mr. Agreste after another moment of silence. Any softness he had in his voice from before had vanished. “Tell the driver where you want to go. I don’t have all day. This has set me back enough as it is.”

“Oh, um…” Jack lowered in her seat, embarrassed. She glanced at her watch to check the time, startled to see that it was almost three o’clock. Her fitting with Marinette! “Pourriez me prendre pour Collège Françoise Dupont?”

“Pourriez-vous,” corrected Mr. Agreste. He turned to Adrien and said something further. Jack caught the words ‘tutor,’ ‘French,’ and ‘simply atrocious.’

Adrien tilted his head in confusion. “Pardon, Père?”

Mr. Agreste switched to English for Jack’s benefit. “If you are still interested in tutoring Jack, she is allowed over on Tuesdays and Thursdays during the lunch break. But I better see a remarkable improvement in her fluency the next time I see her. That is a time set aside for learning, not for messing around. Have I made myself clear?”

No teenager Jack knew would have thought of this as much of a gift, but not Adrien Agreste. He beamed as bright as the sun. “Père! Je vous remercie!” (Father! Thank you!)

Under Mr. Agreste’s withering gaze, Adrien resumed tutoring Jack where they had left off. While Jack successfully conjugated être though, she felt sick. While she could see Mr. Agreste loved his son, he wasn’t the type of man who apologized for doing wrong by others. In his mind, everything he did was justified.

Jack suspected she knew a man like that. She had never met him. She didn’t even know his real name. Her and Diego had taken to calling him Omega, after the labs he owned that had created—or rather, as Jack was beginning to suspect, cloned—the Kwami. He was the one who had sent Trumpeter Swan after them to retrieve their Miraculouses.

She didn’t like to think about it, but he was still out there, somewhere.

* * *

“Merci encore pour ce faire, Marinette,” (Thank you again for this, Marinette.) said Jack as her
classmate took her up the stairs. As they climbed up into her attic bedroom though, Jack had to pause to take it all in. It was, quite possibly, the coolest bedroom she had ever seen. There was a computer nook, a loft for her bed, arched windows that overlooked the Siene, Jack could go on. In the corner was a dress form, a sewing machine, and everything else an aspiring fashion designer could need to turn her dreams into a reality. After Jack’s eyes adjusted to all the pink (pink walls, pink rug, pink chaise, pink pillows, pink vanity, pink, pink, pink, pink, pink), her eyes fell on a colorful door poster on a stand depicting a man with wild purple hair wearing a leather jacket, his arms crossed across his chest.

“Cool! You’re a fan of Jagged Stone!” Jack said. “Me too!”

Marinette gave a small start, as if she hadn’t expected Jack to know who he was. She didn’t say anything though. Jack realized she must be offended that Jack didn’t try to speak in French first.

“Oh...I mean...J’aime Jagged Stone.”

But Marinette was already rummaging through her drawers. Jack plopped her tote bag down and took a seat on the chaise as she looked around a bit more. There were square marks on the walls where things used to hang, but they had since been cleared away, making the room feel a little bare. Maybe Marinette was in the process of redecorating?

Her classmate found the tape measurer she was looking for, along with a pad of paper and a pen. Jack suspected she made them herself, since they matched a lot of her accessories that were pink with white polka dots, monogrammed with flowers and a black ‘M.’

Marinette motioned for Jack to stand in front of her, so Jack popped back up to her feet and held out her arms.

“Comment est votre après-midi va?” (How is your afternoon going?) wondered Jack, trying to make small talk while Marinette worked.

“Bien.” She looped her measuring tape around Jack’s waist. “Pas aussi excitant que la vôtre...” (Not as exciting as yours...) she added, almost under her breath, but not quite.

Jack scrunched up her face, as if that would ever stop it from turning red. Could she maybe not get embarrassed for once? “Vous me avez vu à la télévision?” (You saw me on TV?)

“Tout le monde vous a vu à la télévision.” (Everybody saw you on TV.)

“Six jours ici et je suis déjà célèbre.” (Six days here and I’m already famous.) Jack meant for that to sound self-deprecating, but she wasn’t sure if it came off right, especially when she swore she heard Marinette scoff. Or maybe she was just clearing her throat. Even so, she hurried to make it clear she wasn’t full of herself. “Je ne l’ai pas faire beaucoup. Ladybug et Cat Noir sont les vrais héros.” (I didn’t do much. Ladybug and Cat Noir are the real heroes.)

Here, a change came over Marinette, as if Jack had said the magic words to thaw her. She smiled to herself and said something. Jack bobbed her head and nodded to appear sociable, even though she had no clue what Marinette had just said. Whatever it was though, she was sure she agreed with it. Maybe Marinette recognized that blank look in Jack’s eyes though, because she suddenly switched to English.

“I saw you get into Adrien’s car after class,” she said nonchalantly, focusing on writing down the
length of Jack’s arms. “And then you went after him when he was taken by that Akuma. I guess I didn’t realize the two of you were so…close.”

“Oh, yeah!” said Jack. “He’s the best. He invited me over to his house for lunch. He’s tutoring me in French on Tuesdays and Thursday from now on.”

Marinette muttered to herself. It sounded like say-zu gotchee. Something days. Her free days? His free days?

“What was that?” Jack wondered.

“Nothing!” Marinette shouted. She took her measuring tape and flung it across the room. Jack watched it hit the wall and slide down. Marinette was definitely an odd one. It was like the girl had no control over her limbs sometimes. “You’re done,” Marinette added, her voice returning to a normal volume.

“Oh. Okay.” That was quick. Jack took a look at her watch. She had hardly been there twenty minutes. “Do you maybe want to hang out a little? Work on homework together? My parents won’t be home until five and they haven’t made me a key yet. Hopefully this weekend though.”

“J’ai des plans.” (I have plans.)

The French wall was back up again. Jack was disheartened. She really liked Marinette, and it seemed like they had a good bit in common, so why was it so hard for Jack to befriend her? There must be some sort of cultural difference she wasn’t seeing. The best she could do though was be respectful. And positive.

“D’accord,” (Okay) said Jack, swinging her bag onto her shoulder, disguising her disappointment with a smile. “Rendez-vous demain.” (See you tomorrow.)

“À demain.”

“Huh?”

“You don’t have to say ‘rendez-vous demain.’ À demain works fine.”

“Gotcha!” Jack tried to rearrange her mouth, to pronounce the way Adrien had taught her earlier. “Merci beaucoup…?”

Marinette didn’t laugh, which Jack took as a great sign. She didn’t say ‘nice butt’ this time! Her French had improved already. Her dad was right. She would be fluent in no time. And then maybe Marinette wouldn’t treat her so distantly. Adrien and Nino were great, but it would be really nice to have some friends who were girls.
Chapter Summary

Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jaclyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Chapter Notes

Unlike Jeremy Zag, when I say something will be coming out in October, gosh dang it, it comes out in October! (Looking at you, Webisodes) Sure, it might be the very last day in October, but mid-to-late October includes the 31st. Happy Halloween everyone! Enjoy this small treat ;-) And thanks again for reading!

In this chapter we have Alya, a little bit of Jack backstory, and a lot more drama than I originally intended. Whoops! Hand slipped.

Special shout out to Bounemr this time around for the incredibly long and detailed comments. Thank you! I loved reading them! Please enjoy this chapter.

Jack was a celebrity at school the next day. The moment she entered the classroom, most of her classmates surrounded her, and they were all more than willing to speak English for once.

“That was awesome, how you just ran up to the Akuma and—” Kim mimed a tackle, nearly taking out Alix in the process. She shoved him back harder than necessary, causing him to stumble into Max and knock the boy’s glasses askew.

“Yeah, it was pretty cool. I guess,” Alix agreed, trying to hide how impressed she was, but her curling lips gave her away.

“Weren’t you afraid?” wondered Mylene. She shook at the very thought, so Ivan put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Oh! I would have been so, so, so, SO afraid!” cried Rose. “What if she made me old?” She grabbed her face. “Or ugly!?”

“You mean, she hasn’t already?” snapped Chloé from the other side of the room. She sat at her desk, leaning back in her seat with crossed arms and a defiant glare. Though Sabrina sat next to her, her entire body was turned towards the rest of them, yearning to join the group but being unable to do so out of some bizarre sense of loyalty to Chloé.
Rose’s eyes filled with crystalline tears at the jab, her lower lip trembling.

Jack’s anger spiked. “It’s a shame you weren’t there, Chloé,” she said. “No matter what Femme Defamation did to you, it would have been an improvement.”

The room exploded into ohs, with Nino adding a ‘snap’ for good measure, drowning out Chloé as she tried to argue that it was pronounced ‘diffamation,’ not ‘defamation.’ Jack felt like she was on top of the world. Despite how upset her parents had been the night before, her heroics had definitely been worth it. This was the best she had felt all week—no Akuma was going to stalk her today! But she hadn’t been thinking about improving her standing with her classmates when she ran headfirst into danger. She just wanted Adrien to be safe.

Speaking of Adrien, he had just slipped into the classroom. He waved at her over the knot of their classmates’ heads but kept on moving. It seemed he had to talk to the teacher about something.

Jack gave Rose an encouraging smile. The girl blinked her eyes dry and returned the favor with a shaky one of her own, Juleka giving a nod of appreciation over Rose’s head. Satisfied, Jack turned back to Mylene.

“I was scared,” Jack admitted. “But I was more scared of what would happen if I didn’t do something.” What was it that Mimmi always said? Bravery wasn’t the absence of fear, but the pressing on in spite of it.

Now that everyone had quieted down to listen to her again, Jack’s ears picked up on two familiar voices arguing in sharp French out in the hall. They only registered in the back of her head though, she was too focused on the group around her.

Max pushed his way forward, adjusting his glasses. “However did you ascertain you would be unaffected by her onslaught?” He paused, unsure. “I hope I said that correctly in English.”

Kim punched him in the shoulder. “Vous et vos grands mots!” (You and your big words!)

Max rubbed the sore spot, but grinned. “Yes, well…A different language is no excuse to speak like a simpleton.”

The arguing outside suddenly stopped. Out of the corner of her eye, Jack noticed Marinette and Alya enter the classroom together, though they seemed intent on looking in opposite directions. Marinette, hands clenched and arms glued to her sides, took a sharp right and marched up the stairs to her desk without speaking to anyone, sliding over to the far side. Alya, on the other hand, paused to orientate herself.

“Jack!” she called out, as if they had been friends all their lives. She hitched up her backpack and made a beeline straight for her, a streak of autumn colors as she wormed her way into the group, chattering in French. Jack caught the word ‘interview’ at the end.

“Vous pouvez parler moins vite s’il vous plait?” (Can you please slow down?) Jack begged.

Alya tried again. “Je vous ai vu hier à la télévision. Fille, tu étais formidable! Vous devez me donner une interview.” (I saw you yesterday on TV. Girl, you were great! You have to give me an interview.)

“Une interview?”
While everyone else groaned, saying things like ‘Encore?’ (Again?) and ‘Chaque unique temps…’ (Every single time…), Alya sidled up to Jack and dug her phone out of the back pocket of her jeans. She pulled up the Internet and loaded a pale pink website with magenta accents that faded into a red with black polka dot pattern at the top and bottom. A banner at the foot depicted Ladybug swinging on her yo-yo across a twilight sky, the Eiffel Tower alight behind her.

“Pour la Ladyblog,” Alya explained.

Jack took up the offered phone, recognizing Alya’s face in the upper righthand corner. This wasn’t just any blog. It was her blog. Jack swiped her thumb down to find videos and blurry pictures and text posts—even fan art!—all pertaining to Ladybug. At the bottom scrolled a constant stream of social media posts with #Ladyblog. Occasionally there was a flash of black of Cat Noir, but it was clear he was an afterthought. Jack found herself a little offended on his behalf, but also impressed with the amount of work Alya had put into her website.

“Quelle faire toi-dire?” (What do you say?) wondered Alya.

“Uh…” Jack took note of the rolling counter with its staggering number of unique hits. She had no idea she was in class with a famous blogger. Famous model, famous DJ—and her proudest accomplishment was once winning fourth place in a local junior surfing competition.

“We can do it in English if it makes you more comfortable,” Alya said, parcing down Jack’s hesitance to the root of the problem with one glance. “I don’t mind translating it later.”

“You sure?” Jack asked as she handed the phone back.

“Ah!” cried Ms. Bustier, clapping her hands together as Adrien headed for his bench. “Je n’ai pas remarqué le temps. Tout le monde à vos sièges!” (I did not notice the time. Everyone in your seats.)

Jack’s classmates dragged their feet as they climbed the stairs to their desks, loathing for class to begin. They hadn’t finished asking Jack questions yet.

“We can do it after school. In the library,” suggested Alya as her and Jack took the stairs together.

“Sounds good!”

Alya slipped into her seat next to Marinette. Marinette gave a soft humph and took a sudden interest in a map of France on the far wall. It didn’t seem like Alya noticed, but Jack knew she was only pretending, what with her observational skills. They must have gotten into a fight in the hall, but over what, Jack didn’t know. It made her a little sad, since they seemed like such close friends.

“Hé…” said Nathaniel quietly when Jack took her seat next to him. Thoughts of Marinette and Alya fell right out of her head as she turned to her deskmate in wide-eyed surprised, flabbergasted that he had actually spoken to her. He tilted his head in the direction of his sketchbook as he slid it across the smooth surface of their desk towards her. “Regardez.” (Look.)

Jack did look. One half of the page was filled with random doodles of baked goods and trees and paper lanterns and swirls and suns, but the other showed a figure diving at a startling likeness of a suprised Femme Defamation. On second glance, Jack realized it was her, wearing a superhero
costume. She had a rippling cape and wore leggings beneath a spandex leotard, with boots and gloves. He had drawn her hair up in a high ponytail, which she had always thought made her look silly, but now she was rethinking that stance. At the bottom, next to an exclamation point in a box, were written the words ‘*Le Sensationnel Jacqueline*.’

“This is amazing!” Jack breathed, but then blushed and remembered herself. “Er…” What was the French word for ‘amazing’ again? Forget it. She wasn’t going to be rude and pull out her dictionary to find out. She’d just have to get creative. “C’est sensationnel!”

The boy bobbed his head, mumbling something as he ripped off the page using a straight edge and handed it to Jack. She smiled blithely as if she had understood. So it was true and not just a lie she had told herself to make herself feel better—Nathaniel really was shy. She wasn’t bothered in the least when he hunched back over his sketchbook and resumed drawing. It seemed he had warmed up to her, since he no longer tried to hide what he was doing.

As Jack settled back to learn, she realized with a sense of triumph that she had earned everyone’s favor—well, everyone who mattered, anyway. Chloé didn’t count.

Oh, but there was Marinette. She was still a little chilly. Jack stared at the back of the girl’s head and bit her lip.

She hadn’t been able to figure her out.

*   *   *

“What is this rabbit food?” Jack wondered, jabbing the knife she had just used to slice her ginormous hamburger in two at the pile of kale on Adrien’s plate.

“I’ve told you, you’ve got to try to say things in French first or you’ll never learn,” said her friend. “Do you not know the French word for rabbit? It’s—”

“*Lapin. I know.*”

“*Puis le dire en français.*” (Then say it in French.)

It was Jack’s first official tutoring lesson with Adrien, and it could not have come at a better time. Chloé had tried to get back at Jack for making her a laughingstock earlier by bringing up Jack’s usual lonely lunch plans. With relish, Jack explained she was going to Adrien’s house to eat. At first Chloé thought Jack was making it up, since she knew Adrien’s father would never allow such a thing—even she had never been over for lunch, and Mr. Agreste loved her!—but then Adrien, his timing as impeccable as his looks, joined Jack and asked her if she was ready to leave. They left Chloé with her mouth hanging wide open. Just thinking about it again made Jack shake with silent laughter.

“Okay then…” said Jack, all smiles. “*Quelle est ce lapin alimentaire*?”

Adrien dribbled what looked to be a thimble of dressing over his salad. “Not bad! But, in this instance, it’s ‘cette,’ not ‘ce.’ And…you said ‘alimentary’ instead of ‘food,’ which works, but—”

“C’mon, answer the question,” Jack insisted. “Where’s your burger?”

“My father wasn’t pleased when he saw what I planned to eat yesterday. I’ve got to watch my weight. The camera adds ten pounds.”
“But—”

“Jack,” Adrien pleaded, silencing her with just a word. “S’il vous plaît. It’s part of the deal.”

To keep herself from saying something nasty about Mr. Agreste, Jack shoved her burger into her mouth. It was delicious, juicy and with a kick, but she found herself having a hard time enjoying it knowing Adrien wouldn’t be able to enjoy it too.

“I saw you talking to Alya,” said Adrien, assisting by changing the subject. “Did she want to interview you for the Ladyblog too?”

“Oh, she asked you too?” asked Jack through her mouthful of meat.

“Yeah. We did it first thing this morning.”

“So that’s where you were! I was wondering. Yup! We’re meeting in the library after school.”

Adrien paused, a fork of leafy greens halfway to his face, and scrunched his eyebrows together, puzzled.

Jack swallowed hard, thrown by her friend’s reaction. “…What?”

“Nothing. It’s just…I though Alya was going with Marinette to the fashion show at Champ de Mars after school. Marinette was telling me about it yesterday. She seemed really excited.”

Jack’s hamburger was becoming less and less appetizing by the moment. She put it down and began to nibble on some crinkle-cut French fries instead as she recalled Marinette and Alya’s argument in the hallway. Were they fighting because Alya was planning on skipping out on their plans to interview Jack? If that were true, it would explain Marinette’s behavior. Even Nath, the shyest boy in school, had brought up Jack’s heroics from the day before. Marinette had ignored her completely. Chloé hadn’t even managed to do that, and she hated Jack. The only explanation was that Marinette was upset with Jack, but Jack couldn’t think of anything she had done wrong. Unless, of course, she had caused a rift between Marinette and her best friend, even if it was unknowingly.

“Ça va?” asked Adrien, wondering if she was okay.

“Ça va,” answered Jack. It was an automatic response. Even if things weren’t okay now, she would make them right.

*   *   *

When Jack and Adrien returned to school ten minutes before two o’clock, she was relieved to see Alya sitting by herself, typing something into her phone. The only other people in the classroom were Juleka, Mylene, and Ivan in the corner, engrossed in a heavy metal music video. Jack told Adrien to hang on and went to go talk to the blogger.

“Just getting a few more questions together for our interview…” Alya said to explain why she couldn’t tear her eyes away from the screen. A few taps of her thumbs later though and she tossed her phone down on the desk and looked up. “Quoi de neuf?” (What’s up?)

“I…um…I was wondering if you wanted to reschedule.”
“Huh? Why? Did something come up?”

“Uh, no. I just thought…” Jack brought her hair over one shoulder and started to comb through it with her fingers. They itched to start braiding. “I thought you were going with Marinette to that fashion thing after school.”

Alya’s eyes flashed. “Well, I was. Until she uninvited me. So my afternoon kind of opened up.”

_Don’t say it, don’t say it, don’t say it_, thought Jack.

“What happened?”

_Dang it._

But Alya seemed like she had been dying to talk about it with someone all day. “She’s just being completely unreasonable! I’m a journalist. It’s what I do. Yes, I’m her best friend, but I just don’t know what she expected. I—!” She seemed to have run out of knowledge of the English language to express herself and devolved into a series of aggravated noises. “So frustrating!” she finished.


“Whatever. She’ll get over it.”

The words were a familiar refrain to Jack, which was why she had to ask: “…Are you sure?”

Alya peered at Jack from behind her black-frame glasses. “Just come to the interview,” she said.

Jack shrugged and agreed to do just that. Then she noticed Marinette entering the classroom, so she scurried back to her seat. It was clear from the Marinette’s ashen face that she was still upset. She made a show of taking the long away around her desk and sitting on the extreme edge of the bench before slamming her sketchbook down and getting to work on it. There were only a few feet between her and Alya, but it might as well have been an ocean.

Jack felt a twinge in her heart, accompanied by a strong sense of défé vu.

Once upon a time, she had a group of friends. The Squad, they had called themselves, five of them in all—Juana, Malie, Verónica, Cadence, and herself. They had been together since early grade school, mostly because of their shared love of jump rope. Jack still had a notebook where she had carefully written down all the songs they used to sing, along with all of their jump records. Jack almost always had the worst one, which was now pretty ironic now considering one of her super powers as Rabbit was jumping.

They were supposed to be friends forever. Wasn’t that what all their friendship bracelets said? Instead, nearly nine years of friendship was destroyed within a month of the Akumas appearing.

And Jack could blame herself for not juggling her double life better. Or she could blame her friends for overreacting when she wasn’t around when she said she would be. She could even blame her grandmother for giving her the Rabbit Miraculous in the first place. But that would be silly. The only one truly at fault was Trumpeter Swan and, by extent, Omega.

Because she had been doing just fine when she was fighting crime and rescuing people from burning
buildings. Despite the extra responsibility, she managed to balance everything because she chose when to be Rabbit. Then the Akumas started to appear at random and her life unraveled. Micro Man, Heartbreaker, Dream Eater, Cywave, Miss Direction, Baron Von Plague, Negator…She found herself embroiled in battle when she should have been attending Cadence’s band concert (she played the tuba), or sleeping in after fighting an Akuma all night when she should have been surfing with Malie (their dads were surf buddies). And the worst part was, Jack couldn’t tell them the real reason why she had suddenly become a flake. Mimmi insisted she tell no one, so her friends drew their own conclusions and assumed Jack no longer wanted to be friends with them.

Malie, always the dramatic one, was the first to cut ties. Verónica was next, operating by the ‘three strikes, you’re out’ rule—she always did love her baseball expressions. After a while, Juana took a step back and examined her friendship with Jack. She concluding it had become one-sided and dismissed her with an air of detachment.

But Cadence, Jack’s best friend, refused to give up so easily. She made excuses for Jack to the other girls, even though it meant she was jeopardizing her friendships with them in the process. Even though she didn’t understand what was wrong, she vowed to help Jack anyway she could, which was how the Positivity Club was born. The goal was to promote positivity to keep people from getting Akumatized in order to help Rabbit—in order to help Jack have her life back. Cadence didn’t understand why it was so important to Jack, but she served as President, canvassing for new members and mobilizing current ones. Despite her best efforts though, it did little good. The Akuma attacks became more and more frequent, and Jack found herself living in a constant state of exhaustion, her mind echoing with the pain she endured on an almost daily basis. It left her unable to provide Cadence with the friendship she deserved, but Jack wasn’t too worried. They were besties. Cadence was always going to forgive her.

Or so Jack thought.

The tipping point was Cadence’s surprise fourteenth birthday party. Jack had started planning it ages ago, before she became Rabbit, with the help of the rest of the Squad. Cadence had caught wind of it, but decided to pretend she had no clue. She didn’t want to ruin the fun of the surprise.

It never happened.

Jack forgot, not just about the party, but about Cadence’s birthday in general.

“It’s fine,” Cadence had told Jack by the time she remembered and gave her a call. “Juana, Malie, and Verónica—they’re throwing me a belated birthday beach party.” She paused, her voice growing thick. “You’re not invited,” she said quickly before hanging up.

Mimmi was concerned Jack would fall into a depression after losing her last friend, but, instead, Jack went into denial.

“She’ll get over it,” Jack assured her Kwami. “They all will.”

Jack was able to convince herself of this for a very long time. She believed that, once she had time, things would go back to the way they were before. She would start showing up again and her friendships would be repaired. But even when Diego joined her and her burden lessened, freeing her up, she discovered this wasn’t the case.

“Oh, so now you care?” Malie had wondered over Verónica’s cussing when Jack turned up at the student art show to support the four of them.
“Forget it, Jack,” said Juana. “We don’t want to be let down again.”

Cadence said nothing and just stared at the ground.

An Akuma would have come for her right then and there if not for Diego and Mimmi, but Jack was still lonely. The cliques at school were pretty much set and rumors painted a pretty ugly picture of her, so it was hard for her to make new friends there and not easy to look elsewhere. She got lucky though. One day, while surfing at Santa Monica Beach, she noticed a group of kids around her age playing Ultimate Frisbee. She thought of her own skills with a Chakram and went over to talk to them. And that was how she joined Glendale Youth Ultimate.

She liked her teammates—Roberto, Maria, Kaden, and all the rest—but they were no Squad. It was harder to get to know them since she only saw them once, sometimes twice, a week, as none of them went to the same school as her, but maybe that was for the best. She let them down less with her vanishing act. They stomached her excuses better. But, other than Diego, who joined the team later—before she knew he was Perro Negro, mind you—she wasn’t particularly close with anyone by the time she left for Paris less than a year later.

Maybe, in a different life, Jack had remained in Los Angeles. With Trumpeter Swan no longer a threat, she had picked up the pieces of her friendships and glued them back together again bit by bit, going through the arduous process of regaining their trust. She was studying with Juana, watching Malie in the school play, teaching Verónica Frisbee throws, and planning Positivity Club meetings with Cadence. She was gushing to her Squad about Diego and they were reminiscing about their old jump rope days.

Or maybe their friendships were lost and gone forever. There was no way to know.

Jack didn’t know what the deal was between Alya and Marinette. She just hoped Alya was right, that it truly was something silly that Marinette would get over and everything would go back to normal by the next day. Because she wouldn’t wish what had happened to her on anyone, not even someone like Chloé.

* * *

“So…how do we do this?” wondered Jack as she settled in across the table from Alya in a quiet corner of the library, the sounds of Ultimate Mecha Strike III filtering through the stacks. She would be lying if she said she wasn’t nervous. Not only was she not used to interviews, but she also wanted to make a good impression on Alya. Maybe they could be friends.

“It’s easy,” Alya assured as she fiddled with her phone. “Just act natural, like you’re talking to a friend. Don’t worry about messing up—I’ll just edit it out.”

“A friend…right…”

The interview started off simple enough. Alya asked Jack to recount the Akuma attack in her own words and then broke in with questions as she saw need. They were easy to field up until Jack got to the part where she realized she was somewhat immune to Femme Defamation’s attack. She brushed over what actually happened following that revelation.

“…So I chased her down to the TV station and—”
“On foot?” cut in Alya.

Jack froze, no doubt looking like a deer in headlights. While she technically did chase after Femme Defamation on foot, it was pretty unbelievable unless she admitted to being a superhero.

“I, uh…” Jack squeezed her eyes shut, her cheeks flooding with color. As if she couldn’t look anymore suspicious. She had to come up with a suitable lie, and fast. “I…may have…borrowed a moped.”

Alya gasped. “Vous avez volé un cyclomoteur!?” (You stole a moped!?)

“I said ‘borrowed’!” Jack insisted. “And I had to. Femme Defamation had taken Adrien!”

The girl pursed her lips in clear judgment, but decided to drop the matter and move on. “When you arrived at TVi Studios, did you see Jack Hammer?”

“Did I…?” Jack was thrown for another loop. “You mean Rabbit?”

Alya waved her off. “Whatever you want to call her. There were reports of her being sighted there.”

“Um, yeah. I did, actually.” Better to put herself at the scene with Rabbit than for Alya to suspect she was Rabbit.

“And what was she doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Was she arguing with Ladybug?”

“I wasn’t—!” Jack felt something dig into her thigh and looked down to find Mimmi floating there. The Kwami shook her head vigorously. “…there for that part,” Jack finished. “They were arguing?”

Luckily, Alya didn’t seem to notice the switch. She stopped recording and began to swipe through a couple of screens on her phone. “Oh, yeah. Someone sent me footage…Où est-ce? Ah! Here it is. Girl, check this out.”

She held up her phone and Jack watched a tiny white figure chase a tiny red figure into TVi Studios. Whoever was recording ran up to a corner of the building as fast as he could, the screen bouncing up and down in time with his huffing and puffing, and held his phone up against the glass. Jack’s back was to the camera, but it did appear her and Ladybug were having some sort of confrontation in the lobby. Without the words though, it looked a lot worse than it actually was. At one point, Jack turned her head a little to the left. The man recording the video gasped and pulled away, the camera now pointed at his feet. He seemed terrified he had been spotted. When he finally got up the nerve to point the camera back again though, the lobby was empty. Unbeknownst to him, Ladybug had taken the elevator up while Jack had hidden behind the reception desk.

“Où sont-ils…? Où sont-ils allés?” (Where are they…? Where did they go?) he wondered, pointing his phone around wildly before the video stopped.

“I must have gone in right after that,” Jack lied. “I saw Rabbit down a hallway while I was waiting for an elevator.”
“So she was leaving!” surmised Alya. “Out the back door, no less. Some hero…”

Jack felt a stabbing sensation in her stomach. “I’m…I’m sure she had her reasons.”

Alya looked at her phone and played the video again for her own benefit. “And what would those be?” she wondered. “Personally, I think she’s working for the Butterfly.”

“Wha—!?"

Jack jumped out of her chair, but the tops of her legs smacked into the underside of the table and forced her back into her seat again. Mimmi dodged while biting a paw to keep from shouting as she glared up in Alya’s direction. Alya was a little surprised when everything on the table jumped, but said nothing, only quirking a questioning eyebrow.

“How could you even think that?” demanded Jack.

“How could I not?” countered Alya. “Marinette doesn’t believe me either, but look at the facts. Jack Hammer shows up and destroys a section of the city—"

“That was a mistake. I heard from Nino that she said her powers got out of hand.”

“D’accord, but what about two days ago? I have eyewitnesses reporting that she tried to run Chat Noir over with a monster truck.”

“That’s not what happened!”

“How do you know? It’s not like you were there.”

“Neither were you!”

“But look at how Ladybug reacted to Jack Hammer in this video.” Alya waved her phone around, the video having already looped back to Jack and Ladybug having their argument. “She didn’t trust Jack Hammer to help her with the Akuma. That says a lot, I think. She’s wise to Jack Hammer’s game.”

Jack wanted to throw something. “What game, Alya?”

“She’s pretending to be this innocent superhero where things just ‘happen’ to go wrong, giving her multiple chances to try and get Ladybug and Chat Noir’s Miraculouses.”

“Did you ever think that maybe things really are going wrong?”

“I have.”

These two words allowed Jack to settle down a bit. “…And?”

“Either way, I’ll need more proof.” Alya’s phone beeped and vibrated, but she ignored it as she tapped the lenses of her glasses with two of her fingers. “But I’ve got my eye on her.”

The end of her sentence was drowned out though as her phone continued to buzz and beep, some of the beeps interrupting others as they trilled. Confused, Alya exited the video. What she saw on the screen behind it had her on her feet in an instant.
“What is it? What’s wrong?” asked Jack, alarmed.

“I monitor social media for Akuma attacks. Take a look.”

She tossed her phone to Jack as she wrestled with her knotted-up olive green jacket. Jack caught the phone with one hand and saw the screen populating with tweets and Facebook posts with #Ladyblog. They slid by in French so fast that Jack’s eyes were having trouble tracking them. Upon seeing a video, Jack tapped it before it could pass her by and it enlarged on the screen.

Distant shouts and screams echoed out of the tinny speakers of Alya’s phone. There were blurs of people running past at first, so it took Jack a moment to make sense out of what she was seeing. It was a street somewhere in Paris. Whoever was filming was hiding behind a pillar holding up elevated metro tracks. They peeked around and zoomed in on a small caped figure clothed in primary colors floating slowly across the street, sort of upright. Anything even remotely near him was tossed aside—trash bins, bicycles, the tables and chairs outside a café. Signposts bent ninety degrees. Branches snapped off trees. Jack flinched and almost looked away, reminded of the damage she had caused on Monday.

The screech of tires made Jack look back. A car barreling towards the figure was trying to stop. The front end of it crumpled, the airbags going off before it even got within fifteen feet of the Akuma. His laughter rang out and Jack realized, much to her shock, that the Akuma was a little boy.

Alya stripped the phone from Jack’s hand before the video even finished.

“Hey!” cried Jack.

“Pardon. Je dois partir.”

“Go where?”

“After the Akuma. I do it all the time.” Alya swung her backpack onto her shoulder and started to back away. “This one is pretty slow moving—if I hurry, I might be able to get there even before Ladybug and Chat Noir. Then I can live stream the whole fight for the Ladyblog! We can finish this interview later. Does tomorrow after school work?”

She didn’t even wait for an answer. She took a corner and was gone.

Jack scoffed and crossed her arms. Good riddance. She decided she didn’t like Alya all that much. Maybe Marinette was right to uninvited her to the fashion show.

Mimmi flew up through the table. “C’mon, let’s go!” she whispered, tugging at Jack’s arm. “We can’t let her get too far ahead of us.”

“Who?”

“Alya! It’s dangerous, tracking Akumas.”

“She said she does it all the time. I’m sure she’ll be—oh. Oh, no. Don’t…don’t give me that face.”

It was too late. Mimmi had covered her mouth with her paws. Her enormous honey-colored eyes filled with tears as her ears drooped. She looked as if she had just witnessed someone kicking a
“It’s not going to work this time,” Jack insisted, even though she could feel her resolve weakening already.

“You can’t let your anger against her get the better of you. You’re a hero! You’re better than that!” she said.

“I’m not angry with her…” mumbled Jack, knowing exactly how unconvincing that sounded.

“It’s okay if you are. I am too! How could she think such awful things about you!? But that doesn’t mean she deserves to get hurt.”

“Who says she’ll get hurt?”

“No one. Because you’re going to protect her. Right?” No answer. Mimmi tugged harder, dragging Jack to her feet with her prodigious strength. “Riiiiight?”

Jack heaved a sigh. “Right.”

*   *   *

Jack crouched on a rooftop, watching Alya bike her way down the street below. The girl skidded to a halt to wait at a stoplight, so Jack took the opportunity to jump to the roof across the way, scaring a flock of pigeons. Alya’s head turned in her direction, but Jack managed to conceal herself behind a chimney just in time.

She had been tracking Alya for about ten minutes now, sticking to the shadows to avoid detection. She could only imagine what Alya would think if she spotted Rabbit following her. She would probably somehow twist it into more proof that Rabbit was working for Hawk Moth. But Alya wasn’t the only one Jack was hiding from—she didn’t need Ladybug appearing so they could rehash the scene from yesterday.

Alya peddled her bike around what looked to be a military school of some sort, judging by the young men and women running drills in one of the courtyards. The compound stood directly southeast of the Eiffel Tower. Jack’s eyes were drawn to it as she darted across the roof of a dormitory. She was actually supposed to visit it this Sunday with her parents, among other famous Parisian landmarks, but it looked like she was going early, because Alya was heading straight for it.

Jack’s ears had long been picking up the screams and shouts of pedestrians as they fled the Akuma, their words a muddled mess. The closer she got though, the more distinct their voices became, until she was able to pick out phrases like ‘Attention!’ (Look out!) and ‘Mettons-nous sortons d’ici!’ (She actually didn’t know the meaning of that one. She would have to look it up later).

Reaching the edge of the roof, Jack ground to a halt and surveyed the long rectangular lawn of *Champ de Mars*, its expanse only broken by a large white tent pulsing with music. But the scene was not a peaceful one. Jack spotted the Akuma floating down the street, his satin blue cape rippling in the breeze. He looks suspiciously like a little boy dressed as a generic superhero for Halloween, but what he was doing with his telekinesis was far from pretend. He sent a group of steal barricades flying, one smacking into the windows right below Jack with a cacophonous shatter of glass.

Again, Jack was struck by the strange way the boy flew. He was angled, arms bowed as he held his
tiny fists close to his chest, one holding a rolled up piece of paper, like a scroll. He remained level with the ground, not daring to fly higher or lower than about twenty feet, though he did sway from side to side. The speed at which he traveled was slow, almost laborious, and Jack was left scratching her head. What kind of powers were these?

The Akuma appeared to be heading towards the tent set up in the park. Even though he could easily fly over the parked vehicles along the perimeter of Champ de Mars, he picked them up and tossed them with his mind instead. They went rolling down the street, their alarms blaring as the metal crunched and side mirrors went spinning off in all directions.

A sharp gasp and Jack looked down to see Alya spying on the Akuma from behind a bush, her bike abandoned. The girl dug through her backpack, juggling her phone as she pulled it out in a hurry. Scrolling through her contacts, she picked one and shoved her phone up against her ear.

“Allons!” (Come on!) she muttered, worriedly glancing at the Akuma as he got further and further away from her. “Décroche, décroche, décroche!” (Pick up, pick up, pick up!)

Jack adjusted her rabbit ears to hear better.

“Vous avez atteint Marinette!” (You’ve reached Marinette!) said the recording on the other end. Alya shook her head, disappointed. “On dirait que je vous ai manqué. Laissez un message après le bip!” (Looks like I missed you. Leave a message after the beep!)

The instant the beep sounded, Alya was talking a mile a minute. Jack couldn’t even begin to keep up, so she let the words wash over her while she tried to figure out why it was so urgent for Alya to call Marinette right this very moment, especially when they were fighting. Besides, didn’t Alya want footage of the Akuma? She was missing her chance. She had even arrived before Ladybug and Cat Noir, like she wanted.

But then the answer dawned on Jack. Pure dread shot down her spine, causing her to break out into a cold sweat. She jerked her head up and sqinted at the white tent the Akuma was heading towards. There were purple words imprinted on the side, but one in particular jumped out at her: Vogue.

Fashion.

Marinette and many other innocent civilians were in that tent for a fashion show, but due to the blaring music, they couldn’t hear the commotion the Akuma was making just outside. Marinette probably didn’t hear her cellphone ring either, or, if she did, saw it was Alya and refused to pick up since they were feuding. If Jack didn’t do something, no one would know they were in danger until it was too late.

Not thinking twice, Jack took a running leap off the building, flipping through the air and landing gracefully behind the Akuma. While she could sneak around, time was of the essence and she trusted her speed. By the time the boy spotted her, she would be out of his range.

Of course, Jack had forgotten that she wasn’t that lucky anymore. Halfway to the tent, Jack heard the boy shout and felt like a squishy rope was constricting her around the middle, pining her arms to her sides. An invisible force dragged her back, lifting her up off her feet and spinning her around to put her face-to-face with the Akuma.

He was a chubby little boy of about six, with an unfortunate bowl-cut and a thick smattering of freckles. When he smiled, he was missing one of his front teeth. Now that Jack was closer, she could
see he had a red emblem on his chest that resembled a head with swirls popping out of the top of it.

“Allô!” (Hullo!) he said with an energetic wave. “Qui es-tu? Une sorte de dame de lapin...?” (Who are you? Some kind of rabbit lady...?)

Jack had dealt with child Akumas before. They were dangerous foes because they had a hard time controlling their emotions—their powers could get out of hand fast. She would have to tread carefully. At the very least though, Jack would be able to understand him. Her French comprehension was about at his level.

“Je suis Rabbit,” Jack said.

“Rabbit...?” repeated the Akuma, struggling with the pronunciation. For one tense moment, Jack feared she might have prompted him to recognize her as the bad guy from TV, but, instead, he put her down. “Quel nom bizarre. Êtes-vous ici pour jouer avec nous?” (What a weird name. Are you here to play with us?)

“Er...” Us? Jack was baffled, but tried not to show it. Maybe he was just mixing up pronouns. “Oui!”

“Youpi!” (Yay!) he cried. “Attends ici. Nous serons de retour.” (Wait here. We’ll be back.)

He continued to float on, but Jack wasn’t about to let him escape. “Attendez! Où allez-vous?” (Wait! Where are you going?)

The boy giggled. “Vous parlez drôle.” (You talk funny.) He did pause though. “Je suis va montrer Maman qu'elle avait tort.” (I'm gonna show Mommy that she was wrong.) He pointed towards the fashion show tent.

“Puis-je venir avec toi? Pour voir votre maman?” (Can I come with you? To see your mommy?) Maybe she could run ahead of him before it was too late.

The Akuma nodded, thrilled. “D'accord!” They turned and started to walk towards the tent together—well, Jack walked while the Akuma floated. He grinned at Jack. “Vous allez adorer Maman!” (You will love Mommy!) he said. “Elle est très gentille. Sauf quand elle est pas...” (She’s very kind. Expect when she’s not...)

Out of the corner of her eye, Jack saw a flash of familiar olive green cutting across the pavement. Her heart suddenly felt lodged in her throat.

“Regarde!” she cried, enlarging her chakram until it was the size of a hula-hoop. She swung it in circles around her arm and threw it into the air, catching it around her neck. She could not believe Alya chose now of all times to try and sneak past the Akuma, but at the very least it solved her problem—her classmate could warn those at the fashion show of the impending Akuma attack. Jack just had to keep the boy distracted until then. His attention was quickly waning though, so she swung the chakram off her neck back into the air and caught it around her wrist again, shrinking it back into a bracelet. “Voilà!”

“Hou la la!” cried the boy.

Jack gave a sweeping bow. “Merci, merci!” With a surreptitious glance, she noted that Alya still hadn’t reached the tent yet. The Akuma’s reach was much further than Jack had anticipated, so she
didn’t feel like Alya was safe until she was out of sight. “Quelle est votre maman tort au sujet?” (What is your mommy wrong about?)

“Fort.” (Strong.) He patted the area in front of him.

“Fort…?” Jack had no clue what was going on.

“Ouïe! Il est mon meilleur ami. …Mais Maman ne pense pas qu’il est reel.” (Yup! He’s my best friend! …But Mommy doesn’t think he’s real.)

The pieces of this Akuma’s puzzle were starting to tie themselves together. He wasn’t flying and using telekinesis after all.

“…Fort est votre ami imaginaire?” (…Fort is your imaginary friend?) asked Jack.

This was the exact wrong thing to say. As the boy jumped from docile to furious, the ground rumbled underfoot. Jack was thrown to the ground “Fort est reel!!!” he roared

“Je rigole! Je rigole!!!” (I’m joking! I’m joking!!!) Jack cried, desperate to regain her footing. She mentally kicked herself for her careless words. Fort might have been an imaginary friend at one time, but he wasn’t anymore.

The shaking stopped as suddenly as it had started, but the boy still glowered down at her, skeptical. In the distance, she could see Alya picking herself up off the ground, the quaking having thrown her off balance as well. Jack had to keep the conversation going.

“Ainsi vous pouvez le voir lui?” (So you can see him?) questioned the boy.

Jack tried to remain calm as she scoffed and flipped her fishbone braid behind her shoulder. “Bien sûr je peux.” (Of course I can.)

The Akuma’s face relaxed and the tension knotting Jack’s stomach released its death grip. Alya was almost to the tent now. Just a little bit longer…

“Oh, bien!” said the boy, but then he was interrupted by the appearance of a glowing moth-shaped outline in front of his face. Jack backed up a few paces, recognizing Hawk Moth at work. The Akuma looked up, confused by whatever the villain was telling him. He shook his head. “Non. Vous vous trompez. Rabbit est mon ami!” (No. You’re wrong. Rabbit is my friend!)

“Ne l’écoutez pas!” (Do not listen!) begged Jack. “Il est un…” (He is a…) Lair. She couldn’t think of the French word for liar.

The boy gasped at whatever Hawk Moth told him next and looked down at Jack, tears in his eyes. “Vous voulez prendre Fort loin de moi?” (You want to take Fort away from me?)

“Non. Non!” Great, now she was the liar.

“Je pensais que tu étais mon ami!” (I thought you were my friend!)

“Je suis!”

“Alors quel est mon nom?” (So what’s my name?)
Jack drew a blank, thinking at first she had forgotten, then realizing she had never even asked in the first place.

“Vous n’êtes pas mon ami.” (You’re not my friend) said the boy bitterly as Hawk Moth’s influence faded. “Vous ne vous souciez pas de moi!” (You don’t care about me!)

A fight Jack had with Cadence came screaming back to her, shaking her to her core. She tried to make amends, but just like with the Squad, it was too little, too late.

“Quel est—?”

“Il est IMAGINEUR!” the boy cried.

Something—no doubt Fort—struck Jack hard in the stomach to punctuate that statement. All the air was forced out of her body and she went flying. The world was a blur, a screeching mass of dull color that came to a grinding halt when she crashed into a pillar so hard it cracked in two. The ancient portico above shifted, but held firm.

Jack hissed through her pain, her back aching and her foot pinned beneath one half of the fallen Corinthian column. She wrenched her body one way and then the other, pushing against the pillar with all her might with her three free limbs, but she could not wriggle free. For one brief moment, she thought about using Dogstruction to get free, but a crack rang out and something akin to a whip struck her. She looked up to find Imagineur floating towards her. He pointed at Jack and she was struck again. The third time though, she was ready. With lightning fast reflexes, she reached out and wrapped her arm several times around something rope-like and squishy, grabbing and pulling it taunt. She hoped she was holding onto Fort’s tail and not his tongue or a tentacle, but knowing her luck…

Surprised, the creature jerked back, nearly yanking Jack’s arm out of her socket but also pulling her free a little. She felt whatever it was slip through her fingers though and it was gone. Imagineur was looming over her by this time. It was now or never for Dogstruction…

Jack’s rabbit ears picked up on something odd though and it took her a moment to place what it was: Silence. The thumping bass that had been throbbing in the background this whole time was now missing. The empty space was soon replaced with harried shouts and pounding footsteps though. Imagineur looked over his shoulder to see people flooding out of the fashion show.

“Non! Maman!” the Akuma cried, turning Fort around. He went floating off, no doubt in search of his mother before she got away.

With a moment to breathe, Jack continued to try and wrench herself free. It would take some time, but she would wriggle out eventually, hopefully before Imagineur hurt anyone with Fort.

Someone cast a shadow over Jack and she glanced up to see Cat Noir grinning at her. Though Jack was happy to see him, her pain and frustration made her voice sharp.

“Where have you been!?” she wondered.

He scowled. “I could ask you the same thing.” He did a corkscrew flip over the pillars, pulling his staff out as he landed next to Jack. “Allow me,” he said, extending the staff and wedging it beneath, right next to Jack’s foot. With a mighty heavy, he pulled it down like a lever, the column rolling
away just enough that Jack could slide out.

“Thanks,” she said, jumping to her feet no worse for wear and shaking her leg out. Her boots might as well have been made out of titanium.

“What have we got here?” Cat looked over at the Akuma as he slung his staff onto his shoulder and got ready to move.

“Imagineur. He got upset when his mom told him his imaginary friend Fort wasn’t real, so Hawk Moth gave him the ability to prove her wrong.”

“I don’t see him.”

“He’s there.” Jack rubbed her back. “Trust me.”

Cat broke into a knowing smile. “So is my Lady.”

Jack noticed Ladybug stepping forth from the mass of people trying to escape. She confronted the Akuma like a stern parent and he drew back. It seemed she had everything in hand, at least for now, allowing Jack to relax a bit.

“And I’ve been here the whole time,” she added to Cat, a little offended.

“I meant during yesterday’s Akuma attack,” he explained. “I was late, so Ladybug could have used your help.”

“What are you talking about? I was…there…” Jack realized her mistake and bit her tongue, but it was too late. Cat tilted his head at her, his tail forming into the shape of a question mark. “Earlier,” she added quickly. “But Ladybug told me to stay back and let her handle it because…you know…” Her ears drooped and she looked away. “My powers…”

“Oh…” Cat Noir’s ears drooped too. He looked like a kitten that had been spritzed with a spray bottle. “Ladybug didn’t mention that…”

Jack felt a lump rise in her throat. “It’s not a big deal. Really.”

“But it is! People like us—we’re not meant to fight alone. She could have gotten hurt…”

Jack blinked, hearing Diego’s vulnerability (or, rather, Perro Negro’s vulnerability, since Diego had a bad habit of pretending he was too cool for that sort of thing) in Cat’s voice. With his jocularity and dramatics, it was easy to forget that he had once told Jack that he loved Ladybug. She must not have believed that he meant it though, or she wouldn’t be so startled to realize just how deep his feelings for his partner ran.

Cat Noir perked up a little. “Do you think maybe that’s why your powers have been acting up? Because you and Perro Negro are apart?”

Jack turned the hypothesis over in her head. She liked that theory a lot more than Ladybug’s ‘it’s because you don’t have a true Miraculous,’ but there was no way for her to know for sure. There were too many unknowns.

There was a flash of pink and the two watched Ladybug whip out her yo-yo and swing it above her
head like a lasso. The time for trying to talk the Akuma down was over. Cat flipped up onto the pillar, gasping and making a fist.

“I imagine my Lady might need our help right now!” he said.

“You go on without me,” said Jack.

“What? But—”

“You two can handle it.” She forced a smile to assure him. All she seemed to do was make a mess, and now she was even driving a wedge between Cat Noir and Ladybug. They would be better off without her.

“Okay,” said Cat. Jack couldn’t tell if he bought her smile or was just trying to humor her. She guessed it really didn’t matter. “But we still need to talk about this whole Kwami cloning business,” he added. “Can you meet Ladybug and me on the rooftop of Notre Dame? Say, 21:00?”

Jack started nodding before she even figured out what time that would be for her on a 12-hour clock. After a little mental math though, her heart sunk just a tad. She and Diego made plans to Skype at nine o’clock her time. She knew he would understand why she had to cancel, but she hadn’t seen him in almost a week now and his mannerisms were growing blurry in her mind. Now she was going to have to wait until Saturday to refresh them.

“Sounds great,” she lied.

As soon as the words left Jack’s mouth, Cat was off like a shot, a black blur as he raced to join Ladybug in battle. Jack would have stayed to watch, but she knew she would only be tempted to fight too. Instead, she ran to the left and bounded behind a bush.

“All hopped out.”

As Jack’s suit vanished in a flash, Mimmi somersaulted out of the Miraculous. “Are you sure about this?” asked the Kwami.

Jack dug through her bag until she found her phone. Thankfully, it was at 14% battery life. Hopefully that would be enough. “I guess we’ll see,” she said, launching her Internet browser and pulling up the Ladyblog.

Alya was live-streaming the fight, just like she said she would. Ladybug was doing handsprings around Imagineur, speed on her side, but every time she threw out her yo-yo to ensnare the Akuma and pull him off his mount, it would ricochet off an invisible wall. Fort was blocking her every shot. Meanwhile, Cat Noir had latched onto Fort and was struggling to scramble up him. Climbing something he couldn’t see though, he might as well have been climbing blind. Eventually, he was grabbed by Fort and stripped off.

“Vas-y!” (Come on!) complained Alya behind the camera as Fort shook Cat like a baby with a rattle. Jack bit her lip. It was pretty disheartening to watch.

Ladybug wrapped her yo-yo around Cat Noir’s legs and tugged him free. He landed on his feet next to her, whipping out his baton and spinning it. As Fort knocked up against it, Cat Noir got shoved backwards. He turned to whisper something into Ladybug’s ear, no doubt some flirtation comment or pun, but the danger was far from over and they were both upended. Presumably Fort had swept
their legs.

There was a flash of Alya’s hand in the corner of the screen as she threw out her arm. “Comment pourriez-vous pas voir que venir?” (How could you not see that coming?) she complained.

Jack wrinkled her brow, positive she hadn’t translated Alya’s words properly.

Ladybug rolled to her feet while Cat put his hands on the ground behind his head and pushed, jumping back up. Ladybug started issuing commands to her partner.

“How could you not see that coming?” she complained.

Ladybug started issuing commands to her partner.

“Que font-ils…? Pourquoi sont-ils debout juste là?” (What are they doing…? Why are they just standing there!?) Alya wondered.

Flames. Fire truck red flames came shooting out of nothing. Thinking fast, Ladybug put her arm around Cat Noir and cast out her yo-yo, snagging the trunk of a tree. They were dragged away before they were roasted alive, a scorch mark on the ground where they had been standing mere moments before.

“Uh, Mimmi?” asked Jack, hesitant. “Does…does it seem like Alya can see Fort?”

The Kwami flew in closer, blocking Jack’s view of her phone. The creature tapped her chin as she concentrated. Her French was a bit stronger than Jack’s, having been to France several times before with Jack’s grandmother.

Jack tried to look around the little white ball of fluff, but she did hear Alya’s voice, harried and breathless. She was running, saying something to her viewers. Mimmi followed along with the words by nodding her head, then jolted. She looked over her shoulder, eyes wide.

“I think you’re right!” she cried.

Jack nearly dropped her phone as Mimmi zoomed around her head.

“She can help Ladybug and Cat Noir fight!” the Kwami cried.

“We have to tell her,” agreed Jack. She turned to Mimmi, eyebrow raised as she held up her wrist. “You ready?”

Mimmi froze. “Uh…I don’t think that’s a good idea…”

“What!? Why not? You always want me to transform. It was your idea to transform in the first place!”

“Because that is who you needed to be to protect Alya. Who do you think you need to be to talk to her?”

“But I can prove that she was wrong about Rabbit!”

“What is more important? That she listens to you or that you prove her wrong?”

Jack opened her mouth to answer, but then closed it.

Listening—not exactly her strong suit. But not listening to Mimmi always led to trouble. It was
strange, now that Jack thought about it. No matter how many times she went against what Mimmi said, the Kwami never held it against her. She always said that Jack would never learn if she didn’t make mistakes.

Jack had made a lot of mistakes, and every single one had led to misery, but she still hadn’t learned. Why hadn’t she learned?

And then she realized.

It was like a fog lifting or drapes flinging open to reveal the sun. Jack hadn’t learned because that would require changing, and she hated change. Change was time-consuming and painful and scary and nothing any fifteen-year-old wanted to deal with. As long as she believed she was right, as long as she didn’t acknowledge any of her mistakes, she could continue on as she had before, or, at least she thought she could. While she hadn’t changed, the world around her did, and things had only gotten more difficult. She had to embrace the changes, or an Akuma would come for her, no matter how many friends she made.

But change didn’t have to be bad. It didn’t have to be hard either. It all started with one step, one tiny difference in how she reacted to things. So maybe, just maybe, for once in her life, she should listen to Mimmi.

Peeking around the bush, Jack could just make out streaks of red and black as Ladybug and Cat Noir continued to battle Imagineur, now with extra flames, the leaves of the surrounding trees ablaze. Jack couldn’t see Alya anywhere, but she had to be close if she was filming the fight. Jack looked back down at the live stream and realized if she could match the current angle, she would be able to figure out Alya’s position.

“C’mon!” said Jack to Mimmi, running across the street and vaulting over the stout stone fence. She felt Mimmi’s body dive into her bag under her arm as she made a beeline for the fashion show tent. Thankfully, Imagineur was too wrapped up in his fight to notice her as she slipped between the white folds.

Inside was eerily quiet, the ranging battle just outside a distant memory. A temporary catwalk marked the center of the area, a multitude of black folding chairs surrounding it. They faced every which way, some knocked over on their sides or completely overturned due to being caught in the crossfire of a mass evacuation. Jack vaguely wondered if Marinette got out okay. She assumed so, or Alya wouldn’t be filming the Akuma fight right now.

Edging around the folding chairs, Jack snuck backstage, keeping an eye on the live stream. Ladybug was pinned down by Fort, so Cat Noir slammed his staff down on her chest. Something stopped it six inches above her and it bounced off, but Ladybug sprung free. Imagineur threw a tantrum, screaming and crying as he pounded his tiny fists on Fort. He was suddenly lifted higher in a jerky motion.

“Maintenant il a des ailes!? (Now it has wings!?) complained Alya. “Quelle est cette chose?” (What is this thing?)

Jack quickened her step, pushing through rolling racks of designer clothes and finally out of the back of the tent. She was much closer to the fight now—too close, in fact. She could make out Imagineur bouncing up and down above her through the lattice of burning branches. Ladybug and Cat Noir stood back-to-back, swinging their yo-yo and staff respectively to ward off any potential attacks from all angles. Jack snuck away, the acidic smoke from the smoldering trees giving her some cover,
though it made her eyes burn and water. Only when she was blinking in cool air again did she circle back.

Jack’s screen matched up with the tableau before her, though she was much further away. She scanned the area for Alya and spotted her classmate squatting behind a car at the edge of an adjoining side street. She raced up, her heavy footfalls alerting Alya to her presence. She didn’t want to scare the girl, after all.

Alya squinted at Jack for a good ten seconds before she leapt to her feet, hazel eyes filling with alarm behind her black frames of her glasses.

“Jack!” she hissed, her shock dovetailing into annoyance. “What are you doing here?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Now! How did you even find me?”

Jack tapped to her phone. It was now showing video of the ground. Alya took note and turned her camera phone back towards the fight. Jack came alongside her.

“I don’t know whether to be upset or impressed.” The blogger gritted her teeth. “You really shouldn’t be here right now.”

“Yeah, well, neither should you.”

“I’m a professional.”

Jack refrained from rolling her eyes. “Listen, I was watching your feed and—can you see the monster?”

Alya jerked her head, giving Jack a quizzical look.

“But it’s invisible to me,” Jack explained. “And I think it’s invisible to Ladybug and Cat Noir too.”

“Invisible…?” Alya looked up, presumably at Fort. The clues came together, as evident by the realization that was spreading across her face. “Bien entendu!” she cried. “I heard Chat Noir call the Akuma Imagineur. Imaginer! He’s a child playing pretend—I play pretend with my younger sisters all the time! That must be why I can see that monster and they can’t!” She turned the camera to face her, Jack feeling awkward upon realizing she was caught in the background. “Vous l’avez entendu ici, amis! Ladybug et Chat Noir ne doit pas avoir plus jeunes frères et sœurs!”

“Uh, what…?”

Alya ignored her, too busy addressing her viewers. “Restez à l’écoute pour plus de révélations!” (Stay tuned for more revelations!)

“Alya, stop recording. You have to—”

A distant cry interrupted Jack and the two girls turned to see Ladybug casting her yo-yo straight up into the air.
À propos du temps,” (About time) Alya muttered. “She’s using Lucky Charm,” she explained to Jack.

Sure enough, pink sparks turned into ladybugs that swarmed in a spiral above Ladybug’s head. Whatever they turned into though must have been small, because Jack couldn’t see it from where she was standing. Ladybug, too, craned her neck as she scanned the air, then the ground.

“Did you see what it made?” Jack wondered to Alya.

“Non. I—” Alya took in a sharp breath. She shoved her phone into Jack’s hands. “Film!” she commanded as she ran out into the park.

“Alya!” called Jack, though she did nothing to stop the girl. “What are you—!?”

“Ladybug!” Alya called, cupping her hands around her mouth. “Ne voyez-vous pas que…” (Don’t you see that…) She paused, her mind working furiously. “Le rayon gel?” (Freeze ray?)

Jack realized the only thing that could defeat an imaginary friend was an imaginary weapon.

“Il est juste à vos pieds!” (It’s right at your feet!) Alya shouted at Ladybug.

Ladybug looked at Alya like she was crazy, but she still played the part of a concerned superhero as she tried to shoo her away. “Qu’est-ce que tu fais? Sors d’ici! C’est danger—!” (What are you doing? Get out of here! It’s danger—!)

With her guard down, Fort sent Ladybug flying into a tree. Leaves turned to webs of flaming embers rained down on her.

“Ma Dame!” cried Cat, racing on all fours to attend to her, only to smack right into Fort, who had landed. Cat rubbed his head, grimacing in pain.

“Chat Noir! Obtenez le rayon gel!” (Cat Noir! Get the freeze ray!) Alya yelled at him.

“Où?” (Where?) he wondered as he whipped his staff around to protect himself. “Est-ce invisible?” (Is it invisible?)

“Il est juste là!” (It’s right there!) Alya jabbed her finger towards where Ladybug had been standing when she used Lucky Charm.

“Non!” cried Imagineur when he saw Cat Noir making a move for it. He spun around, leading Jack to believe Fort was using his tail to sweep the ground again and get the freeze ray away.

Alya took off across the packed dirt, kicking up dust as the tongues of her high-tops smacked against her ankles. She skidded to a halt near the fashion show tent and scooped the ground. “Je l’ai!” (I got it!)

Ladybug was back on her feet by this time, having looped around the tree to avoid getting hit.

“Ladybug, je vais le jeter à vous. Êtes-vous prêt?” (Ladybug, I’ll throw it to you. Are you ready?) said Alya, holding out her hand and miming an underhand toss. Ladybug just stared, so completely confounded.
A shout from Cat Noir dragged everyone’s eye in his direction. Imagineur was floating straight at Alya at a pretty steady clip. He didn’t look threatening, but Alya could see what the rest of them could not. She grew frantic, begging Ladybug to catch what she was going to throw, while Ladybug just told her to run.

“Feindre qu’il est reel, et il va devenir reel!” (Pretend it’s real, and it will become real!) said Alya. “Me faire confiance!” (Trust me!)

Ladybug gave in, if only because she realized Alya wasn’t going to move. It was too late for her to rescue the girl herself and she was desperate to save her. “Jettes ça!” (Throw it!) she commanded.

Alya tried, but something held her arm back on the backswing. The color drained from her face. Fort had gotten to her first.

“Cataclysme!”

Jack turned to see Cat Noir lifting a hand above his head. A sphere of black energy formed in his palm and he enclosed his claws around it, swiping the air and leaving behind a trail of bubbling darkness. A circle of it spread out from his feet and dissipated before he took his hand and slammed it to the ground. A fissure appeared, racing towards Imagineur as it grew. The Akuma lurched and swayed wildly to the side as the earth opened up beneath him. It wasn’t enough to swallow up Fort, but it had certainly tripped him up and caused him to release Alya, allowing her to mime a toss. The moment Ladybug reached out and snagged something out of the air though, something strange happened. In Ladybug’s hand was now a red ray gun with black polka dots, but the gargantuan creature that sprung forth from thin air overshadowed that fact. Fort was an amalgamation of many different animals, some deranged cross between a tiger, an owl, and a shark, with the tongue of a frog, a tail of a T-rex, and even the horn of a unicorn. He had three legs, which made his movements a bit sluggish, but what did that matter when he could take to the air? With one pump of his golden wings, he was up and diving towards Ladybug. She only had a split-second to react—she aimed her freeze ray and fired.

A beam of blue shot out, lacing Fort with ice. Screeching, he dropped, Imagineur holding on for dear life as they hit the ground with an earth-shattering thump that shook the trees. Ladybug didn’t let up though. She kept the freeze ray running until Fort had been turned into an iceberg, the shards reaching for Imagineur. He slipped off his saddle and down the ice, intent on escaping, but Cat Noir blocked his way. The boy drew back in terror.

“Qu’est-ce que c’est ça?” (What’s this?) Cat wondered, almost kindly, as he kneeled and yanked the rolled up piece of paper Imagineur had been holding in his hand. Jack zoomed in on it using Alya’s phone. It was a child’s drawing, done in crayon. Cat Noir glanced at it, his ears drooping a little. “Je suis désolé,” (I am sorry) he said, looking away as he tore the page in two and released the black butterfly that had hidden within it.

Imagineur immediately began to cry, scrabbling against the ice, knowing Fort was leaving him. Jack couldn’t help but pity the boy. She knew what it was like to lose a best friend.

Ladybug flung her yo-yo at the Akuma before it could get too far, going through the familiar cleansing ritual. The newly purified butterfly seemed to glow in the dying daylight as it floated up and up. Ladybug threw her freeze ray up after it, using Miraculous Ladybug to douse the burning trees and return every car to its rightful parking spot. Fort vanished, returned to his true form of a
figment of a little boy’s vivid imagination. *Imagineur’s* outfit bubbled away, revealing the homemade version beneath: yellow sweats with a poorly drawn red insignia on paper pinned to his chest and a ratty piece of blue fabric knotted at his neck. He blinked, his tears forgotten, as he noticed the restored drawing at his feet. He picked it up as he sniffled, wiping snot across the palm of his hand.

Cat Noir had joined Ladybug and they pounded knuckles. Jack gave a sad smile. Her and Diego liked to celebrate their victories with a windmill high-low five, or a Top Gun high-five as Diego insisted on calling it, since it originated from in his favorite movie.

“*Lucas!*?” came a distant shout. Jack felt like it was coming from behind her and she turned to see a fashionable woman in a red trench coat running down the parkway. “*Lucas!*”

The boy looked up at the sound of his name and broke into a gap-toothed smiled. He raised his arms. “*Maman!*” Lucas’s mother swept him up and spun him around, even though he was a bit too big and heavy at this age. Jack zoomed in on the heartwarming scene as the woman put her son down and examined his face, as if searching for a trace of the Akuma he had become, but all she saw was her kind and compassionate six-year-old. She held him by the back of the neck and pressed a kiss to his forehead. The nightmare was over.

Cat approached them and pointed at the picture Lucas had drawn. The boy grew excited, explaining it to the hero while his mother looked guilty and pained.

Ladybug, meanwhile, pulled Alya away, closer to Jack. From what Jack could gather, Ladybug was thanking the blogger profusely for her quick thinking.

Jack’s eyes narrowed. When she helped Ladybug, all she got was a reminder to leave the heroics to the heroes. Why would Alya be any different?

Alya responded sheepishly, saying something about how she realized Ladybug and Cat Noir couldn’t see *Fort*. At no point was Jack’s name mentioned, or the words *mon amie* (my friend) or even *une fille que je connais* (a girl I know) uttered. Jack felt her face grow hot and her blood run cold, her body going rigid as she seethed. She knew she could yell out, demand some sort of acknowledgement for the part she played, but, at this point, it didn’t seem worth it.

Instead, she stopped recording and put Alya’s phone down on the hood of the car. Then she turned heel and stormed down the street.

She knew Ladybug and Alya wouldn’t miss her.

* * *

The air was bracing on Jack’s cheeks as she skipped across the rooftops that night. She had underestimated how long it would take her to reach Notre Dame. Paris was still new to her, an unfamiliar knurl of limestone buildings and narrow streets. She wondered if someday she’d be able to navigate with her eyes closed, or if she’d always be like a stranded tourist, eyes aching for a familiar sight.

Diego had reacted like she thought he would when she canceled on him—gallantly, even though he was disappointed. Saturday wasn’t going to work out either. She had completely forgotten, but Glendale was facing off against their rivals, the SoCal Riptide, that day. Diego offered to skip the game, but Jack wouldn’t hear of it. With her gone, he was their best player. Without him, they wouldn’t stand a chance. And Sunday Jack was sightseeing with her parents all day. They settled for
nine o’clock Monday, but it was frustrating. Things shouldn’t have to be this hard.

She told her parents that Diego had to cancel, so she was going to bed early. Jack didn’t particularly like the looks of pity she received and wouldn’t have normally told them for that very reason, but it ensured that they wouldn’t be checking in on her. Neither of them was keen to navigate the muddy waters of their teenage daughter’s relationship.

Jack darted across the bridge that spanned the Seine and jumped up onto Notre Dame’s gargoyle-infested roof. She edged along the steep pitch until she came across the observation deck enclosed in glass. Jack stood atop it and looked around, ears twitching as they tried to pick up familiar sounds, but it was her eyes that spotted moving shadows in the belfry. A few bounces and she found herself among her fellow superheroes.

“You’re late, you’re late, for a very important date,” Cat Noir sing-songed.

Jack knew he had just been waiting for an excuse to use that one.

“I know. I’m sorry,” she said. She glanced at her watch out of habit, even though it didn’t tell her much. The only hand remained stuck on the five in the twelve o’clock position. She couldn’t be anymore than five minutes late though.

“Oh, this is a date?” said Ladybug in mock shock. “How awkward. I’ll leave you two alone then.” She turned to leave.

Laughing, Cat caught her hand and tugged her back, kissing the top of it. “If I were to go on a date with anyone…”

Ladybug didn’t seem to hear him as she turned towards Jack. “Thanks for staying out of the way today. I know that couldn’t have been easy for you, but it was the right choice.”

Jack nodded, not trusting herself to speak. In a way, what Ladybug said was true. It hadn’t been easy for Jack to decide not to transform into Rabbit.

“And thanks for meeting us too,” Ladybug continued. “I was a little afraid you wouldn’t show up.”

Jack understood what she meant, but didn’t want to dwell on it. She shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal. “We need to get to the bottom of this Kwami thing. It’s kind of freaking me out.”

“Us too,” Ladybug admitted, Cat nodding in agreement. “We talked to our Kwami about yours. They say that they’ve lost skin cells and eyelashes—”

“—and whiskers—” added Cat Noir.

“—over the thousands of years they’ve been alive. They don’t decompose, so if someone were somehow able to identify them and collect them, they might be able to get enough Kwami DNA to create more.”

“So…clones?” clarified Jack.

“More like…re-creations.”

“Recrees,” suggested Cat.
“But who would do something like that? And for what purpose? That’s a lot of power that could be used for evil. My Kwami is worried.”

“Can’t say I blame her——” said Jack. “Wait, your Kwami is a ‘her,’ right?” Ladybug nodded. “Okay, good. Just checking. But she’s right to be worried.” She closed her eyes, feeling stupid. “I actually don’t know a lot, but I’ll tell you what I do know. It starts with a woman named Anita Blaylock.”

Cat Noir tilted his head and perked up his ears. “She created the Recrees?”

“Er…yes and no.”

“Huh? How——”

“Let her talk, Kitty,” said Ladybug gently, silencing her partner. She sat on a ledge to show she was ready to listen and nodded towards Jack. “Go on, Rabbit. Tell us about Anita Blaylock.”

*She was my grandmother*, Jack thought, but she didn’t plan on telling them that part.

Just the basics.
Rabbit

Chapter Summary

Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being
separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting
off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the
neighborhood. For Jaclyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but
easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let
Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Chapter Notes

Who is ready for some homegrown mythology!? If you want to know why Jack goes by
Jack, more about Jack’s grandmother and parents, and how Jack ended up with the
Rabbit Miraculous, this is the chapter for you! Also...a lot more foreshadowing that I
was expecting =P

When I originally envisioned this, I thought I would change the point of view to
someone other than Jack, but then I changed my mind. The good: consistency. The bad:
more telling instead of showing. It’s also my shortest chapter by far (not to say it’s short.
It’s still super long), but I hope you all like it anyway. What it lacks in action it more
than makes up for in answers and character beats!

And the special shout out this week goes to...all the guests who have been leaving me
kudos! I can’t thank you by name, but don’t think I don’t appreciate you reading my
work and liking it. You’re the best!

“Are you sure you don’t want to come in?”

Jack stood on her tiptoes to speak through the cracked window of the family SUV. Her mom blinked
at her through the glass for a moment, obviously frustrated that Jack was asking her this again, but
then she snapped back to pleasant mom mode as she rolled down the window.

“I’m fine in here,” she said, raising her book. Jack wasn’t surprised to see it was yet another trashy
paperback romance novel with a shirtless man on the cover.

“I really think she’s trying to do better, Mom. I mean...she’s been here for two whole months now!
That’s gotta be some kind of record.”

Her mom pursed her lips, a thin white line. “Call me when you’re done and I’ll pick you up right
here,” was all she said before raising the window and driving off in search of some elusive street
parking in the shade of a palm tree.

Jack didn’t move at first, but she could feel the eyes of the valets and bellhops on her back. They
peered at her from underneath the marbled portico, no doubt wondering why a thirteen-year-old girl in an ill-fitting sundress had been deposited at the entrance of The Peninsula. The stately four-story hotel had seen more than its fair share of unusual guests, but for over $600 per night, someone like Jack wasn’t their normal clientele.

Jack didn’t meet any of their eyes as she passed, choosing to open the only door not manned by a bellhop. Inside the lobby, she was blasted with a gust of air conditioning so strong that she was momentarily stunned before making her way to the front desk. She had been coming to The Peninsula for as long as she could remember, but every time felt like the first time. She felt dwarfed by the outrageous floral arrangements, lost in the tastefully ornate surroundings, embarrassed by her very existence. Yet…whoever manned the front desk always greeted her with a smile as if she were a movie star.

“Miss Smith?” said a man in a brown suit. Jack hardly nodded and he was already whisking her down the hall, the plush carpet like grass beneath her feet. He ushered her into a private sitting room set for an Imperial Tea, sunlight streaming in through the bay windows. Once he made sure Jack was situated on a sofa of golden silk, he took his leave.

Jack waited until she was sure the man was gone before shoving dainty pastries in her mouth. They were so good—especially the little strawberry cream ones. Those were her favorite. Her grandmother frowned on unladylike behavior, so Jack had to get her kicks now, before she arrived. Good thing she was always late. It was one of the many things that didn’t make sense about her. She wore a watch and checked it almost constantly, so then why was she always running behind? She stayed at The Peninsula when she was in town too, so it wasn’t as if she had that far to go. Yet, every single time Jack met her for tea, she was at least ten minutes late, maybe more, and she never apologized for it.

This time was no different. Her grandmother arrived nearly a half an hour after Jack, breezing into the room with a haughty air, as if Jack had been the one to keep her waiting instead of the other way around. For the longest time, Jack thought her grandmother hated her. She later realized that the woman was always like that, regardless of circumstance.

She was dressed smartly as always, wearing a 50s-style dress in a cobalt blue with three-quarter length sleeves and a boat neck collar. Her silvering hair was pushed away from her wrinkling face in a simple but elegant chignon. Around her neck on a jeweled string was a pair of cat eye reading glasses. She was a woman of average height, but with her two-toned heels and commanding presence, you’d think she was over six feet tall. And she always, always, always carried a matching clutch, no matter what.

Jack admired her grandmother’s looks—so effortless, so put-together—and tried to emulate her, but it always ended in failure. Jack tried to convince her grandmother to take her shopping a few times to show her what she was doing wrong, but the woman always set her jaw and said, “I’d rather not” and that would be the end of it.

There was something…off about Jack’s grandmother today though. Her skin seemed a shade different than normal, and her dress hung off her body rather than clung. Squinting, Jack caught a hint of dark circles underneath her grandmother’s eyes that were expertly concealed with makeup.

“Hello Jaclyn,” she said, all business as she swept over, forcing Jack to move over as she took her place on the sofa.

Jack scowled. Her mom had named her after her favorite actress, who played Kelly Garrett in the
television series Charlie’s Angels. No one over the age of forty let Jack forget it. Even ‘Jackie’ elicited these responses, but ‘Jack’ didn’t, so Jack she was. Her grandmother refused to call her by her nickname though.

“Jack’s a man’s name,” she would say. “Be proud that you’re a woman.”

Other than her grandpa, her uncle, and her father, Jack was pretty sure her grandmother hated all men. Even those three exceptions seemed to be pushing it.

Jack’s grandmother poured herself tea into a pink floral cup, the scent of chamomile wafting into the room. It was still steaming. The staff of The Peninsula were acutely aware of Jack’s grandmother’s lack of punctuality and always brewed the tea piping hot so it would still be palatable when she arrived. As she brought her cup to her mouth though, her hand shook.

“Is everything okay?” Jack asked her.

The woman wrinkled her nose and put her tea down without drinking it. “Why do you ask?” Not yes or no, just ‘why do you ask?’

“You don’t look okay,” Jack admitted.

“I’m feeling a bit stressed, a bit overwhelmed. Yes.”

“Work?”

Her grandmother gave a sad, frank smile. She wasn’t going to deny it. “Things are not going as I hoped. I’m working on a very important project at the moment and I’m afraid I won’t be able to finish it in time.”

“Oh, don’t say that!” said Jack. “You’re the smartest person I know. You’ll figure it out. I know you will. Just don’t give up!”

Her grandmother turned and stared right through Jack, as if something unsettling was floating behind her. The first time it had happened, Jack turned around, half-expecting to find a ghost, but there was nothing. She was used to the look by now, but it still remained unfathomable.

Her grandmother tore her gaze away and changed the subject. “I see your mother has elected not to join us. Again.”

“I tried, Grandmother. I really did.”

“I know.” She rubbed her knuckles against the tops of her thighs in small circles. “I suppose I cannot blame her. I would be angry too if my mother abandoned me.”

“You didn’t abandon her!”

“I said I would be there for her, for you, and I wasn’t.”

“You have a job that makes you travel a lot. And it’s not like you don’t come back to visit.”

“Not often. Or, rather...not often enough.”
“Well…you’re making up for lost time now.” Jack had probably seen her grandmother more in the last two months than the rest of her life combined. She closed her eyes as she considered her next words carefully. “I’ve been meaning to ask you…since you’ve been here for a while now…Why don’t you move back in with us?”

It felt strange to say because the blue Victorian where Jack lived with her parents was still under her grandmother’s name. They had temporarily moved in after Jack’s dad lost his job and her mom went on unpaid maternity leave. It was two years before their little family was back on their feet again. By that time though, her grandmother was off traveling the world and asked them to watch the house while she was gone. It was, as her mom said, the only loving thing Jack’s grandmother had ever done, and it had happened out of necessity.

Jack expected to hear her grandmother mutter about not wanting to upset Jack’s mom, but the woman seemed frozen, a fashionable mannequin with clouded eyes. She picked up on Jack’s stare though and nearly knocked her teacup as she reached for the sugar bowl. She busied herself by stirring in two cubes.

“I won’t be here much longer,” she admitted.

“Oh…” Jack tried to hide her disappointment. Her mom had warned her not to get too attached. Her grandmother had a funny way of letting down those who loved her the most.

“But that is why we need to make the most of the time we spend together.” Her grandmother playfully bumped her shoulder and gave her a kindly smile. In that moment, Jack could almost believe that she had a normal grandmother who baked cookies and mailed birthday cards filled with money, instead of one who went on tirades against science journals and sometimes forgot the name of her son-in-law. One who had been an integral part of Jack’s life rather than a distant stranger. “How did your surfing competition go?” the woman asked.

“Great!” said Jack. “I got fourth place!”

“That’s wonderful! I knew you would do well. You are a Blaylock, after all. Success is in your genes.”

“I’m a Smith. And you’re a Dembroski.”

“Not by choice. You have to understand—it was a different time when I married your grandfather. Women couldn’t keep their last names like they do now. I had to take his. But that didn’t mean I had to like it. I still used ‘Anita Blaylock’ on anything of importance.”

Jack wasn’t surprised to discover her grandmother didn’t think marriage certificates were important.

“When is the next surfing competition?” the woman wondered, getting back on topic. “Perhaps I’ll come out to see you.”

“It’s today, actually, so maybe the next one,” said Jack.

“Today!? Jaclyn, why didn’t you say something? I would have rescheduled tea.”

Jack couldn’t help but laugh. “And miss spending time with you?” she said. “Some sacrifices are worth it.”
“Anita Blaylock was a geneticist,” Jack explained to Ladybug and Cat Noir, the hallowed air whistling through the belfry rustling everyone’s hair. “She was good at what she did—one of the best in the world, in fact—but no one really knew because her male co-workers kept on taking all the credit for her work. So when Omega Labs, an off-the-books defense contractor for the United States government, recruited her to work on a top secret project, she jumped at the chance.”

“To make Recrees?” asked Cat.

Ladybug rolled her eyes, but also smiled. “You’re really trying to make that word happen, aren’t you Chaton?”

“Yeah,” said Jack. She paused, confused on if she was agreeing with Cat or Ladybug. She shook her head and decided to just move on. “It was called Project Lionheart. The goal was to create super soldiers for the United States Army.”

“Oh! Like Captain America!” realized Cat.

Jack almost asked Cat Noir how he would know that, but then realized oceans didn’t exactly stop movies and comic books from being translated. “Exactly!” she said, nodding. “Project Lionheart was split into two phases. Phase one was the creation of the Kwami—Recrees—whatever you want to call them. Thanks to Dr. Blaylock, phase one was a success. There were seven in all—a rabbit, a dog, a swan, a chameleon, a dragonfly, a firefly, and a mantis.”

“So she did create the Kwami!”

“I didn’t say she didn’t. She just didn’t do it alone. There was a whole team of scientists working on them. And creating them wasn’t her idea either. She was just doing her job.”

“If that was phase one though, what was phase two?” wondered Ladybug.

“Creating the Kwami’s Miraculouses.”

“They weren’t created together…?”

Jack tilted her head, confused on why the concept was so surprising. “How would that even work? Miraculouses are objects, right? Dr. Blaylock had to get the Kwami to bond with an object in order to make them. She tried everything, but nothing seemed to work. She theorized that it was because the objects she was required to use didn’t have any meaning.”

“Meaning…?” wondered Cat Noir, sticking out his tongue at the stealth pun. Blep.

“They were Army-issue wristbands and stuff like that, created for the sole purpose of becoming Miraculouses. They weren’t important. It’s like…there needs to be history for the Kwami to grab on to or they’ll just slip right through. But Dr. Blaylock’s request to use something else was denied. Finally, in 2001, with the threat of Project Lionheart being shut down, she smuggled in a pair of her late husband’s cufflinks. She was able to get a Kwami named Ceeree to bond with them, creating the Swan Miraculous.”

“Ceeree the Recree…” Cat mumbled to himself, liking the sound.
“I see,” said Ladybug. “Was Dr. Blaylock the one who got your Kwami to bond with your watch too?”

Jack paused and looked at the timepiece. It was strange to think about it as hers, even though she guessed that was true. She just remembered too many teas with it buckled around her grandmother’s wrist. But she also remembered the day she got the Miraculous and how there was no mistaking it was always meant for her.

*   *   *

Jack held her mom’s hand as they marched down the busy sidewalk. At fourteen, she felt too old to be doing it, but she was worried. Ever since her grandmother died, Jack’s mom moved as if in a daze. She’d slice her thumb while cutting tomatoes. She’d sit at stoplights long after they turned green. She’d let the hot water run and run and run. If Jack weren’t tugging her along right now, she would probably end up standing in the middle of the crosswalk in the path of oncoming traffic.

It had all happened so suddenly. Well...suddenly to them. When they didn’t hear from Jack’s grandmother, they naturally assumed she had resumed traveling. They had no idea she had checked out of her hotel in order to check into a hospital. Five months later and she lost her battle with pancreatic cancer.

Jack’s mom answered the phone when the hospital called. She insisted it was a mistake, that they had the wrong number, that someone else’s mother had died, but not her’s. Her’s was alive and frowning somewhere in Nepal or Yemen or Brazil. She told Jack with a sort of derangement in her voice that she was going to go to the hospital to set them straight.

She left without putting on her shoes.

Concerned, Jack called her dad. He left work, picked her up, and they went to the hospital together. Jack caught a glimpse of her mom collapsed on the floor next to a bed with the sheet drawn up over a body before she was ushered back into the hall. As she waited next to the closed door, she heard inhuman screams that felt like slivers in her ears. Logically, they came from her mom, but Jack couldn’t picture it. When she closed her eyes to try, all she saw was a wailing void, a black hole of anguish.

Jack didn’t cry. She was sad, yes, but if she were being honest, she didn’t know her grandmother any better than her old piano teacher or a good friend’s mom. Besides, it was fitting. Her grandmother never cried either. Like Jack, she thought it didn’t solve anything. The time and energy could be better spent elsewhere.

Jack went to go find her mom some shoes.

Her dad took care of everything—the cremation, the funeral, the burial arrangements—with his usual aplomb. To those who didn’t know him, it would seem like he wasn’t affected, but Jack knew better. He called his parents in Reno almost daily and was having trouble sleeping. She’d hear him putting around in the kitchen at odd hours in the night, keeping busy by making lunches for the three of them for the next month or polishing the silver. Completely unnecessary things.

“You don’t have to do this,” Jack overheard her mom say one night through the vents. It seemed she couldn’t sleep either.
“I’ve got to do something,” her dad said.

“I should have…” her mom started to say, but stopped short.

Jack heard the clinking of glass, the slosh of water. Her dad was probably washing the crystal that they never used for the second time that week. He remained silent.

“I should have listened to you.” Jack’s mom’s voice was low, almost unintelligible. “I should have talked to her. The last words I said to her shouldn’t have been—”

“It’s in the past now.”

But the past was where Jack’s mom went whenever her mind had a chance to wander, and it was starting to scare Jack. Two months had passed and there was no sign of any change. Her mom continued to drown in her guilt.

“She didn’t tell me she was dying because she didn’t think I cared,” Jack overheard her mom tell her dad another night.

“Maybe…” he said. “Or maybe she didn’t tell you she was dying because she did.”

Jack agreed with her dad. Her grandmother might not have been there for her children, but she had always accepted their dislike of her with weary resignation and never held it against them. Didn’t that count for something? And then there was the will. Her grandmother’s estate attorney sent a copy of it to them a few days ago. She had left them the house. Jack’s mom had been worried they might get turned out, but Jack wasn’t surprised. Her grandmother knew the house had always been theirs—now it was just official.

But what did come as a surprise though was that her grandmother had left something specifically for Jack. It was in a safety deposit box at a bank downtown, one of those fancy ones that looked like the White House. Her parents insisted she wear something nice when they went, but the only thing she had that fit was the black dress her mom had bought her for the funeral. Putting it on made Jack remember the droning priest and the empty chairs. And it itched. But it was better than walking into the bank in a T-shirt that changed color in the sun or her school uniform. Her parents had dressed up too. Strolling down the street together, Jack thought they might be able to pass off as a fashionable family on their way to a matinée.

“Here we are,” her dad said, striding up to the door of the bank and holding it open for Jack and her mom. “What if it’s a signed Sandy Koufax rookie card?” he asked Jack as she passed.

Jack grinned. It was a game her and her dad had been playing—Guess What’s in the Safety Deposit Box. Instead of guessing what it was likely to be though, her dad kept on guessing what he wished it were instead.

“Of course!” she said, playing along. “Grandmother was a huge Dodgers fan.” Jack was one hundred percent sure her grandmother wasn’t even aware Los Angeles had a professional baseball team. Her money was on a tea set.

The grandiose bank lobby was so cliché that, for a moment, Jack wondered if maybe they had walked onto the set of a movie. There were chandeliers and wood paneling, winged armchairs and marbled counting stations with those old-fashioned green lamps. Men and women in suits murmured
to each other about investments and high-interest yields. Jack swore it smelled of old money, like a mix of newspaper ink and copper with just a hint of lemon oil.

Jack’s dad produced the death certificate and the will for a teller with perfect hair and a blindingly white smile. He sat Jack and her family down in a small alcove, offered them the finest in bottle water, and then vanishing around the corner. They didn’t have to wait long. He returned with a vice president of some kind, a woman in tweed with corkscrew curls carrying a clipboard. She explained she would be taking Jack to a private viewing room to see the contents of the safety deposit box. When Jack and her parents stood up though, her face grew pinched.

“I am sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Smith. Only Miss Smith is allowed in the viewing room.”

Jack’s parents looked at each other, confused.

“That’s…I mean, that’s a little intense,” her dad said. “I don’t think there’s any harm in us—”

“We take confidentiality very seriously around here, Mr. Smith.”

“I…I can see that. Now.”

Jack cringed, more than a little embarrassed. “I’ll be right back,” she told her parents, wanting to escape the situation as soon as possible.

Her wish was granted and soon she was following the vice president down a hall and shown to the viewing room. It all felt so familiar…Jack half-expected to find it set for Imperial Tea, but it was simply a windowless room with a coffee table and a leather sofa. The vice president stayed with her until another bank employee joined them with a metal box, which he put down on the table as if it were sacred. It was much smaller than Jack thought it would be, about the size of a book.

Looked like the tea set was out.

“Here is the key,” the vice president said, pressing it into Jack’s palm. She then offered the clipboard. “Please sign and date this affidavit confirming that you have received it along with access to the safety deposit box.” Jack did as she was told. “Lovely!” she said as she and her employee started to leave the room. “Please press this button here when you are finished.” She tapped a black doorbell with a fake red nail. “The room is soundproof, so we won’t know if you’re ready to leave otherwise. Your privacy is of the utmost importance to us.”

“Okay, cool.” Jack gave a thumbs-up, then realized she was embarrassing herself more than her parents ever could. She quickly shoved her hand into the pocket of her dress. The vice president merely smiled though and shut the six-inch thick door, a series of mechanical locks falling into place behind her.

This was all very National Treasure, very DaVinci Code. Jack had to sit down for a moment to take it all in. She sometimes wondered about her grandmother’s patron, the one who funded all of her grandmother’s research. Whoever he was, he was obscenely wealthy, paying for her clothes, her food, her lodging, her travel expenses. He had apparently even paid for this safety deposit box. But any time Jack brought him up, her grandmother would simply say that her patron valued his privacy.

Jack suddenly got it into her head that she would unlock the box to find it brimming with gold bars and flawless diamonds. Never mind why her grandmother would leave something like that specifically to her. When she twisted the key and opened it though, all she found was a small black
jewelry box. Inside was a familiar sight: her grandmother’s silver watch, nestled in the velvet. It ticked away, filling the silence in the room with seconds.

For one brief moment, Jack was disappointed, but it passed. Her grandmother obviously considered the watch her most prized possession, or she wouldn’t have left it for Jack in such a way. She had never struck Jack as a sentimental person, but she had kept a lot of secrets. Maybe that side of her was one of them.

There appeared to be some kind of business card wedged beneath the watch, so Jack pulled it from its casing, trying not to smudge the polished silver with her fingerprints and failing miserably. She thought it might be instructions on how to care for the watch since silver tarnished so easily, but it simply read, ‘Please put on now, wear always, and keep safe.’

Jack flipped the watch over, her thumb running across the inscription engraved on the back. It was Jack’s birthday—July 24, 1999—and the words ‘Between the Earth and the sky above, nothing can match a grandmother’s love.’ Jack’s mom had given the watch to Jack’s grandmother when Jack was born. It was supposed to be a bridge, a sign of forgiveness. After years of harboring hatred against her mother for putting her work before family, Jack’s mom was ready to let it all go and give her mother a second chance. For two years (and only two years) they were on good terms. Jack was too young to remember, but there were pictures, entire shoeboxes filled with snapshots of her grandmother holding her as a baby that proved it. But then Jack’s grandmother reverted back to her old ways. It was too much for Jack’s mom. She wanted nothing more to do with her mother, and any time the two did talk after that, it would always devolve into an argument and Jack’s mom would storm off.

And yet…Jack’s grandmother always wore the watch. Always.

“Why do you still wear that?” Jack’s mom had asked once when she dropped Jack off for tea. Jack couldn’t have been any older than eight, back when she was too young and scared to enter The Peninsula alone.

“It’s a fine watch,” her grandmother said, knowing exactly what Jack’s mom was referring to, yet not even bothering to look at it.

“A fine watch? Is that all?”

“It was also a gift from you. Do you plan on taking it back?”

“Of course not!”

“Then why are we still talking about this?”

Jack’s mom scrunched up her face like she was about to scream, but left without another word. As soon as the door closed, Jack’s grandmother sunk down into an armchair and looked at her watch with a wistful sigh, her eyes growing glossy.

That was the first time Jack realized this woman did actually care about them, in her own bizarre way. She just wasn’t good at showing it. Maybe she didn’t even know how. Jack tried to explain this to her mom later, but she refused to believe it. But here was the proof in Jack’s hands now. Her grandmother didn’t just leave the watch to Jack, but also to Jack’s mom, as if to tell them, “I loved you. I have always loved you.”
With fumbling fingers, Jack buckled the watch around her wrist.

The instant it was secure though, it grew warm against her skin and shot out a beam of white light that formed into a sphere. Jack yelped and threw herself back into the couch cushions. She went to rip the watch off, but stopped short when the light faded, leaving behind a tiny floating creature similar to a rabbit wearing what looked to be black eyeshadow on first glance, but was actually markings on its fur. It had its eyes closed, a blissful smile on its face. Jack stared at it, afraid to move. Whatever it was didn’t *seem* dangerous, but she decided to let it act first.

It opened its eyes, its irises the color of a brilliant sepia-toned sunset. They focused on Jack’s face and its smile widened. “Hi Jaclyn!” it said with a wave so energetic that its whole body swayed. Its voice was squeaky, but definitely female. “I’m so glad we can finally talk!”

Jack could think of nothing to say. The creature’s joy faded just a smidge. She held a tiny paw to her mouth.

“Oh! I’m sorry. You go by Jack, don’t you? I’m just so used to your grandmother always calling you Jaclyn. Anyway, my name is Mimmi. I’m a Kwami.”

“A…what?” said Jack. She sat forward, her fear ebbing away. Mimmi seemed friendly enough, and she knew Jack’s grandmother, but Jack was still beyond confused. Was it some sort of projection? But her grandmother was a geneticist…maybe she had created this creature. It was insane, but not outside the realm of possibility.

“Kwami,” repeated Mimmi. She floated forward, but stopped short when Jack drew back. She pointed to Jack’s wrist instead. “And that is my Miraculous.”

Jack looked at her watch for a moment before holding it out towards Mimmi. “Like…your container?”

“It’s more than that! When I inhabit it, whoever wears it is transformed.”

“Into what?”

“Into a hero.”

“A hero!? Like…” Jack couldn’t believe she was saying this. “…A superhero?”

“Oh, yes! Your grandmother showed me some comic books. I really like *X-Men*.”

“What kind of powers do you give?”

“Well, we all give enhanced agility, flexibility, strength—”

“Wait. We?”

“Yup! There’s seven—” She paused. “Six of us,” she said, much more subdued.

Jack felt an overwhelming wave of compassion for this creature, even though they had only just met. She wanted to know more about these powers and what her grandmother had to do with all of it, but she couldn’t let what she had just heard slide.
“What happened?” she asked, concerned. “If you don’t mind me asking,” she added quickly. "Are you okay?"

Mimmi sunk, landing amidst the folds of velvet that previously held her Miraculous. “It’s okay,” she assured. “I was going to tell you anyway. He…he got caught up in the explosion at Omega Labs.”

* * *

“Rabbit?” wondered Ladybug when Jack didn’t answer her right away. “Did Dr. Blaylock make your Miraculous?”

“Er…Yes and no.”

Ladybug wrinkled her brow.

“**Prudent**, Rabbit, or that’s going to become your catchphrase,” said Cat Noir with a smirk.

“It's complicated, okay?” said Jack. "Dr. Blaylock discovered that a Kwami couldn't be forced to bond with an object. It had to be their own choice. Ceeree was very close with Dr. Blaylock. He chose to turn the cufflinks into the Swan Miraculous in order to save her job.”

“And your Kwami?” wondered Ladybug.

“Um, to answer that, you first need to know what happened when Dr. Blaylock gave the Swan Miraculous to her boss. She knew from experience that men had a bad habit of taking credit for her work, so she bugged the container the cufflinks were held in before handing it…over…”

Jack stopped, noting Ladybug whispering something into Cat’s ear. Her face tinged pink when she caught Jack looking.

“What?” wondered Jack, a bit annoyed.

Ladybug looked away, but Cat Noir raised his hand. Jack nodded to him.

“What does ‘bugged’ mean?” he asked, clearly on Ladybug’s behalf. “I thought it meant…to annoy.” He glanced at Ladybug. “Which doesn’t make any sense. Bugs are amazing, lovely, fantastic, courageous…”

Ladybug made a circular motion with her hand as Cat kept on going and going, thinking of every complimentary word in his English vocabulary. She gave Jack a tired smile as way of apology.

“Sorry,” said Jack, interrupting him. “You two have such good English that I sometimes forget its not your first language. ‘Bugged’ means to plant a listening device.”

“Aren’t there any positive bug terms?” complained Cat.

“What did Dr. Blaylock hear?” wondered Ladybug, prompting Jack to continue her story.

“Nothing good. Her boss apparently took the Swan Miraculous to the mysterious founder of Omega Labs and she found out the truth—the defense contract was a cover. This man…he was only using the US Army for their resources. He planned to take the Kwami and use them for himself.”
Ladybug jumped to her feet and Cat Noir hissed through his teeth. Jack knew those would be their reactions.

“Non. No. That’s dangerous! With that much power—” started Ladybug.

“I know,” assured Jack. “Which is why Dr. Blaylock returned to Omega Labs that night to free the Kwami and destroy everything. She thought Ceeree and the Swan Miraculous were lost, but she could at least prevent the other Kwami from falling into the wrong hands or more from being created ever again.”

"Wait...destroy?” wondered Cat, shocked.

Jack nodded. That had been her first reaction too.

* * *

Jack felt like she was running around in circles screaming, even though she was sitting perfectly still on a couch in a viewing room at a bank listening to Mimmi tell her tale. About Omega Labs and Jack’s grandmother and the Kwami. About the mysterious man behind it all. It all seemed so unreal, like a dream or a movie. She had a hard time reconciling the woman she sat down to tea with all those years with the one who was uploading computer viruses and opening hydrogen containment fields in Mimmi’s story.

The hydrogen set off the evacuations alarms, waking up the Kwami.

“We didn’t know what was happening,” explained Mimmi. “There were loud noises and flashing lights...and then your grandmother appeared and powered down the intangibility suppresser.”

“The…the what? Why?”

Mimmi went all bubbly and dropped right through the table, much to Jack’s suprise. She then popped back up again, waving her arms as she became solid once more. “Ta-da!” she said. “None of us knew we could do that until she told us.”

“They didn’t want you escaping,” realized Jack, literally moving to the edge of her seat, her nails digging into the cushion beneath her.

“Exactly! But that was what your grandmother wanted us to do. Escape. She wanted us to get as far away from the lab as possible so we couldn’t be used for evil. She didn’t really have time to tell us much else—the compound was about to blow up because of the hydrogen leak.”

Jack flinched as it dawned on her. She should have made the connection sooner, but she wasn’t taking Chemistry until next year and the units from junior high were fuzzy. “My grandmother caused the explosion!?” she cried. “Which means…oh. Oh, Mimmi. I’m so sorry…”

Jack didn’t know what to do. She held out an open hand to Mimmi, hoping the Kwami would take the lead. She floated over and wrapped her paw around Jack’s thumb. It felt smooth and warm, like a leather glove.

“It wasn’t your grandmother’s fault,” she said, offering Jack comfort instead of the other way around. “Well, the explosion was, but not what happened to…to—” She shivered, almost losing herself, but
she pressed on, insistent. “She didn’t know. She didn’t know after she left work that day that Wrekk, the Dog Kwami, had gotten sick and was taken down to Quarantine so he couldn’t infect the rest of us. Your grandmother told us to go on ahead, that she would go get him, but I refused to leave without him. Wrekk is—was my partner, the yin to my yang. We were created together, unlike the others, because we needed each other. We belonged together.”

Tears began to leak out of the Kwami’s enormous eyes. Jack offered the creature a corner of her dress. Gratefully, Mimmi buried her face into the starchy fabric.

“W-we couldn’t get…to him…in t-t-time,” she admitted, her voice muffled. Jack gently patted her on the back until she pulled away. “I could go intangible to avoid the blast, but I wasn’t about to just let your grandmother die. She wasn’t the kindest person, I know, but she was a good person. So I saved her the only way I knew how.” She tapped the leather strap around Jack’s wrist. “I bonded with her watch and transformed her.”

“And that protected her? From an explosion!?”

“From getting hurt, yes, but not from the pain. It was too much and she blacked out. By the time she came to, the army was already sifting through the wreckage. She snuck away and changed back.” Mimmi grimaced, remembering. “She…she wasn’t happy with me.”

Jack couldn’t help but laugh. “Sounds like her. Did she think she didn’t need your help?”

Mimmi shook her head. “I have a lot of power, but I can’t be used unless I have a Miraculous. Creating one made me vulnerable. Anyone can take this watch and use it now, for good or for evil.”

“Even if you say no?”

“It doesn’t matter. I have to respect my current holders’s wishes.”

“Mimmi, that’s terrible!”

“But that’s how a Miraculous works and why your grandmother was so upset. She was going to have to find a way to protect me now and she didn’t know how.”

“So what did she do?”

“Nothing. We got lucky—it's one of my powers.”

“Luck?”

“Yup! As luck would have it, the Guardian found us.”

* * *

“The Guardian,” repeated Ladybug, testing the word. “Le Gardien?”

Jack bobbed her head. “Just like the founder of Omega Labs, I don’t know much about him, but I guess he’s the protector of the Kwami. I’m not sure if it’s all Kwami or just the Recrees or what, but he was able to get back the Swan Miraculous and give it to Ceeree’s Chosen One the same night Dr. Blaylock destroyed Omega Labs.”
At this, Ladybug and Cat Noir looked at each other. One of Cat’s cat ears twitched. “Ce pourrait être le même gars…” he said.

“*Il n’y a aucun moyen de savoir,*” said Ladybug.

Jack only had English rattling around in her head at the moment. Switching her understanding from one language to another wasn’t second nature for her yet. “Huh…?”

“Someone gave me and *Chat* our Miraculouses when the first Akuma appeared. Someone chose us,” explained Ladybug, hand to her chest. “But we don’t know who. It might be the same Guardian. Or it might be our version of the Guardian or someone else entirely. We don’t know.”

“So you’re not alone in not knowing things, Rabbit!” said Cat cheerily. “But did Ceeree’s Chosen One go bad or something? You were telling me about Trumpeter Swan…”

“That’s a different wielder of the Swan Miraculous. This was a young woman who went by the name Swan Princess. The Guardian sent her to Dr. Blaylock to speak to her on his behalf. He knew Dr. Blaylock wasn’t the Chosen holder of the Rabbit Miraculous, so he asked if she would find one. He didn’t trust anyone else.”

“Why couldn’t the Guardian do it?” wondered Ladybug.

Jack laughed. “You and Dr. Blaylock. She thought the same thing. She wanted nothing to do with the Rabbit Miraculous. In fact, she tried to hand it over to Swan Princess, but she refused to take it. She explained that she and the Guardian had to focus on tracking down the rest of the Kwami. Besides, it would be dangerous to have two Miraculouses that close together, even for a little while. The Guardian knew how unwilling Dr. Blaylock was going to be though, so he offered her something she couldn’t refuse in exchange for her help…”

“And that is…?” wondered Cat Noir.

“Funding. For her research. She could travel the world, unlocking the mysterious of genetics, without having to worry about money.”

Cat whistled through his teeth.

“Since she blew up her old workplace, I can see why she took the deal,” joked Ladybug.

Jack couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah. She had it made. All she had to do was submit potential Chosen Ones for the Rabbit Miraculous from time to time. But the Guardian rejected every single one of them.”

“Well, not all of them,” Cat Noir pointed out, a Cheshire Cat grin stretching across his face.

“No. Not all of them.”

Jack wanted to tell him the truth—that she had been her grandmother’s last choice—but she clamped her mouth shut. In the end, it didn’t matter. The Guardian approved and she was Rabbit, end of story.

*   *   *

*   *   *
“I can’t be your Chosen One!” Jack yelped. She stood up, tangling her fingers in her hair. She really needed to get it cut. And washed.

Mimmi frowned, her brow lowering. “Why not?”

“I’m a kid! Do you really want me—I don’t know—stopping robberies or whatever?”

“It wouldn’t just be you. It would be me too.” The Kwami zoomed over to get closer to Jack. She punched her arm into the air. “I’ll give you special abilities and knowledge on how to use them! Just say the words ‘Hop to it!’ and transform. You’ll see! You can do it!”

Jack flailed her arms about, trying to put distance between her and Mimmi without actually moving.

“But Grandmother was searching the whole world over for your Chosen One! How could it end up being me, of all people? I’m sure there were a ton of others who were way more qualified than—”

“No, no, no…! You sell yourself short, Jack. You have all the makings of a hero. You have an innate sense of right and wrong. You’re kind and compassionate and forgiving. You’re willing to defend others and stand up for what’s right. You know the meaning of sacrifice—”

“How do you know?”

“Because I heard it from you! Every time you had tea with your grandmother, I was there, in her purse, listening.”

The matching clutches. Jack’s grandmother had always been gentle with them, as if something fragile were inside. Jack knocked one off the couch once when she was younger and had been sharply reprimanded. It was the only time Jack had ever heard her grandmother raise her voice.

Mimmi continued. “You stood up to that bully who stole your jump rope. You accepted Veronica into your circle of friends with open arms. You gave the money you made from your lemonade stand to the children’s hospital—”

“Maybe I was just saying those things to impress my grandmother.”

“Maybe. But there were all those times you tried to patch things up between your mom and your grandmother. And you never once complained when your grandmother was late. You always encouraged her, said wonderful things about her, even though she wasn’t the kindest. Don’t forget the last time you saw her alive, you missed a surfing competition to have tea with her. You said some sacrifices were worth it. Don’t you remember?”

Jack didn’t know why she felt so shaken, but she sunk to the ground anyway.

“I knew you were my Chosen One ages ago,” Mimmi bragged, seating herself on Jack’s knee. “But your grandmother wanted to wait and see.”

Wait and see.

Wait and see.
Now Jack realized what was so unsettling about this whole situation. Her grandmother always said she was a scientist first and a mother—a grandmother—later. She observed a situation to see if her hypothesis would be supported or not supported. Which meant that all those times she invited Jack to tea, she didn’t want to get to know her granddaughter like Jack had always thought. She wanted to see if Jack would make a good Chosen One.

Jack jerked her arm up and stared at her grandmother’s watch with new eyes. Jaded eyes. This wasn’t a symbol of her grandmother’s love. Despite its appearance, there was no sentimentality behind it. It was a Miraculous, nothing more. Cold and clinical. If there had been a better person for the job, she would have left the watch to them, a complete stranger, in her will.

“Jack…?” Mimmi said, sensing something was wrong, but it was too late. Jack was already furiously clawing at the watch, fumbling with the buckle.

“Is that all I was to her? An experiment? Were the teas research?” The word was like poison on her lips. “I thought she loved me!” She ripped the watch off. “I thought…”

Jack drifted off when she realized the Kwami was nowhere to be found. Had Jack imagined her? She gave the room a sweeping glance before her eyes settled on the watch still in her hand. Mimmi had only appeared when she had put it on. It seemed Jack needed to wear it for the Kwami to be able to come out.

Jack’s gaze slid passed the watch to the little black jewelry box sitting on the lip of the table. There was nothing stopping her from putting the watch back in there and hiding it beneath the floorboards in her room. It would accumulate dust while Jack studied for her SATs, got ready for Prom, packed for college, and someday moved out. Maybe the family who moved in after her parents, or the family after that family, would find it, or maybe it would end up in the middle of a pile of rubble when a wrecking ball finally came to put the dilapidated old Victorian out of its misery.

Could she really do that to Mimmi though? Just to spite her grandmother?

With a shaking hand, Jack put the watch back on. Mimmi appeared as she had before.

“I-I’m sorry,” Jack said. “I didn’t realize that would happen. Are you okay?”

But the Kwami just picked the conversation right back up where they had left off. “You think your grandmother didn’t love you?” she said, eyes wide. “Jack, that couldn’t be any further from the truth! She wanted to wait and see because she was hoping to find a Chosen One for me who wasn't her granddaughter. She only submitted your name to the Guardian as a last resort, when she was on her deathbed.”

“Last resort…?”

“That came out wrong. What I’m trying to tell you is that your grandmother was trying to protect you. The founder of Omega Labs will be after you now, and he doesn’t care if you’re a fourteen-year-old girl—he will stop at nothing until he has your Miraculous. And we cannot let that happen.”

Jack was developing a bit of a headache. She pinched the bridge of her nose, hoping it would go away. “If she didn’t want me to have the Rabbit Miraculous, then why give it to me? Why not find someone to take over her job of finding a good Chosen One for you instead?”

“Because the Guardian needs your help now, Jack,” said Mimmi.
“Huh? Why?”

The Kwami hung her head, almost too ashamed to speak. “The Swan Miraculous has been stolen.”

* * *

“By the founder of Omega Labs?” guessed Ladybug.

“Yeah. He gave it to one of his underlings though,” Jack said. "He wasn't going to get his hands dirty."

Cat snapped his fingers as it dawned on him. “Trumpeter Swan!”

“That’s the one.”

“Don’t you mean…that’s the swan?”

Ladybug groaned and shoved her friend. Jack, like always, chose to ignore Cat. It was best not to encourage him.

“Dr. Blaylock was asked by the Guardian to put her search for the Chosen One for the Rabbit Miraculous on hold and track the Swan Miraculous down,” Jack explained. “There was one problem though. She…she was dying.”

This was a twist Ladybug and Cat Noir had not seen coming. She gasped and covered her mouth with her hands, while he dropped his baton that he had been idly spinning. It hit the ground with a clank that engulfed them in echoes.

“I-I didn’t know,” Jack admitted once everything had gone quiet. “But when I got the Rabbit Miraculous, I also got her mission to recover the Swan Miraculous too. I decided the best way to do that was to make myself as visible as possible. The founder of Omega Labs wanted my Miraculous, right? He could use the Swan Miraculous to attack me and then I’d be able to get it back. Now that I look back on it though…it was a stupid plan.”

“How is that stupid?” wondered Cat. “Didn’t it work?”

“Yes and no.” Now it was Cat's time to groan. Jack continued. “Trumpeter Swan has powers similar to Hawk Moth.”

"Hawk Moth?" wondered Ladybug.

"That's what she's been calling the Butterfly. Just go with it."

Ladybug nodded, thoughtful.

"Anyway," continued Jack. "Trumpeter Swan began to send Akumas after me to get my Miraculous. Not only did he stay hidden, but my actions basically put my entire city at risk.”

“You used to have something like Miraculous Ladybug though, right?” said Ladybug. “Miraculous Rabbit?”

“Yeah, but I was also fighting alone. It made every battle so hard. There was always that chance that
everything an Akuma did would become permanent. I was very lucky that didn’t happen.”

Cat tilted his head, confused. “Alone? Where was Perro Negro?”

“He didn’t get his Miraculous until months after I got mine. If it wasn’t for him…” Jack shuttered. “Let’s just say I wouldn’t be here right now.”

“But you are,” Ladybug pointed out. “And you defeated Trumpeter Swan!”

“Huh?”

“You…you did. Didn’t you? Otherwise you wouldn’t be in Paris.”

“Oh, uh…yeah.” Jack winced and watched Ladybug open her mouth to question her more, but the tolling of the bells thankfully interrupted her. “I have to go,” Jack insisted.

“So soon?” wondered Cat. He came forward as Jack drew back.

“I’ve told you guys everything I know.”

“The founder of Omega Labs, he’s still out there?” asked Ladybug.

Jack nodded.

“What about the Guardian? Did he ever find the other Kwami?” wondered Cat.

“I don’t know. I’ve never met him. He’s never contacted me or Perro Negro. Really, I need to go.”

Both seemed to deflate a little, but gave Jack their goodbyes. She escaped the belfry and hopped across the rooftop, a sharp wind tearing at her suit. She didn’t mean to leave so abruptly; she just didn’t want them asking her more questions about Trumpeter Swan’s defeat. It’s not that it was a lie—her and Perro Negro had been able to stop him. But they hadn’t been able to recover the Swan Miraculous and rescue Ceeree.

Jack had failed the Guardian’s mission, and though she had never met the man, she knew he was disappointed in her. Otherwise, he would have reached out to her by now. Instead, he was left waiting for a Kwami that was never going to return.

Jack hated herself for that. Some hero she was.

*   *   *

“Remember,” said Mimmi. “You can’t tell anyone about me. You can’t reveal your identity. It’s dangerous and no good can come from it.”

“I know, I know. I promise I won’t,” assured Jack. Mimmi had only been drilling it into her head for the past ten minutes. “Ready?” she said, holding open the pocket of her dress.

Mimmi looped-de-looped and dropped in. “Ready!” she cried, waving an arm about before yanking it in as well.
Jack grinned as she picked up the black jewelry box the watch had come in and rang the matching doorbell. The locks released and the man who had brought her the safety deposit box opened the door for her. He directed her down the hall, the vice president nowhere to be seen. Jack looked at her new watch. She had been in the viewing room for over an hour! Her parents were probably starting to get concerned.

Sure enough, Jack found her dad at the end of the hall, arguing with the vice president. She blocked his way as he tried to push through.

“If you could just—”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Smith, but I already told you—”

“But she’s taking—” His face brightened as his eye’s found Jack’s. “Cracker Jack!” he said.

The vice president spun around with a huff, adjusting her tweed jacket. She managed to remain professional, however. “Miss Smith! I assume you had a pleasant experience?”

“Yeah.”

"Very good!"

She reached for Jack’s shoulder to guide her out of the hall, motioning for Jack’s dad to follow as she herded them back towards the alcove were Jack’s mom was still seated. She was staring at a magazine, not absorbing any of the words.

“Mom,” said Jack, heading over. “Mom!” she said again, louder.

Her mom flinched and looked at her, her hazel eyes taking a few seconds to focus. She managed a tired smile. “All done?” she asked, as if Jack had only stepped away to go to the bathroom.

“Look what Grandmother left me,” she said, sliding onto the couch next to her mom. She held up the watch.

As soon as Jack’s mom caught sight of the silver timepiece, it was as if time froze. She even stopped breathing for a moment, but then tears began to leak from her eyes, spackling her cheeks like shooting stars across the sky, and time resumed.

“My watch…” she mumbled, taking Jack’s wrist in her hand and thumbing the clock face.

“I think there was a lot Grandmother left unsaid,” Jack said. “Not just that she was dying, but simple stuff. Well, maybe not simple to her, but simple to you and me. Like…that she loved us.” Jack put her arm around her mom and gave her a squeeze. “She loved us,” she repeated, because it felt right and good and true.

Jack half-expected her mom to ask how she could be so sure. Instead, she stood up and wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands. “I’m starving!” she said. She turned to Jack’s dad. “In-And-Out Burger?”

He was startled by the change, not just that her tears had vanished, but, that, after months of watching his wife adrift, she had suddenly clamored ashore. She had returned from whatever distant place her guilt had taken her and was ready to resume living life again. The relief he felt radiated off
of him as he held out his hand to his wife.

“Only if we do Animal Style,” he said.

“Yes!” cheered Jack, a little too loudly. She swore everyone in the entire bank turned to glare at her. She clamped her hands to her cheeks to hide her blush. “Sorry…!” she said.

Her mom laughed, something she had not done since before her mother died, so Jack supposed the embarrassment was worth it.

* * *

Jack sat in her bed, computer on her lap, flipping a white leather compact open and closed, open and closed. She was trying to write an email to Diego about her meeting with Ladybug and Cat Noir, but her mind was drawing a blank. Open and closed, open and closed. She hoped the rhythm would help her think.

Mimmi sat on the windowsill across the room, looking up at the moon. She had turned to speak multiple times since Jack had changed back, but now she finally said what she had been wanting to say. “There was nothing else you could have done.”

“Hmm?”

The Kwami zoomed over and held the lid of the compact down so Jack couldn’t flip it open anymore. “I know you’re thinking of that day you sealed Trumpeter Swan away.”

Of course. There was no hiding anything from Mimmi. Jack didn’t even know why she bothered trying.

Mimmi continued. “You did the best you could with the amount of time you had.”

“But Ceeree—”

“—Would understand. And the Guardian probably does too.”

“Then where is he, Mimmi? There is something wrong with my powers. You’d think he’d reach out to me about it. Unless he’s upset with me.”

“You have to be more positive than that! There could be lots of different reasons why he hasn’t reached out! Maybe he’s hot on the trail of one of the other Kwami. Maybe he knows you can handle the change. Maybe this was supposed to happen.”

Jack couldn’t help but scoff. She sunk back into her pillows.

“And…” Mimmi dropped her voice. “And there is a chance—a tiny, tiny, small, miniscule chance—that something…something bad has happened to him, but I don’t think—”

Jack sat up so fast that her laptop slid off the bed and clattered to the ground. Biting her tongue, she leaned over and scooped it up, all the while berating herself. She had been so focused on herself and the things she had done that she didn’t even pause to think her actions might not be the root of the problem after all. Or at least not this one problem in particular.
“You don’t think Omega—!” she started to say, but there was a hesitant knock on her door that silenced her.

“Jack?” came her mom’s voice. “Was that you?”

Jack didn’t answer at first, wondering if maybe she could foreign sleep and her mom would leave her alone, but she decided against it. She lied enough to her parents as it was.

“Yeah…” she said sheepishly.

The handle turned and the door creaked open slowly, giving Mimmi ample time to slip beneath a fold in Jack’s blankets. Her mom, dressed for bed in an oversized T-shirt from a Vegas trade show and men’s pajama pants, slipped inside. Her hair was in a banana comb, half her makeup washed off—Jack had interrupted her nightly ritual.

“What are you still doing up?” she wondered, taking a seat at the foot of Jack’s bed. She pushed Jack’s computer shut. “It’s a school night. You know the rules.”

“Sorry. I just…” Jack crawled across the bed to put her laptop on the bedside table, then slipped the compact into the drawer. She didn’t know how to finish that sentence and left it hanging.

Her mom read something in that fragment to be concerned about though. “How are you feeling?” she wondered, pushing Jack’s hair out of her face and tucking it behind her ear.

“Fine.” Jack’s mom looked unconvinced, so Jack expounded. “I already told you Diego and I rescheduled. I was just writing him an email.”

“I know you’re putting on such a brave front, but it’s okay to miss him. It’s okay to talk about it.”

“What’s there to talk about? It’s not going to change anything. I just have to make things work here.”

Jack’s mom laughed. “You sound like your grandmother.” She paused. “That’s a good thing, by the way. I always admired that about her. And now I get to admire it about you.”

Jack smiled.

“...But what I don’t admire is you being up at all hours of the night.”

Jack should’ve known the shoe was going to drop that way. “...I’m...still on Pacific time?”

“Nice try.”

“Okay, so I can’t sleep,” Jack admitted. She drew her legs up and hugged them, putting her chin on her knee. “But it’s not because I miss Diego—I mean, I do, but I’ve been thinking about other stuff. Mistakes I’ve made. And I keep on replaying them in my mind and thinking...I should have done things differently.”

“Oh, so talking about things isn’t going to change anything, but regret will?” half-joked her mom, but then she frowned. She shifted and lifted her legs onto the bed, mirroring Jack. They faced each other, hugging their knees together. “Take it from me, Jack. You cannot change the past. You go back and visit it, thinking there is something you can do, but it stays the same. And you can get lucky—find out the mistake you made wasn’t as terrible as you thought it was—or you can learn from it.”
“So you don’t make the same mistake twice.”

“It's more than that, Jack. When you learn from a mistake, you realize you never would have learned that lesson if it hadn’t been for the mistake in the first place.”

“You act like mistakes are a good thing.”

“No, mistakes are bad…but lessons are good, and you really can’t have one without the other.”

“Ying and yang.”

“Ying and yang,” repeated her mom, getting up and lifting Jack’s blankets. Jack spotted Mimmi diving deeper, but her mom wasn’t paying attention, too busy forcing Jack to crawl under the covers.

“What are some lessons you’ve learned, Mom?” asked Jack.

“Too many to count! Never get involved in a land war in Asia for one—”

“No, c’mon! Give me a real one.”

Jack noticed her mom’s eyes flick down to Jack’s watch as it gleamed in the moonlight. “When you withhold forgiveness, the only one you hurt is yourself,” she said after a pause. “It was hard for me to learn too. You’re lucky, Jack. You don’t need to learn that one. You’ve always been very understanding, very forgiving.” She moved to the door. “Now going to bed on time…that’s a lesson you could stand to learn.”

“I know, I know…”

“Goodnight, Jack.”

“Night!”

Mimmi waited until Jack’s mom’s footsteps had receded down the hall before crawling out to lie on the pillow next to Jack’s ear.

“Your mom always reminds me of your grandmother,” said the Kwami.

Jack yawned, her ears popping. “Yeah, right! They’re so different.”

“They’re both very wise.”

“But what lessons am I supposed to learn from failing to rescue Ceeree?”

“Maybe to not give up? We can still save him.”

“You would say something like that,” said Jack with a snort, but as she rolled over, she turned the Kwami’s words over in her head and it began to hatch into a plan. She had given up, hadn't she? The moment the Guardian failed to reach out to her, she had just assumed all hope was lost. But Mimmi was right, as she usually was. Maybe the reason why the Guardian hadn't contacted her was because he couldn't, not that he didn't want to. So where did that leave Jack?
She found herself reaching for her laptop again.

“Jack…” complained Mimmi, rubbing her eyes as the screen flooded the room with sickly pale light. “You’re going to get in trouble.”

But Jack didn’t care. “Just real quick,” she said, her fingers flying over the keys as she finished her email to Diego. Suddenly, it was easy. She was a fountain of words, mainly because she wanted to get to the end of it to float her idea passed him.

…But it got me thinking weve been waiting for the Guardian to reach out to us and tell us what t do about TS and CeeRee but maybe he cant so maybe we should find him instead. Hed hproly no whats wrong with my powers to. IDK, let me know what u think.

ANYwayz that’s it. Besides I miss you. I miss u alot. Which is why (I cant believe im saying this…) I cant wait for Monday! ttyt

<3 Jack
Cottontail

Chapter Summary

Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jaclyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter took a little longer than normal! I’m not sure about you guys, but the holidays are always a super busy time for me. Thank you so much for your patience. I really appreciate it :-) 

So endth the school week for Jack. TGIF. I can’t believe we made it this far, lol. Let’s end with a bang before I implement a time jump!

And the special shout out this week goes to…Anita! The reader, not the character. It’s fun to run into your name while reading fan fiction, and it is random and silly stuff like that that I love to hear. Keep the comments coming, you guys! You’re the best.

Just west of Montparnasse Cemetery was a small Georgian building, square and white, peeking out from amongst some trees—The Paris Observatory. It was only three stories tall, stately but rather unremarkable save for the dome that topped one of the two corner towers. The entrance to the building was guarded by a statue of a man in 19th century grab holding a small book, with a mini sculpture of Atlas carrying the world at his feet. As Jack jumped down from her vantage point and landed on the other side of the observatory’s gate, she was able to read the inscription: U.J.J. Le Verrier 1811-1877 Souscription Internationale. Wikipedia would later tell her that he was a mathematician who technically discovered Neptune.

A quick look around told Jack the observatory was closed, which she took as a sign that she was on the right track. With a few hops she closed the gap to the entrance, but skipped the black double doors entirely by springing to the roof, where there was easy access to the dome where the mounted telescope was kept. Jack found a door along the port-holed side of the dome. She grabbed the handle, ready to turn it, but paused.

Her breathing was loud and harried, especially to her rabbit ears. Was she really doing this? Could she do this? A million reasons came up why she shouldn’t, but all she had to do was think of Alya, and then they suddenly didn’t matter.

Jack kicked the door open with a bang, allowing a ray of light into the dark dome.
The first thing Jack saw was Alya squinting through her glasses, tied to the base of a gigantic gunmetal gray telescope, a piece of duct tape over her mouth. Then the rest of the room came into focus. The walls were insulated with strange black paper, a lattice of piping running from the floor to the ceiling. Other then some sort of control module that Jack suspected controlled the windows (all shuttered), a staircase on a raised platform that led to nowhere, and some office furniture from the sixties, the dome was empty.

Alya started to whimper and squirm, her eyes flickering between fear and hope. Jack stalked up to her and kneeled, lifting a hand. Alya winced and squeezed her eyes shut, but Jack just ripped the tape off her mouth.

"Rabbit!" cried Alya, coughing from her sudden intake of breath. Somehow she still managed a breezy smile. “Girl, am I glad to see you!”

Jack raised a dismissive eyebrow. “Really? Didn’t seem like that when I came in.”

“I wasn’t sure if you were working with this Akuma who kidnapped me or not!”

“Well, thanks to you, all of Paris thinks I am.”

“I was wrong, okay? And I’m glad I was, or you wouldn’t be rescuing me right now.”

“Rescuing you?” wondered Jack, distant. She stared at a point just above Alya’s bushy locks. “Who said anything about rescuing you?”

The hope that had been shining in Alya’s eyes extinguished.

“What!?” she yelped, struggling like mad. “You’re—!?" But Jack muffled Alya’s squawking by smoothing the tape back over her mouth. Her classmate tried to scream, her face turning red with exertion as the gurgled noise echoed in her throat.

Jack considered her coldly. “This is no less than what you deserve,” she spat.

Metal squeaked from behind the telescope and Jack looked around it to see what looked to be a huge glass lantern on the floor. As a preteen girl in a rabbit suit similar to Jack’s crawled out of it, Jack realized it protected the top of a ladder that led into the dome from the building below. As soon as that registered in her head though, the girl was screaming and throwing herself at Jack. Luckily, it was just for a hug.

“Rabbit! Omigosh omigosh omigosh! You’re here! I knew you would be able to find me! I knew it! Ahhhhhh! I can’t believe this is happening! This is the greatest—THE greatest thing that has ever happened to me, ever!” she cried, burrowing her face in Jack’s sternum. Her American accent sounded like home. “Sorry I was hiding. I thought you’d be mad about what I did, so I wanted to make sure…”

Jack patted the girl on the back a few times and she eventually released her hold. She really was like a mini-version of Rabbit, with enhanced strength and everything.

“Psh, are you kidding me?” Jack wondered. She turned to sneer at Alya, who glared back with the ferocity of a wild animal. “I hate this girl.”

“Yeah!” the other rabbit agreed, her hands curling into fists. She seemed poised to attack Alya, but
instead spun around to face Jack. She grinned, light refracting off the metal in her braces. “I’m Cottontail, by the way.”

“I know. You mentioned that in the video you posted, remember?” said Jack.

The girl’s ears drooped. She smacked herself in the temple with the butt of her palm. “Stupid.”

Jack couldn’t help but laugh. “Don’t worry about it. You were just trying to make things official, so I will too. I’m Rabbit.”

This seemed to cheer Cottontail up. “I know! I’m a huge fan! I used to live in Pasadena; I followed everything you did. I was in charge of my middle school’s Positivity Club and everything! I was so bummed when we moved here. I tried to keep up on Insta and stuff, but it was hard. But then you came here! How great is that!? And now that I have superpowers, we can fight crime together!”

“Uh, I’m sorry…we?”

Cottontail’s smile faltered. “I thought…I thought I could be your sidekick…”

“Yeah. I heard Alya call you that. Listen, it’s a sweet thought, but I’m no babysitter.”

“B-But you don’t need to babysit me! I can take care of myself. Promise!”

“Oh, really? Then prove it.” Jack enlarged her chakram and got into a fighter’s stance. “Fight me.”

“F-fight y-you…?” Cottontail looked like she was going to pass out, but from fright or excitement, it was impossible to tell. Even so, she got ready too. Jack took note of the bronze rings she wore, one on each finger. “Okay…!” said the girl, a little unsure. “Here I come!”

Cottontail starting with a flying kick, so Jack stepped deftly to the left, the disturbed air whipping her in the face as the girl missed by a hair. She was quick though—she bounced back as soon as she landed with a back kick. Jack back flipped out of the way, landed on top of the staircase to nowhere so she would have the high ground, and flung her chakram. The throwing ring hit the ground where Cottontail would have been standing had she not somersaulted out of the way. Now the girl was barreling up the steps. She mimed a backhanded slap and something struck Jack in the face. It took her a moment, but she realized it was one of Cottontail’s rings. They were her throwing weapons, much like Jack’s chakram.

Cottontail stopped two steps below Jack. Grabbing a lower stair for support, she preformed a high back kick, trying to destabilize Jack with a strike to the knees, but Jack grabbed the railings on either side of her and lifted herself up out of harm’s way. The girl kicked air.

“Gotta be better than that!” chided Jack, swinging herself toward Cottontail and releasing. She kicked the girl in the chest with both feet, sending her crashing down the staircase. Jack landed about halfway down.

Cottontail preformed a neat little bit of breakdancing to get back onto her feet. “I’m just getting started,” she insisted.

She darted at Jack, who prepared to defend, but Cottontail veered to the right at the last moment, getting to the side and kicking the platform beneath the staircase. It was on a track so it could be adjusted. Jack only realized this now though, when she, staircase and all, went sliding fifteen feet to
the right. The track ended abruptly, throwing Jack off and into a storage cabinet.

Cottontail bounded over to stomp on Jack while she was down, but Jack’s foot met her’s and pushed back, throwing the girl off balance. At the very least, it appeared Jack was stronger physically. While Cottontail stumbled to regain her footing, Jack was able to jump to her feet.

An all out kick war followed—push, roundhouse, side, sweep—but almost every single one was dodged or blocked as they jumped around each other trying to gain the upper hand. Cottontail was able to get a few hits in by flinging her rings, but she eventually ran out and her advantage vanished. Jack had one of her own though—her height. Jumping into the air, she preformed a flawless butterfly kick, striking the girl down.

Now that Jack had a chance to breathe, she looked Cottontail over. She grew dishearten by what she saw or, rather, what she did not see.

“Whoa!” said Cottontail, popping back up with an endearing grin on her face. “That was amazing!”

“You’re not half-bad,” Jack admitted. “But did you give me everything you got?”

“Oh, um, no, I guess not. I didn’t use my special power…”

Jack’s rabbit ears swiveled so they faced Cottontail. “And what might that be?”

“I call it Lucky Mode! For five minutes, everything I do goes my way. Not as awesome as Lucky Strike, but—er…” The girl bit her lip. “Sorry! I shouldn’t have brought that up. Dogstruction is really cool too!”

“Don’t, uh, don’t worry about it.” Jack’s cheeks burned, possibly more embarrassed than her fan. “But Lucky Mode, huh? Can I see it?”

Cottontail shook her head. “I’m saving it. For when we fight Ladybug and Chat Noir.”

Jack gave a delirious grin. Of course!

Encouraged, Cottontail continued. “The people of Paris don’t appreciate you, Rabbit. And that’s because those two losers are always stealing your glory. It’s all ‘Ladybug this’ and ‘Chat Noir that.’” She paused to gag. “But if we steal their Miraculouses, then we’ll be the only superheroes in town! Then you’ll finally get the respect you deserve.”

Jack looked over her should at Alya, their eyes locking. “Sounds like a plan,” she said. She turned back to Cottontail, jabbing a thumb over her shoulder. “Let’s leave little Miss Misinformation to rot here and go look for them.”

