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**What the Cat Dragged In**

by Kryal

**Summary**

Tony’s pretty sure it’s written into cosmic law somewhere: superheroes are not supposed be *cute*.

Apparently, no one’s told these two.

He’s okay with that.

**Notes**

This is set sometime after the first season of Miraculous Ladybug, and about a year after the events of Avengers. It does not, however, take into account any developments in the MCU canon after the Avengers movie.

Also, while technically various characters are transitioning between French and English depending on the audience, I’m writing this with the assumption that all the characters in question are fluent enough to transition easily between the two languages. Therefore – and because, I confess, I have only the most basic grasp of French, certainly not enough to feel confident in using it in a fic – everything here is written in English, although French slips in occasionally for the sake of flavor (or when required for punning!).

Additionally: I will be in Japan throughout the month of August (plus change on either side).
As a result, updates are likely to be sporadic. However, this story is complete, bar final editing passes.

EDIT November 2017: *What the Cat Dragged In* now has its very own TV Tropes page, thanks to WikiSorcerer from Fanfic dot Net. Cool!

See the end of the work for more notes.
“Mister Stark! It is a joy and an honor to have you here with us for this year’s most exciting Expo!”

Yeah, I’ll just bet, Tony thought dryly, pulling his lips back from his teeth in the hopes that it would pass for a smile, while he mentally counted down the seconds until he could probably retrieve his hand from the warm, jolly double-fisted handshake that had taken it hostage without bringing the Wrath of Pepper and a lecture about making nice for the sake of the company down on his head.

Just a second before Tony was ready to pull out, however, Mayor Bourgeois let go, still beaming magnificently. Well, probably not a surprise. Anyone who managed to pull off landslide elections to Mayor of Paris four times in a row pretty much had to be a master of playing to the cameras. Including knowing how to dodge other people making him look bad.

“Allow me to introduce my daughter,” Bourgeois said, turning with an expansive sweep of his arm that somehow led to his other arm resting companionably – but not too companionably, of course – across Tony’s shoulders. “Chloé, my jewel…”

The teenage girl standing impatiently behind them barely looked up from her nails before she sniffed audibly, perfectly primped nose going up in pure disdain.

The alarms going off in Tony’s head at the word daughter faded back to Defcon Three. Daddy’s pampered little pet, he concluded, making the usual noises – yes, yes, pleased to attend, of course he had the highest expectations for one of France’s largest multi-national, multi-industry exhibition events – and quickly making his escape through the hotel doors as the mayor turned his attention to the next high-profile victim – er, guest – to appear. Thank God. Even if Daddy was looking for a money-match, there’s no way she’d be caught dead around a scruffy, forty-year-old upstart who works with his hands. One tantrum, and he’d fold like wet paper.

Too bad there wasn’t anything to save him from the snickering that had ghosted through the door on his heels.

“Someone just dodged a Jericho,” Clint said, the taunting smirk audible in his voice. “Question is, who.”

Tony snorted, stepping to the side so that they wouldn’t be blocking the doors for whoever else walked through. “Some bodyguards you two make.”

Clint crossed his arms over his chest, still smirking. “Wasn’t aware you needed bodyguarding from pretty girls.”

“Girl? That was a shark, Hawkeye.” Tony shuddered. “Heaven help the world when she gets to the wedding dress age.” With a wave of his hand, he dismissed the conversation. “So what the heck did the two of you do to get stuck on Stark-sitting duty, anyway? Fury in a bad mood or something?”

Natasha rolled her eyes slightly, resting a hand on her suited hip. Unlike Clint, who looked about as comfortable as a hawk wearing a canary costume, Natasha carried off her feminine version of a black formal business suit with style. “Believe it or not, the world does not revolve around you, Stark,” she said dryly. “We’re here on separate business.”

Tony mock-reeled, hands over his chest as though he’d been struck. He’d gone the casual
rich route, nice pants and a sexy black silk shirt; after all, he had a reputation to uphold. Or maybe live down to. “I’m wounded. Really. You’d think Fury didn’t trust me or something.” As he started to stroll down the lobby of the convention building, he glanced at them curiously. “Separate business?”

He more than half-expected them to shut the query down, but Clint simply shrugged. “SHIELD’s commissioned something from one of the presenters,” he explained. “The first prototypes are scheduled to be displayed today.”

“And Fury sent you two to look at it?” he asked skeptically.

Natasha smiled slightly, the sort of smile that said I have a secret. “We’re the experts at assessing the particular requirements in this case,” she said.

“And I’m pretty sure Fury sees the Stark-sitting as a bonus,” Clint added, sly mischief glinting in his eyes.

Tony ignored the jibe. “Wait, the prototype’s on display?” he asked. “Not super-secret hush-hush? Have you checked to see if Fury’s been replaced by pod people?”

You’re not nearly as funny as you think you are, said Natasha’s moment of deadpan silence before she answered. “It’s a simple design that may be useful for some of SHIELD’s minor field agents. There’s nothing inherently military about it.”

Huh. That could explain why Tony hadn’t heard anything about this little commission, at least. And it didn’t actually tell him anything.

Making up his mind, he turned around. “Okay, then. Lead the way.”

The two SHIELD agents blinked at him. “‘Okay’?” Clint echoed, eyebrow going up.

“You guys actually have something interesting to see, other than a dozen variations on ideas I had and gave up as boring when I was ten.” Which wasn’t entirely fair; sometimes, the guys at places like this could come up with something genuinely interesting… but if they did, they sure as hell wouldn’t be putting it on public display. He’d mostly agreed to come along as a way of getting the Stark Industries corporate board off Pepper’s back a bit; nothing like an appearance of the madman behind the Ironman for a little publicity.

Point was: boring. At least peering in on SHIELD’s latest project probably would be interesting.

Plus the mild fact that they were definitely taunting him by being cagey about it.

Natasha and Clint glanced at each other for a minute, before both shook their heads. But they obligingly turned, heading for the elevators.

Tony had to blink when the elevator rose past the first five floors. He’d only briefly glanced over the expo’s layout guide – after a while, see one expo, you’d seen a thousand, you didn’t need a map to know where things would be – but he knew that the technology toys were concentrated on the lower levels, to help facilitate moving heavy prototypes in and out. But the elevator kept going up, until…

“Wait. The tenth floor?” he asked in disbelief, finally seeing the number on the elevator display as the car slowed smoothly. “But that’s…”

You’re not nearly as funny as you think you are,
Sure enough – the elevator dinged, and the doors slid open to reveal a ballroom, the movable walls pushed aside to show…

Clothes. Lots, and lots, of clothes.

“The fashion floor?” he squawked. Yes, squawked. He was man enough to admit it.

Clint’s lips were twitching, and even Natasha seemed amused. “Technically, there are six fashion floors,” the archer pointed out wickedly.

Which, fair enough. Fashion and Paris, kind of like really expensive peanut butter and jelly.

“That still doesn’t explain why the two of you are here to look at… what? Prototype black tie?” Tony insisted as he glanced around, noting that, indeed, most of the displays on this floor were higher-end fashion, running the line from swanky evening dress to power suits. “What, is Fury trying to put together a James Bond fashion line or something?”

He could feel Clint winding up for another zinger, but Natasha let out a faintly put-upon sigh, one that communicated clearly that she’d had enough foolishness for one hour.

“It’s not uncommon for SHIELD agents to need to operate at high society levels,” she said. “As bodyguards, as investigators, in any number of different roles. Unfortunately, most of the clothing that blends into that strata tends to be very restrictive; not the sort of thing you want to deal with if you have to respond to an unexpected threat.”

Or an expected one, for that matter. Tony should know. “So…”

“A few months ago, Fury was able to commission Gabriel Agreste to design a line of high-end clothing designed to allow complete freedom of movement.”

Tony’s eyebrows rose involuntarily. “Agreste, huh?”

Clint blinked. “You know him?”

“Our course not,” Tony huffed. “Know of him, sure.” You didn’t move in the multi-millionaire circuits without knowing the really high-end names, the stuff people pulled out to prove that they had both money and taste. Tony owned a few specialty Gabriel items himself.

Which still begged the question. “And Fury sent you two to check out the James Bond suits?” he asked, pointedly.

Natasha shrugged, her attention on navigating through the crowds, which were an interesting mix of designers and fashion critics, interspersed with mannequins and live models displaying the clothes. “We are experts when it comes to freedom of movement,” she pointed out.

True enough; Black Widow and Hawkeye weren’t weaklings by any measure, but they usually played at the level of Ironman and Captain America and the like by being fast, flexible, and really hard to hit.

And scary. Especially Natasha.

It was also the biggest pile of nonsense Tony had heard since a classmate had tried to scientifically prove the existence of Santa Claus in third grade. SHIELD had plenty of highly-qualified staff who knew the physical demands of field agents. Black Widow and Hawkeye were top-level operatives. They didn’t run errands – unless the errand was something on the level of “fetch
the Hulk.”

There was no way in *hell* that they were here just for some nice suits.

Although that was apparently *part* of why they were here, because Natasha was making a beeline for the large, open booth sporting the simple sans serif G in a circle that was the Gabriel trademark.

A young woman in her early twenties was already there, wearing a fine white gown that glimmered subtly with every movement – embroidery, Tony realized after a moment, the exact same shade as the gown. She was talking to a long-faced woman in a business suit… no. To the tablet the woman was holding, which showed the stern, expressionless face of none other than the great Gabriel Agreste himself.

“…*exquisite* stitchwork, Miss Bissette,” the man was saying. His expression and tone never shifted, even as his head tilted the slightest hair of a degree to the side and his eyes moved slightly – likely scanning the woman’s image on his own screen. “Your choice of different tones of white rather than pure white-work is a daring move. The embroidery was done by hand?”

“Yes, Mister Agreste,” the woman said – a little breathlessly, like she was fighting to keep herself from squeaking and present a professional air.

Amused, Tony drifted back a bit as Natasha paused politely to wait for the conversation to end.

Clint sidled a little closer. “Don’t look now, but Her Majesty the shark is circling again,” the archer murmured, grinning slightly. “Nine o’clock.”

Quirking an eyebrow slightly, Tony shifted just enough to glance that way without being too obvious about what he was doing, and immediately bit back a smirk. Yep, there was her ladyship the Princess Bourgeois, strutting her way through the room as though she owned every inch of it. She’d even found a bit of arm-candy to go with her other accessories – although the arm she’d captured to hang off of wasn’t attached to the jock-type Tony had half-expected. The kid had more of a boy-next-door look… if by “next door” you meant “the latest Hollywood Prince Charming,” all tousled golden hair and sunny, toothpaste-commercial smile, even if the eyes weren’t the requisite sickening sky-blue. He was even wearing a suit, the sort of plain and dark suit that probably cost more than a three-month salary for the average CEO. And from the way Chloé was smirking at everyone they passed as she pulled the boy along in her wake, she knew exactly the sort of romance-novel picture they made.

Tony snorted and turned his attention back to the conversation in front of him. *Better you than me, kid.*

Miss Bissette was just thanking Agreste and stepping back, a star-struck look on her face that Tony vaguely remembered seeing on various up-and-coming engineer kids when he’d talked to them.

*Whatever makes her happy, I guess.*

As the younger woman stepped back, Natasha stepped forward, clearing her throat slightly. “Mister Agreste,” she said, as the assistant turned to direct the face of the tablet towards them.

The image of Gabriel Agreste didn’t even blink. “Ms. Romanov, I assume,” he said neutrally, switching smoothly to English. “Mister Barton.” Now his eyebrow rose just slightly. “And
Mister Stark as well? This is an unexpected pleasure. Your latest designs for holographic technology have proven a boon for my own design work.” Agreste tilted his head slightly, the nod of a professional to a professional, before turning his attention back to Natasha as though it had never strayed in the first place. “Ms. Romanov, I assume you are here to see the articles that Mister Fury commissioned?”

Natasha nodded. “We are,” she said. “I was given to understand they would be on display here today?”

Agreste nodded. “Nathalie.”

The assistant holding the tablet jumped slightly, her vaguely distracted gaze snapping into focus. “Ah, sir?”

There was just the faintest, ghostly hint of something that might have been amusement in Agreste’s voice. “Please extract Adrien from Miss Bourgeois’s clutches.”

The assistant blinked, winced slightly, and looked past Tony to Chloé and her captive.

Who apparently had either overheard that, or had noticed their attention shift to him, because he did something, and then he was free of the octopus-grip, smiling apologetically at the pouting girl even as he quickly stepped out of recapture range and walked toward them.

And he didn’t even trigger a screaming tantrum in the process of escaping. Now it was Tony’s turn to blink, reluctantly impressed. I need to learn that trick.

“This is my son, Adrien Agreste,” Gabriel said, his tone never shifting from neutral as the boy approached. “He is modeling one of the preliminary designs for the Bouclier line today.”

Natasha didn’t so much as bat an eyelash, but Tony had to fight down the sudden urge to cackle. Seriously? Agreste had named the SHIELD-commissioned clothing line shield in French? Someone must have been feeling snarky that day.

Adrien smiled at them as he offered his hand to Natasha, a warm, infectious sort of expression that didn’t look feigned at all, surprisingly. “Hello,” he said – in remarkably good English, if slightly awkward, accented in a way that suggested he’d never spent much time in an English-speaking country. “My apologies, I was… briefly detained.” Just a flicker of rueful amusement crept into his tone. He nodded politely to Clint, shifted his gaze to Tony-

And paused, bright peridot-green eyes widening in surprise and recognition.

Tony smirked to himself. What’ll it be this time, he wondered, “Ohmygod, it’s Ironman,” or “ohmygod, it’s Tony Stark?” Probably the first, he’s young and rich. Techie toys from Dad are part of the background, superheroes are cool…

Adrien blinked once, slowly – and then shifted, turning a suddenly piercing gaze on the two SHIELD agents.

The professional, magazine-cover smile unexpectedly morphed into a grin, amusement dancing into the kid’s eyes. “Ah. That explains the name of the clothing line,” he commented. “I wondered.”

Politely releasing the handclasp, Natasha arched her eyebrow up just a hair. “Oh?” she asked, her tone as calm and neutral as Gabriel Agreste at his best.
Adrien clasped his hands behind his back, even as his voice dropped slightly to a tone that, while still normal conversational volume, probably wouldn’t carry behind the little circle they’d unconsciously formed at the Gabriel booth. “If I’m not mistaken… all three of you were involved in the battle in New York last year.”

Natasha, of course, kept a calm, neutral face without reacting at all. Clint, however, visibly stiffened in surprise.

Tony didn’t blame him. Sure, the Avengers had caught a remarkable amount of press after that – which Tony personally thought said something about the self-preservation instincts, or lack there-of, in reporters, considering they’d been fighting an alien invasion and anyone with half an ounce of sense would have been making for safety rather than grabbing cameras. But SHIELD had been very quick to snap down on any detailed information about the Avengers’ identities. Ironman was a known figure, of course – but Black Widow and Hawkeye were SHIELD agents who worked out of the public eye whenever possible.

Hell, SHIELD stayed out of public eye, too. And yet the kid’s comment just now made it very clear that he not only knew their faces, he even knew the name of the organization.

_Fury’s going to be having kittens over this one._ Heck, if Tony weren’t concerned with Natasha and Clint’s cover – which their lives depended on, sometimes – he’d probably be calling for popcorn and a video recording of the man’s reaction.

“So how’d you hear about that?” he asked casually, strolling in a little closer to close up the circle. He didn’t want to _loom_ at the kid – but this definitely needed follow-up.

Adrien’s eyes flicked to the side, back towards the sulking girl who was stomping away towards the refreshments table. “Mayor Bourgeois was in office then, so he got a few more details than most people,” he explained, and smiled at Natasha. “Chloé was… a _very_ devoted fan of yours, ma’am.”

Natasha blinked. Actually _blinked_, looking completely taken aback for just a moment, while Clint covered his mouth with his hand in an unconvincing attempt to hide a surprised grin.

The boy’s smile turned rueful. “She’s not as obsessed as she used to be, so she might not recognize you, but… you might want to avoid letting her know you’re here. She _will_ make you take selfies with her, if she does.” He rolled his eyes slightly, looking oddly amused. “I happen to know for a fact that Chloé with a selfie camera is a match for the most reluctant superhero.”

“I dunno,” Clint said, crossing his arms over his chest as he raised his eyebrows. “You got away from her easily enough just now.”

Adrien stepped back and dropped into a deep bow. “The benefit of _years_ of special training,” he announced grandly, before straightening with a playful grin. “Otherwise known as knowing Chloé since we were six.”

The sound of a throat pointedly clearing brought their attention back to Nathalie, and the tablet she was holding.

“Fascinating as this is,” Gabriel said pointedly, his voice desert-dry, “we do have business to conduct.”

Tony found himself fighting back the urge to frown when Adrien flushed slightly, quickly straightening into a posture that was too perfectly straight to be anything other than carefully trained
and practiced. “Sorry, Father,” he said politely, and stepped back slightly, spreading his arms out to either side to display the suit he was wearing.

“As you can see,” Gabriel continued, his attention back on Natasha, “based on Mister Fury’s requirements, I judged that a simple, basic business suit style would best suit as a basis for the design. It is, perhaps, not cutting edge…”

“But it’s a classic design that will suit the widest range of settings,” Natasha said, smoothly matching the change of tone with a businesslike nod.

“Precisely. Should you find the special modifications acceptable, Mister Fury may, of course, negotiate for more specialized clothing as well. Now. The basic challenge, as described to me, was a suit that would appear appropriately formal, while still allowing for strenuous athletic activity at a moment’s notice. In particular, this required flexibility, to prevent binding motion, while also allowing for an absolute minimum of rucking or bunching even in extreme poses. Adrien.”

Obligingly, the kid rotated his arms – forward, back, up, down, showing off the extent of movement the suit in a way that had Tony’s shoulders screaming in unwanted sympathy. Damn teenage flexibility. Although the really impressive part was when the kid just froze, going completely motionless as Gabriel Agreste calmly talked Natasha through the special features of the suit, like the neat little underarm panels of stretchy fabric that let the kid swing his arms like a lumberjack and still look dapper and tidy as soon as they were by his sides again. Teenage boys didn’t usually do still.

_Huh. Model training?_ Come to think of it, Tony thought he remembered seeing the kid on the cover of a couple magazines. Which… would explain a lot. Tony had dated enough professional models to have an intimate awareness of just how much physical work it took to assume a specific pose and then simply hold it for who knew how long, without cramping or falling over. More than a few of them could rival Natasha when it came to fine muscle control.

Not to mention emoting at the click of a camera. Which sort of matched how the kid’s animated, open expression had just settled into a calm, distant blankness that probably owed more than a bit to his father’s default emotionlessness.

“You’ve done good work,” Natasha said neutrally, after the kid had demonstrated that he could actually reach down, flatten his palms on the floor by his feet and bend his elbows, all without the suit tearing itself to pieces or even riding up, which Tony was pretty sure involved the breaking or at least bending of several laws of physics and probably one or two of karmic justice. “This appears to meet our basic mobility requirements admirably, Monsieur Agreste,” she continued as the kid straightened himself back up. “However, given that actual active motion often involves additional demands… Have you field-tested this at all?”

Gabriel’s eyes flicked to the side, somewhere off-screen, and the barest hint of a frown crossed his face. “I have,” he said, cool grey eyes refocusing on Natasha’s face as though the moment had never happened. “However, I must cut this short, as I have a prior engagement. Adrien will give you the details.”

The tablet went black, and the assistant calmly turned it around to face her as she swiped the program away and walked back to the desk at the back of the booth.

Clint blinked. “Well, that was… abrupt,” he said.

Adrien sighed slightly, shaking his shoulders out a bit – the minute the screen had turned off, he’d relaxed from that ridiculous stillness a bit. “Sorry about that,” he said. “He’s… really busy. I was a little surprised he made time for this at all.”
There was something fundamentally wrong about that – but Natasha simply nodded, transitioning her attention back to the kid as though he hadn’t just been playing human mannequin. “Is the suit comfortable to move in?” she asked.

Adrien nodded. “I wore it for fencing one day, actually,” he said. “Father wanted to make certain it wouldn’t snag or catch…”

Slender arms locked around the kid’s neck in an octopus-grip of doom. “Adri-chéri, why didn’t you tell me?” Chloé pouted, blinking up at the boy coquettishly as he jumped slightly. “I would have come to watch you, of course. I’d never miss one of your tournaments.”