“I’ve got a better idea!” Cottontail skipped across the room and grabbed a silver smart phone off the desk, a Ladybug charm on a neon pink string hanging from it. Jack would recognize Alya’s phone anywhere, having stared at it throughout their entire interview the day before. Cottontail turned it horizontal and began to text like mad.

“…What’re you doing?” Jack wondered.

“Posting our location to the Ladyblog.” Cottontail didn’t even bother to look up as Jack went to join her. “Aaaaaand done!” She tossed the phone over her shoulder. It landed back on the desk with a
heavy thunk. “Now…we wait.”

“What are you thinking!? We could’ve had the element of surprise.”

“Yeah…but we have a hostage.” The girl hopped over to Alya and grabbed her chin, yanking her head up. Alya tried to resist, but it was impossible. “Vous claquez mon héro, je claque le vôtre. Au sens propre,” Cottontail hissed in the blogger’s face.

“Leave her,” Jack demanded.

“Oh! Right! I have to collect my rings. Good thinking, Rabbit.” Cottontail scampered off to gather her weapons and slide them back onto her finger. She stopped to hand Jack her chakram, but Jack couldn’t look her in the eyes. “Don’t worry!” said the girl. “I know Ladybug seems tough, but you can beat her! I know you can. You’re the best! And I’ll keep Chat Noir off your back.”

The girl smiled again, and Jack gave a crooked grin in return. It was nice to have someone believe in her, to say positive things about her. Fighting was easier when Diego complimented her on a good kick mid-battle or when Mimmi congratulated her on a job well done after purifying an Akuma. Even hearing her classmates say nice things about Rabbit in the hallway at school or Cadence and the other Positivity Club members painting encouraging banners for Rabbit and Perro Negro made Jack feel like she could beat anyone who came her way, no matter the odds.

But this wasn’t just anyone she was preparing to fight. Jack turned and faced the open door, her body tense. The seconds ticked by, but Jack felt like they stretched into hours. She knew the wait would be a short one, but it was excruciating.

There was a flicker of a shadow and then Ladybug came swinging in through the doorway feet first, Cat Noir rolling in after her. Cottontail flinched, not prepared for their arrival.

“Cottontail!” cried Cat Noir, but Ladybug only had eyes for Alya.

“Ne vous inquiétez pas,” (Don’t worry) she told the blogger. “Nous allons vous sortir d’ici.” (We’ll get you out of here.)

“How did they get here so fast!?” Cottontail asked Jack.

“They must’ve been patrolling in the area,” said Jack quickly.

Cat Noir crinkled his brow and tilted his head to the side. “Rabbit, what are you talking about? We —”

Jack threw her chakram at him as hard as she could. She thought it would be difficult, stabbing her friend in the back like this, but it was more like watching herself in a dream do something—it felt like nothing at all. Cat stopped running his mouth, but shock kept him rooted to the ground. He just stared at the spinning disk coming straight at his head in slack-jawed surprise.

“Chat, faire attention!” cried Ladybug, throwing out her yo-yo. It knocked into Jack’s chakram moments before it struck Cat in the nose. The throwing ring wobbled into the wall, ricocheting off the lattice piping. Jack jumped back a few feet to catch it.

“Rabbit!” yelped Cat, his eyes blown wide as he flailed. “Why did you—?”
But Ladybug was livid. “That’s my partner!” she shouted, swinging her yo-yo around. “You’ll pay for that!” She hurled her weapon at Jack.

The yo-yo was a lot quicker and more menacing now that Jack was on the receiving end of it. As it came flying at her, she only had a split-second to react. She threw herself backward and swung her chakram like a baseball bat, whacking the yo-yo against the side of the telescope.

There was a blur of light brown and white as Cottontail raced over to engage Cat Noir in battle. He dodged a few of her kicks as he tried to pull his staff out, but Jack lost track of him when her view was obstructed by red and black. Ladybug spun, whipping her yo-yo back around to attack Jack again. Jack back flipped behind the glassed-in cover that protected the top of the ladder. She heard the shatter of glass. Thinking on her feet, Jack flung open the little door and dove down the hole, grabbed the yo-yo on the way before Ladybug could reel it back in. There was a resounding crash above as Jack dragged Ladybug down with her. They both ended up in a heap at the bottom of the ladder.

Ladybug recovered first, Jack having broken her fall. She rolled away and onto her haunches, flexing her wrist so her yo-yo snapped back into her hand as she glared at Jack with disdain.

“What’s the matter with you, Rabbit?” she demanded, tying her yo-yo around her waist. “Why didn’t you stick to the plan!?”

“I panicked,” Jack admitted.

In fact, she had been panicking all morning, starting the moment Mimmi shook her awake because she had slept through her alarm.

* * *

Yawning, Jack trudged up the stairs to school, tripping on two of them as her feet refused to lift. They felt as heavy as her eyelids. She promised herself that that would be the last time she ever stayed up that late, but she knew she would only be lying to herself. Late nights were part of the superhero package, along with keeping secrets and making excuses. Of course, Jack wasn’t exactly saving the day last night. Whatever. Writing her email to Diego was superhero…adjacent. That was close enough, right? Besides, she wasn’t late to school at all, even though she had woken up late. In fact, she was ten minutes early.

Jack was kind of hoping to just sit on a bench and rest her eyes until class started, but these dreams were dashed when she fell through the front doors and found the courtyard echoing with an argument. She didn’t recognize the voices first, or the words that were being said in rapid-fire French, but she saw a knot of her classmates and other students in the middle of the basketball court. Jack shuffled towards them. Since she wasn’t going to get any rest, she could at least satisfy her curiosity. Her mind, clouded though it was with exhaustion, muddled through translations.

“—de l’enlever!” (to remove it?) (to take it down?) (Jack didn’t have any context for the proper translation.)

A righteous scoff. “Il est mon blog, Nino. Je peux faire ce que je veux avec il.” (It’s my blog, Nino. I can do what I want with it.)

Nino. Alya. Now Jack could see they were scowling at each other in the midst of the crowd that had gathered around them. They seemed to be fighting about something Alya had posted on the
Ladyblog. Rather than continuing to try and listen in, Jack fumbled through her bag for her phone to have a look herself. Mimmi was kind enough to hand it to her.

Jack nearly dropped her phone when she pulled up the Ladyblog. Smack-dab at the top was a video with a thumbnail of her silhouette as Rabbit, bathed in a disquieting purple light, and a giant question mark. She started to panic before she even read the title. It roughly translated to: “Rabbit Working for the Butterfly?? You Decide.”

Jack jammed her thumb against the screen to start the video, the sound around her fading as she focused. There was no closed-captioning to help her on this one.

It started with Alya sitting at a desk, presumably in her room at home.

“Yo gens, Alya ici,” (Yo peeps, Alya here) she said, looking deflated. Jack recognized her outfit as the one she had been wearing yesterday. She must have filmed this last night. “J’ai été essayé de me concentrer sur Ladybug et d’ignorer la totalité ‘Rabbit’ la chose, mais je ne peux plus le faire. Voici le scoop: Je pense que Rabbit pourrait être travailler pour Le Papillon. Je ne veux pas tirer de tout conclusions, mais regardons les faits…” (I was trying to focus on Ladybug and ignore the whole ‘Rabbit’ thing, but I can no longer do it. Here’s the scoop: I think Rabbit could be working for the Butterfly. I don’t want to draw any conclusions, but look at the facts…)

Jack played the beginning of the video over and over again until she was one hundred percent sure she understood what Alya was saying before letting it play on. The screen switched from Alya to news reports showing the ruins of the 5th arrondissement. Jack winced and looked away. She didn’t need to translate Alya’s words after that—she knew her classmate was rattling off her theory that she had shared with Jack yesterday. She presented her proof in order: first the destruction on Monday, the eyewitness account of Jack trying to run Cat Noir over on Tuesday, footage of her argument with Ladybug on Wednesday…

But then there was new footage, footage Jack hadn’t seen before. Zoomed in with a shaky hand, it showed Jack looking up at Imagineur as they stood together on the lip of Champ de Mars. She hadn’t even been aware Alya was recording her at the time. It was taken too far away to hear anything that was being said, but the visuals paired with Alya’s narration soon painted a pretty guilty picture.

“…et ici Rabbit est hier, parlant à un Akuma. Remarquez comment elle n’essaie même pas de l’attaquer lui. Regarde, il rit même de ce qu’elle dit! Etrange pour un héros d’être amical avec un Akuma. C’est presque comme s’ils se connaissaient. Et maintenant...” (…and here Rabbit is yesterday, talking to an Akuma. Notice how she doesn’t even try to attack him. Look, he even laughs at what she says! Strange for a hero to be friendly with an Akuma. It’s almost as if they knew each other. And now…) Jack watched as she and Imagineur turned to walk towards the fashion tent. “Regarde ça!? Ils ont prévu d’attaquer le défilé de mode ensemble! C’était la chance que je suis arrivé là pour avertir tout le monde, ou ils auraient été gones.” (See that!? They planned to attack the fashion show together! It was lucky that I got there to warn everyone, or they would have been gones.)

Jack wanted to chuck her phone at a wall, but remained holding it with a white-knuckled grip as the footage switched back to Alya in her room as she concluded the video. Only then did Jack notice the thousands of comments beneath. She scrolled through them, seeing variations of ‘Je savais que Rabbit était mauvais!’ (I knew Rabbit was bad!) and ‘Rabbit est une menace et doit être arrêté’ (Rabbit is a threat and must be stopped!). Few, if any, protested her innocence.
This was wrong. This was all wrong. It was like the world had spun off its axis, like the ground around her had transformed into a mucky swamp. Jack reached for her lucky rabbit’s foot so she would have something to keep her grounded. She couldn’t understand how or why any of this was happening. She wasn’t the bad guy. She had only been trying to help. She had been helping! Why couldn’t anyone see that? But the whole world had gone blind. Alya had seen to that. Now, everyone hated her.

No, no…she couldn’t think like that. She had to stay positive, or an Akuma would come for her.

Try as Jack might though, she couldn’t get her mind off her frustration, her anger, her sadness. Her downward spiral continued. Her breathing hitched. Her body shook trying to contain her tears. A papery flutter of wings sounded by her left ear.

“Rabbit est un héros!”

Jack snapped her head up, an Akuma nowhere in sight as her heart swelled at the words. Nino! That’s right. At least there was one person in her corner. Those were his last words to Alya before he stormed away, clearly having gotten nowhere with her. Before Jack even knew what she was doing, she moved to meet him, absolute and complete gratitude propelling her forward.

“T-thank you,” she said, meaning it with every fiber of her being.

Nino looked at her, startled. His face was still flushed from his argument, nostrils flaring, but he reined himself in. “Oh, hey Jack. Thanks for what?”

Jack smacked herself in the face. Nino didn’t know he was defending her, or that he had probably prevented an Akuma attack. She covered up by rubbing the sleep out of her eye. “Pardon! I’m so tired, I’m not making any sense. I think Rabbit’s a hero too, but I thought I was alone in thinking that. So…thanks.”

“Chya, I think she’s a hero! She saved me from that sinkhole, dude.” Nino doffed his baseball hat and rubbed his forehead before replacing it, his countenance darkening. “But does that matter to Alya? Nah, man. I thought we were buds, but I guess…I mean, where does she come off, talking about my girl Rabbit like that!? Is she cray-cray!?"

Jack had never seen Nino this riled up before. He was normally so chill. Even when he was upset when Jack encroached on his bro-time with Adrien, he had been passive-aggressive about it. His ranting seemed like it was coming from another person, and the longer he went, mixing English and French, the more fearful Jack became. She had never heard of anyone getting Akumatized twice, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t possible. And if it did, it would be her fault. She couldn’t let that happen. Especially since she was pretty sure he had just saved her from the same.

“I have to do something,” Jack blurted out, interrupting Nino’s tirade. He blinked at her and she blushed, realizing her words hadn’t stayed in her head. Oh, well. Too late to take them back now.

Realization dawned on Nino as he gave Jack’s words his own meaning. “About Alya’s video? Dude, I know! Rabbit deserves better.”

Wait…that was it! Jack knew from experience that Akumatization wasn’t just the result of strong negative emotions, but the feelings of powerlessness that often accompanied them. Asking Alya to take the video down didn’t work, and there was an overwhelming tide of commenters who agreed with her theory. Desperate times called for desperate measures—it was time to fight fire with fire.
“What if we posted our own video?” Jack suggested. “Alya should know better anyway, posting bias journalism like that. What about the other side?”

Nino’s eyebrows shot up, his face brightening considerably. “Hey, yeah! Une vidéo de réfutation!”

Relief swept through Jack as she exhaled a shaky breath and recovered. “Totally! I’m not super good with making videos, but—”

“No sweat.” Nino jabbed a thumb to his chest, proud as a peacock. “You’re looking at Collège Françoise Dupont’s number one filmmaker. I enter the Festival du Court-métrage Étudiant Parisien every year.”

“I didn’t know you made movies! Cool.”

“Yah. I bet some other peeps would be down to help too. They usually are. We should ask around!”

“Uhh…” Jack was less enthused about this idea, but it was worth a try, at least. Mimmi’s mantra echoed in her brain. *Be positive.* “Sure! Let’s do it,” she said as they headed up the stairs—class was about to start.

Jack tried Ivan first since he sat in front of her. She drew up the courage and poked him in the back while Mrs. Bustier put on a video about Charlemagne. It took a couple of tries, but he finally turned around. With his heavily lidded eyes, she couldn’t tell if he was angry or not, but pressed on anyway since she now had his attention.

“Pardon,” (Sorry) she whispered as she began to braid her hair into a fishbone. “Vous avez vu la vidéo sur Rabbit sur le blog de Alya?” (Did you see the video on Rabbit on Alya’s blog?)

Ivan grunted, then slowly lowered his head into a nod when Jack still waited for an answer. Apparently, that had been a ‘yes’ grunt.

“Er…qu’as-tu pensé?” (Er…what did you think?) she asked him when he didn’t volunteer any further information.

“Alya a probablement raison.” (Alya’s probably right.)

Jack’s heart sank. She wanted to ask him what made him say that, but needed to look up the verb ‘to say’ first. She tied off her hair and grabbed her English-French dictionary, but by the time she found the word, her classmate had already turned back to watch the video. She poked him again. “Qu’est-ce qui te fait dire ça?”

The boy didn’t bother turning around this time as he shrugged his shoulders. “Rabbit a détruit le magasin de mon oncle. Si elle est bonne, alors elle n’est pas très bonne à il.” (Rabbit destroyed my uncle’s shop. If she is good, then she’s not very good at it.)

Nathaniel, who had been drawing the whole time, nodded his head in agreement. When Jack looked to him, he flipped a few pages back in his journal. He had penciled a drawing of a destroyed street that he had erased a few times as he worked on perspective. The only color was on a bent street sign that showed a picture of a black rabbit head in a red circle with the line through it. The meaning was pretty clear. No Rabbits.
Later, Jack tried her luck with Alix when Mrs. Bustier paired them up to work on identifying literary devices in a poem together.

“*Ugh, passer,*” (Ugh, pass) Alix said, wrinkling her nose and clenched her teeth at the mere suggestion of a video defending Rabbit. “*Elle a mis mon père à l’hôpital le lundi.*” (She put my dad in the hospital on Monday.)

Jack’s eyes went wide. She wanted to know if he was okay, but sputtered as she search for some words. The ones she found weren’t very good. “*Il va bien?*” (He is fine?)

Alix stifled her laughter. “*Ouais. Juste un bras cassé,*” (Yeah. Just a broken arm) She shook her head. “*Homme, vous avez vraiment besoin de travailler sur votre français. Vous sonner comme à un poli robot.*” (Man, you really need to work on your French. You sound like a polite robot.)

“After that, I just kind of…gave up,” Jack recounted to Nino as they headed down to their lockers at the start of the lunch break. “Alix did teach me some new slang words though, so that was pretty cool.”

“Awesome!” said Adrien, who fell into step behind them.

“No. Not awesome,” said Nino over his shoulder to his friend. “No one wants to help. Not even you, dude, and you agree with me on Rabbit.”

“I just think you’re…” Adrien paused and turned to Jack. “What’s that English phrase with the pistol? Like, acting on something too fast?”

“…Jumping the gun…?”

“Yeah! Nino, you’re jumping the gun with this whole video thing.”

“So everyone you talked to hates Rabbit?” Jack asked Nino, feeling so small. She was desperate to hear that someone—anyone—didn’t think the worst of her. Just one more name. That’s all she asked. It could be Chloé for all she cared.

Nino’s face scrunched up like he had just eaten a lemon. Oh, no. Was it Chloé? Jack took it back. Anyone but Chloé.

“Well…Marinette also thinks Rabbit is a hero,” he said.

Jack wiped her brow, relieved. That made sense. Alya had mentioned yesterday that Marinette didn’t believe her theory that Rabbit was working for Hawk Moth.

“…But she and Alya had an epic fight yesterday and they just made up,” Nino continued. “Girl doesn’t want to jinx it, so she won’t back me. Weak, right?”

“Oh. Well…I’m glad to hear they made up.”

Jack meant it. She still didn’t know what their fight had been about, but it seemed the Akuma attack yesterday had allowed them to put aside their differences and forgive each other. Though Jack was disappointed, she had to respect Marinette for putting Alya first. It was the mark of a good friend. If anything, Jack was jealous. She wished Marinette was friends with her too.
Jack, Nino, and Adrien broke apart to go to their lockers. With a sigh, Jack grabbed her paper bag lunch, hopefully for the last time. Next week, it would be the fabled key to her apartment and Chloé would have one less reason to make fun of her. Then all Jack needed were new clothes, closer friends, fluency in French...Jack drooped. Chloé was never going to stop, was she? Well...at least she wasn’t the bully’s only target. Jack was beginning to suspect that no one was safe from her barbed comments, except maybe Adrien. But he had a far worse fate, considering how she clung to him.

Nino and Adrien were waiting for Jack out in the courtyard, which she hadn’t been expecting. It was a pleasant surprise. She doubted they realized how much it meant to her, but that didn’t make it any less thoughtful. She smiled at them so wide her face hurt.

“I’m gonna collect positive news clips on Rabbit from Tuesday during lunch,” Nino told Jack as they all started to walk out together.

“Good idea!” she said. “Maybe I can track down someone she rescued and interview them?”

“Or interview Rabbit herself! Wouldn’t that be primo?”

“Oh my gosh, yes!”

“Guys...” complained Adrien before they got too carried away. “I really think Alya will change her mind if you just wait. In fact, I know she will.”

Nino frowned. “I dunno, dude. She’s pretty stubborn.”

“Yeah,” agreed Jack. “How can you be so sure?”

“We know that Rabbit is a hero, right? Well, so do Ladybug and Chat Noir. I’m sure once they see the video, they’ll go and set Alya straight.”

“Dude. They’re superheroes. I’m pretty sure they have better stuff to do than surf the interwebs, especially their own fan site.”

“Nino’s right, Adrien. We can’t sit around and hope Ladybug and Cat Noir will do something. We’ve got to do something now.”

“Wait a day,” Adrien suggested. “Please.”

“No way, man,” said Nino. “Every sec Alya’s vid is up, more and more people are gonna think Rabbit is a villain.”

“But won’t Alya be upset when you post it? I thought you two were friends.”

“Yeah...” Nino went soft for a brief moment, but then lowered his brows and seethed. “When she isn’t being a hater.”

A now familiar silver town car pulled up to the curb behind Chloé’s limousine. Adrien looked at it, biting his lip. Jack could almost see the mental battle going on in his head as he decided whether or not to stay to argue his point further. In the end, he just shrugged.

“I guess I can’t stop you. Toute à l’heure!”
The three of them gave their goodbyes and all went their separate ways again—Adrien to his car, Nino to his house, and Jack to the park. After such a close Akuma call this morning, she was surprised by how happy she felt. She almost felt like skipping. It was nice to have a purpose and a good friend in Nino.

“I don’t think a video is a good idea…”

Jack looked down at her beach bag, Mimmi peeking up at her from under the crook of her arm.

“Why not…!?” wondered Jack. It never even occurred to her that her Kwami might not support her.

“There’s a rift between Alya and Nino, and this video is only going to make it worse! And you can tell Adrien and Marinette don’t want to get caught up in it, but it’s hard since they’re all friends.”

Jack collapsed on a bench. She hadn’t thought about it like that. Still…

“What would you have me do, Mimmi? Me and Nino were close to getting Akumatized this morning. This video idea saved us.”

“I know, I know.” Mimmi hopped out of the bag and skipped across Jack’s legs to sit on her knee. “But there is more than one way to do something.”

“Like what?”

“Like…uh…hmmm…”

The Kwami tapped her chin, deep in thought. Jack pulled out her ham and cheese sandwich and started to scarf it down while she waited. She had to hurry.

“I’ve got it!” the creature cried suddenly, jumping into the air and hovering level with Jack’s face. She threw out her arms and legs, reminding Jack of the starfish she used to collect when she was younger. “What about the Positivity Club?”

“What about it?”

“You and Nino could start it up here and—”

“But that ignores the fact that what Alya did was totally unfair! Don’t you think I have a right to defend myself?”

“Yes, but—”

“I get where you’re coming from, but I need to clear my name.”

“I know, but does it have to be at Alya’s expense? She doesn’t know any better.”

“Well, she should. You’ve seen how many followers she has. She has a lot of influence, so maybe she should fact-check before posting about her conspiracy theories!” Jack held her watch up in front of Mimmi’s face. “Now then…Nino wants an interview with Rabbit and I don’t plan on disappointing him. Are you with me or not?”
Mimmi gave a resigned sigh, but didn’t put up any further of a fight, so Jack said her transformation phrase and changed into Rabbit. If she hurried, she’d be able to catch Nino before he got home. They had walked passed it during his part of the tour on Tuesday and she vaguely remembered the general neighborhood. As she skipped, hopped, and jumped across rooftops, trying to stay out of sight, she scanned for familiar landmarks. Occasionally she peaked over the edge to the street below, searching for Nino’s signature red hat.

At one point Jack caught the attention of a pedestrian and he stumbled back in absolute terror. Jack pulled away as fast as she could, but the damage had been done. She was so used to people being happy to see her. For someone to look at her as if she were going to hurt them was devastating and she needed a moment to recover.

*C’mon, Jack,* she told herself. *This will all be over once you tell your side of the story.*

Her little pep talk allowed her to pull herself together and continue. Two blocks down, she finally spotted Nino. He slouched as he walked, bobbing his head to the beat blasting through his headphones. Jack could hear it just fine with her enhanced hearing, so she could only imagine how loud he had it set. Really, it was amazing he wasn’t deaf or shouting all the time.

Jack raced ahead of him and launched herself across the street to the opposite rooftop, hoping her friend would spot her. Someone did, judging by the scream she heard, but Nino remained oblivious. Jack facepalmed and shook her head before trying again.

No reaction.

So much being discreet, then.

Jack dropped down to the street using window boxes and darted across the street right in front of Nino’s face. Along with the screams and cries she elicited, she finally caught his attention as she bounded into an empty side street.

“Whoa! Rabbit!” he cried, lowering his headphones and taking off after her. Jack slowed down to a jog but kept on moving. “Wait! I wanna talk to you.”

Jack stopped and looked over her shoulder, grinding to a halt in the shadow of an ancient church with scarlet-painted doors. “I know you…” she said. “I hopped you out of a sinkhole on Tuesday, right?”

She watched Nino’s face break out into a grin. “Chya! The name’s Nino. It’s, like, super cool to meet you again. I never did thank you…”

“No worries. Happens all the time. What’s up?”

Nino seemed a little thrown by how causal she was being, but pressed on. “Have…have you seen what people are saying about you?”

“That I’m working for Hawk Moth?” Jack grimaced. “Don’t remind me.”

"Hawk Moth?"

"That's what I'm calling the Butterfly. Sounds kind of lame in English."
“Well, I think it’s way harsh how people are busting on you like that when you’re clearly a hero. In fact, a friend and I were planning on posting a video to defend you.”

“Are…are you sure you want to do that…?”

“You helped me out when I was in a bind,” he reminded her. “I’m glad I spotted you though.” (Jack barely managed to refrain from snorting. She might as well have waved a neon flag in his face that said ‘FOLLOW ME.’) “An interview with you would be off the hook! You know, tell all the homies out there what’s really going down? It would give my vid a lot of cred.”

Jack chewed the inside of her cheek, tossing Mimmi’s concerns around in her head. If she was going to back out, now was the time to do it.

“I guess it’s worth a shot,” she said.

“Sweet!” Nino dug through the pocket of his cargo shorts and pulled out his phone to record. “This is gonna be lit.”

Jack soon discovered that interviewing with Nino was leagues different from interviewing with Alya. Alya liked rapid-fire questions, interjecting to get the details just right. Nino, on the other hand, seemed content to just let Jack talk. He truly did want to hear her side of the story. And when he did ask questions, which were few and far between, it was only to get her to continue. It felt less like an interview and more like…like talking to a friend. Like how Alya said an interview was supposed to be.

It was a weight off Jack’s shoulders to finally explain what had been happening, because it wasn’t just her powers changing from creation to destruction—that part was obvious—but also her luck going from good to bad. Under normal circumstances, she wouldn’t have nearly run over Cat Noir, or been filmed in such a way that she looked like a bad guy. It was freeing to finally let someone know.

“Like that video that Alya girl posted of me with Imaginuer,” she explained, leaning back against a wall. “I’ve had to deal with kids who’ve been Akumatized before. They’re scary! One wrong move and they throw a tantrum that can take out a whole city block. But unlike adults or even teenagers who get Akumatized, they are still very innocent. Half the time they don’t even realize they’re doing anything wrong. You can talk to them, is what I’m saying. You can figure out what’s wrong and what they’re planning to do. That’s what I was trying to do, talking to Imaginuer, joking with him. I was trying to gain his trust. I found out he was looking for his mom, who was at that fashion show. I agreed to go with him, but I planned to run ahead and warn everyone that an Akuma was on the loose. I never got a chance though.”

“Dude! Why not?” wondered Nino.

Jack had been waiting for an opportunity like this. “Why do you think? Alya! Since she thought I wasn’t going to warn those people, she tried to instead. Ran right by us. If I hadn’t distracted Imaginuer, he would have attacked her. But how does she thank me? She—”

Three notes, like those from tubular bells, played. Nino looked around, unsure of where the sound was coming from as they repeated. Jack flinched at first, but recovered. “It’s my partner!” she gasped, overjoyed. “He’s calling me!”

“Whoa. You have a partner?”
“Had. Or, um…maybe still have? But he’s back home…” It suddenly dawned on Jack why she hadn’t expected her chakram to go off. “…Where it’s three in the morning!”

Nino’s eyebrows shot up and he stopped filming. “Is this, like, an emergency?”

“I don’t know, maybe…”

“Should I go?”

“Nah. You can stay.”

Jack expanded her chakram and slipped it off her wrist, holding it in front of her like a steering wheel. She was shocked to see a green paw print on a black background rather than a black one on purple. She forgot that her and Cat Noir has exchanged contact information yesterday. Running her right thumb along the side, she answered the call. A video image of Cat Noir, and about half of Ladybug, was projected into the empty middle.

“Rabbit!” he cried, jumping up and down. He put his arm around Ladybug and brought her close to him so they could both fit in the frame. “Bugaboo, regardez!” (Look!)

Ladybug’s face was hard to read. She didn’t look unhappy to see Jack, but she was drawn and serious. She swiftly removed Cat’s arm and he let it drop as if it hadn’t been used at all.

“Yo! Ladybug! Chat Noir!” said Nino, recognizing the Parisian heroes from behind the projection.

Cat’s forehead wrinkled. “Is that…Rabbit, are you with Nino?”

Nino came around to stand next to Jack and wave. She turned to him, baffled. “How is Cat Noir on a first name basis with you?” she wondered, but Cat answered instead.

“Let’s just say Nino gave My Lady and I a little bubble trouble a couple of months—”

“He was Akumatized,” said Ladybug, cutting though the mystery in order to get down to business. “Rabbit, have you seen the latest video on the Ladyblog?”

Jack almost snorted. And Nino had been so sure that Ladybug was too busy to peruse her own fan site. Jack held it back though because she was honestly so relieved. “Oh, thank gawd! Yeah. Crazy, right? I hope you set that girl who posted it straight—”

But Ladybug shook her head, one of her pigtails smacking Cat in the face, not that she noticed or he minded. “No, the new one.”

“The new…?”

“On it,” said Nino, pulling the site up with his phone.

“The girl who posted it is named Alya Césaire,” Cat Noir explained. “And I did try to track her down to tell her the truth. I couldn’t find her though, and then Ladybug contacted me and told me to go to the Ladyblog and…well…”

Jack turned to Nino to see what was taking him so long to play the new video and was surprised to
find him frozen in horror. He stared passed his phone, his hand shaking a little. Curious, Jack leaned over to have a look. Filling the screen was a thumbnail of Alya with a piece of duct tape over her mouth, washed out by a bright light, probably the flashlight of the phone that was filming her. The video was titled “I AM WRONG!!!!111!!!” Jack was forced to reach over Nino’s arm and tap it to play.

The video started rather jarringly, with Alya speaking in French mid-sentence, the camera close up on her face as she refused to make eye contact. Jack couldn’t really understand what she was saying and was about to start the video over again when Alya turned her head to the side and spit out words in English.

“There! I said it. Now, let me go!”

“No way!” came a voice off screen. It was a girl’s, younger, with an American accent. Jack caught just a hint of California tonal shift. “Say it again. In English! I want Rabbit to understand you too.”

“Entendu!” (Fine!) Alya turned back to the camera, her eyes not believing a single word that was coming out of her mouth. “I’m sorry. I was wrong about Rabbit. She’s not working for the Butterfly. She’s a hero. And I am a stupid idiot.” She turned back to her captor. “Happy?”

“I guess it’s fine for now.”

“For now!? You said you’d let me go if I did what you said!”

“I said I’d think about it. And I have. And I’ve decided I’m gonna let Rabbit deal with you.”

Alya started to shift from side to side. She was fighting against her bonds. “Then I take everything I just said back! If this is how Rabbit’s sidekick treats people, then she’s no hero! She’s—”

Someone wearing light brown opera gloves slapped a piece of tape over Alya’s mouth. The girl giving a muffled scream of anger and frustration, lending the video it’s thumbnail.

Jack felt her pulse quicken as she started to panic. She gave a sideways glance at Nino, afraid he believed Alya’s words, but he looked just as stricken as before. It seemed he still hadn’t recovered from the fact that his classmate had been kidnapped.

The camera started to move away from Alya, grabbing Jack’s attention again. Alya’s captor had pointed it at herself. She looked to be about eleven or twelve, pale, with a thick smattering of freckles and a light brown domino mask. Her hair at first looked to be auburn, but it was blonde and brown and red, worn in a side ponytail on the opposite side Jack wore her fishbone braid. She also wore blue braces. As the girl held the camera as far from her as possible, her rabbit ears came into view, and a bit of her top half. She appeared to be wearing the exact same suit as Jack, but in a light brown with a white stomach.

“Gens de Paris, ne crois pas cette fille!” (People of Paris, don’t believe this girl!) she announced. Her French wasn’t half bad. Better than Jack’s, at least. “Elle est une menteur qui est essaie de faire sembler Rabbit mal en ordre pour faire le regard de Ladybug mieux. Mais je suis ici pour vous montrer la vérité!” (She’s a liar who’s trying to make Rabbit look bad in order to make Ladybug look better. But I’m here to show you the truth!) She switched back to English smoothly. “And Rabbit…if you are watching this—hi!” She gave an exuberant wave. Jack’s lips twitched and she hated herself for almost smiling. “I’m saving Alya just for you, so come meet me! You know where. The usual spot.” She gave a salute, followed by a showy wink. “Cottontail out!”
The video cut to black, leaving Jack stunned in its wake. She could feel Ladybug and Cat Noir’s eyes on her though and knew she had to say something.

“I…I have never met that girl in my life,” she sputtered. It sounded like a lie, even to her well-attuned ears. “I-I have no clue who she is. I don’t have a sidekick! I swear—”

“We know,” said Ladybug.

Jack sipped up a breath of relief as she dragged her eyes up to meet theirs. They didn’t look reproachful at all, just…solemn and apprehensive. Even so, Jack wanted to double check. “You do…?”

“Chat and I think Cottontail is probably an Akumatized fan of yours who was devastated by the things Alya said about you in her video.”

Nino spoke up, his voice hoarse. “You’ll…you’ll rescue Alya…won’t you, Rabbit?” Jack turned to her friend, unsure of what to say. He looked so lost. “I-I…dude…No matter how uncool that vid was, Alya’s still my bud. You gotta save her, Rabbit. Seriously.”

“Oh…” Jack’s eyes flickered back to her chakram. “I’m sure Ladybug and Cat Noir have it handled.”

“But that’s the thing,” said Ladybug quickly. “We don’t. We need your help, Rabbit. We have no idea where the Akuma is holding Alya.”

“I don’t either.”

“What!? But she said—”

“I know, but—”

“Don’t worry, Rabbit!” said Cat Noir gaily. “I have confidence in you! If somebunny can figure out where Cottontail’s burrow is, it’s you. Where are you right now? We’ll come meet you.”

“That’s not—” started Jack, but Nino pulled down her arm in order to shove his face in front of the chakram.

“We’re on Rue de Gribeauval, by Saint Thomas Aquinas,” he said.

“Got it!” said Cat. “See ya when I see ya!”

He hung up, the projection in the center of Jack’s chakram vanishing.

As soon as Jack was sure he wasn’t going to call right back, she yanked herself free from Nino and turned away.

“Did you have to do that?” she wondered, slipping her weapon back around her wrist. She splayed her fingers, choosing to watch it shrink into a bracelet rather than look at him.

“Dude, what gives?” Nino wondered. “You’re a hero. Saving peeps is your thing!”
“Yeah, well, it’s a little hard when everyone thinks I’m evil.”

Nino paused, confused. It took him some time to find the right words. “That…but…I never though that would stop you from being a hero. It didn’t stop you Tuesday.”

Jack opened her mouth to argue that Tuesday was somehow different, but was it really? The mother in the coral cardigan flashed in her mind, the dirt on her face and the terror in her eyes. But that look hadn’t stopped Jack from helping. No, Tuesday wasn’t any different…but she was. She was broken down, now. Defeated.

“There’s only so much bad-mouthing I can take,” she admitted, looking at her boots.

“Hey, now…” Jack felt Nino’s hand on her shoulder and she looked up to see him smiling at her. A warmth started to spread through her veins despite her best efforts. “You got this, Rabbit! As my girl Tay-Tay says, haters gonna hate. But you’re gonna save one of those haters with Ladybug and Chat Noir. That’s gonna improve your image way more than any vid.” He grimaced and turned to his phone, cradling it in his hands. “Now that I think about it, it would be a total buzzkill to drag Alya for being wrong. I mean, it made sense at the time, but that’s not really gonna help you. We gotta build you up, dude, and not by cutting others down.”

Jack held a fist to her forehead, hearing Mimmi in Nino’s words. How could she have been so stupid? She was always about the short-term. She wanted justice now, even if there were consequences later. Her impatience made her quick to jump to conclusions and produce thoughtless plans. But there was a positive aspect, now that she thought about it. She was also quick to forgive. Alya needed help and, no matter what horrible things she said about Rabbit, Jack wasn’t going to hold them against her.

Two shadows passed by overheard. Jack snapped her head skyward to see Ladybug and Cat Noir standing below the clock inset in the front of the church her and Nino had taken refuge by. Ladybug flung out her yo-yo, snagging the pole of a flag sticking out a building kitty-corner and swinging down to them, while Cat Noir jumped, spinning his baton above his head like the blades of a helicopter to slow his descent. They landed at the same time. Jack felt a pang in her heart—their ability to be in-sync with each other was just another reminder of how things used to be with her and Diego. Couldn’t she go a day without missing him?

At Ladybug’s insistence, the four of them watched the video the Akuma had posted again for clues, hoping one of them would catch something the others had missed. An anxiety pervaded the little group that put Jack on edge. She knew Nino was worried about his friend, but she was surprised by how upset Ladybug and Cat Noir were—Ladybug especially.

“I think My Lady feels partially responsible,” Cat whispered to Jack when Ladybug broke away to pace after the third play-through. He lowered his ears. “Me too. We let the media draw their own conclusions about you, and look what happened. I’m sorry we didn’t say anything.”

He searched Jack, looking for forgiveness. She managed a weak smile. “Don’t you mean you feel…pawtially responsible?”

Cat blinked for a moment, stunned. “Did…did you just…?”

“What can I say? I’m a punny bunny. No hard feelings.”

The boy grinned.
“Il doit y avoir quelque chose ici…” Nino muttered. Jack and Cat turned to see he was now sitting on the church steps, watching the video for the fourth time in a row, torturing himself further. Jack immediately went to his side and took a seat. He was replaying the part with Cottontail over and over again. He tilted the phone towards her. “Dude, there’s gotta be something in the background here,” he said. “It’s the only time it’s zoomed out.”

Jack squinted at the space around Cottontail, but all she saw was black. Wherever they were, it was dark, maybe inside or underground. It was tough to say.

The Akuma saluted and winked again. “Cottontail—” she started to say, but Nino paused it and dragged the current play position back on the progress bar to the beginning of Cottontail’s soliloquy.

“Whoa, whoa, wait!” said Jack. “Go back.”

“You see something?” wondered Nino, perking up as he did as Jack said. Cat Noir overheard and bounded over to them, crouching on the steps behind them, peering over their shoulders.

“Maybe…” Jack didn’t want to get anyone’s hopes up. “Stop,” she said when Cottontail waved.

The video played. “—just for you, so come meet me! You know where. The usual spot.” Salute. Wink. “Cottontail out!”

“Again,” said Jack.

Nino replayed the video from Cottontail’s wave. By this time, Ladybug had noticed something was up and rejoined them. Jack reached out and paused the video herself as the Akuma raised a hand to her forehead.

“That salute,” she said.

“Yeah. She’s doing it wrong,” observed Nino.

“No, no. That’s how it’s done in America. Perro Negro comes from a military family. He uses that salute all the time. It’s, like, his calling card.”

“Don’t you use it too?”

“Huh?”

Nino looked at her, brow wrinkled in confusion. “Maybe I’m cray, but didn’t you salute me like that on Tuesday? When you left to go rescue other peeps?”

Jack blinked. She had, hadn’t she? In fact, she had done it all day that day. She must have been missing Diego more than she thought, because she had never saluted before. “Er…yeah. I guess I picked it up from him.”

“But you think it’s a clue?” demanded Ladybug.

Jack looked around at her friends’ strained faces. “Maybe play it one more time,” she suggested. She wasn’t sure of anything anymore.
Nino obliged. This time, Jack paid close attention to Cottontail’s words, keeping Diego in mind, if he was a clue at all.

_Meet me._

_The usual spot._

And then an idea popped into Jack’s head. “Does…does Paris have an observatory?”


“Back at home, Perro Negro and I would always meet up at an observatory before going out on our patrols. If this girl is a fan of mine, she might know something like that.”

“Un observatoire? Comme c’est romantique!” purred Cat Noir. “Though not as romantic as the Eiffel Tower. That is where My Lady and I—”

Ladybug jumped to her feet. “You think Cottontail is holding Alya at the Paris Observatory?” Behind her, Cat wilted over being ignored.

“It’s worth a shot,” Jack decided.

Nino pushed off the stairs, slipping his phone into the pocket and shouldering his backpack. “Sweet! Let’s go!”

“No!” Jack cried, panicking as she grabbing her friend. One of her only two friends in Paris had already been in the hands of an Akuma this week. She wasn’t about to risk the other one. But she was surprised to see she wasn’t the only one holding him back. Ladybug and Cat Noir had joined her as well. Nino looked around at all of them in dismay.

“Aw, c’mon dudes! Cottontail’s got Alya!” he complained.

“Exactly,” said Ladybug. “We don’t need her to get you too. You stay where it’s safe.”

“Yeah, man,” said Cat. “We got this. You should head home.”

The boy brushed them off him. “Fine, fine…” he said. “I guess my girl’s in good hands…” He began to shuffle off, but paused as he passed Jack. “But could…could you give Alya a message for me when you save her?”

“Sure thing,” said Jack.

“Could you tell her that I’m sorry? She might be a total moronsaurus, but I was pretty harsh the last time we talked. I dissed her hard. Way hard. I mean, I was upset, but that’s no excuse. It’s just…seeing her being held hostage like that…” He scratched the back of his neck, unable to meet Jack’s eye. Color seeped into his cheeks. For the life of her, Jack couldn’t figure out why he was suddenly so embarrassed. “It really, like, made me realize, like, how much I care about her and stuff.”

“I’ll let her know.”

“Thanks.”
And, with that, Nino marched down the street as fast as he could and vanished around the corner. Jack stared at the last place she saw the flash of red of his hat, baffled by his parting words and hasty exit.

“So, LB,” said Cat Noir behind Jack. “What’s the plan?”

* * *

“The plan was for you to gain Cottontail’s trust, figure out her weakness, and lure her away from Alya so Chat and I could rescue her. What was so hard about that?” Ladybug demanded.

“I tried,” Jack argued. “I thought the Akumatized object was one of her rings, but they’re not and there is nothing else on her.”

“No way is she not an Akuma!”

“Oh, she definitely is. It must be hidden on her somewhere. And I did try to lure her away, but she just posted our location instead.”

“Okay, okay, I get it.” Ladybug rubbed the bridge of her nose. “But why did you attack Chat instead of join us?”

“Because Cottontail plans to use her special power, Lucky Mode. For five minutes, everything she does works out. And when her plan is to steal your Miraculouses—”

“So what? It would have been three against one. I don’t care how lucky she is, she’s not going to overcome those odds.”

Jack used the ladder next to her to pull herself to her feet. She was getting upset. “You don’t get it! Ladybug, I’m bad luck. Just look at how your plan fell apart on me. If I fight with you and Cat, we’ll all lose our Miraculouses. I just know it. And it’ll be my fault.”

Jack’s words finally got through to Ladybug and she softened. She sighed and hung her head. Shouts echoed above them as Cat Noir and Cottontail battled in the dome.

“I’m sorry,” Jack offered, backing away. “You should go help Cat. I’ll stay away. Good luck, okay?”

“No—wait!” Ladybug struggled to her feet. “We can use this, your…bad luck.”

“Huh?”

“We used Dogstruction to our advantage against Road Rage, didn’t we?”

“Yeah, but—”

“We can do the same thing with your bad luck, trust me.” It seemed Ladybug wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

“How?”

But Ladybug only smiled as if she had a juicy secret. She wound up and flung her yo-yo straight up
into the air. “Lucky…Charm!”

Pink light and ladybugs created a snazzy pair of sunglasses, the frames a cheery red with black polka dots. Jack liked the look of them and considered finding a normal pair, but couldn’t make sense of how they were going to help Ladybug defeat Cottontail. Ladybug seemed to be at a bit of a loss too as she chewed on her tongue, deep in though. Then her eyes brightened.

“Okay!” she said, handing the sunglasses to Jack. “I’ve got a new plan.”

* * *

Jack jumped up through the hole and back into the dome, shattering the remains of the glass cover. Ladybug’s yo-yo followed her, going up to the ceiling and wrapping around one of the pipes, yanking its user up.

A quick look around the room told Jack she had missed a destructive battle—the staircase was on its side and the wooden desk furniture was in splinters. Cottontail and Cat Noir were battling over his staff while Alya looked on, struggling in vain to free herself.

“Paws off, Petit,” Cat told the Akuma.

“Bite me!” insisted Cottontail as she kneed him in the stomach. He relinquished his weapon and doubled over, coughing. She took the opportunity to wack him over the head with his staff, temporarily stunning him.

“Cottontail!” cried Jack, running over as the girl made a move to grab Cat’s ring. Jack faked a trip though and went flying, tackling Cottontail. Surprised, she dropped Cat’s staff and it went rolling across the dome. “Oh! Oh, I’m sorry,” said Jack, helping the girl to her feet. “Ugh, it’s this stupid bad luck!”

But Cottontail was looking at something over Jack’s shoulder. “Duck!” she cried, yanking Jack back down. Ladybug’s yo-yo went whizzing over their heads. Cottontail reached up and snagged the string. She tried to yank the weapon from Ladybug’s hands.

“Bad luck?” wondered Cottontail while she played tug-of-war. “What are you talking about?”

“Ever since my powers changed, so has my luck. I never realized how much I relied on it until now. I can’t even get a hit in against Ladybug.”

“It’s okay. You have me now!” Cottontail let go on the yo-yo string, causing Ladybug to stumble back into a wall. The Akuma proceeded to pull her rabbit ears down over her regular ears. They began to glow a pale yellow, which spread through Cottontail’s entire body as she curled up into a ball. “Lucky…” She sprung up into a front flip, landing on her feet with her arms up like a gymnast. “…Mode!” Light exploded around her, blinding Jack. She blinked away the spots to see that Cottontail had kept her yellow aura. “My Lucky Mode will counteract your bad luck,” the girl explained. “Ready?”

Jack swallowed her apprehension and replaced it with false confidence. She hoped Ladybug’s plan worked and didn’t blow up in her face. “You bet!”

The two of them ran at Ladybug. For one brief moment, Jack and Ladybug locked eyes, a tacit understanding passing between them. They knew they only had a few minutes to pull this off.
Thanks to Ladybug’s flexibility, she could dodge with the best of them. When Jack kicked high and Cottontail kicked low, Ladybug was somehow able to avoid both. It helped that Jack was purposely telegraphing her moves. Even so, Cottontail’s Lucky Mode was really something else. She came close several times to snagging Ladybug’s ear, but Jack would stumble into her or accidentally kick her hand and Ladybug would be able to pull away.

“Sorry!” Jack would yell over and over again. Cottontail would grit her teeth and say nothing, burying her frustration deep inside. It eventually spilled out though when it happened one time too many.

“Get out of the way!” the Akuma cried. She shoved Jack back hard, causing her to stumble into the telescope and fall. “I got this!”

Cottontail jumped towards the telescope and wall kicked off it, flipping over Ladybug and landing on the other side. She swept Ladybug’s legs, upending her. Ladybug tried to fling out her yo-yo and snag something to keep herself from going down, but Cottontail swung a hand and sent a ring flying at the yo-yo. It connected, killing its trajectory and causing it to arc down to the floor.

But Jack had fallen into position, and Cat was up on his feet.

“Chat Noir!” Ladybug shouted, nodding up to it before clamping her hands down on her ears to protect her earrings. “La roue!” (The wheel!)

Cat followed her gaze, but then looked down at Jack, who was rubbing her head.

“Mais—!” (But—!) he tried to argue, knowing what would happen.

“Chaton, confiance-moi!” (Kitten, trust me!)

Cottontail caught on a moment later, but Cat had already prepared Cataclysm. The girl abandoned Ladybug. There was a brief flash of Hawk Moth’s influence, but her will to get to Jack was stronger.

“Get out of the way!” Cottontail cried, motioning with her arm. Jack just sat there though, pretending to be confused.

Cat Noir’s feet pounded the worn wood floor as he ran at the telescope. Alya kicked his baton towards him and he scooped it up with his good hand. Extending it gave him the boost he needed to get up to the wheel. He struck it with his negative energy and it crumbled into dust. Without its tension holding the telescope in place, it began to tip, swinging down in Jack’s direction. Cat Noir grinded down the optical tube and flipped off the end. He joined Ladybug, who had made her way over to that side of the room while Cottontail was distracted.

Cottontail grabbed Jack roughly under the arms and dragged her out of harm’s way just in time. The telescope clanged against its base, bouncing as it left a dent, its lenses shattering. Alya cringed as the cacophony of noise reverberated throughout the small space, but it was much worse for Jack and Cottontail with their sensitive ears. It nearly incapacitated them, but Jack could just make out Ladybug shouting to Cat Noir.

“À la fois!” (At the same time!)

Jack reached into her boot and pulled out the sunglasses Ladybug had entrusted to her. She slipped
them on as the noonday sun flooded the space, Ladybug and Cat Noir working together to crank open the dome’s shutter. Cottontail was momentarily blinded, but Jack was not. She swiped the ears right off of Cottontail’s head. They were actually attached to a headband, which Cottontail had hidden beneath her hair. Stealing them messed up the girl’s perfectly smooth hair.

“Whoa!” chided Cat Noir. “Bad hare day?”

Cottontail spun around and looked at Jack, completely and utterly betrayed. It shouldn’t have mattered since she was an Akuma, but it shook Jack to her very core. Here was this girl who idolized her, believed in her with all her heart, and Jack had taken advantage of that. She had only ever done that once before, to Diego when they were trying to track down Trumpeter Swan before time ran out. She had stolen his Miraculous so he wouldn't try to stop her when she handed herself over to the Akuma they were fighting. It wasn’t a look that was easy to forget, no matter how good Jack’s intentions.

Still, Jack snapped the headband in two and released the Akuma. Ladybug’s yo-yo zoomed by to snap up the black and purple butterfly before it could escape. Once it was purified, Jack tossed the sunglasses back to Ladybug. She threw them skyward through the open shutter with a shout, her ladybugs going to work. They didn’t have to go far. They fixed the telescope and restored the furniture. The staircase was returned to its upright position on the platform. Alya found herself binding and tape free, her phone in her hand. And Cottontail sunk to her knees, the dark energy that had corrupted her bubbling away.

Ladybug turned to Cat Noir to pound fists with him, but he was a little distracted.

“Alors Rabbit était de notre côté l’ensemble le temps!?” (So Rabbit was on our side the whole time!?)

Ladybug laughed and rubbed Cat behind the ear. “Ne pas y penser sur trop difficile, Chaton. Tout s’est déroulé selon le plan.” (Don’t think about it too hard, Kitten. Everything went according to plan.)

Jack had to hand it to Ladybug—she was an amazing strategist. She was the one who suggested that they goad Cottontail into using her special power, reasoning that whatever she drew her power from would be her Akumatized object. Everything fell into place from there.

Jack noticed the repaired rabbit-eared headband on the floor and almost recoiled. Without the Akuma’s corruption, she now recognized her old best friend’s handiwork. Cadence had made a pair of rabbit ears for herself as president of the Positivity Club and they proved to be so popular that she had started to sell them on the side. Cottontail must have brought a pair. Of course, she wasn’t Cottontail anymore.

Jack kneeled so her face was level with the girl. She looked pretty much the same, though with duller hair. Now she wore a graphic sweater with a superhero ‘POW!’ on it, and shorts with leggings. Jack took note of the girl’s thick white boots, which were actually pretty close to the ones she wore as Rabbit, but they were scuffed and worn for constant wear.

The girl blinked at Jack, her mind fuzzy, but everything fell away when she recognized her hero.

“Rabbit!” she gasped. “Omigosh omigosh omigosh! Ahhhhhh! I can’t believe this is happening!”

“I can,” said Jack, with a wry sense of déjà vu. “What’s your name?”
“Colleen.”

“Here you go, Colleen,” said Jack, handing the rabbit ears back to the girl. "I know this might be difficult for you to hear, but you were Akumatized."

Colleen gasped and only now took in the dome around her. Her gaze fell on Ladybug and Cat Noir talking to Alya. She whipped her head back to Jack, her eyes wide and fearful.

“I-I didn’t hurt you, did I!? I-I’m really sorry if I did! I’m your number one fan. I would never—Ohhhhhh, please don’t hate me!”

Jack put her hands on Colleen’s shoulders to stop her shaking. “Relax,” she soothed. “No one was hurt. All you did was kidnap someone.”

“Kidnap! Who!?”

One of Jack’s rabbit ears twitched as it picked up on the beeping of Ladybug and Cat Noir’s Miraculouses, but also a set of footsteps. She turned to see a hesitant Alya walking up to them, fiddling with her phone in her hands. Colleen followed Jack’s gaze. She was stricken at first, realizing what it meant, but then her eyes narrowed.

“Hey! I know you!” she cried, struggling to her feet. “You’re that blogger who badmouthed Rabbit!”

“Colleen—!” Jack had to grab the girl and hold her back.

“Let go of me!” she complained, fighting against Jack’s iron grip. “This troll—”

“I was wrong, okay?” said Alya, silencing the girl. “I was wrong about Rabbit, and I’m sorry.”

Colleen was taken aback by such a straightforward apology, going slack in Jack’s arm. She recovered quickly though. “I’m not the one you need to apologize to.”

“Er…right…” Alya grimaced as she slowly lifted her eyes to Jack’s. “I’m sorry, Rabbit. How can I make it up to you?”

* * *

Jack trundled up the steps to school, a spring in her own step. Ten minutes until class—she could get used to this ‘being on time’ thing. Whistling a little tune as she pushed open the door, she was accosted by Nino almost immediately.

“Dude! There you are!” he said, grabbing her arm and dragging her over to a bench. “Don’t you ever check your phone?”

“Huh?” Jack dug her phone out, seeing several texts from Nino and one missed message.

yo don’t sweat finding some1 to interview i got Rabbit herself!

jack, pick up

JACK
i’m freaking out! Rabbit went with Ladybug and Chat Noir to rescue Alya

where you at?

call me when you get dis comprende?

what kind of teenage girl are you?? anyway, Alya was rescued

Jack feigned surprised. “Whoa…how did I miss all this?”

“That’s not all!” Nino pulled his phone out and handed it to Jack. “I was just about to text it to you, but check out Alya’s new vid!”

It was impossible for Jack to hide her smile when she saw the thumbnail of the new video Alya had posted on the Ladyblog. There she was as Rabbit, standing with Ladybug and Cat Noir, Cat Noir’s arms thrown around their shoulders. Alya stood off to the side with a bemused look upon her face. It was simply entitled “La vérité sur Rabbit / The Truth about Rabbit.” Jack thought it was a nice touch on Alya’s part to include an English translation.

Tapping the video caused Alya’s face to fill the frame. “À venir à toi vivre de mon propre de porter secours—!” Jack sighed with relief when the English subtitles began to appear at the bottom in white comic sans. Coming to you live from my own rescue! Hello Ladyblog viewers! Alya here, safe and sound, all thanks to the valiant efforts of Ladybug, Black Cat (Jack cringed a little when she read that —she could now see why Cat Noir insisted on the French), and…” Alya took a step back, revealing the trio of superheroes behind her. “Rabbit!” she announced, no subtitle needed, but then they picked up again: Hecka crazy, right? I was so wrong about her.

Ladybug stepped forward, a complete natural on camera as she swung her bangs out of her face. *We just want all of Paris to know that Rabbit isn’t working for the Butterfly (English Name: Hawk Moth)*

Cat Noir put his arm around Jack and gave her a friendly squeeze. *Yeah! She’s our friend and a hero.*

*I’ll give you guys the scoop on my rescue later, promised Alya. But, for now, Rabbit has an important announcement she would like to make.*

Everyone turned to Jack expectantly, but it took her a moment to notice. In the present, Jack found herself slapped with second-hand embarrassment.

“Oh, it’s my turn?” she asked in the video, the captions changing to French. The others nodded vigorously and she blushed. “Um, okay…Uh…” She gave a nervous wave. “Hi, uh, Paris. So…I’m new here. And I know I’ve caused a lot of problems. To everyone I hurt on Monday, I’m sorry. It was an accident. My special power got out of hand, and I don’t plan on using it again until I can get it under control. But I’m still going to help Ladybug and Cat Noir. And you guys can too! Back home, a lot of my fans formed Positivity Clubs to support my partner and me. Bad guys like Hawk Moth target people when they experience strong negative emotions, so let’s fight those together!"

*More positivity means less Akumas for us to fight, explained Ladybug. So if you are a fan of mine or Black Cat or Rabbit, I encourage you to start or join a Positivity Club today.*
“Or a Paw-sitivity Club,” suggested Cat in English with a wink, putting his other arm around Ladybug.

Ladybug had to laugh. *Or that. Who knows? You might just prevent someone from being evilized.*

*You heard it here first, Ladybug lovers! Start a Positivity Club today! Support your old heroes, and the new!* said Alya, jumping back in. *That just about wraps things up here. Stay connected! This is Alya, signing off.*

In the background, Jack saluted before the video cut to black. Sure, it used to be Perro Negro’s calling card, but now it was her’s too.

“Well?” wondered Nino, poking her with the excitement of a three-year-old. “What do you think?”

“About…?”

“A Positivity Club!”

“Oh! Sounds like a good idea.”

“I was hoping you’d say so! I already had a convo with Alya about it. My girl is a little tied up running the Ladyblog, but she recommundo that I be El Presidente of the chapter here.”

“I recommundo that you never talk like that again.”

“Fine. But only if you’re my VP.”

Jack was thrown, not expecting to be asked a second time in her life. Memories of Cadence flashed through her mind. The ache of nostalgia and guilt made her body suddenly feel heavy. What if, what if, what if…

“Dude, c’mon,” said Nino, elbowing her out of her reverie. “If we’re not in charge, Rabbit’s not gonna get any positive vibes thrown her way.”

“She’ll probably get all of them, considering it’s just us.”

“Nope! Alya, Adrien, and Marinette have already signed up.”

Jack didn’t know why this came as such a shock to her. “Really!?”

“So…you my VP?”

Nino stuck out his hand. Jack suddenly recalled walking to *Collège Françoise Dupont* on Monday for her first day of school, practicing handshakes with imaginary future classmates. *Bonjour. Mon nom est Jaclyn Smith. Je vais par Jack.* So much had happened since then. So much was still happening. She still needed to find a place to practice Dogstruction. She still needed to figure out why she was using Dogstruction at all. Questions of the Guardian and Omega and the other Kwami Recrees crashed around in her brain like a ten-car pileup. But she had made some good friends—Nino and Adrien and Cat Noir and…maybe even Ladybug. Did she still miss Diego and want to go home? Absolutely. But things didn’t feel as bleak as they once did.
Jack grabbed Nino’s hand and pumped it twice. “*Je suis votre VP.*”

END OF PART 1
Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jaclyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

**Chapter Notes**

Time jump! Whoop-whoop! Let’s catch up with Jack a month later and see where she’s at! Time to resolve some school drama and get this girl more friends—she’s going to need them after this chapter. (I’m sorry Jack!)

I had a lot of fun writing Chloé. She’s just so ridiculously self-centered. (But I’m also excited for her redemption arc this season!)

You might notice the way French is presented has changed. A month has passed, so Jack’s gotten a lot better at understanding it (Adrien's a really great tutor). She still has a ways to go though…I guess the earliest fluency can be achieved is around three months, but since Jack speaks English at home with her parents, it will probably take her longer.

And the special shout out this time goes to… Phantom_Kat! Kat went above and beyond as a reader and commented on every single one of my chapters, and I appreciated it immensely. You’re amazing! Hope you like the next installment, and keep the comments coming! I sincerely believe I have the very best readers ^_^
Jack made half-hearted attempts to swat her Kwami away. “No. I’m calling Adrien to see if he knows the answer to number five.”

Unfortunately, Jack’s call went straight to voicemail. She hung up. Her friend was probably at some photo shoot or fencing match or something. She texted him instead and threw her phone back down on the desk.

“I really think you should call Alya,” insisted Mimmi.

“She’s not going to help me. She hates me.”

“Be more positive!”

“Okay. I’m positive she hates me.”

Forget why her powers had changed or where the Guardian was or what Omega wanted to do with the Kwami—the real mystery in Jack’s life was why Alya Césaire and Marinette Dupain-Cheng hated her. Well…maybe hate was a strong word. They didn’t bully her like Chloé, but they gave her the cold shoulder and never included her in their plans, even if their plans involved mutual friends. For the life of her, Jack couldn’t understand what she had done to offend them. In fact, Jack was one hundred percent sure Marinette wasn’t behind it—she was probably just backing Alya up. All anyone ever said about Marinette was how nice she was. Jack had seen it for herself, what with Marinette making her an outfit and all. Alya, on the other hand, still seemed salty about Jack following her to the Akuma attack a month ago, and figuring out that Imaginuer was invisible when she could not.

But Jack could take a hint. She spoke to Marinette and Alya just enough to be friendly, but she wasn’t going to bend over backwards to get them to like her. She had made other friends in class. Adrien and Nino, of course, but Jack had also befriended Alix. Despite a shaky start, Jack had asked the girl to toss a Frisbee with her after class one Wednesday and the rest was history. Baking Alix’s father cupcakes after hearing about his broken arm probably helped too. Jack liked Alix a lot. She reminded her of her old friend Veronica, only with a lot less cussing and a love of rollerblading instead of baseball. Jack was trying to pick it up from her in lieu of surfing, but all she had gotten out of it so far were scabby knees.

Mimmi swooped down and picked up Jack’s phone for herself. “You don’t know Alya won’t help you unless you ask! Nino thought she would.”

The quarry truly was the perfect place for Jack to train…save for the fact that she couldn’t contact Diego from it so he could train her. When her chakram didn’t work, she changed back and tried her phone. There was simply no reception. She asked Nino for help since he was so tech savvy, but he had no idea how to get service in a place where there was none. He recommended Alya instead, and even sent Jack Alya’s contact info. But Jack had no plans to call her. It would only confirm what she already knew to be true.

“Yeah, well, I’m also pretty sure Nino is crushing on Alya and we all know love makes you say stupid things,” said Jack, making a grab for her phone. Mimmi dodged and started to fly away with it when the sudden vibration from a text threw her off. She dropped the phone with a yelp and it landed in Jack’s outstretched hand.

“Is it Alya?” asked the Kwami hopefully, clasping her little paws together.
Jack shook her head. “Marinette.”

*Your tenue (outfit)* is done, it said in French. *Come pick it up n’importe quand* (whenever).

Jack glanced at her Chemistry homework. She could feel bile building up in the back of her throat.

*How about now?* she texted back.

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The next morning, Jack found herself tugging at her new outfit as she walked to school, pushing the three-quarter length sleeves of the pleather yellow jacket up passed her elbows and then yanking them down again. She was used to wearing ill-fitting clothes, so it was a strange feeling, wearing something that was tailored to fit her like a glove. But she was happy and confident and felt like a true Parisian for once, so she was just going to have to get used to it.

“See?” whispered Mimmi, pushing aside the water bottle Jack had attached to the handle of her tote bag with a carabiner. “You keep on fidgeting!”

Jack rolled her eyes. Her Kwami was against her new outfit because it, quote, “wasn’t Jack.” But Jack didn’t care. So what if she wouldn’t have picked out a yellow jacket, white capris, and a white-and-black striped top for herself? Marinette was a designer and knew what she was doing. Jack, on the other hand, thought grade school boy’s basketball shorts were appropriate to wear when giving a class presentation (they were not).

“It’s fine,” muttered Jack. “I like it. That’s all that should matter.”

“I don’t know…there’s just something…off about it. I mean, did you see the way Marinette looked at you when you put it on?”

“I was thanking her a whole bunch—she was probably just embarr—”

“Jack!”

Jack turned at the sound of her name to see Adrien popping out of his town car before it even finished pulling up to the curb. The Gorilla rolled down his window to glare and grunt, none too happy.

“Well?” wondered Jack to him in French. She spun around. “*What do you think?*”

Adrien blinked at her and gave her a blithe smile. “*About…?*”

Jack stared. She had woken up to curl her hair and put on makeup and everything.

“Oh! *Did you get a new coupe de cheveux (haircut)?*” he wondered, touching his own feathered locks. “*You look great!*”

Jack couldn’t help but laugh. “*Close enough.*”

They walked the rest of the way to school together, discussing their Positivity Club meeting after school that day and how downright impossible Mm. Mendeleiev’s assignment had been. Jack was one hundred percent sure Adrien’s answers were all right though. She had once joked when she first
met him that he was also a certified genius on top of everything else, but that wasn’t exactly far from the truth. He always got top marks. Only Max was smarter than him.

Maybe it was a good thing Adrien was rather oblivious—otherwise he’d be too perfect.

Jack thought of this as she watched him race up the school steps ahead of her so he could prop open one of the doors, a consummate gentleman. How he was still single was a mystery. Well, maybe not a mystery—a packed schedule, a strict father, and a clingy Chloë all spelled disaster. Besides, Jack was pretty sure he was keeping himself available for Ladybug. If that was the case though, he was going to have to fight Cat Noir for her.

Jack felt Mimmi poke her arm, then fly forward inside the beach bag, causing Jack to stumble.

“Whoa! You okay?” wondered Adrien, steadying her.

Jack glanced in the direction Mimmi was trying to head. Alya was leaning against one of the staircases, texting. She was probably waiting for Marinette.

Jack rolled her eyes. Mimmi wasn’t going to give up, was she? But it was her Kwami’s lucky day. Thanks to her new outfit, Jack was feeling surprisingly confident. So what if Alya didn’t like her? That was her loss—Jack was awesome. And there was no harm in asking for her help anyway, especially since Jack was willing to pay her.

“I’ll be back. I have to talk to Alya about something,” Jack told Adrien as she straightened her back, held her head high, and marched off.

Alya glanced up briefly when she sensed Jack approaching, but her eyes fluttered back down to her screen. She did a double take though, a dangerous smirk curling her lips. Walking towards her suddenly felt like walking into a trap. But Jack wasn’t about to back down.

“Nice outfit,” Alya said with a barely veiled snicker.

It sounded like a taunt, but Jack couldn’t figure out why. If there were something wrong with her clothes, wouldn’t she have noticed? Adrien might be oblivious, but her parents and no one on the street had given her any weird looks. Whatever. Jack intended to take the high road.

“Thanks!” she said brightly, holding out her arms and rotating them so Alya could see the seam work on the jacket. “Marinette made it for me! Isn’t it awesome?”

Her classmate covered her mouth with her hand. “Yeah. Totally.”

Jack couldn’t help but give Alya a funny look. Something fishy was definitely going on here, but she didn’t know what, so she pressed on. “Um…there was something I wanted to talk to you about. Could I do it in English? I don’t…the words…”

Alya nodded, much to Jack’s surprise. She thought for sure this would be where their conversation would end. Bolstered, Jack continued in her native tongue.

“Maybe this is a strange question, but…is there any way to set up Wi-Fi in a place that doesn’t have any?”

“And why would you want to do something like that?” wondered Alya.
“Oh, it’s stupid.” Jack had prepared for this. “I wanted to Skype with my boyfriend back home, but —”

“**What!?**”

Jack was startled. Alya was staring at her as if she just revealed that she was Rabbit. Wait! Had she —? Jack felt her head for ears, but all she found was her hair, sticky with hairspray to force her curls to stay. She breathed a sigh of relief. She had been having one too many nightmares lately of showing up to class as her superhero alter ego, so, for one brief moment, she was terrified they had come true. Luckily, Alya didn’t seem to notice Jack’s bizarre reaction.

“**You have…you have a boyfriend?**” she demanded, switching from French back to English mid-sentence.

“Um, yeah. You didn’t know that?” Jack wracked her brain and realized that, since she never talked to Alya, the topic hadn’t really come up. Still, it wasn’t that surprising, was it? That a girl like Jack would have a boyfriend?

“But—who is he?”

Strange question, but Jack was down. “His name’s Diego. We were on the same Ultimate Frisbee team. We had just started dating before I moved here, but we’re trying to make it work. That’s why —”

“But what about Adrien?”

“What about him?”

“You know…”

It took Jack a moment to realize what Alya was implying. “**You think…?**” She had to laugh. The very idea seemed absurd to her. Not to say he wasn’t a great guy, but he was way too much of a people pleaser for her taste. Even if she were single, he wasn’t her type. “**We’re just friends.**”

Alya lunged at Jack before she could react, grabbing her by the forearm with two hands and dragging her across the basketball court. As they moved, Alya scanned the room frantically, eventually setting her sights on the front door.

“Alya, what are you—?” started Jack.

“In here,” Alya insisted, throwing open the door to the janitor’s closet and shoving Jack inside. Jack tripped over a mop and stumbled into a wall as Alya closed the door behind them, plunging them into darkness. It lasted only a moment. Alya soon had her phone out, the small space awash with the pale blue glow of her home screen. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry,” she said, frantically jabbing at her phone before putting it to her ear. She turned in a tight circle, unable to pace in such a constrained area. “**Marinette, where are you?**” she muttered to herself as the other line rang and rang. “Do you have a change of clothes in your locker?” she asked Jack.

“Huh!? No, I—”

Alya hung up on Marinette before it even reached her voicemail. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”
“But—”

The door creaked open, a shaft of light spilling through. “Stay!” commanded Alya again, before slipping through and slamming the door shut behind her.

Jack stood in silence in the darkness for several seconds, stunned.

“Well…that was weird,” said Mimmi.

“You’re telling me.” Jack pulled her own phone out for light. She spotted a bucket and flipped it over so she could sit on it. She searched for her Kwami, finding her hovering by the utility sink.

“What was that all about?”

Mimmi shrugged.

Jack decided to pass the time waiting for Alya to return by playing Threes. Normally she didn’t like playing games on her phone, but this one had her addicted, moving numbered tiles across the board into multiples of three as she tried to beat her high score. She had never really appreciated math before, but moving to a different country made her change her mind. It was a universal language, the same no matter where you went, and there was comfort in that. Besides, Threes was fun! She had gotten the entire class addicted to it.

Wait a minute…

Class…

Class!

Jack shined her phone on the face of her watch. She had two minutes to get her butt up the stairs and into her seat, or Mm. Bustier was going to mark her tardy again.

Was this Alya’s evil plan? To make her late? Jack jumped to her feet and struggled to throw her bag over her shoulder, but she accidentally punched the wall instead. Hand sore, she pushed her way out of the closet and staggered into the now-empty courtyard, the last straggling students disappearing into their classrooms. As she made a beeline for the closest set of stairs though, Marinette was rushing down them. The girl was frantic, eyes as wide as they could go and arms flailing. She hit the last stair hard and threw herself forward, grabbing Jack by the forearms to keep herself from falling.

“Take this off!” she cried, pulling at the sleeves of Jack’s yellow jacket.

“What? Why!?” wondered Jack in English, but she still did as Marinette asked.

“I’ll explain plus tard (later).” Marinette took the jacket and slung it over her arm before grabbing Jack’s wrist and dragging her towards the front door. Jack tried to resist, but like Mimmi, Marinette was stronger than she first appeared. “We have to go!”

“Go where!?” wondered Jack. “Class is about to start!”

“No. We need to get you sortir (out) of here before—”

Marinette skidded to a halt just inside the front doors of the school. One of them was still propped
open from Adrien, and the day outside was beautiful and bright. Jack looked around, baffled by what could have caused her classmate to freeze up.

Somewhere in the distance, Jack was surprised to hear Chloé’s grating voice.

“…your fault, Sabrina!” she was saying. “Take note! Don’t let me dormir trop longtemps (oversleep) again!”

Meanwhile, Marinette was looking all around her, frantically searching for something. Her eyes fell on Jack’s water bottle. It was one of those plastic ones with a sports cap Jack’s mom had gotten at a networking event. She had a never-ending supply, which was great because Jack had a bad habit of losing them. Since she started hanging out with Alix consistently, she thought it was a good idea to always have one on hand. Had to stay hydrated!

Marinette yanked the water bottle off Jack’s bag and jerked the sports cap up like she was going to take a swig before continuing to pull Jack outside, taking care to make sure the girl stayed behind her. Chloé and Sabrina were just cresting the stairs now, Sabrina madly tapping on her mini tablet while Chloé lorded over her. Marinette and Jack’s appearance distracted Chloé though. She locked eyes with Marinette and started to sneer.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t Marinette Dupain—Grah!!!”

Jack flinched as Marinette squeeze the water bottle, spraying a stream of water right into Chloé and Sabrina’s faces. The next thing she knew, she and Marinette were tearing down the street together in the direction of Marinette’s parent’s patisserie, piercing shrieks and squawks of outrage hot on their heels. Only entering the shop and slamming the door shut behind them silenced them.

Jack and Marinette leaned against the door together, breathing heavily.

“Why did you do that!?” cried Jack, looking at Marinette like she was crazy.

“Marinette? Jacque?”

The girls look across the room to see Marinette’s mother peering at them from behind the counter. Marinette snapped to attention like a rubber band.

“Oh! Hi, Mom,” she said, scratching the back of her head and forcing laughter. “I just...forgot... some homework...” She gave a sidelong glance at Jack. “Group homework.”

“Hi, Mm. Cheng,” Jack said with a big friendly wave. She absolutely adored the woman—every time Jack came over for a fitting, she always made sure Jack left with a chocolate-filled croissant. “It’s my…” Jack couldn't remember the French word for ‘grade.’ “…rank too, so I wanted to help Marinette look for it.”

The woman seemed a little suspicious, but accepted their story, telling them to hurry up. This was apparently the third time this month Marinette had done something like this.

Marinette led Jack through the patisserie to the small foyer that led to the Dupain-Cheng family’s living quarters. Now that they were alone, Marinette tried to hand Jack back her water bottle, but Jack refused to take it. Instead, she crossed her arms.

“Can you explain now?” she wondered.
“I couldn’t let Chloé and Sabrina see you,” Marinette admitted in English, turning away. She snapped the sports cap back down again. “You’re wearing Chloé’s favorite outfit.”

“I’m…” Jack paused, trying to make sense of what Marinette had just said. She looked down at her stomach and picked at the black-and-white striped top. “But you…” Her brain was flooded with confusion but, bit-by-bit, realization began to sew together an answer. She looked back at Marinette, who once again couldn’t meet her eye. “…You were playing a mean joke on me.”

Marinette bowed her head, deeply ashamed.

“Why?” wondered Jack. Marinette was the nicest girl in school. Jack couldn’t even begin to comprehend what she had done to deserve such treatment.

The girl bit her lip. “I was jealous…of all the time you were spending with Adrien.”

“What are you talking about? You spend a lot of time with him too.”

“Yeah, but not…not like…” Marinette squeezed her eyes shut. “I thought you liked him. Like, liked him, liked him.”

“You thought I had a crush on Adrien Agreste!? What kind of girl do you think I am? I have a boyfriend…” Of course. Like Alya, Marinette didn’t know. Jack facepalmed. Adrien wasn’t the only oblivious one. “You like him,” she realized.

The very words caused Marinette to blush. Now that Jack said them aloud, they seemed obvious. Marinette was always staring at Adrien, or acting squirrely around him or getting tongue-tied, but Jack just thought she was shy and socially awkward. And Alya…! This whole time Jack though Alya disliked her and Marinette was backing her up, when really it was the other way around.

“Alya told me about Diego,” explained Marinette quickly. “If I had known…No, this serves me right. I should have never done what I did in the first place. There were times when I was thinking of scrapping the whole thing because you seemed so nice, but then you’d bring up Adrien and I’d get jealous all over again and…I’m sorry. Please, please, please let me make it up to you. Please give me a chance! I’ll design you a new outfit. I’ll take you shopping. Whatever you want! But if you hate me and never want to talk to me again, I totally understand.”

Jack was speechless. This was the most Marinette had ever spoken to her, and it was all in English.

Marinette’s eyes fluttered up for a moment, probably wondering what was taking Jack so long to say something. There was a part of Jack that was furious, of course. She had half a mind to yell at Marinette for making assumptions, but there was a much larger part of her that was relieved. She hadn’t done anything wrong—Marinette and Alya’s hatred of her had all just been a big misunderstanding. A bit of her bad luck, as it were. Nothing more.

Jack reached out and put a hand on Marinette’s shoulder. “No hard feelings.”

It seemed Marinette couldn’t believe her luck. “Really? After everything?”

“Chloé is going to come after you hard after what you just did.” Jack snagged her water bottle back. “I think that’s punishment enough.”
The designer gave a lopsided smile. She moved around Jack and up the stairs. “C’mon. Let’s find you something else to wear for now.”

They went through Marinette’s clothes together, but everything was perfectly tailored and thus several sizes too small for Jack to squeeze into. They ended up raiding Mm. Cheng’s armoire instead. Most of her clothes were beautifully handcrafted Chinese garments, but there was a faded blue blouse in the back spattered with pink paint. Jack went to the bathroom to try it on. She actually kind of liked thearty look. Mimmi flew out to see for herself and flashed Jack a thumbs up. As for her capris, she was suddenly hit with a wave of inspiration.

“Hey, Marinette?” Jack peeked her head out of the bathroom. “Can I have a pair of scissors? I think I’m gonna just cut these pants so Chloé won’t recognize them.”

Her classmate put her hands to her face, peering through her fingers. “Coupez-les (Cut them)!”

Oh, they were back to French again. Jack gave a blank stare, so Marinette held up two fingers and mimed a pair of scissors.

“Oh!” realized Jack. “Yes.”

“I-I guess you could do that…”

Marinette vanished up the stairs.

Mimmi waited until she was sure Marinette was gone to speak. “That was kind of you to forgive Marinette like that,” she said.

Jack shrugged. “You know me. Grudges aren’t really my…thing…”

She paused, hearing the soft thunder of footsteps overhead. Mimmi hid just inside the bathroom as Marinette bolted back down the stairs. She handed off the fabric scissors to Jack as she ran by. “I’ve got to go. Good luck!”

“What? But—”

But Marinette was already continuing down the stairs, taking them two at a time. Jack heard the front door open and then slammed shut, shaking a nearby plant on a stand. Jack turned to her Kwami and the two exchanged shrugs before Jack padded back into the bathroom and got to work.

Several decisive snips later and Jack found herself wearing a pair of Bermuda shorts. She took a moment to admire her handiwork before glancing at her watch. She was now twenty minutes late for class, but it was well worth it if it meant preventing her own social suicide. Still, she didn’t want to miss the entire first lesson, so she left the scissors on the sink and headed out.

As soon as Jack entered the side alley next to the Dupain-Cheng’s bakery though, she heard hysterical shouting. Curious, she crossed the street and looked down at the river walk to investigate, where she found two things.

The first was that the Seine was blue. It was so blue, in fact, that Jack thought the normally gray waters had been dyed, but they weren’t clouded. She could see the shadowy slips of fish racing along a few feet beneath the surface. It was breathtaking. Somehow, it had been cleaned completely.
The second was a knot of people playing tug-of-war with a man in a motorcycle jacket...against a giant tentacle of water protruding from the Seine.

Jack sighed. Another day, another Akuma. Looked like she was going to be later to school than she thought.

She dropped down onto the walk, not even bothering to conceal herself since the only people down there were distracted. “Mimmi! Hop to it!” she whispered.

By the time Jack was done transforming, the water tentacle had almost yanked the man free from the others’ hands.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” Jack cried, throwing her chakram. It sliced through the tentacle, separating it in two. The part that was no longer attached fell to the ground with a splash. Everyone who had been trying to save the man fell over backwards in a heap, the man landing on top. Jack took a few hops and planted herself between them and the river just in time to catch her chakram, which had bounced off the far bank and back. Enlarging it, Jack swung it around her arm, creating a golden yellow shield. The water tentacle reformed and tried to attack, but it bounced off. Another tentacle formed, trying to go above Jack to get to the man, but she jumped up into its path and fended it off too.

“What did you do!?” she asked the man in the motorcycle jacket over her shoulder. She had half a mind to ask him in French, but she had long ago decided that Rabbit didn’t speak or understand anything but English in order to preserve her identity. The man was too busy struggling to his feet to answer anyway. “Never mind,” she said, shooing him and the others away. “Just go. Run!”

They tried, but it seemed the Seine wasn’t going to give up that easily. More tentacles sprouted. They went after Jack until her hands were so full fighting them off that another could slip behind her and grab the fleeing man by his ankle. The other people weren’t able to grab him this time and he was dragged screaming towards the water.

“No!” cried Jack.

She held her chakram firm and spun around on the spot, slicing as many of the tentacles as possible. Her angle wasn’t good to free the man like she had last time, so she darted across the pavement to grab him instead. Unfortunately, she was so focused on recuing him that she didn’t notice the new tentacle forming off to her far left. It shot out and wrapped around her. Jack soon found herself floating in water and lifted high into the air.

A streak of black came racing down the street, followed by the glint of silver. A staff extended out and swiped through the tentacle holding Jack hostage. The water around her started to fall and so did she. Cat Noir vaulted down the embankment though and caught her.

“So nice of you to drop in, Rabbit,” he told her, but Jack was concerned about other things.

“Where—!?” she wondered, climbing out of her friend’s arms and looking around for the man she had been unable to save. Had he drowned? She wouldn’t be able to live with herself if he had.

She scanned the river, looking for any air bubbles, but movement upstream caught her eye. There was a large trash barge floating towards them, filled with mountains of garbage—muck and grime smattered with broken glass, banana peels, tree branches, beer cans—even a rusted bike! On closer inspection though, it wasn’t a trash barge at all, but one of the boats tourists rode up and down the Seine packed to the gills with trash. Jack watched as river water pushed the man in the motorcycle
jacket up into it, where he joined a handful of others.

“Uh…Rabbit?”

Jack turned to Cat to see his eyes glued to a small whirlpool that had formed in the River Seine right in front of them. A tentacle of water rose up out of it, but it was different from the other ones. This one was in the shape of a girl about Jack’s age, with wavy hair and a skinny neck that made her look like a bobble head. Around her collar was a strange necklace with a large, rectangular pendant. She wore a diadem and a simple long-sleeved dress that was tight on the top, but flowed down into the river on the bottom, giving the appearance that the Seine was her train. She rose up a little, the dress never-ending. Jack couldn’t help but think she had seen the girl somewhere before, which was a first.

Cat Noir took a step back. “Inès!?”

Inès Renaud! Jack knew she looked familiar. She was in the same grade as Jack at Collège Françoise Dupont, but in a different class.

The girl’s serene face twisted into a scowl at the sound of her real name. “It’s Sequana!” she cried, throwing down her arms and splashing water everywhere. Her voice echoed and sounded distant, like she was talking through a pipe.

Cat shook the droplets of water off him, much like his namesake would. “Water you doing?” he wondered.

“English puns?” wondered Jack. “Now!?”

“Give me a break! I haven’t fought by your side in a while.”

“I’m not fighting!” Only bad things seemed to happen when Jack tried to fight. Her and Ladybug both agreed it was for the best if she avoided it at all costs. “I rescue people and that’s it.” Jack pointed towards the boat, where the captives sat in filth. “Let them go, Sequana!”

“Yeah! Let them go!” translated Cat.

“No way! They are the ones to blame for polluting my bien-aimée (beloved) Seine!” hissed the Akuma. She gestured grandly upstream, where several more boats filled with garbage and people came into view. “Look! All that was a trouvé (found) in the river! The people of Paris traitent (treat) the Seine like garbage, so I will traitent (treat) them the same manière (way). See how they feel. I will make them respect the Seine again! I will! But first…” She lifted her arms, two tentacles rising up from the waters around her. “I’m taking your Miraculouses!”

Jack dove to one side and Cat rolled to the other as the waters lashed out at them. They used their weapon to cut the tentacles down to size, but Jack knew that was only a temporary fix. Sequana was forming more.

Bounding over to her friend, Jack grabbed him by the wrist and they ran away together, more tentacles upon their retreating backs. She jumped and he extended his staff to reach the street above, the resounding crash following as the water hit below them. Jack was reminded of the crash of an ocean wave and drew strength from the sound. They kept on moving, darting through traffic and down Rue de Seine. It was fitting, considering the Seine was chasing them. As the tentacles closed in on them again, Cat Noir grabbed Jack around the middle and boosted them up to the rooftops as she threw her chakram behind her, giving them some space. They didn’t stay above for too long though
—too exposed—and heads back down to the ground again to cut through apartment courtyards and side streets. The water eventually lost sight of them, allowing her and Cat to pause and gather their bearings by a Vélib’ Bike Rental station tucked out of the way of a busy street.

“Whew! This new Akuma certainly makes a splash, doesn’t she?” said Cat Noir, casually leaning against a bright green trashcan. “So what’s the plan?”

Jack blinked at him. “Why are you asking me?”

“You come up with some pretty good ones. Remember when you kicked Road Rage out of his monster truck?”

“…and almost ran you over?” reminded Jack. She shook her head and look away. “I’m no good at plans—mine always end up putting someone in danger. Why don’t you call Ladybug? I’m sure she’d come up with something good. I should go.”

Jack turned to leave only to find Cat Noir holding her back.

“Cat…” she said with a sigh.

“No, don’t!” he begged. “I already tried to call Ladybug and she didn’t pick up. I can’t fight Sequana alone.”

“You won’t. She’ll show up. She always does.”

“But can’t you fight with me until then?”

“No! It’s too dangerous. Until I learn how to use Dogstruction, I can’t—”

Cat lowered his cat ears. “I know, I know,” he groused. Then a thought crossed his mind and he perked up again. “Hey, did you check out that quarry I told you about yet?”

“…yeah, actually.”

“And?”

“And…I think it might actually work. I need to set it up first, but I could probably start training there soon.”

"Great! You just let me know when you need me to help."

"Totally. I was thinking—"

Cat’s eyes went wide. “Look out!” he cried, diving forward and tackling Jack to the ground. She fell over backwards and watched a jet of water shoot over their heads between Cat’s ears. There was a resounding crash as it hit the trashcan.

Sequana had found them.

The water tentacle yanked itself out of the trash, the end now filled with Styrofoam cups and cigarette butts. It began to shake and thrash about.
“What the…?” wondered Jack.

Cat rolled off Jack and helped her to her feet. They watched as the tentacle continued its odd dance, like a possessed snake. Instead of attacking them like it should have, it was trying to clean itself. The two superheroes took advantage of the situation and ran. They knew more tentacles were no doubt on their way. But not all hope was lost.

“I think I have an idea after all…” Jack told her friend as they ran side-by-side. Cat turned to her, his eyes sparkling. “What if we distracted Sequana by making the Seine dirty again?”

“How?”

“Is there, like, sewage we can dump into it or something?”

“Sounds like a job for Hôtel de Ville! I’ll take you there.” He splayed a hand to his chest. “I’ll have you know that I am personal friends with the mayor.”

Mayor Bourgeois—Chloé’s father. Jack grew nervous at the very thought. She had seen the mayor on TV a couple of times, a regal man with a flabby chin that was never seen without his patriotic sash. He didn’t seem as bad as Chloé, but she had a sinking feeling that if her plan didn’t pan out, he would burn her like he had some of his political rivals. But Cat seemed confident in her, so that helped. What did Mimmi always say? Believe in yourself and you will be unstoppable.

Jack followed Cat’s lead as he took a right and then another right, looping around. Other than the gasps and murmurs of pedestrians as they darted by though, everything seemed peaceful and calm. The closer they got to the Seine though, the emptier the streets became until they were completely deserted. Still, there was no sign of Sequana or her water tentacles. When they arrived at the river though, they realized why.

Tons of tentacles—twenty, maybe thirty—were reaching out from the Seine to arc over the street and attack the penthouse of the Le Grand Paris. They kept on breaking apart though, drenching the area below. The tiny figure of Ladybug kept them at bay with her yo-yo.

“No wonder My Lady’s been absent!” Cat observed, and then elbowed Jack in the ribs. “Get it? AB-SEINE-t?”

“I don’t think that pun is going to help Ladybug,” Jack pointed out. She knew Cat Noir loved Ladybug, but he sometimes got preoccupied with being a walking stereotype of a superhero. A gentle reminder of what was truly important though always put him back on the right track.

“Er…right!”

They headed to the row houses next door to the hotel, with Jack jumping and Cat extending his staff to get on the roof. Jack threw herself over to the hotel, but it was a long jump and gravity took a hold of her. She ended up grabbing onto a Juliet balcony affixed to a window a floor below the penthouse balcony she had been aiming for. Cat Noir, on the other hand, vaulted over Jack’s head and easily landed on the right floor. Jack scrambled up to join him. She was a little embarrassed her legs couldn’t take her as far as his staff, but now wasn’t the time to dwell on it. One of the water tentacles had snagged Ladybug by the yo-yo throwing arm, temporarily dismantling her attack, but Cat Noir swung his staff down on the offending tentacles and it lost all hold.

It was nice to see Ladybug look relieved to see Jack for once, but maybe it was just because of Cat.
“Chaton! Rabbit! Good timing!” she said before switching to English. She swung her yo-yo, the string severing three more arms of the Seine. “Seems our Akuma really has it out for Chloé Bourgeois.”

“Not surprised…” Jack muttered to herself under her breath. She threw her chakram through a tentacle. It smacked into the railing and bounced back, taking out another.

“She calls herself Sequana,” explained Cat, twirling his staff around, water splashing at his feet. “Wants the Seine to be clean. And our Miraculouses, of course.”

“Sequana? What kind of name is that?” wondered Ladybug. Jack nodded in agreement. She also had no idea of the significance of the Akuma’s name, but had been too afraid to ask. She just assumed it was a French word she didn’t know the English translation of.

“Don’t you know, Bug-a-boo? Sequana is the Gallo-Roman goddess of the River Seine. Seems your mythology is a little rusty. I could tutor you, if you’d like.” Cat waggled his eyebrows at her.

“Duck,” Ladybug told him, swinging her yo-yo at his head without a second thought. He heeded her command.

“Ducks were actually her familiars!” explained Cat, not skipping a beat. “Looks like you don’t need my help after all.”

“We need to get Chloé out of here,” insisted Ladybug, getting them back on topic.

“Right! Why don’t we take her to her dad? We were on our way to see him anyway. Rabbit has a great plan.”

“A plan?” Ladybug cast Jack a worried glance. Cat didn’t seem to notice.

“Yup! Rabbit, run inside and grab Chloé, will ya? My Lady and I will cover you.”

Jack turned towards the sliding glass door, but hesitated.

“What’s wrong?” wondered Cat, spinning his staff behind his back to take out a water tentacle that was creeping up behind him. He took a moment to gently push Jack towards the door. “Go on! Don’t be shy. She loves superheroes!”

Jack felt like she had no choice. She was just going to have to put her personal grievances with the bully aside and act professional. Besides, Rabbit had never met Chloé. She had no problems with her. Maybe they could start fresh. It would be pretty funny if Chloé adored her as a superhero.

She slid open the door and slipped inside, slamming it shut behind her.

The floor-to-ceiling windows rattled as water splashed against them, but the plush purple area rug now underfoot seemed to absorb a lot of sound of the fierce battle happening right outside. Everything inside the ornate suite felt calm and still. As Jack looked around though, she couldn’t help but be annoyed. Did Chloé really need a TV that took up an entire wall? Did the seat cushions of the quilted fuchsia box sofas really need to be monogramed with her initials in gold thread? Did those red flowers really need to be in a Ming Dynasty vase?
Jack closed her eyes and breathed out hard through her nose, trying to keep her personal feelings in check.

“Chloé?” she called out.

“In here!”

For someone whose life was in peril, Chloé certainly sounded chipper. Jack followed the voice, padding through the lounge and rounding the bend to find a bed at the end. It was freshly made, no doubt thanks to housekeeping, with an oversize stuffed teddy bear and ladybug leaning against the pillows. There was the sound of something snapping shut to Jack’s right though and she looked to see a bathroom. Chloé stood at the vanity, putting the finishing touches on her periwinkle eye shadow. Jack gave a small start—she was wearing a pair of white capris, a black-and-white striped top, and a yellow jacket—her favorite outfit Jack had been wearing an exact copy of not too long ago.

“Just a second, Ladybug!” Chloé trilled. “I’m presque (almost)—” She turned, her face souring instantly. “Oh. It’s you. As if my day couldn’t get any empirer (worse).”

“Ladybug is risking her life out there to protect you…and you’re doing your makeup!?” cried Jack, unable to keep her outrage to a minimum.

“How dare you!?” complained Chloé in her near-flawless English. “Like, I’m totally the victim here! First a girl at school sprays water in my face FOR NO REASON, forcing me to come home to change my clothes and reapply my makeup. Then, as I’m leaving for school a second time, an Akuma does the SAME EXACT THING. Thank goodness Ladybug came, or this would be the ABSOLUTE WORSE DAY EVER.”

“Well, if you’re done…I’m here to take you to your dad.”

Chloé crossed her arms and looked away. “I’m not going anywhere with you. Where’s Ladybug?”

“She’s busy.” Jack reached for Chloé’s arm. “Now let’s go.”

Chloé slapped Jack’s hand away. “I will not! I—ah!!! What are you doing!? Put me down, you mangy rodent!”

Jack had grown tired of Chloé’s attitude and just picked the girl up. “I’m not a rodent, I’m a rabbit.”

“Same difference!”

“Whatever.”

The moment Jack took a step Chloé stopped fighting and flung her arms around Jack’s neck with a sharp intake of breath. Jack often forgot about how startling her speed was. She could go from zero to 45 mph in no time flat. In a flash, they were standing at the sliding glass door, watching Ladybug and Cat Noir fight off the Seine.

“Woo! Look at Ladybug go!” said Chloé.

Jack rolled her eyes and tapped the glass with the toe of her boot. Ladybug glanced back, but a tentacle grabbed her while she was distracted. Muffled shouting sounded from Cat as he chucked his
staff at a section of the tentacle further back and opened the door for Jack at the same time. He freed Ladybug only for several tentacles to wrap themselves around him now that he had no way to defend himself. They worked in unison to drag him off the roof.

“No! Chat!” cried Ladybug. She used her yo-yo to lasso his foot, yanking him out of Sequana’s clutches. Unfortunately, he swung backwards and vanished, though the three of them winced when they heard a sound smack as he hit the building. Ladybug quickly reeled him in. “I’m sorry, Chat!” she told him as she pulled him up over the railing and went to his side, extremely concerned. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Her partner was quite dazed as he stumbled about trying to find his footing, but he managed to give her a toothy grin and a thumbs up. “Je vous balancer votre chemin (always swing your way), My Lady.”

Ladybug was not amused. “I’ll take that as a yes…”

“Um…hello!? My make-up is in peril here!” cried Chloé, pointing toward the tentacles that were coming back for them.

“Time to check out!” shouted Cat in English as the three of them jumped, vaulted, and swung off the balcony.

They raced along the rooftops parallel with the Seine, following Ladybug’s lead. Tentacle after tentacle sprouted from its waters to snag them, but they managed to stay a step ahead. They had to cross sometime though—they were passing by Notre Dame now.

Ladybug banked a sharp right and they managed to cross a bridge onto Île de la Cité. By the time they reached the other side though, Sequana had headed them off. A forest of water tentacles stood at the ready, the Akuma among them. Ladybug, Cat Noir, and Jack skidded to a stop.

“You!” cried Chloé, climbing out of Jack’s arms before she could stop her. “You’re behind this, aren’t you? My father is going to hear about this!”

“So now you go to your father?” said Sequana. “But not with any of my proposals to nettoyer (clean up) the Seine, huh? I saw what you did with them. You threw them into the river! MY river!”

“Oh, Chloé…” murmured Ladybug, shaking her head.

“You should’ve seen those ringard collants (tacky binders) they came in, Ladybug,” said Chloé, defending herself. “You would have done the same.”

One of the tentacles lashed out at Chloé. She screamed so loud that Jack nearly went deaf, but Cat cut it down to size before it could reach the girl.

“Fine, fine!” said Chloé. “I’ll take one of your stupid collants (binders) to my father. Just don’t ruin my make-up again!”

All the tentacles lowered into the river slightly as Sequana clasped her hands together, looking hopeful. “Really? You mean it?”

No sooner had the words left Sequana’s mouth then the glowing outline of a purple moth appeared in front of her face. Hawk Moth always had something to say when his end of the bargain wasn’t
being upheld. Jack didn’t know what he was telling Sequana, but it didn’t matter. Now was their chance to cross the river, while the Akuma was distracted.

Jack wound up and flung her chakram ahead of her to mow down the tentacles impeding her way before scooping Chloé up again and jumping after her weapon. There was the zip of a string and Jack watched a yo-yo fly beneath her and wrap around the trunk of a tree on the far side of the river. She and Ladybug were across before Sequana even knew what was happening, but she reacted quickly. With a rush of water, the river level lowered as it gathered into the middle and pushed up, climbing higher and higher, forming a wall. It rose upstream and downstream, as far as the eye could see, pushing up the trash-filled boats thirty feet into the air so they teetered precariously on top. The screams of those trapped on them filled the air.

“Chaton!” realized Ladybug when she turned around and noticed her partner had not followed them, but there was no time to worry about him. Water tentacles burst forth from Sequana’s wall and spiraled towards her and Jack.

They had to move. Now.

“This way!” Ladybug shouted, motioning to Jack as she shot off to the north, moving away from the Seine and Hôtel de Ville at an angle. Jack hopped after her, Chloé complaining that they were going the wrong way as they moved across rooftops and down through a park. The water tentacles weaved around buildings and cars, trying to catch up.

Ladybug spun around on top of a chimney. “Here!” she cried, holding out her hands.

Jack didn’t need to be told twice, especially with water licking at her heels. She tossed Chloé over. The girl closed her eyes and shrieked, and continued to do so even after she ended up safely in Ladybug’s arms. Free from the burden, Jack spun around mid-jump and took out one of the tentacles chasing her out with a well-angled throw of her chakram.

Jack took the low road while Ladybug took the high one, but they eventually switched. As they passed each other, Ladybug shoved Chloé back into Jack’s arms. Now it was Ladybug’s turn to cut down the Seine’s reach, whipping her yo-yo around as she did handsprings down the street and over cars.

The two of them continued on like this—tossing a yowling Chloé back and forth, dodging and destroying thrashing water tentacles—until they were no longer being pursued. Jack was actually a bit disappointed when that point came. It was nice to be in-sync with Ladybug for once, and Chloé deserved the scare she had gotten.

“Ladybug!” complained Chloé, desperately combing her hands through her hair to remove the tangled knots as the three of them rested on the roof of a grand iron-domed building. “Look at what Rabbit did to my hair!”

Jack and Ladybug rolled their eyes in unison as Jack peered around the corner, her rabbit ears swiveling. She caught the sounds of people and traffic, but no rushing water.

“I think we lost her,” Jack reported.

“Let’s double back to Hôtel de Ville then,” said Ladybug. “Carefully,” she added. “We don’t want to get caught.”
Jack nodded. “I’ll follow your lead.”

Jack paused, a sudden wave of nostalgia enveloping her. Diego always said that, that he would follow Jack’s lead. He trusted her irrevocably. She remembered how much that had scared her the first time since she didn’t want to let him down. She grew into her leadership role eventually, but it was fear that drove her to it. She doubted Ladybug was the same way. She seemed so confident. A natural-born leader. No wonder even someone as petulant as Chloé adored her.

“Urrrgh, we forgot Chloé…” realized Ladybug when they reached the ground.

A quick return trip to the roof and the three of them made their way back in the direction they had come. As Ladybug pointed out, it would be what Sequana would least suspect, and thus the safest route. Sure enough, her words held true. They arrived at Paris’s city hall without running into any more tentacles.

“Daddy!” cried Chloé as soon as they were inside, leaping out of Ladybug’s arms and running up the one of the curved staircases. The building was eerily empty, no one even manning the reception desk, and Jack could guess why. She could see the wall of water Sequana had created outside every window. The building had probably been evacuated, being so close to the Seine.

Jack and Ladybug followed Chloé to the mayor’s office, a cavernous and ornate room that spoke of history and experience. The man himself sat at his oversized desk conferencing with some of the top members of his staff. He seemed completely in control, which was rather laughable when just beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows was evidence Paris was under threat.

“My little princess! What are you doing here?” he was saying as Chloé clung to him.

“Mayor Bourgeois!” said Ladybug, making her presence known. Every eye in the room turned to her as she marched forward. Jack, unsure, hung back.

“Ladybug! Merveilleux (Wonderful)!” said the Mayor. He turned to the others. “On dirait (it looks) like this Akuma business is as good as solved.”

“Her name is Sequana. I found her attacking your daughter.”

“Ladybug rescued me, Daddy!” explained Chloé.

Jack wanted to argue that she helped, but decided it wouldn’t be worth it. Instead, she watched the color drain from Mayor Bourgeois’s face. He enveloped Chloé in a hug, and Jack found herself smiling. In that moment, Mayor Bourgeois reminded her of her dad.

“Thank heavens you’re okay!” said the man. “I will make sure that Akuma is prosecuted to the fullest extent of the loi (law)!”

Jack frowned. Okay, that reminded her less of her dad.

“Let me m’en occuper (take care) of it,” suggested Ladybug. “She’s made of water, so a prison isn’t going to hold her.”

“Then I shall arrest her after you defeat her!”

Ladybug became alarmed. “What!? No! She’s not in control of her actions. You’re daughter actually
—Argh, never mind. Sequana doit (must) be stopped—I think we can all agree on that—but nous avons besoin (we need) your help to do that.”

“Tout ce que tu veux (Whatever you need), Ladybug. It’s yours. What’s your plan?”

“Oh, it’s not mine.” Ladybug turned to Jack. “Rabbit?”

Jack flinched at the sound of her name coming from Ladybug’s lips. She looked around at the big and important people now staring her down. She dropped her gaze and toed the parquet floors with her boot.

“Um…Do you all understand English?”

“Well enough,” said the Mayor, his voice formal now that he was speaking to her and not Ladybug. “Tell us of your plan to defeat Sequana.”

“She…she is more concerned about keeping the Seine clean then anything else. If she’s distracted doing that, Ladybug can beat her.”

“Hmmm…” Mayor Bourgeois stroked his chin. “What are you proposing then?”

“We…we dump sewage into the river.”

“WHAT!?”

Jack jerked her head up, surprised it was Ladybug who was indignant and not the mayor or one of his employees. She knew she and Ladybug had their differences, but she had been expecting her fellow superhero’s support like she had gotten from Cat Noir. Without it, she knew the mayor wouldn’t even consider her idea.

“Excuse us,” said Ladybug, recovering. “I need to speak to Rabbit privately for a moment.” She grabbed Jack’s wrist and dragged her to a corner, by a mini-model of Paris “Destroy the Seine?” the girl whispered, aghast. “Are you crazy? I trusted Chat when he said you had a great plan!”

“He said that because he trusts me,” Jack pointed out, trying her best not to be hurt. “So why can’t you?”

Ladybug opened her mouth to answer, but froze. The word ‘dangerous’ was on her lips again. Jack could feel it. And it wasn’t unwarranted either. But for Ladybug to equate that with Jack not being trustworthy…It seemed she realized maybe she was being unfair.

“If you have a better idea, let me know,” said Jack. “But if you don’t, please give mine a chance.”

That did the trick. Ladybug grimaced, looking a bit guilty. “Okay. You’re right. I’m sorry I reacted that way.”

“No hard feelings.”

Ladybug gave her a strange look, but shook her head and headed back to Mayor Bourgeois.

“Comptez (Count) on Rabbit to come up with a disgusting plan like that,” said Chloé, seeking approval from her idol.
“It took me by surprise, but I think it’s a good plan now that I think about it,” said Ladybug firmly.

“Mayor Bourgeois, can you help us?”

Ladybug’s support carried a lot of weight. Though the mayor seemed hesitant, he got on the phone with the nasally-sounding head of Eau de Paris, the water and sewage authority for the city. Jack had a tough time following along with what was being said, especially since she could only hear half of the conversation, but Ladybug gave Jack the translated Cliff’s Notes version. Essentially Eau de Paris was going to create something known as a sanitary sewer overflow, which would dump untreated sewage into the Seine. They usually occurred due to heavy rainfall, but turning off the pumping station lifts and blocking the sewer lines could create them as well. It apparently wouldn’t take long at all.

“Perfect!” said Ladybug into the speakerphone, making the plan official. “Rabbit and I garderons (will keep) the Akuma busy à vous acheter (to buy you) some time. Good luck!”

“Thank you, Ladybug. We’ll do our mieux (best)!” said the head of Eau de Paris before hanging up.

Without further ado, Jack and Ladybug headed out, back to the Seine. All the while, Jack felt an ache in her bones for home. Her homesickness had dulled over these five weeks in Paris, but that didn’t mean it was no longer there. It was as persistent as ever, and it was at times like this—when she was reminded that she was an outsider—that it ate away at her. In L.A., she had been like Ladybug. Everyone trusted her, from Diego to the police to random people on the street. She never realized she had taken that trust for granted until it was gone. All this time she had been trying to earn it in Paris by rescuing people and refusing to use her special power, but it didn’t seem to be working. It was disheartening. But Ladybug had finally taken the first step in making things easier for Jack. Maybe things were finally starting to look up!

The two of them skidded to a halt at the edge of the Seine, craning their necks as they looked up at the closest trash-laden boat. Ladybug threw her yo-yo at it, but a tentacle of water burst forth and immediately swatted it down. Jack jumped onto Ladybug’s shoulders and leapt towards it, holding her chakram out and spinning to slice through it. Ladybug’s yo-yo then wrapped around Jack’s throwing ring and dragged her back to safety. It was a pretty cool way to take out one tentacle. Unfortunately, there were five more to take its place.

“Sending the Seine to do your sale boulot (dirty work)!?” chided Ladybug while her and Jack fought off the tentacles back to back. With water splashing everywhere, it was starting to get hard to see. They would probably be overwhelmed in a moment if they didn’t try to escape soon. “That’s low, Sequana!”

The water tentacles fell down dead, draining back into the low river. Wiping water off their faces as their suites drip-dried in seconds, Jack and Ladybug looked to find Sequana standing on a ledge of water protruding from her water wall. Three of her tentacles remained. One reached over the wall, another ran down the Seine before it disappeared over the horizon, and the last one went back the way Jack and Ladybug had come.

“I only play sale (dirty) because you did so d’abord (first),” said Sequana, gesturing to the tentacle that ran the length of the Seine. It took Jack a moment, but she realized the water was rushing. It was reeling something in, or, rather, someone. A man in a suit with a large nose and glasses was madly treading water at the end of it. As he called out for help, Jack and Ladybug recognized his nasally voice from over the phone.
The head of Eau de Paris.

The tentacle next to Jack and Ladybug began to pull back too. Jack tried to slice it with her chakram, but it wriggled out of the way, lifting up. Jack tried to jump for it, but she couldn’t get high enough. She watched it yank a screaming Chloé over her head.

“Do you think I’m stupid?” wondered Sequana, tossing the two unceremoniously up onto the boat above her head with a moist squelch. The two tentacles even dusted each other off like they were hands finished handling something dirty before receding back into the wall. “I knew you were going to go see the mayor. Why else bring Chloé with you across the Seine? I entendu (overheard) your whole little plan.”

“She only let us think he escaped her earlier…” said Ladybug, sharing her realization with Jack.

“Now that I’ve nettoyé (cleaned up) that mess…” said Sequana, glowering down at Jack and Ladybug. “Remettre (Surrender) your Miraculouses. Now!”

“No way!”

Sequana did a fancy flourish with her hand, the last tentacle pulling up and over the wall. Trapped at the end of it with only his head free was Cat Noir.

Jack felt a jolt run through her body, burning a pit in her stomach. “Cat!” she cried, the same time Ladybug squeaked, “Chaton!”

Cat opened his mouth to say something, thrashing and splashing about, but Sequana lifted a hand, summoning a new tentacle, and slammed it over her fist. The tentacle reacted the same way, covering Cat’s head with water. His cheeks were now puffed out with held breath, bubbles escaping his lips as he tried to swim himself free, but the water went with him no matter the direction. There was no escape.

“Let him go!” cried Ladybug, quickly growing desperate. “He’ll noiera (drown)!”

“Only if you give me your Miraculous!” countered the Akuma.

Jack’s whole body had gone slack as she watched Cat struggle. It didn’t feel real. Not even an hour ago he had been making water-based puns as he fought by her side. Now he was in in mortal danger. Their suits protected them from a lot, but not from their lungs filling up with water. They had to free him, and soon. He couldn’t hold his breath forever.

Jack and Ladybug tried to attack the tentacle holding Cat with everything they had, but more appeared to protect it and attack them in return. It appeared the cleaner the Seine had become, the stronger Sequana had gotten. She easily stripped the two of them of their weapons.

“It’s no good,” Ladybug said to Jack, her eyes wide and fearful. “She’s just too powerful.”

“We’ll think of something!” Jack insisted, looking around frantically for inspiration, but there was none.

Feeling frustrated and overwhelmed, Jack yanked hard on her fishbone braid and knelt. If only Sequana hadn’t ruined her plan! She was pretty confident it would have worked, or else why would Sequana have gone through the trouble of capturing the head of Eau de Paris? A sanitary sewer
overflow would have weakened the Akuma, and then her and Ladybug would be able to rescue Cat. As things stood now though, his fate looked bleak.

Jack locked eyes with Cat, who had stopped struggling by this point. He was sad and scared, but resigned. He blew out the last bit of his breath in a shower of bubbles.

A cry ripped through Jack. “NO!”

She would not, could not let Hawk Moth win or, worse, let Cat Noir die. She would never forget that he was the first person she met in Paris who made her feel welcome. He was her first friend when no one else had bothered. If Jack needed to ruin the River Seine to save his life, then she would ruin the River Seine the only way she knew how.

Jack widened her stance, her hands curling into fists.

“Rabbit, don—” started Ladybug, realizing exactly what Jack planned to do, but she was too late.

“Dogstruction!” shouted Jack.

While she had always needed her chakram to perform Lucky Strike, Jack had given up the ghost. As much as it pained her to admit it, it wasn’t her power anymore, so it was time she stopped trying to preform it and skip right to what it had actually become. She crossed her arms above her head, made fists, and brought them down to her chest like she had seen Diego do so many times before as Perro Negro. Sure enough, spheres of light gathered beneath her curled finger. Once they had gathered enough power, she threw them skywards. When they reached their zenith, they twisted together and shot down at Jack, striking her and giving her an aura.

Ladybug reached towards Jack, but Jack was off like the shot down the street, decimating it. Behind her, a constant stream of rubble crumbled into the Seine—fencing, asphalt, street signs, cement roadblocks, the cars that had been abandoned by their drivers in their haste to evacuate. Jack lifted a hand and jumped as she passed under a bridge, her touch causing it to collapse into the river. She knew Miraculous Ladybug wouldn’t fix any of the damage that she was causing, but she didn’t care. If it saved Cat, then it was worth it.

Jack glanced at her watch. Only fifteen seconds had passed, but that was enough. She threw herself over to the other bank, breaking through Sequana’s wall of water as easily as if it were air. When she landed, she sprayed up a geyser of brick and dirt before making her way back in the direction she had come, a trail of destruction following her. She was on the river walk, so now it was brick pavers and trashcans and trees and benches and bicycles that were splashing into the waters of the Seine. Other boats Sequana had run aground were flipped back into the river upside down.

The once pristine Seine was starting to turn gray again, the waters swirling with grim of Jack’s creation. As she boxed in Île de la Cité, she caught hints of Sequana’s water wall weakening. It wobbled, the boats atop it bobbing up and down as they eventually lowered by a few feet. Jack broke back through the wall to the side she had started on to see the tentacle of water that was drowning Cat Noir was having trouble holding its shape. While she was still some ways off, it broke apart, dumping him into Ladybug’s outstretched arms. Cat jerked violently as he coughed up water, but it appeared he was going to be okay, much to Jack’s relief. Ladybug laid him on the ground and used Lucky Charm, summoning an inflatable red raft with black polka dots. She held it up like a shield when Sequana recovered and attacked, all the while hurrying Cat Noir to his feet and issuing him instructions. He nodded and pulled out his staff, taking off towards Hôtel de Ville. He didn’t roam too far though. He looped back around, dodging a few tentacles Sequana had sent after him.
Jack had been confused at first, but now she realized Cat was trying to get a running head start.

Cat Noir extended his staff and planted into the Seine, vaulting up onto the boat of trash above Sequana’s head. Jack stopped where she was to watch him.

“Cataclysm!” he shouted as he summoned dark energy into his hand and ran a claw along the side of the ship.

Garbage spewed out like blood gushing from an open wound, showering Sequana. She yelled out and frantically tried to clean herself but, in the process, she fell off her ledge and landed in the inflatable raft Ladybug had floated over while she was distracted. At some point Ladybug had recovered her yo-yo and tied it to the raft. She used it now to yank the raft back to shore.

Separated from the Seine, Sequana had no power. Ladybug dumped her out on the ground and tore her necklace off. Now that Jack knew the Akuma better, she realized it was the river restoration volunteer lanyard Inès always wore. Ripping the laminated badge in two released a black butterfly.

With a few choice words and a swing of her yo-yo, Ladybug purified the Akuma and then tossed the inflatable raft into the air to use Miraculous Ladybug. But though her ability cleaned the boats, returned the people who had been trapped on them to the streets, and even left the Seine cleaner than usual…the destruction Jack had caused remained. The Seine was now a river with ragged edges and, unlike the damage Jack had done to the 5th arrondissement, this time it had been intentional.

Miraculous Ladybug had returned Cat Noir to his Lady’s side. As Inès returned to normal, he offered his fist to Ladybug so they could pound knuckles in celebration, but she ignored him as she marched in Jack’s direction.

“Just what were you thinking, Rabbit!” Ladybug demanded, her eyes slits in her mask. She gestured around. Jack couldn’t look anywhere without seeing the crumbling remains of her handiwork. “Look what you’ve done!”

“I had to!” Jack insisted, careful not to move and cause any more damage. “It was the only way to save Cat.”

“No, it wasn’t! If you had just waited…I hadn’t even used Lucky Charm yet!”

Jack felt her self-righteousness evaporate, leaving her dizzy and weak in the knees. Her ears drooped. It only dawned on her now that she had acted impulsively.

Ladybug wasn’t finished with her tirade. “You didn’t even talk to me about what you were going to do! You want me to trust you? Well, it’s a little hard when you clearly don’t trust me.”

“That’s not…” Why hadn’t Jack shared her plan with Ladybug? Any excuse she came up with on the spot seemed weak. There was no time. I thought you would stop me. It was the heat of the moment. When it all came down to it, Jack simply did it because she thought she was in the right. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. How many times did she have to realize she wasn’t the hero she once was before the idea stuck? Luck was no longer on her side.

Jack’s Miraculous rang, giving her only two minutes. Ladybug crossed her arms, a scowl on her face.

“Go on,” she said, jerking her head as her own Miraculous beeped. “Get out of here. I think you’ve
done enough damage today. Enough damage for a lifetime.”

“Ladybug…” pleaded Cat. He had hung back out of respect to his partner, but it was obvious he didn’t want things to end this way.

“Fine, then,” she told him. “I’ll leave.” She threw out her yo-yo and snagged a rooftop. “But I refuse to defend what she has done,” she said coldly before zipping away.

Cat Noir watched her go with a pained expression. He turned to Jack, apologetic. “You were trying your best. I’m sure once My Lady cools down, she’ll see that,” he told her, but it sounded more like he was trying to convince himself of this. “Thanks for saving me,” he added, meaning it with every fiber of his being.

“No…don’t…” Jack looked away. “She’s right.”

“You just need more control. That’s all.” They both knew that wasn’t the problem this time, but it was a nice thought. “When do you want to practice at the quarry?”

With the little time Jack had left as Rabbit, her and Cat Noir made plans. It was all Jack could do, really—focus on what she could improve. She could berate herself all day for her shortcomings. It wouldn’t change the fact that she had destroyed another part of Paris.

* * *

Tote bag sliding off her shoulder, Jack booked it up the stairs to class. She was going to be late regardless, but her tardiness had gone from being justifiable to completely inexcusable by this point. She was going to be sent to M. Damocles for sure! But when Jack burst into the room, she discovered that Mlle Bustier and some of her classmates weren’t even there, and the ones who were were just milling about. Alix paused her conversation with Kim to wave, but before Jack could walk over and join them, a voice called out to her.

“Jack!” said Marinette. She tripped coming down the stairs, but was able to save herself from crashing to the ground by grabbing a hold of the desks on either side of the aisle. She made the most hilarious ‘yikes’ face before springing up and acting like she hadn’t nearly face planted. “Thank goodness you’re okay!”

“Marinette was out looking for you during that Akuma attack, si vous le croyez (if you believe it),” explained Alya, following her friend with a lot more grace.

“Really!?” asked Jack with a mixture of surprise and happiness.

“I should have never left you alone like that,” Marinette admitted. “I was just so afraid of getting in trouble. When the Akuma attacked though, I went back to find you, but you were gone. Did she get you?”

Jack nodded, switching to French. She’d never get better if she didn’t use it when she could. “Yeah. Tossed me into one of those boats. But I’m okay. Am I late?”

“No. The school is still on verrouillage (lockdown) because the Akuma attack was so proche (close).”
Alya shoved herself next to Jack and showed her a shaky video playing on her phone. “I got quelque (some) awesome footage of Chat Noir getting captured for the Ladyblog,” she said. “Check it!”

Sure enough, Jack watched herself leap across the Seine with Chloé in her arms, Ladybug following her. Cat Noir backed up to give himself a running head start so he could vault after them…only to smack right into the wall of water Sequana just created. If not for knowing how close he had come to drowning later, Jack would have found it comical.

Alya swiped to the right. The video was followed by picture after picture of the ruined banks of the river. “Je ne pouvais pas (couldn’t) see what happened after that, but it looks like Rabbit went on a rampage again. I’m sure she did it to vaincre (defeat) the Akuma, but still…she devrait (should) have left it up to Ladybug.”

“She really devrait (should) have,” said Marinette. “I know she’s not a bad person, but it seems she does more nuire (harm) than good parfois (sometimes).”

“She’s dangerous,” agreed Jack gloomily.

Alya paged through a couple more photos and Jack was forced to look away. As fate would have it though, she did so as Chloé come through the door, their eyes locking. For one brief moment, Jack panicked, but Chloé’s gaze slipped over her as if she were nothing but a mere speck of dust and zeroed in on Marinette.

“Uh-oh,” Jack whispered to the other two. “Incoming.”

Chloé stormed up to them. “Marinette Dupain-Cheng, you asticot (maggot)! You ruined my morning!”

Marinette dropped her eyes. “I’m sorry, Chloé. It was an accident.”

“An accident! No, I know what it was. You were being petty because you’re jealous of me—not that I puisse (can) blame you. Who voudrait (wouldn’t) want to be me? But I will make you pay for what you did. Écoutez-Moi bien (Mark my words)!”

“Who’s being petty now?” wondered Alya.

Chloé growled but turned to stomp away, smacking into Jack’s shoulder on purpose as she passed.

“Get out of my chemin (way), clothing reject!” she snarled.

“You don’t like my outfit?” asked Jack, pretending to be hurt. “I wore it just for you!”

Alya snorted, Marinette elbowing her in the ribs. Chloé just looked at Jack like she was crazy before pulling out her phone. Soon she was talking to Sabrina, apparently demanding to know where she was and why she wasn’t at Chloé’s side to comfort her after the Akuma attack.

“We got lucky,” warned Marinette. "We presque (almost) put Jack through a lot of trouble she didn’t méritait (deserve)."

“I never did apologize,” realized Alya, putting her phone away. “I’m sorry I’ve been so mean to you, Jack.”
“It’s fine,” Jack insisted. “You had your friend’s back.”

“And now I have yours,” insisted the girl in English. “What were you saying earlier? About wanting to Skype your BF where there’s no Wi-Fi?”

“Oh! Yeah. There’s this abandoned rock quarry back home that Diego and I used to go to when we wanted to be alone together,” explained Jack. It wasn’t entirely a lie. “I found one kinda like it just outside Paris. I thought it would be nice if he could Skype me from his and I could Skype him from mine and we could pretend we were together…okay, so now that I say it out loud, it sounds dumb, but—”

“No, no! I like it!” Alya insisted.

Marinette nodded her head vigorously. “Very romantic!”

"…Can you help?” Jack wondered.

“Why don’t you set up a mobile hotspot?” Alya suggested, adjusting her glasses. “I have the equipment—you can borrow it after school. I’ll teach you how to use it.”

"I've got Positivity Club, but maybe after? If that's okay?"

"Oh! Positivity Club!" Marinette all but shouted. "Alya and I were thinking of joining."

"After Positivity Club works for me," Alya said.

“Actually, could you bring the stuff to my house after?” wondered Marinette. “Jack and I have to brainstorm on a new outfit for her anyway.” She bit her lip, suddenly unsure. “Er…right, Jack?”

Jack was all smiles. It had been a rough morning, but not all of it was bad. She had wanted to be friends with Marinette and Alya from the start. Now that the miscommunication of the last month had been cleared up, it looked like her wish was finally coming true. “Sounds great!”

Marinette’s face relaxed. She laughed a little at herself for being so worried. It warmed Jack’s heart to hear it. “Good!” said the girl, excited. “I can’t wait!”
Chapter Summary

Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jaclyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Chapter Notes

Let’s mix things up with another FLASHBACK! For those of you who have been waiting ever so patiently to find out more about Diego, congratulations! Your perseverance in reading this lengthy OC fic will finally pay off.

Sorry it took a little longer than normal to post this chapter. There is a lot going on in this one, with a lot of talking at the end (for obvious reasons). As such, it’s a little longer than average as well. Anyway, I hope you enjoy it.

And the special shout out this time goes to…DevlinRay! I appreciate new readers, and I understand that not all of them are down for comments. Kudos are just as wonderful, and don’t think I don’t notice them ;-) Thank you so much!

Jack lay on her back looking up at the stars, her electric generator thrumming a few feet away from her head. The rocky ground of the quarry was cold and uncomfortable, but she didn’t care. She was happy.

“Oh, hey!” she said, getting up on her elbow to face her tablet. “Remember that really big fight Marinette and Alya had that I told you about?”

“Yeah, yeah! On that day you fought the Akuma kid with the imaginary friend?”

“Fought? I’m pretty sure I told you that he used me like a punching bag.”

“It was a fight of the mind, mi conejito. Without your quick thinking, where do you think Ladybug and Cat Noir would be?”

Jack rolled her eyes, pretending to be annoyed, but she knew her blush was betraying her. “Not important,” she insisted. “I just found out the fight was about me after all.”

Diego, his image grainy and delayed over Skype, threw his head back and laughed. The sound was infuriating to those who didn’t know him, since he laughed all the time, about everything. But to those who did know him, it was endearing. The boy had been through so much—he deserved to
laugh. To be honest, after everything that had happened to him, it was amazing he still could.

Jack fought a smile and continued. “Alya told Marinette she was thinking of interviewing me for the Ladyblog and Marinette got all mad. Alya wanted the scoop no matter what though, so Marinette uninvited her to the fashion—”

A snore cut through Jack’s story, silencing her. Her and Diego’s eyes met before they burst out laughing. Diego jabbed at a small black lump curled up on the table in front of him. It sprung to life, floppy ears flapping, blinking its yellow-green eyes.

“No, ma’am!” he insisted.

“I was just joking,” Jack assured him. “But you were snoring again.”

Mimmi hopped up onto Jack’s shoulder. “Aw, it’s okay, Wrekk!” she assured. “It was cute!”

“I was just about done telling Diego about my sleepover anyway,” said Jack. She had spent the night before at Marinette’s house along with Alya. They watched Amélie and had an impromptu dance party and talked about boys almost all night. “So what’s new with you two?”

“All quiet on the western front,” reported Diego, saluting. It was pretty amusing to see him do it over a bowl of cereal. It was noon on a Saturday in Los Angeles and Diego had just woken up, judging by his hair. He could pull off the bedhead though. “Trumpeter Swan is secure.”

“So you did nothing all week?”

Diego’s smile grew as he and Wrekk exchanging conspirational glances. “Oh, I wouldn’t say nothing…”

Diego was always good for a story (or twelve), but it worked perfectly because Jack loved listening to them. He was such an engaging storyteller, talking with his hands, doing voices, pausing at just the right times to build tension or pull off a punch line. No one loved being a hero more than he did and it showed whenever he spoke of his exploits. It didn’t come off as bragging though—more like someone sharing about their passion.

Jack listened to her boyfriend talk about how he foiled a team of carjackers who only targeted limos, rescued a movie star’s son from kidnappers, and had been invited to present at the Teen Choice Awards. Defending Los Angeles definitely had its perks.

“And what about the Sanchezs?” Jack wondered.

Diego deflated instantly. Jack knew he hated his civilian life. If he talked about it at all, it was to tell her about his latest adventure in urban exploring. Anything else seemed like he’d just rather forget.
“What about them?” Diego wondered, shoving a spoonful of shredded wheat into his mouth and leaning on his hand.

“You’ve been living with them for…what? Two weeks now? How are they?”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s not like I’m gonna stay here.”

“But they’re treating you well, right?”

“As far as foster families go, they’re okay.” He waved his spoon around. “They’re never around, so I guess that helps with the whole ‘being a superhero’ thing.”

Jack felt a little guilty for pushing Diego to answer. It was clear he was desperate to talk about anything else, but stayed on the topic for her sake. Wrekk came to his rescue though, trying to fly straight up into the air but floating off at an odd angle towards Diego’s face instead. Diego deflected the Kwami gently with his hand with practiced ease.

“Did you give Jack an update on Operation Hide-and-Seek?” Wrekk wondered.

Jack shook her head good-naturedly. Diego was always giving their plans military operation names. Operation Chronicle. Operation Blackjack. Operation Double Jeopardy. Operation Hide-and-Seek was the name Diego had assigned to their search for the Guardian.

“¡Ay! Mi conejito, I forgot!” Diego admitted. “…Probably because there is nothing to report.”

“Don’t give up!” squeaked Mimmi. “You can do it, Diego. I know you can!”

“Thanks, Mims. I promise I won’t.”

“I wish I could be there to help,” said Jack.

Diego paused, the mirth usually shining in his eyes fading into something sad and soft. “I wish you could be here too,” he said, his voice thick.

Jack winced, feeling helpless. No matter what they were talking about, they always seemed to come back to how much they missed each other. It shadowed all their conversations. It was inescapable, like a shadow. And that ache Jack felt that lessened at the sound of Diego’s voice would come back in full force, throttling her until it was hard to breath. Because she knew what Diego was going to say next, and it killed her every time.

“I should’ve never—” he started.

“No. Don’t,” said Jack.

“But if I hadn’t shown you who I was, then—”

“I showed you who I was too. The truth is, we both should’ve listened to our Kwami—” At this, Wrekk and Mimmi lowered their heads. “—but we didn’t and there is no point in wishing we hadn’t because it doesn’t change anything.”

“I wish I could tell you that if I had known what was gonna happen, I would’ve never done it,
“I know,” assured Jack. “I’ll never forget what you did for me.”

Far in the distance, a train blasted its forlorn horn. Jack turned and looked over her shoulder, even though she couldn’t see much beyond the bubble of her floodlight. The train would be passing by on the ridge above her any moment now though.

“Cat Noir?” Diego asked.

Jack looked at her watch. It was a little after nine o’clock. “It should be.”

“We should get ready, then. Wrekk? Bare my teeth!”

There was a flash of purple light and Jack turned back to her tablet to see Skype had frozen on Diego mid-transformation, his black suit spreading out like a spider web from the center of his chest were his dog tags were. Seeing it now, she wondered how she never realized that Diego and Perro Negro were the same person when they had the same build, same hair, same eyes. According to Mimmi, all Kwami had an ability called Glamour. It prevented people from seeing Miraculous holders as their civilian selves as long as they were transformed. If anyone caught them changing though, the spell would be broken, like it was between Jack and Diego. Jack guessed it was the same case with Ladybug and Cat Noir too. She might even know who they were as civilians, but would never realize it. She kind of doubted she knew them though. I mean, what would be the chances? Paris was a city of two and a half million.

“Jack…?” wondered Diego.

Jack shivered. When Diego was Perro Negro, the timber of his voice was lowered. She felt a rush of exhilaration that made her feel lightheaded every time she heard it. It was the kind of velvety voice that made you feel safe and protected. The kind that made you fall in love.

“Hm?” Jack had lost her train of thought. The tablet had unfrozen and Diego was blinking at her.

“You gonna change, mi conejito?”

“Oh! Yeah!” Jack punched the air as her Kwami zoomed around and giggled. “Mimmi! Hop to it!”

The stiffness and cold in Jack’s bones from lying on the hard ground melted away as her suit appeared. Perhaps she should have transformed sooner, but she really wanted Mimmi to be able to talk to Wrekk. They were best friends, even if Mimmi exhausted Wrekk with her perpetual optimism. The poor thing just wanted to sleep 80% of the time.

Diego clapped his gloved hands. Jack hadn’t seem him transformed in a while and was once again struck by how similar his outfit was to Cat Noir’s. They were almost exactly the same, save for the tail and ears, of course, and also the neck. Cat Noir had that ridiculously oversized bell. Perro Negro zipped his suit all the way up to the throat, with a purple collar around his neck on which his Miraculous hung.

“I’m excited to finally meet this friend of yours!” Diego said as Jack picked the tablet up. “I feel like I know him already because of how much you talk about him.”

“Jealous?” Jack teased.
“Depends…how good-looking is he?”

“Don’t worry. You know Ladybug’s the only one for him.”

“¡Ay! So he is good-looking then!” Diego cried melodramatically, his lips twitching as he tried to keep a straight face. Jack giggled.

“What’s so funny, bunny?”

Jack spun around to see Cat Noir walking into the pool of the floodlight, spinning his baton before affixing it to his back. She laughed even harder, which made Cat beam.

“Here,” said Jack, trotting over to hand the iPad to her friend. “Perro Negro, meet Gato Negro.”

“¡Hola, Cat! Good to meet you. Thanks for looking out for my lady.”

“No paw-blem,” said Cat, grinning so wide that all his teeth showed. “It can get a little ruff here sometimes with all the Akumas.”