One of Adrien’s eyebrows flicked upwards ever so slightly in a perfect expression of amused skepticism. “It was just a regular lesson, Chloé,” the boy said, leaning just a bit farther away from her than simple balance would require. “It wasn’t even at the school; Master d’Argencourt came over to the house, since father wanted to test an unpublished design.” He looked at Natasha again. “Nathalie has the video recording on her tablet, if you’d like to go over-”

Chloé huffed loudly, clearly displeased at being ousted from the center of attention. “Oh, him,” she said contemptuously, actually letting go of Adrien’s neck so that she could make a dismissive gesture. “Well, that explains why I didn’t hear anything. I’m amazed that sorry excuse for a rusty old relic has the nerve to even show his face in public at all, after what happened with the elections.”

“Chloé!” Adrien said sharply, snapping a stern look at the girl. “That’s enough.”

The blonde sniffed – but, oddly, didn’t quite meet Adrien’s eyes, and instead stuck her nose in the air and turned away slightly, as though suddenly absolutely fascinated by her nails. “Well, that explains why I didn’t hear anything. I’m amazed that sorry excuse for a rusty old relic has the nerve to even show his face in public at all, after what happened with the elections.”

“Chloé!” Adrien said sharply, snapping a stern look at the girl. “That’s enough.”

The blonde sniffed – but, oddly, didn’t quite meet Adrien’s eyes, and instead stuck her nose in the air and turned away slightly, as though suddenly absolutely fascinated by her nails. “Well, at least he’s a better fencer than he is a politician,” she said, as though making a grand allowance with the statement. “Not that he ever had a chance, running against my father.”

Tony blinked. That was… odd. Like she’d been about to say something else, but had reconsidered at the last moment-

And Natasha and Clint were both listening. With the carefully nonchalant intensity of cats who’d just heard the pitter-patter of little feet at the mousehole.

Tony narrowed his eyes, suddenly suspicious all over again.

What are you two up to?

“Um… Adrien Agreste? I don’t know if you remember me…”

The kid blinked, turning away from Chloé to look past Tony’s shoulder. Immediately, the set look of his face softened into a welcoming smile that magazines probably paid to feature on their covers. “Miss Blanche Bissette, correct?” he replied. “You won the dress competition for the winter show last year, with the Snow Queen theme…”

Tony took advantage of the distraction to sidle away from the kids and closer to Clint and Natasha, who’d covered those momentary expressions of interest with calm patience, in Natasha’s case, and general bemusement on Clint’s – probably from the idea that people could put so much interest into clothes.

Which, yeah, Tony could sympathize with – but he’d been at enough parties to know how to fake fashion chatter. Or at least not completely humiliate himself.
“So. Anybody else find it a little creepy that Agreste has his kid modeling a *fighting suit*?” he asked casually.

“It’s hardly a *fighting suit*,” Natasha pointed out dryly. “I wouldn’t take it over my normal uniform, given the choice.”

*For which the Y-chromosome-bearing portion of the population either curses you, thanks you, or both,* Tony thought in amusement, but kept the words behind his teeth. He did have some vestigial sense of self-preservation, after all.

“It’s just a business suit that allows more freedom of movement than most,” Natasha concluded. “Assuming the line goes into production, he’s far more likely to find customers among athletes than he is secret agents.”

“Athletes and kids,” Clint added, with a crooked smile. “Face it, if you really want to field-test an outfit for its ability to hold up in any and all situations, you could probably do worse than an active fifteen-year-old.”

Tony had intended to respond, maybe guide the conversation in the direction of *so why are you two really here* – but apparently Miss Bissette had more social graces than Princess Bourgeois, because she looked up from her conversation with Adrien and flushed suddenly in embarrassment.

“I’m so sorry,” she stammered, clearly a little flustered. “I didn’t mean to interrupt, it’s just…”

Natasha smiled. “That’s all right,” she said smoothly, offering her hand as she stepped forward. “And let me compliment the embroidery on your dress. Did you do it yourself?”

Tony almost smacked himself in the face. Or laughed. Because *of course* Natasha would know just the right things to say in order to blend in here. She was a spy. She was a professional at this.

Tony? He’d spent his career making a name for himself by deliberately blowing niceties like social graces off. Sure, he’d learned to fake it, but this sort of thing? Not really his strength.

That said… well, when he glanced over the dress with an eye trained by too many dinner parties to count, he had to grant the point. Bissette herself was fairly unremarkable – a nice but not striking face, just a little rounder about the edges than the normal hire-a-personal-trainer-with-ridiculous-numbers-of-zeroes-on-their-paycheck types. She made it work, though; the dress had clearly been modified to flatter her fuller figure, and the design on it was honestly stunning, even in Tony’s admittedly jaded experience. Closer, what had looked like white fabric turned out to be a very, very subtle pale cream. And the embroidery itself wasn’t pure white either. Instead, it was a complicated pattern of many colors, all of them just as subtle and pale as the cream, so that unless you looked closely, the eye got confused and translated the whole thing into a kind of faint iridescent shimmer on white.

Tony blinked. Come to think of it… no wonder Natasha had taken note. Adapt that trick with dark colors, or more neutral tones, and you had the makings of a very effective hide-in-plain-sight sort of camouflage, without being obvious about it. Which… huh. Translate that to alloys, see if there was a way to get in the visual texturing without messing up streamlining… he had been thinking of trying to put together a stealthier version of the suit…

Politely – and prudently – stepping out of the way of a passing waiter balancing a full tray of glasses, Bissette beamed at Natasha, the expression lighting up her whole face. “Yes! I mean…"
yes, I always do original designs by hand. I learned from my grandmother. I even inherited her sewing kit.” Reaching into her purse, she pulled out a small bag, the patterns on the cloth faded and a little threadbare, obviously lovingly kept for many years.

With a loud snort, Chloé shouldered in, latching onto Adrien’s arm again. “Oh, come on, Adrien,” she huffed, “stop wasting our time, I want to see the new Chloé sunglasses.”

“You mean the ones on top of your head?” Tony thought he heard the kid mutter under his breath as Chloé used her grip on his arm to drag him out of the group-

And promptly crashed headlong into the waiter.

Tony was all too familiar with the train wreck effect – the horrible moment of knowing a disaster was about to happen, knowing nothing he could do would stop it, but at the same time unable to look away. The waiter had half-turned in an attempt to get out of Chloé’s way – but the only thing that accomplished was to put him off-balance as the girl slammed into him. His free hand flailed in a useless attempt to regain his balance as he staggered – then his polished shoe slipped on the smooth ballroom floor, one foot tangled with the other, and the poor man toppled like a tree, straight into Bissette.

The shattering of glass from the dropped wineglasses broke the moment.

“Ow!” Chloé screeched, recoiling as though she wanted to hug herself from the horror of actually touching one of the plebian masses. “Watch where you’re going, you oaf!”

Adrien ignored her, taking advantage of her slackened grip to duck free. He quickly hurried over to the stunned pair. “Are you alright?” he asked, offering a hand to help the waiter roll to the side and off of Bissette. “Be careful, there’s a lot of broken glass…”

With a slight groan, Bissette pushed herself up from the floor – and then froze.

For a second, Tony thought the flying shards of stemware had managed to cut something important – but, no. No, the red came from the wine in the glasses, which had splashed all over her. To say nothing of the puddle she and the waiter were lying in.

A puddle rapidly soaking into that white-on-white-on-white gown, as Bissette stared in stunned horror at the ruins of what had to represent weeks, if not months, of careful, painstaking work.

Chloé burst out laughing.

“Oh, that’s beautiful!” she said, a broad grin spreading across her face as she leaned close – although not so close that the spreading puddle of wine could get anywhere near her shoes, of course. “All that white was just horrible, anyway, this color suits you much better!”

“Chloé!” Adrien snapped, eyes flashing angrily – but before he could say anything more, Bissette suddenly burst into tears. Scrambling up from the floor without any regard for the stray shards of broken glass, she grabbed her bag and bolted through the crowd of gathered onlookers.

“Blanche-!” Adrien started, then looked down at the still-dazed waiter and winced. “Would someone go after her, please?” he said, before crouching down again to rest a hand on the man’s shoulder.

Chloé stomped her foot. “Why are you wasting your time…”
“You’re a real piece of work sometimes, Chloé,” Adrien said curtly, not even looking at her this time. To the waiter, he repeated, “Are you all right? That looked like a bad fall…”

That seemed to break the guy’s paralysis. “I-I’m so sorry, I…”

“This wasn’t your fault,” Adrien told him firmly, tugging slightly until the man – who looked like he was probably a university student, no wonder he looked like the world had just collapsed around him – managed to climb back up to his feet. “It was just an accident.”

“But…”

“Go talk to the staff, ask them to send someone to clean up the glass. And ask them to take some bottles of sparkling water to the women’s restroom,” Adrien added firmly. “And a container of salt, if they can get their hands on one quickly.”

Good try, kid, but you know that’s not likely to work, Tony thought with a wince, waiting well back from the drama with Natasha and Clint. He’d had enough drinks thrown in his face to know that there was a very narrow window for actually getting stains out of white fabric. And given how the whole art of that dress had been based around the play of very subtle colors… Ouch. Poor girl.

Having chivvied the server off, Adrien glanced around at the quickly dispersing crowd. He frowned slightly, and glanced over at their little group.

“Please tell me someone really did go after Blanche?” he said quietly.

“Not that I saw,” Clint admitted.

To Tony’s surprise, Adrien winced. “That’s… not good,” he said slowly.

“Take it from me, she’s probably better off if we leave her alone for a bit,” Tony suggested.

Adrien shook his head, and then looked up to scan the crowd again, more intently this time. “Normally I’d agree,” he said, his tone distracted, “but things have been a little too quiet for comfort the past few days. I’m worried that…”

Someone screamed, shrill and piercing.

Adrien winced. “Oh, no,” he breathed, as mad laughter filled the room. “Called it…”

[Authors Notes moved to main body of the fic, because AO3 is strange when it comes to end notes for the first chapter of a story.]

I confess, I was cackling up my sleeve for large parts of this. Mostly because Fashion is Serious Business. Which it is, both in France in general and particularly in Miraculous Ladybug – but it’s not a normal Avengers topic! Poor Tony.

Adrien speaking English – although it’s never mentioned in the series itself, Adrien’s status as a high-profile model and his apparently demanding education suggest that he probably would have learned English as a matter of course, as it’s fairly important in the business world. Especially once one takes into account the fact that he’s passably fluent in Chinese, which probably would have been lower-priority to Gabriel.
And given that he’s a *model*, and canonically does outdoor photo shoots on a semi-regular basis, yes, Adrien probably knows all the tricks for getting stains out of expensive clothes. Although I should add that I have no personal experience with the club soda-plus-salt-to-absorb trick.

Regarding age: we’re not given an explicit age for Adrien or Marinette (the producer likes to say, “They’re teenagers, that’s the important part!”), but we know that Alix, who is in their class, turned fifteen during the Timebreaker episode. Given this, Adrien is probably turning fifteen in the Bubbler episode, and Marinette is either fourteen or fifteen.

Given Chloé’s complete idolization of Ladybug? Heck yes she would have been a Black Widow fangirl, even without the added “oh, you saved me!” impetus. Wouldn’t have made her any less of a complete brat, but it does say something about her taste in role models and ideals. (Honestly, I give her points for focusing on *I want to be like her* rather than *OMG he’s so hawt* in her fangirling. It adds some depth to her character!)

That said. For the Avengers fans… I only wish I were making Chloé sound worse than she is. But I’m really not. Context: out of twenty-six akuma-possessions shown in Miraculous Ladybug at the time of writing this, Chloé is more or less directly responsible for *nine* of them. More than a third. And those are only the ones we see in the episodes. Given the way that girl scatters casual malice about like popcorn…

(I kid you not. Chloé is the name of a ridiculously expensive brand of sunglasses. Knowing that, how could I not toss in a little shout-out?)
Lessons learned from this chapter:

While I like writing fight scenes (I’m a kinetic thinker, I love writing about motion), I need to learn to scale back on the detail, because when I go blow-by-blow… well. This chapter is three times as long as the last one. Argh.

Part of the reason for that, however, is the difficulty of juggling four characters (eventually six) in a very enclosed space. Normally Miraculous Ladybug sets fights in wide-open spaces, and I can see why! A smaller space means I can’t afford to gloss over events, or let characters space things out with running and dodging.

The other part was that, because I was using the fight to introduce the Ladybug characters, I needed to keep a careful eye on the pacing: I had to make sure that the Avengers got due credit as competent themselves (just unsuited for nonlethal combat situations), while still leaving good openings to let Ladybug and Chat Noir shine in their natural environment, and factor in how much time was needed for offscreen events.

On top of that, because I’m writing Tony’s point of view, I couldn’t gloss over the sorts of things that I would from a Miraculous Ladybug PoV. A Miraculous Ladybug character would know what to expect from an akuma, or from the superheroes. Tony doesn’t – and that means I need to describe them, because that’s where his attention would go.

That was hard. (But really, really fun once I got going. There’s a reason I like using an outsider’s PoV sometimes!)

WARNING: This chapter features Tony and Chat Noir in the same room. Beware of puns.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For one wild, chaotic moment, Tony couldn’t make out what was going on. Just the screaming as the mass of convo guests rushed in a mob for the exits, and that hair-raising laughter.

Then someone or something crashed into one of the movable panels that had been set up to divide the hotel ballroom into aisles for the Exposé. It toppled to the floor, crashing down on a set of display racks and sending pieces of suits and mannequins everywhere, and finally, Tony was able to get a good look at the source of the chaos.

He blinked. “…Please tell me you’re kidding.”

A – woman? Maybe? – hovered in the air above the panicking guests, cold laughter playing across her lips. She was wrapped in a dark dress that seemed to shimmer eerily as the long draping skirt and sleeves drifted lightly in the air, blending in with the long tendrils of ribbon-like dark hair. Above the high collar, her skin was an inhuman dark grey – except for her bone-white hands, stretched out before her with thread spooling out from the fingertips to catch and wind like spidersilk.
Tony liked to think he’d become something of an expert on weird since he’d blasted his way into the superhero business with an awesome suit of high-tech armor and an even more awesome attitude. But this was so over the top that he found himself looking for the camera crew.

The crowd churning their hasty way through the doors to the stairs did not seem to agree.

“Oh my God!”

“It’s a supervillain!”

“Run!”

The dark woman ignored the screaming crowds, sweeping forward in a flow of dark fabric before dropping down with predatory grace onto the fallen panel – and then raising her face to fix blazing wine-red eyes on Chloé, who was still standing frozen near Tony.

“Hello,” she purred, lips curving up in a dark smile. “I am the Seamstress. And I have business with you, little girl.”

Eyes darting back and forth, Chloé backed up. “I’ll have you know, my father is the Mayor!” she blustered – even as her face paled and her hands shook. “If you do anything to me, he’ll…”

The Seamstress laughed, deep and malicious. “Poor little girl, all dolled up in your little castle,” she said, and straightened, as long threads began to twine through the air around her. “I wonder, will you be so proud when you’re coming apart at the seams?!”

The last words were a piercing banshee scream, as the threads whirled like living things, gathering together into a spinning spike before shooting at Chloé.

Not a complete idiot, the blonde girl shrieked and fled.

Timing the move carefully, Tony stepped in and swept his arm up just as the point of the thread-spike passed him, knocking the strike off-target long enough for Chloé to bolt for the stairs.

“Y’know, while I can’t blame you for not liking her, last I checked brattiness was not an executable offense,” he snarked. “If it were, I’d’ve been on the chopping block years ago-”

Rather than deflecting, the threads tangled, wrapping around his arm in a snarl of fiber.

Off to the side, he heard Natasha growl something in Russian that probably involved unflattering suppositions about Tony’s ancestry and the intelligence thereof. “Stark, get out of there!”

Tony rolled his eyes a little. “She’s attacking us with granny’s knitting, how bad can it be?” he asked, pulling his arm free.

Trying, rather.

He tugged. Tugged again.

And then his brain belatedly tapped him on the mental shoulder as it pulled up the files on things like tensile strength and distributed tension and all the unexpected things that twisted fibers could do when they all pulled together.

And that was a lot of thread.
“…So I may have spoken a little too soon,” he admitted, as the Seamstress’s look of rage shifted into a hair-raising smile.

“So. You want to interfere with my vengeance, little Avenger?” she asked, raising a hand. “Very well.”

She raised a hand – and Tony jolted forward, dragged by his captured arm, dress shoes slipping uselessly on the polished floor as he struggled for some kind of purchase to fight the pull.

An arm snapped around his waist, blasting the breath out of Tony’s lungs as Clint anchored him. Red and black and flashing steel stepped in front of him, as Natasha grabbed the mass of thread and brought a knife down, furiously slicing away at the threads.

“You dare!”

Threads whipped around and Natasha lost the knife as she threw herself out of the way – but she’d cut just enough. Gritting his teeth, Tony leaned into Clint’s anchor and yanked, the last threads snapping now that there were less of them to distribute the force. With the sudden loss of resistance, he and Clint both crashed backwards into a tangle on the floor. Before Tony could react, Clint grabbed his shoulders and kicked into a roll, sending them both into the cover of an overturned table.

“Gotta hear it for stock villain dialogue,” Tony muttered, clawing the winding threads off him. Luckily, now that they’d been cut off from the Seamstress they seemed more or less like normal thread, and he was able to get his hand free fairly quickly-

As the mass of thread fell away, the Colantotte bracelet Tony always wore dropped to the floor.

In pieces.

…it’s not broken, Tony noted blankly, as his eyes traced the metal shapes scattered on the polished wood. It didn’t break, it didn’t shatter, nothing actually hit it, it just…

…came apart at the seams. So to speak.

For half a moment, he simply stared. Normally, he didn’t even notice the arc reactor in his chest these days; it was just part of the daily grind of his life, like some sort of very bizarre chest piercing to go with that nose ring he’d been tempted to get when he was fifteen and mad at the world, and just sort of mad in general.

Right now, he was very, very aware of it indeed.

“…Well, that’s not good,” Clint observed mildly.

Dark fabric fluttered in the air as the Seamstress dropped down to the floor in the neat sort of three-point landing that Tony normally only saw in martial arts flicks and when Black Widow got acrobatic.

“Neither is that,” Tony muttered, trying not to feel dangerously vulnerable at the moment. The case with his armor was back in his hotel room – not far, really. But without the bracelets to home in on, the automated arming sequences wouldn’t engage properly, and it might as well have been in storage back on the other side of the Atlantic.

Damn it, damn it, where is…
Just as Tony’s eye landed on the dull gleam of polished leather beside the Gabriel display, the Seamstress straightened. Rather than turning, however, she began to pace towards the emergency stairs where Chloé had vanished, completely ignoring the Avengers behind her.

Two small, white, flat objects skittered across the floor to land at the woman’s feet, and electricity arced.

The Seamstress shrieked – but to Tony’s dismay, the sound was more outrage than pain. With a sharp jerk of the woman’s hand, threads gathered around the electrodes and yanked them apart, breaking the current.

The Seamstress turned, eyes almost glowing with pure fury.

“Stay out of my way!” she screamed.

“That’s not what I’m paid for,” Natasha said dryly – and then had to leap out of her hiding place as the Seamstress pointed a furious hand, and five strands of thread whipped out, catching on light fixtures, debris, stands, anything that could be an anchor, forming a multicolored web of string. Natasha barely managed to tuck and tumble through a gap in the web as the threads tried to loop around her as well, escaping a bare breath of a moment before they pulled tight.

Then the web sagged, as Clint cut through several of the strands. The archer didn’t have his bow with him – and from the grim set of his face and the tight grip he had on the combat knife he’d pulled out, he was very much regretting that fact at the moment.

Something hissed through the air, and Clint flinched reflexively.

A thin line of blood sprang up along one cheekbone.

Tony had to fight the urge to wince as he saw the thread arc around and return to the seamstress, the silvery glitter of a needle at one end.

Getting hit by that would be very, very bad, he thought grimly, staying low and working his way around to the fallen briefcase. He wanted to dive for it, but this would take a moment’s set-up and the last thing he needed was to draw the Seamstress’s attention before he was armed.

He’d gotten enough stitches to be gut-wrenchingly familiar with the feeling of thread being pulled through flesh. He didn’t want to imagine what that would feel like when the threads were being pulled by an enemy who wanted to rip you apart rather than piece you back together.

I’m never going to think about granny’s knitting the same way again, he thought, with a humorless smile.

Luckily, he didn’t need armor to keep a few tricks up his sleeve.

Literally, as it were. Tony smirked as he opened the bag one-handed, his other hand palming the wire he’d threaded up under his shirt when he’d dressed for the Exposé. His hand slipped into the cool band of metal and wires in its hidden pocket of his briefcase, and Tony grinned as he felt the magnetized locks click closed.