Jack heard Diego nearly choke on his own laughter. “Mi conejito told me you loved puns, but…hala…you are something else, dude. One might even say you’re…” Diego mimed a scratch. “…clawsome at them.”

Cat Noir pumped his first. “Yessssss!”

Jack listened to the two joke around for a bit, feeling relieved they had taken to each other immediately. For reasons she couldn’t explain, she was afraid they wouldn’t like each other, even though she couldn’t think of any reason why they wouldn’t. Then it struck Jack—Cat Noir was the first friend she had ever introduced to her boyfriend. It was like her and Diego had been dating in secret this entire time and only now decided to go public. Well, as public as introducing two superheroes with secret identities to each other could be, at least.

“Rabbit? Where’d ya go?” wondered Diego at one point.

“Oh!” Jack jumped into the frame. “Right here.” She waved. Diego looked at her with curious concern, but the moment passed.

“Ready to get started?” he said. Jack nodded. “¡Perfecto! Cat, mi conejito filled you in, right?”

“Yup!” Cat puffed out his chest and jabbed it with his thumb. “I’m going to be your feet and hold the tablet so you can watch Rabbit as you train her.”

“I hope you’re up for the challenge. Dogstruction is…well, you know.”

Cat grimaced, clearly remembering the time it blasted him into a brick wall as he rubbed the wrist of the hand he had tried to grab Jack with. “Yeah.”

Jack showed Diego and Cat Noir her set up, flipping the second switch on her generator. Several other floodlights sprung to life, forming a half circle. They shined their light out into the quarry proper. Jack had spent the last of her babysitting money from before she became Rabbit on the lights, tripods, extension cords, and duct tape to make everything work. It had taken her three trips to get
everything to the quarry, and a fourth to set it all up. She hoped it was worth it.

At Diego’s suggestion, Jack pretended like she was fighting someone. She gracefully kicked the air and hopped around a bit as a warm up before using Lucky Strike. There was still a small part of her that hoped her actual ability would return to her if she just tried hard enough, but she was left disappointed. Her chakram only spit out those two beams of light that gave her the ability to destroy, whether she wanted to or not.

“Well?” wondered Diego when she didn’t move.

Jack looked towards Cat, who was holding up the tablet. Diego was too far away to make out properly, but Jack could hear him just fine thanks to her ears—almost as if he was standing right by her side.

“I’m glowing,” she pointed out, suddenly self-conscious about her boyfriend seeing her use his special ability. She fingers itched to yank on her braid, but she was too afraid to move. “I should be—this shouldn’t be—”

“Nah, mi conejito. It’s fine. It lets me see you better. Keep going. I gotta know what I’m working with.”

Bolstered, Jack preformed a flawless roundhouse kick to an imaginary assailant’s face. When she put her foot down though, the rocky ground beneath it crumbled. A simple leg sweep produced a ripple effect, shaking the floodlights and nearly toppling Cat Noir. Her heel drop was like a bomb going off, spraying chucks of rock into the air.

“Can you move me closer?” she heard Diego say to Cat.

“On it!”

“No!” insisted Jack. She thought Cat Noir was close enough as it was. The last thing she wanted was to hurt him again, so she preformed a couple of black flips to put some space between them, creating progressively larger and larger craters. Cat Noir was taking his job seriously though and she couldn’t shake him. For the next four minutes, he continued to dog her, getting pelted with rocks for his efforts. It was a miracle the tablet wasn’t damaged.

Jack’s Miraculous rang to warn her she only had one minute left, so she paused to look around at her handiwork. Jack Hammer really was an apt name for her now. It looked like someone had taken construction equipment to the ground.

“Mi conejito…”

The pity in Diego’s voice hurt much more than it should have. Jack’s gaze skipped over him to Cat. “I’m going to go recharge,” she explained, taking her time as she moved up the slope back to the generator.

“Oh! So that’s what the tent’s for…” realized Cat.

Jack had borrowed a simple green-and-white pop-up tent from Alix with lies that she was going camping with her family that weekend and didn’t want to share a tent with them. Alix was very sympathetic. She once went camping with her family at a dig site in Egypt for her dad’s job and had to share a tent with her older brother Jalil. He apparently talked in his sleep.
“Can’t have you figuring out my secret identity,” Jack joked weakly as she unzipped the flap and climbed inside. In the middle was a cupcake all set up for Mimmi. “You keep Perro Negro company,” she said.

“Done!” said Cat cheerily. “So, Perro…I can call you Perro, right…?”

His voice faded as Jack changed back into a civilian. She collapsed facedown on the floor of the tent, completely spent.

“That was terrible!” she said, her voice muffled by the ground.

“I thought it went pretty well,” chirruped Mimmi, swooping down to seat herself next to the red velvet cupcake heaped high with cream cheese frosting. It was nearly as big as she was. A little bit of drool oozed from the corner of her mouth.

Jack flopped over on her back, her arm covering her forehead. “I mean…yeah, it went fine, I guess. But it shouldn’t be like this at all…”

But Mimmi was too busy gorging herself by this point to offer Jack any comfort. Jack just listened to her Kwami smack her lips instead. The electric generator continued to buzz. The floodlights cast long shadows on her tent. One moved about—Cat Noir talking to Diego. She faintly made out some of her friend’s words.

“…Rabbit…”

Jack rolled onto her stomach. Cat Noir was talking about her! She strained her ears trying to hear the conversation, even going so far as to hush Mimmi up. The creature froze, her cheeks packed full of cake.

“…thinks your reveal is to blame, but how can you be sure?” Cat Noir was saying.

“Well, what did your Kwami tell you about revealing your identity?” wondered Diego. Something had gone wrong with the sound quality on Skype again and he sounded like a gargling robot.

“That nobody’s supposed to know who I am…”

“And why do you think that is, muchacho? Because bad things happen if you do.” Diego paused, deep in thought. “I think about that day a lot, actually. At the time, it felt like the right thing to do—the only thing to do. And I know mi conejito felt the same. But take it from me…it was a mistake.”

Jack heaved a sigh. Like the namesake of the Akuma they fought that day, it was tattooed on her mind. Not a day went by when she didn’t think about it too.

*   *   *

Jack paced the narrow walkway that rounded the back of the dome of the Griffith Observatory, taking turns glancing at her useless watch and scanning the night horizon for movement. Below her was a grid of lights, reaching all the way towards the jagged skyscrapers of downtown Los Angeles. They were encased in a golden glow due to an unholy combination of light and air pollution, like the sun was shining within its limits. It was beautiful, but Jack couldn’t find it in herself to appreciate it like she usually did.
“He’s coming, he’s coming,” she had to reminded herself, over and over again as she ran her hands down her fishbone braid.

But what if he’s not? asked a small voice in her head.

A single moment of self-doubt was all it took and Jack was plunged into the past, reliving memories seared into her brain from her time fighting Akumas before Perro Negro joined her. All the pain, hopelessness, and pressure to save the day because she couldn’t count on anyone to help came roaring back to her. It felt like the emotional equivalent of taking that Ice Bucket Challenge that was going around and a panic attack all rolled into one.

But then Jack heard the unmistakable sound of compressed air as a grappling hook flew up and latched onto the edge of the dome above her. The nylon rope whirred as it reeled back in quickly, bringing with it Perro Negro. He landed on the stone railing and shook his arm to release the hook. It returned to him, the rope magically receding into his cuff. The hook, which looked like a set of silver canine teeth, snapped back into place over his knuckles. He had one for his other hand too. They gave his punches “extra bite,” so to speak, like a pair of brass knuckles.

“Perro!” Jack cried. She had promised herself that she was going to play it cool, but she couldn’t help it. As he jumped down, she bounded over and flung her arms around his neck. He was a little taken aback, but once he got his bearings, his arms snaked around her and pulled her close. He put one hand flat against the small of her back and used the other to cradle the back of her head.

“Rabbit…” he breathed.

Jack felt a pleasant buzzing in her head at the sound of her superhero persona name on his lips. She breathed in his scent of leather and whatever shampoo he used, attuning her rabbit ears to the thumping of his heart. If Jack could stay in that embrace forever, she would have.

“What’s wrong?” wondered Perro when she didn’t let go.

“You were late. I thought you weren’t going to come.”

She felt Perro move his hands to her shoulders and gently push her back. He looked down at her, his warm brown eyes looking completely black in the darkness. He bit his lip as he read Jack’s pained expression. “I didn’t mean to make you worry,” he said. “Wrekk held me up, that’s all.”

Jack narrowed her eyes, flicking them in the direction of her own Miraculous. “Mimmi didn’t want me to come out tonight either.”

She hadn’t thought much about it at the time. Mimmi had simply pointed out that Jack was behind on a lot of her homework—Jack didn’t have to go out patrolling tonight. But now that Perro Negro had brought up his own Kwami, she was starting to put the picture together.

Perro got there first and turned away. Jack’s shoulders felt naked without his touch. “They don’t like all the time we’ve been spending together, eh, conejito?” he said.

Jack and Perro Negro had been making up excuses to see each other a lot lately and they both knew it. They had upped their patrols from twice a week to almost every night, reasoning that it would cut down on Akuma attacks. They now attended every special function they were invited to, no matter what it was, because they claimed it would be rude not to accept. Sometimes Jack even transformed
for no reason at all and tried calling Perro Negro on her chakram, hoping to catch him and suggest they meet up. It never worked until yesterday, when Perro actually called her before she got the chance. They went to the Electric Dusk Drive-In and sat on the roof of Van De Kamp’s Holland Dutch Bakery throwing popcorn at each other while they pretended to watch an old B movie.

“What’s wrong with us spending time together?” Jack wondered, feeling a little heated. “We’re crime-fighting partners! Are they worried we’re abusing our powers? It’s not my fault they don’t want us to know each other’s identities. Transformed is the only way we can hang out.”

Perro wagged his tail. “¡Exactamente! I think Wrekk gets it. He’s just…uh…afraid we’ll want more. That’s all.”

“Oh, Mimmi too.”

“…But do you though?”

“Do I what?”

Perro Negro cocked his head to one side, measuring his words carefully as he searched her face with his puppy dog eyes. “Want more?”

Jack’s heart skipped a beat as it jammed itself into her throat. She had to be imagining this, right? She daydreamed about Perro Negro addressing the chemistry between them all the time, but she never thought it would actually happen. Because, in her dreams, she could tell him yes without reservation. But here, in the real world, there was no point. What kind of future did their relationship have when they couldn’t even know each other’s real names? They liked each other, but big whoop. They would never be able to meet each other’s family, go on a double date with some friends, or learn about each other’s interests. It was all masks and battles and nothing else. Their relationship would only ever be half of what it could possibly be.

“I…” started Jack.

It was a yes or no question with the world’s most complicated answer.

Movement in Jack’s peripheral distracted her. She turned her head to see pinpricks of light rising up east of downtown and splitting off in different directions before they vanished in the afterglow.

“You see that?” wondered Jack, leaning over the railing. She wanted to make sure her mind hadn’t conjured up an excuse to interrupt their conversation.

“Sí. Looks like Inglewood,” observed Perro Negro.

“Great.” Inglewood wasn’t even in Los Angeles. “So it’s going to be one of those nights.”

Her partner laughed. “Nothing we can’t handle.” Perro leapt back onto the railing with a wink and a salute. “I’ll follow your lead.”

With a nod, Jack vaulted over the observatory’s railing and bounded down the hill. There was a crack as one of Perro Negro’s grappling hooks imbedded itself into a tree trunk as she passed and soon he was trailing her down into the neighborhood below. They skipped across rooftops and darted down narrow streets. At one point, Jack grabbed Perro and, with a single bounce, they went sailing over the 101 right into Korea Town, where Perro used his grappling hooks to swing from
palm tree to palm tree. It wasn’t until South Los Angeles where they ran into trouble. They were crossing the roof of a Big Lots when a glowing shape swooped down from the sky. Perro Negro sensed it coming and tackled Jack to get her out of harm’s way. Rolling off of her, he got into his fighting stance. Jack soon joined him, slipping her chakram off her wrist and enlarging it.

Jack caught sight of a gigantic misshaped orb with wings that was as large as she was, glowing a ghostly pale green. When it turned around though, she lost sight of it for a moment since it was as thin as a slice of paper. When it faced them, Jack realized it was a skull. It screeched, toxic spit flying from its mouth. It hit the concrete roof with a sizzle.

“Yikes!” cried Jack, hopping back.

“I got this,” assured Perro Negro, stepping out in front of Jack and shooting both his grabbling hooks at the skull. One glanced off, but the other grabbed on to the skull’s eye socket. Perro tried to reel it in.

The skull became frantic, its bat wings flapping as it tried to fly backwards and yank itself free. Jack jumped above it and drop kicked it, sending it plunging into the building and onto a discount couch below. Perro Negro tried to reel it in again, but the skull screeched and spun in place, wrapping the rope around itself and dragging Perro towards it instead. Perro gave in, tired of fighting the creature’s pull, but as he was coming in hot, he punched it. The force cracked its cranium, but it was able to escape the grappling hook and fly back out. It made a beeline for Jack, probably thinking her to be an easier fight, but Jack was ready. She slammed it with her chakram and followed-up with a front-side-roundhouse kick combo before the skull batted her away with one of its wings. It was more powerful than Jack expected and she nearly went somersaulting off the building, but she was able to latch onto the ledge at the very last second. The skull lorded over her though, its acidic salvia dribbling from its jaw. It was coming dangerously close to Jack’s hand when it was grabbed by another one of Perro Negro’s grappling hooks. He yanked back on the rope with both hands and swung, sending the skull flying as his grappling hook released.

“Rabbit!” he cried, darting over and hauling her up. “Are you okay?”

“Behind you!” cried Jack, the skull returning. She suddenly found herself enveloped in Perro’s arms as they were sprayed by acid, but not a single speck landed on Jack. Perro Negro had taken the hit. And though his suit was impervious to damage, his mind wasn’t impervious to the pain. He flinched and hissed under his breath.

Jack wormed her way out of Perro’s arms and made a run at the skull. She flipped forward and slashed down with her chakram with all her might, nailing the spot where Perro Negro had cracked the skull previously, splitting it in two. Its glow turned to a fire and consumed the pieces, burning it until nothing remained but a pile of black goop.

“Nice,” said Perro.

Jack blushed, but looked down. “You…you don’t have to do that, you know.”

“What? Compliment you?”

“Protect me.”

There was a time when Jack saw it as romantic, but as her feelings for Perro Negro deepened, she began to worry about him. There was nothing wrong with protecting her, but he always seemed to
do it at the cost of himself. Her biggest fear was him getting hurt because of her.

The boy looked chastened. “Sé que sé. You can take care of yourself.”

“That’s not—” Jack sighed. “Never mind.” Now wasn’t the time to talk about this. They still had an Akuma to stop and she suspected this was going to be a tough one. They hurried on.

As they approached the city limits, they noticed other glowing figures like the winged skull. They took on all sorts of strange forms though—Grim Reapers and pythons, wolves and Medusas. Jack and Perro Negro watched them terrorize bystanders, chasing and grabbing them. With their screams echoing in her rabbit ears, Jack almost stepped out to rescue them, but Perro rightfully pointed out that they weren’t being attacked, but taken. As long as they stayed out of sight, they’d be able to follow the constructs back to the Akuma who had created them. It was a good idea, and one Jack knew she was too shortsighted to come up with herself.

They followed the hostages, soon finding themselves on the roof adjacent to a boarded-up two-story building, the words Tabor Street Tattoo’s written on it in a bold and artsy font. The narrow street was packed with frightened people the glowing figures had forced into a haphazard line. One weasely man tried to make a break for it when he thought they weren’t looking, but the floating head of a bat dived down, grabbing him in it’s teeth, and returned him to his place in line. He was shaken and covered in salvia, but otherwise unharmed.

“So they’re tattoos come to life,” whispered Jack. “You know, they’re pretty good.” Jack had been thinking about getting one when she turned eighteen. All the cool older surfers had one. Maybe a rabbit with a surfboard...or was that too on-the-nose? Maybe a chameleon instead? Pascal from Tangled was her spirit animal.

“I bet the Akuma’s inside,” observed Perro. He grabbed Jack’s hand and she felt her face flush. She screamed internally. “There must be a way in from the roof.”

They jumped across without being seen, a miracle considering Jack’s suit was a brilliant white. They found a hatch and dropped down.

The building was a loft-style space, grungy, but only superficially so—it had to be sterile to be functional. Her and Perro Negro found themselves on a catwalk that hung over freestanding walls. They peered down at the lobby, where the tattoos had forced their hostages to sit in chairs.


Jack caught a hint of a robust mumble, very different from the confused and frightened chatter that surrounded it. She made her way down the catwalk to overlook the tattooing station, and the laughter that had been in her heart not even a moment ago faded.

A hulking Akumatized man sat on a rolling stool that seemed barely big enough to support his girth. His bubblegum pink Mohawk was long and wavy, flopping across half his haggard face. It appeared his skin was sewn together, like he was a patchwork quilt of a person, muscles bulging at the seams. Most sections of his exposed skin—and there was a lot of it since he was shirtless—sported a different tattoo. They were all outlined in a glowing green, save for the ink marks around his eyes that gave him the appearance of wearing a mask.

Trapped in the chair in front of the Akuma, bindings holding her in place, was a terrified old lady in a housecoat and fluffy slippers, clutching her plastic purse. She had probably just ran out of the
house to grab some milk from a convenience store across the street when she was abducted. She struggled in vain to escape, praying in Spanish under her breath.

“…but Tattoo ain’t a bad man,” the Akuma was saying, making a lifting gesture with his hand. Several electric tattoo needles gained a green glow and rose up from a nearby table to float around him. He began to fill them with different colored inks.

“Tattoo?” whispered Perro. Jack turned to see him leaning next to her, trying to appear casual, but, if that was the case, he was holding onto the railing rather tightly. “Trumpeter Swan is getting a little lazy in the naming department.”

“This from Black Dog?” countered Jack, raising an eyebrow, but her partner didn’t respond.

Tattoo continued talking, as if the elderly woman was a willing listener. “I opened this shop because I was a good artist, but I guess not a good businessman. No one came. But now…look at how many customers I have! Soon, everyone will know my name…” He sent the levitating needles over to the woman and they lowered towards her cheek as rolled his stood closer to lord over her menacingly. “…Because I will be tattooing it on them!”

“¡Dios mio!” the old woman squeaked as she squeezed her eyes shut.

Jack gasped. She had to come up with a plan, and fast! But it seemed Perro Negro wasn’t going to wait and allow this woman to suffer. Taking a page out of Jack’s book, he vaulted over the railing and landed on the other side of the chair, shooting the needles out of the air with one of his grappling hooks.

“Lo siento, mi amigo. No one is getting inked today,” he said to the Akuma with a winning smile, but it didn’t reach into his eyes.

“Perro Negro!” cried Tattoo, rolling back on his stool in surprise, but he recovered. He stood, an imposing figure barely able to fit through the door. “Bah, I knew you would come. Dog?” He punched the air in Perro Negro’s direction. Perro stared at it, confused, since it didn’t even come close to reaching him. “Meet bull!”

One of the tattoos on the Akuma’s arm began to fill in with the green light that once outlined it. It jumped right off, swelling in size as it shot at Perro. He couldn’t move out of the way fast enough and soon found himself pinned to the wall between the horns of a geometric 2D bull. He wiggled and thrashed about, but the bull had him trapped.

Tattoo stomped forward, reaching for Perro’s dog tags. “I’m relieving you of duty.”

The Akuma was forcing Jack’s hand. Going in guns blazing it was! She hopped down.

“Tattoo?” she said, flinging her weapon at the broadside of his back. “Meet chakram!”

He was struck with enough power that he fell forward on to his knees. Furious, he turned and banged on the ground with his fist, his prodigious strength sending a fissure along the floorboards. Jack deftly jumped out of the way of the splintering wood, but found herself in a corner. Tattoo came at her, but at least it was away from Perro Negro and his Miraculous.

“I’ll crush you!” Tattoo yelled.
Jack must have seemed so tiny and unimposing to the Akuma that he decided to use a haymaker on her rather than a tattoo. That was his loss. She ducked underneath and proceeded to use consecutive kicks to his stomach and then a low kick to sweep his feet. The bigger they are, the harder they fall, after all. But Tattoo didn’t let that stop him. He put out one hand to stop his fall and swung the other. Jack couldn’t back up, so she ducked. His hand drove right through the drywall above her. Taking her chances, Jack grabbed Tattoo’s arm and swung up on top of it as he tried to yank it free, then proceeded to kick him in the face. He fell over backwards, Jack rolling off him as he hit the ground.

“Perro!” she cried, grabbing onto the bull’s tail and pulling back with all her might, but she felt hands enclose around her middle as Tattoo grabbed her and tossed her through the wall into the waiting room.

“No!” she heard Perro Negro yell.

Mass pandemonium erupted as the captives tried to take advantage of the confusion and escape. Jack coughed and tried to gather her bearings as the tattoos went after the escapees, but by the time she did, Tattoo was upon her, stepping on her ankle to keep her in place. He drew his arm back in a fist again.

“This time, I won’t miss,” he bragged.

The sound of compressed air and the zip of nylon rope tickled Jack’s ears. She watched the dark shape of Perro Negro go sailing towards the ceiling, having pulled himself free from the bull. Before he even reached his destination though, he shot his other grappling hook at Tattoo. It encircled the Akuma’s arm. Perro pulled back as hard as he could and held fast. Tattoo struggled to push his fist forward, but it was no good.

Frustrated, he bellowed. A tattoo near the base of his neck began to fill in—a swarm of ghouls, their faces twisted with torment. They erupted from Tattoo in a whirlwind of shrieks and wails. They attacked Jack, ripping at her Miraculous, but Tattoo stumbled off of her as Perro dragged back his arm. She rolled to her feet and swung her chakram around her wrist, forming her shield in order to defend herself.

“Annoying little dog!” shouted Tattoo, grabbing the rope attached to his arm with both hands. He forcibly pulled Perro Negro down from his perch on the catwalk and swung him into the boarded-up windows of the shop. Jack’s partner went crashing through them, releasing his hold on Tattoo.

Not even a moment later, the bull bust through the remains of the wall, joining Tattoo and his pack of ghouls. With all of them bearing down on her, Jack decided now would be a good time to run. As most of Tattoo’s remaining ink began to fill in as he prepared to use all he had, she leapt through the hole Perro Negro had made and helped him to his feet.

“Let’s get out of here!” she cried.

Perro nodded and they took off down the street together, pursued by a bloodthirsty mob of tattoos.

“Did you see that, conejito?” he asked her. “When he released that tattoo, he got weaker!”

“Yeah,” said Jack, a bit more grim. “But he doesn’t really need to release more. Look how many he’s sicced on us!”

Perro looked over his shoulder for a moment and grimaced. More and more tattoos were abandoning
keeping their unwilling customers hostage in order to join in the chase. They were a green wave, gaining on them with every step. A few smacked into street signs and parked cars in their haste though. Jack observed that they weren’t very smart—they all seemed to have tunnel vision.

“We’ll just have to destroy them like the winged skull,” Perro pointed out. “But…all at once… somehow.”

Jack was just about to mention how difficult that had been when an idea struck her. “We could drop a building on them,” she suggested. “Know any good ones nearby that are up for a little demolition?”

Perro Negro, for whatever reason, had an expansive knowledge of all the abandoned buildings in Los Angeles. It came in handy more than a few times. Just last month, Jack and Perro Negro had battled an Akuma named Parasite, who had the ability to control bed bugs. They couldn’t get close to him, so they drew his bugs away to an abandoned building. Lucky Strike produced a huge parachute that fit over the entire structure. It was a hot day—the bugs didn’t last long. Parasite was cake after that.

Perro closed one eye, thinking. “I’ve got it!” he said, taking a sharp left. Jack followed. “There’s one on La Brea that should work. Operation Oz is a go!”

Jack laughed.

The two went up to the rooftops, hoping to avoid innocent pedestrians. It seemed the tattoos had a one-track mind though, ignoring everything around them in their mad pursuit of the Miraculouses. Jack and Perro zigzagged to pick off and slow down a few, but they continued to gain on them. Soon a tiki mask was trying to chomp on Perro’s tail. Jack threw her chakram at it, sending it falling back into a Valkyrie and a tiger.

“¡Ahí!” said Perro, pointing towards a pale green five-story building covered in graffiti. It was lit by the fluoresces of an empty billboard on its roof, and the window panes that weren’t missing were filled with colorful glass. Jack had never seen a more welcoming sight.

They easily busted through the sheets of plywood guarding the front and snapped the lock by pushing on the door. In a past life, the building had been some sort of garment factory with an open floor and two staircases on either side. Perro bounded over to the far one and took it up a floor, Jack following, then ran across to the other side to do the same, going up and across, up and across, until they ended up on the rooftop. Jack slammed the rusted door shut behind them and locked it, even though she knew it would do them little good. The tattoos were thin enough to slide through.

Perro Negro, meanwhile, had skidded to a halt in the middle of the roof and crossed his arms above his head. “Dogstruction!” he shouted as dark energy began to gather in his fists. He brought them down and then pumped them up, flinging two spheres of purple into the nighttime sky. They orbited each other like lost planets for a moment before shooting down and striking him, giving him a purple aura.

Jack didn’t know what it was about the aura, but it always seemed to make Perro Negro hotter than he already was, highlighting his thick eyelashes and amazing hair. Her fingers itched, wanting to run her hands through it while they made—Jack shook her head violently. What was she thinking!? They were in the middle of fighting an Akuma! She admonished herself as she raced over to him.

“Give me a boost?” he asked her.
Jack nodded dumbly, cupping her hands to make a foothold and laying them atop her bended knee. She was pretty sure she would have agreed to anything he asked her at that point. “Good luck,” she managed.

“I don’t need it,” he said with a grin. “I have you.”

Then he leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

Jack had exactly zero time to react to this, since he gave a quick salute and was already stepping into her hand, his hands on her shoulders. She tossed him up with all her might, her face burning with a blush. She watched Perro Negro sail upwards, but it felt switched—She had been thrown into the sky and was watching him on the ground.

It wasn’t until he started to drop that Jack realized she had to get out of there, and fast. Dogstruction packed a mean punch. She darted towards the closest edge and dropped off.

For one brief moment, Jack was falling, the cool night air rushing passed her face. It was exhilarating, life was exhilarating. The world was dizzying and bright and Jack felt like laughing. Forget her late homework. Forget the detention she was serving because of how many times she had been late to school. Forget her losing the game for Glendale on Saturday because of stupid Diego Rodríguez, and the stabbing pain she felt last week when she bumped into her old friends at the mall. Forget that she would never know who Perro Negro was—he had kissed her and that was all that mattered.

But Jack’s feeling of elation was quickly extinguished when something long and green shot out from an open window and wrapped around her, pinning her arms to her sides. She struggled to escape, but that only made the octopus tattoo tighten its tentacle around her as it yanked her inside. It waved her about like a trophy for the entire floor of tattoos to see, but its glory was short-lived. Soon the ceiling was caving in and the floor was giving way, a glowing purple blur blasting through.

Jack had no clue what happened after that. The octopus let go. Sometimes she was falling, sometimes she was rolling, or else being tossed about. Pain struck her at random intervals, causing her to jerk and writhe. There was roaring in both sets of ears. She saw flashes of glowing green in images speeding by her so fast that her brain couldn’t comprehend them. The dust that forced her eyes closed came as a relief so she wouldn’t even have to try.

And, as quickly as it all started, everything went still and silent. Jack blinked her eyes back open, but there was no point. Whenever she had ended up was pitch black. At least it was over though. She let out the breath she had been holding. When she tried to take in another one though, she found it difficult, like she was sipping air through a straw. Jack coughed and struggled to move, but other than her head and her left arm, the rest of her body was completely immobilized by the weight of the rubble she was trapped under.

“No…No…” whispered Jack, trying in vain to free herself with her free arm, but she went quiet. Her second breath was worse than her first. Her magical suit protected her from a lot of things, but suffocation wasn’t one of them.

She was going to die down there.

Her parents. Her aunts, uncles, and cousins. Grandpa Jimbo. Coach K and her Glendale Youth Ultimate teammates. Her classmates, maybe even her old friends…would they wonder how she ended up so far from home, crushed by a building? Would they make the connection she was
Rabbit? Would they blame Perro Negro? What would happen to Mimmi?

All these questions shook Jack to her core. Despite how dangerous it was being Rabbit, she never once thought she was going to die. Well…there had been that one time when she was fighting Negator, but that was different. That was before Perro. But then he came and rescued her.

As Jack began to lose consciousness, she thought about that moment, how he dove in front to take a blast meant for her. It had to have hurt, but he shrugged it off as if it were nothing and asked her if she was okay. And she stared at him because Mimmi had told her that she was never going to have a partner because Wrekk was dead. She thought she had imagined him, this cute tan-skinned boy in a skin-tight leather suit. But then he picked her up in his strong arms and carried her to safety and it dawned on her that he was very real. She could feel those comforting arms around her now, through her memories.

Yes…she should have told him…yes…I want more…I want us to be together…

I…I…

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..

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A loud ringing and a weak light brought Jack back and she saw the dim outline of her hand in front of her face. Due to the lack of oxygen flowing to her brain, it took some time for her to figure out why, but she realized it was her chakram. Perro Negro was calling for her, but she couldn’t answer it. It was around her wrist that was trapped. Her partner had good ears, but she doubted they were good enough to hear the ringing from all the way down there.

There was a piece of rebar though, inches from Jack’s face. She grabbed it and began to smack the rubble around her at random. Concrete, concrete, concrete—the warping echo of metal hitting metal surprised her. She nearly dropped her rebar, but managed to keep her wits about her as she began to hammer away.

Somewhere far above was a slight rumble. Jack nearly shouted, but knew it would be a waste of precious air. Instead, she hit the metal harder. The rumbling grew more intense, and Jack could hear blasts as if dynamite was going off. She was growing lightheaded though and found it difficult to keep a hold of the rebar. She dropped it with a clatter.

Her chakram rang again. Another blast.

“Rabbit! Rabbit!” came Perro’s voice, frantic but muffled. “Hang on!”

One final punch with Dogstruction and Perro Negro broke through, filling Jack’s little pocket with air.

“Rabbit!” he yelped. He slid down towards her, his voice shaking. “This c-can’t be happening. Not…not again…Please…Please don’t…”

Jack could only concentrate on breathing at the moment. As soon as Perro saw that, he relaxed.
“Okay. Okay. You’re okay…” He used Dogstruction to vaporize the rubble holding Jack down. “This is my fault. I did this.”

Jack was shaken, of course, but not hurt. She sat up, her eyes bleary as she focused on the glowing purple outline in front of her. “No, no—” Jack coughed. “Don’t say that. You saved me, like you always do. I should’ve known you would. Thank you.”

Perro Negro refused to meet her eye and accept her gratitude. “Vamos,” he said, lifting her arm over his broad shoulders. “Let’s get you out of here.”

Together, they climbed out of the hole. Some of the building’s outer walls were still standing, but little else. According to Perro, Operation Oz had been a complete success. All the tattoos had been destroyed in the collapse. The remains of their ink was everywhere though and they kept on slipping on it as they made their way towards a gapping hole in the wall that lead to the alley. Perro’s dog tags beeped and Jack watched the last paw print on it vanish. Had it really only been four minutes since he used Dogstruction? It felt like hours.

Movement caused Jack and Perro Negro to freeze. Tattoo had come around the corner, followed by his array of levitating needles. He had a few tattoos here and there, but most patches of his skin were now clear.

He bellowed at the sight of the destruction and yanked at his bubble-gum pink hair. “What’ve you done to my creations!??” he cried. He pointed at them. “You’ll pay for this! Grah!”

He sent his needles flying at them, but Perro simply pushed Jack behind him. The needles disintegrated moments before they struck him, metallic shavings falling to his feet.

“Perro…you need to go,” warned Jack.

“No,” he said, his eyes never leaving Tattoo. “I’m not leaving you here to fight him alone, conejito.”

Jack’s anxiety started to build as she recognized the conviction in his voice. He planned on protecting her again at the expense of his own safety, no matter what. She could tell. But he had never been this reckless before. Any moment he was going to change back into his civilian form and get hurt. Just what was he thinking!?

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him as she attempted to hurry him away, but he was immovable. A wall.

“You’re still recovering.”

“And you’re about to change back.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Perro! Don’t be an idiot!”

“We’re partners—”

“I don’t care what we are!”

“But—”
“Get out of here now! You’re no good to me as a civilian!”

Perro Negro’s eyes darted to her, clouding with hurt as his tail went between his legs.

Jack winced. That hadn’t come out right. “I mean—”

Something was whistling through the air towards her. She jumped back just in time to avoid getting smashed by a giant anchor. Jack stared at it, stunned, before following its chain back to the hands of the Akuma. He must have summoned another tattoo while her and Perro were busy arguing.

Perro! Jack turned back to find he had vanished. She thought she would be relieved, seeing as he had done as she asked, but instead there were only knots and panic-induced bile building in her stomach.

He was gone.

She was alone. She hadn’t fought alone since Perro came into her life. She felt like she couldn’t even remember how to do it anymore.

Tattoo growled as he yanked back on the chain and shortened it so he could spin the anchor above his head. Jack tried to focus, circling her foe, daring him to throw as she picked her way through the rubble. It was a dangerous game though, especially when her mind kept on replaying the last thing she had said to her partner over and over again. Distracted, she slipped on an ink-spattered pipe and the anchor was coming at her. She was only barely able to spin away.

Knowing that she would never beat the Akuma if she dragged the battle out much longer, Jack stomped on the edge of a small slab of cement, causing it to flip upwards. She kicked it at Tattoo. Before it even nailed him in the grizzled face, she was already throwing her chakram into the air.

“Lucky Strike!” she cried out.

Jack’s chakram hit its zenith and stuck, spinning like a gyroscope. Seeing this, Tattoo made a mad dash to tackle Jack, but she was nimble. She hopped back just as the Akuma threw himself forward and used him as a step to jump up and grab her weapon and whatever object her ability had created. Her hand closed around something metallic, about the size and shape of a narrow pastry bag Jack often used to ice her cupcakes. She landed and darted around the corner to a streetlight to take a better look, the enraged bellows of Tattoo following her.

Sometimes Jack wished not everything she summoned was white, because she had no clue what she was holding at first glance. She noticed a button on the side though. Pushing it caused a red laser beam to shoot out of the pointed end.

_Crash!_ Tattoo had sent his anchor through the wall next to Jack, catching her off-guard. It lost most of its momentum by the time it reached her, but she didn’t have any time to dodge. It knocked her down and fell on top of her legs. She struggled to lift it, but it was difficult. She might be faster, but Perro was stronger. It was a wonder she lasted so long without him.

“Heh. Heh. Heh…” Jack’s blood ran cold as Tattoo’s shadow fell across her. Even worse, he began to sing in a menacingly slow baritone. “_Little bunny foo foo, I don’t want to see you_…”

Now it was her turn for her Miraculous to almost get stolen. The operative word though was _almost_, because Jack had just figured out what Lucky Strike had given her. Turning on her laser, she dragged it across the anchor, slicing it in two. It turned to ink, which slipped off Jack’s white suit as
easily as if it were water. The chain turned to ink as well, falling apart in Tattoo’s hands and leaving them stained. His beady eyes opened as wide as they could go.

“A Q-switched laser!?!” he cried.

“That’s right!” cried Jack, leaping back up to her feet. Actually, she had no idea what a tattoo removal laser was called, so it was cool to learn something new. “I bet you regret some of those tattoos.”

For the first time, Jack noticed the tattoo over the Akuma’s heart. It was the logo of his doomed tattoo parlor, just a stylized TST for Tabor Street Tattoos. Unlike the other tattoos, it didn’t have a glowing outline.

“Like that one,” she suggested, pointing straight at it.

Tattoo recoiled and Jack knew she had guessed where the Akuma was hiding correctly. That was only half the battle though. She needed to release that sucker and Tattoo still had some ink to spare. Jack, meanwhile, was running out of time. She glanced at her watch and saw that a minute had already ticked away. She had to hurry. She couldn’t rely on Perro Negro returning—it was all up to her.

Jack dashed towards Tattoo, but in a zigzag pattern to throw him off. He wasn’t fooled though as his back began to glow. Giant angel wings, each feather a different color, erupted from his back and he began to ascend.

Jack panicked. If Tattoo got high enough, she wouldn’t be able to reach him and he could just wait her out. Worse, she was too far away to do anything about it. Or was she? Thinking quickly, Jack jumped as high as she could, level with the Akuma, and threw her chakram at him. Tattoo naturally dodged it and it imbedded itself in the wall of the building behind him. But in moving out of the throwing disk’s way, he had put his wings in the path of something else Jack had thrown. The laser cut a neat hole through the left wing, slowing him down. For Jack, it was enough, since she had made it to the side of the building. She jumped up to her chakram and used it like a springboard to reach new heights, snagging Tattoo’s wings, one in each hand, and forcibly dragging him down again. They landed right by the laser. Jack relinquished one of the wings in favor of cutting the other one off. Tattoo escaped, but at least he was grounded.

Three minutes left.

The tattoo that wrapped around the Akuma’s bulging left bicep began to glow. It was one of those cheesy barbed wire tribal tattoos, but when it snaked off his arm, Jack realized it was a whip. Tattoo cracked it.

“Just try to come near me!” he challenged.

Jack pointed the Q-switched laser at it, but the Akuma only laughed.

“Too far,” he explained, cracking the whip again.

Jack tried. She really did. But Tattoo’s whip wrapped around the laser the instant she got too close and yanked it from her hands, sending it flying in the opposite direction. She chased after it as it landed several blocks away and eventually lost track of where it had gone. Pausing on a street corner, Jack looked around wildly.
“Looking for this?” asked a deep voice.

Jack spun around, so sure it was Perro Negro, but was disappointed to find a random man walking his basset hound. He did, however, offer her her laser.

“I was thinking it might be yours,” he told her when she didn’t react right away.

“Thank you,” Jack said, taking it.

“Is Perro Negro with you? My son is a huge fan—”

But Jack was already running back to La Brea, to the ruins of the abandoned garment factory. Tattoo was waiting for her, having added the last of his tattoos to his arsenal. He now carried a riot shield and wore a Viking helmet, and was surrounded by a sentient cloud of ninja throwing stars. With his one wing, he was a fearsome sight.

“Tick tock goes the clock,” he chided.

Two minutes left.

If Perro Negro was by Jack’s side, she would’ve felt confident, but, without him, she was terrified. She had to get to that tattoo on the Akuma’s chest within the next minute or so, or her Miraculous was forfeit. Spurred by that thought, she made a run at the Akuma once more. She had to jump away constantly, but by holding out her laser again, she was able to tempt him into lashing out at it with his whip. She shoved her whole arm forward though so it would wrap around it instead while she tossed the laser to her other hand. A quick slash with it and the whip fell away. It came at the cost of three throwing stars striking her in the back though. The pain they caused shot straight down through her spine, temporarily incapacitating her. Tattoo thundered up and whopped her with his riot shield, sending her crashing into a Dumpster. While she was still down, more throwing stars rained down on her from above.

Her mind now clouded with pain, Jack swore she heard the sound of compressed air, of Perro shooting his grappling hooks and saving her yet again. The sound of a struggle, the howling rage of the Akuma, Perro shouting—

“Rabbit!”

Jack’s head shot up. Perro Negro stood on top of the building next-door, backlit by the moon, his arms out in front of him. His grappling hooks had wrapped around Tattoo’s bulging biceps. Perro jumped from his perch over the curved arm of a streetlight, stringing the Akuma up by his arms.

“Go, Rabbit!” he shouted as he pulled back with all his strength. Tattoo struggled to escape as he hung a few inches above the ground. “Hurry!”

The pain that had been so prevalent before faded to distant memory the moment Jack got to her feet. She scurried over to the Akuma, grabbed his shoulder, and carved a slash mark through the TST tattoo. A few black and purple feathers leaked from it like a ripped pillow, catching on an unfelt wind and trying to escape to the sky. They didn’t get very far though. Perro released his grappling hooks and used one to grab Jack’s chakram for her. He swung down to the ground before yanking it free and tossing it to her like a Frisbee. Jack drew her weapon back as it closed and then opened again, revealing a pool of light, announcing that it was time to de-evilize. The dark feathers went in
one end and came out the other as white as snow.

“Miraculous Rabbit!” Jack cried, tossing her Q-switched laser into the air. It exploded in a starburst of golden yellow light and bits of cotton fluff, forming eight separate clouds before floating off. Several remained, rebuilding the abandoned garment factory Perro Negro had destroyed and cleansing the area of ink stains. Jack imagined the others were returning Tattoo’s hostages and fixing the hole in the roof of that Big Lots.

Jack turned to find Perro Negro walking up to her. She was all smiles at the sight of him.

“You came back!” she said, raising her hand so they could celebrate their victory over Trumpeter Swan with a *Top Gun* high-five.

Perro stared at her hand as if he didn’t know what to do with it. “Of course I came back,” he said, hurt. “Did you think I would just leave you here, *conejito*?”

“That’s not it at all!” Jack assured him quickly. She took a step forward, but Perro backed away like a skittish animal. Jack bit her lip and stopped trying to close the gap. “It’s just…every time you leave, I’m afraid I’ll never see you again. That I’ll have to fight alone again. It’s…it’s stupid.”

Embarrassed, Jack turned away and squeezed her eyes shut. She didn’t want to look at anything at the moment.

“No. It’s not…” said Perro softly. “It’s my fault you feel that way.”

“Stop blaming yourself. It’s not your fault you didn’t get your Miraculous the same time I did.”

Jack just wanted everything to go back to normal. Ten minutes ago they were a team, and now Perro Negro was holding her at arm’s length. But Jack was afraid if she opened her mouth, she’d say the wrong thing again and make him even more upset, so she waited for Perro to speak.

“Rabbit—” he started.

Jack’s Miraculous rang.

“Yikes!” Jack looked at her watch. One minute left. “I better go refuel.”

“For the record, you’re leaving me this time,” said Perro, a chill in his voice. “But I’m not going anywhere. I promise. Please trust me.”

“I do.”

“Doesn’t feel that way.”

A groaning distracted them both, the artist formerly known as Tattoo coming around from his spot beneath the streetlight. He had returned to normal, a slightly smaller man, still with a Mohawk and tattoos, but with none of the bright colors and Frankenstein’s monster aesthetic.

“I got him,” Perro said, making his way over to the Akuma victim. Usually it was Jack’s job to explain to the victims what had happened, that the police were on their way and would assign a psychiatrist to help him come to terms with his Akumatization, but Perro Negro had learned how to do it too. He did a fine job, but he still always told Jack that she was better.
Jack hopped away, looking for a good hiding spot. She saw a seven-story parking garage and took refuge there, at the top of a stairwell.

“All hopped out!” she said, with seconds to spare.

Mimmi came crashing out of Jack’s Miraculous. The poor thing was completely exhausted, hardly able to move a limb. Luckily, Jack came prepared. She took off her backpack and fished out a white chocolate raspberry cupcake. Most of its frosting was now painting the inside of its Tupperware container, but it smelled delicious. Mimmi’s nose twitched and she was able to drag herself inside and start eating.

Jack sat with her back to the wall, lowering her head into her hands. “Gawd, he hates me!” she said. “I’ve ruined everything…”

Mimmi popped her head out of the container, her ears sticky with frosting as she licked raspberry filling off her paw. “Don’t be ridiculous!” she squeaked. "That would take more than a few silly words!"

“I do trust Perro Negro. You know that, right?”

“Of course! You just have to show him, that’s all. Just stay positive! Everything will sort itself out.”

“Right.”

Mimmi licked up the last of the cake crumbs and Jack transformed back into Rabbit. She returned to Perro Negro and the Akuma victim to find the flashing lights of several police cars as roadblocks kept the media at bay. The victim wore a shock blanket and was being escorted into an unmarked sedan while Perro Negro spoke with the Chief of Police. He was a sunburned man in horned-rimmed glasses, his hair turning a premature gray. When he tried to smile, it came out as a grimace. Jack felt bad for him. He was brand new at the job when super villains out of comic books began to attack his city. There was no way he could have been prepared for that, and still seemed to be coming to terms with it months later.

“Rabbit,” he said, nodding at her. “Perfect timing. We were just finishing up here.”

Jack locked eyes with the Akuma victim and gave him a kindly smile to show she harbored no ill will towards him. He looked a little less green around the gills as he raised and lowered his hand in a poor attempt at a wave before vanishing into the car.

“What’s his name?” she wondered.

“Peter Alvarez. Thirty-four. Wife and five kids at home,” the Captain rattled off. “Bank foreclosed on his shop earlier today—must have been what attracted the Akuma. Inglewood is pretty far out though.”

“What does it mean?”

“I was just telling Perro Negro. Either Trumpeter Swan’s reach is getting further or he found a new hideout.”

“I hope it’s the first one.” The police were having a hard enough time locating him using his attack
pattern without him jumping around all over the place. Jumping was Jack’s thing.

“Only time will tell.”

The Chief was soon called away, leaving Jack and Perro alone. Jack thought about saying something to him, but when he suggested they patrol, she decided to go along with it. She had wanted things to go back to normal between them, and patrolling was as normal as it got, so they set off on their Fibonacci Spiral (A suggestion by one of their fans—it was a good way to cover the city). As they looped around the downtown though, Perro Negro was completely silent. It was eerie, like Jack was working with a shadow.

Jack attempted to think of a way to show Perro that she trusted him. Mimmi was right. She couldn’t just tell Perro she did—she had to prove it with action. Her only thought was to never mention again that she was afraid he wasn’t going to be there for her, but it would be a lie. Just because she didn’t say it, didn’t mean she wasn’t thinking it. She hated herself for it too, but her fears were too deeply ingrained.

They ended at the top of the U.S. Bank Tower before heading back to the Griffith Observatory. Everything was quiet. For the most part, regular criminals knew better these days, and Trumpeter Swan never did back-to-back attacks. Jack theorized that he needed at least 24-hours to recover between evilizing his victims. Thank goodness, or she’d never be able to juggle her two identities.

Perro spun around to face Jack as soon as they reached the observation’s overlook. She braced herself, ready for him to lay into her.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Jack was stunned. “You’re sorry!?"

He sheepishly scratched his head. “I gave it a lot of thought while we were patrolling, and I realized I wasn’t being fair to you.” He went up to Jack and took one of her hands into both of his. Jack was too stunned by the apology to really notice. “You went through a lot of crap before I came, and for me to expect you to not be afraid of going back to that…” He sighed, almost angry with himself. “I’ve protected you from a lot of things, but I can’t seem to protect you from me.”

“That was a fluke. One of the tattoos pulled me back in and—”

“You know that’s not what I’m talking about.”

Jack pressed her lips together and said nothing.

“I could disappear at any time and you’d never find me again,” Perro pointed out.

“You would never do anything like that.”

“Doesn’t stop the idea from scaring you.”

“Perro…”

“I’m not blaming you. I know you feel that way because you…you care about me, more than anyone ever has. But I care about you too…which is why I want to show you my loyalty. That’s what dogs are known for, verdad? I want to show you who I am, so you never doubt that I’m going to be there
for you—superhero, civilian, whatever.”

Jack’s breath hitched and she was suddenly very aware of how close Perro Negro was to her face, his nose almost brushing her forehead. When did he get there? She felt the urge to put her free hand to his jaw and drag him down to her level. I mean, his lips were right—Jack squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the feeling to pass. They were talking about something serious here.

“Y-you can’t,” Jack argued. She knew she should step away to show him how serious she was, but she couldn’t. Her knees had gone weak. “Our Kwami told us that we can’t share our real identities with anyone, not even each other. Bad things will happen.”

“I think it’s worth the risk, _conejito._” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “You’re worth the risk.”

Jack wanted to scream. This was all too much. She felt like she was feeling every emotion all at once—happiness, sorrow, fear, confusion, anger. Rooted to the spot, she watched Perro stepped away and grab a hold of his dog tags, ready to yank them off. His hand shook a little.

“Wait…!” Jack begged, the word getting caught in her throat, but Perro only gave her a rueful smile and a salute. She didn’t even know why she tried. Once Perro had his mind made up, there was no stopping him.

Jack blamed herself. He was doing this for her, after all. It was clear he was nervous about it, that he wouldn’t be doing it if he thought there was another way to reassure her. It broke Jack’s heart. What did she ever do to deserve such a selfless, loving partner? She was desperate now more than ever to show him that she trusted him.

And then an idea came to her. It was so clear, so simple, she wondered why she never thought to do it before. Because what was trust? It was showing flaws and sharing secrets. It was confiding in one another and telling the truth.

It was coming out from behind a mask.

If Perro Negro was going to show her who he really was for her sake, she would do the same for him.

Jack slammed her hand down on her wristwatch just as Perro Negro pulled off his Miraculous. Purple light appeared at the top of his head and started to move down, so Jack closed her eyes since she wasn’t ready yet. Mere moments later, she was able to unlatched her own Miraculous and de-transformed. Her body seized up almost involuntarily as she waited. What would he think of the real her?

A curse word assaulted her ears in a voice she didn’t recognize that did not put her fears at ease—wait, no. It sounded familiar, somehow. Maybe because it was Perro’s, just a bit higher pitched? Her eyes flickered open.

“Diego!?” she yelped, recoiling as she instantly recognized the boy standing in front of her.

Her Ultimate Frisbee teammate stared at her in wide-eyed panic. “Why did you…? I never asked you to—!”

“I-I know. I wanted to. I wanted to…uh…” Her shock seemed to have erased everything of importance from her mind.
“Ay, this was a stupid idea. Stupid,” Diego muttered to himself. He stole a glance at Jack. “I really thought you’d be some girl who didn’t know me. Four million people in L.A. The odds were in my favor.” He paused and hung his head. “You must be so disappointed.”

“Disappointed…?” Jack was feeling a lot of emotions, but disappointment was not one of them. It was mostly confusion on how Diego and Perro Negro could possibly be the same person.

“Yeah. You hate me.”

He said it so simply, like it was a known fact. Feeling a little light-headed, Jack stumbled over to the railing so she could lean on something solid.

“I don’t hate you,” she assured him. “I just don’t…trust you…” She winced. “That’s why I took off my Miraculous, by the way. To show you that I do trust you and…gawd…” She held her head. Two people she knew had become one impossible person and her brain was having a hard time accepting it. Maybe if she talked it out? It was worth a try. “It’s because of that one time we talked to each other when you went to my school, when Cadence and I were trying to get you to join Positivity Club. You told me teams were for losers. Remember? And then I don’t see you again until you just show up one day at Ultimate practice, all, ‘I want to join the team.’ And it’s, like…why?”

“I told you. I changed my mind.”

“Yeah, but what changed your mind?”

“It’s…it’s not obvious?”

Jack stared at him. This whole experience was surreal. She was talking to Diego Rodríguez, her obnoxious teammate, next to the Griffith Observatory at 11:30 at night, about his motivations. If someone had told her that was how she was going to spend her Friday night, she would have laughed at them.

Diego sighed and his gaze softened. Jack felt warm and her heart sped up—it was the same look Perro Negro gave her from time to time. She thought it would look wrong on Diego, but it didn’t.

“You,” he said. “You changed my mind.”

Jack’s breath caught, an electric charge passing between them. Diego blinked though and the look was gone, buried deep.

“Well, not you. Rabbit,” he said, making sure Jack understood the difference. She scowled. “I used to not like the idea of depending on anyone but myself. I thought it made me strong. But teaming up with you made me rethink everything. We’re stronger together. You made it easy though, you know? You believed in me from the start. No one…no one’s done that for me in a long time.”

Jack frowned. What kind of life did Diego lead? He told a lot of over-the-top stories about himself, so it was always hard to figure out what was true and what was hyperbole. She never even bothered to figure out the truth, deciding from the start to take everything he said with a grain of salt. All she knew for sure was that his dad was army and died in Afghanistan when he was young, but only because it was literally the only thing he didn’t joke about. He held a lot of admiration for former and current military. Of course! That’s why Perro Negro saluted all the time. Duh.
Diego pulled at his hair. “Ahhhh…but I just had to show you who I was, huh? And ruin everything. You were right. I’m no good to you as a civilian.”

“That’s not—!”

“I know. You were just saying it to get me to go. Without my powers, I would have just gotten in the way.”

Jack shook her head violently. “No. What I meant was…ugh…” All her actions made sense at the time, but when it came time to explain them later, she was always at a loss. “If you had stayed, you would have changed back and gotten hurt. I don’t want you sacrificing yourself for me.”

“It would have been worth it to protect you.”

“Oh, right. I guess I am the only one who can purify Akumas, huh?”

Diego burst out laughing. Jack was baffled at first, but they had been speaking for a record-length of time without him doing so, so maybe he just couldn’t hold it in any longer. He grabbed a hold of himself though and wiped a tear from his eye.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re oblivious?” he wondered.

Jack crossed her arms. “Yeah. You. Every time I miss a Frisbee.”

“Escucha, I don’t protect the mask, I protect the girl wearing the mask. The one who is compassionate and brave and forgiving.”

“And oblivious?” challenged Jack.

“Sí. And oblivious. And impatient and reckless and a lot of things. All the things that make you, you.”

Jack considered Diego with suspicion. His words sounded like Perro, but they came from a known liar’s mouth. “You mean all the things that make me Rabbit.”

But Diego shook his head. “Take it from me. You’re the same as both Jack and Rabbit. You’re lucky. I wish I was like that. I mean…I’m working on it. I-I know it’s not enough, but…I’m trying.”

“Enough? Enough for what?”

“Uh…”

Diego avoided her gaze and it dawned on Jack what he meant. Okay, so maybe she was a bit oblivious. “Oh.”

Jack sank to the ground, back against the glass beneath the railing. She fiddled around with her Miraculous, contemplating putting it back on. She was going to have to face Mimmi sometime. Once again, the Kwami was right. Maybe this wasn’t exactly what she meant when she warned that a reveal would lead to bad things, but she hadn’t been wrong.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Jack always knew Perro Negro was too good to be true. He was always saving those in danger, never once thinking of himself. He always complimented Jack
and encouraged her, made her feel loved. Jack had always thought those things had come naturally to Perro—it was actually rather intimidating at times—but it turned out he was just chasing after an ideal.

…But wasn’t that kind of admirable? Diego had been given the chance to be someone else when he received his Miraculous, someone with superpowers, and he had chosen to become Perro Negro, the most amazing guy Jack had ever met. Yeah, Diego and Perro were different, but they were still the same person. Perro Negro wouldn’t even exist without Diego.

“I think trying’s enough,” Jack said suddenly.

Diego tilted his head, just like Perro Negro. “¿Qué?”

Jack patted the concrete next to her. Confused and hesitant, Diego took his time going over to take a seat, allowing at least three feet of space between them. Jack quickly scooted over so they were almost touching.

“Changing is hard. I don’t know how you’re doing it,” Jack told him. “Well, I mean, I do. You’re Perro Negro, that’s how, but still.”

“Heh. De nada, cone—er, Jack.”

Jack frowned. She liked it when he called her conejito. She paused to wonder if the ‘he’ in that thought was Perro Negro or Diego, but the two were already getting muddled together in her mind.

“Listen,” he said. “I know I probably screwed things up between us, but I hope we can still be partners.”

“Of course we can still be partners!” said Jack quickly. “And you didn’t do anything wrong. I’m the one who screwed up. You would have never done this if not for me.”

“I thought it would help.”

Jack blinked. Now that she thought about it, the fear that Perro Negro was going to vanish was no longer weighing in her stomach. She couldn’t understand it at first, but when she looked at Diego, it dawned on her. He was real, in a way Perro Negro could never be. Perro was like some amazing dream Jack was constantly afraid she was going to wake up from. Finding out he was Diego grounded him in reality. He wasn’t going anywhere. In fact, she was going to see him at the game tomorrow.

“It did,” she assured him.

Diego broke into a chip-toothed smile and Jack felt like melting. She turned away and looked straight, hoping to steady herself, but the feeling remained. She buried her head in her knees.

The boy laughed. “I’m probably more than you bargained for, huh?”

“Well, I did want more,” said Jack, muffled.

“You what!”?

Jack’s head snapped up. She could feel her blush crossing her cheeks and climbing up around her
ears. “I-I mean…uh…” Shoot. She hadn’t meant to say that. It just sort of slipped out. But now it was like the floodgates had opened and she was suddenly talking a mile a minute. “It’s complicated…? When you asked before, I wanted to tell you yes, but I was going to say no because I didn’t know who you were and you didn’t know who I was, but then the Akuma attacked and…and you kissed me. *Twice.* And now we do know, b—but I’m confused because I thought of you—Diego you—one way and now I’m thinking of you in another way and—argh!” Jack clapped her hands to her head. She had a headache.

“Uh…in a good way or a bad way?”

She really didn’t hear him as she ploughed on. “And you were trying so hard to be better and I didn’t trust you and I am literally the worst partner you could ask for—!”

“*Conejito,* calm down!” said Diego, laughing as he pulled her hands away. “Let me make this simple. Do you want to have a picnic after the game tomorrow?”

“Are…are you asking me out?”

“Only if you say yes.”

Jack had to laugh at that one, easing her panic into something smooth. “I…always did think you were kind of cute,” she admitted.

Diego’s eyes lit up.

The next couple of hours slipped by innocuously after that since they were finally free to share about their lives. There were no walls between them anymore. Their words came as easily as tag-teaming an Akuma. The more Diego talked, the more Perro Negro Jack saw until they were nearly indistinguishable in her eyes. She was so deliriously happy by that point that she didn’t mind when he suggested they face their Kwami.

“Together on three,” he suggested, holding his dog tags above his head. Jack nodded, holding her watch upside down in her hand and placing her wrist on top of it. “One…”

“Two…” said Jack.

“Three!”

Diego tossed the chain around his neck while Jack buckled the strap. There were flashes of white and spots of black and Mimmi appeared, along with a little dog Kwami. He looked similar to Mimmi—same tiny body, bulbous head, and humongous eyes. If Jack had to guess his breed, he looked like a black Labrador. As he yawned, Jack got a good look at his canines. He could probably pack a mean bite if he wanted.

“Wrekk!” Mimmi squeaked, clasping her hands to her cheeks in surprise.

Wrekk flinched at the sound of his name and he was suddenly wide-awake. He tried to fly over to Mimmi but ended up above her, so Mimmi zoomed up and around him instead. He held out his nubby little arms and the Rabbit Kwami eventually flew into them, shoving him back several feet.

“My apologies, ma’am. I can’t fly too well anymore…” he told her. Mimmi furrowed her brow in sorrow and pawed at his shorn whiskers.
“You’re being silly!” she insisted. “I haven’t seen you in over ten years. I don’t care. It’s just so very, very good to see you again!”

“I missed you too. But you know what this means…”

Mimmi gave a heavy sigh and the two turned to Jack and Diego. They reminded Jack of her parents when they found out how much class she had been missing. Without even thinking, she grabbed Diego’s hand for support.

“Sir,” said Wrekk, nodding to Diego. “Ma’am,” he said, nodding at Jack. Diego had mentioned his Kwami was exceedingly polite, but it was still rather jarring, especially compared to Mimmi’s all-out exuberance.

“I can explain!” Diego insisted, but Wrekk waved him off.

“We saw this coming, so we really can’t say we’re surprised.”

“But we weren’t trying to prevent it to be mean, honest!” added Mimmi. “We’re worried. About what happens next.”

“Bad things, huh?” said Diego. He looked around, then down at Jack’s hand entwined with his. He flashed a smile. “Well, nothing bad has happened yet. We haven’t been struck down by lightning or anything.”

“Eep!” cried Mimmi, hiding behind Wrekk.

“Please, sir! Don’t joke about things like that,” the Dog Kwami said. “You’ll scare Mimmi.”

“Lighten up!” Diego suggested.

“Yeah!” agreed Jack. “How do you know something bad is going to happen if this has never happened before?”

The Kwami exchanged glances. “Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst,” advised Mimmi with yet another one of her idioms.

“What happened to ‘Be Positive’?”

“That’s what hoping for the best is! Maybe you’re right. Maybe nothing will happen.”

“I suppose only time will tell,” said Wrekk.

“Well, whatever it is…” said Diego. He held up Jack’s hand, but looked passed it into her eyes. She had never seen anyone look so determined in all her life. “We’ll face it together.”

* * *

Time didn’t take any time at all. Jack and Diego had one glorious weekend together, even making their relationship status Facebook official by the end of it, before Jack’s parents told her the news that they were moving. All that talk of ‘facing it together’ seemed ridiculous in hindsight, considering they were going to be living their lives on separate continents. Jack accepted what was happening,
but Diego refused. He wanted to fight. It made preparations for the move all the more difficult, but, in the end, she left as intended and he learned to live with it. They were still together, so that had to count for something. Maybe if their relationship were able to weather this, they would think it was all worth it.

“I know why you’re asking me about this, amigo,” Diego said to Cat Noir, snapping Jack from her reverie. “You want to show Ladybug who you are, don’t you?”

“Quelle!? Non! Je…uh, I…I mean…”

“Come off it, man.”

“So what if I do?”

“Ay, I get it. You love her. You want her to know that you trust her with your secret, like Rabbit did with me. But even if you don’t believe bad things will happen, it still changes everything. You have to be ready for that. You can hope for the best all you want, but be prepared for the worst.”

“I can be.”

“I thought I was prepared for the worst too, but I was wrong.”

“But aren’t you and Rabbit happy? Knowing who the other is?”

“It doesn’t matter. I wish every day that I could take it back. I revealed who I was because I wanted to show mi conejito that I would never leave her. But, in a roundabout way, I did, so what was even the point?”

Jack didn’t want to hear anymore. She got up and transformed back into Rabbit, making a show of opening her tent. The boys instantly went quiet. She poked her head out to see Cat Noir with his eyes fixed on her, alarmed as he realized that she probably overheard everything. She pretended as if she hadn’t though, bounding right up and nearly crashing into him as she joined him back in the video frame.

“So?” she asked Diego. “What’s the verdict?”

“Mi conejito! What took you so long? I have an idea.”

“I’m all ears!” said Jack, wiggling them.

“When I use Dogstruction, the faster I move and the more strength I put behind what I’m doing, the more destruction there is.”

“Right…I knew that…” Jack was actually only vaguely aware of that.

“You’re used to relying on your speed and not having to hold back, but you can’t be like that when you use Dogstruction. You need to be light on your feet and slower in your movements. You shouldn’t even be able to hear yourself move.”

Jack grimaced. Did Diego forget how good her ears were? “That’s…going to be a bit difficult.”

“You can do it, Rabbit. I’ve seen you dodge bullets and kick an Akuma three times your size.
through a wall. This’ll be cake.”

Encouraged, Jack tried a couple of simple hops. Every time her feet hit the ground though, she heard
a resounding thud. It wasn’t until she was trying to be quiet that Jack realized just how loud she was.
Jump, THUD. Jump, THUD. She tried over and over again, trying to incorporate advice from Diego
and Cat Noir as she went along.

“You need to bend your knees more.”

“Try landing heel to toe, conejito.”

“Keep your arms closer.”

“You need to, uh, like, transfer most of your weight and pressure away from your feet, you know?”

Nothing seemed to work. Frustrated, Jack proclaimed it impossible, only for Cat to pass her the tablet
and preform several soundless leaps from rock to rock. He made it seem so easy, so Jack resumed
with renewed vigor. After an hour, her landings had become noticeably quieter, but it would be some
time before they didn’t make any noise at all. Even so, during Jack’s second round of Dogstruction,
there was noticeably less damage.

“Perro Negro, you’re a genius!” she told her boyfriend.

But even though this was good news, Jack was worried. She would have to completely change
fighting styles whenever she used Dogstruction. Maybe someday it would be second nature to
switch, but it currently felt awkward, like the French words that still got caught in her mouth.

*C’est assez pour ce soir.*

That’s enough for tonight.

*Je suis fatigué.*

I’m tired.
Lock Pick

Chapter Summary

Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jaclyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Chapter Notes

Okay, okay…I’m FINALLY getting to the meat of the story. Let’s get back to Operation Hide-and-Seek and see what’s happening there. Time to track down this Guardian!

I may have been late with my last chapter, but I’m really late with this one! I’m sorry about that. I had this two-week long event at work that I’ve been preparing for since last year that took up a lot of my time. But the event is over and I’m ready to get back to posting once a month! This chapter was also kind of a drag to write. Not one of my favorites. I had trouble planning this Akuma’s powers at first and I was just so excited to write the next chapter the whole time that I wanted to skip this one. But I persisted and I think it turned out okay.

The special shout out this time goes to…Kikurukina! They’re trying to help me improve the French sections of the story, which is a lost cause, but I appreciate it all the same. For anyone to take the time and try to do that is really cool. Thank you! I hope you enjoy the rest of it.

“Cat? Perro Negro and I have another favor to ask you.”

Another Saturday night of training in the quarry was in the books. Every week, Jack improved (“a hare” Cat would joke), but it still wasn’t enough. The moment she thought she had Dogstruction under control, she would lose focus and Cat would end up on his back, clutching the iPad for dear life. She was amazed he kept on coming back, but, then again, she had seen Ladybug stave off his advances on more than one occasion, so maybe he was a glutton for punishment.

“If it’s anything like this favor, I’m not sure my nine lives can handle it,” Cat Noir joked, even though he rubbed his shoulder. The pain had long since faded, but his memory of Jack accidentally attacking him the day they met was as sharp as ever. “What is it?”

Jack took a seat on the rock next to him. This was going to take some explaining. Luckily, her and Diego had discussed what they were going to say beforehand and they had it down to a science.
“Do you remember when I told you about the Guardian?” Jack asked her friend.

“Oui. What about him?”

“Rabbit and I are trying to find him, see if he can figure out why mi conejito can no longer use Lucky Strike and stuff,” explained Diego from the tablet in Cat Noir’s hands. Surprised, Cat lifted it up. “We’re calling it Operation Hide-and-Seek.”

“That is one epic game of hide-and-seek. Couldn’t he be anywhere in the world? How would you even find him?”

“Well…we’ve always had one clue,” Jack admitted. “You know how he took care of Anita Blaylock? He’s been doing the same thing for Perro.”

“I’ve been trying to follow the money trail back to him,” said Diego, scratching his temple. “It, uh…hasn’t been easy.”

Jack held in a snort. They were fifteen. They didn’t know the first thing about tracing money. Luckily, Perro Negro was beloved throughout Los Angeles and he was able to call in a few favors. The tricky part was not compromising his identity. Everything had gone smoothly though, and Diego found the answer he was looking for. Kind of.

“Turns out I’m the beneficiary of some sort of international trust,” he explained to Cat. “I got nowhere trying to figure out who set it up—bunch of aliases—but I did get some addresses of the properties. And one of them is in Paris.”

“I still can’t believe Google Maps failed us,” cut in Jack. The first thing they had tried to do was look up the building on the Internet, but it apparently didn’t exist.

“Can you blame the man for being careful, mi conejito? Omega is out there.” Diego shifted his attention to Cat. “This is where you come in, amigo. You probably know Paris better than anyone.”

“That is true,” Cat agreed.

“Then maybe you can find it. Here’s the address,” said Jack, pulling out a slip of paper she had been keeping in her boot. Curious, Cat Noir took it and had a look. A smile spread across his face, looking like a fat cat that had just eaten a canary. He puffed out his chest.

“I can find this, no pawblem,” he assured them.

“Really!?” Jack didn’t know why, but she thought it would be a lot harder than that.

“It might just be a shell corporation, but it’d be awesome if you could check it out,” said Diego.

Cat nodded vigorously and turned to Jack. “I’ll do some civilian recon tomorrow during the day, and then Ladybug and I will meet up with you at the Eiffel Tower at night to check it out, say, eight o’clock?”

“Er…do we have to involve Ladybug?” wondered Jack.

“Allons! It’ll be fun!”
Jack gave a tight smile, hoping Cat wouldn’t look too deeply. As luck would have it, a train horn interrupted them. Cat gasped, realizing the next one wouldn’t pass for a while. He gave them a quick round of goodbyes and took off to catch it. Jack watched him vanish into the night, his belt tail cracking like a whip in his haste. Soon the train was thundering by on the ridge above, vibrating the ground and making the stones by Jack’s feet dance. As quickly as it had come though, the train was gone, taking Cat Noir along with it.

“Teeth bared,” said Diego.

Wrekk was expelled from his Miraculous, smacking into Diego’s phone and knocking it over so Jack now had a nice view of the Sanchez’s kitchen ceiling. It appeared they had a skylight.

“Oh! My apologies, ma’am,” Jack heard the Kwami say as he poked his head into the frame to look down at it in dismay. Jack could only laugh.

“All hopped out,” she said, changing back and releasing Mimmi.

Diego picked his phone back up, concern painting his face. “Is Ladybug still mad at you?” he asked.

Jack couldn’t meet his eye. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen her since the whole ‘Sequana’ thing.”

“That’s because she hasn’t transformed outside of practice since the whole ‘Sequana’ thing.”

“Mimmi!” admonished Jack. What part of ‘secret’ did her Kwami not understand?

But it was true. Almost an entire month has passed and, anytime an Akuma attacked, Jack stayed put. An Akuma who controlled the weather put all of Paris under a severe storm watch and Jack stayed inside, playing Scrabble with her mom. The next week Jack had gotten caught up in an attack when she had gone to see Nino DJ. As she danced uncontrollably, she knew she could’ve prevented her fate by turning into Rabbit, but had decided against it to avoid any drama. And then there were the reports of Cat Noir stealing the Mona Lisa. Jack knew it was an Akuma posing as Cat Noir, but she didn’t bother to do anything about it. Ladybug wasn’t an idiot. She’d arrive at the same conclusion and take care of it.

Besides, Ladybug and Cat Noir had dealt with Akumas long before Jack moved to Paris. They didn’t need her help. And although saving people was all well and good, it didn’t really matter. Miraculous Ladybug always set everything right in the end.

In fact, Jack wouldn’t have minded giving up her mantel of Rabbit for good if it weren’t for a handful a people. Nino, for instance.

“Dude, I’m m’inquiète (worried) about my girl Rabbit,” he told her on Monday as they cleaned up after Positivity Club. They had been making posters to hang up around school for their ‘Pay it Forward’ project and Rose had brought a ridiculous amount of glitter for everyone to use. Jack and Nino decided to start paying it forward right away by sweeping up the mess so the janitor wouldn’t have to do it.

Jack played dumb, refusing to look up from her dustpan. “Huh? Why?”

“Well…no one’s seen her in a while. You don’t think she’s hurt, do you? Or that she partie?”

“Partie?”
“Left.”

“What does it matter? You have seen what she has done at the Seine.” Jack’s French words were stilted, like always, but at least they made more sense now. “Paris is better without her.”

Nino paused and leaned on his broom in dismay. “Why you gotta be like that, Jack? You’re toujours (always) so down on her.” When Jack didn’t answer, he shrugged and resumed his sweeping. “Seriously, there’s gonna be a day when there’s an Akuma Ladybug and Chat Noir ne peuvent pas correspondre (can’t match) and they’re gonna besoin (need) Rabbit’s help.”

Diego was another one Jack knew would be disappointed in her. Sure enough, upon hearing that she had been shying away from being a hero, he frowned so deep that the lines on his face seemed likely to become permanent.

“Mi conejito…” he whispered, the words dripping with well-intentioned pity. “This isn’t like you. Don’t let how Ladybug feels about you stop you. What if it had stopped you when your friend Alya was kidnapped?”

“That was different!” argued Jack. “I was the only one who could’ve helped, and Ladybug asked me to. Y’know, before she realized that I’m a whole lot more trouble than I’m worth.”

“Hala, I think you’re worth the trouble.”

“You better. I’m your girlfriend.”

Diego laughed and the mood lightening considerably, the world suddenly simple and easy. Jack wished she could take the sound of Diego’s laughter around with her wherever she went—not a recording, or anything canned like that…it was kind of hard to explain. Maybe like a friendly ghost? An astral projection? Or Diego himself. Of course, that was just a dream. Her parents had talked about flying Diego out to Paris for a week in the summer, but that would only be a temporary solution.

“Pardon for saying, ma’am, but the Guardian chose you to be Rabbit for a reason,” piped up Wrekk, never one to let a topic escape him. He paused to yawn. “Don’t forget that.”

“Wrekk’s right!” said Mimmi. “This’ll be a good first step, seeing Ladybug again. Fall down seven times, stand up eight!”

“I feel like I’ve fallen down seven million times,” complained Jack. “But if I can find the Guardian… maybe I can get my power back to normal and be the hero I’m supposed to be.”

It was this thought that gave Jack confidence, and it was enough to get the spotlight off her and on to other things. She and Diego and the Kwami talked about other things—Jack’s parents, Glendale Youth Ultimate, French lessons with Adrien, urban exploring. Time slipped by in such an enjoyable and comfortable manner that when the alarm on Jack’s phone went off, she reflexively picked it up and silenced it before resuming her story about Alix sneaking her into the new exhibit at the Louve before it opened.

“Uh…don’t you have to leave soon?” asked Diego.

“I can take the next train,” said Jack.
“But *mi conejito*! You’ve got your big shopping day with Marinette tomorrow, don’t you?”

Jack blinked. She had completely forgotten. She didn’t know what warmed her heart more—that she was finally going to get some tips on how to dress from a new friend or that her boyfriend had remembered such an obscure detail of her life. She had only mentioned it to him once, ages ago.

“Oh, yeah!” she said, laughing at her forgetfulness. “I’ve got to go!”

“Have an enjoyable time, ma’am,” said Wrekk.

“Thanks, Wrekk! I will!”

Diego grinned, a soft look in his eyes. “Skype again Monday, the usual time? Seems you'll be busy tomorrow.

“Yeah. I’ll have a whole new look!”

“Doesn’t matter to me. You’re beautiful, no matter what you wear.”

Jack blushed as she tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear. If there were ever a ‘Boyfriend of the Year’ award, Diego would win it, hands-down.

* * *

Jack looked down at the pad of paper and miniature clipboard marked with the NantHealth logo, both of which she had taken from her mom’s swag stash. She had filled page after page with Marinette’s rules of fashion, ranging from her body type to the fact that it was okay to mix prints if one was subtle and the other was bold. Among other things, there was a list of clothing basics and tips on how to identify Jack’s signature style, which Marinette was calling “beach-bohemian with a girly touch.” Jack didn’t know what that meant, but she liked the soft, flowing tops they were buying and pairing with more structured bottoms. Everything she tried on felt one hundred percent like her, especially compared to that stupid Chloé outfit. While Jack tried on clothes, Mimmi would often pop out to have a look and throw up her arms (her version of a thumbs up considering she didn’t have any thumbs). Somehow she was able to refrain from telling Jack, ‘I told you so.’

“D’accord,” said Marinette as she flipped through a rack of clothes. They were in one of her favorite boutiques, but Jack had already forgotten the name of it. Something *fleur*. The décor was very pink.

“Now try building an outfit yourself.”

To make the entire process easier, Marinette had spent most of the morning speaking to Jack in English. Shopping was stressful enough as it was without trying to translate, so Jack had been relieved when Marinette suggested it. She was asking for the impossible now though, no matter what language she spoke.

“I—I…um…but you’re doing such a good job picking out clothes for me!” argued Jack, trying to hide herself behind a mannequin, but Marinette grabbed her arm and dragged her over.

“It’s not that hard. Just take what you’ve learned and pick something from this rack. I know you can do it.”

“Uh…” There were too many clothes in too many colors. Jack started to get dizzy. But then she saw
a skirt in a blue that reminded her on the ocean. She checked it and was excited to see it had a cinch tie like Marinette had suggested (“Give illusion of a waist since I don’t really have one” Jack had written in her notes). She started to pull it, but then paused to turn to Marinette, seeking affirmation.

Her friend grinned, her eyes glittering. “Ah! Une jupe en sac en papier! Very nice.”

“Did you just call this…a paper bag skirt?” Fashion was so weird.

“What are you going to pair it with?”

Eyes still on Marinette, Jack touched a brocade shirt in a chocolate brown only to see her friend shake her head. Jack tried again. And again. She start to laugh as she moved her hand around at random, Marinette taking a playful swat at her to get her to stop. Jack jumped back, only to land on the toes of another shopper.

“I’m sorry!” Jack cried in French, her joy evaporating as the woman scowled at her. Jack slinked out of the way and allowed her to pass. Marinette, for her part, held a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide in horror.

The moment ruined, Jack returned the skirt to the rack and the two left the store. They were hungry anyway. Marinette explained she knew a cute little bistro not too far from where they were with outdoor seating, so they headed there, their arms laden with colorful shopping bags.

“I thought of a way to repay you,” Jack told Marinette as they made their way. She felt a little bad still talking in English, but it was easier this way.

Marinette rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “I already told you. You don’t have to do that.”

“I know. But I’m gonna do it anyway. I’m going to help you get with Adrien.”

Marinette was so shocked that she didn’t pay any attention to where she was going and crashed into a pole.

“Marinette!” cried Jack, running over to see if her friend was okay. The girl struggled to stand, her shopping bags knocking off her equilibrium, so Jack grabbed her arm and steadied her.

“I’m fine, I’m fine…” Marinette insisted, her voice raising an octave. She pulled away from Jack and resumed walking, as if trying to put some distance between her and her embarrassment, but it was easier said than done. She switched back to English. “I don’t think you can help. With the Adrien thing. I mean…I can’t even talk to him! I just get so nervous.”

“I’ve noticed…” Jack said under her breath. An idea occurred to her though and she spoke up. “You know, I used to get nervous around Diego all the time too. He was just so perfect.”

“We’re superheroes and sharing our true identities is dangerous,” Jack thought, but that wasn’t something she could just tell Marinette. “Because he thought I wouldn’t like that part of him.” That was also true. “They weren’t the best parts of him, but it made me feel a whole lot better knowing he had flaws just like me.”
Marinette scoffed. “Adrien doesn’t have any flaws.”

“Marinette!” Jack groaned. “It’s that kind of thinking that is keeping you from talking to him! You need to start seeing Adrien as a person, not perfection.”

“I see him as a person!”

“Oh, really? Then prove it. Call him right now.”

Marinette stopped walking. “Right now? Like…right now, right now?”

“Right now.”

“Right now,” Marinette repeated, slamming her shopping bags down on the sidewalk with a purpose, forcing those walking behind them to detour around. “Right now,” she said again, rummaging through her purse for her phone. She glanced at Jack from time to time, perturbed, as she scrolled through her contact list, but she didn’t get much further than that.

“Well…?” Jack wondered, tapping her foot as she waited for Marinette to unfreeze.

Marinette’s lower lip began to tremble as her thumb hovered over her screen. She stared at it, silently willing herself to take the plunge, but, in the end, she chickened out, throwing her phone back in her purse as if it had suddenly sprouted fangs.

“Argh! I can’t! I can’t do it!” she cried. Ashamed, she lifted her eyes towards Jack. “You’re right. What am I going to do?”

“Well, practice makes perfect,” said Jack, pulling out her own phone. Marinette eyed it with distrust.

“What are you—?”

But Jack was already entering Marinette, Adrien, Alya, and Nino’s names into a group text. By the time Marinette realized what Jack was up to and tried to snag her phone out of her hands, it was too late.

Message sent.

*hey nino, when u DJ next? We should all go see*

A cheery beep resounded from Marinette’s phone and she nearly dropped it as she pulled it out again, frantic to see what Jack had done. Before she even finished reading Jack’s text though, Alya answered.

*Fab idea girl!*

Then Nino.

*Chya*

*Tonite @ Le Rex @ 8. Dudes in?*

Jack’s stomach flipped as she realized that she once again hadn’t thought her plan all the way
through. She couldn’t go out tonight. She had to rendezvous with Cat Noir and Ladybug! Worried she wouldn’t come up with a suitable excuse, she glanced nervously at Marinette, but the girl had her head down. Jack’s phone buzzed again though and she saw Adrien had answered.

*Tonight is too short notice. My Father would never let me go. But let’s plan on another time!*

Relief flooded Jack’s body and she was quick to add on to the message

*Totally!*

She lifted her eyes to Marinette, who was now as white as a sheet. “You know…you could’ve at least texted something.”

“Ahhhhhh…!”

Hands shaking, Marinette closed one eye and texted furiously. She hit send and held her phone away from her as if she expected it to blow up, squeezing her other eye shut. Curious, Jack glanced at her own phone when it buzzed.

*I can wait!*

Jack opened her mouth to point out to Marinette her mistake but hesitated. Instead, she just added to the message.

*Yeah! The 5 of us hanging out together is worth the wait*

Mariette noticed her faux pas and flushed briefly before shoving her phone back into her purse. She gave Jack a look that begged her to say nothing, so Jack obliged, asking again where the bistro was. Marinette was happy to take the lead, focusing on the task at hand to calm herself down.

After taking two wrong turns and finally consulting Marinette’s phone for directions, the two were soon being seated by a waiter in a lovely garden, tiny but overflowing with greenery, a trellis overhead granting them some shade. A fountain in the shape of a tulip splashed nearby as Marinette helped Jack decipher the menu. As they munched on cheese and bread, they sat in companionable silence. Jack closed her eyes, enjoying the sun and the simple presence of a friend.

“Thank you.”

Jack’s eyes flickered open, confused. They had been speaking in French for the past half hour, yet Marinette had switched back to English for some reason.

“For what?” Jack wondered, her brow crinkling. She should be the one thanking Marinette, not the other way around.

Marinette dropped her gaze to her lap, where she fiddled with her hands. “For giving me another chance after what I did to you.”

Jack couldn’t help but roll her eyes. The whole ‘Chloé’s outfit’ debacle felt like years ago by this point, but of course it was still weighing heavily in Marinette’s mind. “It was a mistake,” Jack pointed out. “Everybody makes mistakes, you know? So to judge someone else for making one… well, that doesn’t seem fair, does it?” An irate Ladybug, her jaw clenched, flashed through Jack’s mind. “I know from experience that not everyone thinks the way I do. I know not everyone is so…”
understanding.”

Marinette seemed to catch on to the fact that Jack was thinking about someone in particular. “Who…?” she said. “If you don’t mind my asking,” she added quickly in French, clearly fearful she had made some kind of slight.

Jack couldn’t very well tell Marinette about her relationship issues with Ladybug. She knew Marinette was a fan and she wouldn’t believe Jack anyway. And how would Jack even begin to explain without revealing her identity as Rabbit? So she went with something more distant, but still true.

“My old friends back home.”

“The ones you played Frisbee with?”

“No, not those ones. The friends I grew up with. My childhood friends. There were five of us—the Squad, we called ourselves. And I’m not going to say I didn’t mess up. I did. I sorta pulled away from them and got wrapped up in other things. I even forgot one of their birthdays I was so busy with stuff. I felt awful, but they never forgave me for it, no matter how hard I tried to make it up to them. They just…cut me loose and that was the end of it.”

Marinette’s eyes reflected Jack’s own hurt and Jack suddenly found herself blinking back tears. She turned away to stare at some random woman’s ridiculously oversized hat two tables over, willing herself to get it together. She was a little stunned by her own reaction—she never really realized how much her friends’ abandonment had affected her until now. She guessed there had been too much on her plate for her to dwell on it before, but now her she was, dealing with old wounds.

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” offered Marinette.

Jack rubbed her face with her arm. “It’s fine. Really. My mom always says you can’t change the past. The best you can do to learn from it. And I learned that I don’t want anyone to feel the way I felt, so I try to be as forgiving and understanding as possible. I’ve always been that way, I guess, but, like, more now that I was before.”

“Well…if it makes you feel any better…” said Marinette, passing over a napkin so Jack could wipe her eyes. “I promise to forgive your mistakes if you promise to forgive mine.”

“Really?”

“Yeah!” Marinette put her elbow on the table, making the silverware hop, and held out her little finger. “Pinky swear.”

Jack grinned and locked pinkies with Marinette, glad to see that there were some things in the world that were truly universal, no matter what country.

“I wish everyone was like you, Marinette,” said Jack wistfully. Ladybug could learn a thing or two from her.

* * *

In a shock to absolutely no one, least of all Jack, she was late meeting up with Cat Noir and Ladybug. When she finally scrambled up the latticework of the Eiffel Tower to the observation deck,
she found the two already waiting for her. Cat Noir was even taking a little catnap. Upon seeing a flash of white though, Ladybug nudged him awake with the toe.

“Rise and shine, kitty,” she told him.

Cat sprang awake, rolling to his feet and brandishing his staff at Jack. It took a moment for his brain to catch up, but his glowing green eyes eventually flooded with recognition and he grinned.

“Ah, Rabbit! Purrfect timing!” he said.

“She’s late,” Ladybug pointed out.

“Well, the party doesn’t start until the guest of honor arrives.”

Ladybug turned an icy gaze towards Jack. “I’m only here to stop you when you try to destroy Paris again.”

Cat forced laughter as he gave Ladybug’s shoulder a hearty shake. “My Lady is kitting. We know you won’t let that happen again, Rabbit!”

Jack appreciated Cat trying to smooth things over, but he was fooling himself if he thought he was making things better. To keep the situation from spiraling down into an awkward abyss, Jack decided to stick to business.

“Were you able to do some civilian recon today?” she asked him.

Cat nodded, growing serious. He even stopped punning. “That address you gave me is for a small tech firm called Dynamique Technologies—DyTech for short. They deal primarily in bioinformatics.”

“Bio what…?” Jack wrinkled her nose. She didn’t know what exactly she had been expecting, to be honest. This was as good as an answer as any. But still. “What does that even mean?”

Cat scratched his head, sheepish. “I guess they use computers to analyze biological stuff? Like DNA. At least…that’s what the girl at the front desk told me. I couldn’t figure out much else. Security was really tight. I had to go through a metal detector just to get into the lobby.”

“Hmmm…” Jack turned away, deep in thought. She jumped up on the railing and scanned the horizon. It was still jarring not to see a single skyscraper. It made the sky look too big, like it could swallow her whole. “Could you take me there?” she wondered. If the Guardian had something to do with this company, she had to figure out what it was.

Cat joined Jack, extending his staff until it hit the ground. “Ladies first,” he said, gesturing to it with a flourish. Jack grabbed a hold and slid down it like a fireman’s pole, her fishbone braid waving in the wind. She hit the ground and moved out of the way. Ladybug came down soon after, but crossed her arms and turned so her back was facing Jack while they waited for Cat Noir to join them.

“Follow me,” he said as soon as he did, making a beeline north. “It’s not far from the Arc de Triomphe.”

Traveling came as a bit of a respite from Ladybug’s cold shoulder. As the two trailed after Cat across the moonlit rooftops, dodging chimneys and bounding across patios, Jack could almost pretend that
her fellow superhero didn’t hate her. The trip to the landmark was far too short though for Jack to
keep that lie alive. Soon the arc, lit up blindingly white, came into view. Cat Noir paused on top to
allow Jack and Ladybug to catch up a bit before darting off into the night again. It felt a bit like a cat-
and-mouse game, but they eventually found Cat sitting stationary on the edge of a roof, his tail
swishing back and forth. As they joined him, he pointed to the building across the tiny square.

DyTech was extremely non-descript, looking exactly like the narrow off-white buildings that
surrounded it. The only thing that set it apart was it’s modern glass doors and a placard that glowed
with LED light. On further inspection, all the windows were blacked out as well.

“So here’s the plan,” said Cat. “We go inside and tell security that an Akuma is in the building, so
we need to search—”

There was a metallic pop as the streetlight at the end of the lane shattered, tinkling glass tickling
Jack’s rabbit ears as the shards hit the ground. The three of them turned to stare at it, but there
appeared to be nothing out of the ordinary. Maybe a bird flew into it.

“You were saying?” Jack prompted, but Cat was fixated on something down the street.

“Who’s that?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Who’s what?” wondered Ladybug, bewildered.

Jack swore she saw a flicker of movement, like some kind of apparition, before all the streetlamps
began to break. They went out, one after another, the street growing more and more dim.

Suddenly, Cat grabbed both of them by the collars of their suits and yanked them back over the lip of
the roof.

“That’s an Akuma. I’m pawsitive,” he whispered as they huddled together.

Ladybug was stunned for a moment before peeking over the ledge. “There’s nothing là-bas (over
there)...”

“Is he invisible?” Jack wondered. She twitched her ears, but all she heard was the thrum of distant
traffic and their own breathing and heartbeats. “I can’t hear anything...”

“He’s right there,” insisted Cat. “He’s dressed in a... how do you say Morphsuit in English?”

“Morphsuit,” said Jack and Ladybug together.

“Yeah, a black one. With a shiny domino mask, and a cowl that looks like it’s made out of the same
energy I use for Cataclysm.”

Jack decided to have a look herself, but all she saw below was a dark and deserted street.

Cat lowered his ears, a pitiful sight. “Can you really not see him?”

“Oh!” cried Ladybug as something dawned on her, smoothing out her furrowed brow. She turned to
her partner. “Your night vision, Chat! The Akuma must be hiding in the darkness.”

Cat slapped his forehead. “Of course! You’re so smart, Buginette.” He switched to English for Jack’s
benefit. “It’s an Akuma that’s invisible in the dark, but I can see him because I’ve got night vision.”

Ladybug grimaced. “He must have followed us here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Why else would he be—?”

Cat hushed her up, pushing a finger to her lips. At first she looked disgruntled, clearly thinking this was some sort of flirtation tactic, but Cat was hardly paying attention to her at all, which could only mean serious business.

The three of them didn’t dare move a muscle, as stationary as the gargoyles atop Notre Dame. In the moonlight, Jack watched Cat’s eyes dart around as he tracked the Akuma below and then began to rise. Jack realized the Akuma was right across from them now, apparently scaling DyTech. Sure enough, the window on the third floor swung open like a door as if it had been blown open by a gust of wind, no doubt it allow the Akuma to slip inside.

Cat sprung into action as soon as the window started to close, whipping out his staff and flinging it. It spun through the air and hit its target, wedging the window open.

“Nice!” Jack couldn’t help but whisper.

“Thanks,” said Cat. “Now let’s go.”

Cat sprung across the street, latching onto the window right below the open one. Jack tried to do the same, but Ladybug grabbed her by the crook of the arm and dragged her back.

“Stay,” she commanded.

“No way!” said Jack. “Don’t you think it’s a little weird that an Akuma wants to sneak inside DyTech? I have to see what he’s up to.”

“Hurry up or we’ll lose him!” Cat insisted across the street.

“Please, Ladybug. Give me another chance,” Jack begged.

“I have. How many do I have to give?”

“Like you’ve never made a mistake before? Please, Ladybug. This is important to me.”

Ladybug seemed torn, but eventually let go. She leapt across without another word, which Jack took to be tacit agreement.

The open window, which Jack noted wasn’t the type that even opened in the first place if not for whatever the Akuma did to it, led into a small office cluttered with paper. There was a huge computer three times the size of Jack’s laptop, a mini-fridge, and a centrifuge, but they didn’t have time to stop and poke around. The door leading out into the hall was ajar. The light of the moon didn’t reach that far though and it was pure darkness beyond.

“Here,” said Ladybug, foreseeing the issue and grabbing Cat Noir and Jack’s hands.
Jack swore she heard a squee emanate from the back of Cat’s throat. “My Lady! So forward!” he said, kissing the back of Ladybug’s hand. “I like it.”

She rolled her eyes, but didn’t pull away. “Lead the way, kitty.”

Cat nodded and led the chain of superheroes into the hall.

Jack squinted in the darkness, willing herself to see. At first she could make out the faint outlines of framed pictures and filing cabinets, but then they took a turn and there was literally nothing but blackness as they shuffled forward. At one point Jack brushed against a fern, causing the vase to wobble. The three of them froze, but it settled. Jack heaved a sigh—they didn’t want to alert the Akuma to their presence just yet.

“Well, where are you going?” Jack wondered, rubbing her bruised nose with her free hand.

She heard a swish back and forth. Cat Noir was shaking his head. “I don’t know where he went from here,” he admitted.

Jack sighed, feeling hopeless. She twitched her ears again. Why couldn’t she hear anything? Of all the times for them to fail her…

…wait…

It was extremely faint, but there was no mistaking it. There was a voice now, male, French, deep and throaty. Jack’s breath caught as she let go of Ladybug and felt for a wall, using it as a guide as she stumbled around, trying to get closer to the sound.

“Rabbit, where are you going?” Cat wondered, but Jack waved him off.

“The Akuma. He’s talking.”

“To who?”

As Jack took a corner, the voice became clearer. She could pick up on words now. “It’s not here!”

“Oh! Wait. I think I hear it too,” said Cat, brushing passed Jack and taking her hand. He dragged her and Ladybug down the hall, breaking into a jog. Jack and Ladybug jostled each other as they struggled to keep up. It was difficult when neither of them knew where they were going, just being swung around corners in the dark.
A sudden glimmer of faint purple light told them they had found who they were looking for. A door
to their left was ajar, leading into a large room. In the middle stood the Akuma as Cat Noir had
described him, his silver domino mask glittering in the light cast by the glowing butterfly outline of
Hawk Moth’s influence across his face. His body faded away in the darkness, giving him the
appearance of a floating head.

“You promised me La Balise (the tag) and it’s not here!” the Akuma complained. He paused,
listening as Hawk Moth spoke to him psychically. “…Fine,” he said after a while, clearly none too
happy. “I’ll go find Ladybug and Chat Noir the démodé (old-fashioned) way, but I still want La
Balise (the tag).”

With the flick of a switch, the room, a lab, flooded with the dim light of halogens. They buzzed as
they slowly warmed up.

“Or we could find you first,” suggested Ladybug to the startled Akuma.

The Akuma recovered. Now that Jack could actually see him, she realized he was tall, well over six
feet. In his hand was some sort of silver pick with a thick handle. He stood before a metal box that
was open at the top, an empty pedestal rising out of it.

He bowed to them, his cowl flickering around his neck as if it were alive. “You’ll find it very difficult
to find me in the dark, Ladybug,” he said, pointing the silver instrument at one of the overhead
lamps. It glowed, but not with anything that gave off light. The bulb exploded, dimming the room a
bit.

“What is that!?” wondered Jack as she drew away with her friends from the cascade of showering
glass.

“What, this?” asked the Akuma in English, spinning the pick idly across his fingers. “It’s a lock pick,
my American friend. My namesake!”

And, with that, he somehow used it to destroy all the rest of the lights in the room in quick
succession, plunging them back into darkness once more.

“Lock Pick, eh?” said Cat Noir to Jack’s left. She heard him crack his knuckles. “So you’re a cat
burglar! Hate to break it to you, but there’s only room for one cat with powers in Paris, and that’s
me!”

“Kitty, no!” complained Ladybug, but there probably wasn’t a force in nature strong enough that
would’ve stopped Cat Noir from running headlong into battle. Jack heard his boots pound the
linoleum floor and read the silence as he leapt into the air. The sound of two people grappling
followed—grunts, clangs of metal weapons, the faint squeal of Cat’s suit when it twisted. Ladybug
and Jack clung together without even realizing it, trying to follow the fight with their ears instead of
their eyes. It was probably much easier for Jack, but she still found herself straining to see movement,
any movement at all, instead of black expanse.

But then a vertical flash of emerald green tore through the darkness. It silhouetted Cat Noir and Lock
Pick for a brief moment as they fell away from each other, searing their shapes into the inside of
Jack’s eyelids. Jack couldn’t explain it, but she knew instantly that something was wrong with Cat
before he even opened his mouth to cry out.

“My Miraculous!”
“It’s the Butterfly’s Miraculous now,” retorted the Akuma.

Ladybug and Jack both cringed.

“Great,” drawled a new voice. It dawned on Jack that it must be Cat Noir’s Kwami. He sounded slightly nasally and considerably annoyed. Every ounce of his little body seemed dedicated to sarcasm. “Just great…”

“No! Give it back!” demanded the boy who was Cat Noir. He wore different shoes now—sneakers, judging by their squeak. He ran at Lock Pick, but the series of crashes that followed let Jack know that he had been tossed across the room with ease.

Ladybug pushed off Jack and whipped out her yo-yo. Spinning it in a circle provided a faint pink glow of friction and power. It’s weak light was only able to light up her face, which was taut with worry.

“Chat Noir!” she cried out, leaping over lab equipment to get to where she heard her partner land.

“Stay back!” he managed before it morphed into a groan of pain. Ladybug skidded to a halt. “You can’t…My identity…”

“Since when have you cared about that?”

“Since always!”

Ladybug shook her head, clearly confused by Cat’s sudden change of heart, but Jack wasn’t. For all of Cat’s blustering that he was ready for Ladybug to know who he was, it seemed Diego’s words of warning had a profound impact on him. Jack couldn’t blame him. She would never wish what happened to her and Diego on anyone, least of all her friend. It was a smart decision, she decided, though not necessarily an easy one, especially now, when he was in danger.

Ladybug was forced to accept Cat’s decision though. Without even skipping a beat, she turned in the direction she had last seen Lock Pick. “Don’t blessez (hurt) him!”

“Why would I do that?” wondered the Akuma from a completely different direction. “I got what I wanted. From him, au moins (at least).”

It was the way Lock Pick lingered on that last turn of phrase that tipped Jack off.

“Ladybug! Look—”

A shadowy tendril, like a ragged piece of fabric, lashed out at Ladybug from the darkness, aiming for one of her earrings. But Jack’s warning had come in time for her to defend herself, swinging her yo-yo in a figure eight motion in front of her, guarding her sides, her ears. The tendril glanced off her weapon and returned from whence it came, but it attacked again and again, harder each time, pushing Ladybug back. Realizing she needed help, Jack pulled out her chakram and spun it around her wrist to generate her own light. It was in a comforting shade of buttery yellow that barely allowed her to see her own feet, but it was enough to navigate by. She raced over to assist, but Ladybug had other ideas.

“Gotcha!” she cried, flinging her yo-yo after the retreating shadow. Her weapon was a slash of pink
light, wrapping around something until it was stilled and went dark. “And you thought you could cacher (hide) from me…!” Ladybug said triumphantly.

Jack paused next to Ladybug as she pulled on her yo-yo string, an uneasy feeling balling up her stomach. No way would the Akuma be captured that easily. Sure enough, when Ladybug dragged a dark shape into Jack’s pool of light, it wasn’t Lock Pick at all, but a desk chair on its side.

“What—?” wondered Ladybug, but before the word even left her lips, Lock Pick, looking like a faint apparition in the weak light, was there.

So was Jack’s foot.

With a well-timed kick over Ladybug’s shoulder, Jack sent the Akuma flying. Her rabbit ears twitched as she heard the satisfying smack of him hitting a wall. She didn’t wait for him to recover though. She chased him down, but by the time she got to the crack Lock Pick left in the plaster, he was gone.

Disturbed air tickled Jack’s rabbit ears. She turned to find Ladybug had the same idea, and had resumed swinging her yo-yo over her head like a lasso to give her some light. She seemed a little pale. Shaken, even.

“How did you know he was coming?” she asked.

“How…” Jack was pretty sure she had acted out of instinct, but now that she could look back on that moment… “I heard him.”

“I thought you couldn’t.”

“Well, I heard something. Like…like a light crunch. Like stepping into old snow.”

It was a good thing she finally experienced snow for the first time when her family rented that cabin in Park City last New Years, or she wouldn’t have known how else to describe it.

“Hmm…” Ladybug closed one eye, deep in thought, even though she knew they only had a moment before Lock Pick attacked again. “Cover me,” she told Jack.

Jack really didn’t have a choice. Ladybug was already tossing her yo-yo into the air to use Lucky Charm. Scrambling, Jack bounded in front of Ladybug’s unprotected side and held her spinning chakram up like a shield. She grimaced as the tendril of darkness glanced off of it. Only then did it dawn on her that it was Lock Pick’s cowl. It really was alive.

“What did you get?” Jack asked over her shoulder. The cowl smacked straight into her fist in the center of her ‘shield’ and caused a dull pain to crawl up her arm.

Ladybug didn’t answer.

“Well?”

Jack stole a glance. Ladybug was holding a spray can of some sort. She sprayed her fingers and sniffed them before rubbing them together. It was sticky, whatever it was. Jack deflated instantly.

“Oh…” she said. “I was hoping for some light…”
Ladybug’s head snapped up, unaware Jack had been watching her. Her eyes traveled a bit further
though, settling on a point above Jack’s head and then down at the ground as she kicked as some
glass shards at their feet. She broke out into a smile, a smile Jack was growing accustomed to—
Ladybug had a brilliant plan.

“Lock Pick would just destroy it. This is better,” Ladybug insisted. She jerked her head to the right,
across the room. “Follow me,” she said.

Jack was hesitant to follow and leave the safety of the wall to their backs, but Ladybug’s tactics
always produced a positive result. She was still lucky Jack had to remind herself, even if Jack was
not. As long as she stuck by Ladybug’s side, everything was bound to turn out okay.

They went back to back, wielding their weapons to defend themselves from Lock Pick’s cowl as
they slowly crossed the lab. With her free hand, Ladybug sprayed the ground at seemingly random
intervals. Jack knew better than to question her, but she certainly had a lot of questions.

“Ladybug, what are you—?” wondered Cat Noir from the far side of the lab.

“Just stay where you are,” Ladybug insisted, cutting him off as she blocked Lock Pick’s cowl again.
“I got this. I promise.”

Eventually Ladybug and Jack reached their destination and followed the wall to a corner.

“Now what?” wondered Jack over the beeping of Ladybug’s earrings. Whatever was supposed to
happen hopefully wouldn’t take too long. Ladybug had less than five minutes.

“Now…we wait,” she said. “But do you hear him?”

“The Akuma? How…? He doesn’t make any noise when he…moves…”

Jack’s rabbit ears twitched up a storm, a faint clickity-clack tickling their sensitive hairs. It was
familiar, like a shade of the sound that had alerted Jack to Lock Pick’s presence before.

And that’s when it dawned on Jack: Glue. Ladybug had been spraying some kind of adhesive all
over the light bulb shards that littered the floor, and Lock Pick had stepped in them. He may as well
have made himself visible.

“Ha!” cried Jack, stopping the spin of her chakram to fling it into the darkness, straight at her foe.

The noise stopped and Jack knew Lock Pick had paused to snag the chakram to keep it from striking
him in the face. Good thing it was just a distraction. Jack went sailing through the air with a flawless
flying kick. She didn’t know which part of the Akuma she struck, but it didn’t matter. She hit
something solid and he stumbled back. The noise was so clear that Jack could almost picture him
doing so.

“Im...poss...ible...” Lock Pick said, wheezing. Jack aimed another kick at him, but she heard him
spin away. “You can’t see me!” he insisted.

“Oh, yeah?” challenged Jack. The sound of the Akuma’s boots let her know that he had jumped onto
a lab table. She hopped up to join him, painting a picture in her head of his shock, even if his face
was covered. “Try me.”
Fabric wrapped around Jack’s wrist and she instantly regretting talking a big game. Lock Pick was trying to steal her Miraculous now too! Swinging her leg up, she tried to stomp the cowl off, but her leg sailed through nothing but air. Even so, she must have freed herself somehow, or else she wouldn’t be able to spin away and tuck her wrist into her armpit. Sure, it put her at a disadvantage and she probably looked silly doing it, but she didn’t really have a choice.

Jack’s rabbit ears picked up on Lock Pick’s boot scrapping the tabletop as he jumped at her. Sweeping the glass at her feet, Jack was able to get a sense of where some free space was and quickly moved out of the way, kicking Lock Pick as he landed. He caught Jack’s foot with both hands though, pressing his lock pick hard against her boot.

To be honest, Jack couldn’t have planned it better herself.

“Get ‘em, Ladybug!” she cried.

Ladybug slung her yo-yo towards the sound of Jack’s voice, plunging the whole room into complete darkness once again. Jack could tell the yo-yo had looped around Lock Pick this time though because he was yanked back, breaking his grip on Jack’s foot. She fell over backwards and half-landed on something hard and round. Feeling it’s edges, Jack recognized her chakram. She didn’t waste any time picking it up to use it to generate a bit of light again. As she jumped to her feet to race forward though, she caught just a glimpse of Lock Pick holding up his lock pick. It glowed and the yo-yo string began to loosen until it pooled around his middle and allowed him to slip free.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” cried Jack, kicking the Akuma’s hand.

The lock pick went flying off into the darkness, but it didn’t make a sound like it should have when it landed. Not that it mattered, because Jack had made a huge mistake. She had overextended herself on her kick, causing her to expose her wrist so she could balance herself. Lock Pick took advantage immediately, clamping down on Jack’s wrist with both hands and trying to use his thumb to unlatch the buckle.

“No!” cried Jack, struggling to escape Lock Pick’s grasp. “Ladybug!” she said in desperation. “Destroy the lock pick!” If the Akuma wasn’t in there, she didn’t know where it was, but it was their best bet.

Jack tried to beat Lock Pick over the head with her chakram to get him to release her, but the cowl absorbed the hit and ripped it from her hand. Leaving Jack with just her claws, she tried to scratch his hands, but his morph suit seemed to protect him. Under Lock Pick’s grasp, she could feel her Miraculous loosening. It was only a matter of time now…

A sound akin to an icicle being broken in half sounded somewhere to Jack’s right and Lock Pick’s grip went slack. Jack was flooded with relief, but she still had the presence of mind to wrench her hand away and kicked the Akuma back. She heard him smack into something and collapse as she secured her watch.

“Thanks, Ladybug,” Jack said, breathing heavily. That had been a close call. Too close.

“I didn’t do anything,” said Ladybug to Jack’s left.

“Huh? Then who—?”
“I might have lost my night vision, but my Kwami didn’t!” said Cat Noir cheerfully.

“Yeah. Chanceux (lucky) you, kid,” grumbled the Kwami.

“Good call on the Akuma being in his lock pick, Rabbit,” said Cat.

The patter of wings told Jack the corrupted butterfly was flying right passed her. Ladybug spotted it as it crossed her pool of pink light. She swung her yo-yo around and went to work purifying it. Meanwhile, Jack crawled forward through sticky broken glass and found Lock Pick’s unconscious form. She patted him down, finding her chakram. She spun it for light and located a small pouch around his waist. Inside was a blocky silver ring that looked oddly familiar.

“‘Scuse me!” said a small black shape in English as it zoomed by, stealing the ring straight out of Jack’s palm.

“Hey!” complained Jack.

“Aw, quit your yelling!”

Cat Noir’s Kwami was, like, the antithesis of Wrekk. Jack idly wondered if Ladybug’s Kwami was boring and monotonous.

“Thanks, Plagg,” said Cat. Plagg. Wrekk. Of course Omega named the Recrees akin to the originals. “Transform me!” There was another flash of green light in the dark. “Ah, it’s good to see again,” he said, his voice coming closer. “Surtout (Especially) your beautiful face, My Lady.”

“Profitez (Enjoy) it now, kitty,” answered Ladybug as Cat stepped into the pink light cast by her spinning yo-yo. They pounded fists. “I’ve got to go.”

Ladybug tossed the empty can of spray adhesive into the air to use Miraculous Ladybug. The swarms of ladybugs lit the place up, literally. They swept the floor and repaired the overhead lamps, returning light to the room. Jack blinked away the spots. It took her a moment to realize that Ladybug had moved to stand in front of her.

“I’m leaving,” she said to Jack, slowly and carefully in English. She nodded and smiled. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“Uh…thanks.”

Did this mean they were okay now? Jack couldn’t tell. She would have asked, but Ladybug was already preforming a handspring over a lab table and making her way to the door. That and the former Akuma was groaning awake, grabbing Jack attention.

He was a stately man in a turtleneck, wearing horn-rimmed glasses that were knocked askew. Jack couldn’t help herself and fixed them for him before he regained full consciousness. Cat joined her, offering her a pencil.

“What’s this?” she wondered, taking it. It had the words Dynamique Technologies, Inc. printed on it.

“It’s what his lock pick turned back into,” explained Cat.

Cat spoke to the man in French, essentially saying the same thing. The man’s eyes, a lovely shade of forest green, unclouded. Rather than looking surprised or confused though, he seemed embarrassed. He scrambled to sit up, leaning forward as he held his palm to his forehead.

“Please tell me I didn’t…” His voice was smoother now that he was no longer Akumatized, fit for jazz radio. He switched to English for Jack’s benefit. Thank goodness. “Please tell me I didn’t become an Akuma.”

“Er…in that case, I’ve got some bad mews…” started Cat.

Jack cut him off. “What’s your name, sir?”

“…Marcel Lacasse. Dr. Marcel Lacasse.”

“Dr. Lacasse, we found you breaking into this building to steal something called…The Tag…I think?”

The man rocketed his feet. He towered over her and Cat, as tall as he was when he was an Akuma, and made it to the center of the room in five steps. He stood before the empty pedestal, looking as if he had just witnessed a gruesome murder.

“Where is it? What did I do with it?” he asked, harried.

“It was gone before you got here,” said Cat.

He spun around. “Someone stole it!?”

“Maybe it was just moved?” Jack suggested, going over to get a closer look.

Dr. Lacasse lifted a control panel that had been pried open and was now dangling off the metal box by a knot of wires. A few frayed edges let Jack know some had been snipped.

“Okay, yeah. It was totally stolen,” agreed Jack with a grimace.

The man opened a large, narrow drawer nearby that looked like it once had been locked. “No, no, no…” he said upon finding it empty. He hurried over to a computer and shook the mouse more forcefully than necessary to wake it up. He clicked through a few tabs. “How can this be?”

“What’s wrong?”

“The schematics seem to have been stolen too, and any back-up copies have been wiped from the system. My life’s work, gone, just like that!”

“Your life’s work?” Jack’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “If it’s yours…why were you trying to steal it?”

Dr. Lacasse swallowed and turned to her slowly, adjusted his glasses as he did so. “I was…fired from DyTech earlier today and my projects were given to one of my co-workers. And the proper English translation would be ‘The Beacon.’”

“The Beacon…” That made a bit more sense. “What does it do?”
“It is intended to attract those of a similar genetic makeup to that of an input sample.”

“Uh…?”

“Say you wished to find a rare specimen, such as a Dryococelus Australis.” He took note of the blank looks on Jack and Cat’s faces. “A tree lobster.”

The two couldn’t help but laugh.

“Tree lobster? Really?” she asked. “That’s a thing?”

“That’s why I prefer Dryococelus Australis…” Dr. Lacasse cleared his throat. “But say you were looking for a tree lobster, and you just so happened to have a sample of one. You would place it into The Beacon and it would emit a wave that would attract a living tree lobster. If I could have gotten it to work, it would have revolutionized the biology field as we know it! Alas, the process causes rapid decomposition in the sample. I cannot get it to work for longer than a few seconds…”

There was something about those words—rapid decomposition—that struck a chord with Jack.

“So let me get this straight,” said Cat. “Someone stole this device…that doesn’t even work? Who would even want it?”

There was a shift in Jack’s brain, like a glacier calving. Without even thinking, she flung her hand out and grabbed a handful of Cat’s suit, yanking him towards her.

“They don’t decompose…” she said, her voice distant and her eyes far away. She could still hear Ladybug saying those words to her in Notre Dame’s bell tower.

“Oh…Rabbit?”

But in Jack’s mind, she wasn’t standing in the lab at DyTech anymore. Instead, she was hiding behind a pillar in that warehouse again, Trumpeter Swan taunting her as his footsteps echoed through the cavernous building.

You’re only delaying the inevitable, Rabbit. One way or another, Omega will find all the Kwami. He will get all seven Miraculouses. He’s very…resourceful.

Jack snapped back to Cat, whose eyes mirrored her growing fear. “Omega,” she said. “Omega took it to find the Kwami. Their samples won’t decompose.”

She realized how tightly she was holding on to her friend and released him. He adjusted his suit, pulling the wrinkles out of it, but his attention remained on Jack. “Does he have samples?” he asked.

Jack turned to Dr. Lacasse, who was simply baffled by this turn of events. “How big of a sample does it have to be for The Beacon to work? Would an eyelash or a whisker do?”

“Oh, no. You’d need at least a gram,” he said.

The tension coiled up in Jack’s shoulders released. “Oh, thank gawd.” She knew for a fact that Omega didn’t have that much thanks to her grandmother. He might have collected more since then, but not that much.
Dr. Lacasse didn’t seem to be paying any attention, his eyes still glued to the spot where The Beacon once sat, running his fingers through his salt-and-pepper hair. “This is Dr. Evigan’s fault…”

“What makes you say that?” wonder Cat.

“During a recent conference call with the chairman of DyTech, I updated him on my progress with The Beacon and he was very pleased. The Beacon was his idea, after all, but maybe I should have informed him in private because--”

“The chairman!” said Jack brightly, latching on to this new information almost immediately. Omega wasn’t the only one looking for the Recrees. “Who is he?”

“Er…his name is Oliver Bergeron.”

“What can you tell me about him?”

“Not much, I’m afraid. He’s a bit…eccentric, a bit of a recluse, but extremely generous. He doesn’t come to Paris often, but the last time he was in town, he found out it was my son’s eighteenth birthday and sent a car to him as a gift. I couldn’t believe it!”

Jack felt like jumping for joy. That sounded like the Guardian, all right. “I’d love to meet him! Do you know when he’ll be in town again?”

“I wish I did…I know he would believe I’m innocent, unlike management…I cannot believe they think I embezzled money from the company. Me! Of all people! I have been nothing but a loyal employee my entire tenure here! Dr. Evigan framed me, I am sure of it. She was jealous of my success and knew if she got me out of the picture, my projects would go to her, including The Beacon. But I’d rather it be under her care than this Omega you speak of.”

“At least he can’t use it,” reasoned Jack.

“Yeah. But Hawk Moth can. He can just pull samples from his Kwami,” Cat Noir pointed out, shivering. “Now that he knows about it, he’ll definitely be looking for it.”

Jack gave a small start. She had been so worried about her own situation that she didn’t even stop and consider the implications this had for her friend. “That’s a bummer, Cat. I’m so sorry…”

“It’s okay,” Cat insisted, putting his arm around Jack’s shoulders and flashing her a grin. “We’ll just have to find it first.”

*   *   *

“Well!? What do you think?” asked Jack, holding her brand new sky blue tunic in her hands like a dress as she spun around. She didn’t know what Marinette had made it out of, but the fabric seemed to float like it was made of clouds. She loved the leggings even more. They were laced halfway down the backs of her legs with what looked to be ribbon, ending in cute little bows, except ribbon didn’t have any give like this material did.

“¡Caray! Te ves hermosa.”

Diego all but purred the words, sounding vaguely like Perro Negro. His tone made Jack blush.
“Really?” she said. She believed it, but she wanted to hear him affirm it all the same.

“Always,” he said. “Did you pick it out?”

“No, it’s the outfit Marinette designed for me!” Jack gushed as she came forward to pick her phone up off her bedroom windowsill. “She just came by to give it to me.” Jack tilted the camera so Marinette was also included in the frame. “Say hi to Diego, Marinette!”

“Allô!” said the girl with a friendly, energetic wave.

Diego nearly leapt up from his desk. “Whoa. Sudden Marinette is sudden. ¡Hola!”

Marinette held a hand to her mouth to cover her laughter as Jack joined her on the bed. To be honest, she hadn’t been expecting to introduce Marinette to Diego today either, but the timing had just worked out that way. Marinette had been a little against the idea at first, not wanting to intrude, but Jack had insisted. She wanted all her friends to meet her boyfriend. It somehow made him feel closer.

“You did a great job,” Diego told Marinette. “You’re a true artista.”

“Thank you! There’s just one thing missing.”

“There is…?” asked Jack and Diego together.

Marinette scanned the room and spotted what she was looking for hunched over by the desk—Jack’s beach bag. Marinette went over and began to mess around with it.

“What’re you doing?” Jack wondered, craning her neck to get a better look, but Marinette waved her off as she pulled something out of her purse. Jack simply turned to Diego and shrugged.

“Got it!” said Marinette triumphantly, standing back up. A brass chain was now swinging from her fingers, weighed down by Jack’s rabbit’s foot. It was a keychain no longer. “What do you think?”

Jack was speechless, but Diego was never at a loss for words. “What is it? I can’t see. Jack, flip the view.”

“Here,” said Marinette, closing the space between her and Jack. Jack took the necklace and slipped it over her head. The rabbit’s foot swung like a pendulum a bit before settling against her sternum. It felt warm and heavy, but also like it had always been there. She picked it up between her thumb and forefinger and raised it to the camera so Diego could see, still without words.

“Hey, it’s the keychain I gave you!” said Diego, recognizing it instantly. “Nice.”

“Jack told me you gave it to her at the airport when she left for Paris, for good luck. I thought it sounded really romantic and I wanted to…er, intégrer it into her outfit.”

“Integrate?” wondered Jack.

“Oh, it’s close?” Marinette sighed. “I just never know with English…”

“Well, I love it,” Jack assured her friend, rubbing the rabbit’s foot. Now it could be close to her heart at all times. She flung her arms around her friend, hugging her tight. “You’re the best, Marinette. And, someday, Adrien’s gonna see that too.”
“Adrien, huh?” said Diego with a smirk.

Marinette’s face ran the gamut of pink to red.

“You heard nothing!” Jack insisted, also turning red. She needed to think a bit more before she spoke.

“Don’t worry. I’m good at keeping secrets,” Diego assured them both with a wink.

Marinette shook her head. “He reminds me of quelqu’un (someone) I know…”

“Is that good or bad?” wondered Jack.

“Oh, good! I’d trust him with my life, so I guess I can trust Diego too.”

“Oye, I heard my name,” said Diego. “What are you two talking about? Only good things, I hope.”

“Duh,” said Jack.

Marinette couldn’t stay much longer after that. Her parents were expecting her home before curfew, and she was never one to live dangerously. It was just as well since Jack had to catch Diego up on everything she had discovered the night before. The entire story of Lock Pick bubbled up out of her mouth like a natural spring. She was unable to contain her excitement—she kept on walking in circles around the room until Diego told her she was making him nauseous. Even when she sat down, she kept on bouncing up and down.

“Cat Noir told Dr. Lacasse to reach out to me on the Ladyblog as soon as Mr. Bergeron comes to Paris and he can set up a meeting. Like, I just can’t actually believe I actually found him, you know? I thought we never would…it just seemed so, I don’t know…impossible.”

“Psh. I knew Operation Hide-and-Seek was going to be a success! Looks like your luck is turning around,” said Diego over Wrekk’s snores as the Kwami napped behind him. Jack didn’t take it personally. He fell asleep ten minutes into anything.

“Maybe…” Jack frowned. “I mean, Omega still has The Beacon, even if he can’t use it. I’m worried he’s going to come for Mimmi.”

Mimmi, who was sitting on Jack’s shoulder, curled up one of her nubby little arms and punched the other. “Don’t worry! We can take him!”

“He’s not gonna come busting through the door, Mims,” Diego pointed out. “He’ll send someone else to do his dirty work for him. Just be on the lookout, mi conejito.”

“I will. But, man, I need to get The Beacon back, or I’m always going to be looking over my shoulder. And if Hawk Moth gets it first, that won’t be good for Ladybug and Cat Noir.”

“Looks like Operation Security is a go.”

“Security?”

"...What's wrong with it?"
"I don't know...it's kind of lame compared to some of the Operation names you come up with."

"Well, I was thinking Operation Beacon Back, but it made me think of baby back ribs."

"Beacon sounds like bacon."

"Ay, don’t! I’m starving!"

"The Sanchezes do feed you, right?"

"They’re vegetarians."

Jack couldn’t help but laugh at Diego’s downtrodden face, even though she was sympathetic. “Aw, baby…”

"Back. Ribs. Stop it!"

Jack laughed harder. Of course, Diego couldn’t fake anger long. He soon joined her. But it faded, like the sun being covered by a cloud.

“I wish I could be there,” he told her. “To help you.”

“Diego—”

“I know, I know. I don’t know why I keep on bringing it up.”

Jack could only watch, helpless, as her boyfriend sighed and lower his head, raking his fingers through his hair. Pieces stuck up, making him look as disheveled as his heart probably was. She rubbed the screen of her phone with her thumb, hoping it could somehow provide him with comfort from thousands of miles away. For a while they could commiserate, but Jack was forced to admit that she was doing a lot better now. She had her family and new friends and things were clearing up between her and Ladybug. But all Diego really had was her and she was gone. And it didn’t matter how many times she called or texted or sent him a silly Snapchat—she wasn’t coming back.

“Talking to you isn’t enough anymore,” Diego allowed himself to admit. “I want to be by your side again.”

“The summer…” suggested Jack weakly. She was always worried where conversations like this would lead and clung to the idea of summer like it was her lifeline.

“But that’s so far away. I don’t know how I’m going to make it.”

_Are we going to make it?_

The moment Jack thought it, she hated herself for it and pushed it from her mind. They couldn’t break up. They cared about each other too much to do something like that.
Chapter Summary

Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jaclyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Chapter Notes

Ahhhh! I missed this so, so much, you guys have no idea! It was the weirdest thing--I was really excited about this chapter, had it all planned out and everything, and...yet...it took me forever to write it >_< It's not like I lacked interest or had writer's block or any of the usual suspects. I just...dunno. I have no excuses. But it's here and it's long, so we're good ^_^

This here is an action-packed chapter, almost entirely spent by Jack as Rabbit, with plenty of surprises! Unfortunately...I only have one more chapter up my sleeve before I need to wait to see what canon says. There is just so much we don't know about Master Fu and the Kwami that we're not going to learn until, what? December??? I know I can just make stuff up, but I reeeeeeaaaalllly want to incorporate as much of the show as I can to make Hop to It feel more organic and in-line with the Miraculous universe.

Anyway.

The shout out this time goes to...AccordantAuthor! Don’t think I don’t see the lovely notes readers place on their bookmarks =) You took a chance on this fic despite the OC premise of it all and I'm glad you are enjoying it. Lots of good Ladybug/Cat Noir/Rabbit interaction this chapter! I hope you like it! And thanks again for reading!

Jack watched Alix’s face visibly fall when she entered the gallery. Jack supposed she should be used to that look of disappointment by now. No matter how many times Rabbit helped people, they always remembered her mistakes. Not that Jack could blame them, but it was just frustrating when it seemed they would rather face an Akuma than see her coming to their rescue.

“Where is Ladybug?” Alix asked in clipped English that made her sound way snottier than she actually was.

Jack didn’t have time for this. She dove forward and tackled Alix to the ground, a marble arrow sailing over their heads and embedding itself into the base of the pillar behind them. Jack looked up, her eyes locking with the blank face of the Greek goddess Artemis. Well, she wasn’t a goddess exactly, just a statue of her—Diana of Versailles—but that didn’t stop her from being any less
deadly. Because her bow was broken, she threw her arrows like javelins. As she reached into her quiver to pull another, Jack flipped back onto her feet and made a beeline straight towards her. Unfortunately, the miniature buck that normally attended the Artemis statue tackled Jack from the side, tossing her with his antlers into a wall.

The Salle des Caryatides continued to descend into chaos, the room packed with statues that had come to life. A man found himself trapped by a circle of cherubs. A rogue centaur chased a family of tourists, though one of the moms still paused to snap a picture. Alix was now swinging her backpack to keep a satyr at bay as he menaced her with a pair of cymbals.

Jack’s eyes slid closed and her nostrils flared. Today was supposed to be a fun day. Her and Alix were taking funny Snapchats at the Louvre under the pretense of Jack working on her French slang. Before the Akuma attacked, she had sent out pictures of biblical paintings where prostrate men begged God for the wifi password and of ancient Hellenistic statues quoting Mean Girls (like pinky swears, Mean Girls was also universal). Jack was just trying to face-swap with a nose-less bust with an unfortunate bowl cut when screams of terror echoed down the museum wing.

Jack wished she could say she jumped into action right then and there, but she instead tried to drag Alix to the closest exit so they could escape. They had only been friends for a few months now, but Jack should’ve known Alix wasn’t about to leave without checking out the commotion, especially since her father and brother worked at the Louvre and might be involved. She twisted out of Jack’s grasp and made a break for it, shouting over her shoulder that she would meet up with Jack outside.

Jack changed into Rabbit, originally only to keep Alix out of trouble, but as soon as her transformation finished, her heroism took control. There were people out there who needed her help. Things were improving between her and Ladybug after all, and, like Mimmi always said, she was only a failure if she didn’t try—try to help, but also try to keep her poor decision-making in check—so she was going to try.

Back on her feet, Jack raced towards the nearest pillar and up it, pushing off at the top and twisting through the air in a graceful flip, landing on Artemis’s head. Being made of marble, she was heavy and gravity was not her friend. As Jack jumped off her, she stumbled and crashed into the ground, losing her arms in the process when she tried to braced herself against the checkerboard floor.

Now that Artemis had been disarmed (Jack kicked herself mentally for the stupid pun—she had been spending way too much time with Cat lately), Jack could turn her attention to other things. The satyr now had Alix’s backpack between his cymbals and was dragging the girl towards him.

“Leggo you stupid goat man!” she cried. “That’s my stuff!”

Jack sighed and tried to hide a smile. Classic Alix. She flung her chakram, slicing through the backpack’s straps. The satyr fell over backwards. So did Alix, but, unlike the statue, she didn’t break.

“Are you okay?” Jack asked.

“My backpack…!” complained Alix, but she immediately winced and switched to English. “Er, uh… thanks.”

Jack didn’t hold it against her as she scanned the room. “There’s too many of them. We need to get out of here.”
“…How?”

How was right. Four armless women—pillars designed to hold up a balcony—guarded one door, and statues were pouring in from the other direction. That only left…

Jack saluted Alix and bounded towards the centaur as he passed. With a mighty flying kick, she sent the statue crashing through one of the sun-drenched windows. She wasn’t able to break the centaur since they were only on the ground floor, but he struggled on his side pathetically, unable to push himself back up.

Jack leaped onto the lip of the window, kicking out the rest of the shards of glass on the sill. “Everyone! Over here!” she called out, waving.

No one seemed to be paying attention.

“Yo!” screamed Alix, cupping her hands around her mouth. The entire room echoed with her sharp voice. Even the statues seemed to pause their rampage as the tiny girl made an annoyed gesture towards the window. The tourists and other visitors began to migrate towards it.

Jack fought to keep the statues at bay, moving like a Mexican jumping bean and ricocheting her throwing ring around the room. It was a lost cause, but at least it was able to buy people time to escape. It was in the middle of this frenzied but hopeless battle when someone called her chakram. Considering Diego was asleep and Ladybug had never called her before, she knew who it was before she even answered.

“…Rabbit!” said Cat. He seemed a little out of breath and the screen jostled up and down, the background a blur as he ran. “Are you busy?”

“Uh…” Jack dodged yet another statue of a naked man. Why did the Romans have to make so many of them? She had seen enough NSFW to last a lifetime. She looked over her shoulder to see a flash of pink hair as Alix slipped out the window. She was the last one. “Not anymore. Why? What’s up?”

“Where are you?”

Jack hopped out through the window into the courtyard with the glass pyramid entrance and scanned the area, foot on the centaur’s face as his limbs continued to flail. Statues were menacing people out here too, but at least there were ways to escape them. “The Louvre.”

“Purrfect! That’s where I—”

Suddenly, Cat vanished with a grunt, replaced by whirling sky and ground. Watching it was a bit like riding one of those motion simulator rides. It was so nauseating that Jack was forced to look away. She turned just in time to catch a black shape arcing over the Louvre’s Denon wing.

“Cat!” realized Jack, darting across the pavers, but he hit them well before she could reach him and she skidded to a stop. Looking up in the direction he came from, she spotted a slim, dark figure standing on the crest of the roof. For a half of a second, Jack’s heart skipped a beat thinking it was the Akuma, but when it dropped and hit the ground with a sharp crack, she realized it was a statue. A goldstone statue of Cat Noir, to be exact. He made a beeline for the real Cat Noir, but Jack got there first, smacking him back with her chakram, which she had made the size of a hula-hoop. The force of it hurt her wrists.
“I thought cats were supposed to land on their feet,” Jack told her friend as she hauled him up.

“This copycat is giving me a hard time,” he admitted, hanging up his call with Jack. “Get it? Hard? Because he’s made of—”

The Cat Noir statue barreled at them again, this time with his staff out. Jack and Cat dodged his blows, but it was difficult. He was as adept at fighting as the real Cat Noir. The two of them were immediately put on the defensive.

“Use Dogstruction!” Cat suggested as the stone staff narrowly missed whacking him upside the head.

“What!?” yelped Jack. She swore she could feel distrustful eyes on her. People were just waiting for her to mess up again. She could feel it. “No!”

“There’s too many statues, but you could take them all out at once, including this one.”

“It’s bad enough I destroyed the riverfront. You want me to destroy some of Paris’s greatest works of art too? Miraculous Ladybug isn’t going to put them back together again.”

“It’ll save people!”

“It’ll hurt people.”

“But you’ve gotten so much better at controlling it!”

That was true. At Jack’s last training session, she actually sparred with Cat while using Dogstruction and hadn’t accidentally hurt him. But an isolated quarry where it was just her, Cat, and Diego’s encouraging voice was very different from a museum campus crawling with enemies and innocent bystanders alike.

“Why don’t you use Cataclysm?” she countered, trying the sweep the statue’s legs out from under him, but he jumped.

“What if My Lady needs it?” Cat wondered.