Most people carried pepper spray. Tony preferred his pepper-related defenses in a more human form, and went for shinier forms of people-repellent.

The wire clicked into its socket, and Tony’s smirk widened as white light began emanating from the emitter in his palm, charging from the excess energy generated by the arc reactor. “Let’s see
you sew this up,” he murmured, pointing the portable repulsor at the dark figure of the Seamstress-

“Wait!” A smaller hand grabbed his wrist – of his free hand, not the repulsor, at least.
“Don’t hurt her – that’s Blanche!”

Tony jolted, snapping his head around. “Kid. What the hell are you doing?” he demanded.
“Get out of here!”

Adrien smiled tightly, the look a mixture of apologetic and determined. “I tried,” he admitted. “But when she went after Chloé, I got a little tangled up. And now…” He glanced out of his hiding spot, tucked into the V of the Gabriel stand’s desk and a half-toppled panel, and partially shielded from sight by a rack of suits.

Tony winced. Damn. She got between us and the exits…

Wait a minute.

“Blanche?” he echoed sharply, trying to keep an eye on both Adrien’s face and the fight. Although for now it wasn’t much of one; Natasha and Clint were holding their own for now, but they were forced to spend as much time dodging tangling thread and stabbing needles as they were actually trying to get close to the Seamstress.

Pray she doesn’t go for pins as well as needles.

He needed to get out there-

But from the sound of it, Adrien actually had some idea what the hell was going on. “As in that Bissette girl?” he pressed.

Adrien’s lips thinned. “I’m guessing no one warned you about the akuma.”

Akuma? That wasn’t a French word. “Assume they haven’t,” Tony said flatly.

The model sighed heavily. “Of course not,” he muttered, and then winced when their shelter shuddered – Clint had missed a step, and the threads had snared him and flung him into the nearby panel before Natasha had managed to cut him loose.

Adrien drew in a deep breath. “All right. Five second version,” he said in a rush, eyes intent. “Bissette’s been possessed, by something that… that twists people, makes them evil, and then gives them powers and sets them loose.” His eyes darted to the fight for a moment, before fixing with an earnest ferocity on Tony’s again. “There are people who know how to get the akuma out and undo the damage, they’ll be here soon – but I don’t know what will happen if you hurt her before they get here!”

Tony kept his repulsor hand stable – but he didn’t fire, either. “Right. Any suggestions for what we can do in the interim?” he asked, trying to keep the sarcasm… well, mostly in check. “Other than not dying?”

“Stall her. They’ll get here soon to back you up, I’m certain.” Adrien hesitated. “And… keep your eyes open. She’ll be carrying something. A personal item, something that seems a little out of place. That’s what the akuma possessing her is using – get it off her if you can, she’ll lose a lot of her power. But don’t break it, not before Ladybug gets here!”

Ladybug? Not even coccinelle, but Ladybug, in English? Seriously? Tony opened his mouth-
And what he was about to say got lost in a startled curse as Adrien unexpectedly stood up.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Tony demanded, half-starting up out of his crouch himself.

Adrien flashed a brief, professionally confident smile, gold-green eyes hard and bright and determined. “Getting out from underfoot,” he said.

And flinched slightly as loops of thread wrapped around his arms.

“More interference?” the Seamstress raged, turning burning eyes on the boy.

Adrien met her gaze with a calm smile. “Actually, ma’am,” he said politely, actually stepping towards the madwoman, “I’m trying to avoid interfering.”

The Seamstress blinked, clearly caught off guard.

Easing himself up to his feet, but staying out of the direct line of sight for now, Tony took the opportunity for a lightning-quick glance around the room, trying to get a feel for where things stood.

Everywhere he looked, thread stretched between walls, panels, racks, desks, lights – anything that could anchor it, turning the ballroom into a complex, multi-colored, three-dimensional net. Most of the tangle was around Natasha and Clint, who were using the Seamstress’s distraction to work their way out to more open space where they could move. Clint had ditched his jacket somewhere along the way, and Natasha’s was askew.

From the look of things, they weren’t hurt – nothing more than a new scratch or two; a long line of red thread trailing from Clint’s shirt where a needle had managed to tag the fabric but not him. A welt showing on Natasha’s hand, where she’d gotten snagged before snapping the thread by brute force.

So, intact – but they hadn’t gotten anywhere against the Seamstress yet. Hadn’t even gotten close to her…

Tony’s eyes narrowed. Huh.

The half-formed suspicion was interrupted as Adrien took another, catwalk-casual step forward – and now, Tony thought he saw the kid’s plan, nervy as it was. Off-balance and watching the kid with a hint of confusion, as though not quite sure what to do with a bystander deviating from the accepted supervillain script, the Seamstress hadn’t maintained the tension, and the string that had wrapped around the boy had gone slack as he moved closer to the source. As Tony watched, Adrien casually brushed it down and off himself, looking like he’d done nothing more than shake the dust off-

The kid’s hand brushed over the surface of a nearby desk, fingers curling as though he’d palmed something even as he took another step forward.

“I’m not trying to interfere,” Adrien said without his eyes ever shifting from the Seamstress. “It’s not exactly like I can stop you anyway, right? I just want to get out of the way.” Adrien took another step forward, out of the loop of loosened thread he’d brushed off, to stand next to a mannequin that had somehow managed to stay upright through the chaos. “That’s pretty much what you want, too, right?”

Okay, fine, Tony was impressed – because that had to take guts, walking up to a
supervillain to politely ask them to please let you go. Darn it – at this rate, he was going to have to admit that he was getting to like the kid.

It might even work. The Seamstress hadn’t really targeted anyone except Chloé (and Tony would be lying if he didn’t half-agree that the brat deserved a good scare or ten, even if his mind cringed at the thought of what that take apart at the seams trick would do to a living human). She’d had plenty of opportunity to wreak havoc among the attendees while they’d been swarming like panicked sheep and mobbing up at the exits, and other than scaring the living daylights out of them, she hadn’t actually done anything. She hadn’t even gone after the Avengers, not until Tony had deliberately gotten between her and her target…

For just a moment, the Seamstress wavered.

Purple light flared, and Adrien’s shoulders suddenly tensed.

For just a moment, Tony glimpsed a strange shape outlined in pale purple-pink light hovering over the Seamstress’s face, like some kind of butterfly mask. Then it vanished – and the Seamstress’s hesitant expression had twisted into a snarl.

“I don’t think so,” she said, with a nasty smile. “I have uses for you!”

She swept her hand in, the fallen loops of thread whipping up to ensnare – and Adrien threw himself sideways, hitting the floor in a tumbler’s roll to fetch up against the wall, leaving the threads to wrap around the mannequin he’d so carefully positioned himself next to.

“Sorry, schedule’s full!” the kid shouted back – and pegged the paperweight he’d grabbed at her head.

The Seamstress shrieked in fury as the heavy glass weight shot past her ear. “You will pay for that!” she thundered as the glass ball hit the far wall with a crack.

Ding!

Tony’s jaw dropped. He wasn’t aiming at her at all. He was aiming for the elevator buttons.

Teeth bared in a fierce grin, Adrien launched himself into a flat dive across the polished, slippery dance floor.

The Seamstress swept her hands apart and down, threads lifting her up into the air and out of the boy’s path even as two more whipped in to intercept—

Tony’s repulsor blast hit first.

Not a solid hit, not at this angle. But enough. The Seamstress half-yelped, half-grunted, suddenly breathless as suspending threads went boing from the force of the blast—

But not the web-threads, Tony noted with a frustrated mental finger-snap. Too much tension, not enough surface area. So much for that idea…

—and spinning with the momentum. Her arms flailed in a momentary attempt to catch herself – and the snaring threads behind Adrien tangled with each other, falling just short of the kid as his momentum carried his slide straight under the Seamstress.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Tony had to blink.
...did he seriously just close his eyes so he wouldn’t look up her skirt?

Someone call the cosmic police, it had to be against the laws of the universe for a teenage boy to be that polite.

Although, really, not looking up supervillainesses’ skirts was probably less about good manners, and more along the lines of *good life decisions*…

Then Adrien was past her and rolling with the last of his momentum, coming up in a desperate dash. One step, two, ducking a thread at chest-height even as he twisted into a dive over another at knee level-

And the kid tumbled into the safety of the elevator car, just ahead of the closing doors.

“Nat?” Tony heard Clint say lightly, from somewhere nearby. “I’ve made up my mind. I totally endorse that suit. When can I get one?”

Tony dodged towards the archer’s voice; Clint and Natasha met him half-way, grabbing him and pulling him under cover before the Seamstress could recover enough to turn and spot them.

Tony shook out his arm gingerly. The portable repulsor wasn’t as strong as his armor’s gauntlets – couldn’t be, not with nothing but Tony’s skeleton to brace it – but it still packed enough pow to send a large man flying when used at fairly close range. Which made for one *heck* of a kick. His shoulder was going to be feeling that, come tomorrow. “That why you ditched the jacket?” he asked. “Or did you decide you didn’t like the color? Seriously, Clint, I could have told you it just wasn’t you. Give in and embrace the purple.”

Clint’s grimace… didn’t look like it was in response to the mental image. “More like it… unraveled.”

Tony thought about that, and the wreckage left of his bracelet, and looked at Natasha. “Don’t *you* get hit by that thing. I’m sure you’d rock the Xena Warrior Princess look, but the world simply is not prepared.”

She huffed slightly, flipping a knife in her hand and frowning; apparently hacking through so much thread had blunted the edge. “Same to you. The world’s *already* seen far more than it ever wanted.”

Tony bared his teeth in a grin. “I’ll have you know, that tabloid was a complete Photoshop job, start to finish,” he said, twisting slightly in their hiding place to try to get a look around.

Clint made a mock-intrigued noise. “Which one?”

A lilting sing-song call cut through the banter. “Come out, come out, little sheep…”

They all tensed at the Seamstress’s voice. A moment later, Tony heard the sharp *click* of high heels on a dance floor; she’d come down from the web, likely to avoid getting blasted again.

*Not going to get another free shot, probably,* he thought grimly. *Next one had better count.*

“Got some intel off the kid before he got out,” he said, keeping his voice as low as possible.

Hawkeye and Black Widow both looked at him sharply.

“What have you got?” Natasha asked, her own voice so low that Tony’s *breathing* was probably louder. And he hadn’t been the one dodging threads.
“It’s some sort of possession, mind-control thing,” Tony answered – and watched their reactions.