Jack rolled her eyes. He would say something like that, wouldn’t he? But she didn’t have any other ideas when it came to defeating the Cat Noir statue. He was too nimble to topple over, so she grabbed the real one’s tail and dragged him back.

“Let’s bounce,” she told him.

“Aw, c’mon!” Cat complained, yanking his tail back and rubbing it, but he fell into step behind her. The Cat Noir statue gave chase, but they had a head start.

“So…who’s the Akuma?” Jack wondered as she grabbed her friend under his arms and cleared the Louvre’s Richelieu wing in one jump. A villain like this one wouldn’t have been an issue back home, but here is Paris, an old city rife with statues, he was a force to be reckoned with.

“Calls himself Pygmalion.”

“Oh, no way!”
Her and Alix had just been talking about Pygmalion. They had passed a statue in the Grand Palais called ‘Pygmalion et Galatée’ not long before the Akuma attacked. Jack was going to dismiss it as yet another sculpture of a naked lady, but the name ‘Pygmalion’ had struck her as hilarious and she laughed.

“Imagine going through life with that name: Pygmailion,” she told her friend. “Oink, oink.”

“It’s a Greek myth,” Alix explained, clearly not understanding the pig/pyg comparison. She jabbed a thumb at the kneeling man in the sculpture, his hands clasped together as he looked up at the woman in adoration, much like how Cat looked at Ladybug, or (if she was being honest) how Marinette looked at Adrien. “That’s Pygmalion. He’s this artist, right? He sculpts a woman so beautiful that he falls in love with her ‘cause he’s an idiot. So he asks Aphrodite to bring her to life. She sends Eros—” Alix pointed out the little cherub peeking around the woman’s back “—and boom! The statue becomes a real girl and they get married and blah, blah, blah.” Alix was already walking away by this point, her voice echoing down the hall. “For a Greek myth, it’s pretty ennuyeux (boring). No monsters at all.”

Cat tilted his head at Jack emphatic reaction as they ran underneath some colonnades. She tried to play it cool, but she could feel her face burning. “I, uh—”

Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, Jack was saved from having to answer by another goldstone statue stepping out into their path, yo-yo whirling around her head. Jack had been wondered where the Ladybug statue was. It did seem a little odd to see the Cat Noir one without his other (better?) half.

Her and Cat dived to the right, out into the empty street. As long as they stayed on the ground, they were trapped between a rock and, well, another rock, so they made for the rooftops. The Ladybug statue followed though, implacable, like a robot from a Terminator movie. Even worse, her yo-yo zinged her around a lot faster than Jack’s jumps or Cat’s staff. She ended up beating them to their destination. There was nothing either of them could do. The statue swung her weapon and the yo-yo wrapped around them both.

Jack yelped and struggled, trying to break free. Cat, his back to her back, widened his stance so they didn’t fall over. It was something out of a horror movie to see the Ladybug statue slowly walk towards them, her face a literal blank slate. She lifted her hand and reached forward towards Cat’s ring…

A flash of red came swinging from the left, kicking the statue off the roof. It tumbled through the air and shattered on the sidewalk below. Cat gasped as he untangled himself from Jack and raced to the edge, his ears lowering as he stared at the smear of rubble on the ground.

“My Lady!” he cried.

The real Ladybug spun her yo-yo around with a flourish before balling it up in her fist. “You do realize that wasn’t me, right?” she asked him.

“Of course, Buginette, but I cannot stand the destruction of your beautiful figure in any form.”

Suddenly, the Cat Noir statue popped up behind Ladybug, a horrifying jack-in-the-box. He held his staff like a bat, with Ladybug’s head as the ball.
“Look out!” cried Jack, tackling her friend to the ground like she had done with Alix. The statue whiffed anything vital, but buffeted Jack’s rabbit ears with a solid strike. The whole world suddenly sounded muffled.

“No! Cataclysm!” cried the real Cat Noir. Jack had her head pressed down into some shingles, but she heard a horrible crack. Lifting her head, she saw Cat’s claws digging into where his stone double’s heart would be if he had one. Deep fissures crackling with dark energy spread out from that point and the statue fell to pieces, completely dismembered. Jack shuttered as she considered what would happen if Cataclysm were ever used on a person and promptly pushed the thought from her mind.

“Oh, now you use Cataclysm?” she complained instead, rolling off poor Ladybug.

“My Lady needed it,” Cat reasoned. “And Paris needs you, Rabbit. You have to use Dogstruction. There are just too many statues. LB and I can even get close to the Akuma. And now I’m going to change back in five minutes, so…”

“I already told you—!”

But before Jack could repeat herself, something latched onto her arms and dragged her up and off the roof. She struggled for a brief moment before her mind was even able to make sense of what was happening. Flying her off into the wild blue yonder were two hideous stone creatures, gripping one wrist each. One was a mannish looking ape, with wings and horns. The other was a grotesque hawk wearing a hood. Their bottom halves were completely missing. Jack squinted at them, wondering why they looked so familiar to her, but it didn’t take her long to figure it out. They were Notre Dame’s famous gargoyles, and they hadn’t grabbed just her—Ladybug and Cat Noir had also been captured and were now struggling fruitlessly to free themselves. The six gargoyles’ grips were iron tight though, and they were shunted over the Louvre and the Seine with brutal efficiency.

Cat’s ring beeped out a warning. Four minutes.

A glint of gold in the distance caught Jack’s eye. It grew larger as they approached and she made out the shape of a winged horse coming to meet them. Sitting astride it was a young man with lavender skin and messy, dark purple hair, wearing gold sandals and a short gray toga that crisscrossed his bare chest—Pygmalion. He had a gold X painted across his face, over his eyes. Looped around his bicep was a band that held a hammer and a chisel. One of them had to be housing his Akuma, but which one? Jack guessed it really didn’t matter as she tried to pull one arm out of the grasp of the gargoyles and then the other. All she did was swing herself from side to side, useless.

Cat’s Miraculous beeped again. Three minutes.

As the gargoyles rendezvoused with Pygmalion, lining Jack, Cat, and Ladybug up in front of him, the Akuma’s pegasus turned sideways and he stood up on its back.

“It’s time to hand over your Miraculouses,” he announced.

“N’y comptez pas (Forget it), Pyg!” spit Cat. Beep. Two minutes.

“I wasn’t asking,” the Akuma pointed out.

“You need to check Rabbit’s montre (watch),” said Ladybug, flexing her wrist. It was only then that Jack noticed Ladybug had been captured with her yo-yo still in her hand. Her gargoyles held her by
her forearms, a rather poor decision since it allowed her mobility. “Because it’s actually time for… Lucky Charm!”

Ladybug snapped her wrist, sending her yo-yo rocketing upwards. Pygmalion called out and attempted to intervene, but he nearly pitched forward off his mount. He grabbed the horse’s neck to steady himself as the air above filled with spiraling ladybugs. In a flash of light, they vanished, leaving behind a large red flag with a ladybug symbol in the middle of it. Gravity took control of it and it began to flutter towards the ground. Ladybug was able to swing forward and grab it with her feet before it fell too far.

Pygmalion blinked, his fear ebbing away before he tossed his head back in laughter. “What are you going to do?” he wondered, then joked about…Jack couldn’t tell. Sometimes her French comprehension was so good it was scary, but, other times, it completely escaped her. It didn’t matter though, since Pygmalion’s intentions were clear in any language as he sat back on his pegasus and reached towards Ladybug’s ear. Ladybug looked around wildly—at her friends, at her yo-yo, at the gargoyles, at the flag balled up between her feet. It didn’t seem possible that, in that handful of seconds, she was forming a plan. But maybe Jack should’ve known better.

Ladybug swung her body again, flinging the flag up into the air in Pygmalion’s direction. It unfurled like a parachute, the winged horse flying right into it. Its sight obscured, it crashed into one of the gargoyles holding Ladybug hostage. The two statues fell towards the city below, taking an irate Pygmalion with them. Meanwhile, without its partner’s help, the other gargoyle struggled to keep Ladybug afloat, but it was rapidly starting to sink.

“Chat! Pull up with your right arm!” Ladybug commanded before she fell too far to hear.

Cat was confused, but dutiful. “Like this?” he asked, now hanging lopsided.

Ladybug couldn’t answer, but she did wind up and fling her yo-yo in Cat’s direction. It wrapped around the end of his staff attached to his back, prompting it to extend. Cat was angled in such a way that his weapon impaled one of Jack’s gargoyles, entering through its arm and out through it’s wing. It might as well have been shot as it let go of Jack and dropped away like a dead duck.

Like Ladybug before her, Jack also started to sink with only one gargoyle keeping her airborne. Cat was sinking too, being dragged down by Ladybug’s yo-yo, but he still had both his statues flapping like mad to fight the pull. Jack lent a hand, grabbing the other end of Cat’s staff with her free hand on her way down. The gargoyles were no match for two superheroines’ strength.

As soon as Jack’s feet hit solid ground, she swung her arm with the gargoyle on it at the ground, smashing it to piece. It seemed Ladybug had done the same, stone remains at her feet. She was now focused on pulling Cat out of the sky hand over hand. Once he was low enough, Jack kicked one of his gargoyles repeatedly. On the other side, Ladybug reached up and shortened Cat’s staff before taking it for her own, smashing the other gargoyle. It wasn’t long before both ancient, crumbling statue relinquished Cat and fled.

“Worked like a charm,” he said to Ladybug, leaning in to give her a showy wink, but Ladybug grabbed his hand and held it in front of his face. The last glowing digit of the paw print on his ring beeped and vanished.

“You need to recharge,” she reminded him.

He came close to pawing at her ear, which was down to four dots, but recognized the invasion of
space and pulled back at the last minute. “So do you,” he said.

“I’ve got time.” She flipped one of her pigtails before turning to Jack. “Let’s go find that Akuma. He can’t have gotten far.”

Part of Jack wanted to argue—Cat had a point—but she was just so thrilled that Ladybug actually wanted to team up with her for once that she wasn’t about to waste the opportunity. Maybe Paris would actually start giving her some credit. Besides, if Ladybug thought they could wrap up this battle in four minutes, Jack believed her. Without a moment to waste, the two of them darted off together, leaving Cat Noir in their dust.

There weren’t a lot of skyscrapers in Paris, but nearby was a knot of them, reminding Jack of home. She and Ladybug made quick work of scaling one to get a better view of their surroundings.

“There!” said Jack, pointing at a long, narrow island in the Seine, crossed at the ends by street bridges and in the middle by the Metro (Île aux Cygnes, Jack would later find out). In the little park at the far end was a splash of red—Ladybug’s flag. They zipped down towards it using Ladybug’s yo-yo, but when they lifted the flag, all that was underneath were the twisted remains of the gilded pegasus.

Ladybug’s head snapped up, focusing on the empty patina pedestal before them. With a gasp, she spun around. Jack did too, spotting a receding figure racing down the island.

“Come on!” insisted Ladybug, leading the charge. As they began to catch up, Jack recognized Pygmalion, riding away on a green copper horse statue he had brought to life. It was strange though…the horse wasn’t galloping very fast. It was more like a lazy canter, as if Pygmalion wanted them to catch up to him.

Ladybug seemed to sense something was amiss shortly after they ran under the Metro tracks and looked around. There was a stutter in her step, causing Jack to steal a glance too.

An army of statues had amassed behind them and to their sides. People chiseled from marble, lions made of bronze, eagles of obsidian, angels carved from ivory—if they weren’t on the island already, they were filling the skies and bursting out of side streets, lining the Seine so there was no escape. Ladybug even tried to sling her yo-yo at the left bank, but it was batted back.

“It’s a trap!” realized Jack, far, far too late.

Their only clear path was the one going forward, so there was little they could do other than to keep running, lest the statues behind them catch up. A gradual ramp took them up to the street where Pygmalion was waiting astride his patina steed, a nefarious grin on his face.

“No! Stop!” said Ladybug suddenly, skidding to a halt.

Her shouts registered somewhere in Jack’s mind, but not in the part that controlled her legs. By the time she put on the breaks, something large and dull green was leaping over Pygmalion. Jack skittered backwards just in time to avoid becoming Rabbit road kill, but the shock wave of the statue’s landing threw her on her back and collapsed the ramp, the pathetic metal railings crumbling around it like wire coat hangers.

The only thing Jack could think of as she gazed up at the forty-foot tall replica of the Statue of Liberty was that she was grateful she was not fighting this Akuma in New York.
Lady Liberty threw her tablet at Ladybug and scooped Jack up in one smooth motion. Jack struggled to escape the statue’s colossal fist, but it was like her entire body was in a straightjacket. She could kick her legs and move her head, but that was it. If she turned all the way to the right, she could just make out the red of Ladybug’s suit in her peripherals.

“Don’t worry!” Ladybug shouted over the beeping of her Miraculous. Jack had been keeping count and her friend was down to one minute. “I’ll get you free!”

“Forget about me!” insisted Jack. “You’re about to change back!”

“Where am I going to go? There’s too many statues.”

If mentally kicking herself were an Olympic sport, Jack would win the gold medal for sure as Cat Noir’s plea came back to haunt her. There were too many statues. Had Jack used Dogstruction when he asked her, she could have thinned out their ranks. Now, no matter how hard she struggled, she couldn’t free her arms. Figures, the one time she actually wanted to use her ability, she couldn’t.

Lady Liberty knelt and jabbed at Ladybug with her torch, but Ladybug cartwheeled out of the way. She swung her yo-yo around and latched onto one of the points of the statue’s crown, but Lady Liberty spun around, sending Ladybug smacking into one of the bridge supports.

“Ladybug!” Jack cried. She struggled to think of what to do, but no idea, not even a half-baked one, came waltzing into her head. She redoubled her efforts to squirm out of the statue’s grip, catching sight of the rest of the statues converging on their position as she did so. It wouldn’t be long now before Pygmalion had his grubby hands on two Miraculouses.

She couldn’t believe three superheroes had lost to a man in a sheet.

A soft rumble, like that of distant thunder, gave Jack pause though. She looked down the length of the island, in the direction she and Ladybug came from. A small dirt cloud had just passed underneath the Metro tracks, tossing up statues as it went along. Several of them splashed as they fell into the water.

Jack’s breath hitched, unable to comprehend what she was seeing. Only one person could wreck that much havoc.

Well, besides her.

Ladybug noticed as well. “It’s Cat Noir!”

“No…” said Jack, caught somewhere between awe and utter confusion.

Perro Negro—Diego, of all people—came bursting through the front lines of the statue army, sending a Roman solider, one of the Three Musketeers, and the Marquis de Lafayette sprawling. Grainy video chats never did him any justice. He looked as if he had just stepped out of Jack’s dreams. This wasn’t some figment of Jack’s imagination though. There he was, leather suit, purple aura of Dogstruction and all, heroic, dangerous, and having a whole lot of fun. He whooped and waved at Jack, Ladybug’s flag balled up in his fist.

“Don’t worry, mi conejito!” he shouted, as if they had just saw each other in person yesterday. “I’ll get you down.” He shook out the flag and held it like a matador for Lady Liberty, who had
abandoned Ladybug in favor of him thanks to his dramatic entrance. “Dama, dama,” he said as she pulled back to jab him with her torch. At the last second, he stepped to the side and ran at the statue’s base, lowering his shoulder for impact. “Olé!”

It was like a stick of dynamite going off. One moment, Jack couldn’t move, the next, her limbs were flailing as her mind tried to figure out which direction she was falling, her ears ringing incessantly. The answer was down, but Diego was there to catch her. He grinned like he just couldn’t help himself and gave Jack a quick peck on the cheek as he spun her around and put her down. Jack stumbled about, dizzy with delight, but also just dizzy.

Diego strolled over to Ladybug, who was on her hands and knees trying to recover from what had just happened.

“I believe you dropped this,” he said, offering her the flag.

“The Akuma!” she said, looking up.

Diego turned just in time to see Pygmalion kick his horse. It reared and took off.

“I got him,” Diego assured Ladybug, shooting at the receding figure with one of his grappling hooks. The teeth bit into the horse’s tail, grinding into the metal. Diego dropped the flag, saluted, and was dragged off towards his target.

Jack’s heart fluttered as she watched her boyfriend in his element. He flipped up onto the horse and wrestled Pygmalion off of it. A mob of statues approached, the flying ones circling above like vultures. In fact, two were vultures.

“His tools!” shouted Jack.

Nothing, at first. Then there was a great spasm as all the statues resumed their original rigid positions. The ones caught in the air rained down, but Dogstruction protected Diego. Any one that fell on or near him was ground into chalk dust.

“It was in his hammer!” Diego shouted back.

“…You mean his mallet?”

“Yeah! That!”

Sure enough, a butterfly corrupted with dark energy was trying to escape into the sky. Ladybug spotted it and bolted towards it when she suddenly stumbled, her Miraculous trilling like an alarm clock. Panicked, she wrapped herself in her flag just as a pink light started at her feet. Moments later, a small red creature with black spots shot out between the folds in the fabric and skidded across the ground.

“Ladybug!” said Jack, racing up to her friend, but stopped for the exhausted Kwami on the ground. The creature was vaguely reminiscent of a ladybug with her antennae and coloring, but she seemed a lot more mammal, with a funny little tail. Of course, Jack had never seen an insect-based Kwami before. Maybe they were all like that.

The girl who was formerly Ladybug looked around, even though it was obvious she couldn’t see through the flag’s material. “Tikki!?”
Tikki. Mimmi. It seemed Jack’s theory on Omega basing the naming scheme of his Recrees on the originals still held true.

“Don’t worry,” Jack assured her friend, gently scooping Tikki up. “I’ve got her…”

“Hey!” called out Diego down the bridge. “What am I supposed to do!? The Akuma is getting away!”

“Leave it!” shouted Ladybug, her voice muffled.

“What!?”

“Leave it!”

“I can’t hear—”

“She said leave it!” shouted Jack on Ladybug’s behalf, but turned to her quickly. “Are you sure?”

“We can find it again later. I think.”

“You think!?”

“I don’t know. I’ve only let an Akuma go once. But it’s not like we have much of a choice. I’m the only one who can purify an Akuma and I can’t like this.” She flapped her arms up and down beneath the flag, looking very much like a sullen child forced to be a ghost for Halloween.

Jack bit her lip and looked down. If only her powers still worked, this wouldn’t be an issue. But she didn’t have time to throw herself a pity party. Diego was jogging up to them.

“I hope you know what you’re d—” he started to say to Ladybug, but Jack cut him off with a hug now that she had her wits about her. Diego always made her temporarily loose them. Then she shoved him back and smacked his arm. He grimaced, obviously expecting such a reaction.

“What’re you doing here!? I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m so glad you are, but…” She paused, her eyes darting in Ladybug’s direction, measuring what she could possibly say. She doubted the Sanchezes pulled Diego out of school to vacation in Paris, which left only one option. “Did you run away from home?”

Diego’s tail went between his legs. His puppy-dog eyes said it all.

“I missed you,” he said over the beeping of his dog tags.

Jack threw her arms up into the air. She wanted to be mad at him, she really did, but it was a little hard when she was overwhelmed with happiness. She had only ever dated one other boy before Diego, and she doubted Kevin Roberts would have crossed the street for her, much less the world.

“Hey!”

Jack and Diego turned to see Cat Noir coming at them, running along the top of the bridge’s pale green railing. He seemed angry at first, staff at the ready, but it was clear he had misread the situation when he got into swinging distance. He stopped dead, blinking.
“Perro…?” he said.

Diego’s contrite face morphed as it split into a grin as he went over to greet the familiar face. “Look what the cat dragged in! Good to see you, Chat Noir.” He slapped Cat on the back and chuckled. “Mi conejito and your lady were in a bit of a bind, so I thought I’d lend a paw.”

“He freed the Akuma, but I changed back before I could purify it,” explained Ladybug.

“My Lady? Is that you?” Cat wondered, brushing one of the folds in the flag.

Ladybug nearly fell over backwards as she hopped back. “Chat,” she warned.

Cat winced. It was clear he hadn’t meant to scare her. He tried to cover as he switched back to English. “So the Akuma got away? That’s not good…”


“Yeah,” agreed Diego. “This has never happened to me and Rabbit before. We always purify our Akumas.”

Jack turned to her boyfriend, a little embarrassed. Usually when he said things like that, it didn’t come off as bragging, but occasionally he veered into arrogance. A look from Jack would help him get back on track, but he wasn’t looking at her.

“We were fighting an Akuma named Cœur de Pierre,” explained Ladybug. “Er…Stone…heart?”

Jack almost nodded, but morphed it into a shrug. As time wore on, it was getting harder and harder for her to pretend she didn’t understand a lick of French. “Sounds about right.”

“Anyway, we freed Stoneheart’s Akuma but didn’t de-evilize it and…it…multiplied, and turned all these innocent civilians into frozen versions of Stoneheart.”

“So if you don’t get to the Akuma in time, it’ll turn a bunch of people into Pygmalion statues?”

“Yup!” said Cat. “And if the Akuma victim’s emotions become negative again, the original Akuma will turn him back into Pygmalion. He’ll gain control of all the other Pygmalions and bring them to life to serve as his army.”

“Yikes,” said Jack.

“Ay, sounds like bad news,” agreed Diego. “I came all the way here to spend some time with Rabbit, but it sounds like we need to do something about this first.”

Tikki groaned and turned over in Jack’s palm.

“She likes cookies to recharge,” Ladybug explained. Of course, a sweet baked good, just like Mimmi. “Then I can change back and use Miraculous Ladybug. And then find that Akuma and de-evilize it before things get too out of hand.”

“Great!” said Cat, jumping into action. “I know of a fantastic patisserie nearby. Tom & Sabine’s—you’re going to love it. Allow me to escort you there, My Lady.”
“I’m not your Lady at the moment. I’m just some girl.”

Cat’s normal bravado faded into something soft and sweet. If Ladybug could see the look he was giving her at that moment, there was no doubt in Jack’s mind that she would realize how much he really, truly loved her. “You’ll always be my Lady,” he said, voice low as a purr. “No matter who you are behind your mask.”

Diego coughed, ruining the moment. Ladybug used the noise to pinpoint his location though and turned to him. “Perro Negro, Rabbit. I need you two to talk to the Akuma victim, keep him from succumbing to negative emotions.”

“Oh, good idea!” said Jack. The young man who had formerly been Pygmalion was just beginning to stir. Jack shoved Tikki into Cat’s hands and headed in the victim’s direction, grabbed Diego’s hand along the way. It was time to put all of her Positivity Club training into practice. “Good luck!” she shouted to her friends over her shoulder.

The man looked similar to Pygmalion, of course, with a mop of brown hair and high cheekbones, skin tanned instead of lavender. He wore an apron covered with dust, sculpting tools still lashed to his forearm. Maybe Jack should have guessed he was an artist by trade.

She knelt, but hesitated, her speech on the tip of her tongue. Turning back, she saw Cat grab Ladybug, flag and all, and race off. Satisfied that they were far enough away, she forced her mouth and her mind to switch over to the foreign sound of French.

“What is your name?” she asked.

“Er…Pierre.”

“Pierre, you were Akumatized.” Jack had been practicing in front of a mirror for a while now and she pretty much had the correct French memorized. “I know you weren’t in control of your actions and I forgive you, and so does Ladybug and Cat Noir. Everything is the Butterfly’s fault and we’re going to—”

“Mi conejito, I’m running out of juice,” Diego warned, rattling the chains of his dog tags. It seemed he had less than a minute remaining.

“Oh! Right!” She had to hurry this up. “Do you understand English, Pierre? Is it okay if I speak it?” The young man nodded, still coming to terms with what Jack had just told him. “Killer. So, I have some bad news. The Akuma that took you over is still out there and it can take you over again. Perro Negro and I…we’re not gonna let that happen, but I need some help from you. Do you know what caused Hawk Moth to target you? Something bad must have happened, something that stirred up intense negative emotions.”

Pierre shook his head, only then finding his shaky voice. “I-I can’t…remember…”

“Where were you when it happened?”

“My studio.”

Jack turned to Diego to confer. “There might be clues there.”
“I’m not sure how much time we have,” he said to her. “I’ll just meet you there.”

Diego danced in place as if he had to go to the bathroom as he asked Pierre for directions. Jack stifled a laugh. The corner of her boyfriend’s mouth tugged at his lips to form a half-smile, but he tried to remain focused.

“I hope you brought your own cottage cheese,” Jack told him as he turned to leave. “It’s, like, super hard to find around here.”

“Sobreentendido, mi conejito.”

Diego saluted her and then bolted. Jack felt an ache in her chest as she watched him leave, but it was tempered by the fact that her boyfriend was actually there. This wasn’t some figment of her imagination, some dream. She was awake, Diego was real, and it was like the world had righted itself. Her heart wasn’t big enough to hold everything she felt. It spilled out in her smile as she turned back to Pierre.

“You are in love,” he observed.

Jack felt like her first instinct should be to deny it. She was fifteen, after all—what did she know about love? Love was such a strong word. It was a white-hot burning sun. It was a gallon of strong perfume. It was…

It was true.

Jack said nothing, but her red face probably said it all.

* * *

Pierre’s studio had been utterly decimated, but mere moments after stepping foot into the converted warehouse, Miraculous Ladybug set everything right. Jack started poking around; exploring the space like it was the newest exhibit at the Getty. Here was a statue that looked to be a bouquet of hyper realistic flowers, but when Jack took a step back, she realized it was two figures entwined in a warm embrace. And over in the corner was a half-finished piece, a phoenix melting as it burst into flames. There was a table packed with little figurines of ballerinas in a myriad of poses and feathers etched from pieces of ivory. Jack didn’t really ‘get’ art, but she’d have to be blind not to recognize Pierre’s talent. Though it seemed he focused mostly on sculpting, there were a few 3D paintings in the works as well, and messy sketches of future projects tacked up on the shiplap walls.

“Sorry it’s a mess,” Pierre said, moving a tower of buckets off to the side before grabbing a broom and dustpan to sweep up.

“I love it,” said Jack, barely able to refrain from touching the cascading curls of a bust of a woman. They looked like they would feel so soft, even though they were clearly made of stone. “You’re very talented.”

Pierre snorted and gave a wane smile that spoke of hard work with little payoff. Jack knew the look well, catching it in her bedroom mirror from time to time whenever Mimmi gave her a pep talk after a poor night of training.

“Here,” said Jack as she grabbed a nearby trashcan to bring it over to Pierre. It looked empty, but something heavy was rocking around in the bottom. Curious, she peered down into the abyss of
black plastic and spotted something that definitely wasn’t garbage. She reached in and pulled out an award of some sort. It was made up of three crystalline obelisks that sparkled in the sun shining down through the skylights above.

“Did you mean to throw this away?” Jack asked Pierre. “It looks important.”

Pierre’s friendly face soured at the sight of it. “It’s not mine.”

Confused, Jack looked down at the words engraved on the plaque, translating them in her head. *The Auguste Rodin Prize presented by the Young Parisian Sculptors Association.* And there was name. “Who is Théo Barbot?” Jack wondered.

“We attend ENSBA together.” Pierre dumped out his dustpan with more force than necessary and took the award. Jack thought he was going to drop it in the trash again, but he put it down on a workbench instead. “The Association sent it to me by accident. His studio is right next door.”

“And it…fell into the trash?”

Pierre rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I was…upset,” he admitted. “Théo is a good sculptor, but so am I. Yet he gets all the recognition because of his Ladybug and *Chat Noir* statue.”

“Oh, wow! That was him?” Pierre gave Jack a withering look. Her rabbit ears pressed against her head. “Er…I mean…”

Pierre blinked as if he had just woken from a trance. “Wait. That’s it, isn’t it? Why Hawk Moth targeted me?”

Jack nodded fervently—anything to get her out of an awkward situation with as little bumbling by her as possible. “Akuma fodder for sure,” she agreed.

The young man slumped onto the workbench, defeated, the dustpan dropping from his hand with a clatter. Jack grew a bit frantic. She was supposed to protect Pierre from negative emotions, not dredge them up again.


Pierre looked at Jack with new eyes. They were as piercing gray as granite “Yes. That’s right. How…?”

“That’s like me and Ladybug. We’re both good superheroes, but she gets all the recognition. People want her to save them, not me. And…I get it, I’ve messed up before. But Ladybug’s messed up too!” Stoneheart immediately came to mind. “She just has way better publicity.”

“People aren’t being fair to us.”

“Right? But you just have to remember that we don’t do what we do to impress other people. We do it what we do because we love…it…”

The sun vanished, giving Pierre’s studio a drab appearance. Jack’s first thought was that a cloud had passed by overheard, but when she glanced up she saw a thick stream of black and purple butterflies flapping through the sky instead.
“No-no-no-no-no-no-no!” Jack cried, darting to the nearest window to get a better look. Face pressed up against the glass, she watched a few butterflies swoop down like ash, the cloud of Akumas thinning out as they dispersed throughout the city. The sun returned, but there was a touch of coldness that remained as the air filled with screams. There were many times Jack had felt hopeless, but nothing could really compare to this moment when she was fully capable of protecting innocents from everything, save for stupid tiny black butterflies.

Pierre joined Jack, aghast as they watched a terrified woman push her baby stroller as fast as she could, an Akuma hot on her tail. A man decided to be a hero and stepped in the butterfly’s path. As soon as it touched him, it exploded in a plume of black and roiling purple smoke. He absorbed it and was transformed into a frozen copy of Pygmalion, trapped in a wince. Further down the street, another innocent person succumbed, having tripped and been unable to get back up on their feet in time.

“What is this…this…” Pierre paused to search for the right word, but the English language failed him, so he fell back on French. “…tableau vivant?”

“They’re your army for when you get transformed again,” Jack explained, then thought better of it. “If you get transformed.”

Pierre stumbled back, as if the window had burned him. “This is my fault…”

“What!? Oh, Pierre, no. You can’t think like that. You need to stay positive or—”

The door to the studio banged open. Diego stood in the doorway; his ears perked as late afternoon light streamed in around him.

“There you are, mi conejito!” he said, wagging his tail slightly. His grin faded into a grimace though as he bounded over to her and peered out at the Pygmalion across the street. “You saw? Yeah, looks like Ladybug and Chat Noir couldn’t find the original Akuma in time. What if they never find it? Those poor people are going to be stuck as ugly statues forever. We’ve got to do something!”


Startled, Diego turned to her and raised an eyebrow. “¿Qué rayos dices? You always have an idea, mi conejito.”

There was a flash of a half-formed plan on the clouded edges of Jack’s mind. Before moving to Paris, she would have leapt at it, but after a moment of careful consideration, she didn’t like the look of it and tried to pretend it had never passed through her head in the first place. Unfortunately, Diego noticed her hesitation.

“You have an idea, don’t you?” he said. When Jack didn’t say anything, he grabbed her by the shoulders and stared her straight in the eyes. “¡Escucha! I want to see you, the real you, mi conejito, but we can’t hang out until Paris is safe. Don’t you want that?”

“Of course! But…” Jack’s eyes flickered in Pierre’s direction. The artist was pacing not far from them, tapping his mallet to his chisel, murmuring to himself about the power of positive thinking.

Diego followed her gaze and bobbed his head. At first Jack thought he had read her mind and was agreeing with her decision, but he instead went to tap the young man on the shoulder. “Er…Could
you give me and Rabbit a moment?"

Pierre’s eyes crinkled and he put his own issues on pause to give a knowing smile that made Jack blush. “Of course.” As he left, he spoke to himself. “Ah, to live on love and fresh water again.” He closed the door softly behind him.

“What’s wrong?” wondered Diego as soon as he was sure they were alone. “Why don’t you want to tell me your plan?”

He put an elbow on Jack’s shoulder and rubbed his thumb against the base of one of her rabbit ears. Normally Jack would close her eyes and lean into him, but she was not in the mood. She stepped away, focusing on the Pygmalion statues outside. The streets were now deserted. People probably remembered what happened the last time an Akuma multiplied and were vacating the area.

“Because my plans aren’t any good,” Jack said. “They’ve never been.”

“Mi conejito, how can you say that!? Of course they are. You save the day all the time.”

Jack spun around to face her boyfriend. “Only because of you!”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you. You protect me and other people when my plans go wrong. And they go wrong all the time because I don’t think them through. I just never realized it until you weren’t there…”

“But I’m here now. I’ll protect you like I always do. So let’s go for it!”

Jack wished she had Diego’s gung-ho attitude, but she had been burned too many times now to not be cognizant of the fire. She slipped her chakram off her wrist and enlarged it. “Let’s call Ladybug. I’m sure she’ll know what to do.”

Diego stopped her by putting his hand on her wrist. “When did you become a sidekick?” he asked.

Jack paused and blinked at her boyfriend, allowing him to gently push her arm down. The words didn’t sting, exactly—Diego was baffled, not irritated—but they had the same effect as all the air getting sucked out of the room.

“You’re a hero,” Diego reminded her, sliding his hand down to hers, entwining their fingers. He gave her an affectionate squeeze. “Can you be a little reckless sometimes? Sí. But when the chips are down, you do what needs to be done to save the day and you always save the day. Have you ever let an Akuma slip through your grasp? Of course not! Ladybug and Chat Noir had their chance, and look where that got us.” He gestured out at the street. “Now it’s our turn. So…what’s the plan, mi conejito?”

“Well…”

“C’mon. You got this.”

“I was thinking…”

“Uh-huh…” His smile was so bright. Jack felt blinded as she squinted at him.
“…that…since it seems like the Akuma is hard to find…we need to lure it out.”

Diego barked his approval. “¡Genialidad! How do we do it?”

For one trembling moment of self-doubt, Jack found herself looking at the door. She could hear Pierre pacing behind it, the nervous tap-tap-tap of his tools as he tried to focus on positive thoughts. Diego gave her shoulder a little shake though and she snapped back.

This was just a risk she was going to have to take.

* * *

Jack slipped back into the studio. She had stepped out for a moment while Diego kept Pierre occupied so she could let Ladybug know where she was and that she had found the Akuma. It was a lie, but Jack hoped it wouldn’t remain one for too long. She tried to catch her boyfriend’s eye and flash him a thumbs up, but he seemed intent on his conversation with Pierre about good landmarks to visit while he was in Paris. As Jack went to go join them though, Diego segued.

“—but that’s not why I came here. The sites are just a bonus.”

“But of course,” said Pierre, casting a mischievous glance in Jack’s direction. “You came to visit your girlfriend.”

“…And to commission a statue of us on the behalf of the great city of Los Angeles.”

Pierre tried to appear casual, but Jack caught his sharp intake of breath. “Oh?”

“Sí. The mayor wants to put a statue of me and Rabbit in the middle of Grand Park. It’s a huge deal, but all the sculptors I looked at fell short. They’re not like you, Pierre. I mean, look at your work!” Ever the showman, Diego spun around and flung his arms out, gesturing to the entire studio. “You are a man of great pasión.”

“You are too kind!”

“A Parisian sculptor is definitely the way to go, so I was hoping you’d be able to help me out.”

“Of course! It would be my honor.”

“Awesome. So you’ll introduce me to Théo Barbot?”

Jack was instantly reminded of a time shortly before becoming Rabbit, when her friend Juana asked for her help. She wanted to ask her crush Mike to the Turnabout dance by giving him a sleeve of cupcakes that would spell out T-U-R-N-A-B-O-U-T-? Her analytical approach to baking always seemed to end in sub-par treats though, so Jack was more than happy to lend the girl her baking skills. Juana delivered the cupcakes to Mike during a passing period. During lunch, Mike showed up at their table to return the sleeve. Only crumbs remained, saved for the ‘N’ and the ‘O’ cupcakes, which he left untouched.

The look on Juana’s face then was the same one that was on Pierre’s face now.

Jack shifted uncomfortably.
“¿Eh? What’s wrong?” asked Diego, tilting his head. He played the part as skillfully as an actor on stage, widened his eyes as ‘realization’ dawned on him. “You didn’t think I was actually talking about you, did you?” Diego laughed and playfully punched the young man in the shoulder, appearing oblivious to Pierre’s feelings. “Come off it. I mean, you’re good amigo, but you’re not Théo Barbot good.”

Jack found herself struggling to hold her tongue. This was her plan, after all, and she had already called Ladybug and everything. She refused to be empty-handed when her friend arrived. But she honestly didn’t think it would be this hard. It was like watching someone kick a puppy, but at least it was over, at least Diego had gotten the point across—

“Ay, you’re a riot! Rabbit, can you believe this guy?” Diego elbowed Jack in the ribs, much to her surprise. “He actually thought I was talking about him! I mean, this ain’t no amateur hour. Our statue has to be made by the best, not by some mopey, second-rate cholo.”

“Perro!” Jack choked out, alarmed. She glanced in Pierre’s direction to offer him an apologetic look, but he stared off into space, broken already by the force of Diego’s blunt words.

“¿Qué? Don’t act like it’s not true. You were just telling me how he got Akumatized because he didn’t win some award.”

“Yes, but—”

Diego bulldozed on. “None of this should surprise you, Pierre. Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re kind of a hack. Theo’s statues look like they could spring to life at any moment. Have you seen his Ladybug and Chat Noir one? Yours, on the other hand…well, yours look like statues. I mean, don’t get me wrong, they’re very nice—better than anything I could make, at least—but, uh, maybe you should stick to sculpting as, like, a side gig or a hobby. I wouldn’t bank on making a career out of—”

Jack jumped on her boyfriend’s back and covered his mouth with her hands, but it was too late. Pierre spun around and hurried out of the studio, a glimmer of tears in his eyes.

“Pierre, wait!” said Jack, trying to follow, but Diego grabbed her by the wrist and yanked her back. She watched as the artist slammed the door shut behind him so hard that one of the 3D canvases fell from the wall.

“What’s your problem?” Diego wondered, his claws pressing into her wrist. “This is what you wanted.”

Jack shook her head. “No.” Shook it harder, as if it could take everything back. “No! You took things way too far!”

She felt like she was going to throw up. The Positivity Club pledge her and Cadence had written, the one Nino had helped Jack translate into French for every member of their club sign, played in a mocking loop in her head—

“I solemnly swear to defend against negative thoughts and feelings. I promise to send positive energy out into the world. Everything I say and everything I do will focus on the good, so that goodness will win the day. I solemnly swear to defend against negative thoughts and feelings. I promise to send positive energy out into the world. Everything I say and everything I do will focus on the good, so that goodness will win the day.
Jack had no right to call herself a Positivity Club member at this point, much less the vice president of the Collège Françoise Dupont Chapter, but she could still try to make good on her pledge. She broke from Diego’s grip, ignoring his calls. No Akuma was worth this. None. She would find Pierre and apologize and, if the Akuma came for him, she would protect him with her life.

But Jack never got the chance. The instant her foot was out the door, she saw a flash of lavender and white, and heard Pygmalion’s maniacal laughter as he disappeared around the corner.

“No…” Jack cried softly under her breath, struck still for a moment by a wave of self-loathing. Then she shook it off and took off after him. She needed to keep tabs on the real Akuma, or it was going to be next to impossible to find it with all the other Pygmalions running around. Rounding the corner though, she saw nothing, so she jumped up to the nearest roof and whipped out her chakram to make a call.

“Rabbit, what is going on?” Ladybug demanded when she picked up, her voice laced with frustration. There was nothing but blue sky behind her, so it was tough to tell where she was. “The copies, they’re—”

“I know, I know!” Jack caught another peek of lavender two blocks down. “I’m tracking the original now.”

“And we’re tracking you. Chat and I will be there soon.”

Jack hung up with one thumb and used the other to scroll to the bottom of her contact list. A picture of Diego as Perro Negro, saluting and looking suave while doing it, filled the throwing ring. She looked over her shoulder just to make sure she wasn’t calling him for no reason, but all she saw was a flock of pigeons. Even if she was upset with him, he was still her partner and they did work better together. She needed to let him know that she needed his help. But when she tapped her call button, the chakram just rang and rang, like it did when Diego wasn’t transformed. He hadn’t changed back into a civilian, had he?

Jack almost lost sight of her target taking a corner. A gap in the rooftops but lack of trees let her know he was heading into a plaza, so she dropped down to street level and had a peek.

The stone square was crawling with Pygmalions. Well, maybe “crawling” wasn’t the right word. They were all very still, posed in different way. Some Pygmalions were pretending to chisel other Pygmalions, while still other Pygmalions pointed or gazed on admiringly. Some were deep in thought or getting struck with inspiration. They were sitting on benches or leaning against walls or squatting to look at cracks in the ground. It felt like Jack had stumbled upon some sort of avant-garde sculpture installation. It was awe-inspiring and positively frightening and the two feelings battled inside of Jack, leaving her breathless.

Then a hand slammed down on Jack’s shoulder and she jumped ten feet into the air.

“Whoa! Didn’t mean to scare you, mi conejito,” said Perro Negro.

Jack shoved him. “Why didn’t you answer?” she complained, not half as angry as she probably should be.

“Answer?”
She grabbed her boyfriend’s arm and shook it in front of his face, his cuff flopping around his wrist. He stared at it, his face strangely inscrutable.

“I called you,” Jack pointed out.

Diego shrugged. “I know, but I was already on my way.” He stepped forward to have a look at the multitude of Pygmalions himself. He rubbed his hands together, thrilling in the moment. “¡A ver!” he said. “How are we going to find the real one in what is clearly a trap?”

Silence. The wind blew, ruffling togas and mops of hair. Not a single copy stirred, though they didn’t fool anybody. Jack knew the instant she went among them, they would spring to life and she could kiss Mimmi and her Miraculous goodbye.

Diego looked at Jack from the corner of his eyes, but she pretended she didn’t see. He finally cleared his throat and spoke up.

“C’mon, mi conejito,” he said. “What’s the plan?”

“The plan is to wait for Ladybug and Cat. They’re on their way.”

Diego’s face scrunched up.

“Not because I’m a sidekick!” argued Jack, knowing what her boyfriend wanted to say, even though he had refrained from saying it. “But because we’re friends and I trust them. And Ladybug is really good at coming up with foolproof plans. Please trust me on this. You do trust me, don’t you?”

Diego put a hand on her shoulder, a calming gesture this time. He gave her a breezy, heartfelt smile as he ran his fingers down her arm and picked up her hand, kissing it gently.

“With my life,” he said.

As Jack turned away satisfied though, she swore she saw Diego roll his eyes. Something white hot and painful burrowed into her chest. Jack didn’t know what to do with it, but was distracted by the zip and pull of Ladybug’s yo-yo. She landed next to Diego, Cat Noir soon joining them as well.

Cat whistled through his teeth as he took in the Pygmalion army. “Looks like we’ve hit rock bottom.”

“How did this happen?” wondered Ladybug, at a complete loss.

Jack ran her hands over her braid again and again as she stared at a cigarette butt on the ground and explained exactly what had happened, not bothering to spare any details. Her plan to lure the Akuma out by playing on Pierre’s negative emotions was a spectacularly bad decision, even by her standards, and she could stand for a bit more punishment.

“Rabbit…!” admonished Cat once Jack had finished.

“How could you do that to him!?” wondered Ladybug at the same time.

Jack grabbed her rabbit ears and pulled them down over her real ones to muffle them out, but only for a second. She let go and they sprang back up. “I messed up. But we can still fix this! You can
A cursory glance let Jack know that Ladybug was retreating down the street to use Lucky Charm out of Pygmalion’s sight. It seemed the girl was willing to put aside her horror over Jack’s actions to save the day, which was more than Jack could’ve hoped for. She, Cat, and Diego followed her slowly, scanning the area for danger, but it seemed Pygmalion would rather wait them out than pursue them. By the time they reached Ladybug, she was finished, holding a red aerosol can decorated with block spots. She shook it.

“Sounds like spray paint,” noted Diego after hearing the telltale rattle.

Ladybug sprayed the ground. Despite its outward appearance, the paint was a streaky gray. Some of it leaked from the nozzle and Ladybug crinkled her brow as she examined her stained fingers.

“Strange,” she murmured to herself when it didn’t drip off.

“It doesn’t smell,” Diego noted as well. “Must be non-toxic or something.”

Jack was only half-listening, distracted by the noise of distant voices. Who would be out and about during a large-scale Akuma attack like this? She wandered up the street searching for the source. A group of people soon crossed in front of her further down—a woman with fuchsia hair in a smart suit, people holding unwieldy cameras and boom mikes and lights. Ladybug noticed and came alongside Jack to watch. The news crew past by without spotting them.

“Nadja Chamack, TVi News. Spreading the voice of the villains,” Ladybug finally explained. Jack nodded. She knew she had seen the fuchsia-haired woman somewhere before, but couldn’t quite place her outside the frame of her TV.

Jack sighed and turned back to her friend. "Any ideas on how to use that?"

Ladybug grimaced as she looked at the can of spray paint. Normally she was so quick to come up with a plan. It was jarring to see her at a loss. It made time slow to a crawl.

“Say what you want, bicho,” said Diego. “At least mi conejito had a plan.”

“Perro!” hissed Jack, glaring at her boyfriend before switching to damage control. “Ladybug, I’m so, so sorry. He’s—”

“…right,” said Ladybug suddenly. She grew brighter, stronger, like a star growing in the twilight. She grabbed Jack’s forearms and gave her a little shake. “He’s right!”

“…Huh?”

“Rabbit, you had a plan. Your execution was bad, but your plan was sound.”

“It was?”

“Yes!”

“Oh. Um…thanks. I guess.”

“No, thank you!”
Ladybug looked up the street to where the news crew had disappeared, and then down at the can of spray paint and her stained fingers, a beatific smile spreading across her lips.

“*Kitty, how good are you at being still?*” she asked her partner.

Cat Noir seemed to get what she was hinting at and soon had a smile that outstripped Ladybug’s.

“I’m *marble*lous at it,” he bragged.

“*Good. Here’s the plan.*”

* * *

Jack squatted in the shadow of a balcony three floors up, Diego wedged next to her. She cast a glance down at the scene below, tapping her foot as she watched Nadja Chamack straightened her peplum suit jacket. The reporter glanced down the street at all the Pygmalions just in sight, then back at the pedestal behind her covered in a silk sheet, as if to assure herself that it was still there.

“What’s taking so long?” complained Diego.

Jack pursed her lips, but said nothing. She heard her partner sigh and knock his head against the wall.

“I just want this to be over so I can spend time with you, *conejito.*”

She sensed him reaching for her hand, so she pulled it out of reach to grab onto one of the railing supports and pull herself closer to the edge. As luck would have it, the boom mike went up, the lights went on, and Nadja raised her microphone to her lips. They were live.

“*Nadja Chamack. Don’t be bemused, it’s just the news!*” the reporter announced with her practiced poise before launching into her report.

Jack always had a hard time following along with news reports. Maybe it was because they went too fast, the words sliding away from her before she fully grasped them. You couldn’t ask the news to slow down. But she had been standing there when Ladybug explained what Nadja was going to say, and to have certain words and phrases repeated now was helpful for Jack’s comprehension.

Dark times.

Don’t give up hope.

Théo Barbot.

Gift to the city of Paris.

Jack rose a little on her haunches as Nadja used her free hand to yank the sheet off, revealing what was beneath it with a surprisingly elegant flourish.

“*Pygmalion pouvoir (might) bring statues to life,*” said the reporter, “*But Mr. Barbot is the real artist.*”
Jack could imagine the camera zooming back as televisions everywhere showed Theo’s latest creation. The extremely lifelike versions of Ladybug and Cat Noir stood back-to-back, weapons out and ready for action, their bodies tensed with potential energy that came off as almost electric. To those who didn’t know what they were looking at, it was a breathtaking gray soapstone sculpture that improved upon Theo’s first design. The pose might not be as action-packed, but it more than made up for it in the details. The stitching in Cat Noir’s suit, the curve of Ladybug’s ear—it all came together in a dazzling display of artistic mastery.

There was a guttural yell of anguish. The news crew turned to see Pygmalion marching towards them. Jack instinctively drew back, smacking into Diego. She murmured an apology, but her mind was focused on her part as she pulled her chakram off her wrist and enlarged it to the size of a miniature hula-hoop.

“Théo!?,” raged Pygmalion. “THÉO!?”. He spouted what Jack assumed to be creative insults before he reached Nadja, who was backing away as the cameras continued to roll. He pulled out his chisel and mallet. “He is nothing compared to me! You want to see real? I will show you real!”

Pygmalion sealed his fate the instant he tapped his mallet to his chisel in the statue’s direction. Ladybug and Cat Noir sprung to life, not because of anything the Akuma did, but because they were never statues to begin with. They grabbed one arm each and pulled down.

“Rabbit! Now!” Ladybug commanded.

Jack vaulted over the railing and dropped behind Pygmalion, slipping her throwing ring over his body before tightening it, pining his arms to his sides. Ladybug and Cat released him while Jack kicked his feet out from under him. When he fell forward and hit the pavement, he released his tools. The chisel went rolling away, but the mallet stayed put. Jack smashed it with a heel drop, releasing the corrupted butterfly within.

Pygmalion’s copies began to flood the area by this time, but it was too little, too late. While Cat Noir fended them off with a large sweep of his staff, Ladybug got to work purifying the Akuma. When that was done, she looked up at Diego.

“Spray paint!” she called out. He lobbed the red and black spotted can over the railing, missing Ladybug completely. Jack darted over to catch it, tossing it to her friend. She flung it into the air with her usual aplomb. “Miraculous…Ladybug!”

The burst of ladybugs split off into a frenzy, turning the copies back into the people they once were. They engulfed Ladybug and Cat Noir too, scrubbing them clean of gray paint, living statues no more. Jack could picture the rest of the swarms sweeping across Paris, returning fallen statues to their pedestals, bases, plinths, stands, daises, platforms, and podiums. The galleries of The Louvre repopulated. The gargoyles returned to guard the roof of Notre Dame. Paris’s Statue of Liberty once again stood tall at the tip of Île aux Cygnes. Everything was as it should be.

Ladybug and Cat pounded fists as Diego dropped down next to Jack. He held up his hand for a high-five, but Jack pretended not to notice.

Ladybug’s Miraculous trilled and she held her fingers to her ear. “I’ve got to go!” she realized.

“Until next time, My Lady,” said Cat.

The girl waved goodbye to Jack and Diego, then turned heel and raced down the street.
“Wait!” cried Nadja, chasing after the super heroine, shouting questions. She made sharp motions to her crew over her shoulder, so they picked up their equipment and followed as fast as they could. To be honest, Jack was glad to be rid of them, even if they did help capture the Akuma. She just wasn’t a fan of the media.

“You can head out too, Chat,” said Diego.

“Actually, could you stay?” wondered Jack, a little too quickly. She caught a slight glare from Diego, but she gave him a breezy smile. “Just for a sec,” she told her boyfriend. “Then we can hang out.”

Cat shrugged, not caring either way. “Whatever you want, Rabbit.”

Jack disguised her relief by turning her attention to Pierre. The poor artist was crumpled on the ground, shaking. Even if he couldn’t remember what happened, it didn’t take a genius to figure it out.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—” he started, but Jack cut him off.

“I’m the one who should be apologizing,” she said, kneeling and picking up her discarded chakram. “It’s my fault you got Akumatized again. I took some bad advice from someone I thought I knew.”

Though Jack’s eye never left Pierre, she slid her thumbs along her weapon’s edge, tracing the familiar path of calling Diego. The chakram rang.

Two feet away from her, Diego’s cuff did not.

Jack was on her feet in an instant, facing him down.

“Who are you!??” she demanded.

Both boys were taken aback.

“Rabbit, what are you talking about?” wondered Cat. “It’s Perro! Your partner!”

Jack shook her head violently, shoving her chakram in her friend’s face. “I’m calling him right now. So why isn’t he picking up?”

Diego tapped his cuff. “¡Ay! Darn thing must be on the fritz again.”

“Nice try,” snarled Jack. “You know, you actually had me fooled there for a bit, but only because I wanted so badly to believe Perro Negro was actually here. But I know the real Perro, and he would never be as cruel as you are!”

“Mi conejito, calm d—”

“Don’t you dare call me that! You only do because you don’t know my real name.”

“Of course I know your real name! But I’m not going to use it in front of anyone.” He turned to his left. “Chat, help me out. She’s gone crazy.”
“It’s been a long day, Rabbit—” started Cat sympathetically, but Jack talked over him.

“That’s another thing,” she said. “The real Perro Negro calls him Cat like I do.”

Cat’s eyes went wide and he quickly stepped away from Diego. “That’s right…” he realized.

The betrayal and confusion in Diego’s eyes hurt Jack, swaying her heart even though her mind knew the truth. She squeezed her eyes shut to block him out, fist tightening around her chakram. Even though she had asked him, she didn’t actually care who he was. All she knew was that she couldn’t let this impostor get away with what he was doing. She couldn’t allow him to sully Perro Negro’s good name. Before she was even completely aware of what she was doing, she was tossing her weapon into the air. For once, though, it felt one hundred percent right.

“Dogstruction!”

Diego cowered as Jack gained her devastating aura. “Don’t!” he begged. “You can’t control it!”

“That’s what you think,” said Jack.

She stomped the ground, pure power shooting out and causing a small fissure in the street. It struck Diego with just enough force to send him flying into a slotted limestone wall. With a sickening smack, he bounced off and landed on all fours, gasping in pain.

For just one brief moment, one heartbeat, Jack thought she had made a terrible mistake, that she had attacked her boyfriend, her kind, sweet, wonderful boyfriend who had traveled so far to see her. The guilt would have crushed her. But Jack’s gut rarely steered her wrong, so she wasn’t surprised when Diego slowly began to change, to fade into someone else. The wild black hair receded and was replaced with a dome-shaped hood. The dog tail lengthened and curled. The domino mask grew ridges. The black suit turned the color of rust, with faint stripes in a darker color. The size and shape of the body changed too—taller, more powerful. Eyes with pitiless black iris, but with sclera the same color as the suit, glared out at Jack for ruining his ruse.

Next to her, Cat Noir pulled out his staff and got ready for a fight.

“Now let’s try this again,” said Jack, trying to keep calm, even though she was tempted to fly into a spitting rage. “Who are you?”

As the boy pushed himself up onto his feet, Jack studied his face. He had a proud, smirking mouth and a sloping, Romanesque nose. A trace amount of pockmarks on his skin from acne let Jack know that, while he was certainly older than her, it probably wasn’t by that much. His muscles were well-defined beneath his suit. Jack’s boy crazy friend Malie from back home would have probably thought he was hot, but he was definitely not Jack’s taste, even without impersonating her boyfriend.

“Who’d ya think?” he asked Jack in a thick New Jersey accent.

His hand snapped out and, with it, a bright pink whip. Jack couldn’t react fast enough as she tried to snatch her arm away. Luckily, Dogstruction deflected the attack for her, protecting her Miraculous.

Jack held her wrist to her heart, still stunned. “Chameleon,” she realized.

There was a beep and Jack looked down at the source. Chameleon wore an anklet with five rough stripes. One flickered, and then went out.
Suddenly, Chameleon cracked his whip again. It didn’t seem that long when he had used it on Jack moments before, but it seemed to stretch to accommodate his needs. Its tip stuck to the edge of the roof and he launched upwards, like a slingshot, and went sailing over the buildings.

Cat gave chase immediately. Jack was a bit more hesitant, but she took in a deep breath and followed. *Light steps, light steps,* she reminded herself. Once she got into a rhythm, she was able to catch up to her friend. They took a corner together, the flash of dark orange overhead leading them onward. They gained on him.

But then the streets of Paris, once empty due to Pygmalion’s reign, began to fill again. Jack nearly crashed into a gaggle of children, just barely able to spin away at the last moment. Cat could push his way through the growing crowds, but Jack didn’t have that luxury. She zigged and zagged until the streets were so thick with humanity that she was forced to jump up to the closest roof, leaving a crack on a rooftop patio. It took too much time, time she didn’t have, and, as she scanned the horizon, she knew the truth before Cat even joined her.

“He’s gone,” her friend reported.

Jack lowered her shoulders.

Cat twirled his staff and put it away.

“He’s was a Miraculous holder,” he noted, trying to sound casual but failing miserably. Jack supposed she owed Cat an explanation.

“His Kwami is a Recree, like mine. And Perro Negro’s.”

“And he was after your Miraculous?”

Jack considered this thought, but then shook her head. “He could’ve stolen it plenty of times, but he didn’t. I think…” She recalled flashes of the past few hours, of all the times Diego—no, Chameleon, she had to remind herself. Diego was back in California, probably sleeping—had wanted to wrap things up so they could hang out. “I think he was after my identity.”

“Why?” A pause. “Wait…you don’t think he works for Omega, do you?”

“I… I don’t think so.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, if he did, wouldn’t Omega use Chameleon’s Kwami to activate The Beacon?”

“How do you know he hasn’t?”

“My Kwami would feel it.” Thinking of Mimmi, Jack’s eyes flickered down at her watch only to realize that she was about to change back. It was almost too easy to tune out the ringing of her Miraculous sometimes. “I’m out. We can talk about this more tonight. The usual time, the usual place?”

“Okay,” said Cat. “But call me when we meet up so I know it’s you.”
Jack grimaced. So this was how it was going to have to be as long as Chameleon was running around…

“Good idea,” she said.

* * *

Jack checked all three marble and cement stalls, just to make sure she was alone. It was an extremely small and out-of-the-way bathroom at the Louvre, but she would rather be safe than sorry.

She peeked into her beach bag where Mimmi sat licking the last remains of a Nutella cupcake from the inside of a plastic container. “All clear.”

The Kwami flew out and pined Jack against the door with a hug, something she had clearly wanted to do earlier, but couldn’t with all the people around.

“You’re okay!” she squeaked.

Jack patted the creature on the back with two fingers. “Technically speaking.”

“Oh, oh!” Mimmi floated backwards, biting her paw. “Of course you aren’t! You thought Diego was here…and then it turned out he wasn’t…”

Jack sank to the floor, even though the floor was disgusting. The past few hours might as well have been a marathon, she was so exhausted.

“I’m glad you saw through Chameleon’s charade. Still…” Mimmi shook her head. “Poor Hokss.”

“Hoax?”

“Sounds the same, but spelled H-O-K-S-S. He’s the Chameleon Kwami. Sweet little thing—a bit naïve at times, but his heart was always in the right place. He was created last, so we always thought of him like a little brother.”

Jack grabbed her phone and scrolled down the messages left by her parents and by Alix expressing concern about her well being. She let them all know that she was okay—that she had taken refuge from the Akuma in a bathroom, but the service down there was terrible and she had only just gotten a bar.

“This is the last thing we need, another evil Miraculous holder,” complained Jack. “Trumpeter Swan was bad enough, but at least we knew exactly what he was after and why.” She paused, her voice dropping to a low, wistful murmur. “I wish Diego really was here…”

Mimmi opened her mouth, no doubt to say something comforting, but Jack’s phone buzzed. Alix had answered, letting Jack know that it was safe to come out. Alix had answered, letting Jack know that it was safe to come out. Jack explained she was lost though, which was surprisingly not a lie, so her friend got some details and promised to come find her.

“Alix will be here soon,” she reported to her Kwami.

Mimmi dipped her head gracefully to show she understood. She then looped around and landed on Jack’s shoulder, deciding not to say anything after all. At least, not at first. She let a few minutes tick by before deciding to open her mouth again.
“You know, it’s not all bad,” she said.

“Hm?”

“I think Ladybug’s figured out that you’re not a bad hero just because you’ve made some mistakes. She’s made mistakes too and I think she realized today that she hasn’t been fair to you, holding you to a different standard than she holds herself.”

Jack allowed herself a small smile. “Yeah?”

“And!” Mimmi started to jump up and down. “You controlled Dogstruction! Yay!”

Now Jack had to laugh. “I totally did, didn’t I?”

“Yup! Diego would be proud.”

And then Jack’s heart was aching again. This whole afternoon had been a rollercoaster of emotions and she wanted to get off the ride. Lucky for her, Alix barreled in the room moments later. She was a distraction, a stabilizing presence, so far removed from a world of secret identities and super villains, and Jack was grateful. Anything to make her forget Omega had The Beacon and Chameleon was running around trying to figure out who she was, that the Guardian was so close, yet so far.

Anything to keep her from thinking of Diego and how much she missed him.
Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jaclyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Chapter Notes

Hope you all had a happy holiday and have some fun plans for New Years! Sorry for another lengthy wait on this new chapter. I had a nasty virus for a few weeks and then the holidays started, so writing took a back seat. This chapter also kind of got away from me? It wasn't even in my original plan, but then stopwatchtimecrate wanted to know Diego’s reaction to Chameleon and I wanted to feature more of the Positivity Club after talking with maknaeTaNi about it and…it kind of spiraled from there. But in a good way! Longest chapter to date, just for you!

And it’s a good thing too, because who knows when we’re going to get English dubbed ML episodes on Netflix!? I know I can just watch them in another language, but I’ve always been a dub over a sub kind of girl. I’ve found the first six in English floating around online though, so I can incorporate a little. You’ll definitely see some Despair Bear influences in this one. Still not getting the info I need on the other Miraculous holders and Master Fu though, so I’m still in a bit of a holding pattern...

The shout out this time goes to…GoldenDemon! Saying you were engaged enough in my work to read most of it in one sitting (more or less) is such an awesome compliment, and I always love a good bookmark! Thank you so much for reading. Please enjoy another chapter :-)

Jack stood in the front of the classroom, the uncomfortable feeling of déjà vu building in the back of her throat, constricting it. At least twenty pairs of eyes were focused on her. Her mouth went dry, English welling up inside of her like a geyser, but when she spoke, a passable, if stilted, French came out instead.

“Nino is sick, so I’m going to lead Positivity Club today.” There were a few encouraging smiles scattered about the room—Marinette, Adrien, Alix—so Jack swallowed and continued. “Let’s go over last week’s minutes. Rose?”

Rose leaped up from her seat in the first row, a ball of energy. She shook out a sheet of pink stationary as she rocked on the balls of her feet, flying through what they had discussed last week. Jack could understand French pretty well by this point, but still had trouble keeping up with Rose. The more
excited she was, the faster she spoke, and she was always excited when it came to her duty as Secretary of the Positivity Club.

“...And that’s what happened last week for anyone who missed it or forgot it or if this is their first time here!” she finished, her eyes shining. “And if it is your first time here, welcome! We’re so, so, so, so, SO glad you’re here!”

“Thanks, Rose,” said Jack as the girl curtsied and sat back down, poised to take new notes with her super fluffy glitter pen. A pregnant pause followed as Jack scanning the agenda. Her mind kept on drifting, so it was a good thing everything was written down. “Oh, uh… Mylène has updated—an update on the club numbers.”

There was a shuffle as Mylène got up from her seat in the back and trundled down the stairs, colorful dreads bouncing. She stood tall and proud next to Jack, even if she didn’t stand all that tall.

"It’s going really well! We’re up to 24 lycées (high schools) and 41 collèges (middle schools). I met with Colleen Johansson, President of the Collège Jean-Baptiste-Poquelin Chapter, about our growth last week.”

Jack smiled to herself. The former Cottontail was doing a bang-up job on just the other side of the Seine. She was by far the youngest president, but she was bursting with ideas—mentoring programs, kindness competitions, school team-ups. Jack’s brain was still buzzing from when her and Nino met with Colleen themselves. It was Colleen’s idea to have someone track club growth in the first place, so Nino asked Mylène to head up that project and connected the two.

Mylène continued. “She thinks we should split into regions. That’s how they did it back in America for Rabbit. She’s going to try to put me in touch with this girl named Cadence…Cadence…” Mylène struggled to pull a crumpled note out of the pocket of her jean skirt, so Jack saved her the trouble.

“Oppenheimer.”

Saying the name hurt, like Jack had broken ribs. She knew Cadence would come up eventually, but nothing could really prepare her.

“Yeah, that’s it—” said Mylène absentmindedly, but then her eyes rounded and she slapped her forehead. “Oh, duh! You were in a Positivity Club back in America too. Did you know her?”

“She…” is my best friend, Jack finished mentally, but the words didn’t sound right anymore. “I went to school with her.”

“Whoa, really? Colleen told me Cadence started the very first Positivity Club. Is that true?”

“Yes. That’s...yes.”

“So could you get her in contact with her for me? Colleen wasn’t sure if she could.”

“I will do that.”

Jack leaned over to make a note on her agenda, hoping no one could read the hesitation in her eyes or wonder why she didn’t bring up Cadence before. Luckily, Mylène continued on about how she was going to post the list of Positivity Clubs to Google Docs until the Positivity Club website was up and running. That segued perfectly into Ayla presenting the design for said website, which the group
voted on and approved.

Jack hurried the meeting along. She honestly just wanted this day to be over. “As Rose said, last week we talked about a new Positivity Project with a larger scope than what we have done in the past. Thanks to all who have spoken.” Jack winced, fervently wishing for a larger vocabulary and more eloquent phrasing, but pressed on. “Nino and I have spoken and we think you will love what we plan to do.”

She reached into her beach bag at her feet, Mimmi helpfully offering up a stack of neon pink sticky notes. On the top one Jack had printed ‘You rock!’ in black marker. She held it up for the club to see.

“Imagine that something bad has happened and you may be Akumatized, but you see this note. You smile. All of a sudden, things do not seem so bad.”

“You’ve been protected!” pipped up Adrien.

“Yes! Bye-bye butterfly! All thanks to a small note. Nino and I call this project ‘Kindess Ninja.’ Imagine positive messages hidden all over Paris for people to find. This could save them!”

If Jack could speak English, she would have more to say, but her introduction to Kindness Ninja was enough. Everyone began to talk at once. She let their approval of the idea wash over her for a moment before insisting they share one at a time. Juleka advocated for biodegradable paper while Mylène suggested chalk. Alya began brainstorming on how to promote Kindness Ninja on social media. Even Nathaniel, who never spoke if he could help it, suggested the messages could be encouraging pictures as well as words. While Jack discussed this idea with him further though, his voice cracked and faded as something by the door caught his attention. He wasn’t the only one either. Almost the entire club fell silent as they looked to Jack’s right.

Jack was almost too afraid to look, even though she knew who she would see. Even so, she blinked, not quite believing her eyes when she did.

“Chloé…?” Jack asked. “What are you doing here…?”

The girl scoffed, crossing her arms as she glared defiantly around the room. “What? Am I not allowed to join your stupid little club?”

Positivity Club had been meeting for months by this point, and Chloé Bourgeois had never deemed it important enough to grace it with her presence. It was bizarre to see her now, in what was generally a safe haven from her bullying. Jack suspected Sabrina’s recent inclusion in the club had something to do with it. Now Jack’s entire class were members, save for Chloé herself. It seemed impossible that someone so egotistical and bullheaded would feel left out, but there was little other explanation.

Everyone’s eyes were on Jack again and she knew it. As their (temporary) leader, it was up to her to deal with this unwanted intrusion. If she had her way, she would tell Chloé not to let the door hit her on the way out, but it wasn’t up to her. Or Nino. Or anyone, really. The rules were clearly written in the club charter.

“Everyone is allowed to join,” said Jack.

Chloé grinned in self-satisfaction and moved in to push someone out of his or her seat, but Jack wasn’t finished just yet.
“...But you have been the cause of a lot of Akumas, which goes against everything we are trying to do here.”

Her words were like a record scratch. Chloé froze a moment before predictably jumping to her own defense. “It’s not my fault everyone is so sensitive!”

Well, at least she’s not denying it, thought Jack as she looked up at the ceiling. You had to take your wins with Chloé where you could get them.

“Here,” said Chloé, flipping open her Chanel purse and pulling out a leather checkbook imprinted with her initials. Jack almost didn’t recognize what it was, considering most teenagers didn’t carry one around. “I’ll make a donation to your pathetic club. Whatever you want. How does that sound?”

Several people turned in their seats to look at Max since he was Treasurer. He gulped and adjusted his glasses, glancing down at his notebook where he kept meticulous note of the club’s finances. “Well, we certainly do need money for supplies...And then we could do Ivan’s T-shirt idea, which would be most exemplary.”

“There, see? Now how much is it going to take to make you all forget about the Akumas?”

Marinette was on her feet in an instant. “I cannot believe you, Chloé. Are you seriously trying to pay us off?”

Chloé didn’t skip a beat. “What’s wrong with that?”

“We’re not going to look the other way while you spread negativity.”

“Well, if you exclude me, that makes you a hypocrite.”

The two girls glowered at each other, trying to get the other to back down. Jack had shrunk back so that she was basically one with the chalkboard. She never really was one for confrontation.

“And now you’re trying to bully us!” Marinette pointed out. “If you were truly serious about joining Positivity Club, then you wouldn’t resort to these…” She threw her hand up, as if trying to grab the right word out of the air. She found it. “Manipulations!”

“I am serious!” Chloé insisted, stopping her foot like the petulant child she was. “You guys help Ladybug and I am Ladybug’s number one fan.”

“Then go out there and prove it!”

“Fine!”

“Fine!!!”

Chloé turned heel and started to storm out of the room. Marinette allowed herself a small moment of relief that her ploy had worked, but quickly went stone-faced when Chloé lingered in the doorway and looked back. But Chloé was no longer focused on Marinette.

“Sabrina, let’s go!” she commanded.
“Coming Chloé!” squeaked the redhead, gathering her things and shoving them into her quilted backpack. She left, pens and papers flying. The door clicked softly behind the two of them, allowing the whole club to let out their shared collective breath.

Crisis averted.

* * *

“That went great!” said Mimmi, flying out of Jack’s bag as soon as they hit a deserted street. “No, that went better than great. That was amazing! Fantastic. Stupendous! Your French has really come a long way!”

Jack appreciated the Kwami’s support, but it went in one ear and out the other as she looked down at her phone clutched in her hand. It was in sleep mode, but she rubbed the black screen with her thumb as if she were scrolling through Tumblr. She was on her way to Nino’s, to let him know how Positivity Club went in person and to give him Adrien’s notes from class. She would’ve given him her’s, but they were a mess of English and French, with some Spanish thrown in for good measure.

“JACK!” shouted Mimmi.

Startled, Jack jumped back, clutching her phone to her heart. The Kwami tilted her head to one side, her ears flopping over.

“Didn’t you hear me?” the creature asked.

“Uh…”

“I thought you were worried about running Positivity Club on your own, but…” She looped and landed on Jack’s shoulder, patting Jack on the neck. “It’s something else. Isn’t it?”

Jack stared down at her phone again. She had been hiding her feelings from Mimmi for a couple of days now because she didn’t want her Kwami to worry. Or, more accurately, she didn’t want to worry, since telling Mimmi things always made them seem more real. But the text she had gotten from Diego in the middle of the night was weighing heavily on her. With a press of a button, Jack unlocked her phone and showed it to Mimmi. The Kwami craned her little neck as she read the last words in Jack and Diego’s text log, stark in their pale gray bubble.

*We need to talk.*

“We need to talk.”

“Diego’s gonna break up with me,” said Jack tonelessly.

Mimmi shot straight up into the air like she had sat on a pin. “What!? No! He would never!”

“You saw how upset he was when I told him Chameleon kissed me.”

“Jack, he was upset because you got taken advantage of by someone pretending to be him.”

“Yeah, and I should’ve figured out that it wasn’t him a whole lot sooner.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself. Listen, Diego is upset at the situation and how he can't be here to help, not with you.”
“Then why has he been so distant since then? He canceled two of our last Skype dates, he hasn’t been answering my texts even though I know he’s reading them…Even if he’s not upset about the whole Chameleon thing, the strain of this long-distance relationship has to be getting to him. He’s probably found some other girl—”

“Jack…”

“—who is prettier than me—”

“Jack!”

“—and lives a whole lot closer—”

Mimmi zoomed down and pressed both her paws against Jack’s lips, silencing her. “You are being ridiculous! You and I both know that you’re the only girl for Diego. Be more positive.”

Jack gave her heartbeat a chance to slow down to a normal speed. Right. Positive. Be positive. She didn’t want an Akuma to come for her.

Her phone buzzed in her hand. A quick glance down at the yellow ghost icon let Jack know that Diego had sent her a Snapchat. She calculated the time difference between Paris and Los Angeles in her head, something she had gotten exceedingly good at. He was probably bored waiting at the bus stop. With a ghost of a smile, Jack opened the app and tapped his name marked with the double pink heart emoji.

There was Diego all right, bedhead and bright-eyed, but he wasn’t outside. He was somewhere else, somewhere inside, cheek-to-cheek with—

Jack flinched as a gasp jumped into her throat, lodging itself there so it was suddenly difficult to breathe. Her phone dropped from her hand. Watching it fall was akin to having her life flash before her eyes. The sound of it clattering on the ground snapped her out of her brief fugue state, but it was too little, too late. When she scooped her phone back up, it refused to turn on. Not that she really needed it to. The image of the girl with Diego was seared into her brain. Older, buxom, luxurious chestnut hair, a beauty mark on her upper lip. There had been text too. Something about coffee…getting coffee with...F. Fatima? The girl looked like a Fatima.

Knees weak, Jack found herself sinking to the ground, staring passed her broken phone. Mimmi flew around her in a tizzy, since she saw the Snap too and knew exactly what Jack was thinking.

“What are you doing!? Jack…? Jack! I am sure there is a reasonable explanation! Just…ah…no, no, no! Jack, don’t. You can’t! You need to be positive, remember? You need to be positive or you’ll attract an Akuma! You can’t let that happen! You’re better than that!”

It wasn’t that the Kwami’s words fell on deaf ears. They just felt insubstantial, like they weren’t real. Dream words. Jack continued to listen and Mimmi continued her stream of encouragement, but only to pass the time. It wouldn’t be long, now. Soon there would be the flapping of wings and then there would be the sweet voice of Hawk Moth in her ear, whispering of temporary comfort that she so longed to hear.

Hello, Spatia. I am the Butterfly. Distance has been cruel to you, but now you are in control of it. You shall decide what shall be together and what shall be apart. All I ask for in exchange is one small favor. Get me Ladybug and Chat Noir’s Miraculouses!
Spatia, like spatial? Because her powers would be spatial manipulation? Okay, so the name needed work. Jack was sure Hawk Moth would come up with a more suitable one. He seemed much better at naming than Trumpeter Swan.

“…Jack?” wondered Mimmi, waving an arm in front of Jack’s eyes. Jack blinked and focused on the little creature. Mimmi’s face was scrunched up on only one side, bewilderment and relief side-by-side. “You were just being dramatic, weren’t you? Don’t scare me like that!” She flew around to Jack’s beach bag and tugged up on the strap, lifting Jack with it so she was on her feet again. “I thought an Akuma would come for sure!”

“So did I…” Jack mumbled, peering up into the sky, but there was no corrupted butterfly, just clouds and a lone wren.

Mimmi tugged Jack forward and she fell into a methodical march without even thinking. Jack knew she should feel grateful that she hadn’t been targeted, but something didn’t sit right with her. Were her feelings not negative enough? Did Hawk Moth not want her anymore? Neither option felt true. Maybe he was busy, then. Maybe he—

Jack’s eyes widened. Her sudden urgency caused her to stumble forward as she broke out into a run.

“Jack…! What is it? What’s wrong!?” wondered Mimmi, flying after her, but she sensed people around the corner and vanished into Jack’s belongings.

“An Akuma can’t come for me if it’s already come for someone else!” Jack said, shoving her useless phone into the inside pocket of her bag, right next to her Kwami.

She needed to get access to the Ladyblog, and fast.

* * *

“Yo, Jack! What’s going down?” asked Nino as he scooped up the remote and turned the volume down on his TV. He sat in a bed littered with snot rags. Jack was sure to give him a wide berth and approach from the foot of the bed, tossing Adrien’s notes down on the striped duvet.

“Good,” she said, eyes roving the room until they fell on Nino’s desktop computer. Sound mixers and turntables and other DJ tools she didn’t recognize crowded it, a shirt tossed over half its screen. “Can I use your computer?” she asked, already walking towards it.

“Er…yeah, sure. Whatever you want, dude.”

In the background, Jack could hear the rustle of sheets as Nino adjusted his pillow to sit up straighter, but she was focused on pulling up the Ladyblog. The strangest thing happened when she Googled it though. It didn’t appear as the top result. Or any result, really. She didn’t think anything was wrong though until she plugged www.ladyblog.fr into the address bar and was taken to an error page.

“Oh…what happened to the Ladyblog?” she asked, a little too confused to speak in French.

“The Ladyblog?” repeated Nino with a tone of surprise Jack hadn’t been anticipating. She spun around in the desk chair to see her friend raising an eyebrow at her. “Is that some chick site?”

“No, man. The Ladyblog! The Ladybug fansite.”
“There’s a fansite for an insect?”

“Alya’s website!”

“She’s made a new one!? Since when? Girl is cray. You’d think running Phénet would be enough.”

“Phénet…?”

Nino sat there blinking, as if Jack had asked him a nonsensical question, before narrowing his eyes. Jack got the sense that she had suddenly skated out on to some very thin ice.

“What gives?” her friend wondered.

“Uh…”

As luck would have it, Nino had to blow his nose, so while he was busy honking like a dying goose, Jack quickly typed in ‘Phénet’ into Google. There was movement underneath her arm and Jack glanced down to see Mimmi had climbed up to peek out from Jack’s bag. The Kwami pointed at the screen. The first result was a www.phe.net, which looked promising. Jack clicked it.

As the page loaded, it quickly became clear that she had found the missing Ladyblog, or at least what used to be the Ladyblog. Alya’s picture was still in the top right-hand corner. The widgets were all in their normal places. But Ladybug was no longer the featured superhero. In place of her silhouette was that of a burly man with wings, wreathed in flames. It dawned on Jack that Phénet was a play on Phénix—Phoenix, a superhero Jack had no idea existed until right that very moment. Probably because he wasn’t a superhero at all.

Today was just full of awful surprises.

Jack sprang up from her seat and briskly walked away. “Can I use your bathroom?” she asked Nino over her shoulder, again not waiting for permission. She yanked the door closed behind her and clutched her beach bag to her chest. Mimmi zipped out, wild-eyed.

“This is bad,” said Jack. “This is really, really, really bad.”

“I’ll say!” squeaked Mimmi. “An Akuma that can alter reality around him? This won’t be easy.”

“Is…is that what’s going on?”

The Kwami facepalmed. “You…couldn’t tell…?”

“Well, I mean, I knew something was obviously off…”

“Phoenix has changed the world so that he has taken Ladybug’s place. Looks like no one even knows who Ladybug is anymore.”

“But I do. How come I’m not affected?”

“Because you’ve got me! All Kwami have reality anchoring abilities.”

“So Ladybug and Cat Noir won’t be affected by Phoenix’s rewrite either,” realized Jack, a bit of
weight sloughing off her chest. “That’s a positive.”

“That’s the spirit!” said Mimmi, beaming with pride.

But if the Kwami had any further encouragement, it was cut short by a muffled yell on the other side of the door.

“Dude! Hurry up! Phoenix is on TV!”

Jack nearly tripped as she hurried back to Nino’s room, Mimmi taking refuge in the pouch pocket of Jack’s hoodie. He boosted the volume as an overexcited reporter spoke and gestured wildly to the area behind him. It featured an empty street between two glass buildings made up of diamond-shaped panes, a sky bridge connecting the two. The lattice metalwork over the sky bridge made it look like a fisherman’s net had been cast over it. There were scorch marks and broken windows all over the place, and even a few tipped cars. A battle was definitely in progress.

There was a thud as something red fell onto the roof of a bus stop shelter, followed by a small, circular object—a yo-yo. Cat Noir then skidded into view, using his staff to vault up to where Ladybug was and help her to her feet. The reporter jabbed his finger in their direction.

“There they are!” he said, his eyebrows rising so high they disappeared into his hairline. “These Akumas go by the names Ladybug and Chat Noir. Again, if anyone watching this is near Beaugrenelle Paris, you need to evacuate immediately. They are extremely dangerous and will—”

The reporter ducked as a shadow swooped overhead. Ladybug was still recovering from her fall, so Cat got into a battle stance, ready to defend his Lady. A streak of crimson and gold descended on him though and yanked his weapon right out of his claws. Ladybug tried to retrieve it with her yo-yo, but she missed and it wrapped around the trunk of a tree instead. The string bowed as the thief swung around and landed on it. Try as she might, Ladybug was unable to yank it free.

“My man! So awesome,” said Nino, beating his chest. “Respect.”

Phoenix cut a majestic and dapper figure, dressed to the nines in a spangled suit with tails…feathers. Tail feathers. They matched the red-tipped wings sprouting from his back. Jack would put him somewhere in his late thirties, brown hair and barrel-chested, orange domino mask over black eyes. It was hard to explain, but there was something trustworthy about him, like he would not rest until justice was served. Maybe it was the strong jaw.

“Give that back, bird brain!” shouted Cat. Jack winced. With her friend dressed in black and slinging insults, he really did look like the villain in this situation.

Cat crouched down on all fours and launched himself off the bus shelter at Phoenix. The Akuma burst into flames and Cat went right through him, coming out singed and smoky on the other side. Cat was smart enough though to hook his foot around Phoenix’s ankle once he went solid again and upended him, allowing Ladybug to pull her yo-yo free. Phoenix grabbed the string on his way down though and pulled, dragging Ladybug down too and causing her to crash into Cat Noir just as he was getting back up.

The camera zoomed in on Jack’s friends’ crumpled bodies. “Why is this so difficult?” Ladybug wondered aloud as she struggled to push herself back onto her feet.

Jack dropped her bag and bit her lip. Her friends had no idea what they were up against, did they?
“Hey…” said Nino, voice soft. Jack turned to him to see his eyebrows knotted as well. “Don’t worry. Phé will take care of them. He always wins.”

That was exactly what Jack was afraid of.

“I have to go,” she said.

“Dude. Seriously!? But you just got here! You didn’t tell me how Positivity Club went!”

But Jack was already down the hall and out the door.

“Wait! Your bag!” Nino cried out, much too late.

* * *

It was lucky the reporter had mentioned where the fight was taking place. Beaugrenelle Paris was a mall located in the 15th arrondissement. Jack, Marinette, and Alya had just gone shopping there last week. Jack didn’t know exactly where it was, but she knew it was right along the Seine, so if she followed the river, she was bound to find it. Transforming into Rabbit on a rooftop, she headed out.

Jack steeled herself like she always did whenever she knew she was go to be forced to see the damage she had done to the Seine. Her fight with Sequana felt like it was ages ago, but the river reconstruction was going to take months, and every time she saw it was just a sharp and painful reminder of her failure to be patient. There were even some sections that were beyond repair, so they were simply cordoned off and left to crumble.

But there was no wreckage on the banks of the Seine when Jack finally approached its waters. Gone were the tape and warning signs and brightly colored cones. At first Jack was baffled, wondering if the damage was further upstream, but then realization dawned on her. If Ladybug and Cat Noir had been written out of reality, then it made sense that Rabbit had too, which meant none of her mistakes had ever come to pass.

Jack moved as fast as she possibly could, and not a moment too soon. She reached Beaugrenelle to find poor Cat Noir tied up in a bow made up of a light pole, her rabbit ears picking up the beeping of his Miraculous as he struggled to free himself. Before Jack could head over to help him though, Ladybug did a three-point landing in front of her.

“Ladybug!” Jack cried, relieved her friend was okay. “There’s something you should know about Phoenix. He’s—”

“Tell me after we synch,” interrupting the girl, opening her yo-yo to call Jack.

Jack sighed but took off her chakram just as it started to ring. She hung up on Ladybug and called her in return, the yo-yo buzzing, confirming her identity as well. They couldn’t run into Chameleon since the day he pretended to be Diego, but they could never be too careful, especially at a time like this.

A sliver of tension in Ladybug’s face faded and she offered Jack a weak smile. It was short-lived. Both of them caught sight of Phoenix swooping down from above and dove to the ground. He managed to snag Jack’s chakram though and throw it as far as he could, leaving her weaponless.
“You distract him,” said Ladybug as she flipped back up onto her feet and flung out her yo-yo. “I’m going to use Lucky Charm.”

“Wait—!” cried Jack, but Ladybug was already zipping away. Jack tried to chase her, running a few paces before launching herself into the air, but her momentum was cut short when Phoenix darted in front of her and batted her down with his wing. She hit the ground face first, but managed to land on her feet on the bounce. When Phoenix dived-bombed her, she was ready with a kick to the nose, but he once again became intangible flames, the searing pain of burns lacing Jack’s body in the process. He landed behind her, so she spun around to face him.

Fighting was pretty much out of the question. Jack knew that. So she went with a different track.

“I know what you did, re-writing reality around you,” Jack told the Akuma. “I just have one question.”

Phoenix raised an eyebrow at her. “And that is…?” he asked. His English was strangely perfect.

“Why?”

Jack had fought almost a hundred different Akumas by this point, but whether they were encasing the city in ice, forming giant trash monsters, or causing all technology to malfunction, they all had one thing in common: They loved a good monologue. When pressed, they would almost always explain how they were wronged, why they were in the right. They all had this need to vent, which was what probably made them perfect targets for people like Trumpeter Swan and Hawk Moth in the first place.

Phoenix was no different.

“Superheroes are all anyone talks about these days!” he explained. “Ladybug this. Chat Noir that. You know, I was considered a hero, once. Ladybug and Chat Noir ruined everything. I’m just putting things right again. That’s all.”

“You’re no hero, helping Hawk Moth,” challenged Jack.

“And you are, destroying Paris?”

It was a deep cut. Jack opened her mouth to defend herself, but nothing came out. Phoenix crossed his arms and leaned back.

“Honestly, you should be thanking me,” he said. “I’ve fixed all your mistakes. Now, if you don’t mind…” He slipped back into a fighting stance. “I really must return to saving the day.”

Phoenix wound up for a punch, but Jack skipped back out of the way. The Akuma grunted his frustration when he whiffed, but tried again. Jack jumped back once more, but Phoenix’s speed had doubled and his uppercut connected with chin, sending her flying up into the sky bridge. Jack hit one of the metal bars that encased the walkway and fell back down to the street.

Hand to her jaw as she tried to recover, Jack felt Phoenix’s shadow fall upon her. “Don’t do this,” she begged, wheezing through her pain. His strength was immense. It was no wonder he was easily able to twist that streetlight around Cat like a pretzel.

“I live by a saying,” the Akuma said. “‘Save or perish.’ It means I never give up. And I’m not going
to give up until Paris is safe from the likes of you. Now let’s see that Miraculous!”

His arm shot out to grab Jack’s wrist, but a streak of red swung down and whisked Jack away.

“Thanks!” Jack told Ladybug as they landed on one of the mall’s roofs. “So what’s the plan? What did you get from Lucky Charm?”

“We need to pull out,” Ladybug said, shoving Jack’s recovered chakram into her hand. “Get Chaton.”

“Wait…what…?”

The beating of wings announced Phoenix’s arrival, so there was no time for a follow-up. Like second nature, Jack tossed her throwing ring into the air.

“Dogstruction!” she cried, even as the Akuma bore down on them. She stood strong though, receiving her aura in the nick of time. The instant Phoenix’s fist grazed her, he was thrown back with such force that he not only crashed through the glass wall of Beaugrenelle, but through several stores as well, judging by the sound of it.

Jack didn’t waste any time. She front-flipped off the building and fell most of the way in a belly flop position to slow her descent, only going feet first right at the end so she would land as lightly as possible. The road cracked, but it was nothing a little tar couldn’t fix. She darted over to Cat, slicing through the base of the streetlight with a swift kick. As it tipped to the side, Cat landed on his feet, back bent. Jack tore at the metal that encircled him. It broke apart like Styrofoam.

“Whew!” he said, standing up and stretching. “Thanks, Rabbit! I thought I was a goner.” He glanced at his Miraculous and showed it to Jack. There was only a paw pad and no glowing green toes left.

“Or should I say…a pawner?”

Ladybug called out to them from up the street, waving at them to follow her and giving Jack the opportunity not to dignify Cat’s awful pun with any sort of reaction. They set off.

“What’s the plan, My Lady?” Cat wondered as soon as they caught up with Ladybug and the three of them started running

“We’re retreating for now,” she answered in English, no doubt for Jack’s benefit.

“It’s probably for the best,” said Jack in response to Cat Noir’s confusion. “You guys don’t know what we’re up against.”

“What do you mean?”

“Phoenix is going to be, like, super hard to beat. He has the ability to alter reality around him. He’s the superhero now and we’re the Akumas.”

Silence from both Ladybug and Cat Noir as they digested this new information. Jack grimaced, wishing she didn’t have to be the bearer of bad news.

“That’s…impossible…” Ladybug insisted.

“Check the Internet and see for yourself,” said Jack.
Ladybug pulled out her yo-yo and opened it up to do just that. Cat looked over her shoulder (and smelled her hair) while she scrolled through Google.

“The Ladyblog is gone,” Jack added. “I already looked.”

Ladybug’s face paled, her lips forming a perfect ‘o’ at all the recent headlines that denounced her and Cat, and the many more that praised Phoenix for his heroics.

“What did you get from Lucky Charm?” Jack asked again.

Ladybug snapped shut her yo-yo and shook her head. “Let’s lay low for now and meet back up at the usual place at the usual time tomorrow night.”

“Great! Gotta go!” said Cat, darting into a parking garage. A flash of green followed as he changed back into a civilian, but Jack and Ladybug were already a block down.

“Why won’t you tell me what you got from Lucky Charm?” complained Jack.

“Because…” said Ladybug, not meeting Jack’s eye. “There’s no way. I could never…ugh. Just let me worry about it. Okay?”

And then she was gone too.

*   *   *

Jack glanced at her watch as she trudged up what felt like seven billion stairs to her apartment. She was relieved to see it was only 6:24 PM. It had taken her almost two hours to get home after she de-transformed because, without her phone, she had no clue where she was going. She had to rely on her French and the kindness of strangers. If only she hadn’t forgotten her bag at Nino’s too. There was a peanut butter chocolate cupcake in there that could’ve recharged Mimmi and saved Jack the time and the blisters, not to mention her Paris Metro Card. But at least she wasn’t late for dinner. It was one of her parents’ few rules, so she was thankful she hadn’t broken it.

Leaning on the front door, Jack turned the handle and fell into the apartment. It was alive with the smells of onions frying and the dulcet tones of Bruno Mars on MYfm Los Angeles through the iHeartRADIO app on her mom’s iPad. If Jack closed her eyes, she could almost pretend that she was standing in the foyer of their blue Victorian, having come home exhausted from Ultimate Frisbee practice.

Home. The word suddenly made Jack feel sick because home meant Diego. And Diego had moved on.

Jack shoved her hands into the front pocket of her hoodie, nearly jabbing poor Mimmi in the face, and moseyed on in to the kitchen.

“Hey, Mom,” Jack said.

Jack’s mom had her back to Jack, focusing on the stove. She always turned to smile at her daughter whenever she came in, no matter what she was doing. Unless she was upset with Jack.

She didn’t turn around.
“Look who decided to join us.”

Jack turned to find her dad leaning on the doorframe to the next room, holding her beach bag. His face was impossible to read…which meant he was mad.

“I’m not late for dinner,” Jack pointed out, immediately on the defensive.

“We were worried about you,” her dad said, putting Jack’s bag down. “There are three Akumas running around and we didn’t know where you went after you left your friend’s.”

“I was fine,” Jack insisted.

Jack’s mom spun around, livid. “And how would we know that when you’ve broken your phone again?!” she demanded, waving her wooden spoon around.

So maybe it wasn’t the first time Jack had done this. It wasn’t that she was clumsy, just…easily surprised. And usually in high up places. In fact, this time was probably the shortest drop her phone had ever taken on its way to breaking. But for her mom to act like she had the moral high ground on this one really rubbed Jack the wrong way.

“You went through my stuff?” asked Jack

“I’m your mother. I’m allowed to do that.”

“No, you’re not!”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you made the rules around here. Do you pay the rent too?”

There was just no winning and Jack knew it. “…No.”

“You know the rules, Jack. We told you that if you broke your phone one more time, we weren’t going to pay for a new one—”

“But Mom!”

“No. I don’t want to hear it. We were serious. If you want a new phone, you’re going to have to pay for it yourself.”

“That’s not fair! I’m fifteen. It’s not like I can just go out and get a job! And in a foreign country?!”

Jack’s mom returned to her onions before they burned. “You can help me with my work after school. I’ll pay you $12 an hour. That’s...uh...how many euros...?”

“I can’t do that!” Jack went to her mom’s side to plead her case. “I’m way too busy!”

The woman tossed her head back to give a mirthful laugh. “Doing what? Being social? Jack, sweetheart, I’m glad you’ve been able to make friends here, but I don’t think that counts.”

Jack had to think fast, since telling her parents she was a superhero part time was never an option. Nino had mentioned Positivity Club, so that was apparently still a thing. “I’m Vice President of the Positivity Club!”
“I don’t even know why you started that club,” Jack’s dad said as he lumbered over to his seat at their tiny lacquered table. “Phoenix doesn’t need any help.”

“He always wins,” Jack’s mother agreed.

That was the last straw for Jack. On top of Diego’s Snap and her phone breaking and an Akuma turning her world upside-down and her and her friends’ failure to stop him and the walk that went on forever and her parents being upset with her…Phoenix had made her work with the Positivity Club worthless. But it was more than that. It stung to hear her parents’ support of an Akuma when it was usually reserved for Rabbit. She never really noticed how much she relied on it until it wasn’t there waiting for her.

So, Jack snapped.

“Phoenix is an Akuma!” she shouted.

Jack’s mom dropped her spoon with a clatter while Jack’s dad stood up so fast that his chair tipped over.

“I’ll have no talk like that in my house!” he yelled. “You go to your room right this instant and think about what you’ve said!”

“Fine!” said Jack, marching out of the kitchen, snagging her bag and dragging it down the hall. It smacked into the doorframe and then against the baseboards as she went.

“And no dinner!” Jack’s mom added.

“Fine!!” Jack said again, slamming her bedroom door behind her.

*   *   *

“Nine o’clock!” announced Mimmi, gliding over to Jack’s desk from her spot on the windowsill.

Jack waved her Kwami off, pretending to be eyeballs deep in her math homework, even though she finished it a half hour ago. In fact, she had finished all her homework in a timely manner. After she had gotten sent to her room, she posted to social media about breaking her phone and then had nothing else to do. She contemplated Facebook stalking Diego to find out more about this girl he was cheating on her with, but as soon as his profile picture of her and Diego (a selfie they had taken on their first date picnicking next to their Frisbee field) showed up next to his name in the search bar, she lost interest. Completing a vocabulary worksheet, writing an entry in her Spanish journal, reading fifteen pages from her history textbook, and solving all the odd math problem on page 112 suddenly seemed much more enticing.

Jack had also received an interesting email from Colleen. She wanted to meet up as soon as possible, but didn’t say why, only that something was wrong. Had she not been affected by Phoenix’s reality altering somehow? It was tough to tell and Jack didn’t want to give herself away, so she gave a vague answer, suggested Wednesday, and left it at that.

Mimmi zoomed down and stole Jack’s pencil. “I know you’ve been thinking about that Snap since you saw it. Time to Skype Diego and get to the bottom of this!”
Jack lowered her forehead to her desk. “What’s the point? He’s just going to break up with me.”

“You don’t know that unless you ask!”

“I’m not going to ask him to break up with me.”

Mimmi’s ear drooped. “You know that’s not what I meant…It’s just like we talked about. You have to be more patient and stop jumping to conclusions.”

Knowing Mimmi wasn’t going to let this go, Jack sighed and spun her chair to look at the muted TV. It was like every news channel had become *The Phoenix Show*. There he was defeating Guitar Villain. There he was saving tenants from a burning building. There he was rescuing a cat from a tree and volunteering at a soup kitchen and being interviewed by Nadja Chamack.

“What would happen if we just let Phoenix go?” Jack asked idly.

Mimmi wrinkled her brow but said nothing. Jack suddenly felt ancient, like she had lived a million years, fighting an unending battle, a thankless task. She pressed on.

“I mean…He’s not like other Akumas. He’s not destroying the city or hurting people. He even fixed the Seine. I know he wants our Miraculouses, but if we never transform again, he’ll never get them.”

“You’re forgetting that he’s not in charge, Jack. Hawk Moth is,” reminded Mimmi, returning the pencil to its mason jar on the desk before taking a seat on Jack’s knee. “And he has gifted Phoenix with a set of terrifying powers that allow him to change the very fabric of reality as he sees fit. Things don’t seem so bad now, but if you do nothing, it will only get worse. Trust me.”

A ringing almost caused Jack to jump out of her skin. A picture of Diego laying out for a Frisbee filled her laptop screen. She slammed it shut.

“Jack!” yelped Mimmi, forcing the computer back open, but the call had been disconnected. The creature sighed.

“I’ll talk to him tomorrow,” said Jack, pretending it was the truth as she shut her computer again. She didn’t want him to message her. In fact, she didn’t want Diego to ever contact her again. That way, she could pretend they were still together, even if they weren’t.

“Don’t put off tomorrow what you can do today,” advised Mimmi.

“One thing at a time.” Jack eyed the TV. They were replaying the footage from the fight today, as well as running the number and hashtag to the tip hotline and showing suspect sketches of her, Ladybug, and Cat Noir. Whoever had drawn them had made all their eyes dark and sinister. Jack faked a yawn, but it morphed into a real one. “I’m exhausted, Mimmi. I just want this day to be over.”

The Kwami’s face smoothed with understanding. She looped over to the bed and turned down the sheets for Jack with a single tug. “You’re right,” she said. “There’s not much else we can do tonight. Well, let’s get you to bed, then. I’m sure things will look better in the morning.”

* * *

Things did not look better in the morning.
In fact, overnight, every billboard, ad, and sign in the city had been transformed to feature Phoenix in some shape or form, whether it was his colors (crimson, gold, and orange), his symbol (a wing that resembled fire, or maybe it was fire that resembled a wing) or his face (very heroic, unfortunately). Worse were the wanted posters she passed of her and her friends that glared at her on her walk to school. Jack wanted to tear them all down, but she didn’t want to look suspicious, so she kept her hands jammed in the pockets of her new distressed skinny jeans. It was a relief to finally get to school.

Jack took about two steps into the building when a distressed girl, her blonde hair a tousled mess, accosted her.

“Jack-or-whatever-your-name-is!” she cried in English, grabbing Jack by the shoulders and shaking her violently. “You’re still a fan of Rabbit, right? Right!?"

It took Jack a moment to orientate herself. Yes, this was Chloé in front of her, but she was somehow almost unrecognizable, wearing her clothes and make-up from the previous day. Dark circles under her eyes made it clear she hadn’t slept. Jack just stared, causing Chloé to throw her arms up in defeat.

“Ugh, you too!? What is going on? Unless…” The girl’s hands curled into fists and she held them to her forehead. “No! No! NO! I am not crazy! Everyone else is!”

There was a snort and Jack looked up to see Kim walking by with Sabrina, carrying her books. (When had that happened? Jack vaguely wondered). He elbowed Sabrina to direct her attention away from her tablet and pointed at Chloé. Sabrina, her momentary confusion clearing, smiled in a dangerous way.

“Look who it is!” she chirruped. “The Akuma lover!”

Chloé spun around. “Ladybug is a hero!” she insisted, clearly not for the first time.

“And Phoenix is the real bad guy, right?”

“Sure, sure, she is, Chloé,” chided Kim. “He is!”

Kim and Sabrina doubled over with laughter, leaning against one another for support. Chloé’s face turned an interesting shade of pink as she sputtered, but no coherent words made it passed her lips. Jack basked in the moment for just a second—after all, the bully was only getting what she deserved—even a moment ago.

Maybe it was because Jack didn’t like to cry herself, but she couldn’t stand when others did it. She was always drawn to help them.

“Bathroom. Now,” Jack insisted, grabbing Chloé’s elbow and dragging her in the direction of the locker room.

“Why won’t anyone believe me!?” she wailed, a bit of snot dripping from her nose. It was not a pretty sight and Jack immediately felt terrible for enjoying Chloé’s reversal of fortune not even a moment ago.

Kicking open the door to the girl’s bathroom, Jack only found Alix inside washing her hands. She smiled at Jack, but wrinkled her freckled nose when she saw Chloé was with her. Jack asked if Alix
was willing to watch the door for five Euros because she didn’t want to be disturbed. Alix upped the price to five Euros and a piece of Malabar bubble gum—she always did drive a hard bargain—before leaving to play bouncer.

“Someone else here?” Jack called out, her voice echoing. She tried to listen, but it was a little hard to hear over Chloé’s sniveling. Jack tried to shush her, but it caused Chloé to wail even louder. There didn’t seem to be anyone else in the bathroom though, so Jack relaxed.

“Cool it,” she begged, the unholy noises now emanating from Chloé giving her a migraine. “I am not affected either.”

Chloé managed to reign in her sorrow so it was now just a quivering lip. “W-w-w-what!?”

“I know that Ladybug and Cat Noir and Rabbit are heroes.”

In a move Jack wasn’t expecting at all, Chloé threw her arms around Jack’s, locking her into a death grip. Jack thought she was going to collapse from lack of oxygen as her breath got squeezed out of her.

“I knew it, I knew it!” Chloé crowed into Jack’s ear. When she let Jack go, her tears had vanished. If Jack hadn’t seen them glimmering on her face firsthand, she would have thought the girl had been fake crying. “Well, of course you’re not affected. You’re one of Rabbit’s biggest fans. And I’m Ladybug’s biggest fan.” Her eyes grew wide for a moment. She looked very pleased with herself as she placed a hand to her chest. “Ha! See? I told you I was! This proves it.”

Jack sighed. “You realize—” There were voices on the other side of the door as Alix, chomping on her bubble gum, told someone to scram. “You realize your love of Ladybug has never been in question, right?”

“But Dupain-Lame said—”

“That you cause a lot of Akumas.”

“I know, but I didn’t cause this one!”

The conversation ground to a halt as the wheels in Jack’s head started to turn. Here were the facts: Chloé caused a lot of Akumas. Chloé left Positivity Club and Phoenix appeared not long after. Chloé wasn’t affected by Phoenix’s rewrite of reality. Jack had her Kwami to anchor her to reality, but what did Chloé have? Certainly not a Kwami. Yes, her adoration of Ladybug might have protected her, but what if Phoenix had left her untouched on purpose? What if it was an act of revenge?

“Are you sure?” Jack asked, raising an eyebrow.

Chloé scoffed and then scoffed again. “How dare you!? I am…my father will…!”

There was a bang as a bathroom stall door was flung open into a wall. “Just answer the question.”

“…Ladybug?” said Jack in utter confusion as the superheroine came over to join them. A collège girl’s bathroom was the last place Jack would ever think to look for her.

“Ladybug!” trilled Chloé at the same time, scurrying over. “You left so quickly yesterday, I wasn’t able to get a pic of us!” She pulled out her phone and tried to force a selfie on Ladybug, duck-face
“Yesterday…?” wondered Jack. The flat look on Ladybug’s face confirmed. "When?"

The girl rolled her eyes “When I was shopping.”

"You were at the Beaugrenelle!?"

With Chloé distracted, Ladybug stole the girl’s phone to keep her on track.

“Chloé! The question!” the superheroine insisted. “Did you or did you not cause this Akuma?”

Chloé looked down at her pointer fingers as she tapped them together, looking suitably chastened. “How could you even ask that?” she wondered in a pathetic baby voice that probably would’ve worked on her father, but definitely not on the protector of Paris. Ladybug and Jack shared a beleaguered look, so Chloé dropped the act. “I don’t know! Maybe?”

Ladybug closed her eyes and shook her head, handing the phone back to Chloé. The girl snapped a quick picture and put it away before Ladybug showed Chloé a place card with a red border with black polka dots. Chloé’s full name was printed on it.

“Ah!” cried Chloé, trying to snag it, but Ladybug pulled it away. “Is this what you got when I saw you use Lucky Charm? My name?”

It seemed to physically pain Ladybug to admit it. “…Yes.”

Jack felt something inside her prickle. So this was what Ladybug couldn’t tell her? That Chloé was the key to defeating Phoenix? Chloé had been right there! Jack knew Ladybug disliked Chloé for causing Akuma attacks, but that was no reason to put off asking for her help, especially since Lucky Charm was always helpful. They could’ve stopped Phoenix yesterday! It dawned on Jack that Ladybug probably knew that too, which was why she kept Lucky Charm from Jack and Cat. She felt guilty for putting her personal feelings ahead of saving the day. And now look where they were: Phoenix had literally taken over Paris.

But while Jack was fuming, Chloé was squealing as she jumped for joy. “I’m so excited! Don’t worry, Ladybug. I’ll totally help you take down this Akuma!”

“You’ll help too, won’t you?” asked Ladybug as she locked eyes with Jack.

“What!?!” asked Jack and Chloé together, though in completely different tones and languages.

“I’m a wanted bug. I can’t go around trying to figure out how to stop Phoenix. I’ll get caught. So I need all the help I can get. I bet there are other super fans who weren’t affected too. I’m sure they’ll help.”

Jack remembered Colleen’s email. She was definitely Rabbit’s biggest fan, which meant Chloé’s theory was true. Ladybug seemed to think so, anyway.

“But…what can we do?” wondered Jack. “He changed the reality!” Wait, no, that didn’t sound right…

“You would say that,” said Chloé, sticking her tongue out and not giving Jack the chance to try
“Figure out if Chloé is the cause, then go from there,” said Ladybug, causing Chloé to hang her head. Ladybug pushed the door open slightly to usher them out. “I know you guys can do it. Good luck!”

Jack groaned as she bumped into Alix on accident. Things had gone from bad to worse to terrible. Hadn’t she suffered enough? But, no, apparently not. Apparently, she had to solve the problem of an all-powerful Akuma without the aid of her powers with the meanest girl in school, all because Ladybug had put off doing what she needed to do.

* * *

Jack’s morning had been interesting, to say the least. The school curriculum had started off normal enough, but then it devolved into Phoenix-centric madness. They were apparently reading his autobiography in their lit class (“Born to ordinary parents during a solar eclipse, Phoenix honed his remarkable abilities through strength of will and hard work.”) and history included a lesson on how he single-handedly stopped World War Two by punching Hitler in the face. He had been around then because he was immortal. Jack fervently hoped that new tidbit of information was a Phoenix’s rewrite and wishful thinking, not, you know, actually true, but there was no way to know.

Dragging herself down to her locker to ditch the heavy weight of all her new books, she paused when she saw Chloé and Marinette waiting for her. Jack blinked several times; sure her eyes were playing tricks on her. The two girls’ willing presence within ten feet of each other had to be another reality rewrite. But Chloé was filing her nails and Marinette was scanning the room with the urgency of a mother searching for her lost child, so it was tough to say.

“Jack!” said Marinette, running up and linking arms with her. “Chloé told me everything. I’m glad I’m not the only one who knows what’s going on.”

The pressure in Jack’s chest lessened, but only slightly, as she leaned into her friend. “Oh, me too!”

“Hey!” snarled Chloé. “What about me?”

Marinette froze, her eye twitching as a goofy smile spread across her face. Chloé stared, not sure of what to make of what she was seeing, but she was distracted soon enough by an approaching Adrien, who Marinette had seen coming.

“H-hey Chloé. Marinette. Ja—” he started to say, but Chloé flung herself at him with all the grace of a wild animal, slamming him against the lockers.

“ADRIEKINS!” she shrieked.

Adrien did an admiral job of smiling through his discomfort as he tried to pry Chloé off of him. In the end, he just patted her on the back more times than necessary to gain his release.

“Hey, Adrien! Do not we usually meet outside?” Jack asked him. It was Tuesday, after all. Adrien was supposed to tutor her.

“Oh, Adrien! Do not we usually meet outside?” Jack asked him. It was Tuesday, after all. Adrien was supposed to tutor her.

“Of course! But…uh…hold on.” He turned to Chloé. “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

“Anything for you, Adrien!” trilled the girl.
Adrien took up Chloé’s hand and they went to the far side of the locker room, but not before Chloé locked eyes with Marinette, a devilish grin on her face as if she had won some sort of unspoken competition between the two. Marinette’s frozen face melted into true heartbreak and Jack watched her fold in on herself. Jack shook the girl, but she seemed too focused on Adrien and Chloé’s entwined hands to notice.

“You know he doesn’t like her like that,” Jack was forced to remind her, sadly not for the first time.

“They’ve been best friends for years though.”

“You are being ridiculous! You and I both know…” Jack stopped. The words had come so easily, without any thought at all, but they were Mimmi’s from when Jack was freaking out about Diego, just in a different language. Jack didn’t know what to make of it. “You and I both know she’s not his, uh, kind?” she finished. She meant to say type, but she didn’t know the word. Marinette seemed to get it, but she still bit her lip, so Jack grabbed her by both shoulders. If she was going to parrot Mimmi, then she might as well go all the way. “Be more positive.”

The mantra seemed to resonate with Marinette, her eyes almost drifting back to Jack’s. “You’re right. You’re—”

Marinette gasped and held a hand to her mouth as she continued to stare at Adrien and Chloé across the room. Confused, Jack spun around to see the two hugging, followed by Chloé giving the boy a quick peck on the cheek. She turned to look at them, but rather than gloating, she looked pensive. After a moment of hesitation, she dragged Adrien back to them.

“We are the true members of our school’s Positivity Club,” she proudly proclaimed. “All four of us weren’t affected by what’s-his-face.”

“Adrien! You too?” wondered Marinette, awe-struck. “I didn’t realize you were such a big fan!”

The boy laughed, running his fingers through his feathered blonde hair. He wasn’t about to admit to his crush on Ladybug and Jack knew it. “Yeah. Chat Noir is awesome!” He glanced around furtively at passing classmates. “But, uh, don’t tell anyone that right now.”

“Well, let’s see,” said Chloé. “I’ll be President, naturally. And Adrien will be Vice President. Jack, you can…I don’t know. Take notes? Yes. Write down everything I say. It’s all terribly important—”

“No way!” complained Jack. “I’m still Vice President!”

“Fine! Whatever. As long as I’m President.”

“You can not be President. You do not know what you do. Ugh, I mean—”

“Ladybug put me in charge.”

“She did not!”

“I understand. You’re just jealous Lucky Charm gave Ladybug my name and not yours.”

“This only happened because you probably caused the Akuma in the first place!”
Chloé clenched her teeth as her and Jack glared daggers at one another, but Adrien moved smoothly between them, a master bomb diffuser. “Chlo, the more we know about Phoenix, the better off Ladybug will be. You might have interacted with him yesterday before Hawk Moth got to him, maybe without realizing it. So what did you and Sabrina do after you left Positivity Club?”

“We went to go speak to my father, and then I had to drop Sabrina off at home because I wanted to go shopping at Beaugrenelle, but she was all, ‘I don’t have any money’ for the fifth time this month. Like, ugh, just ask your dad, it’s not hard.”

“And did you talk to anyone else between then and when Phoenix appeared?”

“No. I swear. Just my father and Sabrina.”

“Why don’t we retrace your steps?” Marinette suggested, finally returning to her normal self. “Just to make sure? Maybe something will jog your memory.”

Jack was relieved Marinette said something, since the last thing she wanted on top of spending copious amounts of time with Chloé was to drag a lock-jawed lovesick Marinette around as her nerves got the better of her around Adrien. One of the things Jack and Alya coached Marinette on was how important it was that Adrien see the real her, the smart, capable, courageous girl they knew her to be.

Chloé crossed her arms. “That’s a lame idea.”

“That’s a great idea, Marinette!” exclaimed Adrien.

Marinette blushed.

Chloé looked from Adrien to Marinette and then back again. “I mean…I’ll show you what I did yesterday. To prove to you that I didn’t cause this Akuma. C’mon, Adriekins! Let’s go!” She grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him away.

“Wait, now!? I have to tutor—!” started Adrien, but she had already yanked him into the courtyard.

Jack and Marinette exchanged looks before slowly following.

“This is going to be a long day,” Marinette said, putting Jack’s thoughts into words.

*   *   *

The presence of Adrien only moderately tempered Chloé. Instead of spending her time looking down on Jack and Marinette, she talked herself up to Adrien, who would simply smile and nod. It was pretty easy to see how they had remained friends for so long.

Chloé took them to Hôtel de Ville via her limo. When Marinette pointed out that Chloé had to have spoken to her driver to tell him where to go, and thus her father and Sabrina weren’t the only ones she had spoken to like she said, Chloé argued that the driver didn’t count because he was ‘the help.’ Jack gripped the edge of her seat, her fingers digging into the plush leather, but managed to say nothing. Next to her, Marinette tensed up as well. Only Adrien spoke, saying that retracing Chloé’s steps was already proving helpful, since they found at least one other person Chloé had spoken to whom she had forgotten about. And since the driver was still there, they could safety assume he wasn’t Phoenix.
Adrien and Mimmi would make great friends, Jack thought. He’s almost as positive as she is.

When they arrived at city hall, a giant portrait of Phoenix greeted them from behind the reception desk. It was jarring, especially since it usually depicted Mayor Bourgeois. They weaved between all the government workers and started to climb the nearest staircase, only for Adrien to tell them to stop because Chloé was no longer with them.

“There she is,” he said after a quick scan, pointing her out. She had walked up to reception as if in a trance to stare up at the oil painting.

“It’s getting worse,” noted Marinette, looking down at her feet. Jack nodded, once again reminded that Ladybug really dropped the ball on this one. Jack was going to have to give her a piece of her mind when they met up tonight.

Chloé seemed to realize that things were getting worse too. Her hands formed into fists and she started to shake. When one of the receptionists tried to speak to her, she turned and stormed away. For a brief moment she was lost among the suits, scared and alone, but Adrien waved and she smirked. They didn’t receive any explanation or thanks for waiting. She just brushed passed them and continued up the steps.

“Daddy has a lunch meeting, so his office should be empty,” she told them, rummaging through her purse and producing an old-fashioned key for the door. It creaked as she ushered them all inside.

Jack had not been back to the mayor’s office since her disastrous meeting concerning Sequana, but the room looked exactly the same. No…wait…were there carvings of fire and feathers in the wainscoting? Before Jack could go investigate though, she realized Chloé was talking.

“…come in here with Sabrina, right? And I tell my father this great idea. This, like, amazing idea that only I could come up with—”

“Was he alone?” interrupted Marinette.

“I believe I was talking. Rude.”

“Chloé! This is important. Was there anyone else in the room?”

“I don’t know. Yes. I guess there was this guy.”

“Where was he?”

With a petulant sigh, Chloé pointed to one of the chairs set up in front of Mayor Bourgeois’s desk. “He was sitting there. But I didn’t talk to him, so I don’t see why it’s important.”

Marinette moved to the chair in question and put her hands on the back of it, looking around the room for a moment. Jack could see the wheels in her head turning and grew excited. Finally, a chance for Marinette to show off her intelligence to Adrien! Jack was one proud wing woman.

“Adrien, can you sit in the Mayor’s seat?” Marinette asked.

Adrien was surprised, but did as she asked.
“And Jack, you stick with Chloé. You’re going to be Sabrina in this scenario.”

Chloé snickered. “Makes sense. Your fashion sense is just as bad.”

Jack scowled. She didn't think she looked half-bad today! She had washed her hair and worn new clothes and everything.

“And I’ll be the man Mayor Bourgeois was meeting with,” Marinette explained, sitting in the chair. She grinned at Adrien, a little bit of blush highlighting her cheeks, but she managed to keep her limbs from flailing. Adrien flashed a smile back, which did not escape Chloé’s notice.

“Can we start or what?” she demanded, tapping a foot.

“Whenever you’re ready,” said Marinette. “Start with when you entered the room.”

Chloé hissed under her breath, but stalked away to start. Her bitterness got undercut though when she realized she needed Jack to play her part and returned to grab her. Jack felt like a rag doll getting tugged around.

“Were your dad and his guest talking?” asked Marinette.

“How am I supposed to know?” snapped Chloé. Marinette fell silent, so Chloé slipped into her favorite character to play: herself. “Daddy, Daddy!” she cried, tearing across the floor. Jack struggled to keep up for fear Chloé might yank her arm right out of her socket. “Stop everything. I just had the most amazing idea!”

Adrien blinked for a moment. “Oh, my turn?” he realized. He held himself straighter and tucked his chin back so it looked like he had more than one. “Of course, my princess! What is it?”

Jack and Marinette covered their mouths to keep from laughing at their friend’s spot-on impression, complete with a comically low voice. Adrien’s eyes shined with delight as he also tried to keep a straight face. Chloé didn’t seem to notice any hilarity though as she continued.

“As Ladybug’s number one fan, I’ve realized that she’s not getting the recognition she deserves. She saves Paris on the daily and how do we thank her? She doesn’t even have a day dedicated to her. Well, I say we change that!”

“Chloé, you just can’t make up a holiday,” complained Marinette.

“Ah-ah-ah! The man didn’t say anything.”

“What did your father say?” wondered Adrien.

Chloé waved her hand around. “Something about choosing a day.”

“Right.” The boy cleared his throat. He was Mayor Bourgeois once more. “Excellent idea, my dear! We will set aside a day to celebrate Ladybug, and don’t forget Chat Noir. Maybe even Rabbit.”

Jack couldn’t help but grin. It was kind of Adrien to throw a little love her way, even if he didn’t know she was Rabbit.

“Adrien, Daddy did NOT say that,” complained Chloé.
He ignored her and continued on with the charade. “What day would you like it, sweetheart?”

“On Bastille Day, of course.”

Silence.

Jack tugged on Chloé’s sleeve. “Uh… Chloé?”

“Not now, Sabrina,” said Chloé, roughly shoving Jack away. “Think about it, Daddy. No one really cares about Bastille Day, but the infrastructure is there. With a couple of tweaks, it could make a really great Ladybug Day—”

“There is no way your dad agreed to this,” interrupted Marinette.

Chloé sat on the edge of the desk, looking smug. “I’ll have you know he loved the idea. He even asked the man he was meeting with to leave so he could get started on it right away.” She looked at Adrien expectantly. He looked back at her with a blithe smile. Quickly growing frustrated, Chloé cleared her throat and tilted her head in Marinette’s direction. “He asked. The man. To leave.”

“Who was he?” wondered Marinette.

Chloé threw up her arms. “I don’t know. I don’t care!”

“What was he wearing?” asked Jack, surprising even herself by suddenly participating in the conversation.

“Some kind of uniform. Normally those don’t look too bad, but he paired it with this awful red ascot. Ugh. Few men can pull off an ascot, and he didn’t even come close! It made him look like he had no neck…”

While Chloé continued to rant about fashion faux paws, Marinette had pulled something up on her phone. She shoved it in Chloé’s face to get her to stop. “Was this the uniform?”

Jack took a look herself. It was a picture of a group of people in navy pants and pale blue shirts, sun glinting off their silver hats and the rows of medals pined to their chests. Every single one of them wore a red ascot.

“Ew. It’s even worse with the hat!” complained Chloé.

“He was a fireman,” Marinette realized, passing the phone to Jack so she could see for herself. “A member of the BSPP.”

“BSPP?” wondered Jack.

“Uh… the… Paris Fire Brigade,” offered Adrien in English. He was leaning forward in the desk by this point. “That has to be our guy! And, if I had to guess… I bet the Akuma is hiding in the medal he has pinned to his lapel.”

Jack found herself nodding as she looked at the Wikipedia page Marinette had pulled up. Not only did a firefighter cover the ‘hero’ angle and the ‘fire’ angle of this Akuma, but the motto caught Jack’s eye. Sauver ou périr. Save or Perish.
“How could I have upset him?” complained Chloé. “I didn’t even talk to him!”

“You didn’t have to. The BSPP marches in the Bastille Day parade,” explained Marinette. “Your Ladybug Day would’ve taken that away from him. I bet he was very frustrated and unhappy, especially after your father dismissed him in favor of Ladybug like that.”

Chloé was at a loss for words, her eye twitching. It was a little unnerving, but it seemed she was close to finally taking responsibility for her actions. But, in true Chloé fashion, she veered at the very last moment.

“Oh, please!” she said, tossing her hair back. “No one cares about a parade that much.”

Adrien, Marinette, and Jack sighed in unison. Well, they tried.

“I’m starving!” announced Chloé, too close to the truth for her own comfort. “Let’s get out of here.”

Jack welcomed the distraction of some lunch, but mostly because she needed time to think. Maybe if Chloé apologized to Phoenix, it could serve as a distraction so Ladybug or Cat Noir could grab his Akumatized object? Oh, but who was Jack kidding? Chloé didn’t seem to think she had done anything wrong, much less caused someone to get Akumatized in the first place, so why would she apologize? The situation was basically hopeless.

“Akumas!”

Jack looked up to find a man pointing at her and her friends as they headed towards the staircase. He sported a huge ‘Je <3 Phénix’ button on the lapel of his suit. His shout rippled down the hallway, eliciting echoes of his words and shouts of terror.

Jack threw up her hands. “We’re not…” she started to say, backing up, but people were now running towards her and her friends with murmurs that sounded suspiciously like ‘they are the enemy’ and ‘get them.’

Marinette took stock of the situation the fastest. “Run!” she cried.

The four of them took off in the opposite direction. Only then did Jack see that everyone was wearing the same button. Je <3 Phénix here, Je <3 Phénix there… Je <3 Phénix everywhere.

Crashing down a disused stairwell, the four escaped Hôtel de Ville using an emergency exit. Out on the street wasn’t much better though. It was now awash with people who hadn’t been there when they had arrived. The vast majority of them were decked out in red and yellow outfits complete with face paint as if they were going to a sporting event. They cheered as some sort of parade passed, with floats depicting Phoenix’s victories over Akumas like the Bubbler and Cottontail. Confetti in his colors rained down from the sky from an unseen source.

“We need to steal some of those buttons and blend in,” said Marinette, briskly walking in the opposite direction of the parade.

“What!?” complained Chloé. “But they’re, like, so tacky.”

As the four of them tried to turn the corner of the building though, the police flooded their path. Marinette turned to head in a different direction, the others following, but more and more police
appeared. They soon found themselves surrounded.

“STOP!” commanded one officer, a portly pale redhead, through his bullhorn.

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded Chloé.

“QUIET, AKUMA!”

“We’re not Akumas, Lieutenant Roger,” Marinette pointed out evenly. “We’re just kids! We haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Does Marinette know that police officer…?” Jack whispered to Adrien.

“That’s Sabrina’s dad,” Adrien explained.

“Oh!”

Sabrina’s father took offense to Marinette’s words. “WHAT DO YOU CALL NOT SUPPORTING PHOENIX?” he demanded. “THAT IS A CRIME AND YOU KNOW IT! SO YOU FOUR WILL BE TAKEN TO PHOENIX FOR QUESTIONING, BECAUSE IF YOU ARE NOT FOR PHOENIX, YOU ARE DEFINITELY AGAINST HIM.”

“How rude!” said Chloé. “My father, the mayor, will be hearing about this!”

But the Lieutenant Roger was clearly unimpressed by Chloé’s threats as he motioned with his hand and the four of them soon found themselves being manhandled straight into the back of a waiting police truck. The door slammed shut behind them, plunging them all into semi-darkness broken only by slivers of light where the metal was bolted together. It was definitely not one of their nicer trucks.

“Hey!” cried Chloé, going to pound on the door, but the truck started moving and threw her back into Jack. “What is going on!?” she wailed. “They just can’t do this to us!”

Jack struggled to detangle herself from Chloé and pulled herself up onto the bench. Marinette and Adrien had already taken their seats on the other side, twin looks of grim resignation on their faces.

“Why not?” Jack asked, shaken by what had just happened. “It’s the world of Phoenix.”

This silenced Chloé and they road along with only the squeal of the brakes to break up the quiet. Chloé stayed where she was, huddled on the rusted ground.

Jack’s mind working furiously to come up with a solution to their current predicament. She could escape easily by transforming into Rabbit, but then she would be revealing her identity to Marinette, Adrien, and Chloé, so that was completely out of the question. Maybe when the police opened the door, she’d be able to escape? No, not without her powers activated. So she would have to face Phoenix then, as a civilian. He wouldn’t know she was Rabbit. But could he guess? Jack wished she could talk to Mimmi, but with the others around, all she could really do was reach into her bag and rub the shivering Kwami on the head. She’d think of something. She had to.

“I never meant for any of this to happen.”

In the semi-darkness, Jack didn’t know who was talking at first, but then Chloé continued.
“I was only trying to help. You guys have to believe me.”

Adrien was quiet, probably out of respects for his friend, but Marinette snorted. “Help? Is that what you call it?” she asked. “Look what you’ve done.”

Jack pressed her back up against the wall, feeling the vibration of the truck’s engine. The uncomfortable sense of déjà vu from yesterday returned to twist her stomach. In this moment, Chloé sounded an awful lot like…well…an awful lot like her, if she was being honest, with Marinette playing the part of Ladybug.

“I believe you, Chloé,” said Jack suddenly.

“You do?” asked Marinette in disbelief.

“You do?” asked Chloé in pure relief at the same time.

“You’re like Rabbit,” Jack explained. “She tries to help, but she makes mistakes. But she learns from them. And you can learn from yours too.”

Here, unbelievably, Chloé scoffed. “There’s nothing to learn, other than that people are stupid crybabies. But I already knew that.”

“…Are you freaking kidding me?” said Jack, unable to contain herself to French, but she slipped back. “Forget I said anything.”

Jack leaned back and closed her eyes, the swaying of the truck nearly lulling her to sleep. She was surprised to find how exhausted she was, but now that she thought about it, it made perfect sense. She was beaten. Problems had been raining down on her since yesterday and nothing she did seemed to make any difference.

There was a slap of a hand on metal and Jack opened one eye to watch Chloé drag herself up to sit next to Jack. Her face looked a little warped in the low light.

“Okay,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I guess I could be…more aware of the feelings of those around me.”

Baffled, Jack turned to look at Chloé. The girl shrank back, not out of fear, but because of something Jack couldn’t quite put her finger on. It looked painful though and Jack realized she was probably the only one who could ease it.

Well, she was the forgiving type, wasn’t she?

“That’s what it means to be a Positivity Club member, is not it?” said Jack with a big smile. Chloé seemed to distrust it though, so Jack added: “President?”

“That’s right! I am the President!” said Chloé, as if remembering a long forgotten promise. She straightened up as she began to comb her fingers through her hair. Jack was a little startled by the familiar motion, especially when Chloé’s nimble fingers began to braid her blonde locks into a side fishbone. “Listen up Positivity Club! I’ve got a plan.”

“Chloé?” asked Adrien hesitantly. “What are you doing…?”
“What does it look like?” snapped Chloé. She tied off her hair and pulled a little make-up remover wipe out of her purse. She started to rub off her thick layer of foundation. “My hair isn’t dark enough to pass as Ladybug, and I certainly can’t pretend to be Chat Noir—”

“Are you crazy?” wondered Marinette. “You can’t just pretend to be Rabbit!”

“Why not? This way I can get in close and get that medal off of Phoenix’s chest.”

“No. It’s too dangerous!”

“I’m not letting Ladybug down. She’s counting on me.”

This seemed to shut Marinette up. Satisfied, Chloé continued.

“Besides, you all shouldn’t have gotten caught up in this mess anyway. Does Phoenix honestly think any of you three could pass as superheroes? Seriously? What an idiot!”

Jack didn’t know whether to give a derisive snort or feel offended, so she settled on a grimace. She was thankful for the semi-darkness for hiding her face as she looked across the way at Marinette and Adrien. For a brief moment, Jack entertained the idea that they were Ladybug and Cat Noir, but easily dismissed it. Clumsy Marinette was the graceful Ladybug? Dutiful Adrien was the crazy Cat Noir? Jack shook her head. The chances that her superhero friends were in her class in a city as large as Paris was flat out improbable, especially after she ended up knowing who Perro Negro really was in Los Angeles, which was an even bigger city. Besides, Jack almost felt like choking on the irony of Marinette liking Adrien and Cat Noir liking Ladybug if they were the same people. That would mean they were in some sort of Love Square with each other, which made a great basis for fan fiction, but not so much in real life.

The police truck stopped abruptly, throwing everyone back. They had to grip the bottom of their benches in order to keep from falling over. There were murmurs and footsteps before the doors were thrown open, blinding them all with sunlight. Jack squinted as she looked out into the crowd of police officers as they pulled out the ramp. She couldn’t help but feel like she recognized where they were.

"Is that…my house?" asked Adrien.

Sure enough, Jack realized the police truck had pulled into the courtyard in front of Adrien’s mansion, but it looked a little different decked out with Phoenix banners and flags. The pavers beneath the police’s feet were arranged to form the Akuma’s symbol as well.

“I don’t think it’s your house anymore,” said Marinette, craning her neck to look out.

Chloé got up and walked to the lip of the truck, throwing out her arms to block the police before any came barging inside. “Okay. You got me. I’m Rabbit.”

Jack whipped her head in Marinette and Adrien’s direction to find them in wide-eyed surprise looking back at her. They all knew Chloé spoke pretty good English, but what they apparently did not know was that she had an amazing American accent too. There was no trace of French at all. Her words were flat and plain.

Lieutenant Roger appeared from the crowd with his bullhorn. “STAND DOWN, AKUMA!” he commanded in decent, if shaky, English.
“I am!” Chloé pointed out, stomping a foot. “But none of the other three are Ladybug or Cat Noir.”

“ALL POSSIBLE AKUMAS MUST BE QUESTIONED!”