Clint’s lips thinned. Natasha’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Lovely,” Clint said flatly, his face twitching as though he’d like to curl his lip in disgust. “So how do we break it? We’re not having much luck with cognitive recalibration so far.”

Yeah, Tony had kind of expected that reaction. Hawkeye had opinions about mind-manipulation stuff.

High heels clicked nearby, and Tony froze – but they were moving away, not towards their little bolthole, along the other side of the now half-toppled divider.

We’ve got a bit of time. Not much. Keep it quick.

“Adrien said to look for some sort of talisman,” Tony said. “Something personal-looking or out of place. Apparently the real bad guy will be hitching a ride there. Get it off her, and this should get a lot easier.”

Clint and Natasha looked at each other.

“Sewing kit,” Clint said. “Her left hip. She’s carrying it like a weapons pouch.”

Tony suppressed the urge to wince. Well, that as good as confirmed Adrien’s claim that somewhere under the horror house costume and mad laughter, they were dealing with Bissette. Which pretty much confirmed the mind-control thing, too, because there was no way the hopeful embroiderer would have gone on a rampage like this, stained dress or no, on her own.

To say nothing of the flying threads and needles, he reminded himself. Or the creepy makeover.

And Adrien had known what was going on. Hadn’t even seemed surprised.

Heck. Going by the kid’s reaction when the laughing had started, he’d seen it coming.

I want answers. And I want them now.

Yeah, well, wishes, fishes, and elbow room in the ocean. They had a problem to deal with first.

“Any ideas for how to get close?” he asked, raising the hand with his repulsor slightly. “I’ve got plenty of juice for this thing, but not much range.” It was still a prototype. And he hadn’t exactly designed it with sniping and supervillains in mind. Hell, he’d gone out of his way to make it not much of a weapon. He was out of that business. It was meant to be something more along the lines of an emphatic personal space enforcer.

He could see calculations running through Natasha’s eyes as she glanced up at the multicolored strands crisscrossing the room around them. “She only has ten threads. Only two of them have the needles – watch out for the red threads.”

“She needs all of them to do that seams trick,” Clint added, glancing down at the shirt that had been covered by a basic suit jacket when they’d walked into the hotel. “So if you see them bundle up, get out of the way. Apparently it only works on things that actually have seams, though.”
That… was a relief. Though if he’d known that, Tony would have reconsidered taking the hit for Chloé. A little public embarrassment might do that girl some good. Not to mention that Pepper would kill him for that Colantotte bracelet. They were expensive. Not that he couldn’t afford to replace it, but, well, it was the principle of the thing. He thought.

Focus. “She needs her arms to control the thread,” he offered. “If we can get close…”

The air hissed. Tony flinched back in surprise.

And felt his eyes cross as they tried to focus – on the red-threaded needle that had just buried itself in the underside of the overturned table they’d been hiding behind.

Clint’s hand slammed into Tony’s shoulder, sending him tumbling backward. “Scatter!”

Tony hit the ground with his shoulder – the sore one, ow – and rolled. Something caught on his ankle, almost pulling him up short before weight and momentum snapped him free.

_Ambush. She knew where we were the whole time, she circled us!_

Boxing with Happy was never going to get him numbered among the heavy hitters of fisticuffs – definitely not in Natasha’s league, not with the badassery-to-mass conversion ratio she had going for her. But Tony had picked up a few useful skills, even so. He came out of the roll into a tensed crouch, absorbing the last of his momentum with his feet as he snapped his head up to take in the situation.

Clint and Nat had both gotten clear – but the table they’d been hiding behind was wound around with several layers of threads, blue and black and white and a vivid purple. Natasha had rolled the opposite direction, stopping just barely clear of a thick tangle of threads that would have tangled her up as thoroughly as any real spider’s web. And Clint had apparently gone up, and was balanced precariously on the upper edge of the overturned table, only upright due to inertia and the counter-force of the threads.

Then the archer _smirked_ – and rocked back. The table teetered on its edge a moment longer, then toppled, flipping completely to land upside down, top flat on the floor and legs poking up towards the ceiling. The Seamstress made a surprised grunt, stumbling forward a step as her threads jerked at her hands-

And Clint, who’d easily ridden the fall out, darted a hand into the thick of the thread-tangle to grab the single lone line of red still attached to that embedded needle.

New loops of thread whirred in to snare, and Clint jumped aside – but he kept his grip on the red thread, and as he came up to his feet, his other hand came up with a knife gleaming in his grip to slice through the thread.

Carefully circling to get a better angle on the Seamstress, Tony allowed himself a moment’s relief. He’d much rather tangle with string than deal with flying needles, a guy could get an eye poked out that way-

“But you think _that_ is enough to stop me?” A flick of the Seamstress’s hand pulled the loose end of the red thread out of Clint’s grip to wind its way back to her, as her other hand dropped to the sewing kit by her side.

_Backups. Of course she has backups. I shouldn’t even be surprised._

But in that moment, her attention was divided, one hand busy.
Natasha and Clint moved.

Clint went high, taking the short open space he had to launch himself upwards from a running start. His hands closed around a set of threads that crisscrossed above their heads and he used the hold to flip himself around them and slingshot himself down at the Seamstress, forcing her hands away from the sewing kit as she twisted herself out of his path-

And straight into Natasha’s as the Black Widow came in low and hard and fast, using the same trick Adrien had used to escape by throwing herself into a slide across polished wood that carried her under the web of threads, flipping onto her hands as her legs whipped around to knock the Seamstress’s feet out from under her. The possessed woman grunted as she hit the floor and Natasha finished the sweep of her feet to bring them back under her, lunging to grab the small bag hanging at the woman’s side.

Fingers still streaming thread clamped onto her arm as the Seamstress snarled, pulling Natasha with her as she rolled backwards and threw with a strength that was flat-out not human.

Tony glimpsed just a flash of Natasha’s face, wide-eyed in rare shock as she flew through the air to slam into Clint with enough force to send both of them flying off their feet – straight into the webwork of threads. The string tangled around them both, the added tension pulling the web higher, lifting them off the ground to hang suspended out of reach of anything they could use as leverage to work loose.

Not good! Bracing his hand, he triggered the repulsor-

And swore viciously and vigorously as loops of thread whipped in, whirring in the air as they wrapped around his arm and yanked him upright, and the repulsor blast hit the ceiling instead, cracking tiles and actually dropping a chandelier, the net of threads around it sagging as their anchor fell – and then Tony went up, hauled off his feet by his captured arm.

Ow, ow, ow!

Below, the Seamstress flipped herself up and onto her feet with insulting ease. Too much ease; Tony had been on the receiving end of Natasha’s take-downs in sparring, and even that left bruises. In combat, she’d been known to break ankles right through army boots. The woman spared a single, pleased glance at the Avengers caught in her web of thread, and started to turn away-

And then paused, as those strange purple-light lines flared across her face again.

Tony mentally swore, grabbing at the threads holding his arm in a vain attempt to get some leverage, or at least take enough of his body’s weight off his repulsor arm to get a little slack. He didn’t like the look of this at all. Especially not that slow, malicious smile that was spreading across grey lips.

“Yes, Papillion,” she murmured, slowly turning to regard her three captives again as the strange light-mask faded from her face. “After all, one should practice before trying a new design.”

She reached for the bag by her side again.

Gritting his teeth, Tony hauled himself up higher. No time to free his arm, and no good angle on the threads holding him. Instead, he twisted in the air, fighting to work his captive arm around to aim at the fixtures anchoring the threads holding Clint and Natasha up in that web.

Only going to get one shot at this. Hanging in the air like this, there was nothing to help him brace against the recoil – and with his arm tangled up, it wasn’t going to be a simple matter of getting
knocked off his feet. If he made it out of this with a dislocated shoulder, he should probably count himself lucky. Note to self, build in more power control next time, don’t care if it makes the thing a bit bigger. And better targeting, I can’t get a good angle from here, dammit!

Didn’t matter. He did not like the look of sharp and pointy metal glinting between the Seamstress’s fingers as she pulled her hand out of the bag-

Somewhere behind Tony, glass shattered, and the Seamstress whirled about.

“Don’t tell me someone started a game of cat’s cradle and didn’t even invite me? I’m hurt. Really.”

The Seamstress’s eyes widened for a moment – and then narrowed as that creepy mask flashed again, for just the barest moment. “Oh no, Chat Noir. You are very welcome.”

The newcomer snorted. From this angle, Tony couldn’t actually see the guy properly; he couldn’t get enough purchase to twist around for more than a glimpse of a slender shape crouched on the windowsill, the light coming in from outside bright enough to make any features hard to distinguish. But his voice was light and playful. “Said the spider to the fly…” he sing-songed.

The Seamstress’s lips curved as her eyes flashed dangerously. “If you want to play so much,” she said, raising the hand that wasn’t carrying lots of sharp and pointy things between the fingers like some kind of ninja senbon in a gesture that looked like it might be a dismissive wave, “then by all means…”

“Watch her threads!” Natasha shouted.

“…come and play with me!”

The air whirred as enchanted thread cut through it-

And a dark-clad figure tumbled between the gaps of the threads and into view, bouncing up to his feet with easy nonchalance. “I have the feline,” he said lightly, “that the offer has some strings attached.”

Twisting about to get a better look at the newcomer, Tony gaped.

“…are you seriously wearing a leather catsuit?” he blurted. Which was maybe not exactly the most relevant thing to be thinking about at the moment, but come on. Belt for a tail, fake ears on honey-blond hair – the guy even had a black domino mask.

Yeah, sure, fine – Chat Noir, Black Cat, Tony got it. There was such a thing as taking a call sign too far!

Green eyes flicked over to meet his, and Tony’s brain blanked.

Those are not human eyes.

They were cat eyes. From the bright, almost glowing green that reached from corner to corner without a hint of whites, to the vertically-slitted pupil, currently contracted into narrow lines against the afternoon sunlight pouring in from the window and the lights of the half-wrecked ballroom.

That’s not an effect you can get from lenses.
And then the guy grinned broadly, resting his hands on his hips in mock-offense. “Talk to my costume designer,” he said. “I wanted ruffles and lace.”

Tony almost lost the grip his free hand had on the threads when he burst out cackling.

*Sass, sarcasm, and bad puns. I think I like this guy-

Chat Noir’s eyes widened – and then he dropped and rolled, as pins hissed through the air where he’d been and embedded themselves in the wall and floor with the force of really thin, really pointy bullets.

“Do not think you can stop me!” the Seamstress hissed. “Not on your own, Chat Noir!”