Jack saw a flash of self-doubt on Chloé’s face, but the girl buried it with expert ease. “I’m telling you, you have the wrong people. Besides, there are three Akumas and four of us. And you know for sure I’m Rabbit, so…”

Roger lowered his bullhorn and knotted his brows, clearly performing some mental math as he scratched his head under his hat. His blunder becoming clear to him, he lowered the volume on his bullhorn. “Take only three of them to see Phoenix,” he told the others.

Police officers swarmed Chloé, and others surged passed her into the truck. They ended up grabbing Adrien and Marinette. The two shouted and fought a bit, even though they knew it was a lost cause. Jack jumped up, upset over the treatment of her friends, but she was shoved back and told to stay where she was. Feeling a bit helpless, Jack watched Adrien, Marinette, and Chloé get dragged away before the ramp went up again and the doors were slammed shut in her face with a rattle.

Mimmi came shooting out of Jack’s bag like a breath of air after being underwater for too long.

“I can’t believe Chloé just did that!” she said.

“Me either,” Jack agreed. The girl didn’t know it, of course, but she might have just saved herself by saving Jack.

The Kwami tapped her chin. “You know, she might have the makings of a Chosen One.”

“Let’s not get too crazy.”

“I’m just saying. Are you ready?”

Jack nodded and punched the air. “Hop to it!”

Mimmi zoomed into Jack’s Miraculous, the warmth of her transformation into Rabbit melting away all her fear and apprehension of being captured. It was heroing time.

Slipping her chakram off her wrist and enlarging it to its normal size, Jack opened her contact list. Perro Negro’s black clawed paw print filled the circle, causing Jack to flinch. There were two messages from him. She quickly scrolled away and selected Ladybug. The call icon shook a few times as it rang before changing from green to red.

“I’m not available right now,” said Ladybug on her voicemail. “Please leave a message after the beep.”

Jack didn’t bother. She hung up and tried Cat Noir.

“Has the cat got your tongue? Leave a message!”

Jack sighed. She knew it was a long shot, what with them all being wanted Akumas. Ladybug and Cat Noir wouldn’t be wandering around Paris transformed. She supposed she could’ve left them messages, but by the time they heard them, it might already be too late. Jack’s friends (…and Chloé)
were in danger right now.

It looked like Jack was on her own.

“Hey!” she cried, going over to pound on the door. “Let me out!”

Jack knew she could easily kick open the doors, but that wasn’t the point. The point was to make a racket.

“YOU BE QUIET IN THERE!” commanded Lieutenant Roger, back to full volume on his bullhorn.

Jack smacked the door a few more times before rubbed her boot along the rusted seam in the bed of the truck. With a quick drop kick, she caused half of it to collapse. She rolled down it and escaped by crawling beneath the truck cab, with the police officers guarding the back none-the-wiser.

Darting towards the closest wall, Jack jumped up to the top of it and ducked behind the railing. The balusters didn’t give her much cover, but a swift glance at the police milling about down below let her know she hadn’t been spotted yet. She had to move fast though. Head down, Jack bounded down the walkway in the direction of the mansion and leapt up to the first level of the tiered roof. As luck would have it, the dormer window there looked into an office where Phoenix presided over Chloé. Afraid Chloé might give her away or Phoenix might turn around and spot her, Jack pulled back so she was out of sight, her ears tuning into their conversation.

“—telling you, I’m Rabbit,” Chloé was insisting.


“So you can take my Miraculous?” A pause, not doubt so Chloé could take a defiant stance. “I don’t think so.”

At first Jack wondered how Chloé even knew about Miraculouses, then realized she had probably been around enough Akumas shouting about them to figure out it was what they were always after. Jack had to admit, she was impressed.

“Even if what you say is true and you really are Rabbit…your Miraculous is worthless to Hawk Moth,” said Phoenix. He switched to French, his voice heading in a different direction as he addressed someone else in the room. “Bring in the next one!”

“Hey, I’m not done!” cried Chloé. “I’m…sorry…I tried to take your parade away.”

“You…what?”

“Bastille Day. I wanted to do something nice for Ladybug because, you know, she’s my BFF, but I’ll pick a different day. The ordinary, every day heroes of Paris need to be honored too, and that’s part of what Bastille Day is all about.”

Phoenix sputtered. “Wait…you mean that? I—”

He stopped so abruptly that Jack’s curiosity got the better of her and she took a quick peek. Seeing a flash of purple light told her all she needed to know. Hawk Moth was exerting his influence once more.
“No!” Pheonix shouted, banging his fist on the desk. Chloé yelped, so flames were probably involved. “You’ve destroyed parts of Paris. You’ve disrespected the ordinary heroes. Your apology means nothing! It can’t undo the awful things you’ve done, Rabbit. Only I, the great and powerful Phoenix, can do that!”

“If you’re so great and powerful...why haven’t you captured Ladybug or Cat Noir yet?” chided Chloé.

“If they haven’t already been captured, they will be soon.”

Chloé laughed. “I know where they are, and you won’t find them.”

“You’re lying.”

“Fine. Think that.”

There was a growl of frustration, followed by Chloé’s high-pitched scream. Jack took a step in front of the window to see Phoenix had grabbed Chloé and was leaving the room. Jack wondered if she should kick in the glass, but Chloé didn’t let up on her screaming. It allowed Jack to track her. She was headed up.

A streak of crimson burst forth from the cupola atop the mansion as Phoenix flew Chloé straight into the sky.

“Chloé!” cried Jack. She reached the cupola in two bounces, but it was too late. Phoenix was out of Jack’s jumping range. She could only watch, face contorted with guilt, as the pair receded.

The pull of Ladybug’s yo-yo sounded, and she and Cat Noir joined Jack. Their timing could not be better. Jack turned to them and struggled to explain what they missed.

“Phoenix...Chloé...! She’s in danger!”

Ladybug clenched her teeth as she looked up. “This is my fault,” she said. “None of this would’ve happened if I had just asked her...” She didn’t finish her thought. With herculean effort, she tore her gaze away and looked to Cat. “Chaton, get us up there!” she commanded desperately.

Cat spun his staff and planted one end firmly on the roof, offering Ladybug his hand. “With pleasure, My Lady,” he purred as she grabbed it. His eyes, friendly as always, though edged with urgency, met Jack’s and he jerked his head. Catching his drift, Jack grabbed the staff right below where he held it, and the three of them went shooting into the sky after Phoenix together.

They gained on him quickly. He had been carrying Chloé bridal-style, but he grabbed her ankle and dropped the rest of her so she swung upside-down as he saw them approach. She was still screaming, her face turning red. Her lung capacity was really something else.

Phoenix fumed once he caught sight of Jack. He lifted Chloé as high as he could and shook her. “I knew it! I knew you were lying!” he said before tossing her away.

Ladybug geared up to throw out her yo-yo to rescue Chloé as she fell passed them, but Phoenix swooped down and easily knocked it off course. Without even thinking, Jack flung herself after the girl instead. Arms glued to her sides, she angled herself down as she freefell in order to catch up with Chloé and her flailing limbs. With how fast they were approaching the ground, Jack was afraid she
wouldn’t be able to reach Chloé in time, and, even if she did, the most she could do was cushion Chloé’s fall with her own body. It was going to hurt.

“Chloé!” Jack called out, reaching for the girl.

On hearing her name, Chloé’s eyes fluttered open and she stopped screaming, though she remained terrified. “Rabbit! Here!” she cried, holding up something shiny and small. It was the metal Phoenix usually wore pined to his lapel. Chloé must have stolen it from him when he grabbed her. Since Jack couldn’t will herself to fall any faster though, that left her one option. Jack slipped her chakram off her wrist again.

“Don’t move!” Jack shouted as she chucked her weapon.

There was a whimper from Chloé, but she did as Jack said. The throwing ring struck the medal and broke it in two, releasing the black butterfly within. They fell passed it in a flash, but Jack was able to catch her chakram on the bounce-back and offer it to Chloé, expanding it until the girl was able to grab on with both hands, and shrinking it to bring her closer. Chloé latched on to Jack like she was a flotation device and the air was an ocean.

Jack could see the roof of the Agreste mansion coming in fast, so she spun them through the air so she would strike it first. There ended up being no need for such sacrificial heroics though. Ladybug’s yo-yo wrapped around Jack’s leg and slowed her and Chloé’s descent, stopping them with an inch to spare. Jack stared at the gray shingles, shocked she somehow hadn’t plowed right into them, before the yo-yo unraveled, dropping her and Chloé in a heap.

The two girls untangled themselves and looked up. High atop Cat Noir’s staff, Ladybug captured the Akuma and purified it by using Miraculous Ladybug.

Jack turned to look at Chloé, who was beaming with pride as she watched ladybugs spread far and wide to return the world to normal. A swarm came by to eliminate Phoenix’s flags and banners, rearrange the pavers in the courtyard, and return the police to their stations. Jack knew she should thank Chloé for her help in defeating Phoenix, but, considering she had helped create him in the first place, the words stayed stuck in her throat.

“I like your braid,” she said instead.

Chloé turned, confused at first, as if she had forgotten she wasn’t sitting on the rooftop alone, but it melted into pure delight as she ran a hand along her fishbone braid.

In that moment, Jack almost agreed with Mimmi. Chloé would make a good Chosen One.

*   *   *

“Chloé! Wait!” cried Jack, chasing after the girl as she headed down the steps to her limo after school, Sabrina once again in tow.

Chloé turned a cool gaze on Jack as if she had never seen her before in her life, which Jack supposed was a step up from the usual derision, but it still gave her pause. As Rabbit, she had brought Chloé back to school after Phoenix’s defeat and taken a selfie with her, but, as Jack, Chloé hadn’t even bothered to look up when Jack entered the classroom, too busy regaling their classmates with (a slightly falsified account of) her daring exploits in helping to defeat Phoenix. In her retelling, she somehow broke the medal all by herself, Jack’s own part having been written out completely.
“It was cool, what you did today. Pretend to be Rabbit. You saved me,” said Jack haltingly. “You should definitely join Positivity Club,” she added, a bit smoother. “I’m sorry I did not say it earlier.”

Chloé gave a genuine smile, like the one she gave Rabbit on the Agreste’s rooftop, but then it was as if she remembered herself and it morphed into a smirk.

“Ha! You wish I’d join your lame little club, but what you do is so small compared to actually helping Ladybug. I’m not sure if you heard, but I was the one who freed the Akuma today.”

Jack managed to refrain from rolling her eyes. The entire school knew because Chloé wouldn’t shut up about it.

“You know, I make a pretty good hero, if I do say so myself,” Chloé decided. “Maybe I’ll make a superhero alter ego and help Ladybug more often.”

“Good idea, Chloé!” chirruped Sabrina, right on cue.

“What animal should I be, Sabrina?” Chloé wondered, turning away from Jack without so much as a goodbye. “It should be something graceful. Magnificent! Like a leopard. I do look good in yellow and black.”

“What about a bee, then?”

“A bug? Ew. Pass.”

Stunned, Jack watched Chloé and Sabrina climb into the limo before shrugging and heading home herself. She had long ago arrived at the conclusion that she would never understand Chloé. If she was happy not being a member of their school’s Positivity Club, then all the more power to her. Everyone else was happy with her not being a member too.

“Some day, huh, Mimmi?” Jack said once she reached a quiet side street.

“I’m just glad we were able to defeat Phoenix in the end! He was a tricky one,” said the Kwami from inside Jack’s bag.

“I just don’t understand why Ladybug didn’t ask Chloé for her help yesterday. Things got so much worse because she didn’t.”

“Very true! That why I always say don’t put off tomorrow what you can do today!”

“Yeah! Wait…” It dawned on Jack that maybe she could understand why Ladybug acted the way she did after all, since she was guilty of it too: Procrastination. Sometimes, you don't act when you should and things end up worse, like waking up to a Paris revering the wrong superhero or… stressing yourself silly about your boyfriend breaking up with you when you don't actually know if that's what's going to happen.

“What’s wrong, Jack?” wondered Mimmi, oblivious to the impact her words were having a day later. She peeked out of her bag to see Jack had stopped walking and was playing with her lucky rabbit’s foot necklace. The Kwami’s ears dropped. “Oh…I see.”
Jack scanned the area and spotted a nice hedge alongside a church. She ducked behind it and transformed, jumping to the roof before pulling out her chakram. There were now three messages from Diego. Jack played them

“I saw on Facebook about your phone. Ay, that sucks! There might be something wrong with your laptop too, ‘cause I tried Skypeing you and it cut out and now it says you’re no longer on. Anyway, call me when you get this, mi conejito. I really need to talk to you.”

"Me again. Just…when you get the chance, call me. Por favor. I’ll try to be transformed when you get out of school. 4:30ish your time, sí? That’s a pretty small window for me before school, but…like I said, I really need to talk to you about something important.”

"It's...4:35 your time. I'm just hanging out. You're not avoiding me, are you? I guess that's fair, since I've been putting this off—”

The message was interrupted by an incoming call from Diego. Jack fumbled with her throwing ring a bit before taking a deep breath and centering herself. Once she felt confident enough, she ran her thumb along the side to answer. A half-asleep Perro Negro filled the center of her weapon. He yawned widely, showing off his canines. He was on a rooftop somewhere, the Los Angeles skyline in the background.

“There you are, conejito,” he said. “I was worried you didn’t get my messages.”

“No, no. I…I got them,” said Jack.

Diego tilted his head, and perked an ear, obviously catching the hesitation in Jack’s voice. It was agony to wait for him to speak though, so Jack decided to just rip the Band-Aid right off. She squeezed her eyes shut and went for it.

“Listen, Diego, if you want to break—”

“I’ve been sleeping on the floor of Bradley’s office for the past two weeks.”

Jack’s eyes snapped back open. Bradley. Who was Bradley? Diego had mentioned him before. She searched the annals of her mind for the answer. “Your caseworker?” she remembered. “I don’t get it. What happened with the Sanchezs?”

Diego looked off to his left. “It’s a long story. I don’t really want to talk about it. But that’s why I was avoiding you. I didn’t want you to know. I thought I was going to end up in a group home or something.” He shivered, but then brightened. Jack heard the thump of his tail wagging. “But things are better now! I’ve been placed with this awesome new foster family.”

Maybe Jack should’ve felt guilty about making her boyfriend’s aloofness all about her when he was dealing with personal turmoil, or relieved to find out that he was not breaking up with her after all, but all she felt was sorrow. Diego didn’t talk about the foster system a lot, but when he did, it was always horror stories. Jack tried to smile at the good news, but it slipped sideways.

Diego frown. “¿Qué es eso?” he asked, even though they both knew the answer.

“You went through that alone and you didn’t have to,” said Jack.
“I didn’t want you to worry. You’ve got a lot on your plate.”

“So do you. Listen, it’s okay to share things with me. It’s not a burden. In fact, it makes things easier. It’s like…it’s like fighting an Akuma with two people instead of one. It makes things easier for both people.”

“Jack…”

“But that’s great about your new foster family!” said Jack, reading Diego’s discomfort and switching topics as smoothly as she could. The problem was, there was still one thing niggling her. She took another breath and tried her best to appear causal about it. “So you’re going to a different school now? Making new friends? I saw your Snap…”

“¡Oh, sí!” said Diego, nodding fervently. “That’s my new foster sis, Gabriella. We were meeting her girlfriend for coffee before school yesterday. And…ay, speaking of school, I really got to go. The last bell is about to ring. Can we talk more at the usual time? This or Skype?”

Now the guilt came like an overwhelming wave. How could Jack, for even one second, think her lovely, amazing, sweet boyfriend would cheat on her? He would never hurt her. Heck, he didn’t even want to trouble her.

“Skype is fine,” Jack assured him.

Diego gave her his cheesiest grin, the one that reached every part of his face. He was like a sunbeam.

“I can’t wait!” he told her with his usual salute. “See you then, mi conejito.”

He ended the call, the projection in the middle of Jack’s chakram disappearing. She hugged it to her body, willing it to be her boyfriend. Maybe he felt it, thousands of miles away, but she dismissed it as wishful thinking. All she knew was that she wasn’t taking their distance as well as Diego was, and she was ashamed. So she made up her mind. If she was going to ask Diego to share with her, then she better do the same.

That night, Jack told Diego the whole story, from thinking he was upset with her for thinking Chameleon was him to believing he wanted to break up with her to thinking he was cheating on her with Gabriella. Diego, being Diego, was extremely understanding of the whole situation, which still boggled Jacks mind as she crawled into bed after they said their goodbyes. Because therein lied the problem, if you could call it that. The whole debacle wasn’t because she didn’t trust Diego, but because Diego was such a good boyfriend that Jack often didn’t feel worthy of being his girlfriend. Believe it or not, but seeing his flaws, like his hesitance to share the tough stuff, helped her. It served as a reminder that, just like he wasn’t the perfect person, he wasn’t the perfect boyfriend either…but he was pretty close.

“I’m so lucky,” Jack whispered into her pillow as she rolled over.

“And you thought you lost your luck,” murmured Mimmi on the edges of sleep, hardly cognizant of what she was saying.

"Guess not," said Jack, giving her Kwami a kiss goodnight. She had Diego. She had Mimmi. She had new friends and parents who loved her and she helped save Paris from time to time, even if she screwed up occasionally. These past two days were a reminder of what she had, and, for that, Jack
was grateful.
Commandant

Chapter Summary

Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jaclyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Chapter Notes

Who is ready for a plot heavy “episode”? Got some good stuff in this chapter that I hope is worth the wait!

I thought I’d throw some love Sabrina’s way and feature her this chapter. I feel like I may have made her a bit meaner than she is in the show =P But I get to highlight the cute relationship between her and her dad, so I’m good. Also, Alya being BA and doing some good ol’ fashion investigating ;-)

The shout out this time goes to…Androzani84! Always love chatting about Ladybug lore. Still not getting the lore I need to get much further than this chapter for now, but I have faith!

Jack had fought a lot of tough Akumas in her time as Rabbit. Captain Crunch, a naval officer turned shark-man (and sadly not the cereal mascot), had almost drowned Jack. Aurora Borealis would’ve disintegrated her on the spot if a brave woman hadn’t pulled her out of harm’s way. And who could forget Negator, who used the dark energy of people’s own negative thoughts against them? But all of that was a walk in the park compared to the situation Jack found herself in now.

“We could…um…make an acclaim.”

Sabrina glanced up from her note taking, her sea green eyes cold and suspicious.

“You mean a cheer?” she asked.

Jack’s cheeks burned, but she refused to be defeated so easily. “Yeah. A cheer. We can describe what mercury looks like and—and talk about the valiant electrons——”

“Valence.”

“Huh?”

“Valence electrons. And what rhymes with silver?”
The girl rolled her eyes. “Mercury is silver.”

“It is…? I thought it was red…” Wasn’t mercury the stuff in thermometers? But apparently not, because Sabrina looked like she was going to pop a blood vessel.

“I told you to sit there and be quiet!” she hissed. “I don’t need your help and I’m NOT letting you ruin my grade.”

“But it’s a group proj—!”

“Shhhh!”

Jack leaned back in her chair in sullen silence. She knew her French wasn’t the best, and that she was definitely not the smartest, but she still wanted to contribute. Alix told her she should be happy Sabrina was her partner for their science project since she was used to being paired with Chloé and therefore doing all of the work, but Jack wasn’t so sure. Try as she might, she really wasn’t the type to sit back and do nothing, as Jack or Rabbit.

Snaking her hand across the table, Jack tried to snag a book off the top of the pile Sabrina had gathered, but it was like she had another pair of eyes. She pushed the entire stack out of Jack’s reach without even bothering to glance up. Jack leaned back to stare at her partner in disbelief, but it did little good. They just sat in silence, the only noise the scratching of Sabrina’s fountain pen and the whispers of a few other students in the school library. After a while, Jack couldn’t take it anymore and excused herself to go to the bathroom.

“She hates me!” Jack complained to Mimmi once she was sure they were alone.

“She…” The Kwami started, clearly trying to refute Jack, but no positive spin came to mind and her whole body drooped. “Okay, well, yes, she does, doesn’t she?”

Jack didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Instead, she started to comb her fingers through her hair, beginning her usual fishbone braid. “She won’t even give me a chance. It’s like she made up her mind about me a long time ago and nothing I can do can change it. Maybe I should just give up and let her do her thing.”

“Oh, don’t do that! Maybe find something in common with her? That might warm her up to you!”

“That’s…not a bad idea, actually.”

Mimmi grinned so wide that it nearly enveloped her whole face. She kicked the bathroom stall open with a bang, flew behind Jack, and cheerily shoved her out. “That’s the spirit! Hop to it, Jack!”

“That’s my line,” complained Jack good-naturedly as she adjusted the collar of her polo shirt her Kwami had mussed by accident.

Emboldened, Jack headed back to the library. As she rounded the stacks to reach the table in the corner they had staked out though, she heard the high-pitched murmuring of Sabrina’s voice.

“—so I don’t know how late I’ll be,” she was saying. Jack peeked around the bookcase to see
Sabrina on her phone. Her brow was knotted, but whoever was on the other end said something that cheered her up instantly and she smiled. So it definitely wasn’t Chloé. “I promise I won’t.” A pause, a consideration. “Why don’t I come down to the station once I’m done?” An affirmative. “Great! See you then, Dad! Love you!”

Jack was already approaching Sabrina as she hung up. She had completely forgotten Sabrina’s father was a cop! This was perfect!

“That was your dad, right? The police officer?” Jack asked, the words all but tumbling out of her mouth. “My Uncle Greg is a police officer! And my Grandpa Jimbo—”

“Excuse me. Were you just…eavesdropping on me?” Sabrina demanded.

“Er…”

The girl rose from her seat. “That’s it!” she cried, ignoring the shushing of the librarian as he shelved books nearby. She pointed in the direction of door, her face turning so red she looked sunburned. “Out!”

“But—”

“Do you not understand?” she demanded in English. “I do not need you here. I do not want you here. Leave!”

“Fine, fine…” Jack hastily gathering her things under Sabrina’s glare. Looked like the girl was a lost cause after all. Jack had sealed her fate the day she looked at Chloé the wrong way and called Sabrina a flying monkey.

Actually, now that Jack thought about it, maybe Sabrina was right to dislike her.

Out on the school steps, wind whipping around her as it was a rather blustery day, Jack wondered what she should do. She could go home, of course, but it was the middle of the day on a Wednesday. No one would be around and the idea didn’t exactly excite her. She considered texting Alix to see if she was down for some (attempted) skating, but then remembered that she still hadn’t earned enough money to buy herself a new phone. In the end, Jack’s nose caught a whiff of freshly baked cake wafting from the direction of Marinette’s parent’s bakery next door and she realized it had been a while since the two had hung out. Maybe she wasn’t home, but it was worth checking out since she lived right there.

The bell above the door jangled as Jack entered the shop. Madame Cheng was busy helping a customer put together an assortment of macaroons in a bright pink box, but Monsieur Dupain noticed her as he finished refilling a display case near the cash register. He lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Jackie!” he cried, wiping his enormous hands on his chocolate-stained apron. “Good to see you! Marinette and Alya are upstairs.”

Jack liked Monsieur Dupain, even if she disliked his choice in nicknames for her. He always seemed to know what she wanted to say without her ever saying a word. She thanked him and walked to the back door of the shop, giving the man a high-five as she passed, a cloud of flour rising up into the air.

The trap door to Marinette’s room was closed, but Jack didn’t think anything of it as she flung it
open and climbed up. She caught the tail end of some kind of argument, with Alya sitting in front of Marinette’s computer and Marinette standing over her. They froze and turned around in unison confusion. Only then did Jack notice the blinking red light of the webcam behind them.

“Ah! I am sorry!” said Jack, her face heating up again for the second time today as she realized what she had stumbled into. “Are you filming? Did I ruin the…shot?” Jack started to back peddle down the stairs, but Marinette went over and grabbed the crook of her arm, dragging her back.

“No, no, it’s fine!” Marinette said. “Alya can just edit you out. Right, Alya?”

Alya answered by turning the webcam off.

“Alya!” complained Marinette, but Alya chose to ignore her in favor of Jack.

“Girl, what is up?” she asked, running up to give Jack a hug. “I thought you and Sabrina were working on your element project?”

“We were. She is.” Jack dragged her feet as she stumbled over to Marinette’s chaise and collapsed face down on it. She groaned into the soft pink cushion. Like everything in the Dupain-Cheng household, it smelled of bread.

“That bad, huh?” observed Alya when Jack didn’t offer any more insight. Jack felt the chaise depress as Alya sat down and patted her head. “Don’t worry, we’ll cheer you up!”

“Yeah. After Alya’s done filming,” added Marinette.

“I’m telling you, it’s a trap. I’m not doing it.”

Jack sat up, wiping her flyaways away from her face. She sensed a nice distraction from her current woes. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s nothing,” Alya insisted.

“Why don’t we let Jack decide that for herself?” suggested Marinette. “She is our resident Rabbit expert, after all.”

Jack tried not to perk up at the sound of her altar ego’s name. If she wasn’t interested before though, she certainly was now.

Alya was busy chewing the inside of her cheek as she contemplated Marinette’s words, but it was clear she wasn’t entirely unwilling to share. After a bit of deliberation, she explained that she had received an email through the Ladyblog submission form from someone claiming to have been Akumatized. However, she doubted the claim because she knew all the victims and he wasn’t one of them. Marinette argued that maybe there were some victims Alya didn’t know about, but Alya insisted that he didn’t fit the pattern then. Akumas always caused a scene in order to attract Ladybug and Cat Noir.

“He’s clearly an Internet nut job,” she concluded.

“Here’s the email,” said Marinette, heading over to her computer and pulling it up. Jack followed to take a look, the French words dancing before her eyes a bit before she was able to translate them.
Greetings Miss Césaire,

I am a past victim of an Akuma. It was requested of me by Chat Noir that I get in touch with you about letting Rabbit know when I am able to set up a meeting for her. Have her come to my lab—she knows the place.

Thank you.

Jack tried her best to appear nonplussed, but inside she was doing Mimmi’s happy dance. Dr. Lacasse! Was she finally going to meet the Guardian and get answers about her powers? And maybe Mr. Bergeron would have some ideas on how to track down the Beacon! Operation Security, as Diego had so aptly named it, had stalled right out of the gate since they didn’t have DyTech’s cooperation. The longer Jack did nothing about it though, the more anxious she became, positive that Hawk Moth was working tirelessly to recover it.

“Jack,” said Alya, lightly shaking her shoulder.

“How?” Jack made more of a concentrated effort to listen, but her mind remained elsewhere.

“I asked you what you thought,” said Alya. “This is totally a trap, right? No way am I passing this mysterious message on to Rabbit.”

“But it sounds important!” countered Marinette. “Right, Jack?”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I agree with you,” said Alya. “But I’m going to look into it a bit more before I do anything.”

“I-I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“What, you’d rather I blindly post about it? What about journalistic integrity?”

Jack couldn’t contain herself any longer. “I really should go back and help Sabrina.”

Both girls seemed a little put out that Jack never ended up taking a side, but they gave her their goodbyes. Jack left them to continue their argument, barreling down several flights of stairs. As she burst into the side alley next to the Dupain-Cheng’s bakery, Mimmi tumbled out of her bag to ask about what the email said, but the words were stripped from her mouth as she was sucked into Jack’s Miraculous.

Hopping across Paris as Rabbit, Jack made it to DyTech in ten minutes flat (It would've been eight, but she had a bit of trouble remembering exactly where it was). She soon found herself standing on the rooftop her, Cat Noir, and Ladybug sat hunched on a few weeks ago to case the place when they were distracted by Lock Pick’s appearance. They were only able to break into DyTech because they followed him, as Jack could now see in the light of day that the building’s windows were not the kind that opened. She wasn’t a thief though, nor was she trying to stop one, so she didn’t see anything wrong with just using the front door. After all, Dr. Lacasse had to be expecting her.

Jack dropped to street level, scaring a bike messenger. He swerved to avoid her and continued on his way, cursing over his shoulder, but Jack didn’t care. Her whole body seemed to be vibrating with the knowledge that she was finally going to get some answers.

Stepping up to the glass doors, they sensed her intent and slid open to admit her into the sleek lobby.
Beyond the retractable belt between two stanchions, the platinum-haired receptionist looked at her with curiosity, partially rising from her seat. Jack headed in her direction only for a hulking shape to block her path.

“Where do you think you’re going, missy?” the security guard groused. “Through the detector. No exceptions.”

Jack turned to look at the metal detector to her left in complete disbelief. Surely the guard wasn’t serious? But a brief glance led her to conclude that maybe it was just best for all parties involved if she did as she was told—the instructions weren’t that hard to follow. So Jack turned heel and marched around through the detector. The green light above it turned red the moment she stepped through though, setting off a buzzer. The security guard sighed and grabbed a doggie dish, holding it out to her.

“Ma’am, I’m going to have to ask you to take off your watch and your bracelet and take a step back...”

Jack stared at him blankly, not because she had long ago decided that Rabbit didn’t know French, but because she had a hard time believing anyone would ask her to relinquish her weapon and her Miraculous so causally. The security guard seemed to infer the former though, so he made a move to touch Jack’s watch to show her what he wanted her to do. She slapped his hand away and held her wrist to herself as if she had been burned.

“What’s the big idea!?” he rumbled, shaking out his sausage fingers, but there was a rush of stiletto heels on marbled floor behind him and a sharp, no-nonsense voice cut through the lobby before the situation could escalate.

“Quentin! What are you doing!?”

The very words struck fear into Quentin the Security Guard’s heart. His shoulders rose up to his ears and he pivoted, slowly, as if he were afraid to evoke the ire of a bear. A rather short woman in a power pantsuit and perfect ponytail stood behind him looking murderous. Despite her stature, she did look like the type who knew twelve ways to break a man’s finger and then some. Jack swore she had to be former Special Forces or something. The military precision was definitely there.

The woman marched over to the stanchions and unhooked the belt, allowing it to retract with a clang and a snap.

“This way, Rabbit,” she said, her accent thick and luxurious, like lavender honey. It somehow spoke of knowing many languages.

“I’m sorry, Mercier. I didn’t—” blubbered Quentin, but the woman held up her hand and silenced him in an instant. She looked close to having a migraine, but managed to hold herself together.

“I should have you fired,” she told him. It seemed like there should’ve been more to say, like maybe she should have assured Quentin that he still had a job, but she left the statement hanging and turned to Jack. “Follow me,” she instructed. Jack did so hesitantly, glancing back at the morose security guard. “Rabbit!” the woman called out sharply, already standing at the receptionist’s desk. Jack jumped and scurried over. This was clearly not a woman to be trifled with, reducing men more than twice her size to tears.

“Thank—” Jack started to say, remembering her manners, but the woman cut her off.
“Jade Mercier,” she said, tapping the personnel badge she wore affixed to the breast pocket of her suit jacket. “Head of Security here at DyTech. I was instructed to be friendly to you, so you may call me Jade.”

They were shaking hands before Jack even realized it; two pumps. Efficiency seemed to be the name of Jade’s game as the receptionist handed her a plastic card with a picture of Rabbit on it that Jack recognized from the newspaper, hanging from a metal clip.

“Your guest badge,” Jade explained as she handed it to Jack. She didn’t even bothering to wait as she headed towards the building’s two elevators, her heels echoing like a hailstorm on the roof of a car. “I will escort you to Dr. Lacasse’s office.”

“So he got his job back?” asked Jack, struggling to keep up and affix her badge to her white suit at the same time. It was a little difficult. Luckily, Jade was forced to stop in order to wait for the elevator.

“Yes.”

Jack waited for more, but that was it. She shrugged. She could just ask Dr. Lacasse about it more when she saw him in a few minutes. Jade didn’t seem like much of a talker. In fact, she didn’t say anything further until they reached Dr. Lacasse’s lab on the third floor.

Jack grinned as she entered the familiar room, a sweeping sense of nostalgia welling up inside of her, even if she was more familiar with it in the dark. There was the pedestal in the middle of the room where the Beacon used to rest. And over there was the desk chair Ladybug had grabbed with her yo-yo instead of Lock Pick. And there was the corner where her and Ladybug took refuge, waiting for Lock Pick to get glass shards stuck to his feet. Sure, she had almost lost her Miraculous, but, looking back on it now, she had to admit it had been a fun fight.

“Dr. Lacasse. Rabbit is here to see you,” Jade told a man sitting at a computer, schematics reflected in his glasses.

Jack almost didn’t recognize Dr. Lacasse at first. He had grown a beard since the last time she saw him. He also looked slightly haggard, not that Jack could blame him. He had been through a lot, losing his life’s work and his job in the span of a day. Still, he managed a broad smile as he stood up, towering over Jack. She had honestly forgotten how tall he was. Him and Jade made a comical pair with their height differences.

“Rabbit!” he said warmly, grasping her hand in greeting with both of his. “I was a little worried you wouldn’t get my message.”

“I came as fast as I could,” said Jack. “Jade tells me you got your job back?”

“Only thanks to Mr. Bergeron. I was right. Dr. Evigan was behind everything.”

“Huh. Well, I’m glad you’re back!”

“It’s good to be back! Now I can help you. Let’s go speak with Mr. Bergeron.”

“R-right now?”
Jack hadn’t been expecting to meet the Guardian so soon. She felt underprepared and, somehow, underdressed. Dr. Lacasse was already leaving the lab though with Jade. He paused to look at Jack with a quizzical eyebrow, so Jack was quick to foreign confidence.

“Let’s go!” she said.

Dr. Lacasse led the way down the hall to a mahogany-paneled conference room that accommodated twelve, but all the cushy black leather chairs were empty. On one end was a TV inset into the wall. On the other end was a nook for making cappuccinos. A bank of windows took up the back wall, looking down into a little courtyard. Jack took a seat, thinking Mr. Bergeron would be joining them in a moment, but Jade swept over to the TV and tapped it. It sprang to life, revealing it was a touchscreen. Jack scrambled back up and joined Dr. Lacasse’s side as Jade referenced information on her smart watch to put in a call. Though Jack was slightly disappointed she was apparently going to videoconference with Mr. Bergeron instead of meeting him face-to-face, one of Mimmi’s idioms echoed through her head—beggars can’t be choosers.

The screen turned black for a moment, causing Jack to subconsciously hold her breath. To be honest, she didn’t know what to expect, but was instantly relieved by what she saw when Mr. Bergeron finally filled the screen. He reminded her of her Grandpa Jimbo, with his large ears and nose, and bristly mustache. He was much thinner though, with wisps of white hair peeking out from beneath his panama hat. Upon seeing Jack, his faded blue eyes crinkled in the corners and his face split with a smile, looking at her as if she were his own granddaughter.

“Rabbit,” he said with familiarity, tipping his hat. It was tough to tell where he was. The wall behind him was blank, painted an eggshell white, but his accent was as American as a Midwestern newscaster. “My apologies for being unable to meet you in person, but it’s not safe.”

Jack stared, lost in the moment, but then remembered herself. “A-are you…?” she managed to choke out.

“Yes.” The old man bowed his head. “I am the Guardian. You may call me Mr. Bergeron. Oliver Bergeron is one of my many alias, but it is what Dr. Lacasse and Miss Mercier know me as, so let’s not make things too confusing for them, eh?”

Jack opened her mouth to say something more, but Mr. Bergeron held up a finger.

“Be careful what you say, my dear. I suspect Omega is monitoring this call.”

“I assure you, sir, that isn’t possible with the infrastructure we have in place,” cut in Jade.

“It would be unwise to underestimate Omega,” said Mr. Bergeron. “He is very aware of who I am and has been watching me closely.”

“He has…?” wondered Jack, the hairs on the back of her neck standing up. She shivered involuntarily. Mr. Bergeron took note and tilted his head in Jack’s direction.

“Surely you must have wondered why I never reached out to you?”

The guilty look on Jack’s face probably said it all. Mr. Bergeron disguised his hurt as business.

“I know my silence must have been worrisome, but I was trying to protect you and Perro Negro. So imagine my surprise when Dr. Lacasse informed me that you were looking to meet with me. Despite
my best efforts, you were able to track me down. And with the Beacon now in the hands of Omega, I realized my lack of communication has become more of a hindrance than a help, so here I am.”

“Mr. Bergeron has brought Jade and I up to speed on everything,” explained Dr. Lacasse. “I must admit, I was a little upset by all the subterfuge, but I understand that it was for my own safety. This Omega sounds incredibly dangerous and now he has a chance to gather up those seven Kwami…Yes, your hypothesis was correct, Rabbit—the Beacon was intended to call the Kwami.”

"I knew it!" said Jack, mostly to herself.

The Guardian nodded. “After years of looking for them in the aftermath of the...shall we say, dissolution of Omega Labs? ...to no avail, I commissioned Dr. Lacasse to create the Beacon in hopes of finding them before Omega did, but now it is most definitely in his hands. I don't know how he found out about it, but I suppose it doesn't matter. What's important is whether or not he's been able to activate it.

"He hasn't," said Jack quickly, but then uncertainly filtered in. "At least...I don't think so? Mimmi would feel it. Right...?"

"Indeed she would. We should consider ourselves lucky, but who knows how long our luck will last? Mimmi, Wrekk, and Ceeree are all accounted for, but what of the others?"

“Er…” Jack played with her chakram a bit, spinning it around her wrist. “I know where Hokss is…”

“Rabbit, that’s fantastic news!” said Mr. Bergeron, leaning forward in his chair. “No need to tell me any more though. I don’t want to jeopardize his safety either.”

“But—!” Jack cut herself off since she knew the Guardian was right. She didn’t know what Chameleon’s plan was trying to suss out her civilian identity, but if Omega found out that Hokss had bonded with a Miraculous and had a holder who was against Jack, it would make him an easy target.

“We have more important matters to attend to,” reminded Mr. Bergeron, glancing at his watch. Out of habit, Jack glanced at her own, even though it told her nothing. “Miss Mercier, Rabbit will be assisting you in the recovery of the Beacon. Please share with her everything you have learned.”

Jade ground her teeth together, looking moments away from punching a wall upon hearing this edict. While she remained composed, her words didn’t hold anything back. “So a costumed superhero can be trusted, but not the police?” she demanded in sharp-tongued French.

Mr. Bergeron wasn’t fazed. “Rabbit and Perro Negro were betrayed by the police back in Los Angeles, so, yes. The police cannot be trusted.”

Jack nodded. For an entire year, Jack had entrusted the LAPD with the search for Trumpeter Swan, but they were never able to find him. Once they found his recently vacated base, but it was a ruse, an elaborate lie to make it look like they were helping. The truth was the Chief was in Trumpeter Swan's, or, more likely, Omega’s pocket and had been from the very beginning. Even thinking about it now made Jack burn with anger, not at the Chief, since she could only imagine what it would be like if someone threatened her family, but at herself for being so naïve and trusting.

“But my resources are limited,” Jade complained. “I’ve been looking for the Beacon since it was stolen, but it’s been a month. It might be in another country by now.”
“I have faith,” said Mr. Bergeron, his words gentle and calm. “But you must hurry,” he added. “I don’t know how long we have before Omega gets his hands on a Kwami, or, worse, Hawk Moth gets to the Beacon first.”

* * *

“The thief left no prints,” Jack reported an hour later to her captivated audience of Ladybug and Cat Noir. The two sat bunched together on the sill of Notre Dame’s central spire, their usual meeting place, next to the bronze statue of one of the apostles. Bartholomew, maybe? “They used the back entrance, disabling the alarms and looping the footage on the security cameras. Not a single security guard saw anything, so Jade believes the thief knew their schedules and had a blueprint of the building.”

“Sounds like an inside job,” reasoned Ladybug.

“Jade thought so too, but every employee’s alibi checks out, so she’s at a loss. Whoever they are though has to be some kind of tech mastermind. I mean, he—or she, I guess. Could be a she. Maybe even a they—scrubbed all information about the Beacon from the system. It’s like it never even existed.”

“Huh. Thorough,” said Cat.

“That’s Omega for you,” said Jack. She crossed her arms, rubbing her elbows. She felt uncomfortable just mentioning him.

“And you can’t go to the police?” asked Ladybug. “I can understand why Jade is so frustrated!”

“But the Guardian has a point too,” said Cat. He got up and stretched, obviously feeling stiff from such a long sit. Jack was honestly surprised he had stayed still the whole time, since his normal state was generally an unbound ball of energy. “If Omega had a spy on the police force back in L.A, he probably has one here too.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Jack admitted, grabbing her rabbit ears and pulling them down to her chin. “That’s why I called you guys.”

“Don’t worry,” assured Cat, looking fondly over his shoulder at Ladybug. The superheroine was deep in thought. “You came to the right bug.”

“So you can’t go to the police…but Jade’s done all she can do…but we need more clues...” Ladybug murmured to herself, putting a palm to her chin and tapping her fingers to her cheek.

As Jack waited for an idea to strike Ladybug, as one no doubt would, she moseyed on over to the other side of the tower and looked out across the Parisian rooftops. She could easily see Adrien’s house from her vantage point and vaguely wondered what he was doing. She doubted he was home, but she liked to pretend that he was, binge watching the Harry Potter movies or playing Mecha Strike III. Relaxing and allowed to act like an irresponsible kid for once in his regimented life.

Cat ambled over to join her. He didn’t say anything at first, just stood by her side and enjoyed the sunshine streaming into the spire, but then he noticed the look on her face. He matched her concern with his own.
“What are you thinking *pawt*?” he wondered.

“A friend,” Jack admitted.

“You making some here?”

Jack couldn’t help but smile as she thought about playing foosball with Adrien and jamming out to *Guitar Hero* with Nino and filming pranks with Alix and baking cupcakes with Marinette and gushing over the latest issue of *Majestia* with Alya and working on Positivity Club projects with all (well, most) of her classmates.

“I am.”

Ladybug snapped her fingers behind them and leaped up from her seat. “I’ve got it!” she cried out in French before switching back to English. “I know what we can do. Follow me!” And, with that, she flung out her yo-yo and was yanked out of the tower, Jack and Cat jumping out after her.

*   *   *

Jack had never been to Alya’s house before since Marinette’s was so much more convenient, which was why she was so shocked when the three of them ended up on one of the tiny balconies of a colorful art-deco apartment building and saw a familiar face just inside. Alya fumbled with the sliding glass door for a moment before pushing them apart. In an instant, she had her phone trained on them.

“I cannot believe this!” she said. “Peeps, check it out! Ladybug. Chat Noir. Rabbit. At my house! Are you here for an interview? Please tell me you’re here for an interview!”

Ladybug grimaced. “Maybe another time.”

Disappointed, Alya lowered her phone, but her excitement remained palpable. “Is it an Akuma? Do you need my help battling an Akuma?”

“No, no, nothing like that.” Ladybug turned to Jack and smiled. “We actually need the help of your audience.”

This threw Alya for as much of a loop as it did Jack and Cat Noir. Even so, she ushered them inside of her tiny bedroom. Jack took a seat on the chevron-patterned bed, which was inserted into a reading nook in order to make the most of the small space, and Cat threw himself at a blue beanbag in the corner. To the left was the largest map of Paris Jack had ever seen, marked with black butterflies with color-coded wingtips. It took up an entire wall. Jack was reminded of a similar map of Los Angeles that had been hanging up at LAPD headquarters. It seemed Alya was trying to track down Hawk Moth’s location using his attack pattern.

*Good luck with that,* Jack thought, knowing better now, but she kept the words to herself.

Ladybug explained that she wanted to film a request for Alya to post on the Ladyblog for her followers. Alya kept on asking questions, but Ladybug demurred until Alya gave up and gave in. So, with the map as a backdrop, Ladybug addressed Alya’s camera, exuding confidence Jack could only dream of.

“Hello Ladyblog viewers!” the superheroine said with a friendly wave. “I have a very important
If you or someone you know was within a kilometer of Corsican Boulevard last month on the fifth, between 19:00 and 21:00, and happened to take a picture or a video, please send it in to the Ladyblog. Your submission could help me and Chaton stop something awful from happening.”

Alya stopped filming. “Corsican Boulevard?” she repeated.

“Yes. Why?”

Alya never got a chance to answer, as her phone began to beep and vibrate like mad. Jack was on her feet in an instant, recognizing the signs.

“Akuma attack?” she asked as Alya slid into her desk chair and shook her mouse to wake up her computer. It was already on the Ladyblog, and Jack saw with some satisfaction that Alya had posted Dr. Lacasse’s message for Rabbit to see. Looked like Marinette had won out in the end.

A swift click on the bottom bar opened up the social media stream and the posts drifted by like a stampede. Most of them seemed to be sharing the same video over and over again, which featured the close-up of a girl’s eye, sea green and framed by glasses. Jack sucked in a breath through her teeth as she recognized the face, having sat across from it in awkward silence a few hours ago.

“Sabrina…!?" said Alya, clicking on the video and letting it play.

Sabrina pulled the screen away from her eye. She was struggling to control her breathing as she scrunch herself further into a ball, trying to make herself as small as humanly possible. It appeared she was hiding beneath a desk.

“Ladybug, you have to come to the 21st arrondissement police station right away," she whispered in a quavering voice. It was difficult to hear her, since some woman was yelling in the background. “There’s an Ak—”

A gunshot rang out, causing all of them to flinch. Sabrina let out a pathetic yelp and covered her mouth, eyes wide in panic as she waited to be discovered, but the shouting continued on unabated. Not trusting herself to speak anymore, Sabrina reached around the desk with a shaky hand and pointed her phone out into the police station's bullpen. Though the view was partially obstructed by other desks and chairs and a tipped over trashcan, the source of the shouting became clear. A pale blue-skinned Akuma, a woman with a buzzed head wearing stylized black combat gear with cobalt camouflage accents, was marching around barking orders to a room full of police officers. She wore night vision goggles with a scarlet tint. Across her chest was a bandolier full of bullets, glowing like power cells. She pulled a few and began to reload the futuristic gun she carried with the speed and precision that spoke of a wealth of experience.

There were two things that stood out to Jack about this Akuma. The first was how short she was despite her commanding presence. The second was the plastic card that seemed to be affixed to the breast pocket of her tactical vest.

Jack slammed her hands down on Alya’s desk and leaned in close to the screen, just to make sure, but there was no mistaking it, especially when her mind finally caught up to what the Akuma was saying.

“…until it is found! Now get to work!”

“That’s Jade Mercier!” Jack said.
Ladybug and Cat Noir’s heads whipped around in Jack’s direction and they all exchanged uneasy looks. Even though they didn’t say it in Alya’s presence, they were all thinking the same thing: Hawk Moth was using Jade to get to the Beacon first.

“Uh…who’s Jade?” Alya wondered, but the three of them were already making a move towards the exit.

“Sorry, little lady. We’ve got superhero stuff,” said Cat, vaulting off the balcony.

“Don’t forget to post that video!” said Ladybug, swinging away.

“Thanks, Alya!” Jack shouted over her shoulder as she front flipped over the railing. “Bye!”

Alya chased after them, but she couldn’t very well leap off her balcony. She gripped the railing instead, yelling at their retreating backs that she better get an exclusive interview after the fight.

*   *   *

There was nothing that really made the 21st arrondissement’s police station stand out—just another old limestone building. Had Jack not been following Ladybug and Cat Noir, she would have probably jumped right over it. Insides though, it was cavernous, completely gutted and with walls made of glass, making it easy to find the bullpen. State-of-the-art computers sat on every sleek gray desk, and huge flat-screen monitors were strung up from the ceiling. As luck would have it, the Akuma’s back was to them, stalking the rows as police officers worked at a frenzied pace. She didn’t notice them until they burst into the room.

“Your reign of terror ends here,” said Ladybug as the three of them struck fighting poses. “Let these hostages go!”

The Akuma spun around, but her eyes passed Ladybug and Cat Noir, landing firmly on Jack. The police officers in the room glanced at the standoff nervously, but continued to work.

“Well, well, well,” the Akuma said in English, resting her elbow of her gun-toting arm on her hip. It did look obnoxiously heavy. “If it isn’t my partner…Rabbit.”

Even though experience told Jack that reasoning with Akumas never worked, she still tried. “Jade… don’t do this. Don’t help Hawk Moth. You know this isn’t what Mr. Bergeron wants.”

She tossed her head back as if to laugh, but Jade was not a woman who laughed, Akumatized or not. “Mr. Bergeron? Mr. Bergeron wouldn’t let me do my job, and saddled me with you! Hawk Moth, on the other hand, values me and is giving me all the tools I need to get the job done.”

At the mention of tools, she leveled her gun in their direction. Jack stared down the barrel, recalling a time when it used to frighten her, when she was learning the ropes of being a superhero. Now, though, it was nothing—an inconvenience, if anything—but while she stood firm, Ladybug and Cat shied away.

“Guys,” said Jack out of the side of her mouth. “Did you forget our suits are bulletproof?”

“Good thing these aren’t bullets then,” mused the Akuma, overhearing.
At first it felt like any other bullet. There was an ear-splitting bang followed by a little pinprick of pressure where it struck Jack in abdomen, but that was it. Well, no, that wasn’t it. As soon as the bullet touched Jack, the casing disappeared in a spray of metal shavings, leaving only its sky blue energy behind. Jack’s body absorbed it and she suddenly found herself frozen in place.

“W-what…? Why…can’t…I…move…?” she wondered aloud as she strained against her suddenly unresponsive body.

Ladybug and Cat tried to approach Jack to help her somehow, but the Akuma fired her gun a couple more times, keeping them at bay.

“Jade, what did you do to me?” Jack demanded.

“It’s Commandant now,” said the Akuma, marching up to her. She smelled acidic, almost like smoke. “And I command you to get me Ladybug and Chat Noir’s Miraculouses!”

“Why would I—?” Jack started to say, but then her mind went spinning as her body lurched to the left without warning, found footing, and launched in Ladybug’s direction with no input from Jack at all. Color fled from her friend’s face as she skipped backward, and Jack’s clawed hand just whiffed.

“Ahhhhhhh! What’s happening!?” Jack cried.

“You’re being controlled,” said Cat helpfully, slamming his staff against Jack’s chakram as she pulled it out. “Don’t worry. It happens to me all the time.” He spun away, avoiding another bullet from Commandant. Jack took this opportunity to flip up and kick him in the face.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry!” Jack cried as she reached for the ring on Cat’s finger. Ladybug’s yo-yo thankfully wrapped around her wrist though and yanked her away. Jack rolled to the ground and unraveled herself before popping back up again. Seeing Ladybug and Cat escape the room, she took off after them, feeling like she was riding an out-of-control West Coaster at Pacific Park. Her body had been hijack (Or hi-jack. She had to stop coming up with puns she’d never be able to share with Cat) and she was powerless to stop it. “Get out of here!” she called after her friends.

“We’re trying!” yelled Ladybug over her shoulder.

Jack felt her body gear up to throw her chakram. “Incoming!” she warned.

Ladybug and Cat split, dodging the throwing ring.

“Cat, duck!” Jack warned, recognizing what would happen with her weapon’s trajectory. Sure enough, it bounced off the ceiling, ricocheted down the hall, and narrowly missed nailing Cat Noir in the head as he heeded Jack’s advice.

“Commandant didn’t follow us,” noted Ladybug, yanking Cat up to his feet and out of the way of one of Jack’s flying kicks.

“Use Lucky Charm, my Lady,” said Cat, shoving Jack back with his staff, but Jack grabbed it and rolled over backwards to fling him away. “I’ll cover you,” he said from his heap on the floor.

Jack made another move for Cat’s Miraculous, but Ladybug once again used her yo-yo, this time wrapping up Jack’s entire body, pinning her arms to her sides and dragging her back. Jack’s body thrashed about, knocking Ladybug off balance, and rolled free.
“No,” Ladybug insisted, dodging Jack’s kicks. “It’s too early. Too much can go wrong.”

“But we have to think of something! Rabbit, what about you? You’re pretty good at coming up with plans—”

“I’m trying to steal your Miraculouses!” Jack reminded Cat as she back flipped out of Ladybug’s way and landed behind him. She tried to sweep his legs out from under him, but he was ready and leaped over them. He then proceeded to block all her kicks with his staff.

“So?” he wondered.

“So!? I’m an epic screw-up, if you couldn’t tell.”

“That’s not true!” argued Ladybug. Jack preformed a blind roundhouse kick, nailing Ladybug in the side and sending her sprawling into a wall. Cat Noir put Jack in a headlock to prevent her from doing anything further. With a slight shake of the head, Ladybug continued where she left off. “You have great ideas! You just need to think them through a bit more. But that’s okay! We can help you do that.”

“Really?”

"Of course! That's what partners are for.”

Jack managed to pry Cat’s arms away from her neck and slip out, skittering backwards to give herself space. Though her body language couldn't show it, Jack was glowing inside. They were partners! “Thanks! That really means a lot to me.” She paused. “Heh. At least I still have my voice.”

As Jack bull-rushed her friends, her words sunk in and realization slapped her like a wave to the side of her face.

“That’s it!” she cried as Cat swung his staff to keep her at bay. She jumped on top of it, her weight pinning it to the ground with a metallic clang. “I can still talk! I can turn back into a civilian! All hopped—”

Ladybug launched herself at Jack and covered her mouth. “Not here!”

Jack winced, wishing she could express her gratitude to her friend for stopping her from doing something reckless and stupid. Instead, her body continued to betray her. She tried to kick Ladybug, but Cat was there to grab her foot and flip her over.

“This way!” said Ladybug, peeling away and dragging Cat Noir with her to the nearest door. It opened into a storage room filled floor to ceiling with boxes, probably cold cases.

Jack, despite every fiber of her being screaming no, perused them.

“Move!” she yelled as they stood in the doorway with their unprotected backs to her. Seeing an opportunity, Jack’s body decided to do another flying kick, but, at the last moment, Ladybug and Cat Noir ducked. Jack went sailing over them, crashing into a shelf and causing an avalanche of paperwork to fall on top of her.

“Good idea, My Lady,” said Cat. “Let’s give Rabbit a little bit of privacy while she changes.”
“Sorry about this, Rabbit!” said Ladybug, slamming the door shut as Jack struggled to escape. Once free, she ran at the door full-tilt, but Jack had had enough.

“All hopped out,” she commanded herself.

Her forward momentum carried her into the door, but without her superpowers, the door hurt Jack more than the other way around. She bounced off it harmlessly and fell on her butt, palms pressed down on the polished concrete floor. A little dazed, she looked up to see Mimmi also recovering.

“You okay Mimmi?” Jack asked her.

“Yes! I—” The Kwami regained her bearings and promptly tried to zip through a wall. “Ah! Stop me!”

“Mimmi!” Jack cried, hands fumbling with her Miraculous. She yanked it off her wrist with some difficulty and the creature vanished. Jack heaved a sigh of a relief, and then another upon realizing that she was once again in control of her body. She moved her limbs all around though, just to make sure.

There was a knock at the door. “Everything okay in there?” wondered Ladybug.

“Uh…yeah…” Jack stumbled to her feet, still feeling disoriented as she slipped her Miraculous in her bag. “I’m okay. I’m okay. Commandant’s control wore off when I changed back, but…my Kwami was still affected. I had to take off my Miraculous to stop her.”

“Sounds like she took a bullet for you,” said Cat.

A weak laugh escaped Jack’s lips.

“Looks like you’ll have to stay there then, where it’s safe,” said Ladybug. Jack opened her mouth to argue, but no defense came to mind. Ladybug, like always, was right.

“Yeah, okay.”

“We appreciate your coho...eration,” said Cat Noir.

Jack rolled her eyes. “Don’t make me come out there, Cat.

“Don’t worry,” assured Ladybug. “We’ll defeat Commandant before you know it!” And then to Cat: “Let’s retreat for now and formulate a plan. We can’t have Commandant commanding one of us.”

“Roger that,” he answered before switching back to English. “Bye, Rabbit!”

Jack listened to her friends’ footsteps recede down the hall and then…silence. She waited a moment, ensuring they were gone, before kicking the door as hard as she could. How could be so stupid? She just stood there, like a sap (as her dad would say), and let the Akuma shoot her point blank! Since when had an Akuma ever wielded something as mundane as a normal gun before? Since never! And now she was taking her frustration out on a door, which hadn’t even done anything other than give her a sore toe.

Spinning around, Jack surveyed the damage she had caused. The shelving unit was a little askew,
but she used her hip to shove it back into place and got to work reshaping smashed boxes as best as
she could and gathering up papers that had been strewn about the room. It was a fruitless task,
considering Miraculous Ladybug would do a much better job than she ever could, but it was all Jack
could think to do to occupy herself with no phone and Mimmi out of commission.

Jack was maybe halfway finished with her task when she heard it: murmurs and running footsteps,
terminated with Commandant’s shouts and gunshots. It grew louder as what sounded like the 21st
arrondissement’s entire police force jogged passed her door. Commandant urged some to go faster.
More gunshots. The front doors slammed open. Sirens outside the building began to wail and then
fade as cop cars raced away. Eventually, all the noise faded, leaving Jack in silence once again.

Curious, Jack poked her head out of the records room and scanned the police station. The whole
place was deserted.

An eerie sense of foreboding filled Jack’s gut. The only reason Commandant would leave with the
police en mass was if she found out something about the Beacon.

Jack tore down the hall back to the bullpen. “No, no, no, no!” Nearly tripping over a trashcan, she
skidded to a halt in the open floor between the desks and spun around, hoping something would
catch her eye and tell her what Commandant now knew.

“She’s not here.”

Jack nearly jumped out of her skin as she caught sight of a familiar girl clambering out from
underneath a desk in the corner. “Sabrina!” she yelped, her voice cracking. She was ashamed to
admit that she had completely forgotten the girl was even there and tried her best to save face.
“Thank gawd you’re okay! I saw…uh…I saw the video you posted and—”

Furious didn’t even begin to describe Sabrina’s state of mind as she held up her hand, her tiny body
shaking as she tried to keep her rage contained. “Don’t even try to pretend you came for me. You just
wanted to catch a glimpse of Rabbit, didn’t you?”

Jack sputtered, caught in her lie but taken aback by Sabrina’s off-base assumption. Still, what could
she say?

“She is not there…?” wondered Jack meekly.

“No!” Sabrina stomped her argyle-printed Toms, her eyes like fire. Jack wondered why she wasn’t
like this more often, especially around Chloé. It would certainly give her more respect. But maybe
Jack just brought out the worst/best in her. “The Akuma has the ability to control people, like my
dad did when he was Akumatized. She turned Rabbit against Ladybug and Chat Noir and she
chased them away.”

“Your father was Akumatized!?“

But Sabrina wasn’t listening. “She has him…the Akuma. Commandant. She has control of my dad!”

Jack blinked, vaguely recalling Lieutenant Roger skulking in the background when she, Ladybug,
and Cat Noir made their superhero entrance. Of course, Sabrina had gotten wrapped up in this mess
because she had been visiting him when the Akuma attacked.

“He took a bullet for me,” Sabrina said, tears now glittering behind her glasses.
Jack could vividly picture the portly man standing up when Commandant burst into the room in a spray of bullet, ushering Sabrina behind him so he could shield her with his body. How he froze in place when hit, but, still desperate to protect his daughter, told her to hide beneath his desk. As he was forced to heed the Akuma’s commands, his eyes probably darted towards his desk from time to time, hoping against hope that Sabrina would remain undetected.

Compassion overwhelming her hesitance, Jack approached Sabrina and patted her on the shoulder. She was sure the girl would bite her head off, but she accepted the comfort. Jack suspected she was too distraught to do anything otherwise.

“We will bring back your father,” Jack said. “Do you know what the Commandant does? Er, no…is up? Argh! I mean—”

Sabrina understood what Jack was trying to say and nodded. “She’s looking for something called the Beacon. It was stolen from a place called…Dynamic Technologies, I think she said. Anyway, the police found traffic cam footage of a suspicious van seen in the area during the time of the theft.” She pointed to a large conference room monitor, paused on a grainy video showing one of those black vans without any windows in the back. It looked exactly like the kind Jack's parents warned her never to go near, especially at night. “The plates say the van is registered to a Flynn Lisberger,” Sabrina continued. “So Commandant took everyone to go after him. But…” The girl drifted off, rubbing a scuff mark on the ground with her foot.

“But…?” wondered Jack.

Sabrina lifted her head, her fiery red hair swinging back from her face. “I think the name is fake. You know the movie Tron?”

“It’s a French film?”

The girl shook her head. “Disney. It’s old.”

Jack wished her oral French was as good as her French comprehension. If it was, she would’ve told Sabrina that it sounded familiar. And didn’t a sequel or something come out a few years ago that had that actress her friend Ben had a picture of hanging in his locker? But since that was a little hard to expound even in English, Jack just blinked and waited for Sabrina to continue, which she did after heaving an annoyed sigh.

“You’re from America!”

“Sorry.”

“It’s one of my dad’s favorites. Steven Lisberger directs it, and the main character is named Kevin Flynn.”

“Flynn Lisberger.”

“See?”

“So…Commandant is not going to find him.”

Sabrina bit her lip and nodded. She moved closer to the monitor, crossed her arms, uncrossed her
arms, sat on the corner of a desk and crossed her arms again. She didn’t seem to know what to do with herself.

“I should find the Beacon,” she muttered. “I should find it and exchange it for my dad.”

Jack did not like where Sabrina’s line of thought was going. “Or?” she said loudly. “Or…We find it and use it to lure Commandant into a trap. Then Ladybug and Cat Noir can defeat her and save your father.”

It was tough to tell if Sabrina liked Jack’s idea or not. She walked up to the monitor and touched it. The video started to play. Cars moved down the street. The stoplight changed. The suspicious van slowly rolled out of frame. Sabrina rewound the video and the two watched the same scene over again. Tapping one of the video files lined up at the bottom, Sabrina pulled up other traffic cam footage of the van, each one labeled with the time and the cross streets, but they were all pretty much the same.

“Aren’t there any better angles?” the girl complained, squinting at the screen. “You can’t see the driver in any of these!”

Jack was about to open her mouth to explain that was probably exactly as the thief intended when she was struck with an idea. She dug into her bag for her phone before remembering it wasn’t there. Lucky she was in a room full of computers, then. She swiftly moved to the nearest one and pulled up the Ladyblog. Alya had posted Ladybug’s plea, as requested, which made Jack’s life a whole lot easier.

“When was the Beacon stolen?” she asked Sabrina innocently.

Her classmate couldn’t seem to tear her eyes away from the monitor. “Last month. The fifth. Around 20:00.” She spun around, suddenly suspicious. “Why?”

Jack turned the screen of the computer she was using to face Sabrina and clicked the video. Ladybug’s voice filled the room. As her words filtered into Sabrina’s brain, her eyes widened.

“I saw Corsican Boulevard,” Jack explained when the video ended and Sabrina turned to her in wordless confusion. Jack pointed back at the conference room monitor, to the cross street label on the current traffic cam footage.

“Ladybug and Chat Noir must be looking for the Beacon too!” realized Sabrina. “Do you think anyone sent anything in?”

Jack shrugged. “Call Alya.”

Sabrina looked as if Jack had asked her to crawl into a coffin full of spiders. “I-I don’t think she’ll help me.” She seemed to gather strength from somewhere deep inside, straightened, and wrinkled her nose. “I don’t want her help anyway.”

Jack frowned. It wasn’t hard to catch flashes of Sabrina’s vulnerability. She was always second-guessing herself and her choices, because she knew her friendship (if one could call it that) with Chloé put her at odds with everyone else. Unlike Adrien though, Sabrina was scared of Chloé—not only of standing up to her and becoming a victim of her bullying, but of ironically letting her only friend down by not supporting her in all she did. But the moment you started to feel sorry for Sabrina, she would turn up the mean factor, no doubt mimicking Chloé and her fearlessness. Maybe
that was what attracted Sabrina is Chloé in the first place. She wanted to be bold like her.

“I will call,” Jack offered. “May I use your phone?”

The distrust in Sabrina’s eyes was palpable, but she returned to her dad’s desk and opened a drawer to retrieve her cross-body purse.

“Don’t drop this one,” she said, handing her phone over. Word had gotten around about Jack’s “clumsiness,” but Jack just shrugged it off.

“Oh!” she said cheerfully as she selected the phone icon. It pulled up Sabrina’s contact list automatically and Jack was surprised to find tons of people on it, including every single one of their classmates—even her! She glanced up to find Sabrina monitoring her.

“What?” she wondered, reading Jack’s look. “It’s every person Chloé has ever talked to, in case she wants to talk to them again.”

Jack decided not to question this insane logic and accept it for what it was. She tapped Alya’s name. Before she could even put the phone to her ear though, Alya had already picked up and was speaking.

“—your vid! Are you calling for an interview? Girl, spill. Tell me everything! I’m sure the Ladyblog—”

“Alya, it is Jack.”

“Jack…!? Why are you calling me from Sabrina’s phone?”

“I am with her at the police station. The Akuma is gone. Long…story…?” Jack hoped she was saying that right. “We saw the video of Ladybug and we need what you have. Video. Pictures.”

“You looking for the Beacon too?”

Jack mind promptly stopped working, but at least she didn’t drop the phone.

“Jack? You still there?” wondered Alya after the pause went from natural to awkward.

“What’s she saying?” asked Sabrina.

“Hi-how…How…?” Jack managed. Was Alya a superhero too? Did she have mind reading powers? But Alya just laughed and launched into her tale of good old-fashioned investigative journalism, Jack putting her on speaker so Sabrina could listen too.

It all started earlier that day, with the mysterious email. Alya said she was going to look into it, and look into it she did, identifying the first initial and last name of the sender from the email address: M. Lacasse. Using Pages Blanches, she found seven M. Lacasses who lived in Paris, and wrote down everything she could find out about them: age, address, occupation, etc. Dr. Marcel Lacasse was a front-runner from the start, since he seemed most likely to have a lab, being a doctor and all. Then—could Jack believe it? —Ladybug, Cat Noir, and Rabbit came to Alya to post that video, looking for suspicious activity near Corsican Boulevard. Dr. Marcel Lacasse’s employer, Dynamic Technologies, was located on Corsican Boulevard. Then the Akuma attacked, Rabbit recognizing her as a woman named Jade Mercier from Sabrina's video. After the superheros left to confront her,
Alya looked Jade up too and saw she also worked at Dynamic Technologies as the Head of Security. Thinking this was more than just a coincidence, Alya went to check out Dynamic Technologies in person. She spoke to a security guard named Quentin, who was pretty tight-lipped until she bluffed that she was Jade’s niece. Not only did he tell her that Rabbit had been by earlier to meet with Alya’s “aunt” and Dr. Lacasse, but, when asked about what happened last month on the fifth, he admitted that something called the Beacon had been stolen. Alya concluded that Ladybug, Cat Noir, and Rabbit were searching for the Beacon…and so was the Akuma based on what she said in Sabrina's video.

“That’s…amazing,” Jack admitted, still a bit dazed.

Alya continued, explaining she rushed home to look through the pictures and videos she received to help the heroes track down the Beacon before the Akuma got to it first. She noticed a suspicious black van that might have had something to do with the theft.

“Sorry peeps, I didn’t get the plates,” she admitted. “But I did see the driver’s face in the background of one vid—”

This new information sent a shockwave through Jack, but Sabrina was absolutely beside herself as she launched herself up from her dad’s chair.

“We need that!” she demanded. “Take a screenshot and send it to my dad’s work email right now! We can run it through INTERPOL’s facial recognition software.”

“That is a thing?” Jack asked in shock.

“You can do that?” said Alya at the same time, but Sabrina was already rattling off her dad’s email address and pulling up a site that required a sign-in. As she explained it, her dad was extremely forgetful while her memory was impeccable, so he often shared his usernames and passwords with her and called her up if they slipped his mind.

“Got it!” Sabrina said when Alya’s email appeared in the inbox.

Double-clicking the attachment caused a picture to pop up. It depicted three young women and a man who were enjoying a night on the town with drinks at a table outside a café. One of the women was mid-speech, a very undignified expression on her face, while the others laughed uproariously, but they weren’t of any interest. Behind them was the black van. At first Jack was disappointed, because the driver’s face was shrouded in shadow, but then she noticed the angle and lighting were just right to easily make out his face in the oversized driver’s side mirror.

Jack found herself surprised by how normal the man looked. There was nothing particularly nefarious about him, this man who worked for Omega. He was in his mid-thirties, with a pale, square face. He was so vanilla that he gave off accountant vibes. Sabrina cropped the picture as best as she could and submitted it.

“Now, don’t expect much,” she advised. “Unless he’s a criminal, he’s probably not going to—”

A match popped up almost immediately with a cheery beep.

“What was that?” wondered Alya.

Jack and Sabrina stared at the computer, at the name that had appeared in large block letters: Howard
J. Jenson. Their driver hadn’t been matched to a mug shot though, but to a picture taken at some kind of awards ceremony. Howard, wearing a tux, held up a futuristic plaque in the shape of a shield as he flashed a movie-star smile.

“**It’s a public media image,**” Sabrina realized.

“We found a match,” Jack explained to Alya, who was probably beyond lost. “**Howard Jenson. Not a criminal.**”

Sabrina clicked the picture and got further information from the caption. “**He was matched to a picture of him accepting an award for cybersecurity excellence at a forum held in Vienna last year. He’s the founder of White Hat, an ethical hacking company based in…Pasadena?**”

“Pasadena! Pasadena, California?” Jack leaned over Sabrina’s shoulder to have a look. Sure enough, the letters U.S.A jumped out at her. "**That is near where I used to live!**"

“So he’s American,” said Alya.

“Not necessarily,” countered Sabrina.

“But you’re sure he’s our guy?”

“It makes sense. The profile Commandant—that's the Akuma—gave the police of the thief described someone with technological prowess.”

The two continued to discuss Howard, but Jack had stopped listening as she zipped over to the computer she had been using before. She signed onto Facebook, found the media still of Howard on Google Images, and sent it over to Diego with a short message.

**Operation Security is a go! Fond the Beacon theif Howard Jenson. Owns this comapny white hat in the 626 chk it out.**

Moments after clicking send, Sabrina was calling her back, having apparently found something herself. She had done a cursory Google search on White Hat, and while they were an American company, the very first result was a press release written in French. Apparently, White Hat was expanding, with a satellite office opening up in Paris soon. The address of the new office wasn’t in the press release, but Sabrina had access to public records and proceeded to look it up.

Jack added to her message with Diego: **theirs an office here 2 gonna chek is out**

“Found it!” shouted Sabrina. She rattled the address off.

“**Impressive!**” said Alya. “I’m going to track down Ladybug and let her know what’s up. Later!”

“**Good luck!**” Jack said as her friend hung up, but Sabrina gave an angry sniff as she swept her phone off the desk and into her hand.

“I thought we were going to find the Beacon,” she muttered, looking down and to the left of Jack

“**Yup!**” said Jack, already leaving the bullpen. “**Let’s go grab a taxi. I’ll pay.**” She knew the hard-earned cash she had on hand was needed for her new phone, but this was currently a better use for it.
Sabrina squeaked, quickly closed out the windows on her dad’s computer, and ran out after Jack, throwing her arms around her as they walked. “Thank you, best friend!” she cried. Jack laughed nervously as she tried to extricate herself from the hug, but Sabrina refused to let go.

It was tough to say whether Sabrina’s undying gratitude was better or worse than being her enemy.

*   *   *

The White Hat office was exactly like Jack pictured it: modern, sleek, and white, located in the heart of Paris’s tech district of Silicon Sentier in the 2nd arrondissement. It was a newer build, tucked between two limestone ones. The front doors were locked though, with signs informing Jack and Sabrina that interior renovations were taking place. Somehow, Jack doubted it.

Sabrina chewed her thumbnail as she looked around at passersby, conscientious of their suspicious glances. “Maybe there’s another way inside?” she offered when Jack continued to rattle the magnetically sealed door.

“You stay here,” Jack decided, eyeing the open docking bay. Breaking and entering didn’t really seem like Sabrina’s cup of tea. “I will go look.”

Jack climbed up into the loading bay and spotted an unassuming door, also locked, but also a lot more low-tech and thus much more manageable. She pulled from the collection of bobby pin she had a habit of slipping onto her sleeve. It was hard to be the girlfriend of an urban explorer and not pick up a few tricks of the trade. Diego probably could’ve given Lock Pick a run for his money.

Jack knelt and got to work, sliding two pins into the lock and jiggling one of them around. She was so focused that, even though she heard the echo of distant sirens, she didn’t think anything of them until they were paired with flashing lights, screeching tires, and door slams. Jack looked to her left to see a swarm of police and skittered backwards into the darkest corner of the bay, abandoning her bobby pins in the lock.

A high-pitched shriek pierced the air.

Sabrina!

Jack edged along the wall and craning her neck to get a good look. The police all had their backs to her, so she felt safe peeking around the corner. Aghast, she saw Commandant lording over her classmate.

“You’re the one who picked up the Beacon’s trail?” the Akuma wondered, jabbing Sabrina in the chest with the barrel of her gun.

“H-how did you…?” sputtered the girl.

“You left Facebook open.”

“Wha—!?”

Commandant shot Sabrina in the chest.

Jack flinched, even though she knew Sabrina would be fine. Well, not “fine,” exactly. Controlled and confused, no doubt, since she had never signed onto Facebook. That had been all Jack.
Guilt coursing through her veins, Jack felt her transformation phrase dancing on the tip of her tongue, but she clamped down on it. Squeezing her eyes shut and forming a fist, she pushed her knuckles up against the cool concrete wall. Messing up so royally was bad, but not being able to do anything to fix it was much, much worse. The moment she put her watch on, Mimmi would appear in pursuit of Ladybug and Cat Noir’s Miraculouses, and the moment she transformed, she would do the same. A fat lot good that would do for Sabrina, who was currently being commanded by Commandant to move out of her way, but to “stay close” while the police moved in to break the door down by force. If only Ladybug and Cat were there to help! …but Jack didn’t know where they even were and didn’t know how she would even reach them if she did.

Wait…

An idea started to take shape like a hazy landmark coming forth from a fog, showing Jack where to go. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out her grandmother’s watch and stared at her face’s reflection in the clock face, ruminating on Ladybug’s words from before.

You have great ideas! You just need to think them through a bit more.

Nodding to herself, Jack dropped down from the docking bay and rolled behind a police car that had jumped the curb. A police officer or two spotted her, but they said nothing and Commandant was otherwise preoccupied as she strolled into the now open building, Sabrina at her heels. Taking her chances, Jack darted down the street, away from White Hat, and took a corner. A man was opening up the door to an apartment building, so she slipped inside and took the stairs to the top. The rooftop access was littered with cigarette butts and pigeon poop, but empty. Jack took a squat and once again stared at herself in the watch face, confidence welling up inside of her as she considered her idea from all angles. Satisfied that she had thought it through fully, she slipped the Miraculous back on her wrist.

Mimmi appeared.

“Jack!” she yelped as she started to move away the instant she appeared. “What are you—?”

“Don’t worry,” Jack said. “I got this. Now hop to it!”

The Miraculous sucked Mimmi in before she could float too far, but the instant Jack transformed, she felt a tug on her body. Just like before, her movements suddenly weren’t her own anymore. Throwing herself off the roof, she landed on the one next-door and started to run, bounding over chimneys along the way, head swiveling to scan the area. Her frantic searching soon yielded positive results. She spotted two dots in the distance—one black, one red—and headed in that direction. They came to meet her.

“Rabbit!” cried Ladybug once she was close enough, mouth twisted with concern. “What—”

“Commandant might have found the Beacon!” Jack said before she could gear up for a flying kick. “Look out!”

Ladybug somersaulted to the side, Jack’s landing leaving a gouge in the roof tiles. “What!?”

“Left!” warned Jack, trying to kick Ladybug from that direction. The girl put up an arm to block, her eyes thrown open wide.

Cat slipped behind Jack and used his staff to put her in a hold. “Are you sure?” he asked her.
Jack slammed the back of her head into his face. “Sorry!” she cried, slipping out of Cat’s grasp as one of his hands flew up to his tender nose. “It’s in the second arrondissement. Go!”

“But where?” said Ladybug.

Jack took off her chakram and threw it at Ladybug, but she had her yo-yo out and spinning. It glanced off and back to Jack’s outstretched hand. “I’ll direct you. Just go!”

Her friends thankfully didn’t need to be told twice. Ladybug threw out her yo-yo and swung away, grabbing Cat by the tail and dragging him along with her. After a bit of high-flying, the boy landed of his feet and the two headed off together, Jack in hot pursuit.

“Head towards that church!” she shouted, recognizing the bell tower from her taxi ride to White Hat. Ladybug and Cat Noir adjusted. “Duck!” she yelled. They ducked and her chakram grazed the hair sticking up on Cat’s head. “Faster!” she begged as she caught up to them, trying to heel drop Ladybug in the Achilles’. The girl flung her yo-yo back and formed a trip wire. Jack refused to look at it, ensuring her body would trip over it. She went down, her chin smacking the roof so hard that she was sure she had cracked all of her teeth, but it was an easy price to pay since it bought her friends some distance. She was on her feet in an instant though and chasing them on to their destination, guiding them all the while.


“There’s pawlice everywhere!” noted Cat. “They set up a barricade.”

“Chaton, Cataclysm!” commanded Ladybug.

“But my Lady, can’t we just—”

“Trust me.”

“Always.”

Cat Noir had just enough space between him and Jack that he was able to pause and use his superpower without her catching up to him, but it was close. Jack spin kicked and hit the spot where he had been standing not even a moment before, his movement still in the air. As she lifted her head, she found him bounding towards Ladybug, his hand aglow with destructive energy. Ladybug, for her part, had hooked her yo-yo to the dehumidifier system atop the roof of the White Hat office. She held the string taunt with one hand and offered the other to Cat. When he reached her, she wrapped her arm around him and they swung at the third floor together.

Even though Jack didn’t want to, she leaped after them.

It was somewhere in mid-air, above the crowd of wide-eyed policemen and women clogging the street below, that Jack realized why Ladybug needed Cataclysm. She marveled at the genius of the plan. It was like a photo mosaic. The pictures didn’t seem related up close, but further out they came together to form a cohesive whole.

Cat Noir punched his way into White Hat using Cataclysm, resulting in a contained explosion of glass and steel and travertine. The force of it propelled Jack backwards into the scaffolding of the building across the street while rubble rained down on fleeing police officers, effectively blocking the
front door. Commandant wouldn’t be getting backup anytime soon. That was for sure.

Jack’s body was undaunted by her momentary change in momentum. She untangled herself and jumped down to ground level, bouncing off a patrol car and sailing through the gaping hole where the third floor used to be. Upon landing, her rabbit ears picked up on Ladybug and Cat Noir’s echoing footsteps on a staircase as they headed down. She scooted through the open plan office and into the empty hall to chase them, but before she could take another step, her voice rang out to stop herself.

“All hopped out!”

Mimmi shot out of Jack’s Miraculous like a pinball, but vanished before she could even ricochet as Jack unbuckled her watch again.

And maybe Jack should’ve stopped there. She had done her duty. She had led Ladybug and Cat Noir to Commandant and now it was up to them to stop her before it was too late. But Jack had tried sitting idly by and nothing good seemed to come from it. Besides, she reasoned as she headed towards the door marked with a zigzag sign to signify stairs, I’m worried about Sabrina.

Down Jack went, the tongues of her brand new kicks (which matched Alya’s so they could be sneaker twins) smacking against her ankles with each step. If the Beacon were being hidden here, it made sense that it would be kept in the basement. Before she could even get that far though, there was a sharp crack and pain bit into the hand she was using to hold onto the railing. She tried to yank it away, but found it stuck, the last vestiges of sky blue energy being absorbed into it.

And she had been doing so well thinking things through a bit more too.

“Come down here,” insisted Commandant several floors below. “And make it snappy.”

Jack had no choice. Her body sprung to life again and continued to rush down the staircase. Commandant met her at the bottom, but drew back to squint, unsure of her own eyes.

“Another kid?” She jabbed Jack with the barrel of her gun, as tense as a coiled spring. “Who are you? Identify yourself! Why are you here?”

“...Jack?”

Commandant and Jack turned to look through the doorway leading into the next room. Sabrina stood ramrod straight on the far side of it, her face tear-streaked. She blinked disbelievingly.

“Did...did you come after me?” she asked.

“It’s okay? Er...I mean—Are you...?”

“I’m okay,” she assured, catching Jack’s meaning.

“Oh. You’re her friend,” realized Commandant, lowering her gun. “Go stand next to her, then. And don’t move!”

Jack’s eyes darted to the far end of the room as she headed to her designated spot. There was a huge vault door taking up most of the wall, like the kind they had at banks. A man in a white HAZMAT suit, a wielder’s mask covering his face, was holding a long pole up to it. One end of it was hooked
up to a metal canister with a hose. The other end was on fire, a giant sparkler that hissed and spit as it bit holes into the vault door. A group of police officers, Sabrina’s father included, stood in a clump a safe distance away, armed to the teeth with fire extinguishers. Commandant went to join them, crossing her arms and tapping her foot while she waited.

“This is your fault,” Sabrina said out of the side of her mouth as her and Jack stood side-by-side, staring at the doorway to the staircase together. The door had been blown clean off its hinges by some sort of contained blast. “The Akuma followed us because you left your Facebook open with info on where we were going! What were you even thinking?”

“I…was not?”

Sabrina scoffed and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like ‘understatement.’

The man in the HAZMAT suit twisted the pole and it extinguished. Flipping his mask up, he examined his work before sliding a belt around the door’s handle and backing away to pull it taunt. Commandant shot a few officers, demanding they help, so they rushed over and began to play tug-of-war against the vault door. It groaned.

“It is my fault,” Jack admitted. “I do not always think about things. You have the right to be angry with me. I hope you can forgive me.”

Sabrina’s mouth went slack in surprise. For a moment, she was without words. Then: “W-what did you say?”

Had Jack said it wrong? “I’m sorry?”

“You’re apologizing.”

“Uh…Yeah.”

“Why would you do that? Chloé never does that.”

“Um—”

With one last whine of complaint, the vault door fell forward with a deafening thud that Jack felt in the soles of her feet. Not all hope was lost though. A soft beep Jack recognized as a Miraculous sounded nearby and none other than Cat Noir peered around the corner of the staircase. Sabrina made a move to say something, but he locked eyes with her and held a finger to his lips.

Then he made a run at Commandant, yelling at the top of his lungs with his staff held high.

Jack felt a crick in her neck form as she tried to turn her head, but it was no use. All she saw were occasional flashes of Cat sweeping police officers’ feet out from underneath them and dodging Commandant’s bullets from the corner of her eye. Fire extinguishers went off, flooding half the room with clouds of white chemicals.

“Hold. Still!” the Akuma cried out in frustration.

“Cats never follow commands,” chided Cat, but maybe he spoke too soon, because his movement was suddenly stilled.
Jack closed her eyes, helplessness engulfing her, drowning her.

“Chat Noir...?” whimpered Sabrina.

“That’s better,” said Commandant. “Now fetch me Ladybug’s Miraculous!”

“No! I won’t do it! I’ll never betray My Lady!” Cat cried, even as he ran by on all fours and up the staircase. His Miraculous trilled again. “I’ll fight this. You’ll see!”

He left, taking Jack’s hope of stopping Commandant along with him. So much for that.

More shot rang out from Commandant’s general direction.

“Bring out what’s inside the vault,” the Akuma commanded.

Two officers, one of them being Lieutenant Roger, vanished into its dark confines. Jack strained to look, but it all took place far from even her peripherals. Judging from the noises she heard though, her heart sank. Commandant only confirmed a short while later as something was wheeled out on a dolly.

“I’ve done it! I’ve recovered the Beacon!”

To make matters even worse, Cat appeared again, an unconscious Ladybug in his arms and a grim look upon his face.

“No! Not Ladybug!!” wailed Sabrina.

Jack would crinkle her brow if she could. Why hadn’t Cat Noir changed back into a civilian while he was out of sight? Even if he had forgotten that there was a loophole out of Commandant’s control, Ladybug would have surely remembered. Unless

A spot on Ladybug’s earrings vanished with a soft beep.

Jack smiled. “I think it’s okay, Sabrina.”

Commandant, feeling mighty pleased with herself, strode over to meet Cat, giving Jack and Sabrina the perfect view for what was about to happen next.

“Good kitty,” she cooed, patting him on the head. He growled and tried to nip at her, but his head didn’t move to accommodate the motion. Commandant just laughed. “You’re relieved of your duty,” she said, reaching for Ladybug’s earrings. “I think I can take things from here.”

Ladybug’s eyes sprung open and she grabbed Commandant by the wrist. “You’re not taking anything.”

The Akuma was quick on the draw, reaching for her gun with her free hand, but Cat kicked her as hard as he could in the shins and she went down, her bullets hitting the ceiling and showering them with chips of drywall. Ladybug rolled out of Cat’s arms and stripped Commandant of her plastic badge. The Akuma tried one last time to shoot Ladybug, but Cat stepped in front and blocked the shot with his own body. He shuttered as he absorbed the sky blue energy.

“Take Ladybug’s Miraculous now!” Commandant shouted, but Cat Noir only gave her smirk.
“What’s that?” he asked loudly, brushing his wild blonde hair away from his ear and showing off an earplug. It was red with black spots, the clear work of Lucky Charm. “I can’t hear you!”

Ladybug cracked the badge in two, releasing the corrupted butterfly within as Commandant collapsed in defeat. Whipping out her yo-yo, Ladybug purified the Akuma while Cat pulled his earplugs out and wiped the earwax off of them. Ladybug tried not to look too grossed out as she tossed them into the air to preform Miraculous Ladybug. Jack felt the tickle of little ladybugs on her skin as she regained control of herself. She stumbled forward along with Sabrina, nearly tripping over Commandant as she turned back into a barely conscious Jade.

“Pound it!” said Ladybug and Cat Noir together as they bumped fists. As Cat pulled away though, the last toe bean on his ring vanished.

“Whoops! Gotta go!” he told Ladybug. He turned and winked at Jack, switching to English for a bit. “Jack-Jack, always rushing in to save the day. Good thing I had your back this time, eh? See you around!” He finger-gunned his way out the door, reminding Jack a bit of Nino. She felt like the two would really get along.

Ladybug knelt next to Jade in order to help her to her feet. “Miss Mercier?”

The woman rubbed her head. “What…happened…?”

“You recovered the Beacon.”

Jade and Jack turned to see a metal cylinder with a handle, about the size of an industrial coffee machine, sitting on a gurney inside a specially build carrying case. Dials lined the bottom of the machine, and there was some sort of light poking up at the top. A little porthole looked into what Jack assumed to be the compartment for samples of whatever the Beacon was trying to attract.

But the Beacon was of no interest to Sabrina. “Dad!” she squeaked, racing across the room and throwing herself at Lieutenant Roger.

“Sabrina!” he said with equal gusto. He squeezed her tight, rocking her from side to side. It didn’t seem like he wanted to let her go.

Jack looked around the room awkwardly for a moment before making her way over to Sabrina and her father. They both turned as she approached.

“Oh, um…Dad, this is…” Sabrina paused, unsure of the right words. “My friend. Jack.”

Lieutenant Roger tipped his hat brim up to get a better look. “It’s nice a meet a friend of Sabrina’s who isn’t C—uh…”

Jack laughed into her hand, knowing what the man was going to say.

“Is everyone doing all right over here?” asked Ladybug, coming over. Behind her, Jade closed the case around the Beacon, took it off the gurney, and turned it into a roll along by pulling out the extendable handle. She slinked off, knowing full-well the damage she could have caused had Ladybug not stopped her.

The police officers nodded to Ladybug, but Lieutenant Roger was the one who spoke up.
“All thanks to you, Ladybug.”

“Oh! I couldn’t have done it without Chat Noir and Rabbit!”

“. . .Rabbit? But wasn’t Commandant controlling her?”

“Even so, she was able to lead me and Chat here. If not for her, you’d all still be under Commandant’s control.”

“Wow, that amazing!” said Sabrina. She nudged Jack with her hip, all smiles. “I can see why you’re a fan.”

Jack felt like her heart would burst with happiness. She was proud of herself, something she hadn’t felt since she had captured Trumpeter Swan months ago. It reminded her that she was a good superhero. Sure, she had some—okay, well, maybe a lot—of setbacks ever since moving to Paris, but she was learning from her past mistakes and getting better with each passing day.

Even better, with the Beacon secured, she was now finally one step ahead of Omega.

*   *   *

“Destroy it.”

Jade broke the pencil she had been poised to write with in half. “I’m sorry, sir,” she said, trying to remain professional, but her voice was terse. “…What?”

Jack felt heavy in her leather chair, unable to do much other than blink at Mr. Bergeron on DyTech’s conference room screen, sure she had heard him wrong. Her and Jade had just relayed to him the entire story of Jade’s Akumantization and subsequent recovery of the Beacon. Dr. Lacasse was in his lab now, running tests on the device. It apparently wasn’t working, but he was confident he’d be able to fix it. It seemed pretty clear though that Mr. Bergeron didn’t want it to be fixed.

“I understand your hesitance,” the Guardian said calmly. “But the Beacon is much too dangerous. I cannot allow it to fall into the wrong hands again.”

“With all due respect, sir, I got Akumatized to get it back.”

“Exactly. You and Dr. Lacasse have both gotten Akumatized. DyTech is obviously compromised.”

“I get that, but that doesn’t mean we should destroy it!” cried Jack, propelling herself to her feet. “We need it. We have to get to the rest of the Kwami before Omega!”

“They’ve been doing a pretty good job of evading him thus far,” said the Guardian thoughtfully. “Let’s hope they continue to do so.”

"Let's not hope. Let's know. Let's find them and use them against Omega!"

“Please understand, Rabbit. Omega is not our only concern. There is also Hawk Moth to think about. We don’t want him to get the Beacon either.”

"I can hide it. I can protect it. I promise!"
But Mr. Bergeron only looked at her, drawn and tired. He hadn’t seemed that old when Jack had first laid eyes on him, but now she noticed every liver spot and wrinkle that lined his face. He had to be in his 80s at the very least, far too old to be dealing with a hotheaded teenager and an adversary who was watching his every move.

There was a knock at the door and Dr. Lacasse bustled in without even waiting for permission to enter. Jade glared at him and cleared her throat, but he paid her no mind.

“Mr. Bergeron, I have wonderful news!” he said as if Jack and Jade were not there. “I was able to get the Beacon working again. It turns out a previous sample was gumming up the system. I cleaned it out though, so—”

“Previous sample?” interrupted Jack. "How? I thought you said all of them decomposed."

“It was partially decomposed.” The man held up a petri dish, filled with brackish flakes of something. “I examined them under a microscope. They appear to be akin to the skin of a *furcifer pardalis*."

“A what?”

“A Panther Chameleon."

Stunned, Jack turned to Mr. Bergeron, the answer in both their eyes, though Jack was the one who verbalized it. “Hokss!”

The old man grimaced, which pulled his skin taunt and gave him a more skeleton-like appearance, if only for a moment. “You said you knew where he was? Well, it appears Omega does too.”

So it was true—irrevocable proof that Chameleon was working for Omega. Maybe he had been after her identity so he could steal her Miraculous and thus Mimmi later, when she was a civilian and thus powerless to stop him. That sounded like an Omega thing to do.

Jack shook her head. There was still something off about this scenario. “But Mimmi didn’t feel anything,” she pointed out.

“The Beacon wasn’t actually activated,” explained Dr. Lacasse softly, trying to provide Jack some semblance of comfort. “The sample became too deteriorated to be of any use.”

Here Mr. Bergeron issued a papery sigh of relief. “Hokss is a less powerful Kwami compared to Mimmi or Wrekk. It seems only their samples would be able to utilize the device properly.”

“Then let me put Mimmi’s samples into it,” begged Jack.

“No. Don’t you see how lucky we were, Rabbit? Things could’ve been much worse. The Beacon needs to be dismantled immediately.”

“Dismantled!?” cried Dr. Lacasse, dropping his petri dish. He left it on the carpet, moving right up to the touchscreen to plead his case. “Mr. Bergeron, you can’t be serious! This is my life’s work we’re talking about! It was only just returned to me and now you want me to destroy it?”

“As I was saying to Miss Mercier and Rabbit, the Beacon is too dangerous to have around. I appreciate and value all your hard work, but this is my final decision. Do you understand?”
The Guardian’s eyes were piercing, gazing at each one of them in turn with the intensity of a dwarf star. Dr. Lacasse looked down at his feet. Jack stared back, unable to comprehend. Only Jade spoke.

“Yes, sir,” she said.

This seemed to relax Mr. Bergeron slightly and he settled back in his chair. “Very good.” He turned to address Jack. “Rabbit? I am sorry we could not meet under better circumstances, but you did a wonderful job today. That being said…you must refrain from seeking me out in the future. It is for your own safety. You and Perro Negro. If I ever need to contact you again, I will do so.”

“But—” Jack started, raising a hand as if she could physically stop him.

“Goodbye, my dear. And Godspeed.”

The screen cut to black and Jack was confronted by her frustrated reflection. She never got a chance to ask the Guardian about why her powers had suddenly changed! That was the whole point of finding him in the first place. He was supposed to fix her. Her mastery of Dogstruction had reached the point of her being able to control it, but all it took was one wrong move and she would cause irreparable damage, maybe even death. She didn’t want to be a liability anymore. She had gotten a small taste of true heroism today, the heroism she had back in Los Angeles, and she craved more.

And what were her and Diego supposed to do about Trumpeter Swan and Ceeree?

Jack consoled herself though. Surely this wasn’t the last time she would ever speak to the Guardian. Now that the Beacon crisis had been averted, discussing the loss of Lucky Strike would be at the top of her list the next time Mr. Bergeron made contact with her.

Speaking of the Beacon though…Jack trailed a silent Jade and a devastated Dr. Lacasse back to the latter’s lab, deep in thought. The Beacon had been returned to its pedestal, its knobs and dials now glowing green. Dr. Lacasse threw open a drawer and grabbed a wrench with a heavy hand. He took to the machine, poised to loosen a bolt.

“Wait…” said Jack, mind working furiously. Dr. Lacasse froze and looked at her, hoping. “What if…what if we don’t destroy it?”

Dr. Lacasse would’ve probably agreed to give up a kidney to save his work, but Jade was a bit less receptive.

“Mr. Bergeron gave us orders,” she reminded.

“We can fake it!” said Jack, building the idea as she went along. ”We can make it look like it was dismantled, but I can take it someplace safe and use it. The Guardian doesn’t have to know. If Omega was on that call, he’ll think it’s been destroyed too. It’s the perfect plan.”

“Are you sure that is wise? It appears Omega has access to Hokss. The Kwami could potentially alert him to the Beacon’s location when he feels its activation and Omega would just retrieve it again.”

“Oh…right…” Jack’s cheeks burned, embarrassed. Her reckless ideas were going to hurt her someday. Good thing there were people like Diego and Ladybug and Jade around.

Dr. Lacasse tapped his wrench to his glasses. “Not…necessarily.”
Jack and Jade turned to the scientist and he gave them a sheepish grin.

“I could widen the containment field. If Hokss doesn’t try to leave it, he won’t even notice the Beacon is on at all.”

"Containment field?” wondered Jack.

"The area where the Beacon's waves stop. It's currently set at zero so targets come right up to the Beacon, but I could expand it to, oh, I don't know, maybe about fifty kilometers without losing integrity."

Jack still had trouble with mathematical conversions, even after several months of European living. "How many miles is that?"

“Around thirty. Large enough to encompass all of Paris and then some, depending on where you hide it.”

“That’s perfect! I think as long as I stay in Paris, Hokss isn't going anywhere.”

“I don’t know, Rabbit. This is a dangerous game you are playing,” warned Jade. “If Omega finds out what you are doing, he’ll try to intercept the Kwami.”

“If he finds out, you mean. And, even if he does, I think that will be tough to do in a city this big. It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“Then how will you find them?”

“I won’t. They’ll come find me. I’m not exactly hiding, unlike Omega.”

“Hm. True.”

“So…you approve of this plan, Miss Mercier?” wondered Dr. Lacasse, hands clutching his wrench like a bouquet of flowers, knuckles turning white. “I would hate for all your hard work in retrieving the Beacon to have been for nothing,” he added, a sly glimmer in his eye.

That did it. “I’ll see what I can do about faking the dismantling,” Jade said as she turned heel and marched away.

They waited until she was clearly out of the room to celebrate. Jack whooped and pumped her fist, while Dr. Lacasse happily threw his wrench back into the drawer with a clang.

Over the next hour, Dr. Lacasse gave Jack a crash course on how to care for and use the Beacon while he worked on expanding the containment field, referring to the machine as if it were some sort of pet Jack would be watching while he was away on a business trip. It was all rather endearing. At one point though, they were interrupted by a call on Jack’s chakram. She was pleasantly surprised to see Perro Negro was on the other end, so she excused herself and headed up to the roof for some privacy. She had so much to tell him! …But apparently not as much as he had to tell her.

“Mi conejito!” he cried out as soon as he laid eyes on Jack. He raked a hand through his hair and tugged on one of his dog-ears. “Ay, it’s all my fault. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know—”
“Diego!” Jack interrupted in alarm. Her boyfriend was normally so chill, so she was immediately put on edge. “Calm down. Breathe.” He struggled to follow her instructions, eyes darting all around, but gamely tried his best. “Now…start at the beginning,” Jack suggested. “What’s wrong? Did Trumpeter Swan escape?”

Diego took in several more deep breaths as he shook his head. “I got your Facebook message. The guy who traced my money, Mike? …he works for White Hat.”

Jack didn’t normally swear, but one slipped out. It was simply beyond her control.

“It’s my fault,” Diego repeated. He shifted, the bright noonday sun whiting out the screen for a moment before he blocked it again. It appeared he was on the roof of his school again, probably during his lunch period. “I led Omega right to the Beacon.”

“You didn’t know,” Jack assured him. “Besides, I helped recover it today, so there is nothing to worry about!”

“Estupendo.”

Jack frowned at Diego’s lack of enthusiasm. She really thought he’d be more relieved. Somewhere in the distance, a school bell rang, but Diego didn’t even react to it.

“Everything okay…?” she asked hesitantly.

He couldn’t meet Jack’s eyes. “There’s more,” he said. "I looked into that Howard Jenson guy. I found his wedding announcement…”

Whatever words came next, Diego clearly didn’t want to say them, so Jack had to prompt him. “So?”

“I…I know his wife.”

“You what!?”

“Yeah. Evelynn. Evie.”

“How…!?"

“She used to take care of my abuela.”

END OF PART 2
Chapter Summary

Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jaclyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Chapter Notes

I promised stopthattimerave I'd have this chapter up by the end of May—sorry it's a day late! Bonus though, it's Friday, so everyone can spend the weekend reading it ;-) 

Guys, we are now in Part 3!!! Get excited. Part 1 was all about Jack acclimating to a new place and powers, Part 2 was about the Beacon, and now we're at Part 3...the other Recree Miraculous holders. And Part 4 will be the conclusion, so...dang, I guess we're officially halfway through this rodeo. Crazy!

The shout out this time is extra special and goes to...Clato Lawa! I'm not sure what they go by on AO3, but I was just bumming around on the Miraculous Ladybug TV Tropes a few days ago (as you do) when I clicked on the Fanfic Rec tab to check things out. Imagine my surprise when I see that Clato Lawa recommend my fic. That in and of itself is super cool, BUT THEN I FOUND A WHOLE TV Tropes PAGE for Hop to It!!! And not just a small page either with just a handful of tropes. A big one! I was completely blown away. I'm not sure if the page was all Clato Lawa's doing or not, or if there was more than one contributor, but thankyouthankyouthank to whomever for putting so much work and time and effort into it and literally making MY YEAR. My birthday was a few days ago and this is quite possibly the best birthday gift I could've ever received. Like, I was just smiling the whole time I was reading it and I LOVE IT.

*Happy tears* I'm serious. I truly have the best readers. Thank you all, and enjoy the chapter.

Jack squatted between Ladybug and Cat Noir as they took a break on the roof of the Trocadéro. They had their backs to the Eiffel Tower, scanning the 16th arrondissement for any kind of trouble. Cars rolled. People strolled. The setting sun painted the City of Light sherbet orange and pink. All was calm.

“So…” Jack said, deciding now was as good of a time as any. “I activated the Beacon yesterday.”

It had been such a process, faking the dismantling of the Beacon and moving it safely, that Jack had begun to feel like she would never be able to say those words. But here she was.
Her friends looked at her, Ladybug shocked and Cat flicking one of his cat ears as he grinned.

“And?” he wondered.

Jack took a seat, swinging her legs over the side of the building and letting them dangle. “And nothing.”

Maybe ‘nothing’ was underselling things a bit. With Dr. Lacasse’s help, Jack had done the math. She knew it was going to take seven and a half hours for the Beacon’s waves to reach Wrekk in Los Angeles, so she made sure she was Skypeing with Diego when the Kwami felt them. One moment, he was sleeping, the next, he was bouncing off the walls, filled with the indescribably urge to go east. And he would’ve gone too, had Diego agreed to go, but the Kwami was bound to his Miraculous and could not abandon his Chosen One. Diego did, however, help calm the creature down by wrapping him in acoustic foam, as prescribed by Dr. Lacasse.

“Is the Beacon broken?” wondered Ladybug.

Jack shook her head. “If the Recrees haven’t bonded with Miraculouses, they should’ve been here by now, which means…”

The words sank in. They weren’t good or bad, they just were.

“We’ll be on the lookout for other Miraculous holders, then,” said Cat, rubbing his chin. “I suppose I could always use some more super-powered friends!”

“I thought I was the only one for you,” joked Ladybug.

“Very true, Bugaboo.”

“Are you two flirting again?” wondered Jack, always up for furthering her charade of not knowing French. She also secretly shipped them, if she was being honest. It would be rather fun if her and Diego could go on a superhero double date with Ladybug and Cat Noir.

Ladybug designed not to answer that. “I hope the rest of them aren’t like Chameleon.”

Jack puffed out her cheeks and blew out a breath. “You and me both.”

Currently it was Jack and the Guardian verses Omega and Chameleon. She could use a little help to tip the odds in her favor. Hopefully the Firefly, Dragonfly, and Mantis Kwami had made better choices in Chosen Ones than poor little Hokss. According to Mimmi, he always was easily manipulated due to his naivety. He was the perfect target for misuse; right up there with people-pleasing Ceeree.

The trio didn’t spend too much longer atop the Trocadéro. They moved on, patrolling up the Seine. When they reached the roof of the Louvre, they slowed their pace and walked along it. Below them people shouted and waved. The three waved back, Cat Noir even blowing a few kisses. Ladybug ignored his antics, but Jack couldn’t help but roll her eyes. What a ham.

“Looks like everything’s quiet,” noted Ladybug when they reached the end. “Why don’t we wrap up patrol early tonight?”

“I don’t know…” said Cat. “Doesn’t it seem like it’s been a little too quiet lately? Something’s not
right. I can feel it in my whiskers.”

“First of all, you don’t have any whiskers. And second…if there was an active Akuma, don’t you think it would have attacked us by now?”

“Depends on the Akuma. Remember Evillistrator?”

“Or Hawk Moth could be on holiday and we can finally get some much needed rest. Good thing too. I’m going to need it for tomorrow.”

“Oh, that’s right! You’re reading to the kids,” recalled Jack.

*Storytime with Ladybug* was happening at the Fantômette Library the next morning. The event flyers plastered Jack’s neighborhood from top to bottom. Ladybug thought it was the least she could do after the head librarian got Akumatized earlier that week. He had reacted poorly to the low attendance for *Storytime with Mayor Bourgeois*. Or, rather, Mayor Bourgeois had reacted poorly and blamed the librarian. Feeling hurt, he had allowed Hawk Moth to transform him into Biblio Phil (his name being Philippe), an Akuma who brought stories to life. It was really only thanks to Ladybug’s ingenuity that he had been defeated.

“I still don’t understand why they didn’t invite me,” fumed Cat, crossing his arms. “I’m pawsively amazing with the little kitties.”

“I invited you,” said Ladybug, flicking his bell as if the noise would remind him. “And you said you were busy.”

“Yeah…”

All the joy seemed to have been sucked from Cat’s voice, causing Jack to give him a double take, but Ladybug didn’t seem to notice anything was amiss. She flung out her yo-yo, snagging a pipe poking out of the roof across the river. “Have a good night you two!” she shouted over her shoulder as she sailed away.

Jack and Cat waved goodbye as Ladybug vanish over the horizon. It seemed she was always the first to leave. Jack suspected it was because the girl had a really nice civilian life she wanted to return to, much like her. Cat…not so much.

“Don’t stay out too late again tonight, dude,” Jack said as she turned to him, but then she saw his face. Downcast, dejected—like a stray cat abandoned in a rainstorm. “Hey…” said Jack, lowering her voice as she put a hand on his shoulder. He glanced up and tried to force a smile, but it was too late. Jack shook her head almost imperceptibly to get him to stop pretending. “…You’re really feline down about this library thing, huh?”

Cat offered her a more natural grin in light of Jack’s pun, a crooked one that made his eyes crinkle. “Ladybug is the most amazing girl I’ve ever met—of course she deserves all the praise! …But it would be nice to have more recognition,” he said. “Not to be greedy or anything,” he added quickly.

“No, no! I totally get you. I kinda feel the same way. I had a lot of recognition back home and now…well, you know. But if it makes you feel better, I’m a bigger fan of you than I am of Ladybug.”

“Really!? How come?”
“You were the first person to make me feel welcome here. And you trained me. It’s only thanks to you that I can control Dogstruction now. Without your help, I’d still be Jack Hammer, Destroyer of Paris. But there is someone who is an even bigger fan of you than I am.”

“Who!?"

“Ladybug.”

Cat took a step back, flabbergasted, so Jack continued.

“Ladybug knows things wouldn’t be the same without you. She’s heard me tell horror stories of when I had to fight alone, before Perro Negro came into the picture, and she’s grateful she’s never had to do that. You’ve always been by her side.”

“I didn’t know she felt that way…”

“Well, she made me promise not to tell you.” Jack poked her friend in the forehead. “She says your head is big enough as it is.”

Cat playfully batted her hand away and faked a scowl, but the mirth gleaming in his eyes gave him away. Unable to contain her laughter, Jack snorted. Cat tried to tackle her for such an infraction, but Jack was not easily upended, so it morphed into a hug instead.

“Thanks, Rabbit,” he said into her shoulder. “I’m a fan of you too.”

They didn’t hang out much longer after that. Jack needed to get home for dinner. It was her dad’s turn tonight, and he was making his famous mac ‘n’ cheese. Just the thought of the cheddar, Gruyere, and just a hint of pecorino Romano (for extra bite) melting together around a generous dollop of barbecue pork made Jack’s mouth water, so she bid Cat goodnight and headed off, skipping across rooftops.

Jack’s bounces were sure. She knew what to expect with each passing one. The line of silver bikes with lavender seats in the waning shadow of the Republic Statue. The slightly bent lamppost in front of the wallpaper store. The open square in front of the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Despite every previous inclination, Paris was starting to feel like home. But without the ocean and Diego, there would always be pieces missing, like an incomplete puzzle.

Suddenly, a dark shape materialized in Jack’s peripherals, running parallel to her. She jerked her head to get a better look, but nothing was there. Even so, Jack leaped onto the roof where she saw the shadow last and skidded to a halt by a chimney. Diego couldn’t possibly be…No, she couldn’t get her hopes up like that. But someone was definitely there. She could hear them breathing.

“Who’s there?” she called out. She considered switching languages, but was forced to remind herself that Rabbit knew English and only English. “I know you’re there!” she said instead. “Come out!”

Jack’s body tensed up, the twilight air feeling electric. Cat Noir was right. Paris did seem a little too quiet lately. There had to be an Akuma laying in wait. Was she sharing a rooftop with one now?

A head poked out from behind a dormer, a girl with dark skin wearing a pale green domino mask. Her wildly curly black hair had been tamed into two half buns, giving her head a triangular shape. Long blades of grass poked out of each one. Bobbing in the wind, they looked like antennae.
“Rabbit…?” she drawled, her Southern accent as thick and as sweet as molasses.

Jack’s mouth dropped open, recognizing the girl for who she was immediately, even if she really didn’t know who she was. “…Mantis?”

“Yes’m,” said the girl, approaching Jack with the timidity of a mouse. “Roadd said ya’d recognize me.”

Mantis’s suit looked more superhero-y than most, with oversized gloves and boots with jagged ridges running the length of them, and a cape that flared out around her hips. She wore a copper utility belt with green ribbons coming from her sides, as thick and as long as her arms. She was thinner than Jack, but with broader shoulders.

Jack was swept with relief and an exhilarating rush of excitement. “Ah!” she cried, closing the gap between them in a single bound and sweeping her fellow Recree Miraculous holder into a hug. “It’s so good to meet you! Welcome to Paris!” She pulled back, honestly a little surprised by how fast Mantis had come. She had only just activated the Beacon. “How was…the flight…?”

Jack’s blood ran cold as she gave her thoughts a bit more attention. Even if Roadd lived in, say, Georgia and convinced Mantis to buy a plane ticket the moment he felt the waves, they would still be somewhere over the Atlantic right now. There was a small chance that Mantis just had good timing, but it seemed a tad too coincidental for comfort. Jack hardly listened as Mantis babbled on about arriving with her family yesterday.

“…I was tryin' to git out to Los Angeles to see ya, but then I heard ya popped up in Paris, so I tell my mamma, I tell her, ‘Let’s go to Paris for family vacay this year!’ Lemme tell ya, it was harder than nails gettin' her to say yes…”

Jack nodded in order to appear invested, a frozen smile plastered on her face that was starting to hurt her cheeks. She slipped her chakram off her wrist and tried to appear casual, playing with it for a moment.

Then she took her chances.

In one smooth motion, Jack expanded her weapon, slammed it over Mantis’s head, and tightened it around her, pinning her arms to her sides.

“W-what the hey…!?” cried the girl, terrified, but Jack refused to waver, glaring with enough intensity to cut steel.

“Nice try, Chameleon,” she said.

“Chameleon!? What're ya talkin’ about!? I’m not—”

Jack kicked Mantis over and she fell like a bowling pin, crashing to the ground on her side. The impact was more than enough to cause the illusion to melt away. Small to big. Green to rust. Girl to boy. Even though it was exactly what Jack expected to see, a shiver still ran down her spine. She had let her guard down and it was by her instincts alone that she hadn’t suffered the consequences.

“Aw, c'mon!” complained Chameleon, half into the ground with his nose smushed up against his face. "There's no way you could've known it was me!"
Jack opened her mouth, but thought twice about her response. She had it hand it to Chameleon. He wasn’t as dumb as he looked, fishing for information like that. She almost spilled about the Beacon.

“Lucky guess,” she said instead over the beeping of his Miraculous.

“Okay, well, you got me. Now lemme go.”

“No way! I’m gonna do to you what you tried to do to me.”

“Pretend to be my boyfriend?”

Jack ignored him as she reached for his anklet, but he tried to kick her in the face. She backed off, unfortunately giving him the room he needed to rock up onto his knees and then jump back onto his feet. A stare-down commenced. It wasn’t going to be easy figuring out Chameleon’s civilian identity, but Jack had a backup plan since stripping him of his Miraculous didn’t seem like it was going to be an option. She only had to keep him occupied for five minutes. It couldn’t be that difficult. She had gotten other bad guys to do it for much longer.

“You know, it was pretty smart of you to go after my identity rather than my Miraculous,” Jack said.

Chameleon gave her a rueful smirk that she was beginning to realize was his signature. “Yeah? You like that?”

“If you had just gone after my Miraculous, I would’ve known you were working for Omega from the start. All this time I thought you were, like, a third party or something. But then you got sloppy. You left Hokss’s samples in the Beacon.”

The boy wrinkled his brow and tilted his head, his self-confidence replaced by utter confusion. “Omega?”

“I’m sure he goes by a different name, but I know all about the man you work for.”

The smirk returned, along with an obnoxious amount of faux surprise. “Really!? News to me. I could’ve sworn my boss was a chick.”

Jack felt herself teeter a little, like a tightrope walker in the wind, and the question that immediately sprang to her mind slipped out through her lips even though she had a suspect in mind. “Who?”

Chameleon snickered. “But I thought you knew all about the ‘man’ I work for!”

A quickstep from Jack and she had swiped the retractable whip Chameleon had in the holster on his leg. He turned red as he stumbled back, sputtering, but Jack paid him no heed as she flicked her wrist. The bright pink tail came out maybe three feet. Jack grabbed the end of it. It stuck to her glove as she yanked more of it out and then looped it around Chameleon, tying him up as tight as she could.

“Are you that afraid of me?” he wondered, his tongue sliding along the top row of his teeth. Jack was tempted to kick him again, if only to wipe the smug look of self-satisfaction off his face, but instead took back her chakram. She used it to pull up the picture Diego had sent her of Evelyn Jenson, cropped from one of the photos he had taken of her with his _aubela_. She was a rather plain-looking woman in a pink scrubs and a dowdy cardigan, a stethoscope around her neck. Her most
striking feature were her bluer than blue eyes, but the bags beneath detracted from their beauty. And with her wavy chestnut hair tucked back into a sloppy ponytail, she looked like pretty much every nurse ever. Jack supposed that was the point, to look ordinary, to escape detection.

“Is this her?” she demanded, showing Chameleon.

He appeared nonplussed, but Jack could be a human lie detector if she wanted to be. Her rabbit ears picked up on a sharp intake of breath and an increase in heart rate.

“…Thanks,” he said, after a moment.

Jack tilted her head to one side. “For what?”

“For freeing me.”

Chameleon’s whip retracted back into its handle so fast that Jack flinched when it snapped and she dropped it. Chameleon scooped it up, preformed a flawless spin flip over Jack when she tried to kick his feet out from under him, and landed on the lip of the roof behind her.

“Gotta go GTL,” he said, stomping his foot. His Miraculous jingled, two lines left. “Wouldn’t want to change back in front of you, now would I?”

Jack bull rushed him, but Chameleon saluted her sarcastically (with the wrong hand, she might add. She was stung on Diego’s behalf) and flung out his whip. It caught and he was yanked away. Jack jumped after him, but lost altitude. Grounded, she watched Chameleon sail over buildings and vanish a street beyond her. By the time she reached where she had seen him last, he was gone.

And now Jack was late for dinner.

* * *

As soon as the lock to her bedroom door clicked, Jack threw herself onto her stomach and pulled out a storage bin from beneath her bed. Concealed behind it was the Beacon, a colorful beach towel wrapped around it to block its glow. Jack knew under her bed was the most clichéd spot for her to hide it, but needed it to be close by where she could keep an eye on it. Unfortunately, her room wasn’t very large, so she didn’t have a whole lot of options. She missed her old bedroom, with its myriad of nooks and crannies. She could’ve hidden the Beacon beneath the floorboards or in the vents or in the weird little attic space above her closet.

Mimmi came down from above by phasing through Jack’s bed. She floated around the machine like a moon to a planet, examining it from every angle with a look that meant business.

“All good?” Jack wondered.

The Kwami raised both her arms up into the air—touchdown. It was basically her version of a thumbs-up since she didn’t have any thumbs. “All good!”

Relieved, Jack went about concealing the machine again. She had already checked on it multiple times that day, but her meeting with Chameleon had left her shaken. She wanted to make sure it was still there, and that no one had tampered with it in any way. Once everything was back in place, she hugged her knees and laid her head down on top of them, mentally exhausted.
“Oh, Jack. Turn that frown upside-down!” chirruped Mimmi, bouncing on the bed. “Running into Chameleon was a good thing! Now we know our plan worked. He clearly doesn’t know we have the Beacon.”

“True. And he basically confirmed he is working for Evie, which means she’s working for Omega.” Jack rubbed her face as her words sunk in a little. This was not good.

“Yeah! But…about that…”

Mimmi looked contrite, tapping her arms together. Jack hadn’t seen her Kwami act like that since Imagineur.

“Oh, no. What did I do?” Jack wondered, leaning her head back on the bed and looking at the cracks in the plaster ceiling.

“It’s not a big deal! But…you probably should’ve shown Chameleon that picture of Evelynn *after* his Miraculous ran out…”

Jack groaned. How could she have missed such an obvious solution? “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” she muttered to herself. "And I was doing so much better at thinking things through too!”

“It’s okay! Really! If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.”

“Yeah…but—argh!” Jack grabbed a Hawaiian-print pillow that had fallen off the bed and pressed her face into it, screaming out all her pent-up frustration into the fabric while Mimmi patted her on the back. She felt a modicum better as she lifted her head and blew her hair out of her mouth. "I almost had him!"

"Jack..."

"I promise I'll do better next time. I swear.”

"I know that. And at least now we know about Evie, so it’s not all bad.”

"Yeah...Diego's not going to like that..." Jack slowly clambered onto her feet and dragged herself over to her computer. It was time to face the music…

Opening Skype, Jack clicked the phone button and the familiar oscillating tones of a call filled her bedroom. Her boyfriend picked up halfway through the second ring.

“You want to talk to me again, *mi conejito*? Must be my lucky day!”

Really, all Jack wanted to do was gaze at Diego’s face and listen to him regale her with tales of urban exploring and super heroism, but business took a front seat. “Did you find out more about Evie?” she asked.

If he had been in costume, Jack knew the boy’s ears and tail would’ve lowered. “Sí,” he said. “My *abuela*’s old care facility finally called me back. It turns out Evie started working there right before my *abuela* was admitted, and quit right after she…you know…”

Jack did know. She had never gotten the opportunity to meet Diego’s grandma, but she had heard nothing but wonderful things. Despite her early-onset Alzheimer’s, the woman had raised Diego by
herself for as long as she was mentally capable after Diego’s mom left. Her death had left a deep
gouge in Diego’s heart that still made it difficult for him to talk about her passing. It would always be
a fresh wound, even more than a year later.

“But I don’t think that means anything!” insisted Diego, continuing. “Evie told me herself that she
was super attached to my abuela, and she couldn’t continue working there with her gone. ¿Ya
sabes?”

“I don’t know. It seems a little suspicious to me. Especially since I ran into Chameleon again and—”

Diego growled, his voice growing rough. “¿Ese polla? He didn’t try and make a move on you, did he?”

“He tried to trick me by disguising himself as the Mantis Miraculous holder.”

“Ay, tried to lull you into a false sense of security! But I know my girl. You saw right through him!”

“Of course! He got away, again, but…he let it slip that he works for a woman, and then got all
squirrelly when I showed him that pic of Evie.”

Diego fell silent. Jack could only imagine what was going through his head. A woman he trusted,
one who had taken care of the most important person in his life, had betrayed him. The foundation of
their entire friendship had been a lie. That knowledge couldn’t be easy for him to come to terms
with…which was probably why he didn’t.

“No,” said Diego finally, shaking his head. “It’s not true. It can’t be. She can’t have been…”

“Diego…”

“Listen,” he insisted. “The last time I saw Evie, she gave me her email and told me to reach out to
her if I ever needed anything. Does that sound like someone who works for Omega?”

She was clearly looking for the Dog Miraculous. We’re lucky you got to it first.”

“But can we…can we please just assume she’s innocent until proven guilty, mi conejito? I just
finished my email when you called. Here, I’ll send it over.”

Emailing Evie was Diego’s very first thought after he had dropped the bomb on Jack that he knew
the Beacon thief’s wife, but he had rewritten it a thousand times since then and had yet to show Jack.
Jack wondered what you would even say in an email like that. Dear Evie, are you working for an
evil man who created seven magical creatures so he could abuse their powers?

The chat window filled up with text. Jack read:

Hey Evie,

I know it’s been a while. I feel bad about it. I was thinking about mi aubela and you, and I thought I
should email you. What’s going on? Where are you working now? Are you still in LA? Things have
been rough, but I am living with a really cool foster family now. I also joined an Ultimate Frisbee
Diego

There was nothing accusatory about the email at all. In fact, it looked like someone trying to reconnect with an old friend. And maybe that was for the best.

“Good job with the grammar, Wrekk!” said Mimmi after she finished reading over Jack’s shoulder, knowing full well Diego couldn’t have written such a coherent email on his own. He simply didn’t have the patience for it.

Diego turned in his chair to reveal his Kwami half-asleep at the foot of his bed, wrapped in foam and rubber bands like a mini Michelin Man. Wrekk lifted a sleepy paw in acknowledgement before settling back down for some more shut-eye.

“It looks good to me,” said Jack, anxious for answers. “Send it.”

* * *

Jack was yanked from sleep the next morning by a little incessant mamba tune. For a split second upon opening her gummy eyes, she didn’t recognize her room, the skyline outside her window, the air—like she was living in a misplaced dream. And whose phone was ringing? But then it dawned on her that it was her’s. She had only gotten it yesterday, and had yet to change its default ringtone to the harp she was familiar with hearing. She reached over a soundly sleeping Mimmi and snagged it off the bedside table, fumbling to answer it in time. She didn’t even notice who was calling.

“What?” she mumbled.

“Glad someone is answering!” came Alya’s voice, much too loud. “Girl, I need your help! Something big is going down and Marinette is MIA. Meet me outside your place. I’ll be there in ten!”

“Uh…”

“Later!”

Alya hung up. Jack just lay there, propped up on one arm, blinking in the morning light that was sneaking in through the slats of her blinds. A minute passed and then it occurred to her that she now only had nine minutes to get ready. She barreled out of bed, taking the duvet cover with her and sending Mimmi flipping through the air.

“Ah! Sorry Mimmi!” cried Jack, spinning in place before locating her overstuffed armoire and riffling through it. She missed closets. “Something’s up. I’ve gotta meet up with Alya. Like, now.”

“Got it!” said the Kwami, not even skipping a beat as she phased into the armoire. She popped out moments later with a shirt to go along with the lightning bolt leggings Jack had pulled out.

Exactly eight minutes later, Jack burst through the front door of her apartment building, a little out of breath but punctual.

“Whoa, Jack. Good timing!”

Alya strolled up, but she hadn’t come alone. Trailing behind her were her younger twin sisters, Ella and Etta. Jack had met them a few times before and they were always bouncing off the walls like they were on a perpetual sugar high. Today, however, they appeared to be on their best behavior.
They lined up behind their big sister in single file. Though they looked around curiously, often catching each other’s eyes, they didn’t say anything and kept relatively still.

Alya noticed Jack’s gaze and rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I promised my mom I’d take the Sapotis to Storytime with Ladybug. But that’s okay. I was going to go anyway.” She looped her arm through Jack’s and they headed down the street together, Ella and Etta falling in step behind them.

“Are you going to interview Ladybug?” guessed Jack. She almost had to laugh. Of course this would be the big thing Alya was talking about.

“No, I gotta warn her,” said Alya. She glanced sideways at Jack, trying to gauge a response. “Something’s up. I don’t know how to explain it, but…doesn’t Paris seem a little quiet to you?”

Jack frowned, wanting to tell her friend that she wasn’t the first person to say so, but kept her mouth shut. She knew Alya—the girl would want to know who else had said that and Jack didn’t want to have to lie to her.

Alya realized Jack wasn’t going to say anything and continued. “Marinette tells me it’s all in my head, that Positivity Club is working, but I can’t help but feel that there’s an Akuma at play here.”

“What makes you say that?”

Alya glanced briefly back at her sisters before leaning in close to Jack and lowering her voice. “The Sapotis have been acting weird. I mean, like, really weird. They don’t speak unless spoken to. They always say please and thank you. They haven’t gotten in trouble in over three days—” Jack snorted, causing Alya to scowl. “I’m serious!”

“So your proof is that your sisters behave…are behaving? You are right. An Akuma is the only explanation.”

Jack’s friend sighed and pushed up her glasses in order to rub the bridge of her nose. “When you put it like that…I don’t know. Maybe I’m wrong. I took them to the pool yesterday and they seemed like their old selves—didn’t want to leave, like always, begged me, even—but I’ve been watching other kids and seeing the same kind of thing. They're all so well-behaved, but look so…so sad.”

Jack took a moment to look at Ella and Etta again, but with new eyes. Now that Alya mentioned it, their movements were a little sluggish, as if they were dragging their feet, and their shoulders were slumped. They stared down at their sneakers, defeated in all senses of the word.

“Oh, hello!”

A fuchsia-haired woman in a blousy tunic was addressing Alya. She stood on the corner waiting for the light to change, hand-in-hand with a buck-toothed girl who appeared a little bit older than Ella and Etta. “You’re Marinette Dupain-Cheng’s friend, aren’t you? Remind me of your name again.”

“No worries, Mme Chamack. It’s Alya.”

A jolt ran through Jack as she recognized the news reporter from TV. She felt a little sheepish for not realizing who she was sooner, but the causal clothes had thrown her off.

Alya squatted so she was eye-level with Mrs. Chamack’s daughter. “Why, if it isn’t Manon, my fellow unicorn sista! I haven’t seen you in forever! How are you, girl?”
The little girl smiled, but it twisted a bit. Jack tilted her head. Now it looked more like a grimace. “I’m…good. Thank you,” she said.

“Wait…this is Manon!?” cried Jack, dumbfounded. She had heard horror stories from Marinette about babysitting this child. She was an outright little terror, destroying everything she touched, using her baby doll eyes to always get her way, wreaking havoc like it was a personal hobby. Though she could be a sweet girl at times, she was generally just an uncontrollable ball of energy. Marinette had been so relieved when Mrs. Chamack had finally gotten an au pair, so Jack had a hard time believing the calm little girl before her was Manon.

“The one and only,” informed Alya though, popping back up to her feet. She turned to Mrs. Chamack. “This is my friend Jack, by the way. Marinette’s told her all about how awesome Manon is. Isn’t that right, Jack?”

“Er…yes! I mean, yes!” said Jack as she shook the woman’s hand. She cast Alya a look of gratitude.

“I know you,” said Mrs. Chamack, a twinkle in her eye. “You’re the girl who saved Adrien Agreste when Simone Sauvage got Akumatized! Sorry if I was a little forward when I was trying to interview you. I just really wanted the scoop.”

Jack tried to recall Mrs. Chamack specifically, but the media who had accosted her that day was all a blur. “I do not remember,” she admitted, then blushed. “I am sorry.”

“I don’t blame you. You did seem a little anxious about all the attention.”

“So are you going to Storytime with Ladybug too?” Alya wondered. By this time, other parents and guardians and the like had joined them in waiting to cross, the library only a block away. While the adults traded sunny greetings to one another, recognizing their friends and neighbors, the children were suspiciously quiet. Jack focused on their faces. How was it that all of them looked so resigned and hopeless? Did they know something the rest of them didn’t?

“Oh, yes,” said Mrs. Chamack to Alya. “Manon has been extra good lately, so I thought I would treat her. She loves Ladybug.” She looked down at the girl fondly. “Do you have your Ladybug doll Marinette made you, Sweetie?” Manon held up a hand-made plush doll of the superhero. Mrs. Chamack ruffled her hair. “Don’t drop her now.”

The light changed and everyone crossed the street en masse. Every single child who wasn’t already holding an adult’s hand did so the moment they stepped off the curb. Ella and Etta formed a chain with Alya, and they didn’t separate until they were all safely on the other side. No one ran ahead. No one insisted they were big enough to not have to do something like that. It all seemed perfectly innocuous if you didn't think about it, but now that Alya had pointed it out, Jack’s weirdness sensor was going crazy. She could understand a handful of well-behaved children, but all of them?

“You are right,” Jack told Alya as they walked up to the Fantômette Library and slipped beneath its colonnades. “Something is up.”

“Girl, I told you!” said the girl. “I think Ladybug might be in danger at this event. I really can’t leave my sisters though. Maybe you can try and find her before the reading starts?”

“I can try,” said Jack, following a father with a double stroller inside.
Jack had passed the Fantômette Library a few times in her travels, both as a civilian and a superhero, but had never taken the time to pop inside. She regretted it now, and not only because she didn’t know her way around. It was gorgeous, all open and airy, filled with warm woods and potted plants. Crystalline kaleidoscope skylights allowed sunlight to stream into the reception area, making the whole place feel like a greenhouse that also grew books.

“Good luck!” said Alya, unceremoniously pushing Jack into an aisle before she, Ella, and Etta were swept away by the rest of the crowd.

Jack stumbled, Mimmi tumbling out of her beach bag. The creature spotted a staircase through the stacks and pointed it out to Jack, who took it down to the archives. Other than one beleaguered university student absorbed in his studies, it was a ghost town. Jack easily found an isolated corner. She almost transformed, but remembered that she had been trying something new lately—asking for a second opinion.

“Well, Mimmi?” Jack wondered. “Is this a job for Jack or Rabbit?”

The Kwami tried to hide how delighted she was to be asked, but still waved her paws and feet around wildly. “The kids of Paris are acting strangely and Ladybug’s gonna read to them? Sounds suspicious! Rabbit will find her a lot faster. Like I always say, better safe than sorry!”

That was all the assurance Jack needed. “Then hop to it!”

Before her transformation was even complete, she was calling Ladybug on her chakram. Unfortunately, Ladybug didn’t pick up (again, Jack noted wryly), so Jack left her a message to call her as soon as she could, and then tried Cat Noir. He picked up almost immediately.

“Hey, Rabbit!” he said, his face filling her chakram. “I was hopping you’d call.”

"I thought—" Jack heard a distance shush from a library patron and winced. She tried again in a whisper. "I thought you were busy."

Caught, Cat tried to laugh it off. "You know, my schedule just cleared up. What's up?"

“Can you come to the Fantômette Library?”


“She’s fine. It probably nothing, but—”

“I’ll be right over.”

The screen shut off, so Jack shrugged and returned her weapon to her wrist. Ladybug had to be in the building somewhere, so she returned to the first floor in search of her.

The reception area was now mostly empty. Everyone had filed into the next room. As Jack approached the door, she saw dozens of backs—it appeared Storytime with Ladybug was standing room only, not that she was suprised. It was a bit of a struggle pushing her way inside.

“Watch it!” muttered an older woman as Jack snaked her way passed and knocked her purse.
“Ow!” complained a man when Jack accidentally stepped on his foot.

“Sorry, sorry…!” Jack whispered, shrinking beneath death glares and double takes. At least no one ran away from her screaming anymore, but they still flinched, still thought of her a trouble. Jack thought of herself as trouble too if she wasn’t careful.

“In an old house in Paris that was covered in vines, lived twelve little girls in two straight lines...” came Ladybug’s voice from somewhere in the back of the room. Jack still couldn’t see her, so she looked up in search of higher ground. The second floor balcony would suit her purposes perfectly, so she broke from the claustrophobic crowd and jumped up there. She found herself by a small café, with it’s seating outside on a balcony, the door propped open to let in the breeze off the Seine. The café was closed, due to the event. In fact, the whole second floor was as empty as the archives below.

Looking down, Jack could now see Ladybug encircled by children. They all sat Indian-style in even rows, their backs perfectly straight. Though there was an occasional fidget, they were still and quiet. The superheroine read to them from a bright yellow book, Manon sitting in her lap with her Ladybug doll clasped in her hands. It was a peaceful scene, but one Jack felt in her bones was inherently wrong.

Ladybug didn’t notice anything amiss as she licked her finger and turned the page, but Manon’s little hand was sneaking up towards her ear. Towards her Miraculous.

“Ladybug!” Jack shouted in warning, much too late.

Luckily, a hand shot out and grabbed Manon’s wrist, stopping her just short of Ladybug’s earring. Jack hadn’t even noticed Alya sitting close to Ladybug by with her sisters, but she had dove forward to prevent the theft. Ladybug looked at Alya and then dropped her gaze down to Manon, putting two and two together

“Were…were you trying to take my Miraculous?” she asked in disbelief.

Manon burst into tears upon being found out. She shrieked and wailed, causing Alya to drop her and skitter backwards. Ladybug covered her ears, both to protect herself and ward off the noise, but the outburst didn’t last long. Manon’s mouth suddenly snapped shut and her tears seemed to vanish right off her face, as if an unknown entity had wiped them away. Her body convulsed, but it appeared she was forcing herself to calm down. Only then did hundreds of tiny pinpricks of lavender light flee her body.

She wasn’t the only one either. Thousands of lavender lights came off the other perfectly behaved children and joined with Manon’s, gradually forming into a young woman. She had a ghost-like yet mechanical appearance, with parts of her body jagged and unfinished. With a short cape and a jaunty hat that was pulled down over one of her eyes, she looked part private investigator, part Mary Poppins.

“Now, now…” she said in French, the words weighed down by her heavy British accent. “There’s no need for tears. You tried your best, Manon.”

“You!” shouted Alya, whipping her phone out to record. Next to her, Ladybug placed Manon on the ground and got into a fighting stance. “You’re the Akuma who’s been controlling my sisters and all these other kids!”
The Akuma’s nostrils flared. “That’s such a nasty word. Akuma. My name is Nanny Mite, poppet. And how dare you accuse me of such travesties!? I am not controlling them. I am simply helping them learn acceptable behavior with my nanites.”

As if to demonstrate, Nanny Mite held up a stump of an arm, the particles of light coming together to form her hand. More lights came shooting out of her wrist, hovering above her outstretched palm like well-trained fireflies. They were much too tiny to see, and faded from sight when they weren’t moving about and emitting light.

Meanwhile, the shock of seeing an Akuma appear was starting to wear off. Children began to cry. Nanny Mite’s keen eyes picked up on them though and her nanites got to work, flying around the room to wipe more faces. They also flew into the faces of any adult who tried to get to the children in the middle, causing them to stand down.

“Uh-ah-ah!” Nanny Mite admonished, wagging her finger at the kids as she slowly spun in place. “We do not cry in public. It is extremely disruptive.”

“Charlotte…? Charlotte, is that you? Please don’t do this. Please give me my daughter back!”

The Akuma froze, her brow wrinkled, before degenerating into nanites and reforming to face the other way. Mrs. Chamack stood at the forefront of the adults. Her eyes glistened with tears and her mouth was set—she was equal parts enraged and terrified.

“Why, Mrs. Chamack, I thought you were chuffed about all the improvements in Manon’s behavior!” said Nanny Mite. “After all, the whole reason why you fired me in the first place was because you didn’t think I was doing enough to keep her from acting up.”

Mrs. Chamack faltered, her eyes dropping. Satisfied, the Akuma nodded to herself and lifted her chin as she addressed the rest of the adults.

“As far as I can tell, I haven’t received a single complaint about my work. I don’t mean you or your children any harm. I am only here to collect my payment for a job well done.” She disassembled and zipped over to Ladybug to reform. “Ladybug’s Miraculous!”

Ella and Etta came out of nowhere, latching onto Ladybug’s hands and hanging off her like monkeys. Ladybug tried to shake them off, but it was obvious she was afraid of hurting them. Alya yelped and, while she didn’t let go of her phone, she tried to use her free hand to pry Ella (or maybe it was Etta) away. Other children had stood up and were making their way towards Ladybug as well, but they shambled like zombies, clearly fighting the nanites influencing their every step.

Jack’s chakram rang. “Looks like your hutch was right, Rabbit,” said a voice next to her. “My Lady needs our help.”

“Cat!” cried Jack, turning to her friend, but the boy was in hero-mode as he slammed his staff onto the railing and pointed it at a downward angle. It expanded and hit the ground in front of Ladybug. While he did this, Jack whipped off her chakram to check his identity too. The staff gave a cheery ring.

“Now that's been established...Let’s go!” he said, grabbing Jack’s wrist. They jumped on top of his staff and grinded down it with their boots. Cat stopped short at the bottom though so he didn’t mow down a little boy. The child’s fear of almost being trampled overpowered the nanites and he ducked, Jack leaping over them both. She somehow did not land on any children, though she did cause a few
to stumble.

“*You don’t mean the children any harm, do you?”* wondered Ladybug, taking note of the near mishaps. “*Then why are you putting them in danger like this?”*

Nanny Mite looked as if she had just eaten a lemon. With a harrumph, she made a rising motion with her hands, causing all the nanites to leave their young charges entirely and lift into the air in unison. They looked to be more numerous then the stars in the night sky. Ella and Etta dropped from Ladybug and stared up at the ceiling in awe-struck wonder.

“*Return to your guardians, poppets,”* trilled the Akuma as the area erupted into chaos, children running into the arms of their caretakers. Alya dodged and weaved, but continued to record. “*And remember everything I’ve taught you!”*

Believing Nanny Mite to be distracted, Jack decided to take her chances. She flung her chakram at the Akuma. The angle was perfect, set to hit her right between the shoulder blades, but the nanites swarmed and plucked the weapon right out of the air.

“Whoops!” said Jack, giving a weak laugh as she watched the chakram wobble a bit as the nanites took over. Then it came shooting back at her. Cat stepped in and smacked it away, using his staff like a baseball bat, but the force of the impact knocked it from his hands. It went spinning across the room. Cat chased after it on all fours, but the nanites were faster. They gained control of his weapon just as quickly as they had Jack’s.

Jack lost track of Cat after that. Nanny Mite was sending swathes of nanites at her. They were actually fairly weak—made to control children, not superheroes—but the chakram they now wielded was a different story. As the throwing ring went whizzing about like a homing missile, Jack was forced to duck, run up a wall, and preform a series of intricate flips and hops to avoid getting struck.

“**Cover me, Chaton.**” Jack’s ear’s picked up at one point. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a black shape dive at Nanny Mite, but the Akuma simply dispersed into a cloud of nanites.

Jack turned to Ladybug, just in time to watch her throw her yo-yo into the air. “**Lucky Ch—!”**

The nanites yanked the weapon right out of Ladybug’s hand and began to swing it themselves. Ladybug, biting back on her shock, held her arm up to protect herself as she slowly backed away.

“**Run!”** she cried.

Jack was just about to suggest the same course of action. She caught up with Ladybug and Cat Noir before they got too far, grabbed one under each arm, and sprung up to the second floor. They escaped using the open door next to the café. Vaulting over tables and chairs, their own weapons and a cavalcade of nanites in hot pursuit, they hurdled off the balcony and landed on the street below.

Ladybug led the way, cutting through private gardens and taking every twisting side street possible to throw off their pursuers. The three of them easily outstripped their weighty weapons, but the nanites were a different story. No matter what they did, they just couldn’t seem to shake them, and when Ladybug took a sharp turn around a blind corner, she ran headfirst into a swarm that had been lying in wait. She struggled to extricate herself, waving her limbs about, but she was like her namesake flipped over on its back.

“My Lady!” cried Cat.
As he raised a hand to cast Cataclysm, Jack dared to look over her shoulder at the encroaching fog of nanites. If they hadn’t clumped together, they would be nearly impossible to see in the daylight, but there they were, closing in fast. Thinking Cat’s powers weren’t going to do squat against so many little machines, she ran up to the struggling Ladybug and tried to pull her free.

“They must have some weakness!” said Ladybug, thinking out loud.

Jack’s mind flipped through what she knew about the nanites like it was paging through an old-fashioned Rolodex. It wasn’t much, but she landed on something Alya had said earlier, about how her sisters were back to their normal selves at the pool and didn’t want to leave. It was now apparent that it had been the only time they were free of the nanites influence.

“I think… water!” said Jack, looking around for some, but, in the end, she didn’t have to worry. With dark power of destruction crackling, Cat shoved his hand into the cloud next to them.

The nanites near Cat’s fist froze as their lavender glow darkened into purple. It spread like a ripple in water, not just to those holding Ladybug captive, but to the nanites chasing them as well as soon as they got close enough. And then, without any further ceremony, they dropped to the ground, making a sound akin to shattering glass before seemingly vanishing.

Ladybug dropped to the ground and scanned the area before allowing her shoulders to sag. She leaned against a wall.

“I think we are safe for now, but we can’t sit on our haunches just yet. Nanny Mite will just make more,” she said over the beeping of Cat’s Miraculous. She turned to him. “Thanks, Chaton.”

“Nano problem,” he said with a wink.

“So LB, what’s the play here?” wondered Jack as she grabbed at her wrist. She felt so naked without her chakram, especially since it was her only true defense against Chameleon.

“I need to get my yo-yo back so I can use Lucky Charm,” said the girl.

“That shouldn’t be too hard, considering it’s after you.”

“That is not the problem. Keeping the nanites from stealing it again is the problem.” Ladybug stroked her chin. “Maybe we can lure Nanny Mite into a trap like she did with me. Lull her into a false sense of security so she doesn’t notice what I’m doing.”

Jack recognized Diego’s echo in Ladybug’s words. What Nanny Mite did to Ladybug was very similar to what Chameleon had done to her just last night. She shivered. Sometimes it was almost too easy to let your guard down.

Wait…

Another hazy, crazy idea started to form in Jack’s head. A small part of her didn’t want to put it into words, confident that it would only get shot down if she shared it. She should just do it herself! But she quashed that thought. It was thinking like that that got her in hot water. Ladybug was her friend and fellow superhero, Jack had to remind herself. She wasn’t seeking her approval, but contributing to the team.
Teamwork makes the dream work, thought Jack wryly. It was surprising Mimmi hadn’t picked up on
that one yet.

“I have an idea…” said Jack slowly. Cat grinned as if he knew Jack was going to say those words
from the start, while Ladybug leaned forward with interest. “But it’s dangerous and stupid and we
have to split up.”

Ladybug considered these words carefully before answering.

“Let’s hear it and see what we can do.”

* * *

An hour later, Jack found herself alone on the Eiffel Tower observation deck. The moment she had
jumped up there, the staff ushered all the tourists down in a frenzied mass. They knew that, when
Rabbit appeared, trouble was sure to follow, but at least a nice American family had stopped to take
a picture with her. Perhaps Jack shouldn’t have felt as bitter about it as she did. She did want the area
to be clear, after all, but because of the ensuing Akuma fight, not because she was going to use
Dogstruction. And so what if she was? Ladybug had made Jack’s plan as Rabbit-proof as possible.

Speaking of Ladybug, Jack’s ear twitched, picking up steps on gravel too fast to be that of anyone
short of an Olympic sprinter. Jack hopped up onto the railing and looked down at the Champ de
Mars, a tiny red and black figure making her way towards the tower. Jack dropped, pulling off a
three-point hero landing.

“Oh, thank gawd,” said Jack, giving Ladybug a quick hug. “I was worried Nanny Mite caught up
with you.”

“I’m sure she’ll be here any minute,” said the girl, looking over her shoulder. “Where’s Chaton?”

A dark figure burst through the bushes, as if waiting for a grand entrance. It surprised neither of
them.

“I’m always by your side, My Lady,” Cat Noir assured, taking up Ladybug’s hand and kissing it.

“Except when your Kwami needs to recharge,” noted Ladybug, spinning her partner around her so
they were now back to back. “We have to be more careful. Nanny Mite could—”

“Incoming!” warned Jack, hearing disturbed air that certainly wasn’t caused by birds.

Jack’s chakram came zinging at them first. The three of them leaped over it, but Cat’s staff and
Ladybug’s yo-yo followed. Caught in the air, it seemed like they were sitting ducks, but Ladybug
was quick. She unlatched Cat’s tail, used the weighted end to wrap it around the staff, and whipped
it into the yo-yo before it could ensnare them. It ended up being all for nothing though. A net of
nanites swooped in to catch them.

The total number of microscopic machines had swelled since the fight in the library. Jack found
herself no longer able to fight them off as she had before. Every time she pushed forward to break
free, they would push back. Her body jerked like a puppet on a string in a never-ending game of tug-
of-war. She saw that Ladybug and Cat Noir were having similar issues. Luckily, Cat had just enough
mobility to start to use Cataclysm. The nanites shied away, escaping to the shadow of the Eiffel
Tower like magnets had repelled them. About a tenth of them clumped together, concentrating to
once again form Nanny Mite. She clucked her tongue and waved a finger at Cat.

“*Naughty kitty!*” she said. “*It’s rude to break something, especially if it isn’t yours. Someone ought to teach you some manners!*”

But Cat just smirked. “Stick with me, my lucky ladies. She can’t use those nanities when I’m around!”

The three made a run at Nanny Mite together. Although the Akuma was disgruntled by the prospect of a full-frontal assault, she held her own. Or, rather, she didn’t hold at all. Jack would try to sweep her legs and they would temporarily disassemble. Cat would try to claw her, Ladybug would try to grab her—it was impossible. Even if one of them made contact, which was rare, Nanny Mite would literally slip between their fingers as easily as if she were made of liquid. And it wasn’t long before their weapons returned to the fray, specifically targeting Cat. Ladybug was able to fend them off with her makeshift whip for a little while longer, but soon it too was stripped from her hands by the nanites. Her own yo-yo was finally able to wrap them all up in a tight little bundle.

“*Keep still, poppets,*” said Nanny Mite. “*You’re being extremely disruptive!*”

She floated over and made a move for Ladybug’s earring, but Jack wasn’t having any of that. She squatted and then pushed up off the ground, jumping as high as she could.

“*Lean to the left!*” commanded Ladybug as the three of them twisted through the air on the way back down. They were able to unravel themselves and land. “I need that back,” said Ladybug, looking up at her yo-yo as the nanites controlling it retracted its string. “I need to use Lucky Charm or we’re never going to win!”

“No *pawblem!*” Cat told her, scanning the area. His eyes fell in the direction of one of the ponds on either side of the Eiffel Tower and he took off. The three weapons went shooting after him.

“*Wait, Chaton, no!*” cried Ladybug once she put her partner’s plan together. She chased after him, Jack hopping along after her. Bursting through the foliage, Cat stopped on a dime at the water’s edge and spun around. “*You can’t—I!*”

Jack’s chakram came first, which Cat easily dodged, followed by his tail, which he snagged from the air. Pulling it taunt, he used it to catch his staff. With his hands full though, he was an easy target for the yo-yo to wrap him up. Legs locked, he started to tip over backwards. Ladybug reached for the front of his suit, but just whiffed. He fell into the water with the splash, the nanites fleeing.

In an instant, Jack and Ladybug were swept up by a swarm of nanites so thick and bright that they were forced to squint. Nanny Mite had made even more machines, it seemed, and now there were enough to lift the two of them up and away, to where Cat would not be able to reach them just by jumping. Jack and Ladybug struggled, but it seemed there was no escape.

Nanny Mite took shape before them, speaking to herself more than anyone else considering it was in English. “The lad is daft! Cataclysm was the only thing holding me back.”

“Are you so sure?” questioned Jack.

Nanny Mite stared at Jack for a moment, struggling to comprehend what her words meant. Jack fought, but eventually managed to cross her arms above her head.
Though she was used to using her chakram to use her power, she technically didn’t need it.

“Dogstruction!”

Before she could even finish the word, the nanites dropped her.

As Jack belly-flopped to slow her decent, her destructive aura blooming around her, she knew landing here would be the most difficult part of this entire plan. Her and Cat convinced Ladybug it wouldn’t be an issue, but with the ground approaching fast, Jack was beginning to question her confidence. What if she hit the ground so hard, she opened up a sinkhole a la Road Rage and it swallowed the Eiffel Tower whole? At the very least, there would be a huge crater in the middle of Gustav Eiffel Avenue. The whole area would have to be cordoned off and sightseers who had planned their Parisian vacation for months would be forced to turn away. Tourism would take a nosedive and it would be all Jack’s fault. It would be the Seine all over again.

No! Be positive! thought Jack, expelling the pessimistic thoughts from her brain. She thought of Diego instead, of all the times he patiently coached her until she managed not to cause damage from a stomp, a run, a jump.

A drop.

“You can do this, mi conejito,” he told her after the fifth time she dropped off the ledge of the rock quarry and still caused an explosive amount of damage. She stood on the edge again with little hope of a different outcome for her sixth attempt.

“It’s impossible, Perro!” she complained. Cat made a face that showed he disagreed with her, but said nothing as he held the iPad up higher. This conversation was between Jack and her boyfriend.

“Part of it is a mind game. You think you’re going to fail, so you do.”

“So, what? Be positive?”

Diego roared with laughter. “I’m not Mims, but that’s never bad advise. Oye, mi conejito, let’s try this. Don’t focus on success or failure, okay? Focus on my voice…Are you listening?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t care if you get this on your first try or your hundredth try or your millionth try. I will not give up on you. I will never give up on you. I will always be here. Well, not here here. But…you know.” He held a hand to his chest, to his heart Jack could hear faintly thumping over the connection. It was a good heart. Strong. Jack thought about it more than she probably should, attuning her rabbit ears to its rhythm. It pumped faster as their eyes met and Jack felt a red hot blush creep up her cheeks and fireworks in her stomach. “Aquí,” he said softly, but they both knew what he was really saying.

Jack ended up succeeding on her eleventh try.

She planned on succeeding on her twelfth attempt as well.

As she landed, time seemed to slow. Jack could feel the asphalt crackle beneath her boots, but she kept her knees as soft as possible and allowed her body, rather than the ground, to absorb the shock. It rattled her bones, but left the street unscathed, as it was meant to be.
“Yes!” cheered Jack. She did a celebratory little hop, which created a pothole. She drew back with a nervous laugh. She supposed that’s what she got for celebrating too early. The battle wasn’t over yet.

Shielding her eyes, Jack looked up to make sure Nanny Mite was taking Ladybug even higher, just as planned. The window of opportunity was open now, but probably not for long. Hopefully Ladybug—the real one—had already gotten started.

Jack took off towards the pond where she had last seen Cat Noir. Brushing passed a bush, she accidentally uprooted it in her haste, but arrived just in time to see Ladybug catching the item she had just conjured using Lucky Charm. Cat stood by her side, hair dripping wet, as he worked on reattaching his belt tail.

Jack jogged up to them. “How can I help?” she wondered.

Ladybug didn’t even look up, concentrating on the object in her hands with all the brainpower she could muster, but Cat broke into a huge smile.

“Rabbit!” he said. "I didn’t even hear you land! Good job!"

Now that she was closer, Jack could see that Ladybug had received a large metallic ring with a screw on one side, painted red with black spots. At first glance, it reminded Jack of her chakram since it was about the same size as a Frisbee. On second glance though, she recognized it from her Uncle’s tool collection.

“What are you going to do with that hose clamp?” Jack wondered over the beeping of her Miraculous.

“Hose!” said Ladybug, head snapping up. She scanned the area, her gaze settling on a nearby fire hydrant. She then looked at Cat, Jack, Cat again, the uprooted bush, and the yo-yo in her other hand. She flung it at the bush and dragged it over to her as she made a beeline for the cheery red hydrant. “Follow me!”

It seemed Ladybug had developed a way to defeat Nanny Mite just in time, since Jack could hear the Akuma shout from above.

“A fake!?” she screeched.

“She’s on to us,” Jack warned her friends, but Ladybug seemed too preoccupied with implementing her plan. She slipped the hose clamp over the hydrant and stole Cat’s staff off his back. She affixed it to the hydrant’s base, tightening the clamp around the two.

“She’s on to us,” Ladybug commanded, roughly pushing Cat down behind the hydrant even though it gave literally no coverage. She then grabbed the bush though and Jack got the hint. She squatted down next to Cat while Ladybug concealed them from view using shrubbery. “Cat, use Cataclysm on the top of the hydrant when Nanny Mite is in place,” Ladybug explained as she adjusted the bush. “Then have Rabbit ride your staff up.”

“Got it!” the two chorused together.

Happy with her work, Ladybug then spun around to face the Eiffel Tower. She made a huge show of throwing her yo-yo into the air, exaggerating her movements to an absurd degree.
“Lucky...!” she shouted at the top of her lungs.

It was a repeat of what had happened earlier in the Fantômette Library. The nanites swarmed overhead, once again gaining control of Ladybug’s yo-yo. Seemingly frightened, she started to back up into the bush, the nanites closing in from all around.

Nanny Mite manifested. “You deceived me, poppet! I didn’t want to have to do this, but it looks like I have no choice. I’m putting you in a time-out...permanently!”

“No thanks,” said Ladybug. “I’m a bit too old for time-outs.”

Annoyed, the Akuma made a grab for Ladybug, but she back flipped over the bush and just out of reach. Her yo-yo was waiting for her though and she got tangled up in its string. Through the greenery, Jack and Cat watched Nanny Mite float forward until she was right above them. The two then looked at each other, scarcely believing their good luck. Jack grabbed Cat’s staff and Cat lifted an arm. He whispered Cataclysm at the same time Jack’s watch beeped again. Nanny Mite looked down, but it was too late. Cat stroked the top of the fire hydrant and it turned to rust. No longer able to hold back the pressure, water burst skywards.

Nanny Mite’s body scattered into a million nanites, avoiding a direct hit as they danced between the water droplets, but now it was Jack’s turn. Cat extended his staff and she went shooting into the air, the geyser pelting her in the back. With Dogstruction activated though, the water reacted to her as if she were a stick of dynamite constantly exploding. It went everywhere, soaking everything in a hundred foot radius. Since Nanny Mite had concentrated all her machines in her quest to capture the real Ladybug, almost all of them went down, pelting the ground like hail. When Jack couldn’t hear any more, she slid back down the staff like a fireman’s pole and found Ladybug and Cat searching the ground.

"Is this it?" Cat asked, picking up a soaked piece of black paper. Ladybug leaned over and had a look.

"Dear Charlotte, we regret to inform you that your current employment with the Chamack family has been terminated. Please return to the Europair Services office to—" Yes, this must be it!” She tore the letter in two, releasing the Akuma. While she went to work purifying the butterfly, Jack made herself useful and fetched the hose clamp.

Miraculous Ladybug set everything back the way it was. The fire hydrant repaired itself, Jack’s chakarm returned to her wrist, and a de-evilized Nanny Mite—Charlotte—appeared on her hands and knees, gasping for breath, the piece of paper repaired, inverted, and clutched in her hand. The bush remained uprooted, but it could be easily planted again. The pothole was no doubt still there, but it could be filled. All in all, not a bad day for Jack. She beamed as she watched Ladybug and Cat Noir pound fists in celebration.

"You too!" said Cat, offering his fist, but as Jack reached for him, a Ladybug fell from the sky.

Jack, Cat Noir, and Ladybug had Chameleon surrounded in an instant as his disguise faded away.

“Thanks for dropping in to help,” Jack told him, fighting back a smirk. It felt good to pull one over on him for once.

“You tricked me!” he snarled.
“Duh.”

“No. There’s no way—you couldn’t have known…How...?”

“It’s not hard to figure out you monitor the Ladyblog to keep tabs on us,” Jack pointed out. She took her chakram off and ran a thumb along its edge, bringing up the website and playing the second-to-last video Alya posted. The shaky footage showed the fight against Nanny Mite in the library. “You knew our weapons got taken over. And with no way for me to check Ladybug or Cat Noir’s identities, I knew you’d try to make your move. So I purposely went to a public place by myself where you would be able to find me.”

"And remember this video?" asked Ladybug, joining in. After Cat left to recharge, Ladybug had purposely found Alya to give her a quick update on what was happening, which Alya had also posted. Now it played on Ladybug’s yo-yo without sound. In it, Ladybug essentially explained that Cat had used Cataclysm to help them escape, and that her plan to defeat Nanny Mite involved using her civilian identity.

Chameleon looked as defeated as the nanite-controlled children.

"And you thought disguising yourself as Ladybug was your idea," chided Cat.

"After that, we only needed to get my yo-yo back and then trick Nanny Mite into capturing you, giving me the time I needed to use Lucky Charm,” finished Ladybug.

A smirk floated over Chameleon’s lips that made Jack’s insides curl. “Ah, I see,” he said. "So you used me as a distraction. Clever.”

It was the way he lovingly lingered on the word distraction, like it was his girlfriend’s name. Jack suddenly looked down at her watch and realized she had less than thirty seconds before she changed back. There was simply no time to explain. She turned tail and ran, leaving a gouge in the ground in her wake. She made it just beyond the northeastern tree line of the park before her powers fled in a gust of wind, expelling Mimmi from her Miraculous.

“That jerk had us monologuing!” Jack said.

Mimmi panted as she flew over and took refuge on Jack’s shoulder. She was unable to speak, but managed a nod.

“Ladybug and Cat are going to end up changing back before Chameleon does too…” Jack stood on her tiptoes to try to see over the bushes and through the trees, but there was too much shrubbery in the way. Still, she knew what she would see. “He’s going to get away. Again.”

“Don’t beat...yourself up...about it,” Mimmi insisted, waving a dismissive arm. “It was a great idea...to use Chameleon in the first place...and Ladybug made it work.” The creature threw her arms around Jack’s neck, nearly choking Jack on accident. “I’m so proud of you!”

Jack felt her phone buzz in her beach bag and she realized with a start that Alya was probably looking for her. It ended up being just a Duolingo alert, but Jack saw that she had a missed call and several unread texts from Alya. Jack scrolled up to the top to read.

Girl, where are you? The reading is gonna start any min
And then, fifteen minutes later:

Jaaaack where are you I tried to call

U saw the Akuma rite? Im taking my sisters home

I hope youre safe

Another break, and then the texts started coming pretty regularly.

Where are you??

Your phone better be ded

Shame on you, you’re worse than Marinette

Rabbit’s been spotted at the Eiffel Tower and I’m heading there, call me

If I don’t pick up than I’m filming

Ugh. Cops won’t let me thro i can't see a thing

Found a spot!

Jack called.

“What happened?” were Alya’s first words, in lieu of a hello.

“I’m sorry Alya!” said Jack. “I could not find Ladybug and then my phone died and that Akuma attacked and it was crazy. I tried to find you, but when I could not, I decided to go home for my charger, but I got a little lost and—”

“Dang, girl. Breathe!”

Jack did as instructed. Lying always did make her feel like hyperventilating.

“No worries,” continued Alya. “I thought it was something like that.”

“Are you still near the Eiffel Tower?” Jack wondered.

“Just leaving. Couldn’t get close enough to get good footage, but you wouldn’t believe what I saw using my binoculars.”

“What?”

“There’s another superhero! Or maybe supervillian. He looked like some kind of lizard, and he disguised himself as Ladybug.”

“So he is like a…er…chameleon?”

“A chameleon! Yas girl, I bet that’s what he is! He—”
At first Jack thought the line had gone dead. Alya had been cut-off mid-sentence, so there seemed to be little other explanation. Still, there was sound on the other end—birds chirping, the wind through leaves, a faint but familiar whoosh.

“Alya…?” asked Jack hesitantly.

Her bated breath was answered by pounding footsteps and harrowed gasps of air. Suddenly wide-eyed, Jack ran forward, even thought she didn’t know where she was going or why.

“Alya! Alya, what is it? What’s wrong?”


Jack stopped dead, hand snaking for her rabbit’s foot keychain, but it wasn’t there anymore, and the necklace it was now on was hanging from her bedpost back home. She fiddled with the fraying edge of her bag instead. She really needed to get a new one, but she couldn’t bring herself to let go of this vestige of her former life.

“Did he see you?” she wondered.

“N-no, I don’t think so.”

“Oh, awesome!”

“Awesome…?”

It had just dawned on Jack that this was so much better than finding out Chameleon’s identity by holding him until his Miraculous ran out. Because then he would know that she knew.

“Where are you right now?” asked Jack. "I'll be there in ten."

* * *

Jack’s stomach rumbled as she sat on a bench in the park next to Marinette’s house, the beautifully buttery smells of Tom & Sabine Boulangerie Patisserie wafting through the air. It had been such a busy morning that she had almost forgotten about lunch, but her hunger pains were stern reminders. She’d have to grab some food soon, but she had some important business to attend to first.

“I really think I should post about Chameleon,” said Alya as she fiddled with her phone.

“We talked about it,” reminded Jack.

“I know, but…the people need to know there is a fake running around!”

“He will go underground. You want to help Ladybug and Cat Noir and Rabbit, right? Let’s stay on the DL.”

Alya hung her head, her bushy hair obscuring her face and her shame.

Just then, Jack spotted a flash of tomato red and watched Nathaniel from school wander passed the Ladybug and Cat Noir statue. He looked a twitch pale and nervous as he scanned the area, adjusted the strap of his messenger bag. The weight of it looked a bit uncomfortable.
Jack jabbed Alya in the side to get her attention before jumping to her feet. “Nathan!” she shouted, waving at him.


“Thanks for meeting with us,” said Alya.

The boy looked everywhere but at their faces. “Uh, yeah. No…no problem. I guess.”

The silence that followed was claustrophobic, so Alya dug into her purse to pull out a wad of cash to clear the air. “Right! Your commission!” she said, handing it over.

The sight of money eased Nathaniel up considerably. He even managed a little smile. “Thanks!”

“So, about this sketch…”

“Yes!” He whipped out a pencil and a sketchbook; spinning the former while he flipped open the latter with expert ease. Jack and Alya exchanged glances, amazed yet unsurprised by their classmate’s change in demeanor. Jack had sat next to him long enough to know that art always brought out the more outgoing side of him.

“I was thinking you could do one of those police sketches of an OC,” explained Alya. “Like, I describe him and you draw him?”

“Sounds challenging…Let’s do it!”

Alya began, in as much detail as possible, to describe Chameleon as a civilian. A couple of words and phrases stood out to Jack—acne scars, seventeenish, hook nose—but she was having a hard time reconciling them with the picture of Chameleon she had in her head. She knew what he looked like, but a Glamour was a powerful thing. It divorced Chameleon’s civilian looks from his superhero looks, even though they were pretty much the same. Since Alya saw him de-transform, only she would see the two sides as one. Jack, meanwhile, would continue to not see the resemblance, even if it tap-danced in front of her face wearing a tu-tu.

Jack’s phone buzzed and she idly pulled it out, thinking it was Nino or Alix wanting to hang out now that she finally had time (working for her mom to pay off her phone had been THE WORST), but it was just an email. It looked like spam, being a forward and all, but, on closer inspection, she realized Diego had sent it to her. She was miffed. What was he doing up so late? But then she opened it.

It was Evelynn Jenson’s response in full.

Hey DR! Great to hear from you!

It’s been over a year, hasn’t it? Wow. Time sure flies. But don’t feel bad. These things happen. I’m happy to hear you found a good family. I hope you can stay with them for a good long while. And it sounds like you joined a team? That’s surprising. Good for you! I don’t know anything about Ultimate Frisbee, so I can’t wait to hear more!

I’m good! You’ve missed so much that I don’t even know where to start. Well, I guess the most important thing is that I got married! You remember me telling you about my boyfriend Howie, right? Well, he finally popped the question after all these years. It was a small ceremony, otherwise I would’ve invited you. No pictures either :-(

It’s funny you should mention your girlfriend lives in Paris because that’s where I am right now! Howie owns a small tech company and he’s opening an office here. It’s been a nice little vacation for me since I’m between jobs. But as long as I’m here, I should grab coffee with her! (Or is that weird…?)

Hope to hear from you soon!

-Evie

Jack blinked and then read the email again. And again. Coffee? With Omega’s henchwoman? It seemed a little too good to be true. Could it possibly be a trap? But Omega’s team didn’t know she was Rabbit, so maybe Diego was right. Maybe Evie really was innocent. If that was the case, then Jack had misread Chameleon and Evie had no idea what her husband was up to, stealing Beacons and all. Either way though, the link to Omega was there. And anything Jack could use to stay one step ahead of him was fine by her.

Maybe it was because she was flying high because she finally got one over on Chameleon, or maybe it was because she was just reckless, but Jack answered Diego’s email without a second thought.

Set up the coffee date
Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jaclyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Chapter Notes

Ah, it's been a while, hasn't it? Sorry about the delay. You'll kind of see why after you're done reading the chapter. We'll see how far I'm able to get on the next one!

DID YOU GUYS SEE THE RABBIT KWAMI IN SANDBOY? Omg. Other than both being white rabbits though, I picture Mimmi a lot differently. I'd like to write a silly one-off or something where they meet. And Wrekk can meet the Dog Kwami! That would be fun.

This chapter's got some fun stuff going on. Positivity Club! Reveals! Surprise appearances! Resolutions! An Akuma who doesn't appear until half the chapter is over! Yeah...it might have some pacing issues >_< Jack's story is kind of taking over now, which I suppose is the point, but I've got a formula to uphold and, by golly, I'm going to uphold it.

The super special shout out this time goes to...AxelFones! They commented on almost every chapter and I absolutely love it when people do that! It can be exhausting though, so thank you, thank you, thank you! They hoped Colleen would show up again, so guess what? I'm always happy to fill special little requests like that ;-) Enjoy!

“Leo, great to see you, man. Yo Dubois, how’s it hanging? Carissa! Always tops seeing you.”

Jack stood next to Nino, dutifully checking off the names of Positivity Club Regional Presidents as they passed into their school’s library, but inside she was squirming. She kicked off one of her soccer sandals and used her foot to rub the opposite ankle. Why hadn’t Adrien texted her back yet? She hoped he was still coming, since she knew what would happen if he didn’t. Her entire plan hinged on him.

Nino remained oblivious to Jack’s discomfort as he high-fived a bespectacled boy and welcomed him. She slid her phone out of her pocket and glanced at it for the fifteenth time in as many minutes. Still nothing.

“How many do we got left?” Nino asked.
Jack jumped, bobbling her phone, but Nino snagged it out of the air. “Whoa. Careful, dude. Don’t want a repeat of last time.”

Jack colored as she accepted her phone back. It used to be Marinette who was synonymous with being clumsy. She covered by busying herself with her clipboard. “Uh…five.”

“Make that four,” said Nino as a familiar face adorned with braces bounded up the steps, wearing bold patterns and bright colors. “It’s the girl of the hour!” he said, raising his voice as she approached. “What up, Colleen?”

“Hi Nino! Hi Jack!” Colleen and Nino proceeded to preform a secret handshake of their own making, complete with a Superman pose at the end.

“Thanks again for connecting us with Cadence,” said Nino.

There was no malice in his words—in fact, Jack didn’t think there was a malicious bone in Nino’s body—but they still cut Jack to the quick. An uncomfortable pressure began to build in her stomach and she found herself focusing on crossing Colleen’s name off her list multiple times. She was supposed to reach out to Cadence, left Post-It notes all over her room to remind her to do it, but she kept on putting it off and putting it off until Colleen went ahead and did it herself. To be honest, it was exactly what Jack hoped would happen, but that didn’t make her feel any better about it.

Colleen puffed out her chest. “No problem! Glad to help.”

“Cadence is the bomb,” Nino gushed. “Everyone’s real amped for her PIE Talk tonight.”

PIE stood for Positivity, Ideas, and Encouragement, both in French and English. The talks were Marinette’s idea, based off the TED Talks she liked watching about design. Once a month, the Regional Positivity Club Presidents would meet at Collège Françoise Dupont and listen to a speaker while enjoying a slice of pie (to honor their American roots) provided by Tom & Sabine Boulangerie Patisserie. They hoped to live stream the PIE Talks one day, but, for now, Alya was just going to film them and post them on the Positivity Club website for others to watch and learn. As the President of the original Positivity Club, Cadence was naturally asked to be the first speaker. It worked out too, since she had an upcoming school holiday, giving her the Monday off so she could talk despite the nine-hour time difference. The announcement caused quite the stir, but not as much as Alya’s promotion of it.

“Is Rabbit here yet?” Colleen asked eagerly, craning her neck and peering around Nino into the packed library.

Jack felt like crawling into a soft bed and sleeping for a thousands years. In order to drum up more interest in the first PIE talk and make it a huge success, Alya had posted an invite for Ladybug, Cat Noir, and Rabbit on the Ladyblog. Jack casually brought it up to them during patrol and they all agreed they planned to go.

“Not yet,” said Nino. “But don’t sweat it. She’ll be here. I know my girl won’t let us down!”

She will if Adrien doesn’t show, thought Jack as she fiddled with her rabbit’s foot necklace. Somehow, she just knew she was going to need all the luck she could get today.

Colleen headed inside, and Jack and Nino waited another ten minutes, until Ivan and Mylène,
who were greeting and directing guests at the main entrance, joined them. It looked like no one else was coming. Anxiety rising like a tide, Jack was about to check her phone again when it buzzed against her leg.

“Finally!” she said.

*Hey! Yes. Sorry! I just woke up. I thought I would feel better, but I don’t, so I won’t be able to make it tonight.*

Jack stared at Adrien’s perfectly punctuated and grammatically correct text as if it were written in another language. Well, technically it *was* written in another language, but it was like one Jack couldn’t even begin to comprehend. His words refused to register in her mind. Yeah, he had stayed home sick from school today, but Nino said he hadn’t looked that bad when he went to give Adrien his homework after class, so she assumed he would be able to make it to the PIE Talk.

*Bt u need to translate fr Cadence!!* Jack texted back, fingers itching in desperation.

*You can do it too. You're probably a better choice than me anyway.*

Jack tapped her phone to her forehead. Nino asked her to be Cadence’s translator first, but she argued that Adrien would make more sense. This was before Rabbit was even invited, so Jack couldn’t use it as an excuse to ease her mind. She simply just didn’t want to do it.

“What’s wrong?” wondered Ivan, his eyebrows crinkling in concern.

“Adrien’s not coming, huh?” realized Nino. “What a downer.”

“Who’s going to translate for Cadence?” wondered Mylène.

“I’m sure Colleen will do it,” said Jack quickly as she took a step towards the library, but Nino slid in front of her.

“Dude, she’s a guest!”

“So?”

“So? Uncool! C’mon, Jack. You know you’re the girl for the job. I thought you said you sort of knew Cadence.”

*That’s the problem,* Jack thought as she squeezed her eyes shut. This was all too much for her. The world was spinning and she wanted to get off the ride. Couldn’t an Akuma attack now or something so the whole PIE Talk could be rescheduled?

“Hey, are we starting soon or what?” asked Alya as she sidled up to join their knot. “Cadence is already on the line. Where’s Adrien?”

"Not coming. Jack’ll translate."

Alya spun to face Jack, her eyes glittering with excitement. “Oh, girl, I know you’re nervous, but you got this.”

“I do not do it,” Jack insisted. She paused to wince at her poor French before continuing. “Literally,
"anyone would be better than me."

"English is rough. I know it might seem like we all know it well, but there’s a ton of, like, nuance and stuff we don’t get. That’s why we all agreed Cadence needed a translator in the first place."

"Adrien told me you’ve been rocking your lessons," said Nino. "So what’s the deal?"

The deal was that Jack was Rabbit, so the two of them couldn’t be in the same place at the same time. The deal was that the last time Jack had been face-to-face with Cadence (as Jack, mind you), Cadence looked passed her as if she didn’t even exist.

“Moving?” she repeated though, with the sort of dull surprise usually reserved for not doing as well on a test as you thought you did.

“Yeah.” Jack danced from foot to foot to avoid getting squashed as the passing period wound down to its bitter end. “In like…two weeks.”

Cadence slammed her locker shut. “Good.”

Jack blinked, the memory fading in favor of her four curious friends.

"Okay," she said, shoulders sinking, too tired to fight anymore. “I’ll do it.”

With feet like leaden weights, Jack dragged herself into the library after her friends and over to the laptop Alya set up. Thankfully, it hadn’t been casted onto the big screen yet, so no one saw Cadence flinch when Jack approached.

Jack didn’t know why, but she thought Cadence would look different. It had been five months—she could have chopped off her wavy pale locks or gotten new glasses or changed the color of the purple stripe in her hair—but she had done none of those things. She looked exactly as she had when she cut Jack to pieces with a single word. Her eyes were a bit more focused now though, wide and disgruntled.

“Hey. I’m going to be your translator for tonight,” Jack said, the words rushing to escape her mouth. There. Done. Then she turned and walked to the front of the room as Nino started his introduction.

*   *   *

"It was a disaster," bemoaned Jack to Diego over Skype a couple of hours later. “First, we run out of pies and Marinette had to leave to make some more. She was gone, like, the whole time! And then Ladybug and Cat Noir show up and kept on telling everyone that I was coming. I mean, that Rabbit was coming. That…” Laughter spilled out of her boyfriend’s mouth and she gave him a beleaguered smile. “You know what I mean. Ladybug even tried calling me. Colleen and Nino and a couple of other people were super disappointed. And Cadence was just—she was like…it was like I never even existed.”

“You or Rabbit?”

“Me, you dumb butt.”

“But you are Rabbit.”
“Very funny.”

Again, Diego laughed.

Jack continued. “She was telling everyone about the history of the Positivity Club and didn’t mention me at all.”

Here the amusement faded from Diego’s eyes. He swiftly switched to guard dog mode. “¿Qué? That’s not fair! Positivity Club was your idea!” he barked.

Jack sighed and slumped over her desk, accidentally hitting several keys and filling her text box to Diego with nonsense. Mimmi hopped on Jack’s hand to get her to notice, and then worked to erase it. “I guess I can’t blame her,” Jack admitted. “That was the first time I’ve talked to her since I told her I was moving.”

“Wait… ¿De verdad? But I thought—”

Jack shook her head, the pigtails she was currently sporting swishing from side-to-side. Cadence cut Jack out of her life, so Jack tried to return the favor. She didn’t connect her with Mylène, and even when Colleen eventually did, Cadence chatted with Nino while Jack made excuses in order to avoid her. Cadence knew she was there, Jack hadn’t kept that a secret, but Jack avoided her like everyone else did Chloé.

“You know, I had tons of opportunities to reach out to her, DM her or something,” said Jack quietly. “But I think I thought, if I ignored her, she’d go away. Then I wouldn’t have to deal with everything. It was…like, really selfish of me, now that I think about it.”

“¡Oye! Don’t beat yourself up, mi conejito. She hurt you, and made it very clear she didn’t want to talk to you. You were just honoring that.”

“But I hurt her first.”

“You were busy with other things. It’s not your fault. It was just a bad situation.” Diego averted his eyes, looking down and to the left. “I know all about those…”

There it was, that little bit of darkness. Dead dad, absentee mom, no family—Jack knew the last thing her boyfriend wanted was pity, but she had a hard time not feeling it whenever he offhandedly mentioned his lot in life. The next instant she knew he would snap back to sunshine and smiles, but that darkness was always there, bubbling beneath the surface.

Sure enough, he perked up like a dog being asked on a walk. “But I got something to cheer you up!” he said. He whipped a piece of paper out and held it up to the camera. “Ta-da!”

Jack stared at the blurry page. Big bold red letters lined the top and there was a picture of someone in the middle.

“What am I looking at here?” she wondered as her webcam struggled to focus.

“Operation Clark Kent was a success!”

“What! You found him!?”
“Yeah. Turns out he was Superman the whole time, but with glasses.”

Mimmi’s tinkling laughter filtered through Jack’s ears, but she was too anxious to be amused.
“How?”

“Your uncle really came through. Glad there’s still one cop we can trust. Turns out Chameleon is a runaway, and by Chameleon, I mean...Zachary Canterelli!”

An attachment popped up on Jack’s computer and she opened it to find a PDF of the missing person flyer Diego was waving around. The photo of a bored teenager with dark hair, acne, and a prominent nose was almost an exact match to Nathaniel’s sketch she had sent Diego the week before. Jack rifled through her desk so she could compare the two side-by-side. The similarities were uncanny, down to the faint scar on the chin.

“Way to go, Uncle Greg!” applauded Mimmi.

“From Newark, New Jersey,” Jack began reading. “Seventeen; missing since November 17, 2013—that was around the time I moved here! Last seen at home after an argument with his dad…”

“I did a little more digging, talked to some of his classmates and stuff on Facebook,” said Diego. “Turns out the guy likes to act. Imagínate. He was even on Broadway when he was a kid.”

“That’s…actually pretty cool.”

“Sí, but things sort of went downhill after that. His mom died and his dad remarried, and he went from acting to acting out. Shoplifting, a couple of B&Es. Some kids even told me he stole a car, but he didn’t go to juvie. Just lots of community service.”

“Sounds like our guy. And what about Evie? What did you dig up on her?”

Silence. At first Jack thought her computer froze, but then she saw Diego blink.

“Diego!” she complained. “I’m having coffee with her this Wednesday! I need to know what I’m up against.”

“What’s there to say? I’ve told you all I know.”

“What, that stuff about her going to UCLA and being a traveling nurse?”

“Sí.”

“There’s gotta be more than that. Did you even try?”

“That’s it. That’s all I could find. I swear.”

“And you don’t find that a little suspicious…?”

“What else do you want to know?”

“Well, like, how about her family?”

“She told me when I first met her that her parents died when she was a kid.”
“How?”

“No lo sé. I didn’t ask. I was…um…kind of dealing with other stuff at the time.”

Diego pushed away from his desk a little, as if to put distance between himself and the current conversation. Jack was starting to feel guilty, but she pressed on. After all, he wasn’t the one who was meeting an Omega connection face-to-face.

“What did their obituaries say?” she asked.

“I, uh…” Diego looked away and grimaced. “I couldn’t find them.”

Jack threw herself back in her chair and raked her fingers through her hair. Incredulous wouldn’t even begin to describe her feelings. “Diego!” she cried.

“What!”

“None of this is making her look better. In fact…I’m starting to think that Evelynn Ende isn’t even her real name. Doesn’t sound like one, anyway.”

Diego looked like he wanted to disagree, strained his mouth to make a sound, but Jack had rendered him speechless. In the end, he gave in, mostly because he was never the type to be silent for long. “Ay, you might be right,” he admitted. “I’ll try harder to dig up info on her.”

* * *

Despite Diego’s best efforts, he found nothing else by the time Wednesday rolled around. Jack found herself underprepared as she followed her phone’s GPS to La Cachette, the coffee shop where Evie suggested they meet. Jack had scoped it out online. It was one of those trendy new places, industrial with lots of windows. Nothing out of the ordinary.

“Who’s this chick again?” wondered Alix as she rollerbladed circles around Jack. She had invited herself along for the walk after lunch, not that Jack minded. Alix was always good company.


“’Cause that’s not convoluted or anything.”

Jack made a move to push her friend, but she spun out of reach as expected, snickering.

“Nah, I get it,” she said, now rollerblading backwards. “It’ll make you feel closer to him, talking to someone who knows him too.”

Alix meant well, but it was a bit of a painful tug to the heart, to be reminded that oceans and continents separated her and Diego. She hadn’t even been thinking of her meeting with Evie in that light, she was so focused on the mission, but now she wished she could.

“It’s kinda lucky she’s in town,” Alix continued, oblivious.

“Yes. Lucky,” Jack managed to agree. She subconsciously patted her bag, nudging Mimmi. The Kwami looked up at Jack between the folds and beamed. If there was a time Jack needed luck, it was
now.

En route, Jack lost Alix when they ran into Kim and he challenged Alix to a race, so she reached La Cachette without having to field anymore questions. Through the copious amount of windows, Jack saw Evie sitting at a table in the center, sipping a Cafe au Lait. Seemingly sensing she was being watched, she turned and locked eyes with Jack. Shocked, Jack gasped and dropped her gaze immediately. It was too late to back out now. Almost like a bull, she rushed at the revolving door and pushed her way into the coffeehouse.

“Jack? Are you…are you Jack?” asked a slightly raspy voice. Morning voice.

Jack forced herself to look up, a little bit mesmerized by the blue eyes she found. Pictures did not do them justice. The rest of her was equally enigmatic. She had a youthful face marred with signs of age. If not for the bags under her eyes and the fine lines around her mouth, Jack could mistake her for a teenager. They were about the same height too.

“Evie! Hi!” Jack managed haltingly.

She was fast. She grabbed Jack and pulled her into a hug. “It’s so nice to meet you!” She shoved Jack into the seat across from her. “Diego told me you looked like a surfer, so I thought that had to be you standing out there. Love that, by the way. Hang loose!” She put down her middle three fingers to make the sign really quick. She was as embarrassing as Jack’s dad. “I’ll get you something to drink. What would you like? Are you too young for coffee? Maybe, like, a hot chocolate or something?”

“I’m…good.”

“Are you sure?” she pulled a wad of cash from the orange purse she wore slung across her body. “I’m buying!”

Jack sensed anything from this woman was poison, so she shook her head. “No. Thank you.” She squinted and bit down on her tongue. She sounded like a tongue-tied robot.

Evie’s face fell a little, but she didn’t argue. She returned to her seat and scooted her chair closer to their spindly little table. It raked the cement ground, echoing through the coffee shop and attracting attention. Jack’s ears picked up on a woman nearby muttering to her friend as they stared: Américain. Jack sank a little in her seat.

“So!” said Evie, oblivious. “DR’s told me so much about you that I feel like I know you already.”

Jack almost laughed derisively. Hopefully Diego didn't tell her too much. “Same.”

“He’s a cool kid. And, I have to say, quite the catch. I don’t know very many boys his age who would visit their grandma every week like he did.”

“Yeah…” Jack looked towards the service counter as she tried to gather her thoughts. She was on a fact-finding mission and, so far, she was failing. “Kind of crazy you’re in Paris,” she tried, even though it was a non sequitur. “When did you get here?”

“Oh, I don’t know. A couple of months ago?” The timeline matched up to when Diego used White Hat to track his money. “I’ve lost count. This whole ‘not having a job’ thing is kind of rough, to be honest. I’m a nurse. I’m used to working long hours.”
“So what have you been doing then?”

“I go on a lot of walks. Museums. I bet I could spend a month at the Louvre alone. Sometimes my husband needs help.”

“With what?” Stealing Beacons? Jack added in her head.

“Boring stuff. Data entry and the like. You’d think the life of a professional hacker would be more exciting.”

Jack huffed. What was she thinking? If her theory was right and Evelynn was working for Omega, she wasn’t going to slip up and tell Jack something incriminating. Jack had to try though. At the very least she might be able to prove Evie’s identity was fake.

“Ende. That’s an interesting last name,” Jack said.

“You think?” said Evie. She shrugged. “I always kind of liked the alliteration. But your name…I love how you go by Jack. Very unique. It suits you.”

“Oh, uh…thanks.” Jack tried again. “What do you think about Rabbit?”

“Rabbit…the superhero? What about her?”

“Well, she was in Los Angeles, and now she’s in Paris.”

“Oh, yeah. DR said you were a fan. You must be pretty happy! You know, I lived in Los Angeles the longest and I’ve always considered it my home. I’m glad Rabbit and Perro Negro were there to protect the city when it needed it.”

“Yeah…” Jack was getting nowhere and really had nothing else to say.

Evie took a moment to sip her drink before she posed her next question, keen on keeping the conversation flowing. “So, DR tells me you met playing Frisbee?”

“Actually, I met him before that.”

"Oh?"

"Yeah, he, uh, he went to my school for a hot second. Then, like, a few months later, he joined my Ultimate Frisbee team.” Jack paused and leaned back. How did Evie do that? Her personality was just so warm and inviting that Jack couldn’t help but share, even though she really didn’t want to. She placated herself with the thought that, to Evie, she was just some random girl.

“Was it love at first sight?” Evie wondered.

Jack snorted. “No!” Laughter spilled from Evie’s lips and Jack couldn’t help but giggle too. “I’m just a kid. Besides, he didn’t make a very good first impression. But then he became my teammate and we had to work together.” In more ways than one, she thought. “We made a pretty good team. We always had each other’s backs, no matter what. Then I realized one day that there was nothing he wouldn’t do for me…and…uh…yeah…” She felt her cheeks color, but somehow didn’t mind.
“Sounds like me and my husband,” said Evie thoughtfully.

“How did you two meet?”

The woman tilted her head and gave a wry smile. “In college. He started dating my roommate our junior year.” She paused, lost in reverie. “God, I hated him.”

Jack found herself laughing again, but Evie just shook her head.

“Howie was always standing my roomie up or ditching her and acting all self-righteous about it, like, ‘Babe, I know I missed dinner, but I was exposing corruption. Okay? We can do dinner some other night.’” Evie gave an epic eye-roll. “My best friend deserved better than that, but it took her for-freaking-ever to kick him to the curb. I was so glad when she finally did.”

“Wow. And you married this guy?”

“Libby breaking up with Howie was a bit of a wake-up call for him. He realized he couldn’t take people for granted like that or he’d end up alone, so he turned over a new leaf. I didn’t buy it, but he was there for me during a really difficult time my senior year and we kept in touch after college. Mind you, this was before smart phones or even Facebook. I’m talking Messenger and phone calls, sometimes even letters. The first thing I did whenever I got to a new city was send him a postcard.”

“Oh, yeah, Diego said you were a traveling nurse. How was that?”

“Amazing! But also exhausting. I was in a new city every four to six months. As much as I loved it, I had to stop after a while. That’s why I got that job at Belmont. I always enjoyed working with the elderly.”

“But why there?”

“Well, it was right next to UCLA—that’s where I went to college—so I was familiar with the area. But…if I’m being completely honest…I had developed feelings for Howie by that point and…I wanted to be closer to him.”

“Aw!” It was almost an involuntary reaction. Jack slammed her mouth shut as soon as she could. She knew for a fact that ‘Howie’ had stolen the Beacon. This meant Evie was either a terrific liar or completely in the dark to her husband’s illicit activities. Anger or pity were Jack’s only appropriate reactions, not delight.

To be honest, Jack was leaning towards pity. Diego had been very sure Evie was innocent and that had to count for something. After all, he knew Evie much better than Jack did. And now that Jack thought about it, the idea that the woman before her, who was currently busy mopping up a bit of Cafe au Lait she spilled with a napkin, was some evil mastermind’s henchwoman seemed laughable. Jack wasn’t living in a James Bond movie. Evie was simply a coincidence, nothing more.

Relieved, Jack settled back into her chair. Now she could talk about Diego with Evie like Alix suggested! But the thought was short-lived, struck down by sudden dread.

There was a boy.

Over Evie’s shoulder.
He was sitting in a booth, hunched over his drink in an odd way, as if he was trying to make himself look smaller than he really was, but his lanky frame didn’t seem to be folding up the way he wanted. But his face looked familiar. Even if she couldn’t believe it. Even if everything inside of her refused to make the connection. Because it looked like the exact same face that was on Diego’s flyer. Jack surreptitiously slipped out her phone to pull it up, just to make sure. It was like holding up a mirror.

Jack jumped up from the table, spilling more of Evie’s Cafe au Lait. Zach shouldn’t be here, she reasoned. **He doesn’t know who I am!**

But maybe he had another reason for being there. Jack could only think of one.

“Whoa! Are you okay? What's wrong?” wondered Evie, tilting her head.

Jack found herself backing away a few steps, her body shaking. “I forgot. About something. School…stuff. I have to go.”

“Um. Okay. Rain check?”

Again, Jack forced herself to remember that Evie had no idea she was Rabbit, even if it didn’t feel like it. If Jack didn’t get a hold of herself now, she would only make herself look suspicious.

“Yeah. Rain check,” Jack repeated. She held out her hand, her gaze sliding back to Zach. He glanced their way, then back to his drink, seemingly disinterested, but Jack wasn’t fooled.

Instead of shaking Jack’s hand, Evie pulled her into another hug, which Jack accepted with only a minimal amount of rigidity.

“Hey, you be careful out there,” Evie said into her ear. “Akumas and stuff. Seems like you can’t catch a break.”

Jack forced a smile before speed walking as fast as she could out of La Cachette.

“Jack…!” whisper-talked Mimmi, waving her arms about inside Jack’s bag. “Why did you leave?”

“Zach. He was there.”

"Why would he be...?" The Kwami squeaked so loud as realization dawned on her that she was forced to shove her whole arm into her mouth to keep herself quiet. Jack ducked into a doorway so she could have a somewhat private conversation with her. Man, how she missed the alleyways of Los Angeles.


“This is a good thing!” assured Mimmi. “Now we know for sure Zach is working for Evie, which means Evie is working for Omega. But she doesn’t know that we know. Just like with Zach! I say we follow them. They might lead us to Omega! Then at least we’d know what we’re up against.”

It was true. They didn't have a name or face for Omega. “Mimmi, you’re a genius,” praised Jack, kissing her Kwami on the cheek.

“Aw, thanks! I try.”
Jack hurried on until she found a private drive, which led to a tiny, empty courtyard away from prying eyes. She transformed into Rabbit, but just as she geared up to wall-kicked up to the nearest roof, she felt a vibration around her wrist. Her chakram was letting her know she had a voicemail. It was probably Diego though and he could wait.

Quickly making her way back to La Cachette, Jack took up residence on the roof across the way so that she would be ready to follow Evie and Zach the instant they left. After a few minutes though, the incessant vibrations of her chakram were starting to get to her. She slid it off her wrist and enlarged it only to find she had missed five messages from Cat Noir.

Jack’s mind immediately went to an Akuma attack, but she ignored it in favor of a less likely explanation. Rabbit hadn’t shown up to the PIE Talk on Monday or answered Ladybug’s call. Cat was probably just wondering what was up. Five seemed a little excessive, but—

Jack’s thumb slipped down the side of her chakram and it scrolled to show one new missed message from Ladybug sent today as well.

Jack bit her lip and scanned the horizon. Okay, so there was an Akuma on the loose. Why did it have to attack now though, when she was so close to finding out about Omega? If only she had Perro Negro’s tracking devices. Then she could just hide one on Evie and go help her friends.

But maybe…maybe they didn’t need Jack’s help. She couldn’t see anything from where she was, so maybe Ladybug and Cat Noir had already defeated the Akuma and everything was fine! Just as Jack was able to convince herself this was true though, her chakram’s projection flicked to an incoming call with a ladybug icon and began to ring.

“Gah!” cried Jack, squashing her chakram down to the size of a bangle and shoving her fist through it. That stopped the ringing, but it continued to buzz until Ladybug’s call went to voicemail. Jack looked around wildly. Still no sign of the Akuma. Maybe she could just pretend she hadn’t heard Ladybug’s call. After all, if she hadn’t seen Zach, she would still be in her civilian form talking to Evie and unable to receive it anyway.

“I’m sure they’ll be fine without me,” Jack insisted out loud to herself and returned to watching the revolving door of La Cachette intently, willing Evie or Zach to push their way through it. It went without saying that Jack was not a patient person, but the wait was agony, especially with her conscience screaming at her to go help her friends. Her mind told her though that she might not get a chance to use Evie and Zach like this again.

Finally, after what felt like a millennia (but was actually probably only five minutes), Evie exited the coffee shop, her nose to her phone. Something caused her to pause in front of the door though, trapping Zach inside. He threw his arms up in frustration, but she wasn’t paying attention to him. She was too busy looking up.

Jack hopped back. Had she been spotted? She threw herself on her stomach and shimmied forward to take another peek. No, it seemed Evie was just looking to her right. Jack refused to take her eyes off the woman to see what she was looking at, too afraid she would vanish the moment Jack turned away. There was some sort of commotion up the street though. She usually tuned out what her rabbit ears picked up, but now the sounds had reached her human ears. There was yelling and people running in their direction, the screech of tires as a few cars took the corner hard and came zooming down the street.

And then smoke billowed around the corner and over the rooftops, rushing at them like an
overwhelming flood. Eyes wide, Evie screamed and ran back into La Cachette full-tilt, taking Zach with her. Jack didn’t have much more time to react. She jumped to her feet and started to run.

As fast as Jack was, the smoke was faster. Soon it was licking her boots as it filled in every crevice of Paris. Mid-jump from rooftop to rooftop, Jack found herself engulfed by it. At first she feared it was magical—well, more magical—but it was just regular smoke. It stung Jack’s eyes, made her throat burn as she coughed. She squeezed her eyes shut and held a hand to her mouth, breathing through the fabric of her suit, which purified the air. Once she had enough breath, she held it and pulled her chakram off to finally listen to the messages she had ignored, pushing the weapon up against her ear as all of Paris descended into a coughing fit.

“Hey, Rabbit! It’s Chat Noir. There’s a new Akuma in town and I didn’t want to leave you out of all the fun. You’re around, right? You didn’t go to that thing at Collège Françoise Dupont on Monday…If you’re out of town or something, you’ve got to tell me or else I’m going to start getting worried! Hop-finally I’ll see you soon. Chat out.”

“Me again!” In the distance, Jack heard Ladybug: Chaton, what are you doing? “Just an update if you’re feline like joining us. My Lady and I are at the Garden of the Plants. Uh…the Botanical Gardens! Akuma calls himself Fumer, which, hey, kind of works in both languages! He—”

“Sorry about that, Rabbit! I got smoked. This Akuma is no light weight. He’s left me breathless.” Chat! cried Ladybug. “Okay, okay, enough with the puns. We’re keeping Fumer contained for now in one of the hothouses, but My Lady and I could use a hand. Or a rabbit’s foot!”

“Okay, we really need your help now, Rabbit.” Cat paused as he coughed. “We can’t even touch this guy. It’s like Nanny Mite all over again.”

“Rabbit…” It was Ladybug this time, her voice ragged. She cleared her throat. “Please, when you get this…Come to the Botanical Gardens right away. There’s an Akuma…” Coughing now. “He uses smoke. I can’t…pull off Lucky Charm. If you could distract him…or come up with some crazy plan…” Even more coughing. “Just come.”

“Rabbit…please pick up.” Cat’s voice was a hoarse whisper now as he strained to speak. “We need you.”

And then the final message, the one from Ladybug Jack had hung up on. “We have to…break…the glass.” It sounded like Ladybug was hacking up her own lung. “He’ll flood Paris…with smoke. Help!”

Jack dropped her chakram with a clatter, holding both hands to her mouth as she sunk to her knees. Why did this keep happening to her? Whenever her friends needed her most, she always ended up ignoring them in favor of her own thing. And she could tell herself it was for the greater good, but that changed nothing for them, only for her. It made her feel less guilty. Made it “okay.” Made her complacent.

No, thought Jack, feeling around for her chakram. She did a lot of harebrained things, but she learned from her mistakes. She may or may not have been able to help Ladybug and Cat Noir stop Fumer, but the people of Paris needed a hero, and that was who she was, even though she was flawed.

Jack allowed herself a couple blinks so she could navigate her chakram’s interface and call Ladybug. The superheroine picked up within half a ring.
“Oh, Rabbit! Thank goodness you’re alive! We thought something terrible happened to you.” Jack had her eyes closed again, but it was clear from Ladybug’s voice that she was breathing fresh air.

Jacked ripped her hand away from her mouth to speak in all one breath. “Are you and Cat okay?”

“My Lady and I are above the smoke,” came Cat’s cheery voice. “Where are you? Looks...a little gray.”

“Uhhh…” Jack didn’t know anymore. In her haste to escape Fumer’s cloud, she hadn’t been paying attention to where she was going. But then she got an idea. “Look for me.”

She squatted down as low as she could, so her butt almost brushed the ground, and sprung up, shooting high into the air. She felt the rush of cool air against her cheeks as she broke through the smoke coverage and took the chance to gulp in some clean air. Blinking away tears, she saw most of Paris completely covered with a thick blanket of smoke. Only the tallest buildings poked through, like the Eiffel Tower and nearby TVi Studios.

Jack spun in place as she reached the zenith of her jump and caught sight of an impossibly tall pole with the tiny figures of Ladybug and Cat Noir perched atop it. Before the smoke swallowed her up again, she swore she saw Cat pointing her out to his partner.

“I think we saw you,” said Ladybug. “You’re by TVi Studios, right?”

“Yeah!”

“Let’s meet there.”

“Got it!” said Jack, saluting her friend blindly before hanging up.

Sliding her chakram back onto her wrist, Jack geared up and jumped again, clearing the smoke and clearing her lungs once more. She didn’t know what she was going to land on as she sailed forward towards TVi Studios, but she braced herself and hoped for the best. Her feet touched down on something metallic, denting it, and she stumbled forward, falling onto the hood of a car. All in all though, it wasn’t that bad of a landing. She picked herself up and jumped again, finding herself quickly closing the gap between her and the media skyscraper. Just a few more hops and she would be there and breathing easier in both senses of the word.

As Jack descended into the smoke two blocks away from her destination though, she landed with one leg on the roof and the other, well, not on anything, so she ended up tumbling down three stories. The landing only knocked the air out of her, but that was a precious commodity. As she bounded back onto her feet and prepared to jump, trying desperately not to breath in the acidic air, something smacked into her side and sent her hurtling through a wall.

"Where do you think you're going?" demanded a voice, rough with anger.

"Fu…Fumer…” said Jack, coughing.

"That's my name. Don't wear it out."

Something kicked Jack and she went rolling across tile floor. Risking the sting of smoke, she opened her eyes at a squint to take in her surroundings. She was in the lobby of a bank, the patrons and employees gasping and screaming as smoke flooded into the area. They fled into a private meeting...
room while she clambered back onto her feet.

Fumer stepped in through the Jack-shaped hole in the wall by one of the teller stations. At first Jack thought her eyes were playing tricks on her—his face(s?) looked like a Picasso painting. He was in profile and portrait at the same time, with skin tones that ranged from ashy white to a dark charred gray. His black hair was a mess and seemed to almost waft right off this head. He wore an oversized bomber jacket that appeared to be made of smoke over colorful spandex in plaid, cheetah print, and tie-dye, with fishnet and chains as well, like some kind of clothing trash heap reject. Marinette would be aghast. What stood out the most to Jack besides Fumer’s face though were his little stubby white fingers poking out of his sleeves. Each was tipped with a flaming glow and smoked slightly like a cigarette.

Jack flung her chakram at him, but his body only curled like smoke where it passed harmlessly through him. In a poof, he vanished from twenty feet away and popped up right in front of Jack, head-butting her in the chin and sending her stumbling back. He seemed to be solid when he wanted to be. Jack’s throwing ring bounced back at her and she was barely able to catch it as it sifted through Fumer again.

"This is my world now," he insisted. "I'm not gonna listen to les keufs and you're not going to stop me."

Jack had no idea what ‘les keufs’ were, but that was far and away the least of her problems. She had to escape, and fast. If Ladybug and Cat Noir weren't able to win against Fumer together, she had no chance by herself. She couldn't believe she used to fight Akumas alone.

“I don’t know what you’re saying,” said Jack, fighting a tickle in her throat. “But are you ready for one last smoke?”

She flung herself at him, knowing full well that the Akuma would go incorporeal. He was expecting it, but probably not expecting her to stop short. She stood where he stood so it was impossible for him to become solid, held her chakram with both hands, and gave a powerful sweep, fanning away the smoke in the area, including Fumer. Then she took off, back through the hole gushing smoke. Eyes smarting, she closed them and jumped, only for Fumer to snag her leg and slam her down into the asphalt.

"You're not going anywhere, Hare Brain," he hissed.

Jack tried to kick him right in the priceless Picasso face, but her foot went through it. It distracted Fumer long enough for her to get back onto her feet though. She couldn’t see, she couldn’t smell, but she could hear. The smoke made the streets quiet, everyone seeking refuge indoors, so when Fumer whooshed at her, she heard it and dodged. He materialized behind her, but she ducked, both sweeping his feet and waving her chakram like a fan. Between being blown away again and being upended, the Akuma chose to go intangible. She made a move to jump again, but darted blindly to the side instead in order to trick him. Maybe it would’ve worked if she hadn’t gotten tangled up in a bicycle.

Fumer stepped on her wrist and made a move to remove her watch. He was solid though, so Jack was able to grab his wrist and fling him away. She launched herself into the air, coughing and gasping as her body yearned for fresh air. As she broke free of the smoke though, she saw she had taken a leap in the wrong direction.

With a beleaguered sigh, Jack frantically began to fan the ground with her chakram. It seemed Fumer
could transport himself anywhere within his smoke, so she didn't want to be standing in it. One sweep took off the top layer below her, and then another and another. The smoke curled around her as she dug down into it, but she managed to land in a clear area. She saw a flash of eleven glowing dots from Fumer's fingertips as he tried to reach out to grab her, but she had already bounced.

Both the advantage and the problem with TVi studio was its height. Jack’s jumps wouldn’t take her to the roof, and the smooth glass facade made it hard to grip. Normally she would run at the building and up the side, but the smoke was Fumer’s territory—she was lucky she had gotten out alive. As she bounced near the skyscraper though, she exhaled a breath that had been keeping tension in her shoulders. Ladybug had left her yo-yo hanging off the side of the building, right where Jack could grab it. Sweeping away the smoke for one last jump, she launched herself up at the weapon and grabbed it with both hands. She dropped a little before the string went taut, maybe five feet above Fumer’s smoke, before she was reeled in.

Cat sat on the lip of the roof, Ladybug having affixed her yo-yo to his baton to create a fishing pole.

“My Lady, look!” he said excitedly over his shoulder as he pulled Jack up, a cheeky grin on his face. “I caught a rabbitfish!”

"Is that a thing?" wondered Jack. Cat nodded eagerly.

Ladybug was standing a little further back, in the shadow of the three ginormous billboards that advertised TVi’s newest programs, examining something in her hand. It was red with black polka dots, so it was no doubt the work of Lucky Charm.

“What is it, LB?” Jack wondered as Cat swung her over onto the roof and she dropped.

Ladybug turned to Jack, worry in her eyes as she shuffled up and offered what she was holding. “Please tell me this isn’t a gun.”

At first Jack thought it was, and wondered what gave Lucky Charm the right to give her friend something so dangerous. Their weapons were non-lethal for the reason! They weren’t meant to kill. Ladybug had probably never even seen a gun in real life before. There was something off about it though. The barrel was very large for such a small weapon. Curious, Jack opened the chamber and pulled out a single bullet the size of a shotgun shell. It was plastic.

“It’s a flare gun,” Jack realized, loading it back up and handing it to her friend. Relief flooded Ladybug’s face, but it was short-lived.

“Hey, guys?” said Cat, scrambling backwards away from the ledge. “Smoke alarm. Smoke alarm!”

Fumer came blasting up, propelled by the smoke issuing from his fingers. Ladybug looked around, clearly desperate to formulate a plan. Nothing came to her mind in time though as Fumer landed on the lip of the roof, a nasty smirk on his face(s). He raised his hands in their direction.

“Peek-a-boo,” he said, blasting them with smoke, but the three of them cartwheeled, flipped, and jumped out of the way.

The Akuma scowled, vanished, and appeared in the new cloud of smoke he had just created. It was already dissipating, so he added to it, thick furls forming around him. Jack tried to fan it away.

“Good idea!” observed Ladybug. “Keep that up.”
“For how long?” Jack wondered, but Ladybug was spinning her yo-yo and vanishing into battle, Cat at her heels. She was at a bit of a disadvantage though, still holding onto the flare gun. Jack wondered what she planned to do with it. She had a sinking feeling that Ladybug was wondering the same thing.

Jack bounced around the outside of Fumer’s smoke cloud as she tried to keep it down, seeing flashes of Ladybug’s yo-yo and Cat Noir’s staff, but it grew despite her best efforts. Occasionally Cat would get thrown out, but he would simply wipe his chin and run right back in. Ladybug would sometimes pop out for a quick breather too. From what Jack could gather, nothing was being accomplished. The flare gun even got kicked out at one point. Jack managed to grab it before it went flying off the roof. Ladybug nearly barreled into her in her pursuit of it.

“This is getting dangerous,” Jack said, eyeing her friend’s earrings as she gave the flare gun back. Ladybug was down to three spots.

“I know. I just…there’s nothing to use my Lucky Charm with!”

“I can’t help you there.”

Ladybug froze. She looked at the flare gun again. “Help…” she repeated. “Help!”

Cat came bursting forth from the smoke. “I’m here, My Lady!” he cried, taking a defensive stance in front of her. He looked around wildly, trying to suss out Fumer’s next attack.

“No, kitty. I…” She paused, looking up at the backs of the billboards. “Actually…I do need your help.”

Cat was on the same wavelength as his partner. He followed her gaze to the billboards and nodded, raising a hand into the air. “Cataclysm!” he cried, gaining his destructive aura. He blasted through the smoke and ran along the edge of the roof, scratching the bases of the billboards as he passed. They rusted instantly and the signs fell over backwards onto the roof like dominoes, one after another, sweeping away all the smoke on the roof. Only Fumer remained, having phased right through them.

“Idiots,” he said, looking around. “You’ve only delayed the inevitable.”

Ladybug went to go attack the Akuma, but he blasted off into the air. She skidded to a halt right below him though, held her flare gun above her head, and squeezed the trigger. The flare spiraled up and straight through Fumer before exploding into a red firework with a sharp crack.

Fumer laughed. “You missed!”

“My Lady, what was that!?” wondered Cat as he jogged back to them, a light on his ring flickering out.

“A call for help,” Ladybug answered.

“Here he comes again!” warned Jack. They dodged Fumer’s smoke as it billowed towards them.

“We do like we did before,” said Ladybug, whipping her yo-yo around. Cat and Jack exchanged glances of confusion, but he shrugged and followed Ladybug back into the smoke. Jack was left to
try her best to fan it away, baffled and more than a little worried. Ladybug had only about two minutes before she turned back to a civilian. Whatever she was planning, she was cutting it close.

Once again, the smoke cloud swelled. Jack could hear Fumer whooshing around, Ladybug and Cat hacking as they choked on the smoke-filled air, and what was she supposed to do? Wait for their demise? Smoke soon enveloped her too, before she was even ready. Holding a hand to her mouth as she coughed, she tried to look for her friends locked in battle, but felt close to throwing up without fresh air. She had no choice but to jump straight up to catch clean air, but the smoke had curled skywards. She could no longer jump high enough to clear the smoke. She tried again though, and a third time, hoping, straining to jump just a little bit higher. She needed oxygen. She needed it now. The edges of her vision were starting to go dark.

There was a sound halfway between a flapping and a purring as she was caught underneath the arms and taken higher to fresh air. Jack sucked it in greedily first before taking notice of who had saved her.

It was a young man with high cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes, and an eyebrow piercing. He wore green, with a triangular kickboxing helmet with a yellow Plexiglas visor. Oh, and he had wings.

“Mantis!” Jack yelped.

He groaned. “I mean, I guess. Praying Mantis with these freaking robes.” His voice was quiet, but American. He didn’t appear to have an accent.

Jack’s heart dropped as a thought occurred to her. “Please tell me you aren’t Chameleon in disguise.”

“I’m…not…? Listen, I saw the flare, I came to help.”

“And what made you come to Paris?”

“What is this, the firing squad?”

“Please. It's important!”

Praying Mantis mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like a derisive ‘people.’

“What was that?” asked Jack.

“My Kwami was going insane, okay? Said we had to come out this way and felt better when we got to Paris.”

The Beacon! The Beacon had worked. Jack couldn’t believe her luck. This was the real, honest-to-goodness holder of the Mantis Miraculous.

“Thank gawd you’re here. Why didn’t you come find me sooner!?” she complained.

“You think I want to get wrapped up in all this stuff? But I can’t ignore a call for help.”

Help. Of course. Ladybug had been banking on a Recree Miraculous holder to appear. Her Lucky Charm wouldn’t have given her that flare gun otherwise.

“Ladybug and Cat Noir are going to run out of energy soon,” Jack explained. “We need to get back
down there and defeat that Akuma.”

“A-what-now?”

“Bad guy. The one who is causing all the smoke?”

“Oh, him. What a jerk. He’s ruining the environment.” His voice lowered, as if he were talking to himself. “Okay. Deep breath now.”

Before Jack could even ask what Praying Mantis was planning to do, he dove back down into the smoke. He came in for a landing, but he still ran his wings. It cleared a little pocket for them so they could see, even if the air quality was low.

Jack spun around to get the full view of the Mantis Miraculous holder. He was tall and thin. Elegant, even. His wings were a part of his monk-like robes, whipping up and down rapidly as if possessed. Tied to either side of his waist was a pair of…fighting sticks? Jack didn’t know what they were called, but they were sticks with handles, a little bit longer than a man’s forearm (Tonfa, she would later find out). They were painted green and stuck out, giving Praying Mantis the appearance of six limbs.

The smoke began to thin as Praying Mantis pumped his wings harder. Jack spotted a splash of red and ran forward to find a collapsed Ladybug, Cat swinging his staff madly over her body to protect her. He locked eyes with Jack.

“Go!” she yelled at him, pointing to the rooftop’s door. He didn’t need to be told twice. He shoveled Ladybug into his arms and dashed away. Fumer tried to follow, but Jack swung her chakram, creating a gust of wind that sent him tumbling. He vanished and reappeared behind her, but Praying Mantis had a quick reaction time. He whipped out one of his sticks, spun it, and slammed it into Fumer’s side, sending the Akuma sprawling.

Fumer disappeared before he hit the ground. Problem was, he didn’t reappear where Jack and Praying Mantis could see him. The smoke limited their visibility, and the Akuma had apparently concealed himself somewhere else to add to it, because what little visibility they had created was quickly diminishing.

Praying Mantis and Jack turned their backs to each other as they scanned the area, Jack swinging her chakram and Mantis working his wings, but it wasn’t enough. It wouldn’t be long before they couldn’t breath, couldn’t see.

“It’s no good,” said Jack. “You better do your thing now before it’s too late.”

Mantis said nothing.

Jack cast a glance over her shoulder to find him covering his mouth with the sleeve of his robe. “Praying Mantis! Use…” she coughed. “…your superpower!”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Do you even know what my superpower is?” he asked, his voice muffled.

“It doesn’t matter. Lucky Charm called you, so you’ll be able to use it to defeat the Akuma.”

“Lucky—?”
"Trust me."

Mere moments after the words left her mouth, Jack felt searing pain around her ankles as Fumer grabbed her. He swung her around and tossed her. She went sailing through the smoke, smacked her shoulder against the edge of the roof, and nearly fell off the building. She had the presence of mind to grab the ledge, but only just.

Fumer materialized from the smoke to lord over her, nudging her hands with his boots. "You're as stubborn as the gum on my shoe," he said, but beneath the words, Jack heard something else. A shout.

"Deflectoskeleton!"

Fumer was mere moments from stomping on Jack’s fingers, but he heard a clang of metal and paused. There was another clang, and another clang. The Akuma turned to see his smoke, once placid and uniform, roiling like a summer thunderstorm in the direction of the noise.

Without warning, the smoke fled, parting for a figure the color of liquid mercury, footsteps the source of the noise. It took Jack a moment, but she realized it was Praying Mantis. He stood before Fumer, his face impassive, before spreading his legs, arms, and wings, and squatting. He looked exactly like the pictures of mantises in books using threat displays. Fumer wasn’t threatened though. He stood his ground, crossing his arms and spitting at Mantis’s sandals. It was black like tar. Praying Mantis refused to acknowledge it though, instead locking eyes with Fumer and gesturing for the Akuma to come at him.

Fumer raised his hands and pointed his fingers at Mantis much like he had done to Jack, Ladybug, and Cat. When he blasted Mantis with smoke though, his body repelled it. It gathered behind him, which was good enough for the Akuma as he vanished.

“Behind you!” Jack warned, but Mantis didn’t move. Fumer came flying at him, winding up for a punch, but when he struck Mantis he bounced back, almost as if he had struck rubber.

Angered, Fumer cursed and tried again, and again. Jack could only watch in slack-jawed amazement. Every hit was a no-sell that repelled the Akuma. Realizing that he would turn his attention back to her when he wasn’t going to win against Praying Mantis, Jack pushed down on the ledge, flinging herself up and landing by her new friend’s side.

“Whoa. That’s totally awesome!” she told him.

“It’s not that great,” he insisted, turning to her as if in slow motion. There was the sound of something unclicking and a bead, one of five on Mantis’s eyebrow ring, dropped to the ground and skittered away. “I lose all my agility, so I can’t really fight. I’m just a glorified brick.”

Fumer came streaking towards Jack, but she heard him coming. She spun around Praying Mantis and pushed him. He fell on top of the Akuma, trapping him since there was no smoke for him to disappear into.

“Good,” said Jack, honestly a little surprised that had worked. “I need a brick.”

She grabbed Fumer’s right hand and searched it. She had noticed it when he tried to grab her through the smoke before she got to TVi Studio. It looked like he had six fingers on one hands. He wasn't
polydactyl though, he simply had a cigarette up his sleeve. She broke it, ash falling out of it along with a butterfly.

Wait.

Jack realized too late that Ladybug wasn’t around to purify the Akuma. Did she have another Pygmalion situation on her hands? She watched, helpless, as it took wing and made it’s escape. As luck would have it though, Ladybug and Cat burst from the doors leading onto the roof, refreshed and recharged.

"Ladybug!" cried Jack, pointing at the escaping butterfly. The superheroine flung her yo-yo at it, but it didn’t reach, falling back to earth with a clatter. Cat grabbed her though and they shot up using his staff. Ladybug’s yo-yo retracted and she tried again, snagging the Akuma this time.

As the purification process began, Jack helped Mantis as he stumbled off Fumer.

"Sorry I pushed you," said Jack.

“Sometimes I need a push,” Praying Mantis acknowledged. He gazed out across the smoke-filled city. “Otherwise I act too late.”

“Better late than never,” said Jack. She wrinkled her nose before the words even left her mouth. She was spending too much time with Mimmi.

“But all those people…”

As if to put his fears at ease, Miraculous Ladybug went to work, cleansing the city and rebuilding the billboards around them. Mantis spun around, amazed. His eyes fell on Ladybug and Cat.

“Was that them?” he asked Jack. “Did they do that?”

“Ladybug, yeah. Her powers are like mine.”

“You can do that too?”

“Well…I used to.” Jack frowned and tilted her head. “You know who I am, don’t you?”

“Er…Rabbit?”

“Are you guessing?”

“Uh…I kind of live off the grid, so…”

Fumer changed back into a civilian, coughing and sputtering and interrupting them. Ladybug ran up to him and knelt, speaking to him softly in French. Cat stood nearby, looking at Mantis warily.

“That’s not Chameleon, is it?” he asked.

"Nope!"

"Are you sure?"
Jack pulled off her chakram and gestured for Praying Mantis to take up his tonfa. "So we can get into contact with each other," she explained, making a move to knock the two weapons together. "You have to do it too."

Mantis did as she said, and he was added to Jack's list of growing superhero contacts. She forwarded him on to Ladybug and Cat Noir. Though Ladybug was a little busy at the moment trying to calm down a punk who had issues with authority, her partner popped open his staff to have a look and sighed with relief.

"Who’s Chameleon?" asked Mantis.

"Did your Kwami tell you about Hokss?" wondered Jack. Praying Mantis gave a curt nod. "Hokss picked a real winner when it came to forming a Miraculous. Chameleon can disguise himself as anyone. He pretended to be you a few weeks ago."

"Me!?" Another bead fell off his eyebrow ring as if to punctuate his shock.

"Well, not you-you. He didn’t know what you looked like. But he pretended to be the holder of the Mantis Miraculous. He was after my identity for his boss’s boss, Omega. I mean, I don’t know what his name is, actually, but I call him Omega. It's a long story, but that’s kind of why I called you here —"

Here Praying Mantis drew back. "That was…that was you?"

"Yeah. I have this machine called the Beacon that—"

Mantis fell back even further, shaking his head. "Did it ever occur to you that I didn’t want to come? I was perfectly happy where I was. You didn’t even give me a choice."

Jack blinked, stunned into silence. While it's true she never thought—oh. Oh. That’s right. She never thought. Of course. She just assumed the other holders of the Recree Kwami would be happy to help her, but now that she was giving it more thought, not everyone had the luxury of dropping everything and going to Paris just because their Kwami was acting up.

"Praying Mantis…" she tried to argue weakly, but he geared up his wings like they were an ageing lawn mower.

"No, man. Whatever's going on, you’re just going to have to deal. I’m out."

"Hey!"

Jack made a move to grab him, but pulled back at the last second, watching him buzz away and slip into the grid of buildings below. It wouldn’t be fair to force him to stay against his will. Well, anymore than she already was, since, according to Dr. Lacasse, as long as the Beacon was active, Kwami wouldn’t be able to leave its field once they entered it anyway.

"What was that all about?" wondered Cat, joining Jack’s side.

"He…He doesn’t want to be here," said Jack.

Cat put a hand on her shoulder and gave her a warm shake. "Give him some time to come around."
“That’s...not bad advice, actually.” Jack turned to her friend and smiled. “Thanks, Cat.”

“Hey, what else are friends for?”

* * *

Jack sat on her bed in her pajamas, the events of the last few days washing over her and making her numb. The PIE Talk. Finding out Chameleon’s identity. Her coffee date with Evie. Fumer’s attack. Meeting Praying Mantis. It all started to run together. Words mixed with memories that she wasn’t expecting.

*You were busy with other things. It’s not your fault. It was just a bad situation.*

Cadence uninviting her to her birthday party.

*I’m sure they’ll be fine without me.*

Cadence saying ‘Good’ when Jack told her she was moving.

*Sometimes I need a push. Otherwise I act too late.*

Cadence staring at Jack coldly from the computer screen when Jack said she would be her translator.

*Give him some time to come around.*

Jack held her head. Cat just had to mention friends at the end of their battle with Fumer. That’s what was setting this all off.

“Jack…?” came Mimmi’s voice, dripping with concern as she flew over from her usual place on the windowsill.

“Okay!” she all but shouted, causing the Kwami to yelp and fly backwards. Jack blushed and lowered her voice. “Okay. I’m gonna do it. I’m gonna call Cadence.”

Mimmi blinked her luminous eyes, clearly not understanding how Jack reached this decision but pleased all the same. “Really?” She clapped her hands together. “That’s wonderful! I know it’ll be difficult, but you got this! I believe in you and I know—”

“Ah, Mimmi?”

“Yes?”

“Maybe...maybe a little privacy?”

“Of course!” The creature zipped up and phased through the ceiling, only to pop back down again real quick. “Good luck!”

Jack couldn’t help but smile. “Thanks, Mimmi,” she said as the Kwami waved aggressively, her whole body waving too, and vanished again.

With nothing else left to stop her, Jack found herself fiddling with her phone. She pulled up her contact list, but switched over to Instagram to page through pictures of surfers, cupcakes, and
adorable animals. Coming across one posted of Alya and Mariette though, Jack felt a pang in her heart and went back to her contacts. She called Cadence.

The slightly gargled tone of the ring put Jack on edge as she hoped under her breath that Cadence wouldn’t pick up. Her wish came true and it went straight to voicemail.

“Hey Cadence. It’s…uh…me. Jaclyn. Smith.” She winced. “Of course, you know that. I hope. I mean…I wanted to talk about Monday. It was…Uh, you didn’t…I mean…” Her phone buzzed. There was someone on the other line. Jack pulled her phone away from her ear to have a look, nearly dropping it when she saw Cadence was trying to call her back. She hung up on her awkward voicemail and switched, hoping it wouldn’t save.

“I’m at school,” said Cadence. No ‘hello.’ No ‘this is a surprise.’ Nothing.

“You called me,” Jack pointed out.

Jack could almost hear her friend grudgingly roll her eyes through the phone. “Yeah, well, I have Mr. Dennison for pop lit this semester and he lets us read outside on nice days.”

"Nice!"

"What do you want, Jack?"

“Oh! Right. I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“Sorry!?”

“Yes. I know we’re not friends anymore, but, like, we were. Best friends. And I could’ve at least reached out to you since I moved. I’m sorry I didn’t.”

Jack waited for Cadence to respond, but all she heard was silence. Had she hung up? Had the call dropped? But then the girl spoke, a tight twist in her voice.

“I don’t…why are you sorry?”

“Um…”

“You’re not mad at me?”

Jack looked around her room, as if searching for a hidden camera. What was going on? “No. Why would I be mad at you?”

“Because I cut you out of my life. And even when, like, you tried to make it better, I just…So, wait. You’re not mad?”

“Gawd, Cadence. Do I have to send you smoke signals? A carrier pigeon? No, I’m not mad. Maybe a little hurt ‘cause you didn’t mention me at all during your PIE talk, but—”

“I-I didn’t want to make things awkward.”

“Why would it be awkward?”
“You weren’t talking to me. And I sorta picked up on the fact that you told your new friends that you hardly knew me.”

“Oh.”

More awkward silence followed. Jack wanted to pull her hair out or throw her phone or-or something! Anything than continue to wait on Cadence. Their conversation wasn’t going as bad as she thought it would though, which was a plus.

“What you did was pretty crappy,” Cadence eventually said. “You didn't want to hang out with me anymore and I was mad for a super long time. But then…you moved. I know it’s not because of anything I did, but…it felt like it was. And then the Akumas stopped appearing and Rabbit left, so Positivity Club folded—”

“What!? But during the PIE Talk, you said—”

“I was embarrassed. I didn’t want anyone to know. But that’s not even the worst of it. The Squad…”

“No! Don’t tell me—”

“Oh, no. We’re all still friends and stuff, but the…what’s the word? Dynamic! Dynamic. That’s it. The dynamic’s changed. Malie finally got together with José and it turns out the dude is a controlling jerkward.”

“Really? But he also seemed so nice!”

“That’s what he wants you to think, but he's been turning Malie against us, saying we’re all jealous and don’t care about her. And Veronica thinks she might be bi, and Juana isn’t being very supportive, but she's been kind of...let's say 'witchy' lately because of her parent's divorce and…and I can’t help but think that you were the glue that held us all together.”

“Cady…”

“I wish things had been different,” said Cadence, voice shaking a little. “I wish we hadn’t fought. I wish you hadn’t moved. But, most of all, I wish you had just…been there more.”

“Me too.”

It was unfortunate that Cadence would never know how much Jack meant those words. She hoped the conviction in her voice would be enough, but already the moment was passing. Too late. Too late.

“So…it seems like Positivity Club is doing really well over in Paris,” said Cadence, moving on to a new topic.

“Oh. Yeah.” Jack struggled to hide her disappointment. So that was it, then. “Your PIE Talk was a huge hit. Everyone’s been talking about it.”

“I’m just glad Rabbit has the support she needs. She—Oh, man! I never did tell you, did I?”

Jack felt thrown by the change in Cadence’s tone. “Uh?”
“Rabbit came to visit me right before she took on Trumpeter Swan!”

It took Jack a second to realize she had to approximate some level of surprise. She decided to jump up from her bed, slamming her feet on the floor. “What!?” she yelped, forcing her voice to crack. “That’s crazy!” Yuck. No. That sounded fake. Luckily, Cadence was too caught up in her news to notice.

“I know! I wanted to tell you as soon as it happened, but…Anyway. She shows up outside my window and she tells me she’s going to go fight Trumpeter Swan and…she was freaked out she wasn’t gonna win.”

“No!”

“Yes! And that’s why she came to me. She knew you and I started Positivity Club. She said she was counting on me, counting on all of us, to stop Trumpeter Swan if she failed. And I got scared for her. Do you know how young she looks up-close? I always thought she was an adult or something, but she didn’t look much older than me.”

“She’s magic. She could be ancient.”

“I know, but it didn’t feel like it. She felt like she could be my older sister or something.”

Jack snorted, but played it off as annoyance rather than amusement. “I can’t believe you kept this from me!”

“I almost called to talk to you about it, especially after there were no more sightings of her. I thought something terrible had happened to her. But then she popped up in Paris, which totally makes sense.”

Even though Jack was confident in her Glamour, a thin film of sweat broke out across her forehead. “It…does?”

“Well, yeah. Rabbit already defeated one Akuma creator. Of course she would jump over the Atlantic to help Ladybug and Black Cat with theirs.”

“Cat Noir. Black Cat sounds lame.”

“Uh, don’t the French say Chat Noir?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Good thing you took Spanish.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, Jack. Has anyone ever told you that you’re oblivious?”

“Yeah. My boyfriend. Like, all the time.”

Cadence laughed, genuine and warm. “Aw, you have a boyfriend!? Wait, wait, wait. It's not that handsome sunshine prince of a French boy, is it? Adrian or something?”

"Adrien. And, no, it's...uh...You won't believe this, but it's Diego Rodriguez."
Jack squeezed her eyes shut, fully expecting her old friend's admonishment. Instead, she got confusion.

"Uh...who?" asked Cadence.

"Diego! You know, when we were first starting Positivity Club, we asked him to join?"

"We asked a lot of people, Jack."

"I know, but he said no and was really rude about it, remember?"

"So let me get this straight. You could be dating some super hot French guy, but instead you're going long-distance with someone who was a jerk to you?"

"It was just that one time! And he's way cuter than Adrien."

"Whatever, Jack."

"So you don't remember him?"

"Nope. Sorry. But, speaking of boyfriends...We're in agreement that Rabbit and Perro Negro are totally together, right?" Classic Cadence, always switching the topic back to Rabbit.

"Right," said Jack.

"So, then, why didn't he go to Paris with her? Did they break up or something?"

"Gawd, I hope not," said Jack, dappling in a little self-indulgence. "They're perfect for each other."

"Duh. But if they're still together...why did he stay behind?"

"Maybe he didn't have a choice. Maybe you're right and they're teenagers like us. Not everyone can drop everything and go to Paris."

"If that's the case, that's so sad! I thought it was more like...Rabbit and Perro have been protecting L.A. for so long that they didn't want to leave us unprotected, even with no more Trumpeter Swan, so they split up. And once Rabbit makes Paris safe too, she'll come back. At least I'm hoping she will."

Jack grimaced. If only it were that easy.

A soft knock on her door distracted her and she glanced at her clock. How was it ten o'clock already? She could've swore it was only nine.

"Cracker Jack, time for bed!" her dad announced as he burst in like the Kool-aid Man for maximum embarrassment. He gave her an apologetic frog smile though when he noticed she was on the phone. "Oh, sorry," he stage-whispered. "Diego?"

"Uh, no. Cadence."

"Is that your dad?" asked Cadence. "Tell him I said hi. And that he still owes me a milkshake!"
Jack giggled. She had almost forgotten about her last Dodger game. Her dad always made sure to buy three tickets so Jack could bring one of the Squad. Even though Veronica pointed out that none of the other girls liked baseball besides the two of them, Jack wanted things to be fair and always cycled through them. Cadence, Malie, Juana, Veronica—that was the order. It just so happened that, for the last game Jack didn’t even realize was her last game, it was Cadence’s turn.

It was the bottom of the ninth, bases loaded, two outs, Giants by three. Jack’s dad wanted to leave so they could beat the crowds out of the stadium, but Cadence had faith. She didn’t know a thing about baseball, but she had faith. She bet Jack’s dad a Milky Way Malt from Milk that ‘the guy with the bat’ was going to hit one over the bleachers and into the trees. Knowing the batting average wasn’t in Cadence’s favor, Jack’s dad jokingly took that bet. The look on his face when Cadence’s prediction came to pass was priceless.

“I thought…” her dad started, brow knotted, but he paused to allow it to smooth. “That’s nice. I’m glad you two are talking again.”

“She says hi and that you owe her a milkshake.”

“Memory like a steel trap, that one. Okay, well, wrap things up and I’ll be back to tuck you in.”

“Right! Your trip.” Jack’s dad was heading out early tomorrow morning for London. It had been their tradition since she was a little girl to have him tuck her into bed the night before any work trip. It was super lame now that she was older, but she couldn’t bring herself to break tradition since she knew doing so would break her dad’s heart.

Jack’s dad winked, and gave her a finger gun and made a clicking sound before moonwalking away. Jack’s mom liked to joke that her dad was usually set on 'Maximum Ham.'

“Hey, Cadence?” said Jack. “I gotta go.”

“Yeah, me too. The period’s almost over. We’re heading back inside.”

“Well…um…” Like how she put off calling Cadence in the first place, now she was putting off saying goodbye. Talking to her again, it felt like home, and Jack didn’t want to lose that feeling, so she dragged the pause along.

Cadence spoke up again before things got too awkward. “Hey, if you ever want to talk about Positivity Club stuff again…I wouldn’t mind.”

“Really!?"

“I still wanna help Rabbit, even if she’s in another country.”

Today had been a rollercoaster of a day. Jack put together one more piece of the Omega puzzle, but was unable to follow-up on it. Her plan with the Beacon was working, but Praying Mantis wanted nothing to do with her. She was exhausted and maybe a bit nauseous, but talking with Cadence and clearing the air between them gave her a second wind.

“Thanks,” Jack said. “I think you help Rabbit more than you’ll ever know.”
Gravity Screw

Chapter Summary

Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jacquelyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Chapter Notes

I hope you all had a Merry Christmas and will have a Happy New Year! You’ve all been so patient waiting for a new chapter. Thank you! I hope it doesn’t disappoint. I usually struggle with my Akumas, but not this one. He’s got a really cool set of powers!

I knew it was only a matter of time before one of the show’s Akumas matched one of mine, at least in abilities, but I was a little surprise when it turned out an Akuma had the same powers as one of my OC Miraculous holders! I had to laugh when I watched Chameleon. I was not expecting Season 3 to start so quickly! Is it weird that I kind of like long hiatuses? It’s because of the long hiatus between Season 1 and 2 that I started writing this piece ;-)

The shout-out this time goes to… Myzic! They recently went back and re-read this whole story and commented on every chapter this time around. I loved reading the comments! Thank you so much for taking the time to do that =D And just in time for a new chapter too! Hope you enjoy!

Jack stared up at Tour Montparnasse. It was really nothing compared to the U.S. Bank Tower back home, which was probably almost twice as tall, but it was downright bizarre to see a skyscraper without others nearby. It rose up from the surrounding buildings like a giant towering over some Lilliputians. Stranger still, some of the windows of the 59-story building were papered over in neon, forming art deco letters. It read:

HAU
TEC
OUT
URE

“High fashion,” Marinette translated into English upon seeing Jack struggle. Now that she said it, it seemed obvious. The same arrangement of letters was on the banners that decorated Tour Montparnasse’s main entrance. It only made sense as the title for a fashion show being held in a skyscraper. The designer—Jack had forgotten his name already—could give Cat Noir a run for his money in the pun department.
“How are you?” Jack asked her friend in French. “Okay?”

Marinette offered a nervous smile in response. She was certainly dressed for the occasion, with a daisy-patterned black romper and a white pleather jacket. Not knowing what else to wear, Jack had just gone with the outfit Marinette had designed for her.

They almost got into the building before Marinette had her nervous breakdown. Alya had warned Jack, so she was prepared.

“I can’t do this,” said Marinette, turning heel and trying to escape, but Jack grabbed her wrist and spun her back around.

“Of course you can! Adrien assists…no, bleh. Adrien is waiting for us.”

Jack was a girl of her word. She had promised Marinette ages ago she’d help her get with Adrien and today was the culmination of her efforts. After mentioning to Adrien several times during their tutoring sessions that she really wanted to thank Marinette for making her an outfit by taking her to a fashion show, he finally picked up on the hint and offered to pull a couple of strings, though he would probably have to be with them.

“It could work,” she had told him with a sly grin. Internally, she had done an A-Team impression her dad would’ve been proud of. I love it when a plan comes together.

It was nice that something was going to plan, since everything else was a hot mess. Praying Mantis still refused to talk to her, even though she had left him some messages warning him about Chameleon, and there had been no more sightings of the other Recree Miraculous holders. As for Evie, Jack must have spooked her because she was suddenly too busy for their rain check. Jack hadn’t seen her since their ill-fated coffee date. Zach, on the other hand, had once again made an attempt to figure out Jack’s civilian identity. This time he disguised himself as a child and followed her after she helped Ladybug and Cat Noir defeat an Akuma in hopes of seeing her de-transform, but she caught him and he bounced.

“I know Adrien is waiting for us,” Marinette pointed out. “That’s why I can’t do this!”

“Here.” Jack took her lucky rabbit’s foot necklace off and shoved it into Marinette’s hands. The girl’s eyes grew wide.

“I can’t take this!” she said, pushing it back.

“You can.” Jack threw the necklace around Marinette’s neck before she could protest and adjusted it. “Every time I feel nervous, I cling to it and recover strength. It reminds me of Rabbit. She fought Akumas alone before the arrival of Perro Negro, and if she could do it…do that, you can do this.”

Marinette held the rabbit’s foot to her chest and she took a moment to center herself. “You’re right,” she said, suddenly certain. “Thank you.”

But Marinette’s newfound strength didn’t last long. Jack trailed a marching Marinette into the lobby only for the girl to stop dead. Adrien was waiting for them by a bank of elevators, behind the velvet ropes. Jack waved at him, catching his attention so it would be too late for Marinette to back out.

“Hi Marinette! Hi Jack!” he said as his bodyguard unhooked the rope so they could bypass the line.
“Thank you for inviting us, Adrien,” said Jack. She looked to Marinette, but the girl had gone mute. Jack jabbed her.

“Yeah! You thank…I mean, thank you!”

A woman monitoring the elevator checked four named off her list and handed them VIP lanyards before allowing them to cut in front of the next group. They clambered inside when the doors opened.

“You’re going to love Sty, Marinette,” Adrien said. “He’s all about mixing haute couture with ready-to-wear with mass market.”

“I-I...I know.” The girl grabbed Jack’s necklace again. “I’ve been following him for a couple of years now.”

The boy laughed. “I should’ve known. You have such an eye for fashion, Marinette. I bet you could give Audrey Bourgeois a run for her money.”

Marinette’s pale cheeks turned rosy.

“So you model his clothes?” Jack wondered.

“Uh, no...” He scratched the back of his head. “It’s a little hard when he only designs for women.”

Jack turned red in contrast to Marinette’s pink.

The bodyguard grunted and herded them out when the doors rolled open on the 56th floor. The event space had been configured for the fashion show, with chairs arranged in a curve around a platform. It appeared the space around the mezzanine floor, which ran the length of the windows and was sectioned off by metal railings, would serve as the runway, leading to and from the platform. The room was a little dated, with mirrored walls and pillars, and outer space themed carpet beneath the mezzanine, but Sty was leaning into the curve—the whole space had been decorated like a futuristic 80s disco.

A short man in an army jacket, the sleeves rolled up to show off the wavy ink lines of his tattoos, spotted them. He excused himself from a woman wearing a headset and made his way over. He wore so many scarves that Jack could hardly see the bottom half of his face.

“Adrien Agreste, you made it! Marvelous, marvelous.” He kissed the boy on the cheek, or tried to, rather, since his scarves were in the way. “And your friends?” He kissed their cheeks too. “Marvelous, marvelous.”

“It’s an honor to meet you Sty,” squeaked Marinette.

“Marinette is a fashion designer herself,” explained Adrien.

“She designed my outfit!” said Jack, proudly spinning around.

“Good movement!” said Sty, clearly impressed. “And see how happy your customer is? You are what I’d like to call a compassionate creator! Come. I’ll give you a tour of backstage.”
Sty didn’t wait for an answer. He headed for a door while Marinette gaped like a fish. Adrien laughed a little and gently took her by the hand.

“C’mon!” he said.

Marinette allowed herself to be led, eyes looking through everyone as she ascending to a plane of addle-brained ecstasy. “I’m in heaven!” Jack heard the girl whisper to herself.

The next room was a flurry of activity. The droning of hair dryers, the misting of hairspray, models chatting as they helped zip each other up into outfits that seemed to grow more intricate and complicated with each passing glance. One rushed by in a crinoline skirt, shouting to see if anyone had an extra pair of liner socks.

Sty launched into his inspiration for his show, which was all about bringing high fashion down to earth. His pieces progressed from high fashion down to his brand new H&M line. He got distracted though when he saw one of his models apparently wearing her outfit backwards and rushed off to fix it.

“What do you think, Marinette?” wondered Adrien. “This could be you someday.”

“M-m-m-me?”

“And maybe Adrien can be your model,” suggested Jack.

“That would be—” started Adrien, but he never got to finish, his hulking gorilla of a bodyguard cutting him off by shoving a phone in his face. Adrien looked at it and then pulled his own phone out of his pocket. He grimaced “I…uh…I missed a call from my father. I guess it’s important. I’ll be right back.”

“Do not be too long!” said Jack. “The show will begin soon.”

Marinette waited until Adrien was out of sight before doing her happy dance. “This! Is the best! Day! Ever!” she cried, then whooped for joy, the sound blending into the cacophony around them.

Jack laughed. “Easy, girl.”

“Is this a dream? Because it feels like a dream.” She looked around again, soaking it all in. “Jack, you need to pinch me because—Oh!” Her eyes caught on a statuesque model with flawless bronze skin. Her effortlessly curled brown hair shone with caramel highlights, half pulled back in a French barrette to not obscure her face. Every feature on her symmetrical face was striking, from her perfectly arched eyebrows to her slightly pouty red lips. There weren’t enough adverbs in the world to describe her. She sat in one of the make-up chairs unattended, chatting with the girl one chair over. “It’s Lalita Patel,” squeaked Marinette. “THE Lalita Patel.”

“Uh…who?”

“She’s an international supermodel, one of my absolute favs. Next to Adrien, of course. What’s she doing here?”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s not in the show.”
“How do you know?”

Marinette tapped her VIP lanyard and Jack noticed Lalita was wearing one too. She blushed, zero for two on the day already.

“Why not go talk to her?” Jack suggested, but before the words even left her mouth, Marinette was already drawing back. “Marinette!”

“I don’t want to bother her. She looks busy.”

It looked like Jack was going to have to go straight up Mimmi on Marinette as she nudged her friend forward. “You miss one hundred percent of the shots you do not take. Besides, there is nothing wrong with meeting her. What is the worst that can happen?”

Marinette grabbed onto Jack’s necklace again and nodded, steadfast. She marched over to Lalita, Jack trailing.

“Excuse me, Lalita Patel—?” Marinette started to say when they were in spitting distance, but someone nearly knocked her over as they rushed past.

“Lolly!” trilled a familiar voice that made Jack’s insides curl. She cursed herself. She never should’ve asked what was the worst that could happen. She had willed this into existence.

Lalita’s eyes rounded as she smiled, but the chill she exuded did not change. “Chloé Bourgeois!” The girls made a large show of kissing each other’s cheeks. “And who are your friends?”

Marinette and Jack froze the moment they saw Chloé, maybe both thinking that if they did not move, she wouldn’t notice them, even though they were standing feet from her.

Chloé overcame her bafflement by narrowing her eyes at them. “What are you lamewads doing here? Are you guys stalking me?” She spun back to Lalita. “I would never be friends with these creeps. They keep on following me around everywhere. Like, get a life, losers!”

“How awful. I could call security if you would like.” Lalita nodded towards a burly security guard stationed by the door.

“Uh…no!” said Jack quickly. “We’re guests of Adrien Agreste.”

“A likely story!” crowed Chloé, but Lalita tilted her head at Jack.

“Is that an American accent I hear?” she asked in English.

Jack stared.

“Oh, don’t look so shocked,” said Lalita, rolling her eyes. They were pale green with flecks of gold in them. Of course. “I’m American too. I’m from New York. How about you?”

“California.”

“Oh, I adore California! Where at? San Diego? San Fransisco?”
“Los Angeles.”

“Oh…” Her countenance fell. “What a shame.”

Jack wrinkled her nose, taking offense on behalf of all the great people of L.A. But maybe she shouldn’t have been surprised by Lalita's slight—she did hang out with Chloé, after all.

“What’s wrong with Los Angeles?” Jack challenged.

“Nothing,” said Lalita as she turned to primp in the mirror. “If you don’t mind dirt and smog, that is. Anytime I visit, I can literally feel the poverty drying out my skin. No wonder Rabbit abandoned it.”

“What!” Jack took a step forward, but Marinette held her back. She was surprisingly strong for someone so slim. “You take that back! Rabbit would never…”

Lalita remained unfazed. “She’s not much of a superhero if you ask me. Perro Negro at least stayed, loyal dog that he is, but I guess it wasn’t enough for Rabbit after she stopped Trumpeter Swan. She had to come here and muck things up for Ladybug and Black Cat—”

“Cat Noir. And that’s not—”

“You're a rude one, aren’t you? I believe I was talking. And it’s Chat Noir, sweetie. Stop embarrassing yourself.”

Chloé sighed and crossed her arms. “Get rid of them already, Lolly.”

“I thought the American one might be interesting to talk to, but she’s proven herself to be very uncultured. Not that I’m surprised, considering where she’s from…”

Jack tried to break Marinette’s grip, but the girl held firm. Jack could only watch, helpless, as Lalita called out to the security guard. He hunkered over, listened to Lalita and Chloé complain, and then politely but firmly escorted her and Marinette out. They didn’t put up much of a fight, though Marinette dawdled hoping Adrien would return. In the end, they headed to their seats thinking they would meet him there. The show was about to start soon anyway.

“I can’t believe I ever liked Lalita!” said Marinette as she fell into the chair next to Jack in the front row, the seats around them already filled. “She might be gorgeous on the outside, but she’s as horrible as Chloé on the inside!”

“You did not know,” said Jack, patting her on the shoulder. “Well, I do now.”

They both scanned the area for Adrien while they waited. As the minutes ticked by though, Jack grew more and more anxious. Her perfect plan was going up in smoke, all because of Adrien’s dumb father! What could he possibly say to his son that was taking so long? Just as she was thinking about getting up to look for him though, her phone rang. She barely heard it above the din of the crowd, but she had been waiting for it. Waiting for it and dreading it.

“Adrien, where are you?” Jack shouted, covering her opposite ear as she pressed her phone up against the other. Marinette looked at her, her bluebell eyes filled with hope and just a hair of wariness. The house lights turned down and Sty took to the stage amidst applause. He welcomed
everyone and then broke into some sort of introductory beat poem, the spotlights changing colors at key moments.

“I’m sorry, Jack. My father...demanded I come home,” Jack caught Adrien saying.

“What!?”

“I said—”

“No, no. I hear you. Why?”

“He didn’t say, but he seemed very upset. I wanted to come back to say goodbye, but the Gorilla wouldn’t let me. I’m sorry, Jack, but you and Marinette have fun! I kind of felt like I was intruding anyway.”

“What’s he saying?” stage whispered Marinette.

Sty left the stage and the music started, some XY song that made Jack’s ears bleed. The first model came marching around the bend. She wore some sort of swirly, structured nude and periwinkle dress that came off of her in large, static waves. It reminded Jack of icing on a cupcake frozen stiff.

“His dad wants him home,” Jack explained. Her worst fears confirmed, Marinette seemed to crumple in on herself. Jack wanted to comfort her, but she also felt like she might be able to salvage the situation by getting Adrien to come back. She returned to her phone. “Adrien, you are not a third wheel!”

“First Chloé, now this...” Marinette muttered to herself. “Only one thing could make this day worse...”

The first model was walking up to the middle platform when she was struck with a ball of black energy about the size of an orange. It didn’t seem to hurt her as she gained a black aura, so she ignored it as she struck a pose. Jack almost thought it was a part of the show...before the model suddenly fell forward off the stage, her professional facade crumbling as she yelped.

Someone cut the music as the model was pulled down the center aisle towards a figure who had just gotten off the elevator, his arm glowing white. The arm went dark and the model was dropped at his feet. It was a young man with metallic appendages that were not directly connected to his body. He appeared to be wearing a silver spacesuit-type outfit with a fitted hood and goggles. A blue cape that defied the laws of physics by floating hung from his huge, pointed red epaulets.

“Hello, Tabitha!” he snarled.

The model gasped as recognition and terror danced across her face. “L-Laurent?”

“It’s Gravity Screw now!”

It took all of two seconds for the crowd to realize they were in danger. People left their seats, giving Gravity Screw a wide berth as they trampled over each other trying to get to the emergency exits. The Akuma ignored them, his sole focus on Tabitha as he clapped his hands above his head.

Jack didn’t know what happened. One moment she was looking around, trying to figure out how to get Marinette to safety and then transform, and the next she was falling. Everyone was falling. She
smacked into the ground, a chair falling on top of her. In her confusion and shock, she dropped her phone.

“Jack…!? Jack! What's going on!?” wondered Adrien’s tiny voice on the other end.

As Jack tried to gather her bearings, she realized the ground had changed. It was now black.

“Jack! Jack!” said Marinette, shaking Jack’s shoulder as she pointed at the ceiling. Jack recognized the wood and the space carpet above her head. Her neck cracked as she looked out the nearest window. The sky was down, the city of Paris was up. She whipped her head back to the Akuma, who still stood on the ceiling, which used to be the floor, unaffected unlike everyone else in the room. He glared up at Tabitha.

“You turned my life upside-down when you broke up with me!” he raged. “Now I'm going to make everyone know that pain, starting with you!”

There was a pattering sound and a girl in cyan rose up on iridescent flapping wings to make herself known. “You will do no such thing!”

Jack gasped. Could it be? The Dragonfly Miraculous user!? She was here! She was tall and thin, wearing a headband in her chestnut bob with bobbles on the sides that resembled compound eyes. Her ‘wings’ were actually a double-layered semi-transparent poncho. Beneath it was her cyan suit with royal blue ribbing down her legs, and a teardrop pattern on her chest. The teardrop motif carried into her domino mask as well.

“You leave these people alone!” she demanded, pointing at the Akuma with a hand mirror of all things. It was rather handsome, made of burnished silver and decorated with dragonflies.

Tabitha saw her chance and tried to escape, but the Akuma made his right arm glow white once again. The model started to tumbling over backwards towards him. The Dragonfly Miraculous holder swooped between them and waved her mirror though, and the Akuma and Tabitha both stopped glowing. Tabitha was able to regain her footing and, not daring to question her good luck, made a run for it.

“Where do you think you're going!?” cried Gravity Screw, forming another small ball of dark energy just off his fingertips and slinging it at Tabitha's retreating back. The Dragonfly Miraculous holder looped around though and deflected the energy sphere with her hand mirror. It spun off and struck a chair instead. The chair gained a black aura.

“You think you can stop me?” Gravity Screw wondered. “Your friend already tried and failed.”

Here the Dragonfly Miraculous holder’s confidence wavered. “Friend..? No…”

As if on cue, something started to force open the elevator doors. It took some effort, but they were eventually pried apart and a figure in an oversized black coat fell out, crashing to what was now the floor.

A girl popped to her feet, sporting a red head covering/mask combo like Zorro. A bun of hair so pale it almost looked white poked out of the top, two black sticks holding it in place. It was difficult to tell what the rest of her costume looked like because of the black pedal jacket, but it was an obnoxious shade of yellow. It made her pale skin look even more alabaster white.
“There you are!” she said in English as she whipped a huge flashlight off her utility belt, her voice clear and sweet. “Thought you could get away from me, huh?”

The Dragonfly Miraculous holder pressed a hand to her face as she shook her head. “Firefly,” she said, annoyed as she smoothly switched to English. “What on Earth are you doing here?”

Firefly squinted as she looked up before breaking out into a beatific smile. “Nymphy! Oh my gosh, it’s great to see you again! What are you doing here!?”

“I’ve told you a million times, it’s Nymph! And my business is of no concern of yours.”

“Well, I’m fighting this Akuma. Wanna team up and take him down?”

“No, I am fighting this villain and I don’t need your help. You’ll only get in the way, like you always do.”

“Enough!” shouted Gravity Screw, not liking being ignored. He clapped his hands towards the ground, flipping everything back the way it was. Screams of terror echoed through the space. Marinette had the presence of mind to grab onto a round diffuser with one hand and Jack’s wrist with the other though. Now they were hanging from the ceiling.

Jack looked back towards the Akuma confrontation. Firefly had fallen on top of Nymph. The two superheroines were trying to extricate themselves from one other as Gravity Screw made his escape, sending out more balls of dark energy to hit any folding chair in his sight.

“I’m going to drop you,” said Marinette to Jack. “Are you ready?”

Jack looked up, slightly in awe of her friend’s prodigious strength, but nodded. Marinette let go. Jack fell five feet to the ground, landing as if she were using Dogstruction. She felt a little bit like a ninja. Marinette dropped down next to her with ease. Jack wondered if she took gymnastics or something as a child, but now really wasn’t the time to ask her.

“Wait, wait!” cried Firefly, grabbing Nymph’s leg as she tried to fly after Gravity Screw.

“Let go!” Nymph insisted, straining. “He’s getting away!”

“But you won’t be able to stop him without—”

Nymph kicked Firefly in the face, escaping her grasp.

Gravity Screw saw Nymph gaining on him quickly, so he slung a ball of white energy at her, the chairs affect by his black aura moving after it like tumbleweeds. Nymph dodged the sphere though and it struck Firefly instead. Upon noticing her new glow and the stampede of chairs coming at her, she cried out.

“Nymphy! Help!”

Nymph looked over her shoulder to see Firefly running from the chairs, quickly getting tripped up. They pile up on top of her. Nymph turned back as if she had seen nothing of interest though and disappeared after Gravity Screw.

Jack gasped, horrified that one of her fellow Recree Miraculous holders would be so cruel to another.
“Come on!” she told Marinette, rushing over to Firefly as the poor girl struggled. She tried to use all her limbs to push the chairs off of her, but they were relentless and crashed back down on top of her again. “Here!” Jack said, holding some of them back. They were heavier than they should’ve been, as if Jack were holding them above her head. “Marinette,” she commanded, nodding towards Firefly’s other side.

“I got it!” said Marinette as she ran around and pushed back more chairs, giving Firefly some room to breath.

“Yes you okay?” Jack asked.

Firefly clambered to her feet. Her eyes lacked colored irises, just two pools of black, but they shone with friendliness as she grinned. Her teeth were perfect and the same shade of off-white as her skin. Now that Jack was closer, she could see the girl’s Miraculous. It was a gold pin in the shape of a shield on the lapel of her jacket. A black firefly split into five parts—left wing, right wing, left wing casing, right wing casing, and a body—was stamped on it. Jack guessed her to be about college aged.

“Oh! Hey! You speak English!” she said. “Where are you from?”

“Uh…” Jack had a flashback to twenty minutes ago when Lalita eviscerated her hometown.

“I’m from Kansas,” Firefly offered when Jack didn’t answer right away.

Well, the superheroine did seem a whole lot nicer than that stuck-up model. Jack took her chances. “Los Angeles.”

“Ugh! Jealous! Did you live there when Rabbit and Perro Negro were protecting the city?”

“Yeah, actually.”

“So cool! I’ve always wanted to meet them. I’m Firefly, by the way. Pleased to meet you!”

“Jack. And that’s Marinette.”

“Hello!” said Marinette as one of the chairs slid out of her grip and tried to flip into Firefly’s face. She managed to block it just in time.

Suddenly, everything changed again. Now the windows that used to line the left side of the room were the ground. Everyone and everything fell towards them, a much longer and more dangerous fall than floor to ceiling (or ceiling to floor), especially with the metal railings near the end. Jack and Marinette screaming at the top of their lungs as they fell towards them. There was a bright light though and they found themselves safety moved to the windowed ground. Other people appeared around them in a flash. Firefly stuck her landing shortly afterwards, only to be crushed as a mountain of chairs rained down on her.

“Firefly!” Jack and Marinette cried.

“Oof,” she groaned from beneath the pile. “Everyone okay?”

“What did you do…?” Jack wondered.
Firefly snaked her arm through some chairs and brandished her weapon. “My flashlight!” She pointed the beam at the space-carpeted wall and clicked. Even when she turned her flashlight away, the pool of light remained. She then shone the beam on Marinette and clicked. Marinette vanished and reappeared where the imprint had been. The girl gasped and stumbled back. “And this lightning bug can be lightning fast!” Firefly added. “I guess it’s supposed to make up for the fact that I can’t fly.”

“What!” cried Jack. “But it’s in your name!”

“I know, but I’m a girl.” She sighed. “Female fireflies can’t fly.”

“Can she use her flashlight to evacuate all these people?” Marinette wondered.

“Good idea, Marinette!” Jack turned to Firefly. “Can you use your flashlight to get all these people to safety?”

“Hmmm…I can try! If I could…um…just…” Firefly shifted around, trying to make room for herself, but the chairs were almost stuck to her like glue.

“I got it,” said Jack, pulling some chairs back again.

“Thanks!”

Firefly increased her flashlight’s reach and intensity by moving a slider on its side before pointing it through the window, taking advantage of its refraction. She clicked, a pool of light appearing on the sidewalk six hundred feet below, a tiny glint on the concrete. She pumped her fist in celebration.

Marinette found a brave volunteer to go first. Once everyone saw him safely on the ground, they lined up to be transported. While Marinette helped move those who had gotten hurt, Jack continued to battle chairs in order to give Firefly space to work. Soon Jack and Marinette were the only civilians left.

Fatigue set in and the chairs Jack was desperately trying to hold back slipped from her grasp. They all went crashing back into Firefly, flattening her.

“Sorry! Sorry!” Jack cried.

There was a ding and the elevator doors opened. Jack and Marinette looked up to see a familiar mop of blonde hair as green eyes peered down at them.

“Purrincess! Jack!” cried Cat Noir in English for the benefit of the pun before switching to French. “Are you two okay?”

“Cat calls you ‘Princess’?” Jack wondered, raising an eyebrow. Well, at least she knew this was the real Cat Noir and not Chameleon in disguise.

“He’s saved me from an Akuma before, same as you,” Marinette explained before raising her voice. “Perfect timing, Chat Noir! We’re fine thanks to our new friend.”

He extended his staff and slid down it like a fireman on a pole to reach them. He shortened his weapon with a flourish.
“This is Firefly,” Marinette introduced, gesturing to the superheroine.

“She only speaks English,” Jack added as Firefly waved at him from the ground.

“Not the bug I was expecting, but it’s nice to meet you,” he said, kneeling to shake her hand. “Er, you are the real Firefly, right?”

Gravity switched for the fourth time before Firefly could answer, sending them all to the ceiling again. It was a short fall for Jack and Marinette, but no so much for the superheroes. Luckily, they could handle it. It also answered Cat Noir’s question. Chameleon wouldn’t be able to keep his illusion intact after a tumble like that.

“The one and only,” Firefly said from beneath her heap of chairs. “It’s an honor to meet you Black Cat.”

“He prefers the French,” said Jack.

“Oh my gosh, I’m sorry, Chat Noir! I didn’t know.”

The boy laughed. “No big deal. What’s with the chairs?”

“Thanks to the Akuma, Gravity Screw, they think I’m the ground,” Firefly explained, shifting the pile as she tried to pull them off. “Will Ladybug be here soon? Nymphy went after Gravity Screw by herself, but I’ve done my research. Only Ladybug can stop an Akuma. Well, I mean, Rabbit can too, but she hasn’t purified any Akumas over here. Maybe she can’t purify French ones?”

Jack tilted her head. She had never thought of it like that before. Maybe the reason why she couldn’t de-evilize Hawk Moth’s Akumas was because she could only de-evilize Trumpeter Swan’s.

“Nymphy?” wondered Cat, his tail arcing in the shape of a question mark.

“There was another Recree Miraculous holder here,” Marinette explained as her and Jack got to work freeing Firefly again. “Nymph.”

“Wow, two in one day?” Cat rubbed his hands together. “Rabbit it going to be psyched!”

“Is Rabbit coming too?” Firefly wondered, catching the only English word Cat said. “I can’t wait to meet her!”

Cat popped open the screen on his staff. “Let’s see where My Lady and Rabbit are at, shall we?”

Jack fully expected Ladybug to pick up in the middle of fighting Gravity Screw and wonder where Cat was, or at the very least tell him she was on her way. Instead, Cat’s call went straight to voicemail. The same thing happened with Rabbit, of course, but Jack wasn’t surprised there.

“Huh,” said Cat, slightly put out. His ears drooped a little. “Looks like we’re on our own for now.”

“Chat, you should use Cataclysm to destroy all these chairs so they don’t trip Firefly up anymore and get going,” Marinette suggested.

“What!” cried Jack. “He should not waste Cataclysm like this! We do not know when Ladybug will arrive!”
Cat looked from one girl to the other, unsure who had the right idea. “Er...uh...”

“I think if Ladybug were here, she’d want Chat to help Firefly,” said Marinette. “Trust me, Jack.”

It was the way Marinette spoke. She had such conviction, almost as much as Ladybug herself. Jack nodded. “Okay,” she conceded. “Do what Marinette says.”

“What are you guys talking about?” wondered Firefly, standing up as she wrestled back the last few chairs. She watched as Cat charged himself up with Cataclysm and yelped when he swiped in her direction. He ran his claws along all the folding chairs though and they rusted instantly, crumbling away into dust. Firefly’s glow faded. “Oh! Much better!” she said.

“I’ve got five minutes,” Cat told her, waving his ring around. “Let’s glow! Get it? Go/Glow?”

Firefly laughed. “Oh my god, you’re hilarious! Um, yeah, let’s get going...glowing! But let me get my new friends out of here first.”

“Good idea. I wouldn’t want anything to happen to these two.”

Jack didn’t say so, but she was touched.

Firefly used her flashlight and soon Jack and Marinette were on the ground in front of Tour Montparnasse. The building didn’t look any different, but nobody was fooled. The police were already there, sanctioning off the area, and news crews swarmed the sidewalk. They were busy interviewing those who had escaped, Jack catching snippets.

“And then this new superhero appeared...”

“...was suddenly the floor and...”

“...No, no, this was a different one. She was dressed in red and black and yellow.”

Marinette put her hands on her knees, exhausted after their ordeal. Jack’s rabbit’s foot necklace swung wildly from side to side.

“Are you okay?” Jack asked her friend.

“Yeah...I’m just glad Adrien didn’t get caught up in that. I never thought I’d say this, but good thing his dad is so strict!”

As much as Jack wanted to play it safe with this Akuma and not turn into Rabbit, she was worried. Nymph and Firefly were very inexperienced from what she could tell, and with Cat due to de-transform in five minutes and Ladybug nowhere to be found, Jack felt like it might come down to her. She had to come up with some way to slip away from Marinette though without the girl thinking Jack had abandoned her. She went with the tried and true method she had always used back home, digging through her drawstring backpack for her phone and winking at Mimmi in the process. She pretended to look at her texts.

“Ugh. My parents saw the Akuma attack on the news and they want me at home.”

For one brief second, Jack was worried Marinette might suggest she go with, but the girl manhandled
Jack towards the entrance to the underground Métro station instead. “Good idea! This isn’t a safe place to be with Gravity Screw around. What if he leaves the building?”

“But what about you?”

Nervous laughter spilled from Marinette’s mouth. “Alya would kill me if I didn’t get the scoop. I’m going to stick around here.”

Jack guessed she shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth and took off running down the stairs. She hid herself in a dark corner.

“Mimmi!” she called, the Kwami phasing out of her bag. “Hop to it!”

Once transformed into Rabbit, Jack jumped back up the staircase in a single bound, and then leapt on top of the nearby Grande Récré, the mall right next door to Tour Montparnasse, before anyone saw her. She ran across the roof to avoid most of the media and dropped down in front of the skyscraper just as she heard the familiar zip and pull of Ladybug’s yo-yo. She was taken back to a different time her and Ladybug met up in front of a skyscraper, both of their way to battle an Akuma, but the atmosphere could not be more different from Femme Defemation. It was really proof of how far they had both come.

“Glad I’m not the only one who’s late!” Jack told the superheroine as the news reporters noticed their arrival. The police kept them back, but they still took pictures and shouted their questions. They were ignored.

“I saw the news,” said Ladybug as she called Jack on her yo-yo and Jack called Ladybug on her chakram. It was like second nature now. “The Akuma’s name is Gravity Screw and he, well, controls gravity. And it sounds like there are two Recree Miraculous holders in there as well.”

Jack arranged her face in what she assumed was a shocked yet pleased expression. “Really!? That’s great!” She gave her performance some further thought. She could probably add to it. “Is Cat coming? I got a call, but he didn’t leave a message.”