He came up in a low crouch, still smiling brightly. But there was an edge to the smile now, hidden in slightly narrowed eyes. “Then it’s a good thing I’m *not* on my own, isn’t it?” he said – and his free hand darted behind his back and then up and out, and something about a foot long and metallic spun end-over-end through the air, parting threads like stray strands of spiderweb as it whirred through them. Natasha and Clint both dropped to the ground as half of the threads holding them up suddenly snapped, and Tony breathed a sigh of relief.

And then nearly swore when, in complete defiance of all laws of physics, the weapon *ricocheted off* the wall and came shooting back, still spinning, *straight at him*.

It passed so close Tony actually felt the breeze as it shot through the threads holding his repulsor arm captive – and then he was falling.

Without thinking, Tony tightened the grip his other hand had on the threads, his newly freed hand twisting around to support, so that he didn’t fall straight down. Instead, he Tarzan’d his way down to the floor, grunting slightly as his feet hit the wall to absorb the last of his impact.

A soft thump, and Chat Noir skidded to a stop next to him. He’d caught his weapon on the return swing, somehow, and now Tony could see that it was a short rod made of some sort of alloy Tony couldn’t quite identify, a small, dimly glowing green cat’s paw in the center the only decoration, nicely matching the identical symbol adorning a flat-faced black ring on the guy’s right hand.

*Not steel, doesn’t look like titanium. It doesn’t even have any sharp edges, how on earth did he cut the threads…*

**Dear God. He’s tiny.**

Tony knew perfectly well that he wasn’t exactly a towering bastion of manly altitude, he left that sort of thing to Steve, or Thor if he was in town – or better yet, to the Big Guy. But even so, he’d be shocked if he didn’t have at least six inches on this guy. Chat Noir wasn’t even *built* big to make up with it, he was at least as slender as Natasha-

*Which could be a clue right there. Don’t complain about local help, Tony.*

Impossible cat-eyes flicked to the side to meet Tony’s gaze. This close, Tony realized that they weren’t actually a flat green from corner to corner. The area that would be white on a human’s eyes was a bright, new-leaf green, but the dark-edged irises had a golden shine to the green that made them stand out, just a touch.

“I met Adrien on the roof,” Chat Noir explained, voice low and quick and intent. “He explained the situation.”
Good. Debriefing in the middle of a combat situation tended not to go so well. Stuff tended to get lost in the chaos. Like important details. And sometimes important body parts. “He made it out okay?” Tony asked, shaking out his stinging hand. He hadn’t actually cut himself on the threads, but he’d at least gotten a rope toast if not an actual burn.

“He’s fine,” Chat Noir replied, with a quick nod. “The talisman? He said he’d told you…”

“We think it’s her sewing kit,” Tony answered quickly as he pulled the threads off his other arm. He was tempted to ignore them, they weren’t in the way, but… well, they hadn’t seen the Seamstress manipulate any threads other than the ones attached to her yet. That didn’t mean she couldn’t. “Pouch on her belt.”

Chat Noir grinned. “Purrfect,” he said lightly. “Then it’s practically in the bag…”

“Look out!”

Tony threw himself back as a deadly barrage of pins shot through the air where the two of them had crouched a half-second earlier. And swore as he immediately got tangled in another part of the web of threads. Chat Noir fared better; rather than coming up to his feet, he’d darted away in an impossible four-legged cat-sprint that kept him below the level of the worst of the thread-web.

*How the hell does he not break his fingers doing that?*

Tony shoved the thought aside – he’d already guessed the guy wasn’t standard-issue human, next please – and quickly scanned the room as he worked his way loose. Clint and Natasha were trying to close with the Seamstress, but between the constantly thickening web of threads crisscrossing the room and the pins, they weren’t having much luck. The Seamstress had already repaired most of the damage that Chat Noir had done to the web, and now the new strands were starting to weave around the ones already in place.

*If we don’t do something about that soon, she’s going to have us wrapped up with a bow.*

Natasha ducked under a twisted braid of red and blue and purple as it whistled past close enough to ruffle her hair, then grabbed it and brought her knife down viciously, parting the threads and hopefully depriving the Seamstress of another needle before a new barrage of pins forced her to jump, flipping in the air to pass through an opening in the web. Landing in a crouch, her eyes darted over to Tony’s, and she jerked her chin at one of the fallen panels that had managed to land on its side, rather than face-down.

Tony nodded quickly, and scrambled across the aisle to the far side of the panel – which proved to be held up by a heavy desk it was leaning against. The combination gave a bit of a clear space from the threads for now, though Tony wouldn’t take bets on that lasting for very long once the Seamstress came around to hit them again. Clint and Natasha came over the panel a moment later. Tony hadn’t seen them signal Chat Noir, but either they had and he’d missed it, or the guy had been keeping tabs on them – on the other side of the room, Chat Noir toppled several more furnishings, making the web sag and strain and forcing the Seamstress to hastily repair her work. In the lull, the catboy made another of those tumbling scampers behind some cover and around to join them.

“We need to do something about those threads. We don’t have enough room to move,” Natasha said flatly the moment Chat Noir skidded to a stop next to them, clearly determined not to waste the few seconds it would take for the Seamstress to thread a new needle, repair the web, and resume her attack. “Cutting a few at a time isn’t enough. We need to take them all out.”
“I’m guessing you have an idea,” Clint said.

Natasha raised her left hand to show them a small green lighter, and arched a red eyebrow.

Chat Noir grinned, eyes narrowing slightly. “That’s one way to heat things up, I suppose,” he said – although his gaze darted to the threads all around them, clearly worried.

Tony didn’t blame him. Things could get a little too hot, very fast. And there were a lot of flammables in here.

*On the other hand, thread’s too thin for fire to stay in one place long enough to ignite anything bigger.* “We need a clear place to stand,” he said, flexing his hand around the repulsor as his mind raced. “But that’s going to leave us open to becoming pincushions…”

Chat Noir’s thumb flicked the symbol on his baton – and just like that, the little rod became the length of a quarterstaff. “I can cover that,” he said, still smiling. “Purrvided I have a bit of room.”

*When this is over, I’m so stealing that toy of his,* Tony thought – and forgot just as quickly as he traded a quick glance with Clint. The archer nodded quickly, eyes flicking to the panel sheltering them, then down to the repulsor on Tony’s hand in obvious understanding–

“Enough hiding!”

Threads whipped in from all sides, wrapping around panel and desk and closing their little quartet in a box of string. And they moved.

Bracing himself, Tony fired the repulsor at the panel. Hit broadside and at point-blank range, it shuddered and shifted fully upright – and then toppled outright as all four of them lunged against it, throwing their full weight and momentum into it. The panel slammed to the floor, strings twisting and snapping and sliding everywhere as every thread of the web anchored to it or to threads that had been connected to it bowed and flexed, some stretched past their strength, others gone slack as the resistance holding them gave way.

Practically as one synchronized entity, Natasha and Clint rolled over the panel as it crashed to the ground. Clint grabbed up a colorful handful of the slackened thread dangling down from the web and pulled it taut, as a flame clicked into life over Natasha’s lighter.

“Don’t you dare!” The Seamstress whipped her hand around, launching pins that hummed like hornets as they sliced the air–

And pattered to the ground, knocked aside as Chat Noir placed himself between the supervillainess and the rest of the team, spinning his staff into a blurred circle of translucent silver.

“Ever thought of doing a little cheerleading in your off time?” Tony quipped as he moved farther into the protection of that improvised shield, repulsor hand up and ready as he watched for any sneak attacks from behind. And idly trying to calculate just how fast Chat Noir had to be spinning that thing, for that trick to actually work. And how fast his hands had to be moving to pull that off.

It obviously took a fair bit of concentration – but Chat Noir managed to toss a wink over his shoulder. “The fans love me,” he said – trying for light, but with tension creeping into his voice.

“Got it!”

Light flickered in the corner of Tony’s vision – flames, shooting up and across the threads
and into the web of string filling the room. Wherever two threads crossed, the fire split and diverged, spreading faster and faster as it went.

*really hope we don’t end up regretting this*…

The Seamstress’s shriek this time had an edge of real fear to it, as more and more of her web came down. Twisting about, Tony saw that the fire had spread to one of the threads coming from her fingers, and was quickly eating its way towards her hand. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Chat Noir flinch slightly, the spinning staff coming to a stop-

The Seamstress snapped her other hand out, and the threads on it twisted together as they lashed – not at the Avengers and their ally, but at the ceiling. Why…

*Oh sh*…

Tony had just enough time to realize what was happening before the destructive threads ripped through the fire suppression system – and sprinklers went off all around the room.

“You thought that would stop me?” the Seamstress cried, as Natasha spat something vicious-sounding in Russian and Chat Noir bit back a yelp as he shielded his eyes against the spray. “You’ll pay. You’ll pay. You’ll pay, you’ll pay, you’ll *pay*…”

Tony’s mouth felt dry, even as he spat out a bit of the metallic-tasting water he’d accidentally almost swallowed. *Oh, that doesn’t sound good.* Not that she’d sounded sane through any of this, but he had the bad feeling something had just gone *snap*, and it wasn’t string this time.

The Seamstress raised her hands, pins gleaming brightly. Chat Noir quickly regained his stance, staff held in a ready position as the woman snapped her hands down to launch her weapons-

Not at them, but around the room.

“A good design needs fitting,” she said, straightening. Her fingers flexed as she smiled at Chat Noir. “You’ll make a fine mannequin for me!”

And all around them, empty suits and dresses that had been lying fallen and scattered on the floor… stood up.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” Tony breathed, as the army of empty clothes began to advance and their little foursome reflexively drew together to stand back-to-back. The web of threads that had been giving them so much trouble, sagging with water now and snarled and scorched in places, didn’t even slow the clothes down; they just folded up to get through any tight spots.

Literally.

Tony huffed. “You know,” he said dryly, “I get not being a fan of stuffed shirts. But I think this is taking things a little far.”

Chat Noir chuckled. “Whatever suits her, I suppose,” he said. He’d stayed on the side facing the Seamstress, slightly apart from the rest of them – probably smart, if she threw another barrage of pins into the middle of this, things were going to get *tricky*…

A flash of motion caught Tony’s eye, as Clint grabbed his combat knife. “Source of power is in her bag, right?” he asked flatly.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tony saw Chat Noir shift his head slightly to look at the archer.
“Yes-”

Clint flipped the knife around to hold it by the blade. “So let’s cut the problem off at the source.”