“Knowing that kitty, he’s probably already in there causing trouble.” Ladybug tilted her head back as she looked up at the building. “Can you jump that high?” she wondered.

Jack shook her head, so Ladybug whirled her yo-yo around and flung it towards Tour Montparnasse’s observation deck. It took a moment to reach its destination, but it caught and held.

“Then I’ll go high and you go low, and we’ll meet in the middle,” she said to Jack as it began to reel her up. “Good luck!”

“Same!” said Jack over her shoulder as she darted inside.

Jack’s best course of action seemed to be to take the elevator. Fifty-nine floors was a lot of ground to cover and, if Gravity Screw were active, she would certainly know as she passed. Sure enough, on the 50th floor, Jack found herself falling towards the back of the elevator. She threw her chakram at the emergency stop button that was now on the ceiling above her head and it ground the elevator to a halt. Jumping up, she braced herself in the doorway, nearly doing the splits as she forced the door open and poked her head out.

Her eyes went wide as she saw something, or, rather, someone she wasn’t expecting.
“Adrien!?"

Somehow, the boy was standing nearby, face drawn and arms up and ready to fight as Chloé cowered behind him. Upon seeing Jack though, he relaxed.

“Oh! Rabbit!” he said. “We thought you were the Akuma.”

“What took you so long!?” demanded Chloé. “And where’s Ladybug?”

“She’s here. She went to the roof,” Jack explained.

“What good does that do me!?”

“What are you two doing here?” Jack really only wanted to know about Adrien. He had left. She thought he was safe.

“There was a fashion show here that some of my friends were at,” the boy explained. “I was on the phone with one of them when the Akuma attacked. I came here to see if they were safe.”

“You mean Dupain-Lame and the Tramp?” cut in Chloé. “What about me!?”

“I already told you, Chlo. I didn’t even know you were here.”

Chloé pressed her fingers to her chest. “Well, I was visiting my very dear friend Lalita Patel, international supermodel. Perhaps you’ve heard of her? She’s only, like, the most famous model in the history of existence. Oh!” She turned to her friend. “Second only to you, of course, Adriekins!”

Jack hopped over the pair and tried to herd them towards the elevator. “I’ll find your friends. Just get to safety.”

“Those two dorks are NOT my friends,” snitted Chloé. “I’m looking for Lalita. Lolly has to be around here somewhere.”

There was a resounding crash down the hall that caused Chloé to scream and go scurrying for cover behind Adrien again. Jack looked over her shoulder to see two bodies crumpled on the floor (well, the wall that was now the floor), one glowing white while the other glowed black. They struggled to get up.

“Ugh! This is all your fault!” said the one with the white glow. “If you didn’t make me lose my mirror…”

“I’m sorry, Nymphy!” said the one with the black. “I really thought—”

“Now he’s getting away!”

“It’s not like we could’ve stopped him.”

“We? No. Me? Yes.”

“No, she’s right,” said Jack. “We need Ladybug.”
Both superheroines froze and turned their heads to look at Jack in unison, though their reactions could not have been more divergent.

“Oh. It’s you,” said Nymph with a scowl.

“Rabbit! It’s you!” cried Firefly with joyous abandon at the same time. She tried to jump to her feet only to fall over backwards onto a prone Nymph again. The Dragonfly Miraculous holder groaned with a mixture of pain and frustration.

“Here,” said Jack, offering Nymph a hand. The girl stared at it as if hands were a foreign concept.


Nymph wrinkled her nose, but did as Jack suggested. With a mighty heave, Jack pulled the girl to her feet, bringing Firefly along with her. Nymph tried to push Firefly away, but Jack was quick to slap her hand.

“Gravity Screw has made it so she’s gravitationally pulled to you. You guys are going to have to work together if you want to move.”

“We can do it, Nymphy!” said Firefly, going back to back with the other girl and grabbing her hands. “Are you ready?”

Nymph rolled her eyes, but took a shaky step forward while Firefly took a step back. Firefly beamed as if they had just defeated an Akuma together.

“Um, hello!?” demanded Chloé, marching down the hall towards them, Adrien chasing after her.

“How are there three superheroes and not one of you is helping me?”

“Lalita probably already got out like Marinette and Jack,” said Adrien.

“Lalita? The international super model?” wondered Nymph, overhearing.

“Whoa!” cried Firefly. “You can speak French too!? How many languages do you know?”

Nymph ignored her as she continued to converse with Chloé. “I saw her escape down the stairwell at the start of the attack.”

“What!??” cried Chloé. “I stay up here, putting my life on the line just to look for her, and she doesn’t even have a decency to be in danger? Ridiculous! Utterly ridiculous!”

“Ah. I see now. She wasn’t trying to escape from the Akuma. She was trying to escape from you.”

Chloé paused as if the slap had been physical rather than verbal. Her eye twitched as she finally managed to spit out some words. “How…dare you! Lolly loves me!”

“Aren’t you Audrey Bourgeois snot-nosed spawn? Pretty sure she’s only friends with you out of professional courtesy. Nothing more.”

With a strangled yell, Chloé tried to attack Nymph, but Jack got in the way, stopping the girl by grabbing her shoulders and pushing her back. “Listen. Chloé. If we’re all here, that means Ladybug—oh, and Cat Noir—” she remembered to add last second. “—Are fighting that Akuma alone and might need help.”
“Actually, I don’t know where Chat Noir is,” said Firefly. “He was here a minute ago, but he ran out of juice.”

“Hear that? Ladybug is alone and needs help! But we can’t just leave you and Adrien here. It was noble of your guys to look for your friends, but you need to get to safety. So can you do that for me?”

Chloé pouted. Jack knew she hated being told what to do, but also that what Jack said was the truth. As she simmered, Adrien came up behind her and held her shoulders. Jack literally passed Chloé off to him. She looked up at him with a look of begrudging resignation. It was actually rather sweet.

“Of course,” said Adrien. “Let’s go, Chlo.”

“Fiiiiiiine,” she huffed as she let herself be led away. Jack watched as Adrien helped her down into the elevator, saluting him when he gave her one last look. The doors then forced their way back shut and they were gone.

“Not bad,” said Nymph.

Jack rolled her eyes. “Yeah, no thanks to you. What were you thinking, picking a fight like that?”

Nymph crossed her arms. “Oh, you think just because you’ve had your Miraculous longer than me that you can boss me around?” she demanded. “Well, let me tell you, Missy—I know what I’m doing, so step off.”

“She doesn’t mean that!” insisted Firefly. “Nymph’s just in a bit of a bad mood, that’s all. I do get in the way, like, a lot.” She turned to the Dragonfly Miraculous holder. “But Rabbit won’t! She’s a professional.” Back to Jack. “I’m Firefly, by the way. I’m a big fan. It’s nice to meet ‘cha!”

“Nymph,” said the other coldly upon realizing she had yet to properly introduce herself.

Jack shook her head. So these were her fellow Recree Miraculous holders. The Guardian had every right to have her grandmother seek out a proper Chosen One for the Rabbit Miraculous for years on end, because here was the result of Kwami choice: a diva and a doormat. This was going to be like fighting alongside Chloé and Sabrina.

“Maybe you don’t need direction, Nymph, but we do need Ladybug,” said Jack, moving passed them through the doorway they had come crashing through. “When you’re ready to be a part of a team, you can come follow me.” She cast an apologetic look at Firefly, who looked to be fighting back tears. She gave the girl a warm smile. “I’m sure you’ll be able to help her.”

With no time to waste, Jack darted down the hall. She maybe got about halfway down when the ground changed to the other wall. Jack managed to keep her wits about her and pushed off what used to be the ground so she landed on her feet and kept on running. It changed a second time though, and a third. She was able to keep upright for a little while, but she quickly became disorientated and began to bounce around like a rag doll. When gravity stopped changing, it still felt like the hall was spinning. Stumbling to her feet, she carried on despite her nausea, crashing into an empty office when she saw a flash of red through a pane of frosted glass.

Jack reacted almost instinctively, flinging her chakram at Gravity Screw as he hung over a motionless Ladybug. She hit his hand just as he was reaching for the girl’s Miraculous and he pulled
“Leave her alone, you bucket of bolts!” she shouted as she ran up to kick him in the face. She sent him flying into a mound of office furniture and cubicle walls that had gathered in the middle of the space. She quickly helped a panting Ladybug to her feet. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I just need my yo-yo.”

It wasn’t roped around Ladybug’s waist or in the girl’s hand. Jack followed Ladybug’s gaze up though and saw it. It was glowing black as it stuck to a glowing white sign that jutted from the wall and welcomed them to EGAMO: An Asset Management Company.

“Every time I make a move for it, he just changes the gravity and tries to hit me with those spheres of energy,” Ladybug explained. “I’m barely able to dodge.”

“I got it!” said Jack, making a leap for it, but there was a clap and she found herself plummeting to the side. Gravity Screw charged up a ball of black light on his fingertips and tried to fling it at her, but she blocked it with her chakram. Or, rather, sacrificed her chakram as it gained a black aura.

“Dear little Rabbit,” said the Akuma, his right arm glowing white. Jack’s chakram suddenly felt unbelievably heavy. She knew if she dropped it, it would go straight to Gravity Screw’s hand. “I don’t think you understand the gravity of your situation.”

“You want it?” wondered Jack. She spun and flung her chakram as hard as she could. “Then you can have it!”

A spinning disk coming straight for him, Gravity Screw yelped and dropped his glow. With a small window of opportunity, Jack bounced over to Ladybug’s yo-yo and grabbed it.

“Nice!” cheered Ladybug, who wasted no time when Jack handed it to her. “Lucky…” She flung the yo-yo into the air, only for the string to unravel and head straight for the sign. It struck it with a clang and stuck there. Ladybug reeled it back and tried again. “Lucky…” Her and Jack winced in unison as it smacked into the sign again. Then they both had to dive out of the way as a white sphere of energy came flying at them. It struck the door instead, causing Jack’s glowing black chakram to fall towards it. The weapon struck hard, embedding itself in the wood.

“Yikes!” cried Jack.

“Time for another tumble,” insisted Gravity Screw as he clapped his hands in a random direction. While he remained floating in place, the corner of the room was now the floor. Ladybug and Jack went plummeting towards it, readying to land on their feet, but the Akuma changed the ground once again and they fell in a new direction, hitting the ground, now the windows, headfirst. Before they could even recover, they were falling again, but Jack felt Ladybug wrap her arm around her and pull on her yo-yo string. They were dragged into the air together as it reeled them in.

“Get ready!” warned Ladybug before tossing Jack at the Akuma. Jack tackled Gravity Screw out of the air and pinned him to the ground.

“Find Cat!” Jack advised. “Get him to use Cataclysm on that sign to free your yo-yo.”

“But what about you!?”
“I’ll be fine!” Seeing a dark glow emanating from the tips of Gravity Screw’s fingers, Jack jumped back. She put out her arms like a soccer goalie trying to anticipate her opponent’s moves. “Someone’s gotta keep him busy.”

“Rabbit, this is a terrible plan,” said Ladybug, even though she moved to the door, keeping a hold of her yo-yo’s string. It dawned on Jack that it was her lifeline, a way to find her way back to the room when the whole world was topsy-turvy and nothing looked like it did before.

Gravity Screw slung the ball of energy at Jack, but she front-flipped over it and made a beeline towards him. He clapped his hands in front of him before she could reach him though, sending her falling away. Out of the corner of her eye though, Jack saw Ladybug escaping, the door falling open and forming a ledge. Gravity Screw didn’t seem to notice until the glowing outline of Hawk Moth’s influence appeared over his face. Jack could only imagine what the villain was saying. Probably something like, “Ladybug is getting away, you asinine astronaut. After her!”

“No!” cried Gravity Screw. He floated through the door after Ladybug, but Jack saw her chance. She jumped up and kicked it, shutting the door right on the Akuma’s cape. She heard a clunk of metal on wood as he was yanked back. Jumping back up again, Jack used her chakram as a foothold as she gathered the gravity defying fabric in her hands and pulled as hard as she could. Gravity Screw struggled on the other side, changing the direction of gravity to no avail. Jack simply hung on to his cape for dear life, bouncing around until the Akuma managed to get a handle on the door. Since it was now a part of the ceiling, it fell open when he unlatched it and flicked a ball of glowing black energy at her.

As Jack started to glow, the Akuma formed a ball of white energy above his fingertips and prepared to sling it at the closest wall. Remembering Firefly and Nymph, Jack scaled Gravity Screw’s cape and clamped down on his back. She reached around Gravity Screw, grabbed his wrist, and tried to pull his hand towards himself.

“N-n-nugh!” cried Gravity Screw as he tried to lock his arm, but Jack was stronger as she bent the metal hinge that served as his elbow. She forced him to strike himself and he gained a white glow. An invisible force suddenly pressed Jack up against him.

“Looks like you’re stuck with me!” Jack crowed, unable to help herself.

The glowing moth-shaped mask outline appeared again, Hawk Moth instructing Gravity Screw on what to do. The Akuma made a move for Jack’s watch.

“No!” she yelped, struggling to kick him away. Her and her shortsighted plans! She was able to fend him off for a little while, but then they rolled over and he clapped right in Jack’s face. They fell, Jack smacking into the ground first with Gravity Screw landing on top of her, knocking the wind out of her. She felt cold metallic fingers start to unbuckle her watch’s strap.

Jack knew there was only one escape, one she hadn’t even dared to entertain before that very moment. Dogstruction would get her out of her predicament, but what would happen afterwards? She was in a skyscraper. Anything she did, controlled or not, might ruin the integrity of the building. If Miraculous Ladybug could fix the damage, it wouldn’t be an issue, but as things stood now...

It looked like Jack was just going to have to lose her Miraculous.

“No! Rabbit!” yelped a high-pitched voice from somewhere, “Bioluminescence!”
There was a glow behind Gravity Screw, attracting his attention. Firefly and Nymph had finally arrived, still struck together. The yellow costume beneath Firefly’s jacket appeared to be emitting light like her flashlight, her actual flashlight nowhere to be seen. Realizing what was going to happen a half second before it did, Jack closed her eyes as Firefly shrugged off her coat, filling the room with dazzling light. Gravity Screw wailed in pain. As soon as everything went dark again, Jack’s eyes flicked back open to find the Akuma holding his hands over his face.

“Got ‘em!” cheered Firefly as she shrugged her coat back on, spinning her flashlight in her hand. “Your turn, Nymphy!”

“You already used your power, so what’s the point of wasting mine?” she wondered.

“I can’t see…I can’t see!” cried the Akuma. It appeared Firefly had the ability to subject people by blinding them.

Jack yanked her arm back and secured her watch. “Thanks, Firefly! I owe you one.”

“Grrrrrrr!” Gravity Screw began to clap in random directions, in an attempt to send Firefly and Nymph tumbling, but Nymph could fly and he had made it so Firefly had to stick with her. As things fell around them, the girls twisted and spun, but a combination of Nymph’s maneuvering and Firefly’s warping using her flashlight allowed them to avoid any falling debris.

“What...is...going...on...!??” demanded Gravity Screw.

“What’s going on is that you might control space, but your time is up!” said Nymph as she worked her way upright.

“What did you say?” wondered Firefly on her back. “Was it an awesome one-liner? I bet it was an awesome one-liner.”

Nymph looked like she wanted to kill someone.

It was only in that moment of silence that Jack noticed Ladybug’s yo-yo was reeling backward instead of forward. Suddenly, Ladybug and Cat Noir burst into the room.

“I got it, My Lady!” said Chat, eyes glued to where the yo-yo was. “Cataclysm!”

Using his staff to assist him in a jump since the original floor was cocked at a steep angle, he clawed at the sign, the destructive energy causing it to crack, deteriorate, and eventually shatter, the shards vanishing before they could even hit the ground. The yo-yo’s glow faded as it hit the ground and slid down, right into Ladybug’s outstretched hand.

“Lucky…!” started the girl, but Gravity Screw was blind, not deaf. He tried to clap his hands, but Jack grabbed one of his elbows to prevent him from doing so. “…Charm!” finished Ladybug, flinging her yo-yo up as it produced a shower a pink sparks and ladybugs. They formed together into a red hairdryer with black polka dots, of all things. Ladybug pulled at it’s retractable cord, confused.

“How are you going to blow our minds with this one, LB?” wondered Cat.

“Ha! Good one, Chat!” said Firefly while Nymph rolled her eyes.

Gravity Screw spun his arms around his body like a rotor, knocking Jack away, but she was forced
to fall back into him and get struck again and again and again, pain rocketing through her body. Just as she was starting to lose her senses though, she heard a clap, felt gravity switch, and ended up crashing into him, sending the two of them tumbling to the ground. Disoriented, she looked up to find that Ladybug had used the hairdryer’s cord like a lasso and roped Gravity Screw’s hands together, forcing him to clap in her direction and then be unable to clap again. A combination of her pulling and Jack smacking into him brought him down.

“Get Rabbit away!” Ladybug commanded as she handed the hairdryer over to Cat and prepared her yo-yo.

“Fine,” said Nymph, doing as she was told, though it was clear she didn’t like it. She swooped down and grabbed Jack beneath the arms and airlifted her away as the Akuma spoke.

“You think your yo-yo can stop me?” the blinded Gravity Screw wondered, forming a black sphere of energy at his fingertips. He tapped it to the cord and then made his arm glow white, ripping the hairdryer out of Cat’s hand. Ladybug grinned as she flung her yo-yo, hogtying Gravity Screw before he even realized he’d been tricked.

“It can and it will,” answered Ladybug, pulling him the rest of the way toward her. “Now to figure out where your Akuma is.”

“His cape!” realized Jack when she gave it some thought. He had gone absolutely berserk when she was holding it.

“Thanks!” said Ladybug as she grabbed the gravity defying fabric and ripped it in two, releasing the butterfly.

Everyone who had a glow watched it fade, and Firefly fell off Nymph’s back. Jack followed soon after once Nymph unceremoniously dropped her. Though a little worse for wear, Jack made her way over to Ladybug and Cat as the former went about purifying the Akuma. Picking up the hairdryer for Ladybug, she had to laugh.

“Hey, Cat!” she said, pretending to use it. “It’s a hare dryer. Get it? Hare?”

Cat wasn’t the only one who laughed. Snorts and giggles echoed behind them as Firefly cracked up. Nymph murmured divisively to herself.

“Time to turn things right-side up!” said Ladybug, snagging the hairdryer out of Jack’s hands and throwing it upwards. “Miraculous Ladybug!”

The ladybugs swarmed like a tornado around them, returning gravity to normal and placing them on the proper ground. The office had been returned to its original state. Nymph even had her mirror returned to her hand, and Jack her chakram. Ladybug and Cat Noir celebrated by pounding fists.

“Whoops!” said Firefly, her pin beeping at her. It was down to a body and a wing. “I gotta vamoose!” She jogged over to Ladybug and forcefully shook her hand. “It’s an honor to meet you! Like, really. Thanks for purifying that Akuma. I hope I did okay for my first official battle.”

“You did great!” said Jack, patting her new friend on the back. “You saved me.”

Firefly beamed at her with the intensity of her superhero persona namesake.
“Where do you think you’re going?” wondered Cat.

Everyone turned to find Nymph halfway out the door. “What?” she wondered. “We’re done here.”

“You’re not going to transform anytime soon and neither am I,” Jack pointed out. “If you could wait a second, I need to talk to you.” Nymph didn’t look moved, so Jack tried a different track. “…Unless you don’t want to know why your Kwami wanted to come here…”

Nymph tilted her head back. “Ugh. Fine. But only for Zaasa. Poor dear has been going crazy.”

“Lummy too!” cut in Firefly. Jack was confused for a moment before realize she mean Lummen, her Kwami.

“Yeah, but we’ve got to move,” said Cat as he and Ladybug herded her out.

“We’ll trade contact info and meet up with you later,” suggested Ladybug. “Where’s your flashlight?”

The door clicked shut behind them just as Firefly excitedly brandished her weapon, accidentally smacking Cat in the nose (“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry Chat!”), leaving Jack to tend to the Akuma victim. He was a relatively handsome young man who was clearly trying too hard to play the part of an intellectual, sporting a pair of wire-frame glasses he didn’t need. In his lap, balled up in his hands, was his former cape. Jack could see now that it was one of those cringey blankets couples sometimes bought that sported a full-sized picture of themselves. Tabitha the model smiled up at her. It was actually rather pitiful.

“W-what happened?” the young man wondered. “You—Rabbit?”

Jack knelt. “Laurent?” she asked. He nodded, slow and unsure. “Laurent, you were Akumatized. I know you weren’t in control of your actions and I forgive you, and so does Ladybug and Cat Noir. Everything is Hawk Moth’s fault and we’re going to—”

“So you can speak French,” interrupted Nymph. “And it’s atrocious.”

“Would you like to do this?” Jack shot over her shoulder

“Who’s she?” Laurent wondered, wide-eyed as he looked Nymph up and down. He addressed her with gob smacked awe. “You’re beautiful.”

Nymph looked down at her nails. Unimpressed didn’t even being to describe it. “Tell me something I haven’t heard before and maybe I’ll listen.”

Laurent stumbled to his feet, his blanket forgotten, and the bite of Nymph’s words ignored. “Are you a new superhero? Did you save me?”

“I had a hand in it, I suppose.”

“Thank you!” He took her hand up and kissed it. “My guardian angel.”

“Lovely. Now, Rabbit and I were planning on having a little chat, so if you don’t mind…” She made a shooing motion. Laurent all but jumped to follow her command.
“Oh, of course! Of course, of course, of course;” he said, moving towards the door. “My apologies. Thanks again…What did you say your name was?”

“Bye.”

Laurent left, a dreamy smile plastered on his face.

Nymph sighed. “This is my curse,” she explained. She picked at the blanket with a look of disgust on her face before eventually tossing it into a trashcan next to the reception desk. It took up most of it. “Girl made the right decision, kicking that sad sack to the curb,” she decided as she dusted off her hands. Only then did she turn to Jack “So tell me what’s going on. And make it quick. I have a nail appointment.”

Jack stared. This girl had no business being a superhero.

“Uh…” Jack knew she’d have to be extra careful here explaining the situation or she’d have another Praying Mantis on her hands. “Do you want to sit?” she offered, gesturing to the armchairs that served as the office’s waiting area.

Nymph crossed her arms. “I’d rather not.”

Something about the girl reminded Jack of her grandmother. They both seemed equally hard to please and extremely set in their ways. Maybe it was best to just get to the point as quickly as possible.

“Are you unhappy to be here?” Jack asked, deciding to test the waters first.

“No. Who would be unhappy to be in Paris? I travel all the time, so this is nothing.” Jack heaved a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived. Nymph wasn’t done. “But I’ve got places to be, people to see. Now that Zaasa’s feeling better, we’ll be on our way.”

“You can’t leave…!”

“Oh, really?” Nymph arched an eyebrow and started to march out of the room. “Watch me, Missy.”

“No, I mean…there’s a containment field around Paris, so your Kwami can’t leave—”

The girl spun around. “Wait. What!? Who would do such a thing?”

Jack found herself choking on her own words and fell into silence as Nymph’s multicolored iridescent eyes cut through the air to stare her down. Jack took a faltering step back and looked down.

“Oh. Oh!” said Nymph as realization dawned on her. Jack squeezed her eyes shut, knowing what was coming. “This is a trap, isn’t it? Set by that awful man who was going to misuse Zaasa? He wants her back. He wants all of the Kwami back.”

Jack blinked. “Um…” All she had to do was remember Praying Mantis flying away from her, a stony look of disgust on his face, and the urge to lie overcame her. “Yeah.”

She was overwhelmed with regret almost immediately. Why was she like this!? But the moment she tried to correct herself, to take responsibility, Nymph was talking.
“So that’s why you left Los Angeles and never came back!” she said, icy demeanor suddenly thawing. “I thought you had abandoned it, but it all makes sense now. You went to investigate, same as me, and got trapped here. And I assume you warned Perro Negro to stay away?”

“Er…”

“This is a disaster. Why didn’t you warn me? Oh, well, I suppose you really couldn’t. That’s fair.”

“I was hoping we could all team up to stop him.” At least that part wasn’t a lie.

“Of course, of course. Are there others trapped here as well?”

“Yeah. The Mantis and Chameleon Miraculous holders are here too, but Chameleon is working for Omega—or, the bad guy.”

Nymph’s hands curled into fists. “Omega…” she said, the words poison on her tongue. “How could Chameleon do such a heinous act?”

“I don’t know, but he’s been disguising himself as other people, trying to figure out my civilian identity, so we’ve all taken to checking each others identities by calling each other.” Jack held up her chakram. Nymph looked at it for a moment before lifting her mirror. The two tapped their weapons together.

“Don’t worry, Rabbit.” Nymph assured, using her mirror much like Jack used her chakram to check her list of contacts. Rabbit now joined Firefly. “We’ll stop Omega and get out of here. Where is the Swan Miraculous?”

“Someplace safe and far from here.”

“Good. Let’s keep it that way.” She started to move towards the door. “Unfortunately, I must be going, but let me check my schedule and see when we can all meet up to discuss strategy—You, me, Firefly, Mantis, and the Parisians.”

“Sounds good.”

“And Rabbit?”

“Yeah?”

“…I’m sorry I misjudged you.” Jack could tell those words were a struggle for her. “None of this is your fault.”

Jack’s heart ached as she watched Nymph sweep out. She wanted to chase the girl down, tell her the truth, but then she knew she would have no hope of getting Nymph on her side. If worst came to worst, Jack could always turn the containment field off. It just never occurred to her when she turned it on that she would find herself on a team of reluctant superheroes who wouldn’t want to help her.

* * *

Jack could only imagine what would have happened if she had told her friends the truth.
“You lied to her!?” Ladybug would’ve cried.

“I know you hate liars, but I just didn’t know what else to do!”

“I cannot believe you right now.”

“I can,” Cat would say. “Have you met Nymph?”

“Oh, she’s not that bad…!” Firefly would argue. “Right, Bitty?”

“Bitty?” Jack would say.

“What? You don’t like your new nickname?” Cat would chide.

“Her new nickname should be liar,” Ladybug would say.

“Oh, c’mon! What else was I suppose to do!?” Jack would wonder.

“Tell her the truth?”

“Then she wouldn’t help us! Besides, she hates me enough as it is. She thinks I abandoned Los Angeles. At least this way she thinks I didn’t have a choice—which is true, by the way. I didn’t.”

“All the rationalizing in the world is not going to make what you did any better.”

“Then how do you rationalize the fact that we lie about our identities all the time?”

“That’s…that’s different!”

“No it’s not!”

“Yes it is! And if you’re not going to make things right, then I want nothing to do with you!”

Instead, Jack found herself telling Firefly the truth that she claimed she had also told Nymph.

“I’m the one who called your Kwami here,” said Jack as she stared down at her boots. “…and I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” Firefly looked first to Ladybug and then to Cat before looking back at Jack. “Why are you sorry?”

“Because I forced you to come here. I didn’t even give you a choice.”

“Could you have given me a choice?”

“Well…no. I didn’t know who you were until I met you. I just really needed everyone’s help to stop the man who created our Kwami and planned to misuse them in the first place.”

“What?” Firefly nearly fell out of Notre Dame’s belfry, grabbing the sill just in time. “He’s still out there!? I thought he would’ve been locked away by now!”

“Nope. Still at large. We’ve been calling him Omega since we still don’t know who he is. He’s got
“That’s why we all called each other when we first got here,” Ladybug explained, shaking her yo-yo. “Chameleon has the ability to disguise himself as anyone, including us, and he’s been trying to figure out Rabbit’s civilian identity. Calling is how we prove to each other that we are who we say we are.”

“Oh…” A light brush of pink bloomed across Firefly’s cheeks. “I just thought it was a Parisian superhero thing…”

“Listen, I know this is a lot to take in,” said Jack. “And I get it if you’re upset. The device I used to call your Kwami, the Beacon, has a containment field Lummen can’t leave now that she’s here, but if you don’t want to help, I can turn it off and let you go.”

Here Firefly jumped down from the ledge she was sitting on, though her coat got caught and she was yanked back. Embarrassed, she pretended it hadn’t happened.

“You’re being ridiculous, Bitty!” she said as she worked to pull her jacket free. “I understand completely. What else could’ve you done? You had no other way to find us. Even if you turn the containment field off, I promise to stick around! Er…until my student Visa expires.”

Jack had to laugh. “Man, if only Praying Mantis was as on board as you are. I told him all this and he wanted nothing to do with me.”

“Maybe I can help! I can track him down and convince him. Nymphy tells me I’m very persistent.”

“Is that how you found her?” guessed Cat.

“Yup! I’m a research fiend, so I’m really good at finding things! I’ll get him to come around before we all meet again. You’ll see. You three should just focus on keeping Paris safe from Hawky.”

“Clawsome!”

Firefly burst out laughing, filling the tower with ghostly echoes. “You are seriously the funniest person I have ever met, Chat! Okay, well, it’s getting late, but if you need anything…” She whipped out her flashlight, causing Cat to wince. She didn’t seem to notice. “…You know how to reach me! Bye Lady! Bye Chat! Bye Bitty!”

She shone her flashlight out into the night, and then pointed it at herself. In a flash, she was gone.

Ladybug went over to look out across the city. The night was peaceful. In the distance, the Eiffel Tower glittered with flashing lights, meaning it was a little just passed the hour.

“Firefly’s right. It’s getting late. You two have a good night!”

Flinging out her yo-yo, she swung away towards the southwest, leaving Jack and Cat Noir alone.

“Good work today!” he told her, giving her a hearty pat on the back. “My Lady told me that you saved her again.”

“Yeah…”
“Everything okay?”

“Huh? Oh, um…” Jack didn’t want to lie to her friend. She had done so enough already. “I guess I’m just nervous…” Nervous of her lie coming to light. Nervous that it would ruin everything. Nervous that if she told the truth now, it would also ruin everything. She needed Nymph on her side, or she would never be able to defeat Omega. She honestly didn’t know what to do.

“Well, now that all possible Recree Miraculous holders are here, I guess it's time for us to go after Omega. I'm kind of nervous too. You should do whatever you normally do to calm yourself down when you get this way.”

Jack gave it some thought before nodding. “Right. Thanks for the advice, Cat. I should head out myself.” She jumped up onto the ledge.

“Don’t you usually go that way?” Cat wondered, pointing to the southeast.

“I’ve got a stop to make first!”

And, with that, Jack threw herself off the tower, took one hop across the roof, and landed next to the ancient church. Another jump took her across the Seine and she made her way up to the rooftops. She eventually hopped down into the park next to Marinette’s house, and used the empty carousel as a secluded space to de-transform.

The bakery was closed this time of night, but all the lights were on in the apartment above. Jack made her way to the double black doors on the side and rang the bell. She saw a face in the window above and then heard the thuds of someone rushing down the steps. Marinette opened the door, pajama pants on and mouth drawn up in surprise.

“Jack…?” she wondered. “What are you doing here?”

“I am sorry. I know you said you'd bring my necklace to school tomorrow, but I really need it now.”

Jack had texted Marinette earlier to see how getting the scoop for Alya had gone. Apparently, better than expected. Marinette ran into Adrien and found out he had come back to make sure she and Jack were safe. He even gave Marinette a ride home, so, in a way, Jack’s plan had actually kind of worked.

Marinette invited Jack into the foyer and ran upstairs to get the necklace. When she returned, she found Jack sitting on the bottom stair, tapping her feet on the white and blue tiles.

“Did…did something happen?” Marinette wondered, fiddling with the necklace’s chain as she sunk down to join her friend. “You told me this gives you strength when you’re nervous.”

“I made a mistake,” Jack admitted, taking the rabbit’s foot and balling it in her hands. It felt good to actually tell someone. “I lied about something I shouldn’t have.”

Marinette took in a sharp breath and almost spoke, but pulled back at the last minute.

"Go on," said Jack. "Say it."

“That doesn’t sound like you,” Marinette admitted after a pregnant pause.
“It seemed like a good idea at the time. All my ideas seem like good ideas at the time, although I know they are usually not.”

“What if you told the truth? It’s not too late.”

“It will only make things worse.”

“Better now than later.”

“Depends on when ‘later’ is.”

Marinette heaved a sigh, almost buzzing with consternation. Jack could see the girl was torn between wanting to be a supportive friend and sticking to her moral high ground. In the end though, she put her arm around Jack and put her head on Jack’s shoulder.

“I said I’d forgive your mistakes if you forgave mine and I meant that. You know…I lie sometimes too.”

Jack didn't know why she was so surprised. They were teenagers, after all, and nobody was perfect. "Really?"

Marinette nodded. "Sometimes, there’s just no way around it.”
Chapter Summary

Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jacquelyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Chapter Notes

Gosh, I’m sorry about the wait, guys. This chapter was very weakly storyboarded, and I was hoping to find out more lore from the show (mostly about Mayura’s powers), which never happened. But that’s okay. I’m really happy with how it turned out. The Recree gang’s all here and you know what that means! Stuff’s about to go down. But first let’s get to know Praying Mantis a bit better! Enjoy some Kim! And let’s break up the Akuma of the Week format a bit, shall we? Good times.

Also, how amazing was Oblivio!? *Tears* To celebrate, extra long chapter yyyyyyyyyyyyy!

The shout-out this time goes to… my IRL friend Em! Em helped me formulate the idea behind his chapter, as well as served as my beta. Em, you’re the best! Glad I was able to drag you down this Miraculous Ladybug rabbit hole along with me :D

Jack ran as fast as she could, bounding over the rocky ground. Each footstep was supposed to take her further away from the incessant flapping that dogged her, but it seemed to come from everywhere. She chanced a glance above. There was nothing but the low light that illuminated the area. In the pit of Jack’s stomach, a nervous energy burbled up like a muddy spring. She found herself slowing down, and then stopping, her boots scrapping the dirt as she spun around, desperate to find the source of the noise before it found her.

Then, without warning, the flapping stopped.

Jack dropped to one knee and rolled to the side just as something large and green fell from the sky. Finding herself on her feet again, Jack saw Praying Mantis had landed with a heavy thud where she had been standing mere moments before. If she had remained there, he would’ve crushed her.

“You…you don’t have to do this,” Jack begged, fear edging into her voice as she pulled back into a defensive stance.

He didn’t even lift his head as he pulled out his tonfa, whipping them around for a moment before gripping their handles. He launched himself forward at lightning speed, but Jack was just as quick.
She nimbly leapt back and Praying Mantis whiffed. He tried again, but Jack simply leaned to the left to dodge his sluggish swing. She knew before Nymph’s words even cut through the air that they were going to have to try this again.

“Stop! Stop, stop, stop!”

Praying Mantis paused before dropping his arms to his sides and letting his head rock back.

“What now?” he groaned.

Nymph marched into the light, a look of disgust twisting her fair features. She somehow managed to restrain herself though as she addressed Jack first.

“Rabbit, good work. I truly believed you were afraid. As for you…” She rounded on Praying Mantis. He shrunk back a fraction of an inch, not out of any kind of fear, Jack knew, but because of his distaste for confrontation in general. “You were faker than a spray tan.”

“I did what you said and whatever,” he said. Though there was no way for Jack to know, she sensed Praying Mantis was the oldest out of all of them, and he wasn’t about to let Nymph boss him around.

“Did as I—!?" Nymph threw out her arms and looked to Jack as if to say, See what I have to deal with? “Listen here, you kung-fu reject, you have to make me believe you. You could’ve played off Rabbit. Given her an evil grin. Responded to her. Said something like, ‘Don’t tell me what to do’ or ‘Too bad’! And your attacks…I’ve seen babies hit harder.”

“What would you have me do? Hurt her?”

With no preamble whatsoever, Nymph used her mirror to reflect the light above into Jack’s eyes. Temporarily blinded, Jack felt Nymph sweep her legs out from beneath her. As she fell though, Jack put her hands behind her head and back handsprung away. Nymph was relentless though as she flew forward, ballet flats skirting the ground as she wound up to strike Jack across the face with her mirror. Jack had just enough time to hold up an arm and block the hit with the chakram around her wrist a la Wonder Woman with her armlets. They exchanged a few more blows like this, the force of Nymph’s strikes reverberating down Jack’s arm and into her bones, before the Dragonfly Miraculous holder stopped as abruptly as she had started, hands on her hips as she glowered at a wide-eyed Praying Mantis.

“Commit to your role,” she demanded. “Rabbit can take care of herself.”

Grimacing, Jack backed away for a little breather while Nymph continued to coach and/or berate Praying Mantis in the fine art of fake supervillainy. She found refuge up on the ledge where Firefly was camped out, lighting a large portion of the abandoned limestone rock quarry with her flashlight.

“Everything okay down there, Bitty?” the girl asked with her trademark cheer, as if she couldn’t hear or see everything from her position.

“Yeah…” Jack wiped her brow out of habit more than anything else. “Nymph is scary good. Emphasis on scary.”

Firefly giggled. “I know, right? I wish I could be half as good as she is.”

“Firefly…”
The girl turned, looking like a peaceful ghost against the encroaching darkness. Jack wanted to point out how awful Nymph was, but found herself unable to do so. They needed to work together now. No point in causing any undue discord. This was the team Jack had to work with whether she liked it or not, so establishing unity was her top priority.

“…You’re good in your own right,” she finished.

Firefly positively glowed. “Really!? You think so…?”

“Hey!” shouted Nymph below them. “Eyes down here!”

While Jack had been talking with Firefly, the girl had allowed her flashlight to drift. Nymph and Praying Mantis were now standing in darkness.

“Whoops!” cried Firefly, waving her flashlight around wildly before realigning it. “Sorry, Nymphy!”

“I gave you one job…” Nymph muttered as she turned away.

“Ah…maybe you shouldn’t distract me…?” Firefly told Jack.

Jack left the girl in peace, returning to find that Praying Mantis and Nymph’s argument had only intensified.

“Since it seems like you’re so much better at it, why don’t you just do it?” the young man wondered, throwing up his hands as he backed away.

“We’ve already been over this, flyboy! All of Paris knows who Firefly and I are. We’re heroes.”

“Some hero. From what Firefly told me, I helped a lot more with my Akuma than you did with yours.”

“Where’s your proof?”

“Like you have any?”

“Eye witness accounts of my bravery. Which is exactly why you’re going to play the part of a supervillain. No one knows who you are yet. I, on the other hand, already have a pretty strong fan base.” Nymph twirled her hand mirror and pulled up Instagram on it, paging through picture after picture of people holding up signs of gratitude, wearing blue and cyan. It would probably be more impressive if she hadn’t propagated the hash tag herself.

Praying Mantis rolled his eyes and then stormed passed her. “Whatever. I just want to get out of here.”

“This is the only way,” said Nymph.

“Yeah…”

His eyes flicked in Jack’s direction. Good to her word, Firefly had somehow tracked Praying Mantis down and an agreement had been reached. Praying Mantis would help Jack defeat Omega and, in return, she would shut down the Beacon’s containment field so he could leave. The result was teeth-
clenched teamwork and the chance he (or Firefly) would accidentally reveal to Nymph that Jack was behind the containment field. As he looked at her now, his frustration and betrayal almost palatable, Jack felt her breath grow thick and loud. Luckily, Nymph didn’t seem to notice and moved back to the task at hand.

“Just where do you think you’re going?” she demanded. “You still haven’t tried to hit me yet.”

“I’m not hitting you.”

“I said ‘try.’ It’s not like you’d actually be successful. I know a failure when I see one.”

Nymph’s words struck a nerve and Praying Mantis froze. Jack grimaced.

In a flash of green, Praying Mantis spun around and struck Nymph in the knee with his tonfa, sending her crashing to the ground. He slowly took a step back, his shadow lording over her, though his face was of stone. He took no pleasure in what he had to do—he simply felt the need to put Nymph in her place.

Nymph, for her part, looked momentarily ill. Jack suspected she was in shock, but then her sweet tinkling laughter filled the air. She clambered back onto her feet.

“See? There. I knew you had it in you.” Her smile was dangerous, like that of a shark. “We’ll turn you into a supervillain yet! Now let’s talk lairs. I’m thinking a nightclub.”

“I love clubs!” shouted Firefly, dancing like a classic white girl up on her ledge.

“I don’t need your unsolicited opinion!” returned Nymph.

Praying Mantis put his tonfa away. “I hate nightclubs.”

“I don’t need your opinion either.”

As Praying Mantis and Nymph began to bicker once again, Jack’s chakram started to ring. She felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude to her boyfriend for his spectacular timing. No one noticed as she slipped out of the pool of light into the semi-darkness just beyond and answered the call. Diego’s floppy dog-ears perked up at the sight of her as his face filled the screen.

“Just like old times, eh mi conejito?” he asked.

Jack had to laugh. They needed a private place to practice, so she had suggested the rock quarry where she had spent months training to control Dogstruction.

“How’s it going?” he wondered.

“It’s…uh…” Jack glanced up as Praying Mantis began to shut down, Nymph refusing to let up. “It’s going.”

“Oh, no. That bad, huh?”

“I mean, Nymph came up with a great idea. We know Chameleon is after my identity and he has super failed to get it. Omega is probably in the market for a better henchman. Sure, Praying Mantis isn’t the best choice to go undercover, but, with a little bit of work, I’m sure he’ll do fine.”
“So then what’s the problem?”

Jack dropped her eyes and her voice. “You know…”

“Verdad, verdad.” The amused twinkle in her boyfriend’s eyes faded. “I understand why you did what you did…but if she finds out—”

“You think I don’t know that!?” The wounded look in Diego’s eyes caused Jack to immediately regret her tone. She sucked in a deep breath and held it there until she felt her emotional spike pass. “I’m sor—”

“Ah, no, mi conejito. I understand. I understand completely.”

“What are you two talking about?”

Jack looked like a deer in headlights at the sound of Nymph’s voice. Her mind fumbled for words as the Dragonfly Miraculous holder approached her. Luckily, Diego did what he did best—filled the awkward silence with talk.

“Ay, sounds like the dulcet tones of the lovely Miss Nymph. How are you doing tonight, senorita? Mi conejito and I were just discussing new names for my man Praying Mantis.”

Nymph’s face softened, but it went back to diamond sharp the instant Praying Mantis joined them.

“What’s wrong with the name I have?” he complained as Firefly realized they had moved and adjusted her spotlight.

“Do you think ‘Praying Mantis’ is going to strike fear into anyone’s heart?” snapped Nymph. “You sound like a Buddhist monk.”

“Hey, those guys are hardcore. Ever hear of Thích Quảng Đức?”

“Not. The. Point.” Nymph looked at Jack’s chakram, to Diego. “What have you come up with, Perro Negro?” she asked in flawless Spanish, as if speaking English was beneath her. Jack resisted the urge to mutter ‘showoff’ beneath her breath.

“Well, mantis’s are predatory insects, verdad? What about ‘Predator’?”

Nymph frowned. “What is this, an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie? Next.”

Diego did not let Nymph’s rejection bother him in the least. “Muy bien. I got more, don’t you worry! Mantis, it looks like your look’s inspired by Chinese martial arts, specifically Northern Praying Mantis style. What about the Chinese word for Mantis then? Tángláng?”

“I’m Korean,” Praying Mantis deadpanned. “Not all Asians look the same, you know.”

Diego winced, knowing there was no coming back from that one, and just moved on. “Then I don’t know. Raptor, maybe? Short for raptorial foreleg?” He made a striking motion with his arm that mantises made. Sensing Jack was just about to point out that mantises had nothing to do with dinosaurs, Diego continued down his list. “Or Ambush! That’s how mantis’s catch their prey.”
“Ambush…” said Nymph, testing the word, trying to find fault in it.

“That’s perfect, Perro!” said Jack, taking her chances. Otherwise they would be at this all night and she had plans with Marinette in the morning. “Firefly, what do you think!?"

“I love it!” came the girl’s shout.

“Praying Mantis?”

He shrugged. “It’s okay, I guess.”

“Then it’s settled,” said Jack, skipping over a scowling Nymph completely. “Mantis, your supervillain name is Ambush.”

* * *

All in all, it had been a fairly successful night of training. The four of them hitched a ride back to Paris on the top of a passing RER train and went their separate ways before it went underground. Jack glanced at her watch, once again forgetting that it didn’t tell her the time. It looked late though, the traffic sluggish and the moon high and full and bright. Thank goodness Mimmi had the foresight to suggest Jack pack her bed with pillows and a wig in case her parents checked on her. Without a moment to waste, she took off, hopping across the rooftops in the direction of the 21st Arrondissement.

Jack’s mind wandered as she made her way home. It always seemed to gravitate to Diego’s face, the one she traced in her mind’s eyes. The crinkle of his eyes when he laughed, his chipped tooth when he smiled, the warm glow of his skin only marred by the adorable beauty mark on his forehead…

Maybe if Jack hadn’t been trying to spot it all night, she wouldn’t have noticed the flash of green. As it was, she saw it streak across her peripherals on the street below, rounding the corner before she could turn her head to have a better look. It almost felt like something out of the dream or déjà vu. Her first thought, of course, was that it was Zach trying to disguise himself as some version of Praying Mantis again, but then she realized she was missing the obvious.

Dropping down, Jack found herself in front of a flower shop. Buckets and vats filled with lavender and roses crowded the corner and there was a hand-painted sign hanging on the door explaining the proprietor could be found down the street at Café Verdant. Jack glanced over her shoulder to see outdoor seating beneath a green awning lit with fairy lights. Most of the people were too busy enjoying the warm night and the company of their friends to notice her, though one woman locked eyes with her and hurriedly began to pack up her things. Jack felt her stomach twist and it remained that way as she turned away.

“Praying Mantis?” she called out. No answer. “I know you’re here, so you might as well come out, or I’m going to stand here until you do.” She waited, but grew impatient quickly. She slid her chakram off her wrist and called Praying Mantis.

There was a trill as a tall green figure stepped forth from the shadows of the next doorway. It was hard to read Praying Mantis’s expression through the yellow Plexiglas of his helmet, but his body was rigid as he slammed his hand against his tonfa, silencing it.

“Were you following me?” Jack wondered.
He looked away, which was all the answer she needed. Her rabbit ears fell to the sides a little.

“Why... why would you do something like that, dude?” A terrifying thought rampaged through Jack’s head and she took a step back. “You’re not working for Omega, are you?”

He snapped back to face her. “What!? No way! I would never—Listen, I was just trying to find the Beacon, okay? Geeze. Thought that’s where you were headed and I could, I dunno, turn it off or something.”

“But I thought...” Jack edged closer, but Praying Mantis kept the space between them by backing up. “Firefly talked to you. I thought we had a deal.”

“What would you have me do? You gave me one option, so I took it. Doesn’t mean I’m not going to look for others.”

Jack heard laughter around the bend and realized a street corner was not a good place to continue this discussion. Praying Mantis needed to remain a secret.

“C’mon,” she said, jumping back up to the roof. When Praying Mantis didn’t follow, she waved him up. With a visible sigh, he flew up and joined her.

“Is it really that bad? Helping me?” Jack wondered as she led the way over to a blaring air conditioning unit. “It’s not like I wanted to force you.”

“Then lift that containment field.”

“But then you’ll leave.”

“Yeah. So?”

“I need your help, Praying Mantis. Please. You told me when we first met that you could never ignore a call for help.”

“Are you in any immediate danger? I don’t think so.”

“So... what?” Jack felt a bloom of anger growing deep inside, rooted in something primordial. “You’re going to wait until Omega has everyone else’s Miraculouses first and then act?”

“Sounds about right.”

Firefly didn’t have a clue, and Nymph was just plain mean, but Praying Mantis’s apathy really took the cake. Jack crossed her arms.

“What’s your problem, man?” she asked. “You’re given these amazing superpowers and you don’t even want to use them unless you have to?”

“Pretty much.”

Jack’s jaw dropped. She honestly wasn’t expecting such a bunt answer. Praying Mantis just shrugged.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Rabbit,” he said. “I just want to be left alone. Superheroics only draw
attention. I mean, I don’t want anyone to die, but it’s like that stupid line from that one movie, you know? ‘With great power comes great responsibility’ or whatever. I don’t want to be responsible for when things go wrong, because they have…”

“What are you talking about?”

“There was a really bad storm shortly after I got my powers, okay? A call goes out that a rock climber is stranded on the mountain and he’s told to wait it out. But the storm only gets worse, so I finally decide—I’ll just fly over and grab him. Easy. So I do that, but the wind is buffeting us all around and…”

Jack felt her breath grow shallow as Praying Mantis lifted his hands to look at them. They were shaking. Suddenly, Jack regretted everything—the Beacon, the plan, this conversation. She took it back, she took everything back, whatever it took just so she wouldn’t have to be in this moment, listening to Praying Mantis’s words.

“I get slammed into a rock face and I…I drop him. And I try to catch him, but it’s raining so hard I can’t see and…”

Compassion propelled Jack forward and she made a move to put a hand on his shoulder, but Praying Mantis turned away.

“That man had a family. A wife. She heard the rumors about me and blamed me for not saving her husband. Can you believe that? She thought it was the storm that killed him because I didn’t go out to save him. I never set her straight. I’d get blamed either way, so what’s the point?”

“Mantis…” Jack nearly choked on his name, words escaping her. “I’m so sorry…”

“Yeah?” He looked over his shoulder with a derisive gaze that cut like shards of glass. “But you can’t even imagine, can you? Your ‘Miraculous’ whatever power puts everything back the way it was. Or it used to, I guess. Nice of you to join the rest of us. Now you actually have to deal with the consequences of your actions.”

Jack felt an unfamiliar sting in her eyes and realized she was struggling to hold back tears. His words didn’t hurt because they were mean. They hurt because they were true.

“You’re right,” she said.

Praying Mantis gave her a double take and spun around to face her again. Whatever response he’d been expecting…it wasn’t that.

Jack swallowed and pushed forward. “I totally skated by on Miraculous Rabbit for a really long time. And when it was gone, when I couldn’t take back the damage I caused or the people I hurt, I had a really hard time. I didn’t think I was cut out to be a hero anymore. But then…” She closed her eyes, recalling her excruciating first week in Paris, and the conversation she shared with her mom the night she told Ladybug and Cat Noir everything she knew. For some reason, it had stuck with her. “I learned. I learned to be a better hero. One who wasn’t so reckless, who relied on her friends and thought things through and didn’t go barreling headfirst into situations without understanding the consequences first.”

“It’s not the same…you didn’t—”
“I’m not saying it is. But a wise woman once told me that you can’t change the past. Sometimes you go back and visit it, thinking there is something you could’ve done, but it stays the same. So you can either do nothing…or learn from it. So learn from it, Praying Mantis. Learn to be a better hero.”

“But I don’t want to be a hero. I was never meant to be a hero. The Guardian actually chose you to wield the Rabbit Miraculous. I was a mistake. I got caught up in a rockslide and no one was coming to save me because I was an idiot and didn’t tell anyone where I was going. It would’ve been like 127 Hours except with the guy dying in the end. But Roadd found me, and the noble idiot ignored what the other Kwami said and bonded with my eyebrow ring to save me.”

“But…if you don’t want to be a hero, why even keep Roadd? Why not give your Miraculous to someone else?”

“Because I don’t trust anyone else not to abuse this power.”

Jack paused, a sly smile spreading across her face. “…And you’re sure you don’t want to be a hero?”

“That’s what I just said.”

“Really? Because protecting Roadd sounds an awful lot like something a hero would do.”

Praying Mantis’s eyes narrowed into slits. He looked a bit like the unamused emoji. Jack laughed, but took a step back just to be safe. She knew how quick he was with his tonfa.

“Just a thought,” Jack said. She took two quick hops and ended on the lip of the roof. “I’ll see you Wednesday for more training, okay?”

“Yeah. Okay.”

“Goodnight!”

She hopped away, her mind turning over everything she had learned. Despite Praying Mantis’s sad story, it was nice, in a way. He seemed very open and honest. Even though he had a hard exterior, he was willing to share and that gave her hope for them and their fledgling team.

He didn’t follow her home.

*   *   *

“This is insane!” Kim yelled over the roaring of the crowd as they reached their seats on the balcony of the main stand, in the center of the long side. The soccer field (football pitch?) was spread out before them, emerald green and glistening. Players in navy with a red stripe or powder blue uniforms stretched and ran drills beneath the blinding stadium lights.

“It is very cool!” agreed Jack, nodding fervently as she looked around at the mass of humanity packed into Parc des Princes, cheering rancorously even though the game had yet to start. It was nothing like a Dodgers game. Sure, people wore jerseys and hats, but they also waved flags and scarves. One man had a megaphone and Jack saw the lights of several red flares scattered throughout the stands, their smoke billowing skywards, making it look like parts of the stadium were on fire.

When Alix said nothing, Kim and Jack both turned to look at her. Her eyes were wide as she pushed
up on the railing to take it all in. As soon as she saw them staring though, she lowered the brim of her Paris Saint-Germain cap and crossed her arms.

“It’s okay,” she muttered.

Kim gave a harsh bark of laughter as he reached over to flip off the girl’s hat.

“Whatever you say, shorty,” he told her as she tried to fix her mussed hair. “Let’s see if I invite you the next time I win tickets to The Classic.”

“Thanks again for inviting me, Kim,” Jack told him as they sat down. The two of them had come a long way since her first day of school, when he had made fun of her for her poor pronunciation. She had found out months later that he had only done so to impress Chloé, who he had a crush on for reasons Jack couldn’t quite figure out.

“No problem!” he said, running his hand through his coif, which he had temporarily dyed red for the occasion. “I knew you’d appreciate it since you like sports and stuff. I still can’t believe you’ve never been to a football game before!”

“Hey, rocks for brains, you know football in America sucks,” interjected Alix, slamming her cap back onto her head. “What would even be the point?” She turned to Jack. “Does Los Angeles even have a team?”

Jack shrugged. She honestly had no idea. “I do not know anything about football. You will have to teach me.”

“No problem!” said Kim. “I’m a football fanatic! And the first thing you should know is that The Classic is a big deal.”

So Jack had been hearing the entire week. Paris SG was playing their rivals, Olympique de Marseille. It was like the Dodgers versus the Giants, but bigger. Tickets, even the cheap ones, were going for 100 Euros, so Jack had no intentions of going. Even when Kim won four tickets by being the 27th caller into NRJ, she assumed he’d take Max over her, but Max politely declined, suggesting Kim invite people who were a bit more sports-orientated. So Kim had invited Alix, Jack, and—

“Hey guys! Sorry I’m late!”

The three of them turned to see Adrien pushing his way down the aisle. He was wearing a knitted cap with earflaps in Paris SG colors—clearly Marinette’s handwork—his blonde hair carefully tucked away beneath it. A matching scarf covered most of his features and he carried a French flag over his shoulders.

“Adrien! You made it!” said Kim, his eyes lighting up. The two preformed a complicated handshake before Kim turned to Alix. “Ha! In your face! Told ya he’d show. You owe me five Euros.”

“Yes, yeah…” said Alix, rolling her eyes as she dug a note out of her pocket. Adrien looked a little hurt, but she was unfazed. “What?” she wondered. “Usually your dad doesn’t let you out of the house. I thought it was easy money. But it’s good to see you, man. Best five Euro I’ve spent in a while.”

Happy, Adrien took his seat on the other side of Jack.
“Be honest,” said Jack, leaning over to her friend. “You escaped.” Jack didn’t know the word for ‘sneak out,’ but she could tell from the look in Adrien’s eyes that he understood what she meant. Lucky for him, the opening ceremony was starting and he was saved from Jack forcing him to answer.

True to his word, Kim taught Jack all about soccer as the game commenced—the positions, the rules, the history of Paris SG. Apparently they had been dominating The Classic since 2012, so Kim was pretty sure they were going to win. Not only that, but the team had signed superstar Edinson Cavani, a Uruguayan forward, last year. Kim pointed him out to Jack, a man with a long face, chiseled cheekbones, and brown hair that hung down to his shoulders in wild waves.

“He didn’t come cheap though,” Kim explained as he stuffed nuts down his gullet. “It was reported he signed for 64 million Euros—that’s the most expensive signing in French football history!”

“I still don’t think he was worth it,” said Alix.

“Don’t listen to her. Cavani is the man! You’ll see.”

Jack kept an eye on Cavani, expecting great things, but the half passed and nothing happened. The two teams appeared to be evenly matched. Everything changed though when another Paris SG player, Maxwell, managed to field a pass through three defenders and kick a goal. Jack jumped up and down, screaming at the top of her lungs and high-fiving her friends as the crowd around them went wild. The roar was unlike anything Jack had ever heard before, Dodger game or otherwise. It reminded her of the ocean on a windy gray morning.

Still, Jack kept an eye on Cavani. She saw him in action plenty of times as he made countless kicks on goal, but none of them went in for one reason or another. She could tell from his body language that he was getting pretty frustrated.

Then, with eleven minutes left in the game, Cavani found his time to shine. The ball went up, another playing kicked it to Cavani before it could even hit the ground, and Cavani headed the ball right into the goal. Marseille’s goalie made a valiant attempt to lie out and block the shot, but the ball bounced right off his fingertips and into the net.

“Worth! Every! Euro!” whooped Kim as everyone jumped to his or her feet to cheer. Cavani raced towards the corner of the field making the ‘crazy’ motion with his hands, and then hugged a sidelined teammate. When he pulled himself away, he shouted something indecipherable into the crowd as he pumped his arms.

And then all Jack heard were boos. Confused, she scanned the field for answers. Adrien had to point out one of the referees dressed in yellow. He was running up to Cavani holding up a yellow card.

“A penalty!?" Jack yelped in English. “What for?"

“Excessive celebration!?" cried Kim when the answer soon came to light. “That’s crazy!”

Cavani seemed to think so too. He jogged up to the ref and began to argue with him. It grew rather heated, everyone in the stands murmuring about this bizarre turn of events. The ref remained unmoved by Cavani’s pleas though. In fact, he took a step back and drew a red card from his pocket.

The whole stadium fell silent. Jack tried to remember what a red card meant. Wasn’t it something like ejection from the game? But that was ridiculous. Cavani hadn’t done anything to warrant…
The boos started up again, much louder than before. People even began to throw things onto the field—cups and flares and the like—in the direction of the ref. Cavani, his jaw set, looked like he wanted to punch somebody, but several of his teammates came up alongside him. They tried to walk him to the bench, but he pushed them away and stormed off towards the locker room instead.

Kim fell back into his seat, stunned. “I can’t believe it…” he said.

“That was weird,” agreed Alix. “Awesome goal though.”

As they settled back into their seats, Adrien remained standing, squinting in Cavani’s direction as the man disappeared down the tunnel. Since Jack was next to him, she was the only one who heard his sharp intake of breath. She spotted a little speck of fluttering purple and black shortly after he did.

“An Akuma!” they said at the same time before looking at each other, shocked.

“Huh?” wondered Kim while Alix went rigid.

“We need to get out of here,” said Adrien, gathering up the trash from his food as fast as he could. “Now.”

“What!? Oh, c’mon!” complained Kim. “Paris is about to win!”

“Move!” shouted Alix, shoving her entire body against the boy, but she made little impact.

A fireball came barreling out of the tunnel, a few Marseille players diving out of the way to avoid getting scorched. It hit the edge of the stands where it exploded and sent flaming pieces into the air. The smell of burning synthetic leather filled the area.

“What was that!?” cried Kim, suddenly all about moving. The four of them barreled towards the aisle, pushing up against Kim and using him as a battering ram. Other spectators had the same idea, crawling over seats and each other to reach an exit, but most were craning their necks, trying to get a better look at the figure that had just darted out onto the field, leaving behind a track of fire. He made a beeline for a color commentator on the sidelines who held a microphone, which he commandeered.

“You want excessive celebration!?” the Akumatized Cavani cried out, his Uruguayan accent weighing down his words as they filled the stadium. “Striker will show you excessive celebration!”

Jack chanced a glance at one of the big screens. The Akuma’s body was navy, with a red stripe from his forehead on down. His legs were covered in thorny yellow spikes that grew thicker as they reached his feet, forming a nasty looking pair of cleats. On his chest was a sigil of a soccer ball on fire. He held up a hand and made a soccer ball appear. It was navy and red like him. He dropped it and kicked it with such force that it caught on fire like a meteor entering Earth’s atmosphere. It went rocketing towards Marseille’s goal, passed the goalie, and through the back of the net. It exploded, throwing the poor goalie forward.

Striker lifted his arms in celebration, whopping and hollering. He summoned more soccer balls and kicked them straight up, where they exploded like fireworks, raining embers across the field.

Jack wasn’t looking where she was going and tripped up the stairs. Alix helped hauled her back up.

“Where’s Adrien?” she shouted over the terrified shouts all around them.
Jack turned to look, but Adrien was gone, swept away by the crowd.

“We have to go,” Jack argued, pulling Alix along before they got trampled. They really couldn’t afford to wait.

Pushing Alix ahead of her towards Kim, Jack watched her two friends head left in the direction of the closest exit. Jack, however, veered right, towards a women’s restroom.

“What’s wrong, ref!” she heard Striker say, his voice echoing through the concourse. “Are you not going to give me a red card?”

The bathroom was empty, but Jack still sought refuge in a stall. Mimmi burst out of Jack’s bag, flying in a spiral.

“Ready for Operation Ambush?” the Kwami trilled.

“Let’s focus on defeating the Akuma first, okay?” Jack suggested, punching upward. “Mimmi, hop to it!”

Once her transformation was complete, Jack took off, but found she couldn’t get far. Kim had told her that the stadium held almost 48,000 people. Now, all 48,000 of those people were trying to escape. Jack had to preform some pretty creative wall jumps to get back to open air, and then jumped to the roof to gain some breathing room.

A bit of red caught Jack’s eye and she noticed Ladybug about a hundred feet away from her. Jack shouted and waved, grabbing the superheroine’s attention. They jogged towards each other, meeting in the middle as they quickly called each other to confirm identities before moving on to pleasantries.

“Fancy bumping into you here, Rabbit,” Ladybug joked.

“Ladybug! We really must stop meeting like this,” rejoined Jack.

“So we’re starting with this one, right? Operation Ambush?”

“Yup!”

“Okay. I’ll make sure not to use Lucky Charm until everyone is in play. And it’s me this time, right?”

“Yeah, you’ll attract the most attention.”

“And you’ll come to the rescue!”

“That’s the plan! Thanks again for being so willing to do this.”

Ladybug shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal. “You’re my friend. Of course I’m going to help you.”

A yowl interrupted them, so Jack didn’t have time to be touched by Ladybug’s words. They both recognized the sound of Cat Noir and raced to the edge of the roof so they could look down on the field. A black clad figure was standing in the net below their feet. Tucked into a ball behind him was a referee, no doubt the one who had given Cavani his red card. Striker was kicking ball after fireball
in his direction, but Cat defended him, deftly deflecting the projectiles with his staff. The soccer balls were coming in hot though and after Cat knocked one away, another came roaring right afterward and knocked his weapon out of his hands. It went spinning into the stands.

Without even thinking, Jack jumped down in front of the orange regulation soccer ball abandoned on the sidelines. “Let’s see how you like it!” she said, drilling the ball straight at the Akuma. He was so focused on Cat and the ref that he failed to notice and was hit in the side of the face.

Striker turned slowly and glared at her, grunting as he summoned a soccer ball the size of a beach ball.

“That’s…not…regulation size,” Jack said, backing up as he kicked it and it went rocketing toward her, catching fire along the way. She could’ve jumped out of the way, but no one beat her in a kick-off. She spun and kicked the fireball right back.

Jack could see Striker’s eyes widen in surprise, but he recovered and ran towards her, returning the kick. They volleyed the ball back and forth a few times, but Striker closed the gap and Jack’s foot was starting to throb. When he was within a few paces of her, Striker preformed such an insane spin kick that the flames surrounding the ball turned blue. Jack blinked and suddenly it was right up in her face.

And then everything went black.

*   *   *

Jack could hear a voice.

“Whoa, no way! Check it out, viewers. Rabbit. Unconscious! I guess this Akuma really packs a punch. Or a kick in this case…”

Jack groaned. Her limbs felt like the marrow had been replaced with lead as she tried to move them.

“Oh! She’s coming around. Rabbit! Rabbit…”

Now Jack could place the voice, probably because she heard it right before she left for the game, complaining about how lucky she was.

You do not even like sports.

I know, but it’s The Classic!

“Alya?” Jack wondered, her eyes fluttering open to see the bespectacled girl hanging over her with her cell phone up.

“Oh, hey! You remembered me!” said Alya. Jack waved her arm about and Alya grabbed it. Leaning back, she was able to pull Jack to her feet with one hand so she wouldn’t have to put down her phone. It was rather impressive.

“How long was I…out…?” Jack wondered.

“I dunno. I just got here.”
Now that Jack was up, she could see that most of the stadium was on fire, and it wasn’t because of flares. Some portions even looked like they had been bombed. Luckily, it appeared everyone had evacuated by this point, other than a few people like Alya who were willing to risk life and limb to record the fight. It was still going on in the middle of the field, Firefly having joined the fray. She kept Striker busy by warping her and Cat Noir around the field using her flashlight. Ladybug stood apart, examining something large and tube-like that was red with black polka dots. She must’ve just used Lucky Charm.

“Gotta go!” said Jack, leaping into action. She darted across the field to Ladybug’s side. Ladybug looked up. “Feeling better?” she wondered, faint concern in her eyes.

“Alya’s in play,” Jack reported.

“Of course she is…” The superheroine heaved a sigh.

Jack sized up the item in Ladybug’s arms and poked it. “What’re you gonna do with that potato cannon?” she wondered.

“What?”

“That…potato cannon?” Jack poked it again, so Ladybug held it up and raised an eyebrow along with it. “Have you never seen one before?”

“Where would I see one?”

“At, like, every sporting event ever? They use them to shoot T-shirts into the crowd.”

“Huh. Must be an American thing.”

“Look out!” came Cat’s distant shout. Jack and Ladybug looked up in time to see a flaming soccer ball come flying towards them. They couldn’t react fast enough to escape, but in a flash they found themselves in the stands further up, watching an explosion go off below them. Firefly had warped them to safety in the nick of time.

Stunned, Jack turned to Ladybug only to see the girl was hyper focused. Her head swung around as she looked at Cat, then the goal, then Firefly, then down at the potato cannon, then over her shoulder at the press box, then at Jack.

“…What are you thinking…?” wondered Jack, knowing that look anywhere. Ladybug had a plan.

“Get up there and make as much noise as possible,” said Ladybug, pointing at the press box.

“On it!” said Jack, saluting and then taking off. She could question Ladybug, but had discovered long ago to just trust her.

Four bounces and a broken door later, Jack ran down the row of seat usually reserved for the media. Through the wide windows she could see that Ladybug had made her way to the top of the net at the left end of the field. She yelled something and smacked her hand against the crossbar. Cat went streaking across the field towards her, calling upon Cataclysm as he did so. Firefly protected him by warping away balls before they could reach him. Diving the last few feet, he tagged the post and the whole frame crumbled into dust. Ladybug back flipped away, pulling the net along with her now that
it was free.

Jack found her way to the announcer’s booth. Firefly was now glowing. Jack shielded her eyes as the girl used Bioluminescence to blind Striker. Firefly and Cat then backed up to protect Ladybug as she began to shove the net into the potato cannon.

“Ohhhhh!” realized Jack. It all made sense now. She quickly settled down in front of the microphone and flipped the switch. “Hello, this is Rabbit, coming at you live from Striker verses Team Miraculous. We join the game already in progress!”

Jack’s voice reverberated, emanating from every loudspeaker throughout the stadium. Striker, the pain passing from being blinded, looked up. He could see nothing…and now he could hear nothing but Jack.

“Striker is looking like a blank as Cat comes up to his left. Looks like he’ll probably get a hit in…” Cat was nowhere near Striker, but the Akuma still summoned a soccer ball and kicked it to his left. “I mean his right. Sorry, folks, I always get those two mixed up.” Striker did the same to his other side before Jack even finished talking. “And that’s a miss. I have to say, Striker just doesn’t play the same after being Akumatized…”

Jack could see Striker’s face light up with the neon purple outline of Hawk Moth’s influence. No doubt the supervillian was pointing out that Jack was misleading him with her words. The Akuma roared in frustration and began to summon a flurry of balls, kicking them in every direction where he heard Jack’s voice. They exploded, some meeting their mark. Jack’s voice dampened as half of the speakers in the stadium were destroyed.

“What’s this?” she cried, really getting into it as she climbed up onto the desk. “Looks like Striker is going all out! He’s attacking the stadium! Folks, he’s lost it. He’s totally lost it!”

And by ‘it,’ Jack meant the battle as well as his marbles. In the commotion, Striker couldn’t hear Ladybug go sailing over him, pulled along by her yo-yo. She shot the net at him with the potato cannon, tangling him up.

“I can’t believe it!” Jack shouted. “Ladybug! Outta nowhere! She’s taken Striker down! But the clock is winding down. Ten seconds left. Can she do it!? Can she defeat the Akuma in time?”

Ladybug yanked the cleats off Striker’s feet as he desperately tried to escape the net. A little butterfly escaped, but Ladybug didn’t let it get far. She captured it with her yo-yo. “GOOOOOOOOOOOAL!”

Ditching the microphone, Jack went running back outside, arms raised above her head in victory. By the time she joined her friends, Ladybug had already used Miraculous Ladybug, returning the stadium to its former glory. Her and Cat were pounding fists in celebration and high-fiving Firefly. Jack was included in the high-fives as well.

“That. Was. Amazing!” cried Alya as she came tearing across the field, phone in hand. “Ladybug! Ladybug, is there anything you want to say to all your fans?”

Ladybug held a hand up to her ear as her Miraculous beeped. “We don’t have a lot of time for Operation Ambush,” she told the others. “Chaton. Firefly. Why don’t you two head out? And Rabbit…”

“I got him,” said Jack, knowing exactly what Ladybug was requesting as she help a dazed Cavani to his feet. She gave him her usual spiel as she guided him towards the locker rooms. They weren’t mad
at him. None of this was his fault. The coach, some EMTs, and a few members of Paris SG met them just as the tunnel split. Jack spoke to them a little bit, but she was focused on listening, waiting for the signal.

A scream. As soon as she heard it, she went tearing back down the tunnel to the field. There she found exactly what she expected: Ladybug locked in battle with Praying Mantis. Alya had apparently been knocked to the ground, but she still had her phone trained on the tableau before her.

“Rabbit! Help!” yelled Ladybug, terrified. “I’m about to de-transform!”

Jack darted up behind Praying Mantis and swept his feet. He went down with a thud, giving Ladybug enough time to whip out her yo-yo and snag something on the roof.

“No!” Jack pulled out her chakram and flipped between them, slicing Praying Mantis’s wrist as she did so. He let go, allowing Ladybug to sail away.

“Who are you!?” Jack demanded, holding her weapon towards him. “And what do you want!?”

Praying Mantis stared up at Jack with dead eyes as he stood, wiping dirt off his cheek with the back of his hand. “The name’s Ambush,” he said. He spat. “And I’m not telling you a thing.”

Jack reacted almost instinctively, growing her chakram and slamming it over Praying Mantis’s head before shrinking it again. He looked down at the ring, and then up at her.

“Really?” he wondered, almost bored. He pulled out his tonfa and spun them a few times before touching them to himself. “Deflectoskeleton!” he shouted as he turned a silvery metallic where his weapons touched him and it spread. As soon as it touched Jack’s chakram, the throwing ring sprang wide, as if terrified, and clattered at his feet. Jack started at her weapon as if it had grown hair.

A wind whipped up, flapping Praying Mantis’s robes. He squatted and then leapt into the air, taking flight. Jack rolled and grabbed her weapon, jumping as high as she could. He was too far above her though, so she threw her chakram. It bounced off him with a clang and it was sent careening back into her. She tried to catch it, but it smacked into her with megaton force and she went hurtling to the ground in a shower of grass and dirt.

“Rabbit!” Alya came running and fell to her knees next to Jack. “Are you okay?”

Jack stumbled to her feet and looked up to the skies, but Praying Mantis was long gone. She turned to Alya.

“What happened!?” she demanded.

“Er…uh…Here.” Alya juggled her phone as she showed Jack the video. She moved the play position forward, to when she was interviewing Ladybug. Praying Mantis swooped in out of nowhere, knocked Alya back, and used his tonfa to put Ladybug in a headlock.

“Your time is up!” he hissed. “Now let’s see who you are behind that pretty little mask of yours!”

Jack managed shocked realization better than she ever thought she would. “He’s after Ladybug’s identity!” She turned to Alya, shoving her phone back into her hands. “You have to post this. Paris
needs to know. There’s a new villain in town and his name is Ambush.”

* * *

For the next two and a half weeks, Jack and her superpowered friends were terrorized by Ambush, at least as far as Paris knew. He appeared, without fail, after every Akuma battle, targeting whoever had utilized their powers last. Someone else would come to the rescue, but Deflectoskeleton always allowed him to escape. But even if the danger wasn’t real, the charade was taxing, and Jack was relieved when Nymph decided it was time to move on to Phase 2.

In the aftermath of the last Akuma attack, Ambush appeared to attack Firefly. No one saw how it ended, as intended. They had thought of the same fate befalling Jack, but Jack didn’t want to use her powers if she could help it, and Nymph decided they shouldn’t play all their cards just yet. Firefly, in her words, was expendable, and Firefly agreed.

“Are you ready?” Nymph asked Praying Mantis, flipping him the phone she had brought. He snagged it out of the air and glared at her. They were back at the rock quarry and Nymph was an hour late.

“Where’ve you been?” Praying Mantis wondered.

“Unlike you, I have better things to do with my time than hang out in a dirt pit.”

“Or help us with your own plan.”

He wasn’t wrong. Of all the Akuma attacks, Nymph had participated in exactly one, and once again refused to use her special superpower. She did, however, play hero, saving Cat from Ambush. It made Jack a bit miffed—Nymph had all the skills to be a superhero, just none of the heart. Maybe that could change though. Mimmi seemed to think it was possible.

“Are we filming this or not?” Nymph demanded. She snapped her fingers. “Firefly! Light!”

“Right!” cried the girl with all the gusto Praying Mantis lacked. She held up her flashlight, nearly blinding Jack in the process.

The way Firefly’s light and the shadows interplayed went a long way in setting the scene. It was deep and dark and dangerous. With a sigh, Praying Mantis widened his stance and pointed the phone at himself. He tried on a couple of different faces, ranging from scowls to smirks, before settling on sardonic. He thumbed the record button.

“Ambush here. I hear a lot of people are talking about me these days and asking why I do what I do. Well, it’s simple, really.” He leaned back on his heels, tilting his head from side-to-side in tandem with his words. “Cold. Hard. Cash.” He brought the phone closer. “I answer to no one. I just want a little paper. Being a superhero doesn’t pay, but I know plenty of people who would to find out a superhero’s identity.” A slow smile spread across his face. “You know who you are and I have what you want. Today, it’s Firefly. Tomorrow? Who knows? Ladybug? Rabbit? Put in your bid—”


“What was wrong with that?” Jack wondered. “I thought it was pretty good.
“Pretty good isn’t good enough, Missy. We need the best! And if flyboy isn’t going to give it to us, then we might as well reveal this whole thing as a charade right now.”

“I am giving you my best,” Praying Mantis insisted, forcing his voice to keep steady. Jack grimaced. She had been around Praying Mantis and Nymph long enough to know exactly where this was going.

“If that’s your best, then you must disappoint a whole lot of people.”

Praying Mantis yanked out one of his tonfa and swung it before Jack could even blink an eye. She leaped forward to get between the two, but Praying Mantis had already stopped just short of bashing Nymph in the side of the face. Even though he had perfect control, his hands shook like they had when he had told Jack his story.

“Don’t,” he whispered.

Nymph turned her head slightly to stare at the offending weapon invading her personal space as if it were a flea. However, she did soften.

“Listen,” she said, pushing his arm down. “I want to get out of here, same as you. I’m just trying to give us the best chance. If we can’t convince Omega or Chameleon that you’re legit, then we’re stuck here.”

Praying Mantis turned to look pointedly at Jack. “We don’t have to be.”

“Yes, exactly.” Lucky for Jack, Nymph wasn’t paying attention; too busy taking the phone and deleting the old take. “The sooner we get this right, the sooner we can all leave. So let’s try this again.” She handed the phone back. “This time…be a bit more smug, more celebratory. After trying for weeks to figure out one of our identities, you finally succeeded. You should be on top of the world! So let’s see it.”

“Yeah…” decided Praying Mantis, coming to the depressing realization that Nymph had a point. “Yeah. Okay.”

It took him almost a hundred takes to get it right, to the point where they had all lost track. In the end, Nymph was actually pretty complimentary. There were times where Jack saw flashes of the superhero Firefly seemed to see and this was one of them.

“Perfect!” said the girl, tucking her shiny hair behind her ear as she played the final video back. “I’ll make sure the right people see this.”

“How?” Jack wondered.

“A lady never reveals her sources. Now, if we’re done here, I have to get back to my date. I left him without much of an explanation.”

“It’s been hours,” Praying Mantis pointed out. “Dude’s probably long gone.”

Nymph laughed as if Praying Mantis was a child saying something precocious. “They always wait,” she said as she flitted into the air. “Ta!” And, with that, she zoomed away into the darkness.

“I wish I had that kind of confidence,” said Firefly.
“I wish I had never met her,” mumbled Praying Mantis, taking a seat. Only Jack heard him though.

“Uh…Firefly! Why don’t you go up and signal us when you see the train?” Jack suggested. “I wanna talk to Praying Mantis for a sec.”

“Kay!” The girl directed the beam of her flashlight to the top of the ridge, clicked it, directed the beam at herself, and blinked away. It left Jack and Praying Mantis in what would’ve been complete darkness if not for the brilliant light of the moon and the stars. Jack stumbled over the uneven ground and found a spot next to him.

“I’m sorry this whole thing fell on you,” Jack said as she searched the sky for a familiar constellation. Months and months had passed and Jack still found herself searching for the familiarity of her old home.

“Nymph doesn’t get it,” Praying Mantis said, using one of his tonfa to draw in the dirt. “It’s…hard being the villain. I thought I wouldn’t care, but the way people look at me when I’m transformed…” He shivered.

“I know how you feel.”

“Huh. Yeah. Okay.”

“No, really! When I first got to Paris and my powers went haywire and I used Dogstruction and destroyed, like, everything, people were afraid of me. Some even thought I was an Akuma or working for Hawk Moth. It was the worst.”

They sat in silence a few minutes more. Jack tried to lean over and see what Praying Mantis was drawing, but he just wiped it away and nodded in Firefly’s direction. She was waving her flashlight around her head. It was time to go.

“It’s not the same,” he insisted as they got up.

“What do you mean?”

“You knew they were wrong about you.”

His words took a while to sink in. By the time Jack realized what he meant, he had already started walking away. Jack darted after him.

“You are a hero,” she insisted.

“I’m a holder,” he corrected. “Nothing more.”

*   *   *

“Jack!” cried Alya, racing across the school’s blacktop with her phone clutched in her hand. Nino was hot of her heels.

Jack adjusted her Hawaiian-print backpack. She missed her beach bag already, but it had finally developed a gaping hole in the bottom. It wasn’t a good space for her pens or for Mimmi anymore. Luckily, Amazon was in France too, so Jack could get something she liked from back home.
Nothing like a good old Jansport that matched her bedspread.

“What is wrong?” she asked her friend, her stomach twisting. They both looked as if someone had died.

“Did you see the video I posted this morning on my Ladyblog?”

“I do not...no.”

Alya tapped the screen of her phone and all but shoved it in Jack’s face. Jack put a hand on it and pushed it back a little, recognizing Praying Mantis immediately. It was the video they had filmed last night. Apparently Nymph’s ‘the right people’ included Alya. Jack almost rolled her eyes. She could’ve done that. But then she remembered that wasn’t exactly the appropriate reaction to what she was seeing. She concentrated on the video, contorting her face into one of horror.

“…If you have the resources, I’m not hard to find,” Praying Mantis was saying. “I’ll be available all night. Just put in an offer. Highest bid wins. Protect Firefly’s identity? Release it to the world? Blackmail her? I don’t really care what you do with the information I’ve got, as long as you’ve got the cash.” Praying Mantis rubbed his thumb and forefingers together before stopping the recording, the screen going to black.

“Do you think that is true?” Jack wondered.

“Of course it’s true!”

The three turned to find Chloé approaching them, Sabrina at her heels. Sabrina offered a little wave behind Chloé’s back, which Jack accepted with a shallow nod. Ever since Commandant, they had sort of been secret friends.

“We don’t know that,” argued Nino. “Dude could be playing us, pretending he knows Firefly’s identity when he’s really just a hater.”

“Well, I’ll have you know that Ladybug and Chat Noir came to see Daddy at breakfast this morning and Firefly was with them. They asked if they could hold a press conference a noon and Firefly admitted Ambush saw her detransform!”

“Oh, no!” said Jack.

“That’s terrible!” said Alya.

“Jeeze…” said Nino.

“It serves her right,” Chloé decided. “If I was helping Ladybug, I would never screw up like that.”

“Man, what’re we gonna do?” Nino wondered, turning to Jack. “I don’t think Positivity Club can help with this one.”

“Don’t worry,” Alya assured her friend as she slipped her phone back into the pocket of her jean skirt and put a comforting hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I’m sure Ladybug is making a plan right now to stop Ambush.”

“Um, hello!? I’m going to save the day,” insisted Chloé.

“Chloé plans to put in a bid,” Sabrina explained.

“Whoa. You’d do that, Chlo?” Nino asked.

“Of course! I’ll do anything to protect Firefly’s identity. All she has to do is give me her Miraculous and I won’t say a peep.”

The three of them didn’t bother hiding their disgust.

“Ugh, you are the worst.”

“Blackmail, Chloé? Really?”

“Uncool.”

Chloé crossed her arms and wrinkled her nose at them, no doubt baffled by why she wasn’t being heralded as a hero. “Whatever!” she said, storming away. Sabrina looked longingly towards Jack, but followed.

“Chloé with a Miraculous…” said Alya. “Could you even imagine?”

* * *

The Yves Saint Laurent Museum in Paris was as traditional as it got, a three-story limestone building with a dark gray dormer roof and wrought iron false balconies. The limestone had been cut to look like slot board. It sat on the corner, surrounded by taller buildings, unassuming and rather quaint.

This was the address Nymph had given Jack. She was supposed to meet Ladybug on the roof. Sure enough, when Jack jumped up, the girl was already squatting there. She nodded to Jack as they called each other. Once their identities were confirmed, Ladybug held a hand to her earpiece.

“Rabbit just arrived,” she reported.

Jack heard Cat’s answer thanks to her super hearing. “So we’re all in place then?”

Jack looked across the street at a taller, more modern building, a waterfall of power washed concrete. Its large, garage-like doors latticed with chrome were swarming with people, lit red by a neon sign depicting a bald man with a beard and a monocle. Music pulsed from within, that annoying new one by XY.

“So this is Le Baron, huh?” wondered Jack. It certainly looked like a place Nymph frequented, and Jack was getting some major villain vibes from it.


“At least you have a good view,” Cat pointed out. He had been regulated to back door duty, meaning he was spying on Le Baron’s garden from the roof of the Chamber of Agriculture. Firefly wanted to be stationed there with him, but they all agreed that it was best that she lie low and sit the night out.
“I can’t see anyone famous from here. Unless I flip my camera to face me.”

“I’m gonna call him,” said Jack, enlarging her chakram. She scrolled through her list of contacts—Cat Noir, Firefly, Ladybug, Nymph, Perro Negro, Praying Mantis. She selected the last one. It rang maybe once before the young man in question picked up. His face, lit up red, looked angular and hard. Music throbbed in the background, but it was muted.

“How’s the backroom?” Jack asked. “All settled?”

“I can’t stand this place,” Praying Mantis muttered, looking off to the side. The neon sign behind him came into focus. Medellín. It was a city in Columbia. It was also a drug cartel. Demonic masks hung around it.

“That’s the thanks I get!?” Jack heard the tinny voice of Nymph cry. Praying Mantis hissed through his teeth and turned. Because of his helmet, Jack couldn’t see his earpiece, but she knew it was there. “Le Baron is for the elite! If not for me, you wouldn’t have been allowed within a hundred feet of the door.”

“I would’ve preferred it that way.”

Praying Mantis took the tonfa he was speaking to Jack with and placed it on the ledge behind him, giving Jack a view of the rest of the room and the door. There was another neon sign, this one a top hat with a curled brim and a lightning symbol down the side. There was also a couch opposite the one Praying Mantis was currently kneeling on as he disguised the weapon with whiskey glasses. It was difficult to tell if everything was red, or if it just looked that way because of the lights.

Praying Mantis swiped an extra tonfa off one of the tables. Nymph had it made for him, so it wouldn’t look like he was missing one and arouse any suspicion. He saluted Jack with it.

“Guess I’m ready,” he said, settling down. Now Jack could only see the top of his helmet.

Honestly, Jack wasn’t sure if Nymph’s plan was going to work. The way she explained it, anyone who really wanted to find Ambush could do so by hacking the phone that had been used to film and upload his video offer. The phone’s GPS signal placed him in the backroom at Le Baron. It would be no problem from someone like Howard Jenson to figure this out. Jack was nervous though. If evil rich people could do it, couldn’t the police do it too? But Nymph assured Jack with her trademark poise that she made sure the information spread to the right people. Even if that was true though, there was no guarantee Omega or someone working for him was going to show up, or that Jack and her friends would even be able to recognize them if they did. Still, this was their best chance to get a lead on Omega without him suspecting a thing.

Jack fiddled with the chakram’s settings so no noise could be heard on her end before leaning it against the rooftop’s ledge. She peered over it to Le Baron. “And now…we wait,” she said.

Jack had never done a stakeout before. She honestly thought it would be more exciting, but she quickly discovered that it was difficult to stay focused. She had to pinch herself just to stay awake an hour into their watch. Two hours in, Jack’s lids grew heavy and she struggled to keep them open. She was saved from the embarrassment of falling asleep on the job though when she saw a middle-aged man in a smart linen suit, carrying a briefcase. He bypassed the line of people waiting to get inside with a quick word and a nod to the bouncer.

“Is that our guy?” Ladybug wondered, spotting him too.
“Someone cat-ch your eye, My Lady?” Cat asked in Ladybug’s ear.

“Maybe…” said Jack. “Nymph will let Praying Mantis know soon enough.” Nymph had stationed two bodyguards outside the door to the backroom to keep out the riffraff and pat down anyone who entered. The process would give Nymph plenty of time to alert Praying Mantis that someone had come to see him.

“Maybe,” Ladybug reported back to Cat. “Keep an eye out.”

A few minutes went by in tense silence and then Jack’s chakram picked up something more than just Praying Mantis’s annoyed sighs.

“Looks like someone would like to pay you a little visit,” observed Nymph in Praying Mantis’s ear. “Silver fox. Great taste.”

“Helpful,” he muttered.

“They found an earpiece on him. They’re checking his briefcase now. Oh…oh, wow. That’s a lot of money.”

Ladybug, who was still focused on the front door, slid her eyes over to Jack and they exchanged glances.

The doorknob to the backroom turned and Praying Mantis jerked and adjusted himself as the mysterious man was escorted inside. He exuded casual cool as he strode over and placed the briefcase on the table between him and Praying Mantis. He looked over his shoulder, waiting for the door to close before he took his seat. He leaned back, putting the ankle of one leg on the knee of the other. Despite his light-colored apparel, he had accessorized with what looked to be a black pocket square. He was handsome, but his good looks were marred by wrinkles.

“Ambush,” he said with a slight but indiscernible accent. He nodded back the way he had come. “Pleasant company you keep.”

“If you don’t like it, you can leave,” Praying Mantis suggested.

The man laughed. “I have no intentions of doing that. The man I represent has far too much interest in what you have to offer.”

“Does he now?”

“Now, I’m sure you’ve received some rather enticing offers tonight, but please hear mine out…”

The man unlatched the locks on the briefcase and opened the lid before spinning it around. Jack gasped. It was like a mob movie or something. Every square inch of the briefcase was filled with tidy bundles of crisp one hundred dollar bills.

“One million dollars in unmarked bills. USD, of course. You are American, are you not?”

“M-maybe.”

Jack facepalmed, and suspected Nymph was doing much of the same. Keep it together, Mantis! Jack
thought.

“This is just for Firefly’s identity,” the mysterious man explained as Praying Mantis reached forward and fanned the bills. “If my employer is happy with the information you provide, he is willing to pay you $900 million to retain your services.”

The stack of money fell from Praying Mantis’s hands. “$900 million?!”

“So, do we have a deal?” wondered the man.

“Uh…”

Jack winced. C’mon Praying Mantis, she thought. Don’t break character. Figure out if this is our guy. I’m counting on you!

Praying Mantis cleared his throat. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch.”

“Don’t give me that. Whose identity is your boss after? Because if it’s Rabbit, I might not be able to do it. She just doesn’t use her superpower anymore.”

“She would if she was the last one left. Her identity is of particular interest to my employer.”

Ladybug whipped her head to look at Jack, since they were both thinking the same thing. Omega. At almost the same exact time though, the ground vibrated beneath their feet. It stopped almost as soon as it started, but it was too late. Everyone felt it.

“Whoa!” said Cat. “What was that?”

The tremor did not go unnoticed in the backroom either. Praying Mantis jumped to his feet, blocking Jack’s view with his head. The crowd outside of Le Baron began to look about in confusion.

“There aren’t earthquakes in Paris…right?” asked Jack, her voice shaking a little. She knew in her heart of hearts what might be the cause, but she didn’t want it to be true. She had already missed one chance to get to Omega. She couldn’t afford to do so again. Ladybug pulled out her yo-yo and slid it open to check the Ladyblog tag on Twitter.

“So,” the man was saying to Praying Mantis in the backroom, no doubt sensing his time was short. “Do we have ourselves a deal?”

Praying Mantis produced from inside his robes a manila folder. Inside was the fake civilian identity Nymph had put together with Firefly’s help, a Lily Malkovits. Firefly had been showing it off before Nymph arrived last night. Jack knew it didn’t count for much, but if she didn’t know any better, it would’ve fooled her.

The folder changed hands, Praying Mantis moving a bit to the right so Jack could see Omega’s henchman again. He was standing now. Looking through the folder, it was clear he didn’t seem convinced, but that didn’t matter. All they had to do now was track him back to Omega.

“Very good,” he said, offering Praying Mantis a business card. “Contact me in a week and I’ll let you know where we stand.”
Praying Mantis reached over to take the card, but as soon as he did so, the man latch onto Praying Mantis’s wrist with his other hand, yanking Praying Mantis forward and head-butting him so hard in the face that it knocked off his helmet. The illusion fading, Chameleon pulled out his whip and swung. It wrapped around Praying Mantis, tying him up. Chameleon then tackled him to the ground and reached for his eyebrow ring.

“No!” cried Jack, grabbing her chakram and jumping onto the ledge of the roof. Another tremor hit though, much stronger than before. Jack wobbled a bit before falling. Luckily, Ladybug was on the ball and snagged Jack by the ankle before her face met the sidewalk three stories below. She dropped Jack and leapt down herself.

“There’s an Akuma at the Tuileries Garden,” the superheroine explained, torn. The ground began to shake again, enough to form cracks in the street, sending people stumbling about. “G-g-goes by the n-n-name Richter.”

“Y-y-you and C-c-cat go!” Jack said, struggling to get back onto her feet.

“But—!”

Jack half fell into, half pushed Ladybug away. “Go!”

The quaking stopped as they split, Ladybug zipping away on her yo-yo while Jack bounded across the street. She looked up briefly to see Cat Noir darting across the rooftops, almost invisible against the night sky. He vanished after his partner.

Jack glanced down at her chakram, but all she could see was a close-up of a red cushion. Praying Mantis’s tonfa must have rolled off the edge and onto the couch. She swore if Chameleon got his hands on Praying Mantis’s Miraculous, she would never be able to forgive herself. The one thing he wanted was to protect his Miraculous and she had talked him into serving it up to Chameleon on a silver platter.

Jack switched off her weapon and slipped it back around her wrist as she shoved her way through the crowd. Just as she reached the bouncer at the door though, she heard screams. Fashion models and starlets alike began pouring out of the nightclub. Realizing she wouldn’t be able to fight the tide, Jack jumped up to the roof and raced across it. The earth shook violently though and she tripped. She tried to pick herself up, but she kept on falling, the earth unsteady beneath her feet. She could feel the building swaying beneath her. She managed to army crawl to the other side though and look down into the garden.

There was a tremendous shatter as a body crashed through one of the back windows of the club, followed by a high-pitched hiss. Chameleon hit the ground with the glass shards and rolled to his feet, manilla folder in one hand and sticky whip in the other. He used his weapon to latch on to the corner of the Chamber of Agriculture. Unfortunately, Cat wasn’t there to mark him with a tracking device. Chameleon went flinging into the air, anklet trilling.

Then a gargantuan green mantis clawed its way out of the building after him.

Jack could only gape as the giant bug twisted its head and looked up to the skies. It rubbed its abdomen, producing the hissing noise Jack had heard moments before. Rearing up, it spread one pair of wings and then the other, pushing off its hind legs and launching itself into the air.
Jack tried to follow. She really did. But Richter made that all but impossible. She took one flying leap before her landing was not kind to her. She fell off a building again, but the sound of wings was close and someone swooped down to grab her.

“Praying Mantis!” she cried, recognizing her rescuer. “You’re safe! Quick, we need to go after him.”

“No,” he said.

“Huh!”?

“I’m done.” His face twisted as they floated in place ten feet off the ground, the world rumbling and shaking beneath them.

“What do you—?”

“I’m not doing this anymore. I almost lost my Miraculous. It’s only thanks to an earthquake that I didn’t.”

“I didn’t think Chameleon was going to try and do that!”

“Yeah…You don’t think, do you!? Seems like that’s your trademark.”

Jack squeezed her eyes shut. It was difficult to tell what was making her feel more nauseous, Praying Mantis’s words or looking at the shaking horizon. Her ears picked up on cracking stone and screams of terror. The rest could only be described as someone shaking a drawer full of silverware.

“This was Nymph’s idea, not mine,” Jack insisted.

It was the wrong thing to say. Praying Mantis exploded.

“And she would have never come up with it if you hadn’t insisted! If you hadn’t trapped us all here!” His voice, normally so placid, boiled with unadulterated rage that was both unfamiliar and frightening. “Nymph is an egotistical she-beast, but at least she had a plan to protect me in case something went wrong! She used her powers to save me. But you! You don’t care about me. You just want to defeat Omega at any cost, even if that cost is your fellow Miraculous holders!”

Cyan blue light pierced Jack’s eyelids and she looked to see a neon mask had appeared over Praying Mantis’s face. Unlike Hawk Moth’s, it took the form of four dragonfly wings.

“What!”? he demanded, seething. He paused to listen to whatever Nymph had to tell him, his anger cooled by sudden confusion. He lifted an eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

Above the din of the now constant earthquake, the thrum of wings from the monstrous mantis was growing louder again. Jack looked to see the beast had changed its course and was headed right towards them.

“What’s going on!?” wondered Jack. “Why did it turn around?” Had Chameleon given it the slip?

“Nymph says her Emotimal is responding to my shift in…in anger.”

Jack’s ears drooped as the impact of his statement hit her. Her. It was coming for her now.
“Mantis…Mantis, please,” begged Jack. “Don’t do this.”

He said nothing as the giant praying mantis drew near, snapping its jaws.

Jack could think of few times in her life when she felt this helpless. The usual suspects came to mind. Fighting Negator. Getting buried beneath all that rubble during her fight with Tattoo. Praying that Perro Negro would rescue her during the final showdown with Trumpeter Swan. They had all happened because she had been alone though. This time, she was surrounded by Miraculous holders. This time, she had brought it on herself. This time, she had acted like a holder, not a hero, and now she was paying for it.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Call it off!” said Jack, fearing the words that were sure to come out of Praying Mantis’s mouth next.

_Lift the containment field and maybe I will._

Instead though, Praying Mantis swooped down to put Jack on the ground next to a jagged fissure caused by Richter’s powers. The earth had stilled, though Jack didn’t know for how long. The shadow of the Emotimal cast over them as it came in for a landing, its viciously curved raptorial forelegs reaching for Jack, but Praying Mantis broke his non-magical tonfa, releasing an albino dragonfly that quickly darted away. The mantis vanished in a cloud of white smoke.

“I guess it wouldn’t be very heroic if I hurt you,” he admitted as Jack breathed a sigh of relief. A flood of guilt quashed it though. Did she honestly believe Praying Mantis would hurt her in order to get his way? When did she become like this?

Praying Mantis’s tonfa rang. He pulled down the handle and it popped open, much like Cat’s staff.

“What happened?” Nymph demanded over the beeping of her Miraculous.

“We couldn’t track Chameleon back to Omega.”

“Ugh! You imbecile! That was our best chance and you blew it! What do we do now?”

Praying Mantis opened his mouth, even though Jack doubted he had an answer. Nymph cut him off.

“Forget it. I’m about to change back soon. We’ll talk about it later.” She hung up.

Jack and Praying Mantis stood in frozen silence for a moment. Part of Jack knew that Richter was still at large. She could go to the Tuileries Garden and help Ladybug and Cat Noir defeat him, but it seemed the easy way out. Being a hero was more than fighting the villain. It was doing what was right, even if it was difficult.

It was sacrifice.

Jack hung her head. She knew what she had to do.

“Follow me,” she said, jumping to the nearest roof. Praying Mantis didn’t follow her. He remained on the ground, staring up at her. “I’m taking you to the Beacon,” she explained.

Praying Mantis tilted his head and geared up his wings, his movements mirroring his Emotimal. He flew up and Jack took off, skipping and hopping across the rooftops to the southwest. The ground
shook every once and a while, but it seemed the worst of it was over. Ladybug and Cat Noir were no
doubt keeping Richter busy now, localizing his powers. Sure enough, as Jack darted across a bridge
that spanned the Seine just south of the park, she saw trees shaking, some even falling, but it didn’t
reach where she was.

Praying Mantis said nothing as he dogged Jack, his flapping robes filling her ears with white noise.
Finally, she reached her apartment building. She had purposely left her window open so she could
scramble back into her room. In her bed, beneath some pillows and a wig, her phone played the
sounds of her sleeping she had recorded from a few nights ago. It was convincing enough that when
Praying Mantis flew into the room after Jack, he immediately dropped and backed up.

“It’s okay,” Jack whispered, whipping the comforter off to reveal the deception. “But you have to be
quiet, okay? I don’t want to wake up my parents.”

“Your parents? This…this is your house…” Praying Mantis realized, looking around as his eyes
adjusted to the dark. He swore softly. “You’re a kid.”

“So?” Jack got down on her hands and knees to pull out the storage bin from beneath her bed. She
wondered what it was about her room that had tipped Praying Mantis off to her age. Was it the
surfing posters she had hung haphazardly? The colorful bedspread? Now that she thought about it, it
was probably the stuffed animals piled in the corner. She had a rather large collection of Beanie
Boos.

“I thought you were older from the way you talked to me. Not as old as me but…at least eighteen or
something.”

Jack dragged the Beacon out from its hiding place. She pulled the beach towel off of it, its soft green
glow filling the room. It pulsed and hummed like an overheated laptop. Like Dr. Lacasse had taught
her, Jack fiddled with the knobs. Its light faded as it clicked off, plunging them back into darkness.

“There,” said Jack. “You can go now. I should’ve never brought you here in the first place, and I’m
sorry.”

“You’re a kid,” Praying Mantis repeated.

“Yeah. I know.” Jack didn’t understand what was so hard about this concept.

Praying Mantis sat down in Jack’s desk chair and lifted up his visor to rub his face with both hands.
“You’re still learning. Man, I remember that age. Thought I knew everything, but I kept on screwing
up. Life’s a process you never really complete. And to be a superhero on top of everything else?” He
paused. “I’ve been too hard on you.”

“No,” Jack insisted. “You were right. I only saw what you guys could do for me. I-I even lied to
Nymph, told her Omega was the one keeping her here so she would stay and help me.”

Praying Mantis whistled through his teeth. “Dang,” he said. “I can see why you did it though. I
probably would’ve done the same.”

“I’ll tell her it was me and that she can go—”

Praying Mantis stood up. “No. Wait.” He strode over to Jack. “Turn it back on.” He nudged the
machine with the toe of his sandal.
“Huh…?”

“Listen, I’m not much of a people person…but I can’t ignore a call for help.”

“You’re…you’re staying?”

“Yeah, but you should probably turn the Beacon back on if you want Nymph to stay too. As much as I hate to admit it…she’s smart and has a lot of resources, not to mention her superpowers are insane. We’re going to need her.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me. It took a lot of trust on your part to bring me to your house. I’m not gonna betray that.”

“Thank you,” said Jack, the words sounding small and incomplete. She was still a little confused by what had transpired, but she wasn’t about to question Praying Mantis’s change of heart.

He hung around as Jack turned the Beacon back on, holding up a flashlight while she worked. About halfway through, there was a flash of pink light in the distance as Miraculous Ladybug went off. Jack couldn’t help but smile at her friend’s success. It faded though as she thought about how unsuccessful she had been in comparison. All their hard work had come to nothing. Chameleon had escaped yet again. Even if Nymph hadn’t sent an Emotimal to protect ‘Ambush,’ it wouldn’t take Omega long to figure out that the information he provided was fake and he was on their side. Jack honestly didn’t know what to do now. Unless Omega came waltzing up to her, she felt like she was never going to find him.

*   *   *

Jack and Adrien entered his foyer trailing behind the Gorilla, their voices echoing with their animated conversation as they made their way to the dining room for lunch. It had been a rough morning at school recovering from the failure that was last night, but Adrien was just what the doctor ordered to cheer Jack up.

“…to fight a hundred of anything?” her friend was saying. “I’m telling you, one horse-sized duck is the way to go.”

“Two problems with that,” said Jack, ticking off her fingers. “One, have you ever met a horse? They are HUGE! Two, have you ever met a duck? They will bite you. So, no, I would much rather fight one hundred duck-sized horses. I could kick them. Or, you know, befriend them with carrots because miniature anything is adorable.”

“My, my…” came a voice that caused both Jack and Adrien to freeze in their tracks. Jack forced her head to turn, seeing Mr. Agreste standing in the doorway of his studio with Nathalie hovering behind him. It seemed wrong, somehow, seeing him in the house, even though he lived there. “It seems your French is much improved, Jack.”

Jack swallowed and exchanged a nervous glance with Adrien.

“Your son is a good…teacher,” she managed.
“You must be fluent by now.” He cast his icy gaze over to his son while the boy examined his high-tops. “Looks like you get your Tuesdays and Thursdays back, Adrien.”

Adrien’s head shot up. “What!? No!”

“I still need more lessons!” said Jack, thinking quickly. Lunch with Adrien had been her rock during the hardest transition in her life. She couldn’t imagine life in Paris without it, and it hurt her heart to think of Adrien once again eating alone in this empty mausoleum of a mansion.

Mr. Agreste looked at his watch. “I’ll be the judge of that. I have some time before a meeting across the city.” He nodded in the direction of his studio. “Let me test your comprehension. I would hate to think you’re taking advantage of my hospitality.”

Jack knew she had to fail. She knew she had to somehow fool Mr. Agreste. She tried to catch Adrien’s eye and give him a wink to let him know everything was going to be okay, but he was grimacing. He knew as well as Jack that she was pretty much toast. It would be easy to fail Mr. Agreste’s test spectacularly, but then he would know she was lying. She had to lie well, which was not Jack’s strong suit. She always gave herself away in the end.

Mr. Agreste cleared his throat. “I don’t have all day, Jack.”

Jack dragged her feet as she headed over to him. Adrien took one step in their direction only for his father to call him out.

“Adrien, you are to wait for your friend in the dining room.”

Adrien’s shoulders slumped a little. “Yes, Father,” he said, slinking away.

Mr. Agreste watched his son’s retreating back before motioning the Gorilla over. Jack wasn’t sure if he intended for her to overhear him or not, but she did.

“Make sure he doesn’t interfere.”

The Gorilla nodded and marched off after Adrien. Mr. Agreste nodded to Nathalie before sweeping Jack into his studio. The door shut behind them.

Jack had never been inside Mr. Agreste’s studio before and found it to be rather bizarre. Framed pictures of Adrien took up the wall next to the door, and there was a gold portrait of a woman Jack knew to be Mrs. Agreste in the back. Mr. Agreste made his way down a set of stairs to a sunken area in the middle of the room. He took a seat on the edge of a long white bench with a magenta cushion and gestured for Jack to sit across the table from him. Jack slung her backpack onto the ground as she took her place. It slumped over, looking as defeated as Jack felt.

“Let us begin,” said Mr. Agreste. “Hmmm…Let’s say…there is a road construction project in your neighborhood that you don’t agree with since you believe it will harm the environment. You decide to write to Mayor Bourgeois concerning the matter. Please dictate what you would write to him to me.”

“Um…Could you repeat that?”

Mr. Agreste frowned, but did as she requested. Then Jack began.
“Dear Mayor Bourgeois…I am writing about a construction of project road in my…district. I am concern…um…”

Mr. Agreste narrowed his eyes at her and Jack could feel sweat break across her forehead. She found herself desperately wishing for some sort of distraction that would give her more time to prepare, like an Akuma attack. Unfortunately, Richter had attacked less than 24-hours ago, so Jack was out of luck. Not that she had any left in the first place.

There was a buzz that echoed through the foyer. Jack recognized it as the front gate.

“Do you have to get that?” wondered Jack, unable to keep the hint of hope out of her voice.

“Nathalie will handle it,” said Mr. Agreste without skipping a beat. “Continue your dictation.”

Jack didn’t know where her fake struggle stopped and her real struggle began. What was she even doing??? “I am concerned that it will have an…impact on local...animals. The noise of the…machines of construction will be scary…will scare the…the birds and, um…” She kept on looking at Mr. Agreste’s face, trying to gage if she was succeeding or failing, but he betrayed nothing other than the occasional blink. It was unnerving. “…Kill trees. The dust and waste from the project are also...problems. I think there are...fewer…” Would she know the word ‘invasive’? Probably not. “…bad ways to repair the road.” Jack silently berated herself. Bad? Really!? Of all the things she could’ve said, she made herself sound like she had the language capacity of a five-year-old. She hurried to make up for her mistake. “There are many green alternatives that I would like you to consider, such as decreasing carbon emissions by using cleaner fuel sources.” Wait…was that too good? Panic was starting to rise in Jack’s throat now. She couldn’t do this. She wasn’t clever enough. No doubt Mr. Agreste could see right through her ruse and she was going to find herself kicked out of his house again and he might even tell Adrien he wasn’t allowed to hang out with Jack ever again…!

A knock at the door interrupted them.

“I’m busy,” Mr. Agreste called out, but the door squeaked open anyway and Nathalie poked her head inside. He glared at her, but her professional demeanor did not waver.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, sir,” said the woman. “But Julius Ende is here to see you.”

Jack’s encroaching panic vanished in an instant. It seemed so pedestrian in retrospect as she stared at Nathalie in slack-jawed shock. Did those words really just come out of her mouth? Ende? As in Evelynn Ende? Who was Julius?

There was a flash of something unfamiliar in Mr. Agreste’s eyes as he rose from his seat. “What!” he said. His strides were quick as he made his way out into the foyer, Nathalie shadowing him.

Jack saw movement as Mimmi peeked out of the opening in Jack’s backpack with wide eyes, frantically ushering Jack to follow. Jack nodded dumbly, getting up and taking a few shaking steps after Mr. Agreste. None of this felt real.

“What is the meaning of this, Julius?” Mr. Agreste was demanding, his voice echoing in the cavernous foyer.

“Is that any way to greet a friend, Gabriel?” asked a papery voice in an American accent. It seemed familiar, as if Jack had heard it before.
“Who is this?” wondered Mr. Agreste.

Jack rounded the corner and found herself looking at a combination of people that did not make sense, as if they were all parsed together from a dream. Mr. Agreste was talking to none other than the Guardian. Jack had burned Mr. Bergeron visage into her mind so she’d be able to recognize him by only his face, just in case she crossed his path. It was a good thing too because he was a bit shorter than she expected, though with a perfectly straight back despite his advancing years. He wore a burgundy suit with a white shirt and black cravat, as well as his trademark panama hat.

And standing next to him in a smart royal blue dress was—

“Oh, how rude of me. This is my granddaughter, Evelynn Jenson,” Mr. Bergeron introduced. “Evelynn, I’d like you to meet Gabriel Agreste and his assistant, Nathalie Sancoeur.”

Jack’s blood ran cold.

“Hello!” the woman said in her slightly raspy yet cheerful voice. “You’ll have to excuse me. My French is not the best, but I’m working on it. It is very nice to meet you.” Evie stepped forward to shake hands.

“I hope you don’t mind us dropping in,” Mr. Bergeron was saying to Mr. Agreste. “We were just on our way to lunch when I realized there was a bit of business I needed to discuss with you. Shouldn’t take long.”

Jack gripped the door frame, her knees knocking together as she suddenly felt faint. Evie’s piercing sapphire eyes traveled across Nathalie and Mr. Agreste’s faces before falling on her. The woman crinkled her eyebrows in confusion.

“Jack…?” she wondered.

Everyone in the room turned to stare at Jack. Blushing furiously, she dropped her gaze to the white marble floor as her mind preformed back flips. Did Mr. Bergeron not realize his own granddaughter was working for Omega? Did Evie not realize her own grandfather was the Guardian?

“Grandpa, this was the girl I was telling you about,” explained Evie. “DR’s girlfriend?”

“Oh, yes,” said the man absentmindedly.

“What a small world! I would never in a million years think I’d run into you here!”

“She’s being tutored by my son,” Mr. Agreste explained in English before turning to Mr. Bergeron. Or, rather, Mr. Ende. “Come,” he said. “We’ll speak in my office. Nathalie, see to it that Ms. Jenson is taken care of.”

“Yes, sir,” said Nathalie.

Mr. Ende nodded in approval. “I’ll only be a minute,” he told his granddaughter, taking a moment to squeeze her hand before falling in step behind Mr. Agreste.

“You better,” joked Evie. “I’m starving.”
Jack scrambled out of Mr. Agreste’s way, desperately trying to catch Mr. Ende’s eye as he passed, but he barely glanced at her. He shut the door behind him, Jack realizing too late that she had left Mimmi and her backpack inside.

“Would you like something while you wait?” Nathalie was asking Evie. “Coffee? Tea? Water?”


Nathalie took maybe two steps away before Jack realized she was going to be left alone with Evie. “W-wait!” she said.

Both women turned to blink at Jack, but Jack could think of nothing to say to get Nathalie to stay.

“Could I have a water?” Jack asked in a small voice. Nathalie nodded and swept out of the foyer in the direction of the kitchen. Jack watched longingly as the door swung shut behind her.

Evie dropped all pretenses and speed walked over to Jack. Jack backed away, desperately wishing Mimmi would come phasing through the wall so she could transform into Rabbit and escape. But Evie didn't know she was Rabbit, right? Jack clung to that thought as if it were a life preserver.

“I am so freaking lucky,” Evie said, concern and relief interplaying on her face. “Are you okay? Nothing happened to you, right?”

Jack stared, completely taken off-guard. “Um…”

“Listen. I am so, so sorry. About everything. Ugh. I never meant to let things get so far…” She raked her fingers through her hair, leaving little tracks. “Listen to me very carefully Jack, because we don’t have a lot of time before she gets back. I know you’re Rabbit.”

Jack eyes widened. “No,” she lied, shaking her head, finding herself unable to do little else than repeat the word. Her worst fears had been realized and it broke her. If Evie knew who she was, then Omega did too. “No. No. No.”

Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jacquelyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Well...here it is! A chapter chock full of revelations and flashbacks, call forwards and call backs, that hopefully answers everyone's burning questions. I've been working on this section of the story for a while now and I hope it all makes sense and that all the pieces fit.

Please note that I went back into the story and added one small change to the end of Chapter 2 and some tweaks to Chapter 12 concerning the Chief of the LAPD. (As a rule, I try not to change anything that I've already written, but I felt like I needed to cheat here to add cohesion.) Basically, his role in betraying Jack and Diego is mentioned much earlier, and it is confirmed rather than suspected that his family was being threatened, because that is obviously something Diego would follow up on after Jack left =P

I also have a big surprise at the end of this one! I hope you guys enjoy ^_^

The shoutout this time goes to...Crisis21! Way to collect dem shoutouts ;-) Thank you as always for your comments. You're always so knowledgeable about lore, whether its tarot cards or Chinese elements, and I always appreciate you sharing. I hope you enjoy this chapter. Please let me know of any errors with your patented complimentary error check!

“That’s a lie,” accused Jack.

Evie’s arms dropped to her sides and she drew back. “What are you—? No. No, I wouldn’t lie about this. How else would I know you’re Rabbit?”

“I don’t know, but I’ve already met the Guardian—the real Guardian—so…” Jack mustered all the courage she had and smirked. “Nice try.”

The woman sighed. “He got to you first, didn’t he?” She cursed under her breath. “Please tell me he doesn’t know your identity.”
Jack froze, her breath catching. Did Mr. Bergeron know she was Rabbit? The two times she had seen him, he only referred to her as Rabbit, but that was because other people were present, and he feared Omega was monitoring the call. But…hadn’t Chameleon tried to trick her in much the same way when he was pretending to be Perro Negro?

*Of course I know your real name! But I’m not going to use it in front of anyone.*

“Jack, I knew your grandma Anita,” insisted Evie, bringing Jack back to the present moment. “I’m the one that sent her out to find the Chosen One for the Rabbit Miraculous in the first place. I used to visit her in the hospital before she…well, you know.”

The mention of her grandmother prompted Jack to recall something that caused her to take a step back. “But Mimmi told me Swan Princess referred to the Guardian as a ‘he.’”

“Yeah, I know. That was me. I was Swan Princess. I lied to protect myself.”

Jack shook her head. She honestly didn’t know what to believe anymore. This was all just too much. “You can’t be Swan Princess or the Guardian,” she insisted. “You work for Omega!”

“Did my grandfather tell you that?”

“N-no…” Jack squeezed her eyes shut and swallowed. “Why else would your husband steal the Beacon?”

“To keep it out of my grandfather’s hands. I can’t let him get the Kwami back. I don’t know how he’ll misuse them, but he will. That has always been his intention.”

“To…to…” Jack’s eyes nearly bugged out of her head as Evie’s words dawned on her. “Your grandfather’s Omega?!”

Evie covered Jack’s mouth with her hand. “Shh!” she hissed. “Not so loud.”

Grabbing Jack’s wrist, Evie dragged her across the foyer to the other side of the staircase, as far from Mr. Agreste’s studio as they could get. Jack was too stunned to fight it. Mr. Bergeron…Mr. Ende…Omega…no…

“I never wanted anyone to know,” the woman admitted. “My grandfather is…not a good man. But he’s good to me. He’s the only family I have left. I thought I could stop him quietly on my own, but —”

“No. No-no-no-no-no-no,” said Jack, eventually pulling away. She backed up into the wall. “He…your grandpa…he can’t…” Jack began to comb her fingers through her hair and sweep it to one side. She began the familiar work of braiding a fishbone, her eye twitching. “Because then I…then I helped him. I helped…Omega… get the Beacon…back…!” The braiding wasn’t working. Jack found herself dry heaving and wishing she had her rabbit’s foot necklace to hold. Evie came forward to apparently comfort her, but Jack shoved her back. “You stay away from me!”

Evie held her hands up and made a show of giving Jack space. “You helped him get the Beacon back? I thought Commandant—Wait. You! You have the Beacon, don’t you? Ugh! Of course! It all makes sense now. You should probably keep it on though so he doesn’t get suspi—”
“No, it doesn’t make sense! None of this makes sense!”

“He’s using you, Jack. He’s using you to bring all the Project Lionheart Kwami here.”

“That’s not…He wanted the Beacon destroyed.”

“Of course he did. He’s very good at reading people and having them do what he wants them to do, but making them think it’s all their idea. I imagine you weren’t about to let something that could help you get destroyed. I would’ve probably done the same thing if I were in your shoes. In fact, I did. I should’ve destroyed the Beacon when I had the chance, but I thought…if I could just get it to work! But we couldn’t even get the thing to turn on.”

Jack stared. “What…? But…no, you did use it. Hokss’s sample was gumming everything up.”

“So that’s why he needed you! My grandfather tried to use Hokss and he didn’t work…”

“But Chameleon works for you.”

Evie tilted her head. “Where did you get that idea?”

“I showed him your picture and he said he knew you!” Jack gave her words a second thought. “I mean, well, he reacted as if he knew you.”

“He does know me. My grandfather assigned him to protect me.”

Jack didn’t think it was possible for her to be any more bewildered than she already was, but the hits just kept on coming. “Protect you? From what!?”

“As soon as my grandfather found out my husband stole the Beacon, he realized he was working for the Guardian and confronted him about it. Luckily, we had prepared for this. Howie forged evidence that the Guardian had threatened my life unless Howie did as he asked. My grandfather let Howie go, but he’s been watching both of us like a hawk ever since. Our place here is bugged, Howie’s office, our phones and computers are being monitored—we’re constantly being tailed by either Chameleon or someone else and can’t do anything about it without making my grandfather suspicious and thinking the Guardian is involved. I wanted to reach out to you by that point, but I couldn’t without putting you in danger. I was so relieved when Diego got in touch with me, since it gave me an excuse to see you. I was going to help you generate a pair of cryptographic keys so I could send you encrypted emails when we met for coffee, but you freaked out and left before I got the chance. It dawned on me that Zach must have spooked you. I don’t know how you found out his civilian identity, but I decided I’d have to figure out a way to give him the slip before I tried to meet with you again.”

“Wait…You could’ve reached out to me before? Why didn’t you!?”

“Ah…well…” Evie grimaced, her face coloring a little. “Your grandma was not the biggest fan of mine after I let the Swan Miraculous get stolen. Besides, without it, I don’t really have a way to protect you. She made me promise not to reach out to you unless I absolutely—”

The door that led in the direction of the kitchen opened and Nathalie came out with a steaming cup of tea and a glass of water. Evie switched topics so smoothly that Jack didn’t even notice the change until halfway through.
“—had to meet you because of that alone. Anyone who can get DR to join a team has got to be someone special.” She graciously accepted the teacup. “Thank you, Nathalie.” She blew on the liquid before taking a dainty sip.

Jack stared. It took Nathalie clearing her throat twice before Jack realized she was being offered water. She took it, only now realizing why Evie had chosen tea as her drink of choice. It took the longest to make.

“Um… I changed my mind,” Jack said, albeit haltingly. “Nathalie, can you get me a cup of tea instead?”

The woman narrowed her eyes, but nodded and left again.

“Seems you have an answer for everything,” Jack said to Evie. “But I’m going to need proof.”

Evie began to gnaw on her bottom lip. “…I was afraid you’d say that…I don’t know what else I can tell you to make you believe me.”

“You can tell me what’s wrong with my superpowers and how to return them to normal. Then I’ll know for sure that you’re the real Guardian.”

The woman’s face smoothed as she offered up a relieved smile. “Oh, Jack, that’s easy. You just need to use Miraculous Rabbit to reset your powers.”

Of all the answers Jack was expecting, that definitely wasn’t one of them.

“…What.”

“You know how Lucky Strike works, right? It gathers the essence of luck together in order to form a physical object to help you win your fight. Using Miraculous Rabbit disperses that luck back into the world, fixing everything. So if you don’t disperse it, nothing gets fixed and there is no luck to gather the next time you try to use Lucky Strike. You preform an anti-version of Lucky Strike instead, a corrupted version that Miraculous Ladybug doesn’t even recognize and thus cannot fix.”

“Wait. So it’s not Dogstruction…?”

Evie wheezed with laughter. “Oh, no. It only takes on that form because Dogstruction is Lucky Strike’s opposite. If you were actually using Dogstruction, you wouldn’t be able to control it at all because it isn’t your power.”

“So all I have to do…is use the last object Lucky Strike gave me to preform Miraculous Rabbit?”

“That’s right.”

Jack hung her head. “I-I can’t.”

Evie’s brow crinkled. “Huh? How come—?”

She was interrupted by the sound of a door opening. Jack froze as she watched the man who planned to misuse Mimmi and her fellow Kwami exit and shake Mr. Agreste’s hand, thanking him for his time. Evie was talking to her though, once again smoothly transitioning to a different topic as if they had been discussing it the whole time.
“…you are perfect for the summer internship at White Hat!” Evie rounded Jack, standing between her and Omega so he wouldn’t catch Jack staring. “Why don’t you give me your email address and I can pass it on to my husband?”

“Evie?” Omega asked.

Evie smiled over her shoulder as she pulled her phone out of her purse. “Just a second, Grandpa. Turns out Jack has an interest in hacking! Just grabbing her email for Howie.”

“My granddaughter’s husband runs an ethical hacking company that recently opened a satellite branch here in Paris,” Omega explained to Mr. Agreste.

“Ah.”

Nathalie chose this time to return, carefully holding a steaming cup of tea. Jack took it without even thinking, burning her hand on the hot porcelain and dropping it. It shattered against the marble, brown liquid splattering the floor like a bloodstain.

“Oh!” cried Jack. Blushing a furious shade of scarlet, she knelt and tried to pick up the pieces.

“Jack, stop that,” commanded Nathalie, grabbing Jack’s arm and dragging her back up. “You’ll cut yourself.” She held out her hand so Jack could tip the shards of porcelain into her palm. “I’ll clean this up.” She swept off in the direction of the kitchen for a third time, her frustration only thinly veiled.

“Jack, put in your email,” said Evie, holding out her iPhone with the notes app open. After a moment of hesitation, Jack grabbed it and typed in her email. “Thanks!” said the woman. “You’ll be hearing from him in the next day or so. It was so great to see you again.”

“Er…yeah…” Jack didn’t know how anyone could act natural in the situation she currently found herself in, yet Evie did it effortlessly. She watched the woman go over to join her grandfather.

“All set!” she told him.

“Are we?” wondered Omega, his eyes twinkling with mild amusement. “Or do you plan to walk off with one of Gabriel’s cups?”

Evie fell into pearls of her wheezing laughter again as she handed the teacup to Mr. Agreste. He looked put-off, but accepted it anyway. “Thank you for your hospitality, Gabriel,” she said. “And thank Nathalie too.”

Mr. Agreste nodded, his cold eyes flashing. “It was good to meet you, Miss Jenson.” A much stiffer nod was given to Omega. “Good day, Julius. I’m sure you can see yourself out.” He turned heel and returned to his studio. “Come along, Jack,” he said over his shoulder. “We’re not finished yet.”

Jack winced. She had been hoping that Mr. Agreste would forget about testing her, but luck was never in her favor, probably because it was locked away in the white compact she kept in the drawer of her bedside table. She trailed after him, glancing at Evie and Omega’s retreating backs, but neither glanced back.

It was miserable returning to her spot across from Mr. Agreste. Jack continued dictating her
imaginary letter to Mayor Bourgeois to him, but she was barely cognizant of what she was saying, almost as if she were functioning on autopilot. Most of her brainpower was instead dedicated to parsing through everything she had just learned. Was Evie telling the truth? Was she the Guardian? Had Jack played right into Omega’s hands? One thing was for sure though—Evie was right about Jack’s powers. This whole time Jack thought the change had something to do with Diego, that the switch was the ‘something bad’ Mimmi warned her about when they revealed their identities to each other. That thought had been the product of a leap in logic through, especially as Jack considered the last time Lucky Strike had worked as intended.

*   *   *

Jack felt like dying as her mom dropped her off in front of Yogurtland, telling her to have fun with her friends.

How can I when you’re dragging me halfway across the world? Jack wondered bitterly, slamming the door harder than necessary, but she said nothing because it wasn’t her friends she was meeting, but one Diego Manuel Rodriguez. She had been planning to tell her parents about him last night when they dropped the bomb on her. Now she no longer saw the point.

Shoving a shopping cart belonging to the nearby Food 4 Less out of her way, Jack stormed up to the frozen yogurt shop. The bell above the door dinged as Diego slid out as eager as a puppy and held it open for her.

“¡Está bien! You’re here!” he cheered and the sourness in the pit of Jack’s stomach dissipated. She grinned despite herself, but it slipped off her face soon after. Diego caught it and arranged his face to match her expression. “What’s wrong?”

“Something…something really sucky happened last night.”

“Ay, why don’t I buy you a fro-yo and you can tell me all about it?”

“Uh…”

“When you’re ready, of course! Don’t wanna, you know, pry or whatever.”

Jack allowed Diego to drag her into the shop and present her with a large cup instead of regular size because, according to him, he wanted to treat her. As they moved along the machines inset in the green Italian glass tile wall, he chattered on and on about all the different flavors, taking full advantage of the free samples.

Taste this Toasted Coconut. ¿Tan decente, verdad? I don’t know how they do it. I mean, coconut, sure. I get that. But toasted? Loco. But I think I’m going to get this Knott’s Berry Farm Boysenberry Pie. I’ve never been to Knott’s before. I really want to go. One of my old schools was going to go on a field trip there a couple of years ago, but I ended up switching foster homes and changing schools because—Hey! We should go to Knott’s! It would be a fun date. What are you thinking of getting? Espera, espera, lemme guess. I know you like cupcakes, so maybe Birthday Cupcake Batter? Oh, you should mix it! Maybe do the Mango, or—Oh! Oh! —Strawberry! Strawberry, sin lugar a duda. That way it can be like Strawberry Shortcake!

Jack let the words wash over her like waves, not listening to them but comforted by their presence all the same. She soon found herself sitting at one of the small white tables off to the side, Diego digging into his mountain of boysenberry frozen yogurt covered in mini Reeses with a neon green spoon.
Now he was babbling about their next Ultimate Frisbee practice and how they were going to break the news to the rest of their team that they were suddenly together.

“I’m moving,” Jack blurted out.

If she could’ve held the words in longer, she would’ve, but she felt like she was going to explode. Instead, she watched Diego’s face morph from confusion to shock to horror. It was like witnessing a car crash.

Then he laughed.

“Jaja. Good one, mi conejito,” he said, playfully punching her in the shoulder, but she drew away and he whiffed.

“I’m not joking.” She looked down at her fro-yo, which she had been stirring into a soupy mess. She wasn't hungry anyway. “My parents told me last night. My dad got transferred for work.”

“Like…where? Another city?” Jack shook her head. “Another state!?”

“Try another country.”

“México.” It was a desperate guess. A Hail Mary. A Suicide Squeeze.

“France,” said Jack, watching Diego deflate before her very eyes. “Paris, France.” Like it made a difference. Whether it was Lyon, Toulouse, or Marseille, it was still a world away.

Diego mumbled something into his frozen yogurt. Jack couldn’t be quite sure what she heard, but it sounded like, ‘Everyone really does leave me.’

“What was that?” wondered Jack, sitting straighter in her seat. That didn’t sound like the Diego she knew, but it did sound like the Diego he often tried to hide. There were still things he didn’t share with her, even now when there were no longer any secrets between them.

“I said…you know, don’t go. You can’t go!” He pushed his fro-yo to the side so he could lean over the table and speak conspiratorially to her. “You-Know-Who is still out there and you’re the only one who can stop him.”

“What am I, Harry Potter?”

Jack had never known Diego not to laugh at a joke, not matter how lame it was. He only blinked at her, doe-eyed and serious. “Tell your parents who you are and they’ll get why you have to stay. Please. You have to. For Los Angeles. For, uh…for me.”

“No, Diego. I’m not…” Jack shook her head. “Listen. This is all happening in the first place because we revealed our identities to each other. Our Kwami said bad stuff would happen if we did, so I’m not sharing it with anyone else anymore ever. No matter what.”

“You think—!?"

Jack snapped her fingers in front of the boy’s face. “Focus! I only have a month left here, so, please, let’s make the most of it.”
“So…Knott’s then?” wondered Diego.

The joke gave Jack some semblance of relief. She thought she had broken him for a good moment there. “You’re not wrong about TS,” she conceded. “We’ve gotta stop him before I go.”

“Or…you could stay.”

“Diego!”

“I’m just saying…If you can’t stop him, you wouldn’t in good conscience leave. ¿Verdad?”

“So you’re not going to help me. That’s what you’re saying.” Jack stood up. Grabbing her mostly uneaten frozen yogurt, she lobbed it into the nearby trashcan. It fell to the bottom with a thud. “Unbelievable.” She started towards the door, but Diego caught her by the arm and swung her around.

“Please don’t be like this,” he said. “I like you, like, a lot and…um…I don’t want to say goodbye.”

Jack softened and took up his hand. It was warm and slightly sweaty and she would be happy to hold it forever, but she knew those were dreams she could no longer have. Not when so much was on the line.

“You’re going to have to,” she told him, placing his hand at his side.

He didn’t follow her as she left the shop and slipped around the corner of the Jersey Mike’s next door. Jack didn’t know whether she was relieved or saddened by this.

“Are you okay, Jack!?” wondered Mimmi from inside Jack’s beach bag. “That must’ve been really diff—”

“Mimmi! Hop to it!”

Cut short, the creature got sucked into Jack’s watch, transforming Jack into Rabbit. She felt better in her superhero form. Things felt less…devastating. Almost like she was an airplane leaving all her problems behind on the ground. They were still there, but distant.

Rolling her shoulders and rocking her head from side to side, Jack sprang onto the roof of the strip mall. The door to Yogurtland dinged again and she watched Diego drag himself out of the shop. She crouched down so he wouldn’t see her and watched him make his way in the direction of some apartment buildings across the parking lot. He had told her his new foster home wasn’t too far away, so that was probably it.

Once Diego was halfway across the parking lot, Jack made her move, heading due east. She bounced across traffic and between palm trees, skirting a hospital and darting through a movie lot as extras milled about waiting for take 42. She ducked beneath the Harbor Freeway and threaded her way to the brick roof of the Museum of Contemporary Art. To her left she could see the green of Grand Park, rolling out like a red carpet from the base of the white tower that was Los Angeles City Hall. Just south was Jack’s destination, a glass cube of a building, inset in a larger white cube, at least from her angle—the Los Angeles Police Headquarters was a bit more geometrical than that. The glass cube jutted out, forming terrace where a few spindly trees grew. Jack was able to launch herself there from the roof of California’s Department of Transportation across the street.
Jack landed in a little Zen garden outside of the Chief of Police’s office, satisfied to see the man in question through the large glass windows. He was sitting at his desk, chomping on a sub as he filled out paperwork. Jack let herself inside and headed towards the map of greater Los Angeles on the far wall. Black pushpins marked where people were transformed into Akumas. It was almost like a Magic Eye in a way. No matter how hard Jack looked at it, it never formed a pattern or a picture. Trumpeter Swan had affected people from Griffith Park all the way down to LAX, from the Santa Monica Pier to the Los Angeles River. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to his attacks, only that Los Angeles was in his sights, and though Jack would never admit it, she knew it was her doing. He was trying to locate her the same way she was trying to locate him.

“Rabbit!” cried the Chief.

Out of the corner of Jack’s eye, she saw him jump to his feet, shreds of lettuce raining down from his sandwich, but she was too focused on the map, noting the newest pushpin all the way out in Inglewood. It was certainly one of the outliers, but still told her absolutely nothing. The only reason there were more attacks in the intercity was due to population density.

“Any leads?” Jack asked as the Chief came alongside her, rubbing a napkin between his fingers.

“No since the last time you checked in,” said the man. “You know the task force is working around the clock.”

A month ago the task force assigned to tracking down Trumpeter Swan had made a move on a prospective hideout. Jack and Perro Negro—Diego, she corrected herself, still in the processes of reconciling the two—were brought in to lead the charge. Storming a solitary home in the hills below the Hollywood sign with police officers in SWAT gear in tow, they found it recently vacated. All that remained of Trumpeter Swan’s activities were some forgotten files on a few of his Akumatized victims. He had been stalking them. Profilers were brought in, but all they could really figure out was that Trumpeter Swan had a taste for the finer things in life, if the caviar in his fridge and his million-dollar view were anything to go by. Omega was no doubt paying him well for his services.

“We’re running out of time,” said Jack.

“Until what?” wondered the Chief.

She turned to the man, unable to discern if he was red in the face due to sunburn or because she had burst in on him without warning. Normally she would’ve knocked, but Diego’s poor response to her moving had left her feeling anxious, even with the bravado of her superhero form shielding her from the worst of it.

“Until I leave,” Jack admitted, dropping her gaze to her white combat boots, but she wasn’t quick enough. She saw a flash of panic on the Chief’s face. “I’m heading out in a month and I won’t be back, so we need to stop Trumpeter Swan now.”

“Rabbit, what’s going on? You’re not making any sense. Without you, we have no defense against Trumpeter Swan and his Akumas.”

Jack’s throat tightened. “I know.”

“Then why are you leaving?”

“I don’t have a choice.”
“There must be something the LAPD can do…”

Jack jerked her head up. “I already told you. Locate Trumpeter Swan. You have a month.” She marched back towards the door and put pressure on the handle, but paused. She looked at the Chief’s reflection, frozen where she had left him. “Please keep that information between you and me, please,” she told him. “I don’t…I don’t wanna cause any panic.”

“Of…of course.”

She nodded, pushed open the door, and jumped off the roof. Without really paying attention to where she was going, she ran and ran and ran, hoping to outrun her frustration. No one was helping, and she had no one to blame but herself. Stupid, stupid, stupid…If only she had listened to Mimmi and kept her identity a secret, but it was too late now. Jack would just have to solve everything herself.

*   *   *

Diego’s superhero dynamic with Jack remained unchanged as the weeks progressed. He still showered her with compliments and protected her with his very life as Perro Negro. Jack was chilly in response though and hyper focused on tracking down Trumpeter Swan as they battled Akuma after Akuma. As civilians, Diego flirted with her shamelessly, much to the confusion of their Ultimate Frisbee teammates, but didn’t seem to listen anytime Jack brought up her move, apparently confident it wouldn’t actually happen.

As the date in question approached, Jack started having nightmares of Trumpeter Swan taking over Los Angeles and was unable to sleep. She took to the streets instead, patrolling alone, which was something she had not done since Diego got his Dog Miraculous and joined her. She kept her eyes peeled for anything that could help her track Trumpeter Swan down, but she would have better luck winning the lottery. She’d eventually exhaust herself and return home only to get an hour or two of rest before her alarm went off for school. She began to fall asleep in class to make up for it, and soon found herself being sent down to see her guidance counselor again. The woman understood Jack was moving though and let her take naps in her office.

With a day to go and Jack still no closer to defeating Trumpeter Swan, she busied herself by packing up the last bit of her life into a suitcase. Her dad had gone ahead two weeks ago to get them situated in Paris before Jack and her mom followed, and Jack ached to see him. A flood of guilt overwhelmed her as soon as that thought crossed her mind though. How could she be so selfish when all of Los Angeles was unknowingly on the brink of something terrible? Maybe Diego was right. Maybe she should just tell her parents…

“It’s okay to be afraid of moving to a strange new place.”

Jack turned to find her mom leaning against the door frame. Her eyes were a little red and Jack suspected she had been crying in private. This was her childhood home after all, a gift from her late mom, the place where she raised Jack—to leave it all behind seem a little cruel.

“I’m not afraid of Paris,” said Jack. She abandoned her packing when she realized she had folded the same Billabong T-shirt three times in a row. Jack watched the lump that was Mimmi phase deeper into her suitcase as her mom approached and put her hands on Jack’s shoulders. She kissed the back of Jack’s head.
“You don’t have to be so brave all the time,” she said. “Your dad and I know you’re anxious about the move. Who wouldn’t be?”

“It’s not the move, Mom.” Jack sat on her bed, an island in the empty room that was still her. “It’s… um…” She took a moment to think how she could phrase it in such a way that her mom would be able to understand without Jack revealing too much. “It’s leaving things here unfinished that I’m worried about.”

“Oh, Jack, sweetheart…” Her mom took a seat next to her and tucked some hair behind Jack’s ear. Somehow, when she did it, it always stayed. “I know you’re concerned about how Glendale will do in the club tournament, but you’re just going to have to trust that your teammates will be able to succeed without you.”

“That’s not—” Jack paused, and then sighed. No sense in arguing. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Anytime.” She squeezed Jack’s hand and left.

Mimmi popped out of the suitcase once Jack’s mom’s footsteps receded down the creaky hall. “There’s still time, Jack!” she said, punching the air. “We can’t give up now. We still have one more day! Once you’re finished packing, let’s go look for Trumpeter Swan again.”

Jack moved across the room to peek through the dusty pane of her window at the street below. Halloween had been three days ago, so most of the houses were still decked out with fake cobwebs and skeletons. To Jack’s relief though, many neighbors were out and about, taking advantage of the cooler weather to take everything down. Good, she thought. She didn’t need any more reminders of how miserable Halloween had been. For the past few years, Jack and the Squad had dressed up in group costumes and took Malie’s little sister and Verónica’s two little brothers trick-or-treating before going to Verónica’s house to watch a scary movie and eat Blue Moon ice cream. This Halloween, some of Jack’s Ultimate Frisbee teammates were having a party, but her mom said no—they had too much to do before the move. Instead, Jack stayed home and handed out candy while her mom stressed out about how to spell ‘miscellaneous’ on multiple different boxes.

Closing her eyes, Jack pressed her forehead against the cool glass. It helped her headache a little. “We’re never going to find him, Mimmi.”

The Kwami squeaked, roughly grabbed the back of Jack’s shirt, and swung her around. “Don’t say stuff like that! Fall down seven times, stand up eight!”

“No. No!” Jack swatted at the creature, but it dodged her hand. “I’m sick of your positivity. Like that’s going to change anything. I did everything I could, okay? Diego has been no help and neither have the police and my mom—just stop! I’m tired. I’m so tired.” She collapsed face down on her bed and buried her face into the hibiscus-printed bedspread, groaning. “She thought I was upset about Ultimate. Freaking Ultimate! If only I could…”

A thought started to form and Jack pushed herself up. Mimmi watched her, silent, with her little ears pointed down. She sniffed the air though and perked up, sensing a positive change. Jack rolled off the bed and hurriedly began to throw things into her suitcase.

“Hey Mooooooom!?” she yelled over her shoulder.

“Yes?” came a shouted reply.
“Can I go for a walk?”

Mimmi pumped her arms in victory.

“Are you done packing?” wondered her mom.

Jack body slammed her suitcase shut while Mimmi zipped it up. They high-fived. “Yes!”

“Okay! Be back by dinner! I’m getting takeout from Yang Chow!”

Jack had already grabbed her beach bag and was down the stairs and out the back door before her mom even finished her sentence. Mimmi floated along next to her.

“You have an idea!” she said. Back when they first met, it had always come out as a question, but now the Kwami knew better.

“Yep!” Jack took refuge in the back shed. It was empty save for the lawnmower. A man from Craigslist was coming to pick it up after seven. “Mom’s right. I gotta trust my teammates to succeed without me. Ready?” Mimmi nodded vigorously, so Jack punched upwards. “Mimmi! Hop to it!”

After a month of hopeless struggle, it felt nice to have a plan again. Jack slipped back outside and launched herself up to the roof. She surveyed the neighborhood with new eyes, savoring the moment since it would probably be the last time. Then she headed west.

The route was still etched in her mind, even though it had been many months since she last took it. It was a little disorientating using rooftops instead of the sidewalk, but she soon arrived at her destination.

Cadence lived in a tired gray house about a block away from Echo Park. Two triple-windowed dormers poked out of the roof. Over one was a tattered awning that the sun had faded to pink. Cadence’s parents removed all of the other awnings during a remodel, but Cadence at seven years of age had climbed out her bedroom window with her stepbrother’s handcuffs and attached herself to her awning in protest since removing it would ‘hurt the house.’ She had flushed the key down the toilet, so the police had to come to free her.

The awning stayed.

Peeking under it, Jack was relieved to see Cadence on the floor playing her Wii U, unattended homework spread across her bed. Jack hesitated before knocking on the glass. She had to remind herself that while Cadence hated Jack, she was one of Rabbit’s biggest fans.

The girl glanced Jack’s way, then did a double take, her pale blonde hair with the purple stripe swinging out of the way of her face like a curtain.

“Rabbit!!” she cried, so loud that Jack winced, even though the glass. Cadence abandoned her controller, Mario getting killed by Goomba as she raced to slide the window open. She was shaking uncontrollably. “Say what!? I mean…um…” She fought hard and successfully regained control of the volume of her voice. “What are you doing here?” she asked, trying to be casual.

Jack arranged her face with what she hoped was mild bemusement. After all, they had never met before. “Cadence Oppenheimer?”
“Yes! Yes! That’s me!” So much for being casual. “I—uh…how do you know my name?”

Jack lowered herself into the room. Cadence had rearranged and repainted, like she did every few months. The bed had been moved to the opposite wall, a new chair had been bought (or more likely found on the side of the road), and the walls were now hot pink with a lime green accent wall.

“You and your friend are the founders of Positivity Club.” Jack turned and offered her a huge smile. “I’ve always wanted to thank you. I know some days it probably doesn’t feel like you help Perro Negro and me all that much, but you do, you really do. And that’s why I need your help now.”

Cadence tempered her excitement, realizing this was serious. She had always excelled at reading people. “What is it?”

“I’m going to try my best to defeat Trumpeter Swan once and for all soon…but in case I fail…”

Cadence surprised Jack by not arguing against failure. “It’s up to us.”

The knot that had been building in Jack’s stomach all month loosened a bit. It didn’t come undone, but Jack could finally breath normally again.

“That’s what you were going to say, right?” said Cadence, growing nervous when Jack didn’t say anything further. Her eyes searched Jack’s face. Jack wondered what she saw.

“Er, yeah. Something like that. If I’m gone…It’s up to you and others like you to spread kindness and positivity to prevent Trumpeter Swan from Akumatizing anyone.”

“Rabbit…” Her voice filled with sorrow. Jack was forced to shut her eyes and wait for Cadence to take exception to her leaving like everyone else had. That didn’t happen though. “Don’t worry. You can count on me.”

Jack’s eyes fluttered back open. “Huh?”

“Uh, I said, you can trust me.”

“No, I know…” Jack paused. “Thank you.”

Jack could have left things there. She had come to say what she wanted to say. But she knew this would be the last time she would ever see Cadence, let alone speak to her on good terms, so she felt compelled to add a little more as her ears drooped.

“I’m sorry for being the one to let you down,” she said as Jack, not Rabbit, even though there was no way for Candence to know.

“Let me…?” Cadence parsed through the words with wide eyes before her expression melted. “Oh, Rabbit, you could never let me down.”

Jack jerked her head. She wasn’t sure if she believed that and Cadence knew it.

“Listen,” said the girl, almost pleadingly. “I can only imagine how hard it must be for you to have so many people depending on you, and then try to live your normal civilian life on top of all that. I don’t know who you really are…but I hope you have people in your life who support you.”
Jack couldn’t help it—Diego instantly came to her mind, even though she was frustrated with him.

*Never doubt that I’m going to be there for you—superhero, civilian, whatever.*

And then there was Cadence, so ready and willing to help like she had been all of Jack’s life. She was the last one to hold out hope for Jack among The Squad, and that meant something. Didn’t it? The more Jack thought about it, the more she realized that their friendship could be fixed in an instant. All Jack had to do was take off her watch. So simple. So easy. In that moment, Jack found the temptation too great to resist. Despite what she had told Diego a month ago during their ill-fated fro-yo date, she reached over and placed a palm on her Miraculous.

“Cadence…” she started to say.

Her chakram around her wrist trilled.

“Oh!” cried Cadence. “Do you need to take that?”

Jack froze, hand still on her watch. She couldn’t believe she had almost revealed her identity. If doing it once caused her to move, who knew what else could happen? Tempting fate was a dangerous game.

“Rabbit…?” prompted Cadence.

“Yeah, I probably should,” agreed Jack. So this was it, then. This was goodbye. “Thank you, Cadence. For everything.”

“See you around!”

Jack took two steps towards the window and looked over her shoulder one last time. Cadence waved, so confident she was going to see Rabbit again. Jack left before her stomach knotted up again, darting a few roofs over to the terracotta tiles of a nearby apartment building. She was breathing heavily, as if she were winded. It took her a few moments to pull herself together and put herself in the right head space to accept Diego’s call. She answered it with maybe one ring left before it went into her voicemail.

“Mi conejito!” Diego cheered, brightening instantly. “I was afraid you weren’t going to pick up!”

Jack was just about to apologize and explain she had been in the middle of something when screams of terror sounded off in the background. Diego frowned as he held his wrist up. People flooded around him as they fled, trampling each other in their desire to escape. Jack caught a few brief glimpses of some people in costume. Daenerys Targaryen, Queen of dragons. The Joker and Harley Quinn. Skeletor.

“There’s an Akuma at the convention center,” Diego explained. “Por favor apúrate!”

“Oh, no!” said Jack, eyes springing wide. Stan Lee’s Comikaze Expo was going on right now! “I’m on my way.”

Hanging up, Jack turned to face the towering buildings of downtown Los Angeles, looking blurry through the light smog. The Los Angeles Convention Center was just beyond them, where the Santa Monica and Harbor Freeway met. She took off in that direction. People were in danger, and today would be the last day she would be able to save them. Whether that was temporarily or permanently
though was completely up to her.

It was strange to think, but if Jack weren’t moving, she would probably be at Comikaze right now. Before her parent’s announcement, she had just spray-painted a pair of boots red for her cosplay. Her and Maria from Ultimate Frisbee were going to go as Majestia and Victory respectively. It sucked having to tell her friend that it wasn’t going to happen.

Five minutes later, Jack found herself on the roof of the Staples Center. The plaza between it and the convention center was engulfed with people, superheroes, anime characters, and steampunks in distress. Jack counted at least ten Deadpools. The area was rimmed with the flashing lights of police cars as they tried their best to control the chaos.

Glass shattered with a resounding crash as a skinny beam of golden light blasted forth from the convention center towards the sky. Screams pierced Jack’s rabbit ears and people threw themselves on the ground, terrified the next attack would be aimed out into the escaping crowd. Jack hopped over to the roof of the Concourse Hall and ran towards the light as it faded. A bit of black on the ground caught her eye though. She hopped down to join Diego, who had taken cover behind a planter.

“Sorry I’m late, Perro!” she said, rushing up to him.

The figure turned, Jack realizing far too late it was a woman in Perro Negro cosplay, complete with a rather realistic messy black wig.

“Good one!” she said, looking Jack up and down before winking. “Rabbit.”

“Er, ah…” Jack’s cheeks heated up. “Never…uh…Excuse me.” She turned and started walking towards the closest set of turquoise doors, a couple of Power Rangers staggering through as they escaped. The fake Perro Negro scrambled to her feet though and dragged Jack back.

“Hey, now! Where do you think you’re going? There’s an Akuma on the loose in there! You have a pretty killer costume, but leave the superheroing to the real Rabbit and Perro Negro.”

“But I am the real Rabbit!”

“Now’s not the time to—”

Another blast rocked the convention center roof and Jack was able to slip out of the woman’s grasp. She gave chase, but Jack jumped to the roof. She spun around to see the fake Perro Negro looking as if she were about to have a heart attack. Jack threw her an apologetic smile and then slipped inside the building through a shattered green-glass pane.

The main atrium stretched skyward in a fan shape with a white steel frame. Diego was currently using it to his advantage, swinging from beam to beam with his grappling hooks to avoid getting hit by blasts. They appeared to be emanating from a diamond a little smaller than a fist inset in the chest of what was clearly an Akuma. He looked as if a generic superhero had morphed with the con’s logo, an octopus, and was now flying around. He wore a black morph suit and domino mask with golden yellow briefs, boots, and gloves, lots of gloves, since he had eight noodle-like arms. In his clutches he waved around a handful of action figures. His head was mostly human, but round and bulbous in the back, and his skin was an ashen gray color.

“Hold! Still!” he demanded as he charged up another blast, Diego in his sights.
Jack threw herself feet-first at the Akuma’s head and bounced off, sending him rocketing to the ground as she landed gracefully on the beam next to Diego.

“What'd you got?” Jack asked him.

Her partner turned to her to proudly show off a white ribbon pinned to his chest, a hint of laughter in his voice. “Third place in the Perro Negro lookalike contest!”

“You know that’s not what I meant!”

“Oh, on the Akuma?” They looked down together at the crater he had made in the middle of the tiled floor. “Calls himself Comikaze.”

“Again with the lazy names!”

“Can’t say it isn’t accurate, mi conejito. I watched him freeze Stan Lee and a couple of others with that blast of his and then ram them, turning them into action figures.”

“He’s got Stan Lee!?”

“Rabbit!” cried out Comikaze excitedly as he crawled out of the hole and pumped his multiple arms in celebration. “Even better! I wish I could keep you and Perro Negro for my collection, but I have a very excited buyer for you!”

“Sorry to burst your bubble there, Doctor Octopus, but we’re not for sale!”

“Doctor… Doctor…” The Akuma sputtered, his previously genial personality fading. “Do I look like one of Spider-Man’s most iconic villains to you!?” he roared, shooting up towards them. Her and Diego split, but he went after Jack. “You’re just some fake geek girl! I bet you’ve never even read a Spider-Man comic in your life! You’re just an Andrew Garfield stan.”

Yikes, thought Jack, grimacing. So the Akuma was one of those guys. Besides, Tobey Maguire all the way.

Bouncing around, Jack dodged another beam from Comikaze’s chest, and then sent her chakram careening back at him. He didn’t have enough time to dodge out of the way and ended up throwing up his arms to protect his gem. The throwing ring glanced off him and wobbled off at an odd angle.

“No! No!!!” the Akuma cried as one of his action figures began to glow. Jack’s chakram must have struck it. “My limited edition Lou Ferrigno! You ruined it! It’s worthless now!”

The action figure began to swell in size, so Comikaze dropped it. Diego swung down and snagged it from the air only for it to become so large that it was unwieldy. He flicked his wrist to release his grapple and hugged the figure as they both went plummeting to the ground. Diego hit first, cushioning the blow as the former bodybuilder rolled out of his arms.

“Mr. Hulk!” cried Diego as he sucked in a breath to combat the pain. “Are you okay?”

“Uh…”

Lou Ferrigno moved his limbs, which was good enough of an answer for Diego. He hurriedly
helped the man to his feet.

“¡Vámonos!” said Diego, releasing one of his grappling hooks by a few feet and spinning it, deflecting Comikaze’s next blast as he pushed Lou Ferrigno towards the doors. “I loved you in *I Love You, Man!*” he shouted after him as he escaped the building.

Jack took full advantage of the distraction to reclaim her chakram. She tried to make her way over to Diego, but Comikaze dropped down from above. He realized this was a poor idea though when Jack tried to swing her weapon at his action figures multiple times, or else try to kick them out of his hands. He escaped to the air to keep them safe.

“It’s over, Rabbit and Perro Negro!” he shouted at them, gesturing wildly. “I have the high ground.”

Jack couldn’t help herself. “Is that a quote from Star Trek?”

Roaring, the Akuma blasted her. She tried to dodge only to realize too late that she wasn’t going to be fast enough. Maybe poking the bear with a stick had not been the best idea. Luckily, Diego had her back. His grappling hooks latched onto her suit and he pulled her to safety. Soon they were running into the exhibition hall, Comikaze hot on their tails. With all the booths though, there were plenty of places to lose him. Spotting an Iron Man 3 display, they weaved between all the armors and took refuge beneath a skirted table.

“So what’s the plan, *mi conejito*?” Diego whispered. "I'll follow your lead."

“Looks like the action figures need to be in mint condition or they turn back into people,” observed Jack.

“*Verdad*, so should one of us be bait then? Or do you think Trumpeter Swan will see through that and warn him?”

Jack opened her mouth to answer only to stop short, her synapses suddenly firing all at once. Recollections of the last hour flooded her brain, voices echoing in her memory.

*You’re just going to have to trust that your teammates will be able to succeed without you.*

*I’m going to try my best to defeat Trumpeter Swan once and for all soon.*

*I hope you have people in your life who support you.*

Jack closed her eyes.

She knew what she had to do.

“Perro…” she started. “Diego,” she amended, because it felt right. “I need one of your tracking devices.”

While one of Diego’s cufflinks was his communicator, the other housed tracking devices. He popped it open and slid out a small purple disk.

“Anything for you, *mi conejito*,” he said, handing it over. She activated it and slipped it into her boot. “Now what?”
Jack patted Diego’s chest, feeling his rippling muscles beneath his bulletproof suit; his strong heartbeat against her hand. Her breathing became harried as she leaned in close, but simply touched her forehead to Diego’s. His collar jangled as he ran a gloved hand over the back of her head.

She wanted to tell him of her plan, but she was too afraid he’d try to stop her or talk her out of it. He never wanted any harm to come to her, but sometimes there was no avoiding it. Sometimes, getting hurt, putting yourself in danger—it was the only way.

Jack grabbed the Dog Miraculous.

“Rescue me,” she told Diego before yanking it off and sliding it across the polished concrete floor through at least seven booths. In a flash of purple and black light, Diego was now wearing a holey white T-shirt and a terrified expression on his face. He grabbed her wrist to stop her as she left, but without his super strength, there was nothing he could do.

“Hey Octoman!” Jack called out as she raced down the central aisle. She hopped a few times trying to get a view over the backdrops. She couldn’t see the Akuma anywhere. “Where’d you—?”

A blast came bursting through a curtain, striking Jack. She froze almost instantly, only able to blink.

“It’s COMIKAZEEEEEAAAAAAAN!” the Akuma cried as he rushed her, his bulging shoulder the last thing Jack saw before everything went dark.

* * *

The transformation back from being an action figure was a rather uncomfortable experience. Spatial awareness was the first thing to return as Jack realized she was falling and then hitting the ground. She tried to move only to discover she only had slight control of only specific joints. The rest of her body felt stiff, and the inside of her mouth tasted like plastic. Eventually, her eyesight returned. Everything was blurry, but it didn’t take a genius to figure out the identity of the purple figure in the feathered cape standing before her.

“My, my…” said a muffled voice. “Someone got sloppy right before they were planning to leave.”

“Trumpeter Swan!” Jack managed, throwing herself at him before she had all her bearings. She hit something solid through and bounced off. She blinked a few more times, but the supervillian didn’t come into focus. Confused, she looked at her gloved hand. It was as clear as day, as was her breath. She was someplace cold. Glancing about, she appeared to be in concrete alcove with a clear plastic wall. She kicked it, but it had no effect, so she kicked it again, as hard as she could. Still nothing.

“Composite plastic,” Trumpeter Swan explained. He rapped on it with what appeared to be a royal scepter. “Strong as steel. Fascinating stuff, really. Engineers at Michigan created it in 2007 using layers of clay nanosheets and a water-soluble polymer that shares its chemistry with white glue. They essentially copied the brick-and-mortar molecular structure found in seashells. There were still some kinks though. It wasn’t for large-scale use. I had it perfected just for you.”

Jack wrapped her hand around her watch. She could still feel the tracker digging into the side of her shin and took solace in that. She just had to hold Trumpeter Swan off until Diego got there.

“Omega is never getting my Miraculous,” Jack told him.

Trumpeter Swan tilted his head. “…Do you honestly still believe that?”
He strolled over to a giant metal canister that was connected to Jack’s plastic prison via a hose. Unscrewing the top a little, there was a hiss and a clear, odorless gas began to fill the room. Jack eyelids started to feel heavy.

“N-n-no…” she said, slumping down again. This had been a bad idea. Terrible. The absolute worst. What had she been thinking? She had been so desperate to get to Trumpeter Swan before she left that she had thrown all caution to the wind. It would’ve been far better to let Trumpeter Swan continue to operate than risk the Rabbit Miraculous like she was doing now.

Jack slapped her cheek with a sluggish hand in an effort to stay awake, then tried to cover her nose and her mouth. It helped a little, but not much, stretching out the last few seconds of consciousness she had left. Trumpeter Swan laughed and it was every bit as chilling as Jack had imagined it to be in her nightmares.

Just as unconsciousness lapped at the edge of Jack’s brain though, she heard a blast, followed by yelling. Trumpeter Swan spun around as something black, purple, and glowing came streaking towards him.

“Comikaze, you fool!” he cried, but he knew better than to stand in Dogstruction’s way. He flew up into the air.

Jack couldn’t keep her eyes open any longer and the floor felt so soft. She laid her head down, taking comfort in the fact that Diego had come for her.

“My boyfriend…” she said to herself, a little loopy thanks to the nitrous oxide.

With an earth-shattering boom, Diego collided with Jack’s jail. All the fancy composite plastic in the world wouldn’t be able to keep them apart as it shattered like flimsy glass. The instant clean air rushed in, Jack perked up. Her mind was still a bit hazy, but she shook it off and slid her chakram off her wrist. Expanding it to the size of a Frisbee, she stepped out of the alcove and tossed it into the air.

“Lucky Strike!” she shouted.

Something small, white, and oval-shaped appeared within the confines of her weapon as it spun. Still a bit woozy, she let them both fall into her hands rather than jumping up to get them. She shook her head again, her rabbit ears slapping each other, as she examined what her powers had given her.

“¡Estar atento!” Diego yelled as Comikaze skittered out in front of them and the diamond in his chest began to glow. Jack ducked behind Diego while he uppercut the ground, digging up concrete and showering the Akuma with it. “Come on!” he said, grabbing her hand as they ran for better cover. His Miraculous beeped. He had three minutes left. She had a little less than five.

Jack could see now that they were in a cavernous warehouse. It appeared mostly empty save for large, concrete pillars and a smattering of racks and disused machines.

“Where are we?” she wondered.

“By the railroad. Preferred Freezer Services.”

“No wonder it’s so cold.”
Now that Jack had a moment to spare, she glanced down at the white object clutched in her hand. It was covered in soft leather and had a small hinge on it. She opened it to find her own bluish-gray eyes staring back at her.

It was a compact.

“If you want to wear make-up, that's fine, mi conejito,” said Diego, noticing. “But you don't need it. You're already beautiful.”

Jack had to smile, but it was short-lived when she saw a flash of purple in the mirror. She jumped, head-butting an encroaching Trumpeter Swan in the face and then spin kicking him to the ground. Diego darted up and tried to punch him, but the man was nimble and flitted away.

Now that Jack could see Trumpeter Swan clearly, he had the look of a medieval warlord. A thick cape of royal purple feathers hung from the spiked epaulettes on his shoulders, which were part of a matching breastplate. He wore vambraces and greaves as well, with black boots. His tight-fitting cowl was reminiscent of Batman without the ears, and bowed at his nose in a black triangle, forming a bit of a beak. Judging from his neatly trimmed beard, he was a redhead.

After months and months of watching Trumpeter Swan terrorize Los Angeles and being unable to do little more then slap a Band-Aid over the gaping wound, it had all come down to this. The man returned to the air and tried to escape, but Jack chased him down, wall kicking off pillars to reach his height. When she tried to slice him with her chakram though, he spun around and held up his scepter, blocking her. As she dropped though, one of Diego’s grappling hooks went shooting over her head and clamped onto Trumpeter Swan’s ankle. He grunted in pain, but it wasn’t enough to stop him, so Diego sent his second grappling hook to help. With a mighty heave, Diego swung Trumpeter Swan and released, sending the supervillian careening into the closest pillar in a shower of concrete and dust.

“They go!” said Jack as she watched Trumpeter Swan fall. She reached him first just as he was getting onto his feet, greeting him with a flying kick. He blocked it with his one of his vambraces though and kneed her in the stomach. Jack dropped. Diego came charging up behind her though, Dogstruction licking the area around him. Trumpeter Swan scrambled backwards, bobbing and weaving. Maybe if he was just fighting Jack he would’ve had a chance, but with Diego’s abilities in play, he often had to take Jack’s kicks to avoid the brunt of Dogstruction. They pushed him back and soon had him cornered with his hands tied with the rope of one of Diego’s grappling hooks, which was just as well. Diego was going to change back soon, and Jack wasn’t far behind.

“¡Finalmente! No flying your way out of this one! You’re days of Trumpeter Swan are over!” said Diego as he roughly pulled Trumpeter Swan’s arms forward so Jack could reach his cufflinks.

Jack’s heart thumped wildly in her chest. She couldn’t believe it. They had beat Trumpeter Swan! And right at the bottom of the ninth too. As he looked up at them though, his eyes twin pools of unsettling inky blackness, it was not with a look of defeat.

“I was never trying to escape,” he said. “Just maneuver you into the correct position.”

A beam of gold light struck Diego in the back, freezing him in place. He didn't even have time to look shocked.

Terror suddenly rampaging through her body, Jack preformed a sidewinder jump over Diego, dodging the beam intended for her. She tried to grab at least one of Trumpeter Swan’s cufflinks as
she did so, but he had the presence of mind to pull out of her reach. Upon landing, Jack was off like a shot, dodging one more beam before taking refuge behind a pillar.

Jack wanted to kick herself. How could they have forgotten about Comikaze!? They were so caught up in fighting Trumpeter Swan that they had completely forgotten about his Akuma, exactly as he intended. Even worse, she had abandoned Diego. She had to stand there and listen to the sound of a body hitting another body, followed by the clatter of something small and plastic on the ground. Her partner, her…her Diego. Gone.

“Why even bother hiding?” came Trumpeter Swan’s voice. His footsteps echoed as he headed in Jack direction, the ringing of her Miraculous giving away her position. She slipped away and found shelter behind another pillar, timing her movements just right so Trumpeter Swan and Comikaze wouldn’t see her. “You’re only delaying the inevitable, Rabbit. One way or another, Omega will find all the Kwami. He will get all seven Miraculouses. He’s very…resourceful.”

The way Trumpeter Swan paused and lingered lovingly on the last word made Jack’s skin crawl.

He continued. “You don’t have enough time to escape. You’ll transform back soon and then you’ll be hopeless, so you might as well give up now.”

Jack glanced down at her watch knowing Trumpeter Swan was right. She squeezed her eyes shut, hugging the compact to her chest.

Wait…her compact! Jack nearly fumbled it as she took a second look at it. It had helped her avoid Trumpeter Swan’s attack, but that wasn’t its intended purpose. She was supposed to use it to defeat Comikaze.

Flipping it open, Jack used the mirror to peer around the pillar. Trumpeter Swan was approaching her, Comikaze a few paces behind. The Akuma seemed mesmerized by his latest acquisition, a little black figure with floppy dog ears and a tail. If Jack were going to act, she would have to do it now, and fast.

“Another doll for your collection?” Jack asked.

Comikaze scowled. “They’re action figures!”

Jack stepped out of hiding, causing Trumpeter Swan to pause, but she wasn’t addressing him. “Hey, it’s okay. Boys can like girl stuff and girls can like boy stuff. I mean, I love video games. I am such a gamer. Love Angry Birds.”

The Akuma growled, the gem in his chest charging up.

“Comikaze…” Trumpeter Swan warned over his shoulder.

“And what’s that building one? Mind Craft?”

“Minecraft!” Comikaze shouted, shooting a beam, but Jack held up her mirror and reflected it towards Trumpeter Swan. It struck him and he froze.

Stunned, the Akuma stared at consequences of his overreaction, but Jack was already making a beeline for the Swan Miraculous. Unfortunately for Jack, a feathered mask of purple light she had seen countless times before appeared to float a few inches in front of Comikaze’s face. It seemed
Trumpeter Swan still had some semblance of control, even in his current state. Comikaze was suddenly barreling forward.

“No!” cried Jack, but the Akuma was closer. He crashed into Trumpeter Swan before Jack could get there, and the supervillain was turned into an action figure. Scooping him up, Comikaze began to fly away.

Jack chanced a glance at her watch. Twenty seconds. This was her last, last chance.

“You let Stan Lee go!” she shouted. “He’s gotta cameo in the next Superman movie!”

Comikaze stopped. “Superman’s not in the MCU.”

“The MCU? What’s that?”

Screaming at the top of his lungs, Comikaze spun around to blast Jack, probably thinking he could dodge out of the way if she reflected his attack again, but she had jumped towards him with the compact outstretched. Realization hit him too late. He had already released the beam and there was no escape. He froze as soon as it struck him and Jack smacked into him. They both fell with a resounding thud that echoed through the warehouse. Moments later, Mimmi was expelled from Jack’s watch, leaving Jack struggling to breathe as she nearly choked on the cold air.

“Good…!” Mimmi managed, lying down on Jack’s stomach. She gave a weak pat. “Good.”

The two lay there for a moment, and Jack wondered why winning didn’t feel more like an accomplishment. After everything she had been through—after every friend she had lost, after every near-death experience—she thought she would be thrilled by Trumpeter Swan’s defeat. But she just felt spent. Empty. Omega was still out there, so what had she really done? Just apparently delayed the inevitable.

After a minute or two of rest, Jack began to shiver. She dragged herself onto her feet and over to Comikaze. Clutched in his hands were all sorts of action figures. Some were guests of the con, like Elvira and LeVar Burton, while others were probably people with excellent cosplays, like Mystique and The Doctor. Jack’s eyes fell on Perro Negro though and she tried to pull him out. She accidentally removed his head instead.

“Whoops!” she said, trying to put it back on, but it didn’t seem to matter. As the action figure began to glow and grow in size, a mysterious force pulled the head from Jack’s fingers and returned it to its proper place. “Uh, let’s not tell Diego about that one,” Jack told Mimmi, who gave an exhausted smile as she rode on Jack’s shoulder.

Diego fell forward on his hands and knees. Jack collapsed next to him.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” she told him, knowing exactly what it felt like. She huddled with him for warmth. “We’re safe. We won. It’s over.”

“Over…?” With a final beep, purple light formed around Diego’s feet and zipped to the top of his head, returning him to normal before his dog tags threw Wrekk out rather unceremoniously.

Jack waited for Diego to recover, stroking his hair and even leaning down to give him a little kiss, but mostly because he was too out of it to really notice. He eventually sat up to look around, bleary-eyed and blinking. He rubbed his bare arms to keep warm.
“Where’s Trumpeter Swan?” he wondered.

Jack pointed to Comikaze and Diego went over to have a look. “Don’t—” she started to say, but the boy was able to slide the action figure out of the Akuma’s grasp without any issue.

“At least it will be easy to hand him over to the police like this,” he decided with a cheeky grin as he began to change Trumpeter Swan’s pose.

Jack was just about to agree when she recalled something that made her blood run colder than it already was in a freezer. “Ah, no…I don’t…think…I don’t think we can trust the police.”

“Huh?”

“Trumpeter Swan knew I was leaving.”

“¿Sí? ¿Así que?”

“So, the only two people who knew Rabbit was leaving were you…and the Chief. And I know you would never betray my trust.”

“Jack, that’s loco. He’s sworn to protect and serve!”

“But it would explain why the police were never able to track Trumpeter Swan down.”

“What are you talking about? They found his old base.”

“Did they, though? I knew there was something off about it. Everything just felt a little too perfect.”

“Ay, now that you mention it, I think you might be right.” Diego ran his fingers through his hair, wide-eyed at this new information as he looked the Trumpeter Swan action figure over. “What are we gonna do with him, then?”

Jack looked down at her compact still gripped in her hand. They could break Trumpeter Swan and take his Miraculous before he fully recovered, but after such a close call, and with the police no longer on their side, and her leaving tomorrow, and the bout of bad luck that came with revealing their identities—Jack couldn’t bring herself to chance it. The Guardian would be upset, she assumed, but he had never reached out to her. If he did, then maybe they could talk, but, right now, all that mattered was that Trumpeter Swan remained neutralized.

“You keep him,” Jack told Diego. “And I’ll take the compact with me to Paris.”

“But don’t you need to use Miraculous Rabbit?”

“What for? So the convention center needs to replace a few windows. We can return all the people back to normal ourselves.”

“Buen punto.” Diego whistled through his teeth. “We got really lucky, huh, mi conejito?” He held his hand up for their usual Top Gun high-five.

But Jack didn’t feel like she was lucky. She ignored Diego and turned to her beach bag abandoned on the floor and took out her emergency cupcake for Mimmi, a vanilla one decorated with little bats.
for Halloween. Diego, as always, didn’t have any cottage cheese on hand for Wrekk, so he was going to have to leave. When Jack pointed this out to him though, he still didn’t move.

“What?” she wondered.

“I’m sorry,” he said, in much the same way he had right before he revealed his identity to her. “…For the way I’ve been acting. I was fighting you leaving instead of fighting Trumpeter Swan. That’s why you didn’t tell me about your plan, ¿Verdad?”

He was right, in a way. Jack nodded. Diego grimaced, something she suddenly couldn’t stand to see. She should've never ignored his high-five.

“But I knew you would rescue me,” she assured him. “You always rescue me. No matter what. That’s what makes you such a good partner and teammate and…well, you would’ve made a great boyfriend too, but I can’t ask that of you.”

Diego gave pause. “Why not?”

“I’m moving to France tomorrow.”

“So? I’ll wait for you. As long as it takes. You’re worth any distance, mi conejito. And there’s email and Skype and Snapchat. I can visit—Er, you can visit me in the summer. We can make this work!”

Jack took a couple steps closer to Diego, drawn to him by the hope in his voice. “You really think so?”

“I would never lie to you.”

“No, I guess not…” Heat crept up Jack’s cheeks and she found herself unable to meet Diego’s powerful gaze. She bit her lip as she toed the ground. “Diego…do you want to be my boyfriend?”

He nearly tackled her with a hug. “Man, I thought you’d never ask!” He gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “When does my lovely, amazing girlfriend leave tomorrow? I’ve gotta be at the airport to say goodbye!”

Jack giggled, feeling slightly lightheaded, but no longer freezing cold. She pocketed the compact, confident for the first time in weeks that everything was actually going to be okay.

Little did she know.

* * *

“Stop,” commanded Mr. Agreste.

Jack snapped her mouth shut. She couldn’t even remember what she had just been saying; only that Mr. Agreste was now rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“You need more lessons,” he said. “Clearly.”

Jack blinked at him. Somehow, she had gotten exactly what she wanted, and she wasn’t even quite sure how.
“Go join Adrien in the dining room. I have business to attend to. Nathalie!”

Jack didn’t need to be told twice. She grabbed her backpack, swung it onto her shoulder, and speed walked out of the room. Nathalie brushed past her and closed the door behind her.

“Jack!” hissed Mimmi as Jack’s sneakers squeaked across the foyer. There was movement and Jack could feel her Kwami burrowing out of her backpack. The creature was frantic. “Jack, Julius Ende isn’t the Guardian! He’s Omega!”

“I know—” Jack started to say over her shoulder, but Mimmi wasn’t done yet.

“And Mr. Agreste is Hawk Moth!”

Jack froze.

“Hey, I thought I heard your voice.”

Flinching, Jack looked to see Adrien waiting for her in the doorway of the dining room as Mimmi dove back down into her backpack. He tilted his head and knotted his eyebrows though when he saw Jack’s face.

“Everything okay?” he asked. “My father didn’t give you too hard of a time, did he?”

“N…No.” Did Adrien know that his dad was Hawk Moth? Was it her place to tell him right now if he didn’t? How would she even explain how she knew?

“Good!” said the boy, none-the-wiser to Jack’s inner monologue. “So, are we…? You know, am I still your tutor?”

Jack almost gave a derisive laugh, but was too close to throwing up. Instead, she offered a shallow nod. Adrien’s face lit up like a Christmas tree and she found herself fervently wishing she could go back thirty seconds to before Mimmi dropped her bomb and experience that same joy. Now she could barely muster a smile.

“That’s great!” Adrien said, but his happiness faded when he noticed Jack was unable to share it. “Are you sure you’re okay? You look a little pale.”

“I do not…feel great,” Jack managed.

“Are you sick?”

Jack was grateful for the excuse. “I think so…I think I should call my mom.”

She must have sounded convincing on the phone because her mom instantly agreed to pick her up. Adrien sat and waited with Jack on the front stoop of his house. He kept on casting concerned glances in her direction, but all Jack could do was hug her knees and concentrate on her shoes. She even began to rock a little. Too much new and terrifying information was buzzing in her brain. She was hardly cognizant when her mom arrived and Adrien helped her walk down the drive. He put her in the waiting car with well wishes. Jack attempted to open her mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

Jack was silent the whole way home. When her mom put her into bed, she hugged Jack and put her
cheek against Jack’s forehead.

“Well, you’re not running a fever,” she said. “But something is definitely wrong.”

“I just want to rest,” Jack admitted.

Her mom turned the words over in her head. “Okay,” she decided. “I’ll call the school and let them know you’ll be out for the rest of the day.”

“Thanks.”

Jack put her head down on her pillow. It was true, she wanted to rest, but all she got were the few seconds it took for her mom to close the door and walk down the hall. Then she was up like a shot, struggling to escape the confines of her comforter.

“Mimmi,” Jack called out softly. The Kwami phased out of Jack’s backpack and zipped over to her. “Mimmi, I need you to tell me word-for-word exactly what happened between Mr. Agreste and Omega.”

“But how did you already know Mr. Ende is—?” started Mimmi.

“Later.” Jack was shaking. “What was their meeting about?”

“Ah, well…Mr. Ende was very upset with Mr. Agreste for Akumatizing Richter yesterday. He said Mr. Agreste ruined his chances of hiring Ambush.”

Jack’s eyes widened. There were several layers to this. The first, of course, was that Mr. Agreste was indeed Hawk Moth. The second was that Omega knew that Mr. Agreste was Hawk Moth. In a distant third was the realization that Omega had actually wanted to hire Praying Mantis after all, which meant Chameleon had gone rogue. He did have that earpiece, probably so Omega could keep tabs on what was happening, but Nymph’s hired muscle had removed it. Maybe without Omega’s supervision, Chameleon decided to try and steal the Mantis Miraculous so he wouldn’t be replaced. That was Jack’s working theory anyway.

Mimmi continued. “Mr. Ende said he thought he and Mr. Agreste had an agreement and that Mr. Agreste would let him know of his plans ahead of time. But Mr. Agreste explained that when Mr. Ende asked him to Akumatize Dr. Lacasse, he was promised the use of the Beacon. Since he still hadn’t gotten to use it, the deal was off.”

“So they’re working together! But…” Jack felt like she was going to have an aneurysm at this rate. So Dr. Lacasse’s Akumatization was planned. That made sense in a weird way. It had probably been very easy for Omega to trump up fake embezzlement charges for his own company and pin the blame on poor Dr. Lacasse, causing him to get fired and be susceptible to Hawk Moth’s influence. But why?

Jack grabbed her head as the answer came to her.

“What? What is it?” cried Mimmi.

Evie. She was right. “Omega wanted to trick me into using the Beacon to bring all the Kwami here after Chameleon couldn’t use Hokss to do it,” Jack explained. “And what better way to alert me to the Beacon’s existence then to have an Akuma steal it?”
“But we were already at DyTech.”

“Omega had no way of knowing that would happen, just like he had no way of knowing Howard Jenson would steal the Beacon before Lock Pick could.”

“Ah! That’s right! We were so wrong, Jack! Howard Jenson—”

“Works for the Guardian. I know, I know.”

“How do you—?”

“Mimmi!”

“Ah! Sorry! You’re right. Mr. Ende didn’t expect the Beacon to get stolen, which he pointed out to Mr. Agreste. That’s why he had Mr. Agreste Akumatize Jade—to get it back for them. Mr. Agreste was still hopping mad though. The Beacon was recovered, yet he still hasn’t been given a chance to use it since Mr. Ende wanted to use it first. Now most of Mr. Ende’s missing Kwami are in Paris, and he doesn’t have Ladybug and Cat Noir’s Miraculouses.”

“What did Omega say to that?”

“He said he currently didn’t know where the Beacon was. It was in your hands, as he intended, but things hadn’t been going according to his plan. He had yet to figure out your real identity and gain your full trust.”

He was right. He had never called Jack by her real name. He must have limited the time he was in contact with her and made sure it was always when she was Rabbit in order to keep her from getting suspicious. It had almost worked too.

“And that’s why Chameleon is after my identity,” Jack realized.

Mimmi bobbed her head. “Mr. Agreste mentioned him. Said he told Mr. Ende that ‘that idiot boy’ wouldn’t be able to figure out who you were. Mr. Ende seemed sure he could get it out of you himself though since you think he’s the Guardian.”

It was almost as if Jack’s heart had stopped and restarted at least seven times throughout all these revelations. “Mimmi, I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry,” Jack said. “I almost ruined everything! All because I believed the wrong person.”

“It’s okay!” assured the creature, patting Jack on the back and nearly knocking all the air out of her. “He had me fooled too. All the pieces seemed to fit. Anyone would’ve made your mistake. But let’s look on the bright side! At least you know now.”

“Yeah...I guess so.” Be positive, she thought.

The Kwami put a nubby little arm to her chin and rubbed it. “Now if only we knew who the real Guardian was...He’d be able to help us.”

Jack grimaced, the evidence now overwhelmingly in Evie’s favor. “It’s a she, actually,” Jack explained. “And she already is.”
Sometimes, life came full circle in the strangest of ways. In the span of less than two years, Jack had gone from meeting with the holder of the Rabbit Miraculous at The Peninsula in Los Angeles to being the holder of the Rabbit Miraculous at The Peninsula in Paris.

When Jack asked to meet the whole team—Ladybug, Cat Noir, Praying Mantis, Firefly, and Nymph—to discuss next steps after the Ambush debacle, it was Nymph who complained that the belfry of Notre Dame was too tight of a squeeze for all six of them. Instead, she suggested a private dinner on the rooftop of The Peninsula. Well, maybe demanded was a better word. Jack let her have her way. She was still lying to her after all. It was the least Jack could do.

Jack arrived late with an accordion folder full of papers, perching on the tallest point of the hotel. It was an extremely picturesque night, with the last vestiges of sunset fading from the sky and the top of the Eiffel tower peeking out over the gables. The Peninsula’s rooftop access was small, with up lighted plants lining two of the sides and a small tree in the corner. A table set for six, with white linens and candelabras, sat in the middle. Jack’s team seemed to be enjoying themselves. Firefly and Cat Noir were gushing about funny Vines, animatedly reenacting their favorites, while Ladybug was asking Nymph about what Le Baron was like. Praying Mantis leaned back in his chair, observing the others until he sensed Jack’s eyes on him. He turned and looked at her, but all he did was nod and give a causal wave before turning back.

Jack jumped down to join them.

“Finally!” said Nymph.

“Thanks for coming, everyone.” Jack suddenly felt like she was speaking at Positivity Club. She took her seat next to Ladybug, who gave her an encouraging smile. “I know things didn’t go like we planned last week—”

“Understatement, much?” cut in Nymph, but Jack ignored her.

“But that’s okay.” She slammed down her accordion folder. “Because I found out who Omega is anyway.”

The table erupted in shocked exclamations and questions of how Jack did it. She waited for them to subside, knowing full well that it was not as impressive as it sounded. Still, the adulation was nice while it lasted. At this point in her hero career, after everything that had happened, Jack took what she could get.

“The Guardian reached out to me,” she continued.

“Mr. Burge…Uh, Mr. B?” wondered Firefly after a bit of a struggle with her tongue. French words were not her forte.

“Mr. Bergeron,” corrected Nymph.

“That’s the thing. Mr. Bergeron isn’t the Guardian.” Jack squeezed her eyes shut. “…he’s Omega.”

There were gasps. Firefly yelped. Praying Mantis even swore softly under his breath, but Nymph drowned them out immediately as she stood up, her chair raking the ground behind her.
“Unbelievable… just—unbelievable! I cannot believe you, Rabbit! You thought Omega was the Guardian!? I mean, how stupid are—?”

“Hey!”

Jack looked to see Praying Mantis staring down Nymph, his jaw set. Nymph was momentarily taken aback, but the eye roll and retort were coming, so Praying Mantis bulldozed on.

“If you haven’t gotten it through your thick skull yet, Omega is one devious SOB. Any one of us could’ve been fooled by him. So for you to stand there and act like you would’ve figured it out…Just sit down, Nymph.”

“I’m sorry, but how can we trust that this Guardian is who he says he is if we couldn’t do the same for the other?”

She, thought Jack to herself, but Evie wanted to keep up the subterfuge. Jack really couldn’t blame her. It had worked well for her thus far.

“He knew my civilian identity,” Jack explained. “And he had a contact teach me how to send encrypted emails so we could be in communication.”

True to Evie’s word, she passed Jack’s email on to her husband Howard. He reached out and invited her to White Hat to discuss the internship. After Jack’s conversation with Mimmi, she was a little more inclined to believe Evie was the Guardian and agreed.

Howard came down to the lobby to meet her, asking if she’d be willing to do a ‘Walk & Talk’ since he was in a Fitbit competition with some friends back home and needed to get his steps in. While there was probably some truth to that, it was mostly so they could get out of the office without raising suspicion since it was bugged. They were followed at a distance, but as far as their tail knew, Howard was telling Jack about the internship and she was taking notes. In reality, he was teaching her how to send encrypted emails and she was writing down his instructions. The whole thing struck Jack as rather odd—to think she thought he was a thief working for Omega, and now she was teaming up with him to learn how to get in touch with the Guardian.

When they returned to the office, Howard was sure to offer Jack the internship. She thanked him for the opportunity and told him she would talk to her parents about it. After successfully getting in touch with Evie, Jack called Howard up to turn down his generous offer. Her summer plans had changed and she no longer had time for the internship. Howard said he understood, and promised to keep her in mind for future opportunities.

Of course, Jack was still a little wary of Evie. The first thing she did was demand the woman tell her everything. Evie agreed upon one condition: Jack was to tell no one else other than Diego. She didn’t know who the other holders were since they weren’t Chosen Ones (or her Chosen Ones, as was the case with Ladybug and Cat Noir) and she didn’t know if they could be trusted.

I wish I still had the Swan Miraculous, she wrote. Then I could just read their intentions.

Jack was shocked to discover the Swan Miraculous had nothing to do with emotions like she had previously thought. She bemoaned the fact that her Positivity Clubs must have done absolutely nothing then, but Evie was quick to assure her that they did help in their own way. By developing a positive culture, people were encouraged to do good rather than evil—it just took a while, which was why Jack didn’t see any improvement right away. Besides, while the Swan Miraculous targeted
intentions, the Butterfly Miraculous it was based off of did target emotions. By bringing the idea of Positivity Clubs to Paris, Jack had done a world of good combating the powers of Hawk Moth.

After a bit of back and fourth, Jack agreed to keep Evie's story a secret. Evie sent back a lengthy response detailing the day the first Miraculous was created and how she became the Guardian of the Recrees, among other things.

“Just because he knows your name doesn’t mean anything,” Nymph pointed out, bringing Jack back to the present.

“He also knows who Omega really is,” countered Jack. She stood up, opened her accordion folder, and tipped it over. Information spilled out, including a rare recent picture of the man, complete with his trademark Panama hat. Nymph grabbed it to get a better look. “His name is Julius Ende, owner of E Enterprises, the largest conglomerate you’ve never heard of,” Jack explained. “And that’s just the way he likes it.”

Her friends began to dig through the information Evie had compiled for Jack, commenting on what they saw.

“Bank records from 2011…No. That’s impossible. No one has that much money.”

“So he owns, like…half of California then?”

“My Lady, you see this house? That’s even larger than my—than the Agreste mansion!”

“Holy—how many people are working for this guy?”

“This is what we’re up against,” explained Jack. “He’s got money. Connections. A history of keeping things quiet. But we have a unique advantage at the moment—he doesn’t know that I’m on to him. He thinks I trust him. The Guardian—the real one—thinks we can use that against him.”

“How?” wondered Ladybug, looking up from a copy of a passport sporting one of Omega’s many aliases, a Gerard Brown.

“He has a plan.”

There were parts of the plan Jack didn’t particularly like, like keeping her knowledge of Hawk Moth’s identity a secret for the time being and not using Miraculous Rabbit on the compact to get her powers back to normal, but she trusted Evie because Evie had trusted Jack first and shared her story. Besides, there was one part that made her overlook all that, a part that made her grin like a complete and utter loon.

“But that plan is going to take all of us,” she explained. “So I'm calling Perro Negro in.”

Chapter End Notes

"Spread My Wings," a companion piece to "Hop To It," explores Evelynn Ende's time as the Guardian. It can be found at:

https://archiveofourown.org/works/19103296/chapters/45390109
While not necessary to understanding "Hop To It," it does provide backstory that Jack is now familiar with due to her correspondence with Evie. I hope you like it!
Corporate Climber

Chapter Summary

Moving to a new place is hard enough for any fifteen-year-old, but imagine being separated from your boyfriend, having to learn a new language, and, oh yeah, getting off on the wrong foot with the local superhero by accidentally destroying half the neighborhood. For Jaclyn “Jack” Smith, her transition to life in Paris is anything but easy, but for Rabbit, her superhero alter ego, there are darker forces at work. Let Ladybug and Cat Noir deal with Hawk Moth. She has her own set of problems.

Chapter Notes

It's been...three months since I last published a chapter. Yikes! I didn't mean to leave my lovely readers hanging! But I had a little bit of a burnout after publishing Spread My Wings. I know not a ton of people read Hop To It, and thus not a ton of people would read Spread My Wings, which is both optional and doesn't include any canon characters, so I knew it would be an uphill battle from the beginning, but its always disappointing to work really hard on something and not receive as many readers/kudos/comments as you were hoping.

Please note that I'm not saying this to guilt you guys! I'm grateful for all my readers. The reality is, we don't owe each other anything. I had to sit down and remind myself that I'm not writing for the adulation, but to get this story out of my head and into the world (and with OCs as the main characters, it was never going to be huge anyway). Readers, kudos, and comments are just a bonus. That being said, comments encourage writers to an absurd degree. I know it's long past Fanfiction Writers Appreciation Day, but why don't you leave a comment on an old favorite or a WIP that hasn't been updated in a while? Like...right now. Open a new tab and do it! I'll wait, I promise.

... 

All done? Great! Time to bring Diego to Paris ^_^

Oh, and the shoutout this time goes to...peristeronic! I'm a simple girl. I see a comment, you get a shoutout. Thank you so much for reading and...excusing my French =P

Jack remembered her first time at Charles de Gaulle Airport. She spent most of it staring down at her scuffed Vans feeling numb inside. Sure, things hadn’t been ideal back in Los Angeles. She had lost all her friends, had become a social pariah at school, but with Ultimate Frisbee and Diego, life had been looking up. Stuck in another country though, she felt like she had no chance at true happiness now. She resigned herself to a life that would always be full of regret, listening to a language she would never be able to understand, not matter what positive idiom Mimmi spouted.

When you hit rock bottom, the only way to go is up! Things will get better, Jack.
It had been easy to dismiss her. Jack had a perpetual rain cloud hanging above her head at the time. It only dissipated because she wasn’t one to dwell on things she could not change. Even though she doubted Mimmi’s words, she knew it was up to her to make the most of her current situation.

Leaning across the metal stanchion with her welcome sign held high, Jack once again made a mental note to trust her Kwami more because, here she was, her second time at Charles de Gaulle Airport, and she was fluent in French with more friends than she ever had before, saving Paris on the regular. There was only one thing Jack felt like she was missing in her life right now, and he was going to come through customs at any moment.

“Diego!” she yelled, jumping up and down as soon as she spotted him dragging a large red duffel bag held together with bungee cords and duct tap, a trash bag of additional clothes tied to the handle. He didn’t notice her right away, hood up and wearing a pair of off-brand headphones. He was probably listening to one of his urban exploring podcasts. But then he saw her and it was like watching a firework go off. His eyes sparked as a smile expanded across his face, reaching from cheekbone to cheekbone.

“Jack!” he cried, pushing his hood and headphones off and abandoning his luggage in the middle of the floor as he flat-out ran towards her. Jack gleefully tossed her poster board to one side just in time to receive a hug that almost knocked the wind out of her. Diego squeezed her tight and Jack buried her face into his shoulder, suddenly desperate to preserve every aspect of this moment in her memory. The feel, the sound, the touch, the smell…Diego was here, he was actually here. No dream. No nightmare. No New Jersey fake. Just him.

Throaty laughter sounded behind them and they broke apart, Jack blushing a little. Diego interlocked their fingers though and proudly swung their hands back and forth as Jack’s dad approached them.

“Good to see you again, Champ,” he said, shaking the boy’s other hand. Jack clasped her rabbit’s foot necklace. The first and only other time Jack’s dad met Diego was at LAX, when Diego had given her her lucky key chain in the first place.

“Hola Mr. Smith,” said Diego. “Thanks for picking me up.”

“It’s the least we could do,” insisted Jack’s mom as she picked up Jack’s sign.

“Can’t hold a candle to your foster family though,” said Jack’s dad with a wink.

“It was so nice of them to pay for your ticket. Mr. Smith and I are so glad you found such a nice family. Do you think they’ll adopt you?”

“Mom!” hissed Jack. She thought she had been very clear about the things Jack’s mom was allowed to ask Diego about and foster care certainly wasn’t one of them. Besides, it was Evie who had paid Diego’s way. As far as his foster family knew, Jack’s parents were the generous ones.

“Oh, allow me!” said Jack’s Dad as Diego reclaimed his luggage, ripping the bag right out of the boy's hand and heaving it on to his shoulder.

Jack shook her head, unsure of who was embarrassing her more, her mom or her dad. Her dad won out in the end through sheer persistence. It had been pretty clear since her first day in Paris that he felt guilty about taking her away from everything she had ever known, and right when she got a new boyfriend too. Treating Diego like royalty seemed to be his way of trying to make up for his poor
He carried her boyfriend’s bag, got the door for him, had him sit in the front seat, showered him with compliments, gave him a rather ridiculous amount of Euros for ‘spending money’… Diego didn’t seem to realize anything was amiss though as he regaled them with the story of his journey. He had been on a plane only once before, to Mexico to visit family, but he was two and didn’t remember it, so it was like he was experiencing everything for the first time—curb-side check-in, going through security, browsing through all the little shops and restaurants on the concourse. Then he boarded a Boeing 777.

“I sat next to a Persian woman. I got so exciting thinking she said ‘Parisian,’ but, nope! She was Persian. She didn’t speak English that well, but she was able to tell me she had a son in Los Angeles and a daughter in Paris. Talk about being well traveled! The man on the end was some kind of bonds trader. Wife. Four kids. Just had the forth, actually. The only girl. Ay, can you imagine having three older brothers? But the dude really loved his wife. He met her on a plane. He was too shy to ask for her number though. He thought he missed his chance and would never see her again, but then… ¿Adivina qué? He met her on another plane a year later. You know what they call that? Fate. El sino. When two people belong together, nothing the world throws at them is going to keep them apart.”

He looked over his shoulder and gave Jack a cheeky grin. She made a show of rolling her eyes, but then giggled. It sounded too loud in the car, but, for some reason, she didn’t care. The level of confidence Diego had in their relationship was one of the reasons she liked him so much.

Jack’s dad pulled up to the Lahiffe household just as Diego was slowing down, wide yawns interrupting his chatter. The adrenaline from seeing Jack again was fading fast in favor of jet lag. He had crossed eight time zones, so no one was really surprised.

“Dude!” shouted Nino as he came down the stairs to greet them.

“Nino! The man, the myth, the legend!” said Diego. The two clasped hands and clapped each other on the back. “Thanks for letting me crash here.”

“No problema!” said Nino. “Like I said before, my little bro is at camp during summer break, so… mi casa es tu casa. Hope you like Mecha Strike sheets.”

Diego laughed. “Who doesn’t?”

Jack grinned. Unlike the trepidation she felt when introducing Diego to Cat Noir, she knew from the start that Diego and Nino would get on swimmingly. Both were loyal, fun-loving, and easy-going guys. In fact, one of the many reasons Jack’s enjoyed Nino’s company so much, especially when she first got to Paris, was because he reminded her of Diego in a way.

While Jack’s parents spoke to Nino’s mom, Nino showed Jack and Diego to Diego's room for the next two months.

“This summer break is gonna be lit,” he was saying to Diego. “Your girl Jack and I have been cooking up something major for Positivity Club and we’re pretty psyched about it.”

“She told me!” Wrapping his hands tighter around his bag as he lugged it down the hall, he looked over his shoulder at Jack. “¿Pero vas a decirme qué es?”

Jack put her hands on her boyfriend’s shoulders and gently pushed him forward. “Nope! You’re just going to have to wait like everyone else.”
Nino’s little brother Chris’s room was cramped, but with plenty of natural sunlight. It was *The Little Prince* themed, but it had been desperately covered up with stickers and posters of monsters, dinosaurs, and robots. A small chest in the corner was bursting with toys, many of them broken from rough play. Nino showed Diego where the plugs were and how to open the window since it could be a little tricky. Diego was only half listening though, glancing at Jack from time to time. Jack’s eyebrows crinkled together as Diego jerked his head in Nino’s direction. When Jack continued to give him a blank look though, he sighed heavily, attracting Nino’s attention himself.

“What’s up, Diego?” Nino asked.

“It’s just…I’ve been surrounded by people since I got here and…” He pointedly glanced at Jack.

It took Nino a moment, but his eyes widened. “Oh! Oh, dude. Didn’t mean to cramp your style. I’ll be downstairs with the parental units if you need anything.”

“Thanks, man.”

They pounded fists and Nino left the room, a confused Jack in his wake.

“Uh…what’s going on…?” she asked her boyfriend.

Diego came over closer to her and grabbed her hand. “Still so oblivious…” he joked as he sat down on the bed and tugged her onto his lap. Jack was so surprised that she fell over his knee and onto the floor. Diego was momentarily horrified until Jack started snorting with laughter. He joined in as he sunk to the ground next to her.

“This is *loco,*” he noted, looking around as his laughter faded. “I can’t believe I’m actually here! In France!”

“I can’t believe you’re here either,” Jack agreed.

“It’s not just that though. It’s everything. I mean…Omega was the one who was paying for my *abuela*’s care? And mine?”

“It was a pretty good way to convince your grandma to hand over the Dog Miraculous. Good thing she didn’t.”

“But it led us to believe Omega was the Guardian, which was *no bueno.*”

“Oh, I don’t know…we also accidentally tipped Evie off to Omega’s plans, so maybe it wasn’t all bad. With all of us working together now, we can finally defeat Omega.”

“I like the way you think.” He paused. "*Mi conejito,*” he added softly.

Jack took in a sharp breath, a flutter in her stomach making her hyper aware of the fact that her and Diego’s knees were touching. She found herself entranced with Diego’s lips and the way they curled around her pet name. She hadn’t heard it in person from the real Diego for so long that she had forgotten how rich it sounded and how much she longed to hear it. It was like the missing piece that completed a puzzle, finally in place so Jack could enjoy the whole picture.

“Okay…” she told him, suddenly breathless. “*Now* I can believe you’re here…”
She learned in close to Diego. He seemed slightly startled at first, but then began to mirror her, his eyes fluttering closed.

“Omigosh!”

Jack froze and grimaced before turning to see Mimmi had just phased into the room. The creature had clamped her nubby hands to her cheeks, a goofy smile plastered across her face. Jack grabbed a pillow off of Chris’s bed and tossed it at the creature, but she simply flew around it.

“I was coming right back!” complained Jack. That was the last time she ever left her bag in the car.

The Kwami’s ears drooped. “But I wanted to see Wrekk…”

Jack couldn’t remain mad at Mimmi for ruining the moment for long. “All right, all right. I get it.”

Though Diego seemed disappointed too, he rolled with it. “Good to see you, Mims. I bet he’s asleep.”

He dragged his red backpack over and zipped it open. Sure enough, curled up among the charging cords, discarded snack wrappers, and extra clothes, the Dog Kwami was fast asleep, drool dribbling down his chin. Mimmi zipped over and tackled him awake with a hug.

“Wrekk!” she cried.

Wrekk opened one eye and patted Mimmi’s arm, but then tried to turn over and go back to sleep.

“My apologies, ma’am…I need…I need…sleep…”

“But Wrekk! I haven’t seen you in months!”

Diego yawned again. “Don’t be hard on him, Mims. Jet lag’s no joke.”

Even though Jack didn’t want to say the words, she knew they were for the best as she stood up.

“We should go, Mimmi. Let the boys rest so they’ll be able to meet everyone tomorrow.”

Despite now being barely able to keep his eyes open, the corner of Diego’s mouth quirked up.

“Sounds like a date,” he said.

* * *

The next day and a half seemed to pass in the blink of an eye. Jack was soon futzing about her room, checking her watch constantly as she counting down the minutes until it was time to head to Notre Dame to meet up with Diego and the others. The night outside was warm and moonless, alive with love and laughter. Couples walked hand-in-hand down below, returning from late dinners with plans to walk along the Seine. For once Jack saw the city in the idyllic way it came across in the movies—The City of Love.

“Excuse me…”

Jack spun around at the sound of Perro Negro’s voice and it was like seeing Diego at the airport all over again. He leaned against the frame of her open window, blending with the shadows of the night with his black hair and black suit, but his bright smile gave him away. His tail wagged.
“...You’re...Jack. ¿Verdad?” he asked, a mischievous glint in his eye.

Jack giggled. She hadn’t been expecting Diego to pick her up, but maybe she should’ve known better. “Oh! *Perro Negro*! What are you doing here?” she asked, playing along.

The boy jumped down into her room. “I’m in town on some very important superhero business when I recognized you through your window. You know...I never did thank you.” He moved in closer to her.

“Thank me for what?”

He was right in front of Jack now, tucking some hair behind her ear. “For saving me.”

Blushing furiously, Jack turned away and began to set up her bed with her decoy. “Me? I never saved you.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Jack watched Diego’s face fall and she realized she wasn’t doing a very good job of playing along.

“Oh, you mean with starting *Positivity Club*?” she suggested.

“With everything you do.”

This was getting ridiculous now, but Jack couldn’t help herself. “Well, there is something you should know about me, *Perro*. Something I can’t hold back any longer.”

Diego squinted at her, confused on where she was going with this. “¿Qué pasa?”

Pulling her comforter over her decoy and her phone, Jack flicked off the light, plunging them into semi-darkness. “Mimmi! Hop to it!” she whispered. The Kwami had thankfully been silent during this whole exchange, but Jack swore she heard the creature squeal about how cute they were as she got sucked into Jack’s Miraculous. Now transformed, Jack turned around dramatically, Diego unable to keep a straight face.

“I’ve been Rabbit this whole time!” Jack announced.

The two laughed all the way to the church, running across rooftops in the direction of where the buildings broke away for the Seine. Notre Dame stood on its own little island, solemn and glowing white like a beacon of truth. Jack was just about to drop to the ground and leap across the river like she always did when Diego’s gentle arm was suddenly around her waist as he shot his grappling hook at the steeple of the belfry. They went shooting across the river together. Jack had forgotten... Diego seemed to know when the space between buildings was too great for her and he made sure to always give her a ride.

Swinging into the belfry, they found it packed with superheroes.

“Welcome to Paris, *Perro Negro*!” said Firefly and Cat together as they tossed paper confetti into the air.

As Diego gently placed Jack down, they were surprised to find the belfry decorated with streamers in all their colors—black for Cat and Diego, white for Jack, red for Ladybug, green for Praying Mantis,
blue for Nymph, and yellow for Firefly. A large banner welcoming Diego was tacked up between two of the apostle statues. Jack’s little welcome sign at the airport paled in comparison.

“¡Caray! All this for me?” Diego wondered, craning his neck to get a better look around.

“I know. Tacky, isn’t it?” said Nymph as she stepped forward and offered Diego her hand as if she were a princess. “Congrats on being stuck in Paris like the rest of us.”

Diego took Nymph’s hand and kissed it politely. “No place I’d rather be, ninfa.”

Jack sidled up to Nymph as Diego went around the belfry officially meeting the others in person for the first time.

“You know the Guardian’s plan hinges on Omega reaching out to me, and he’s not going to do that unless all possible Miraculous holders are present,” Jack reminded her, not for the first time.

"This is a dangerous game we're playing,” Nymph noted.

"At least we know we're playing it."

“It was my idea to decorate,” Firefly was telling Diego. “I always wanted to be the social chair at a sorority, but none of them gave me a chance, so…” She gestured upwards.

“Hey, their loss,” said Diego, catching the smile that had slipped off the girl’s face and returning it.

Cat put his arm around Diego’s shoulder. “I got an idea to get your tail wagging now that you’re in town. What do you say me and My Lady and you and your lady go on a double date?”

“Chat…” complained Ladybug, facepalming.

“We should all go out and do something fun,” suggested Diego.

“…After Omega’s been defeated, of course,” Jack was quick to add. Over everyone’s heads, Praying Mantis nodded in approval.


“It’s only a matter of time until Hawk Moth Akumatizes someone,” said Ladybug. “Hopefully you won’t have to wait too long.”

A momentary wave of guilt flooded through Jack’s veins as she toed the ground. She was forced to remind herself that Evie had a point. If Jack told Ladybug and Cat Noir that Gabriel Agreste was Hawk Moth, they would only go confront him. Omega’s guard would go up in the aftermath, no matter what happened. It was best for now to keep them in the dark and utilize Hawk Moth while they could. His next Akuma was the perfect way to alert everyone in Paris, including Omega, that Perro Negro had arrived. That was what Omega was expecting, so that was exactly what he was going to get. According to Evie, the best way to stay one step ahead of her grandfather was to trick him into thinking everything was going according to his plan, then pull the rug out from under him at the very last second.

“I can’t wait to battle with all you guys,” Diego was saying.
“Sorry, but I’m gonna have to sit this one out,” said Praying Mantis. When everyone looked at him, he offered a one-shoulder shrug. “You know, the whole ‘Ambush’ thing. Paris doesn’t really like me right now.”

“Ay, I gotcha. Maybe be ready though, just in case.”

“Sure. I can do that. But only call me as a last resort.”

“And what about you, Nymph?” wondered Ladybug, a slight bite beneath her words. “Will you be joining us this time?”

Nymph seemed preoccupied at first with primping herself in her hand mirror, but she answered when Ladybug opened her mouth to repeat herself. “If it fits into my schedule, but chances are I’ll be busy.”

“During an Akuma attack?”

“I’ll be there!” said Firefly, even though no one asked her. “I can’t wait! With all of us working together, that Akuma doesn’t stand a chance!”

* * *

Jack grasped the bed sheet she had placed over an easel, waiting for Nino’s signal as the July heat made her palms sticky with sweat. The park by Marinette’s house was packed with all the regional presidents of their Positively Club network, as well as her classmates and friends. Well, everyone except Adrien. His summer break was jam-packed with photo shoots and fencing tournaments and the like, so he had no time to tutor Jack or attend Positivity Club meetings. And while Jack was disappointed she really wouldn’t get the opportunity to introduce him to Diego, she was also relieved. She could no longer face him now that she knew his father was Hawk Moth. She was pretty convinced he didn’t know, but that only made things worse.

Feeling anxious just thinking about it, Jack searched the mass of kids for Diego. He stood on the lip of the fountain to get a better view, wagging his eyebrows at her when he noticed her gaze. Jack was brought back into the current moment. She danced in place, once again giddy with excitement. Her boyfriend laughed to himself under his breath and Jack felt like the sun was shining from inside of her.

“…which is why we’re thinking big. Humongous!” Nino was saying into his wireless microphone. Alya trained her camera on him, recording all his exaggerated movements. “Get ready, peeps, for our major summer break project…”

The boy whipped off his hat and gestured to Jack as she pulled the sheet away, revealing the graffiti-inspired poster beneath that Alix had designed, with its puffy yellow letters and surrounding rainbow mosaic.

“Positivity Fest!”

Excitement rippled through the crowd. Nino gave Jack a thumb’s up for a reveal well done before continuing.

“This free two-day event is going to celebrate everything positive—games, rides, candy, face-
painting, bubbles, music, puppies. You name it, we’re gonna have it at the Tuileries! We’ve got a little less than two month to prep, but it’s gonna be sweet!

Before summer holiday began, Jack and Nino had sat down to brainstorm what to do with Positivity Club over the break. They didn’t want to do just nothing—Hawk Moth didn’t rest, so neither should they. And with all the extra time everyone would have now that school was out, they could do something they normally couldn’t. Thus, Positivity Fest was born. Thanks to Chloé, believe it or not, they had already received a festival permit (“You losers wouldn’t be able to get anything done without me”). Alix designed the logo and was going to help Nathaniel and the rest of the Art Club with decorating all the booths. Marinette called in favors, getting her parents to agree to be one of the caterers, Nadja Chamack to promote it, and Jagged Stone to play a set. Juleka, her brother, Rose, and Ivan’s new band Kitty Section was going to play as well. Alya was getting her dad to bring some zoo animals, her mom to do cooking demonstrations, and her sister Nora to run Zumba classes. Max was already working on the electrical plan. Kim was going to run a dunk tank. Mylene was all set to collect donations on the behalf of several worthy non-for-profits and have her dad perform. Sabrina had developed committees and sub-committees and sub-sub-committees with sign-ups, all neatly organized and color-coded. And that was just Jack and her classmates—she could only imagine how big Positivity Fest would get if everyone pitched in with the same level of enthusiasm.

In the middle of Nino explaining about Sabrina’s sign-ups though, Alya’s phone began its familiar cacophony of buzzes and trills. She stopped recording as she pointed her phone down to check on her alerts.

“Don’t tell me…” said Nino, wrinkling his brow at her.

Alya grimaced as she slowly began to back away. “Sorry, Nino. Akuma sighted in the Sixth Arrondissement.”

“A! Not now,” he complained, taking two steps towards her, but she was already slipping away into the crowd.

“Duty calls! Besides, you were just about done anyway.”

“Not cool.”

Jack was hardly listening though, her eyes meeting Diego’s again over the murmuring and shifting crowd. He jerked his head towards the street and hopped down, vanishing from her sight. Jack craned her neck trying to catch a glimpse of his thick head of black hair so she could follow, grabbing her backpack as she did so.

“Jack!”

“Huh?” Jack turned to Nino. He was rubbing the back of his neck, his eyes darting everywhere.

“Where ya going, dude?”

“Uh…” Jack looked down at her backpack, knowing she had been caught red handed. “That… uh… that Akuma sounded pretty close…”

Nino looked pained. “Good point. I know it would be a total bummer, but maybe we should call it quits.”
Even though it was exactly the kind of excuse Jack needed to slip away, she gave the idea some further thought. “How about this? How about we set out the committee sign-ups and once they are filled up, each group can go off on their own someplace safe to begin planning? And everyone can add a draft of their plan to Google Docs like we talked about.”

“Primo idea! Man, what would I do without you as my VP, Jack?”

While Nino made this announcement, Jack waved her classmates over and instructed them to help Sabrina tape up her neon poster boards with the committee sign-ups to the fence that surrounded the park.

“Where’s Marinette?” Jack wondered, unable to locate her friend’s familiar face.

Juleka mumbled something about Marinette’s parents needing something really quick, so she had popped on over to the bakery. Jack didn’t have time to wait for her—she was running behind enough as it was. Hanging up her one sign, she waited for the other Positivity Club Presidents to flood towards her before using them as cover for her escape.

“Way to juggle, Jack!” cheered Mimmi from her backpack. Jack scanned the street for any sign of Diego. “You’ve come a long way since when you first got your Miraculous.”

Jack rolled her eyes. “Okay, Mimmi.”

“I’m serious! You—”

A sharp whistle cut through the air and Jack spun around to see Diego concealed behind one of the surrounding colonnades, already transformed into Perro Negro. Jack darted towards him, looking over her shoulder to make sure no one was watching. Parked cars encircled the park though, so there was no reason to worry. Still, as Mimmi always said, better safe than sorry.

Jack skidded to a halt in the shadows next to her boyfriend and punched the air, her Kwami already flying around her.

“Mimmi! Hop to it!”

Turning to Diego once her transformation was complete, she found him gazing at her with a faraway look in his eyes and a ghost of a smile on his lips, as if he had just seen a shooting star behind her and was thinking of a wish. Jack even turned to look over her shoulder, sure he had seen something amusing behind her, but they were alone.

“What?” she wondered, fishbone braid swinging as she turned back to him.

“Tonta.”

“Am not!”

He gestured grandly. “After you, mi conejito.”

They headed towards the Sixth Arrondissement like Alya had said. Up on top of the roof of a hotel, they observed two police cars go screeching around the corner. Trusting her intuition, Jack followed them, leaping from building to building. Diego added a bit more flare to his trailing, swinging down through the street on his grappling hooks à la Spider-Man, whooping and hollering and saluting to
anyone who caught his eye. Several pedestrians pointed at him and Jack caught snippets of their surprise.

“Who’s he?”

“That’s not Chat Noir.”

“It’s a dog hero!”

Jack caught up with Diego on a balcony that overlooked a T-way intersection clogged with police cars. They formed a semi-circle around the café on the corner. It really stood out with its fire truck red paint and over-sized blue awnings

“Racionista,” she told him.

“Am not!” he insisted.

Jack snorted and took a closer look at the scene unfolding below. Many of the police officers were crouched behind their car doors. Armed with tranquilizer guns, they trained them on the entrance to the café. The door had fallen inwards. Jack’s keen eyes noticed it was covered with smudged black marks, which she pointed out to Diego. He took a sniff and explained he caught a faint hint of smoke. Something, or, more likely, someone, had torched the door.

“So…fire-based powers?” Diego guessed. “¡Muy caliente!”

“I guess we’ll see,” said Jack as a woman carrying a coffee cup stepped out of the café.

A police officer Jack recognized as Lieutenant Roger was quick with his bullhorn. “Stop! You are under arrest!”

The Akuma appeared to be wearing what Jack could only describe as a black armored skirt suit. The pale green blouse she wore beneath had a huge collar that crowded her face, like that of an anime character. Though she still looked mostly human, her limbs seemed to be afflicted with some sort of skin condition that looked green and slimy, and she wasn’t wearing any shoes. She had accessorized with a pair of bug-eyed sunglasses, her green-and-black-streaked hair pulled back into a low bun to get it out of her face.

“I’m not stopping for anyone,” said the Akuma. The nails on her left hand glowed, highlighting her French manicure with a pink topcoat. Jack recognized the slightly stunted French. It was not her first language.

The Akuma took two steps forward, which was all it took for two officers to squeeze their triggers. The tranquilizers shot at the Akuma, but were soon flipping through the air at an off angle, having hit something solid before reaching their target. Confused, a few more officers tried their luck to the same affect. The Akuma took a swig of her coffee as she waited.

“You done? I’m late for a meeting.” More shots rang out. It was like there was an invisible wall guarding the Akuma. “This is outrageous,” she said finally. “I have done nothing wrong! Who is in charge here? I demand to speak to your superior!”

“Ma’am…With all due respect…You’re an Akuma,” Lieutenant Roger pointed out.
This seemed to ruffle the Akuma’s cool, her face twisting into a snarl. “Excuse me!” Her nails stopped glowing and she spiked her coffee cup on the ground as she marched forward towards Roger. His fellow officers struggled to reload their guns. “That is it!” she told Roger, grabbing him by the front of his police polo with her right hand. Jack noted these nails were painted red. “I have had it with your name-calling and insubordination!” The red nails began to glow. “You’re fired!”

Before either Jack or Diego could react, Lieutenant Roger went up in a plume of flames. The fire licked upwards though and vanished as quickly as it had appeared though, leaving the man smudged with soot, but apparently otherwise unharmed.

He still ran away screaming though.

“We should probably avoid that attack,” said Diego dryly.

Jack watched the police flee. “Should’ve left it to the professionals…” she said with a sigh.

"I'll follow your lead."

"Nah. You can go first. It is your debut, after all."

"Verdad."

Jumping up and down, Diego rocked his head from side to side and rolled back his shoulders, hyping himself up. He then shot one of his grappling hooks at the faux balcony above the Akuma’s head.

“Geronimo!” he said, saluting Jack.

Swinging down, Diego kicked the Akuma into a limestone building across the street. The impact dislodged several stones, a fine dust rising up as the Akuma coughed and sputtered and struggled to her feet. Jack jumped down to join her boyfriend, and they both got into battle stances.

“Viewers! Check it out!” Out of the corner of Jack’s eye, she spotted Alya peeking out from behind an abandoned delivery truck, holding her camera in front of her face. “Rabbit's partner Perro Negro is back! You might remember him from the fight with Pygmalion a few months ago. I didn't get a good look at him last time though. Dang…he’s cute! Pretty sure he’s taken though…” Jack snorted and tried to hide her smile.

With unsteady legs, the Akuma took a few steps forward. “You can’t stop me…from rising to the top,” she said in English. “I’m Corporate Climber!”

Diego shot her with his grappling hook, but with a flash of white and pink nails, it hit something invisible with a heavy clang and clattered to the ground. Corporate Climber started to make a run for it, turning around and scaling the building. Turned out Diego wasn’t the only one who was going to remind Jack of Spider-Man today.

Running up to what was presumably an invisible wall, Jack pressed the palm of her hand against it. It was cool and smooth, like glass, but a couple of well-placed kicks told her it was much sturdier, maybe even unbreakable. Leaping as high as she could into the air though, she eventually found the top of it about forty feet up. Jack flung her chakram down at Corporate Climber before she could reach the roof, targeting her left hand. The weapon struck it and the Akuma yelped in pain, the light from her nails fading. Diego barreled through empty air now and tried to once again grab the Akuma
with one of his grappling hooks. As Jack caught her throwing ring on her way back down, Corporate Climber pushed off the building and flipped behind Diego. She reached forward to grab him with her firing hand.

“Down!” cried Jack as she landed next to Diego. With little to no time to react, she swept her boyfriend’s legs out from under him and Corporate Climber whiffed. Jack preformed a flawless kick to her chest over Diego and sent the Akuma flying down the block.

“Gracias, mi conejito,” Diego said as Jack helped him to his feet. He mimed a few punches with a dodge and weave. “Seems I’m a little bit rusty.”

“Don’t worry, Perro Negro,” came a familiar voice above them. “It’s just like riding a bike.”

“It’s a tough thing to grapple with, but you’ll get into the swing of things soon.”

Jack and Diego looked up to see Ladybug and Cat Noir standing on the lip of the building Corporate Climber had been scaling. Even if she had escaped, it appeared she wouldn’t have gotten very far. Ladybug swung down before opening her yo-yo and calling Jack. Cat Noir did much of the same, using her staff like a propeller above his head to soften his landing before popping it open to give Diego a call.

"Sorry we’re late," said Ladybug. "I had to find Chat."

"I was sort of in the middle of something when the Akuma attacked," said the boy sheepishly.

"No worries," assured Jack.

Identities confirmed, Jack and Diego started to return the favor and call Ladybug and Cat Noir respectively, when Jack remembered the Akuma and looked over her shoulder. Corporate Climber crawled across the building next to them and made a flying leap at their little group.

“Don’t let her touch you!” Jack warned as she bounced to safety. Ladybug and Diego zipped away as well, but when Cat Noir tried to launch himself with his staff, Corporate Climber tackled the weapon out from under him and sent him tumbling. Shortening his weapon, he landed on all fours and managed to use it to block Corporate Climber’s right hand. His weapon went up in flames for a brief moment, but he continued to wield the soot-stained staff to keep the Akuma at bay.

“Cat, get out of there!” Diego warned, trying and failing to snag the back of Cat’s suit with one of his grappling hooks. Corporate Climber had thrown up another invisible wall.

Ladybug swung across the street and tried to get at Cat from the other side, but her yo-yo was also blocked. Cat finally managed to extricate himself by somersaulting backwards. When he tried to extend his staff to get out of Corporate Climber’s reach though, it didn’t work and he faceplanted into the ground instead.

“Kitty!” cried Ladybug, but there was nothing she could do, nothing any of them could do, but watch as Corporate Climber, nails glimmering red, struck Cat Noir between the shoulder blades. He was instantly engulfed in flames.

“Your services as a superhero are no longer required,” the Akuma told him, kicking him over on to his back. Cat’s hair and suit smoked a little, his face streaked with ash. He struggled to escape but
Corporate Climber pinned him down with ease and grabbed his wrist.

“N-no!” yelped Cat, using all his strength to wrench away. He arched his back, boots scraping the asphalt, but nothing allowed him to slip out of Corporate Climber’s vice grip as she started to remove his ring.

Jack kicked at the invisible wall again and again and again while Ladybug desperately tried to find where it ended. Their eyes met and Jack saw her terror reflected in Ladybug’s own.

“Dogstruction!”

Jack turned just in time to see Diego absorb two spheres are dark purple light, gaining a familiar aura that flickered around him, dangerous and powerful. A soft sigh escaped Jack’s lips, her heart rate increasing as she watched what her boyfriend did best: protect others.

A thick shatter, like someone had dropped plastic dipped in liquid nitrogen, echoed as Diego raced forward. It took Corporate Climber one glance to size up her current situation and abandon her current task just as light began to appear around Cat’s wrists and ankles, stripping away his disguise. He slammed the ring back down on his finger and restored it, but Jack was already rushing past him, hot on Diego’s tail as he pursued the Akuma down the street. She had enough of a head start to give them trouble though, eventually reaching a building slightly taller than the rest and climbing up it. Diego shot a grappling hook at her, but she dodged and it grabbed a windowsill instead and started to reel him up. Jack jumped up after him only for the Akuma to look over her shoulder and laugh, splaying her left hand as her nails glowed.

Jack smacked into an invisible barrier above her, the top of her head smarting as fell back down to the sidewalk.

“¡Mi conejito!” yelped Diego when he noticed. He shook his wrist and released himself to drop back down, shattering the new invisible wall along the way.

“What are you doing!?” Jack demanded, watching Corporate Climber slip over the lip of the roof and vanish.

He didn’t seem to hear her as he tried to help her up. “Are you okay!?”

Jack pushed away from him, running to the left and jumping up to the roof of a lower building before launching herself up to the taller one. She heard a zip much deeper than Ladybug’s yo-yo and knew Diego had followed her, but she was too busy scanning the streets below for any sign of the Akuma. She had vanished into the maze of the city though, and Jack’s ears could pick up nothing but the general bustle of Paris.

“Great. Just great,” Jack muttered as she marched away.

Diego looked suitably chastened, ears down and tail between his legs. “Lo siento, mi conejito. I know you can take care of yourself. I just… I haven’t seen you in a while and when I saw you get hurt, I guess I just—” He was interrupted by the first paw print imprinted on his dog tags vanishing. Jack waved him off.

“Go recharge,” she insisted.

“But—”
“We’re probably going to need Dogstruction to defeat her, so hurry up!”

“...Okay.”

Jack didn’t want to be angry with Diego—just thinking about it tied her insides up in knots—but they had an Akuma to defeat and he had allowed her to get away. And for what? Because she had bumped her head? She couldn’t even bring herself to look at him as she dropped off the roof and returned to Ladybug and Cat Noir. The two appeared to be in some sort of argument themselves as Cat leaned on his staff.

“...‘Twas but a scratch. An ember,” he was saying.

“Uh-huh.” Ladybug narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. She nodded to the left. “Jump to the top of that building.”

“Why do that when I’d just fall for you?”

Ladybug covered her face with her hand.

“What’s up?” asked Jack as she jogged up.

“Chaton doesn’t have his superpowers anymore,” explained Ladybug.

“Don’t listen to her, Rabbit! I’m—”

Ladybug kicked Cat’s staff out from under him and he fell in a comically large manner. He struggled to his feet with a sour look on his face.

“Okay, okay,” he admitted. He switched to French to further plead his case. “But remember Reflekta? I still have good ideas, My Lady. I can still help.”

Now that was a picture day Jack would rather forget. She got transformed into the Akuma’s likeness just like the rest of the class and was powerless to help. The same fate had befallen Cat Noir, yet he was able to organize them into a fighting force to save Ladybug, and stuck with her until the Akuma was defeated.

Ladybug shook her head though, grabbing Cat's hand and pointing to his ring. “Your Miraculous wasn’t up for grabs that time, remember?”

Cat’s ears lowered as he frowned. Jack felt terrible for him—it was difficult to be powerless—but Ladybug was absolutely right. Corporate Climber was no Reflekta. Cat Noir was out of the game until this Akuma could be defeated.

“Is Perro tracking the Akuma?” asked Ladybug, turning to Jack.

Jack’s ears and face soon matched Cat’s. “Uh...no. We lost her. He went to go recharge.”

“Seems this fight is going to be a lot more difficult than we anticipated.” With a flick of her wrist, Ladybug opened her yo-yo and tapped at the screen. “I have a plan, but it involves Firefly. I’m going to see where she’s at.”
“Good idea.”

Firefly picked up not even halfway through the first ring. “Lady!” she cried, her voice emanating through the deserted street. “I was going to call, but I didn’t want to interrupt you. I think I’m lost…?”

With a kind and only slightly beleaguered smile, Ladybug began to patiently guide Firefly to their current location. Jack was just about to chime in to help when she noticed Cat making his way over to Corporate Climber’s discarded coffee cup. He picked it up and examined it, rotating it slowly as he stroked his chin. He glanced up, his eyes falling on the café, and began making his way towards it.

“What are you doing?” Jack wondered, jogging to catch up to him. He spun around and walked backwards.

“I’m gonna find out where Business Climber went!”

“You mean Corporate Climber?”

“Oh…” Cat turned the cup to show someone had written ‘Grimpeur D’entreprise’ on it. The French didn’t exactly have a direct translation for the word ‘corporate.’ “Yeah.”

“How are you going to do that?” Jack wondered. “You don’t have your powers.”

“Like I was just telling LB, this cat’s got a few kits up his sleeve!”

Walking over the scorched door, Cat Noir and Jack entered the café, Cat making a beeline for the register. Patrons had barricaded themselves behind chairs and tables, and were only now peeking out to see if the coast was clear. No one was at the counter, so Cat cleared his throat and rapped on it.

“Hello?” he called out. “What’s a handsome superhero have to do to get some service around here?” A barista peered over the counter, her ponytail quivering. “Ah, there you are!” said Cat kindly. He plunked down the coffee cup. “Do you know who the Akuma is?” The barista blinked as she stood up. Cat turned to give Jack an aside. “I’m asking her who the Akuma is.”

“Um…”

“I don’t understand,” said the barista, taking the words right out of Jack’s mouth. “How would I know?”

“Didn’t her order sound familiar?”

The barista’s eyes lit up as it dawned on her. “Triple shot—one shot decaf, two shots regular—not too sweet cappuccino! The Akuma must be that blonde lady who comes in every day before work.”

“And where’s work?” He turned to Jack again. “I’m asking where she works.”

“Why?”

“Because think of it—her name is Corporate Climber. Obviously whatever caused her Akumatization was work-related. I bet she’s heading there now.”
“She did mention a meeting! Cat, that’s genius!”

He beamed at her.

“I don’t know where she works,” admitted the barista. Cat looked crestfallen, but the woman crinkled her brow and concentrated. “But she always wore this name badge with the company logo on it. Some sort of blue and green bar graph. I’d recognize it if I saw it.”

Jack flinched and her breathing became shallow, a sudden weight pushing down on her chest. She knew exactly the badge the barista was talking about. Because her dad had one just like it.

Without even thinking, Jack slid her chakram off her wrist and pulled up the Internet to search for the company logo. She showed the barista the result.

“That’s it!” she said.

Jack turned heel and raced out of the café, a confused Cat trying to follow but quickly falling behind without his enhanced speed. His shouting was intelligible from so far away. He was probably wondering how Jack knew French.

Ladybug was exactly where Jack and Cat had left her, waving towards the roof of a building. Firefly appeared next to her in a flash of light. They turned at the sound of Jack’s bounding footsteps.

“I know where Corporate Climber went!” Jack told them. “We need to hurry!”

Ladybug nodded without even a second thought and geared up her yo-yo. “Lead the way, Rabbit!”

Wall kicking off buildings and landing on the closest roof, Jack gave the area a quick scan, locating Notre Dame and heading in the church’s direction just as Ladybug landed next to her. She gave Diego a call as she did so, but it went straight to his voicemail. It was a bit hard to hear it with Firefly running next to her, the lapels of her black jacket flapping in the breeze, but the message was so familiar that Jack could probably repeat it verbatim.

“You’ve reached Perro Negro, Defender of Los Angeles. You missed me, so leave a message. Ha llegado a Perro Negro, Defensor de Los Ángeles. Me extrañaste, así que deja un mensaje.”

Jack didn’t waste any time after the beep. “We think the Akuma is heading to a building about six or seven blocks north of Notre Dame. Tall. Glass. Huge skylight. You can’t miss it. Meet us there.”

Firefly grabbed Jack around the waist as they approached the Seine and used her flashlight to warp them both across, Ladybug swinging after them. Jack caught a glimpse of Notre Dame. Was it really just last night they had all met together in its wooden belfry? They had been so confident then. Now Jack was starting to worry. If a simple Akuma was giving them trouble, how were they ever going to defeat Omega?

On the roofs on the other side of the river, Jack leaped over chimneys and crossed terraces until the building where her dad worked came into view. It was about seven stories tall, a large atrium taking up one corner. Jack skidded to a halt to gather her bearings, Ladybug and Firefly by her side.

“Is this the place?” wondered Ladybug.

Jack nodded, finding herself unable to speak.
“Let’s wait for Perro to join us, and then we can go over the pl—”

But Jack wasn’t waiting. Even though she knew it was stupid, even though she knew it was reckless, she couldn’t sit idly by knowing her dad could get hurt. The man who took her surfing and to baseball games, who embarrassed her in second grade when he bowled over another parent to get a better view of her in the school play. A part of her understood that it didn’t matter what happened to him since Miraculous Ladybug would fix it, but she didn’t care. She just wanted her dad safe and planned to do everything in her power to make it happen.

Jack launched herself across the street to the radio station next door, the distant shouts of her name following her. When she made the leap to the top of her dad’s office building, she heard a zip and looked over her shoulder to see Ladybug was trying to corral Jack with her yo-yo. Jack used her chakram to bat the weapon down before landing on the skylight just as Firefly appeared nearby. Spotting the rooftop access, Jack bounded through the door, broke off the handle to buy her some time, and slipped down the stairs.

Her rabbit ears on the swivel, Jack caught the Akuma’s distinctive voice, harsh and unforgiving. She was close. The door being knocked down by two superheroines one floor above drowned her out though.

“Rabbit! Stop!” Ladybug demanded as they burst into the building.

"Bitty, what are you doing!?” cried Firefly at the same time.

Jack exited the stairwell and tried to locate the Akuma again. Her voice was closer still. It seemed to be emanating from an open door at the end of the hall. Jack barreled towards it only to see a flurry of movement in front of her. Entering what appeared to be a boardroom, Jack nearly ran into a thin man in a suit, hair graying at the temples, as he tried to escape. Before he could crash into Jack though, he smacked into something Jack couldn’t see.

“The glass ceiling hurts, doesn’t it?” chided the Akuma as the man groaned in pain. Ladybug and Firefly joined Jack, Firefly bumping into the wall and rubbing her forehead. Corporate Climber glanced up at them, her French manicure alight, and offered a winsome smile. “I will be with you and your friends in a moment, Ladybug. I just need to take some disciplinary action first.”

Jack’s eyes darted around the room, realize that it was nothing but men in business suits frozen in their chairs. Then her eyes fell on her dad, looking dapper in dark gray with a pink shirt and matching paisley tie. He was always much more daring than his co-workers when it came to his clothes, some of the others calling him ‘Hollywood,’ but he currently looked equally as terrified.

“Please…” begged the thin man, cowering as Corporate Climber powerwalked up to him. “Please don’t hurt me! That promotion you wanted? It’s yours.”

“Too little, too late,” said the Akuma. “I’m in charge now.” She grabbed what Jack presumed to be the CEO by the neck and lifted him up off his feet, pushing him against her glass ceiling. “You’re fired.”

Her nails flashing red, the man suddenly erupted into flames. As quickly as it happened though, she dropped him, snuffing out the fire. The man that remained seemed to be a burned out shell of his former self. His eyes were glazed over and he was babbling incoherently. He even began to flap his lips with his index finger like a Looney Tune.
Corporate Climber turned to address the rest of the board as if she were finishing up a PowerPoint presentation. “Any questions?”

There was a stampede as almost everyone got up and ran to the far side of the room, as far from the Akuma as they could get. One man even fell. No one bothered to help him as he desperately tried to crawl the rest of the way. Corporate Climber moved towards him, but Jack’s dad stepped in her way.

Jack screamed in her head and she started to kick the wall, even though she knew it was hopeless.

“Linda, don’t do this,” Jack’s dad begged.

“I’m not Linda!” seethed the Akuma. “Linda was weak. She didn’t stand up for herself. I’m Corporate Climber now!”

Jack’s dad held up his hands. “Okay, then. Corporate Climber. I understand that you’re angry, but please don’t take it out on us. A lot of us were trying to advocate for you.”

“Oh, of course! Because I’m a weak woman in need of saving! Thank you, Easton, for volunteering to be the next one who gets fired!”

As the Akuma menaced her dad, Jack felt as helpless as the day Sequana tried to drown Cat. In fact, the same word was on the tip of her tongue. Dogstruction. One word. Three syllables. All Jack had to do was say it and she was through the invisible barrier and at her dad’s side. But Sequana was months and months ago, and if there was one thing Jack had learned, it was that things weren’t always as hopeless as they felt.

“Ladybug…!” said Jack, turning to her friend with a pleading look in her eyes.

It took all of a second for Ladybug to formulate a plan. “Firefly, your flashlight! Get in there!”

“Ah!” cried the girl, struggling to pull her weapon from her belt. She fumbled with it a bit once it was free, but eventually got a grip on it and clicked it on.

In a flash, Firefly was beyond the barrier, standing on the table. With a mighty heave, she clocked Corporate Climber in the head with her flashlight with such force that the Akuma went flying through the windows that took up the entire left side of the room. As the glass shattered, so too did the invisible wall Jack was leaning against, allowing her and Ladybug further into the boardroom. Neither of them wasted any time.

“Get to safety!” Ladybug commanded the group of slack-jawed businessmen. “Quickly, now, before she returns! Go, go, go!”

Jack only had a one-track mind for her dad though. She grabbed him by the arm and gently led him to the door, the others surging around them as they made a mad dash for the exit. He was a little shaky on his feet.

“Hey, do I know you?” Jack wondered. This was surprisingly not the first time her dad had been in danger due to an Akuma and she felt compelled to say something about it.

“Oh, yeah! You asked me to save your daughter.”

"I never did thank you."

"Don't mention it. I'm just sorry you moved halfway around the world only to deal with Akumas here too."

They were safely in the hall now, so Jack left him and headed back.

“Rabbit! Wait!” he called after a moment of hesitation. Jack turned in the doorway to the boardroom to face him. He looked older than Jack had ever seen him, and she was reminded that he was almost fifty. “Don’t apologize for the things others do. You have no control over them, only you, and I know you’ve always tried your best.”

Jack felt a tear creep up in her left eye. “T-thank you.”

“Where’d she go?” came Firefly's voice behind Jack.

“Firefly, no!”

Jack spun around to see Firefly peeking over the edge of the hole she had created, apparently searching the ground for Corporate Climber. Ladybug was making a move to pull her back, but she was too late. Something black and green dropped down from above, tackling Firefly and sending her tumbling off the ledge.

Jack darted over to the broken window just in time to see Firefly and Corporate Climber hit the ground, followed by a fireball as Firefly went up in smoke. Her and Jack stared as the Akuma got up, brushed off her skirt, and turned to glare at them. She pointed at her eyes with her pointer and middle finger, and then pointed at them.

“Looks like my plan just went out the window…” said Ladybug, voice shaking a bit.

With startling swiftness, Corporate Climber ran up to the base of the building and began to climb up towards them. Using her yo-yo, Ladybug grabbed the boardroom table and flung it up against the shattered window. Her and Jack then turned tail and ran back the way they had come, trashing the hallway as they went to at least slow the Akuma down a bit.

“Do you have a back-up plan?” Jack wondered.

Ladybug nodded as she opened her yo-yo. Jack glanced sideways to see Praying Mantis’s stern face as Ladybug tapped the call button superimposed over his picture. Unlike with Firefly, it took him a bit longer to pick up, but he did eventually, looking apprehensive and grim. Jack recognized the background. He was in Notre Dame’s belfry.

“Praying Mantis!” said Ladybug. “I’m calling you in.”

“Huh…? But…”

Jack stole the yo-yo out of Ladybug’s hands. “The Akuma can take away abilities if she touches you. Cat Noir and Firefly are without their powers, and Perro is off recharging so…please! Ladybug and I really need your help.”
Here the young man’s face softened into concern. “All right. Yeah. Um. Sure, I’ll be there. Where you guys at?”

Jack and Ladybug clambered back up the staircase to the rooftop access as Jack directed Mantis on where to go, the footsteps of evacuees echoing up from below them. As he flew to meet them, Ladybug filled him in on her plan. If they could get Corporate Climber to fire Mantis while he used Deflectoskeleton, she’d end up firing herself, making her an easy Akuma to defeat.

“People know how my powers work, though,” Praying Mantis pointed out. “She's not going to fire me or whatever.”

“I know. That’s why I’m going to act as bait,” Ladybug explained. “Once I get her into position, you’ll step in front of me and use your ability.”

"That's too dangerous," Jack countered. "We can't risk you getting fired. I'll be the bait."

"It won't work. You know Hawk Moth has her going after my Miraculous."

"But I want to help!"

"You will. You're going to kick her forward so she doesn’t pull back at the last second."

"Good call," said Mantis.

"And I’ll still have Lucky Charm, just in case.”

A shadow crossed over Jack and she looked up to find Mantis coming in for a landing next to her, his robes billowing.

“Sounds like a plan,” he said, pushing his tonfa closed and ending the call.

Jack’s rabbit ears twitched as she heard footsteps hit concrete. “Hurry! She’s coming!”

Mantis concealed himself behind the rooftop access while Jack hid behind the rumbling air conditioning unit. As the Akuma burst through the door, Ladybug tried to rope her up with her yo-yo, but Corporate Climber created an invisible wall to shield her.

“Thought you could get the jump on me if you had a head start, hmm?” she wondered.

Her nails on her right hand flashed red and Corporate Climber’s French manicure went dull for a moment only to brighten again. Ladybug suddenly found her back up against an invisible wall as the Akuma swiped at her with her firing hand. Ladybug dodged out of the way just in time though and her nails racked against her barrier. It erupted into flames, briefly revealing its shape. This one was about twenty feet tall and spanned the length of the entire roof. No longer able to do its job though, Ladybug slipped through it and away from Corporate Climber, darting along the side of the rooftop access.

The fire disappearing, Corporate Climber growled in frustration as she chased Ladybug down and splaying her fingers, causing the superheroine to trip over nothing. Jack supposed her invisible walls could be of any height, even a few inches tall. Ladybug was in position though, so Jack slinked out of hiding.
“I don’t want to fire you—you do good work—but the decision is out of my hands,” Corporate Climber was telling Ladybug as the girl scrambled to face her foe. Though the Akuma couldn’t see from her position, Praying Mantis was right next to Ladybug, ready and waiting. “This is my superior’s choice.”

The instant Jack saw Corporate Climber’s red nails light up, she darted up and kicked her in the back. The Akuma stumbled forward, unable to stop herself as she reached towards Ladybug. A streak of blue and cyan darted between Ladybug and Corporate Climber though just as Praying Mantis stepped out in front of Ladybug. Jack could only watch, horrified, as Nymph’s hand mirror turned into a ball of fire. Yelping, Nymph swung the burning mirror like a baseball bat and struck the Akuma, throwing her to the edge of the roof before abandoning her weapon on the ground.

“Nymph!” squeaked Ladybug, eyes wide. “What are you doing here!?”

“Is that the thanks I get for saving you?” wondered Nymph. “Rabbit almost knocked that Akuma right into you!”

“That was the plan!”

“You!” cried Corporate Climber, pointing in Praying Mantis’s direction as the poor guy tried to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. Being a bright green superhero made it all but impossible.

The Akuma inched away from them, clearly realizing just how close she had gotten to defeat, before breaking out into a full-out run. Chasing her almost felt like an involuntary action to Jack. She was not about to let Corporate Climber escape again, not when her own dad has the woman’s intended target.

“Stop her!” Jack cried.

Praying Mantis was the fastest among them, easily outstripping Jack as he tried to run the Akuma down. She had a head start though and was already slipping over the edge of the building.

Like a bug on a windshield, Mantis smacked into an invisible wall and collapsed in a heap. Jack skidded to a halt, alarmed to see Corporate Climber reaching up over the edge to grab Mantis’s foot as he laying groaning on the ground. She hadn’t dropped to the ground at all—she’d been lying in wait.

“No!” cried Ladybug as her back-up plan also went up in flames.

“Thank you, but your services are no longer required,” Corporate Climber told an ash-coated Praying Mantis as she crawled back onto the roof and stood up, brushing a little bit of soot off her metallic pencil skirt.

“Look what you’ve done!” Ladybug accused Nymph.

“Excuse me!? Bug boy did that all by himself.”

Ladybug wasn’t having any of Nymph’s attitude. “Forget it. New plan. You and Rabbit cover me while I use Lucky Charm. Go!”

Jack fell back a little, positioning herself between the Akuma and Ladybug. Ladybug still had her ace in the hole. As long as she had time to pull it off, it didn’t matter how many superheroes
Corporate Climber fired—she would lose in the end.

With a scoff, Nymph started to rise straight up into the air as fast as she could.

“No, wait!” cried Jack, but it was too late. Nymph bashed her head on a glass ceiling just like Jack had earlier. She fell from the impact like a dead weight, smacking into the skylight and almost crashing through, but the glass held.

Jack and Ladybug rushed to head Corporate Climber off before she got to Nymph, but it was no use. The Akuma threw up a new invisible barrier and they were helpless to stop her. They weren’t the only ones trying though. Mantis had recovered, and he ran at Corporate Climber and jumped on her back to try to choke her with one of his tonfa. She was so surprised that it took her a moment to throw him off, but that moment was all Nymph needed. Jack watched the girl tap one of the bobbles on the side of her head, the ones that looked like giant compound eyes, and something tiny and white escaped it. It fled into her cupped hands. There was a flash of cyan light as she imbued it with her powers.

“Fly away my beautiful Amok!” she whispered. Only Jack could hear it. "Help Rabbit protect Ladybug!”

Just as she finished her command, Corporate Climber got to her.

“What poor performance you have,” noted the Akuma as she raked her red nails across Nymph’s back. “I have no choice but to let you go!”

There was a buzzing and Jack turned to see a dragonfly glowing a bright greenish-blue darting along Corporate Climber’s barrier. Jack ran to go meet it, holding out her wrist. The bug swung around and dove at her watch, vanishing into it in a shower of light. This was shortly followed by a flash of light, which concentrated into the shape and form of a giant hare as large as a rhinoceros, sporting a magnificent pair of antlers. On it’s back was a saddle.

“What on earth is that!?” wondered Ladybug as Jack eagerly hopped up onto the Emotimal.

“It’s a jackalope!”

“A what?”

“You know, a jackalope! Part jackrabbit, part antelope? They’re…uh…huh. Are they maybe only an American thing?” It didn’t matter. Jack grabbed her steed’s antlers and turned its head towards Corporate Climber’s barrier. It bucked it. A small crack formed in mid-air. The creature headbutted the barrier a more few times, Corporate Climber backing away.

“No! Impossible…!” she insisted, right before the jackalope burst through.

The Akuma went skittering away, slipping over the edge of the building again. Jack wasn’t fooled this time though. As she urged her jackalope forward, she stood up on its back and jumped as high as she could just as they reached the ledge. Below her, Corporate Climber hugged the wall near the top of the building, waiting for Jack and her Emotimal to smash into her invisible barrier. The Emotimal crashed through it though, much to the woman’s shock and horror.

“GOTCHA!” said Jack, flinging her chakram at the Akuma as she dropped down towards her. Unable to form another invisible wall in time, she caught the chakram and fired it instead, leaving Jack free
to kick her in the face. Corporate Climber went rocketing toward the ground and smashed into the street below like a meteorite. Tires screeched as cars swerved to avoid the sudden pit in the ground as pedestrians cried out in fear and fled the scene.

The jackalope, meanwhile, wall jumped off the next building and ended up beneath Jack. Grabbing onto an antler, Jack swung herself back down into the saddle as it continued to wall jump all the way down to the ground. Like a zombie bursting forth from the grave, Corporate Climber was pushing hunks of asphalt off of her as she clambered out of her hole, breathing heavily with a mixture of exertion and rage. Her prim and proper bun had come undone and she was missing a lens from her sunglasses. The eye behind it was reddish-orange with a vertical black pupil—the eye of a tree frog.

“I didn’t work eighty hours a week for years, missing holidays and weekends, just so some rabbit with a…a rabbit can stop me!” she raged.

“Sounds like someone needs a vacation,” offered Jack.

Corporate Climber growled and took a step forward only for Hawk Moth’s influence to appear and stop her cold. Jack bit her lip as the Akuma listened and swung her head to look up at the roof, catching a glimpse of a swarm of ladybugs as Lucky Charm went off.

“You’re just a distraction!” she realized, running off towards the building.

"Wait, no!"

Jack’s Emotimal jumped into action, but didn’t have enough speed to break through one of Corporate Climber’s barriers in one go. Jack could only watch as Corporate Climber once again scaled the building like the slimy frog that she was while her jackalope bashed its antlers against an invisible wall again and again.

“Whoa, mi conejito. Sweet ride!”

Jack turned to see Diego jogging up to her, cuff already open as he called her. Jack looked down at her wrist expecting to find her chakram ringing, only to remember that she had sacrificed it to the Akuma in order to kick her in the face. Jack and Diego’s eyes met, both of them at a loss. How would they be able to prove they were who they said they were?

“Hey, no!” came a shout further down the street. Jack turned to see another Diego racing towards them, her heart dropping further. “You stay away from her, Chameleon!” He tossed Jack her chakram like a Frisbee, which she barely managed to have the presence of mind to catch. “Here you go, mi conejito.”

Jack watched, dumbfounded, as the second Diego tried to call her on his cuff.

“Why…why isn’t it ringing?” he wondered, crinkling his brow.

“It got fired by the Akuma,” Jack said weakly.

“So there’s no way to prove I’m the real me?”

“Come off it, mentiroso,” said the other Diego. “I’m the real Perro Negro.”

The second Diego stared at his doppelganger. A beat later, he was upon him, trying a throw a punch
while the other held his arm back.

“Ay, see!?” cried the one on the defensive. “Chameleon is attacking me!”

“Of course I am!” said the one on offense. He threw a couple more punches, which were all blocked. It was like fighting a mirror. “It’s the quickest way to prove that you’re Chameleon!”

“Mi conejito, I would never attack first like that!”

“I would after what you’ve put my girlfriend through!”

They switched, the first Diego now on the offensive. “Don’t listen to him, mi conejito. Ask me something only I would know.”

“No, don’t! You know he’s after your identity. He’s just using this to get more information about you.”

“Um…uh…” Jack looked from one Diego to the other, all of her worst fears being realized. What kind of girlfriend was she for not being able to tell her boyfriend apart from a jerk who was impersonating him?

“Just kick him!” both Diegos pleaded at the same time as one of them put the other in a headlock.

“Rabbit!”

Jack looked up at the sound of her name, relieved to have an excuse not to intervene in Diego and Chameleon’s fight, but it faded into dread as she caught sight of something red falling through the air. Ladybug had thrown herself off the roof! When she didn’t make a move for her yo-yo though, Jack realized with a stuttered heartbeat that something was terribly wrong.

Jack slipped her chakram around her neck and her Emotimal jumped into action on instinct alone, dashing down the sidewalk with Jack barely able to hang on. It jumped at just the right moment and Jack caught her friend in her arms. Ladybug eyes were glossy with tears. She was brushed with soot and smelled faintly of singed hair and latex.

“I-I tried, but I-I couldn’t… I couldn’t find it. It’s in her… It’s one of them, I know it, I know it, but I didn’t have my yo-yo and there… there were too many of them.”

“What are you talking about? Where’s your Lucky Charm?” Jack had never Ladybug cry before and the sight of her tears shook her to her very core.


Heart jumping into her throat, Jack turned in the saddle to see Corporate Climber crawling down the side of the building towards them. About a hundred feet away, both Diegos name-checked Dogstruction and ran at each other.

It felt like the world around Jack was falling to pieces. Ladybug curled up into a ball in her arms.

“You can’t… you can’t.” Jack shook her friend. “But you still have a plan, right? You always have a plan.”
“What's the point? Without my powers, I can’t purify the Akuma. I can’t fix Paris. I can’t save the day!”

“Er…uh…”

“The only thing I can do now is keep Corporate Climber from getting my Miraculous. So let’s go! Please! Before it’s too late!”

The Akuma had reached the ground now and was sprinting towards them. The Diegos were destroying everything in their path except for each other. There were gouges in the street, cars flipped on their sides with their alarms going off, uprooted trees, shattered storefronts. Diego and Chameleon continued to elude each other, but Jack doubted it would be for much longer. And then there was Ladybug, frantically begging now, urging Jack to run. Jack squeezed her eyes shut and tried to block everything out. This was all too much for her. The worst had happened, and it was happening all at once. What was she supposed to do?

When you hit rock bottom, the only way to go is up!

Something in Jack snapped. It was difficult to tell what it was, but she found herself sliding off of her jackalope with Ladybug still in her arms. Ladybug once told her that she had good ideas. Maybe it was time Jack started believing it. At this point, she couldn't possibly make things worse.

“Rabbit…? Rabbit, what are you doing…!?” hissed Ladybug, probably suspecting Jack was suffering from some kind of mental break. But that was as far from the truth as possible. For once, everything was clear to Jack, from point A to point Z.

“You trusted me to catch you,” Jack pointed out. “Please trust me a little bit longer.”

Ladybug stared up at Jack, possibly seeing something she had never seen before that took her completely off-guard and pushed her straight into acceptance. “All…all right.”

“Perro Negro!” Jack called out. Both boys stopped fighting for a moment and looked to see Corporate Climber, nails glowing red, making a beeline for Jack. Jack pretended she was struggling with holding Ladybug. “Help!”

The two Diegos jumped at her summons, racing to head the Akuma off. Jack had timed it so all three would reach her at the same time. Holding Ladybug tight, she squeezed her eyes shut and hoped her calculations were correct.

Strong arms surrounded them and Jack knew she had found the real Diego. Her Diego. He went up in flames as he took the hit meant for her. The facts of the matter were Chameleon could talk like Diego and act like Diego all he wanted, but he would never be Diego. He wasn’t a hero, so he would never be willing to sacrifice himself just to protect someone else.

“Thank you,” she whispered into his ear before pressing a small kiss into his now ashy neck. “And I’m sorry.”

“…Sorry?”

She shoved Ladybug into Diego’s arms and spun around him to find Chameleon staring at Corporate Climber, who had gotten flung back into a parked car thanks to the power of Dogstruction.
“Anti-Lucky Strike!” Jack shouted, pumping her fists at the sky.

Chameleon turned and the fake face he wore warped with displeasure as he realized the jig was up. He made a move to rush Jack with Diego’s power, but she gained her own destructive aura and stomped on the ground, causing his footing to falter. She then roundhouse kicked him in the face, sending him flying. He morphing back into his true form before he could even hit the ground.

Diego whistled and Jack found herself blushing.

“Perro, get to safety,” she insisted, taking Ladybug back from him. He nodded and, with a salute, started running. Chameleon made a move to follow, but Jack’s jackalope came out of nowhere and tossed him back with its antlers, steam issuing forth from its nostrils.

“Don’t you ever impersonate my boyfriend again,” Jack told him, her face dark as the jackalope charged him again. This time, Chameleon turned tail and ran as fast as his legs could carry him, flinging out his whip to zip away. Jack’s Emotimal was relentless though and vanished around the corner in hot pursuit.

Satisfied, Jack turned to go.

“Did I give you my permission to leave!?” demanded Corporate Climber. Recovered from her close encounter with Dogstruction, she threw up an invisible barrier, but Jack ripped through it as if it were paper, the sound of its shatter the only proof it existed at all. She headed back the way they had come, towards Notre Dame and the Seine. More shatters followed, but Jack easily outpaced the Akuma. By the time they reached the river, Corporate Climber was no longer in sight.

“Where are we going?” Ladybug wondered.

Jack didn’t answer, concentrating on keeping her anti-Lucky Strike in check as she power jumped up to the closest roof and headed in the general direction of her house, a few cracks following her. Spotting a nice rooftop patio that had been transformed into a jungle of potted plants, Jack paused to deposit Ladybug there.

“Rabbit, what are you doing?” wondered the girl, still breathless, but now more confused than hopeless.

Grimacing, Jack made a move to leave. Ladybug would only try to talk her out of her plan.

No, wait. Why was that a bad thing? If the plan wasn’t sound, Ladybug would tell her and they could put their heads together to form a new one. If Jack left now, she was acting no better than she had when they were fighting Sequana. That was ages ago, and Jack had learned so much since then. Her plans were good, but reckless. She wasn’t alone, but she didn’t always have Diego around to protect her. She had to be smart. She had to be sure.

“I’m going to go revert my powers back normal,” Jack explained. “Get Lucky Strike and Miraculous Rabbit back.”

“What!? But—”

“My Guardian told me how to fix them.”

“Rabbit, that’s great! That means you can purify the Akuma!” Ladybug grabbed Jack by the
shoulders, a huge smile splashed across her face as she laughed in relief. “You can save the day!”

Jack turned away, breaking her friend’s grip and eye contact. “But it comes with a catch. If I do it...it will free Trumpeter Swan.”

“What!? How…?” The girl took a moment to scramble back in front of Jack and grab her hands. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. Rabbit, I’m powerless. As much as I hate to say this, you have to do it. If you don’t, Corporate Climber will continue to terrorize Paris, firing people left and right. The city will descend into chaos. *Chat Noir* and I won’t be able to avoid her for long. If Hawk Moth gets our Miraculouses…” She shivered and shook her head. “Still, you’re making an awfully big sacrifice, doing this.”

“Hey, it’s what we heroes do.”

“Putting others before ourselves,” acknowledged Ladybug, squeezing Jack’s hands. The Rabbit Miraculous rang, reminding Jack she only had a minute or so left before she detransformed. “A long time ago, I told *Chat* that you weren’t a hero,” said Ladybug. “I’ve never been so wrong in my life. I can see why your Guardian chose you and I am honored to fight by your side. Get yourself sorted out, defeat Corporate Climber, and we’ll face Trumpeter Swan and Omega. Together! Okay?”

Jack nodded and mustered a small smile. With a salute, she hopped away; looking over her shoulder as the splash of red among the plants gradually disappeared from view. A hero with or without her powers—that’s who Ladybug was too, and Jack was so glad she knew her.

Slipping through her bedroom window, Jack headed straight for her nightstand and opened the drawer. There, sitting among the empty journals and charging cords and baseball cards and old PEZ dispensers was a compact mirror covered in soft white leather. Jack grabbed it.

“Miraculous Rabbit!” she cried, tossing it into the air before she could doubt herself.

The compact exploded like a minuscule sun, throwing golden light and puffs of cotton into eight different directions. They all looped around and headed west. Moments later, Jack’s Miraculous ran out and Mimmi was spit out from the watch face. The poor thing collapsed on the bed, barely able to move.

“Hey. Hey now…” said Jack, gently picking the Kwami up as the poor thing struggled to lift her head.

“I’m so…I’m so…”

Jack hushed her. “After you recharge. How does a coconut cupcake sound?”

The Kwami managed a nod.

Jack padded down the hall to the kitchen. It was exactly how she had left it this morning on her way to Positivity Club. The fan spinning lazily. Her empty cereal bowl still sitting in the sink waiting to be washed. The note from her mom telling her to have a good day (and to pull the ground beef out to thaw at 3:00 PM). It was comforting in a way, because Jack knew her small act of using Miraculous Rabbit had literally changed everything.

Shoving hunks of cake down her gullet, Mimmi regained some of her pep. “’M so prou off ooo,” she said, her mouth full.

The Kawmi swallowed the rest of her cupcake. “Be positive! If you defeated him once, you can defeat him again. Maybe even faster! Because you’re not the same Rabbit you were a year ago. Remember when I told you earlier today that you’ve come a long way? Think about it. You don’t depend on Diego as much, you’re less reckless, you work better within a team, you ask for advice, you think things through…don’t you see, Jack? One of the marks of a hero isn’t how you win, but how you improve after you lose. And after what you did today…there is no doubt in my mind.” She zoomed over and nuzzled Jack’s cheek, pushing her back a little. “You’re going to defeat Trumpeter Swan this time! And save Ceeree to boot!”

“Aw…” Jack giggled as she held Mimmi. “Thank you!”

“Now! Are you ready to show Corporate Climber who’s boss?”

“You know it!” Jack held a fist up high. It was time to be a hero. “Mimmi, hop to it!”

As Jack transformed, she noticed a lightness she didn’t know she had been missing. The knowledge that she was a liability, even after she got her anti-Lucky Strike under control, had weighed heavily on her shoulders. With it removed, her feet had never felt swifter, her convictions never more sure. She darted out of the house feeling like she could fly, racing back to where she had left Ladybug in record time, which was just as well. Corporate Climber had found her.

Jack stood on a roof next to the one Ladybug was on, watching in horror as the Akuma cornered her friend. Luckily, Corporate Climber had her back to Jack and wasn’t yet aware of her presence.

Jack glanced at her Miraculous. “Not on my watch,” she said to herself (Why was Cat never around when she had the best lines!?) before tossing her chakram into the air. “Lucky Strike!”

Spinning wildly, the throwing ring above Jack grew larger and larger in order to accommodate the object it was creating. It was almost fifteen feet across when a simple ladder painted white popped into existence and fell into Jack’s outstretched hands. The chakram shrank with a snap and fell around Jack’s head.

For a moment, Jack looked around frantically for a way to use the ladder as she raced to the edge of the roof. Then she remembered that her powers were a lot more streamlined than Ladybug’s. Lucky Strike was very simple: Get object, use on Akuma. Even if it didn’t always make sense, it always worked out.

With a mighty heave, Jack reached forward over the edge of the building and swung the ladder down at Corporate Climber like she was a fly in need of swatting. The Akuma was too busy reaching for Ladybug's earrings to notice, but soon found herself shoved into the space between the last two rungs, her arms pinned to her sides.

“Rabbit!” shouted Ladybug, her face brightening as she saw Jack over Corporate Climber's shoulder.

Corporate Climber looked over her shoulder and seethed. Her French manicure begin to shine. She had placed an invisible wall…somewhere. Probably to keep Jack from getting to her.

“…Gotcha!” realized Jack, noting the ladder mostly hung in the open space between the two buildings. With a devilish grin, she jumped on the end of it. The force of her weight tipped the ladder
like a seesaw, flinging Corporate Climber at her own invisible wall with a sickening smack as Jack rode it down to the ground. The Akuma dropped in a heap next to her, causing pedestrians to scream and seek cover behind cars and inside the lobbies of the surrounding apartment buildings.

“Rabbit! The Akuma is in one of her business cards!” Ladybug shouted down at Jack.

“Got it!”

Since she was currently recovering from a concussion, Jack had no trouble picking Corporate Climber's pocket for a stack of business cards. They all read 'Corporate Climber, Akuma: Expert in firing, glass ceilings, and wallcrawling.' Jack used her chakram to slice through them all in one go. A butterfly ensconced in dark energy fled from them.

“I got you this time, Akuma!” Jack shouted as she grabbed her chakram and swung is back. Like a camera shutter, the weapon closed and then opened again, now filled with yellow light. “Time to de-evilize!”

Leaping into the air, Jack swatted the butterfly like Corporate Climber before it. In an instant, it was transformed into something harmless and white. Upon landing, Jack waved at it like she had seen Ladybug do countless times before.

“Bye-bye, little butterfly!”

At her feet, the darkness bubbled away from Corporate Climber, revealing a trim woman in a regular business suit and heels, her green eyes matching her blouse. She groaned as she tried to make sense of where she was. “What…?”

Jack went over and grabbed her discarded ladder, which was leaning against a 'do not enter' sign. “Miraculous Rabbit!” she cried, lobbing it into the air. It transformed into magical bits of fluff which floated off in different directions, but some remained behind to scrub Ladybug clean and return her abilities. The girl pulled out her yo-yo and used it to swing down to Jack.

“Pound it!” she said, offering her fist.

“Top Gun high-five!” said Jack at the same time, slapping Ladybug’s fist with an open palm.

They both started at the mishap for a moment, then burst out laughing.

*   *   *

The instant Jack detransformed back at her house, she was on the phone with Diego. He had a little prepaid deal for the summer. It wasn’t much, but it did the job.

“That was amazing, mi conejito!” he cried when he picked up. “You saved the day. You!”

“Diego—” She had to tell him why she apologized the last time she saw him.

“Where are you? I say a Top Gun high-five is in order. And a hug. And definitely a kiss—”

“Diego!”

“¿Qué es eso?”
“Yeah, I got my powers back, but you know what this means. Trump—”

“Huh. That's weird.”

“What?”

“Gabs is on the other line.”

Jack was so thrown that she forgot about what she had previously been trying to say. "Your foster sister? Why is she calling?" It was the middle of the night back in Los Angeles.

"I don't know, but I gotta take this. Hold on."

“Dieg—” There was an odd silence and Jack knew she had lost him. With an anxious sigh, she set her phone on speaker and went to go grab another coconut cupcake for Mimmi. As the Kwami munched on it in content silence, Jack stared at her phone. After a few minutes, there was a slight crackle and Diego was back, his voice suddenly quiet and anxious and unlike him at all.

“Jack—”

Jack dove at the phone and turned off the speaker, shoving it up against her ear. “What's going on? Is everything—?”

But Diego was still talking. “—bad, this is very, very bad. Trumpeter Swan is—”

“He’s back. I know! That's what I’ve been trying to tell you!”

“No, no lo entiendes! He threatened Gabby. He made her tell him who I was and where I was—”

“You told Gabby you’re Perro Negro!?”

“Of course not! She heard noises from my room and she went to go check it out and Trumpeter Swan was there and—”

“In your room?”

“That’s where I’ve been keeping him.”

“In your room!?”

“You told me to keep him safe! And I thought…you know, where else could I keep an eye on him? He fits right in with the rest of my action figures—”

“So let me get this straight. Trumpeter Swan knows your name is Diego Rodríguez? And that you’re in Paris?”

“…Yes.” Diego paused and swallowed and whimpered a little. “He’s coming for me, Jack.” A beat. "What do we do?"

END OF PART 3
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