Chat Noir’s eyes went huge, even as his pupils narrowed to slits with alarm. “Wait, don’t-!”

Clint threw.

The silver staff whirled, knocked the knife out of the air. “You can’t,” Chat Noir said urgently, voice tight. The part of his face visible below the black mask had gone pale under a golden tan. “If we destroy it now, the akuma will just fly away, and that…” He cut himself off, drew in a deep breath. “That would not be good.”

That sounded like the voice of experience. “You’re the local. Got any other ideas?” Tony asked over his shoulder, firing his repulsor at the first suit to get through the tangle and close enough to engage. It – heh – folded, flopping back into the web of threads, one of the sleeves actually half-wrapped around the loose string.

Nice. Whole new meaning to clotheslining-

Tony bit back a groan in the next moment, as the suit began to unwrap itself. So much for that. “Because I don’t know if you noticed, but we’re getting a little strung out here!”

Chat Noir growled for a moment – actually, literally growled, like a cat, the sound rumbling in his chest. “This is more my partner’s department than mine,” he said, with a levity that almost made Tony think he’d imagined the sound, except for the fact that Tony knew all about hiding frustration with levity. “I’m more the mouse-al…”

Trailing off, he tilted his head slightly.

If more than half his attention wasn’t on keeping the suits off them, Tony would have stared.

The cat ears perched in messy, honey-blonde hair were fake. Leather, or something that looked a lot like it. Tony could even see metal rivets on the corners-

And they’d swiveled on the guy’s head, flicking back and forth independently of each other, like a cat listening for prey creeping through the grass.

Then Chat Noir bounced a little, up onto his toes.

His smile was all teeth. “Purrfect,” he murmured, and Tony didn’t know why he bothered with the pun when the word itself was a purr. “The floor below us is clear.”

Natasha grabbed an evening dress that had gotten a little too close, fingers ripping through thin fabric and coming away with a long pin capped by a white ball. The rest of the dress simply dropped, the Seamstress’s control apparently lost with the pin. “You have a plan?” she asked.

“Getting out of the Gordian knot,” Chat Noir replied, and suddenly extended his right arm, the green cat’s paw flaring brightly against the black of his ring. “Cataclysm!”

 Darkness swirled from every corner of the room, gathering in a pulsing orb in the palm of Chat Noir’s hand – and then bursting apart as black-gloved fingers closed on it, the fragments limning Chat Noir’s hand with a dark aura that set the hairs on the back of Tony’s neck standing
straight up.

“Brace yourselves,” Chat Noir said – and twisted, dropping to one knee to slam his hand onto the floor.

With a strange, dry, crumbling sound, wood burnished to a golden shine turned dull and dark. Boards warped with the crackle of over-aged wood, dust and mold puffing up through suddenly splintery spaces between them. Below the floor, Tony heard the nerve-wracking sound of corroded metal snapping under stress, the distinctive hiss-pop of electrical circuits failing.

“What the-!” Clint yelped, as the darkness spread like a stain across the floor, impossibly fast.

Chat Noir just grinned, green-on-green eyes gleeful. “Going down!”

The floor disintegrated out from under their feet.

A clawed hand latched onto Tony’s flailing arm as they fell – then somehow Chat Noir managed to twist in the air, so that they hit the carpeted floor below in a neat roll that brought them up and onto their feet as smoothly as though they’d just hopped off a curb, rather than falling a good fifteen feet or more.

Open space, Tony thought, coughing on dust as Clint and Natasha hit the ground a half-heartbeat behind them. Still part of the meeting areas, then. But not a vendor room, too open – good, less places for her to anchor the thread-

“Scatter, before she comes down!” Chat Noir said, already darting out of the dust cloud even as the last particles of what had been a perfectly serviceable floor and ceiling pattered down around them.

“I thought we were trying to stall her!” Tony shot back. Clint and Natasha had already made their way closer to the elevators, on the interior side of the room. He made for one of the wall corners, mirroring Chat Noir’s position. “Why did you leave her up there?”

“She’ll follow. I have something Papillon wants.”

Papillon. Seamstress said that, earlier. Seriously, what kind of name is Butterfly…

Remembering that strange, mask-like glow that had flashed over Seamstress’s face, Tony bit back a grimace.

Good enough for one really nasty bad guy, apparently.

“Just hope my partner gets here before we take all the fun.” Chat Noir smiled cheerily, and Tony had to give points to the guy even as his heart sank. If Tony hadn’t spent his whole life playing to cameras and acting the confident hero when all logic was screaming we’re gonna die, he’d never have seen past that practiced grin. Chat Noir was good.

But something had put an edge of tension in the guy’s stance that hadn’t been there a minute ago, even though tactically, their situation had improved substantially…

That Cataclysm thing. Bets that it takes a lot out of him?

Cackling laughter snapped his attention back to the hole in the ceiling as the Seamstress descended, suspended on long threads. “She won’t be here,” the woman said smugly, and Tony bit
back a shudder. She’d apparently shaken off the breakdown from earlier, but he was not convinced this was an improvement. Not with the vicious light gleaming in her eyes as she locked them on Chat Noir, completely ignoring the rest of them. “Not in time to save you. Now give me the Miraculous.”

Aaaaaaaand now we have yet more random English. I feel like I’m in some kind of French anime, here.

Chat Noir just grinned – and, to Tony’s shock, actually moved out of his fighting stance, planting his staff at his side and leaning his weight on it nonchalantly, as though he hadn’t a care in the world. “You must not know cats very well,” he said lightly, blinking up at the woman – not a flirtatious batting of eyelashes, but the slow double-eyed blink of a lazy feline who knew the mouse wasn’t going anywhere. “I’m not really inclined to take orders.”

The Seamstress’s eyes narrowed dangerously, and she flicked her fingers. Fabric tumbled down through the hole in the ceiling, empty clothes dropping to the floor and standing up like Invisible Man ninjas.

“You need to be collared,” she said.

Chat Noir laughed, still lounging against his staff. Tony had to admire his panache, if not his planning; with his balance so off-center, there was no way the guy could recover in time to move quickly if things got tricky-

Subtle movement behind the Seamstress in the corner of his eye caught his attention. With her focus on Chat Noir, the Seamstress had overlooked Clint and Natasha, who’d positioned themselves behind her. They were carefully making their way closer, using Chat Noir’s distraction to get into position. Although getting to the Seamstress would be tricky; her threads held her suspended near the ceiling, and this was a fancy conference room, with substantially more headspace to make up for the claustrophobia of lots of people crowded together. It would take some work to get her down.

Narrowing his eyes slightly when he saw the glint of metal in their hands, Tony began powering up the repulsor again.

Chat Noir had to be aware of what was going on. His eyes never strayed from the Seamstress – but those fake-yet-not ears on his head were twitching ever so slightly, and the tip of his tail – which was a belt, Tony could even see the metal cap at the tip – was flicking slowly with anticipation. But save for those subtle tells, you never would have known from his face or tone as he smiled sunnily up at the woman. “Sorry, miss. But only one Lady gets to pull my strings. And you’re definitely not her.”

The Seamstress… smiled.

“We shall see,” she said, and waved her hand.

Pins whistled through the air at Chat Noir – and then through the air where he’d been. Rather than trying to recover his balance to dodge, he’d simply retracted his staff to a short baton again and fallen, tipping sideways into a tumbling roll that carried him neatly out of the pins’ path-

And straight into the path of the suits.

Tony bit back a curse as empty clothing suddenly swarmed around the catboy, fluttering like a flock of ill-omened birds. He brought his repulsor around to bear on them, and then nearly swore again as he realized he couldn’t fire, not with an ally in the middle of that mess.
Note to self, precision aiming, definitely need to add that feature to the next prototype-

With a sound somewhere between a yelp and a snarl, Chat Noir rolled up to that four-legged posture again and pounced, directly into one of the fancy button-up dress shirts swooping down on him. Latching on, he took it with him into a somersault that carried him out from under the swarm, and came up to his feet shaking scraps of ridiculous-thread-count white silk off of clawed fingers.

Tony had heard once that cats were some of the most heavily armed predators out there, pound for pound. Seeing what cute little kitten claws looked like when sized up to a human scale, he was suddenly inclined to take that assessment a lot more seriously.

Then a trench coat separated from the swarm, swooping in on Chat Noir like a net before he could react.

“You’re mine!” the Seamstress shouted gleefully-

Vzzzz!

Tony barely had the time to register the strange sound before something small and red shot past him, trailing black cord – and then suddenly Chat Noir was flying backward, green eyes wide in startled surprise as he was jerked off his feet, the trench coat collapsing onto floor where he’d been standing in a rumpled mess.

“It’s not nice to mess with another girl’s things, you know,” a female voice said tartly from the open window.

“As I said, Miss Seamstress,” Chat Noir said cheerfully from where he was sprawled on the floor, before turning his attention upwards with a grin. “A clawsome entrance as usual, my Lady.”

The newcomer huffed slightly as she disengaged the wire from around his waist. Snapping the spinning weight up into her hand, she dropped down to the floor and extended a red-gloved hand to Chat Noir. He accepted it without any hesitation, letting her pull him back up to his feet.

“Ladybug, I presume,” Tony said. Because, really, who else could she be, what with that crimson red suit covered with black spots the size of her palm?

To which Tony had to say, damn. That was a woman with some serious body-confidence. Even Natasha would think twice before putting on an absolutely seamless, skin-tight suit like that – never mind the color. Not that the woman had any reason to be shy – sure, she might be on the small and slim side, but if she ran around half so much as Chat Noir… better small and slim than lower back problems from Hell, and she carried the sleek athlete look with style.

Although oddly, she didn’t have any of the vividly nonhuman features that Chat Noir sported, spots or no spots. No antennae poking out of hair so black it verged on blue, pulled back into two short pigtails, and the eyes behind the red and black mask – rounded rather than the dark angles of Chat Noir’s, narrowing in the center to show a cute little button nose and a clear brow – were a very human blue-grey.

Said eyes were darting around the room with the same focused intensity of Natasha plotting out to take down twenty men in ten seconds as she nodded shortly, before fixing on the menacing figure of the Seamstress.

Her lips pursed. “Chloé Bourgeois?” she asked, in the tone of someone who already knew the answer.
Chat Noir sighed faintly as he flipped his staff back into his hands and extended it, before resting it across his shoulders. “Seamingly so, my Lady,” he said wryly. “Purrhaps we should simply declaw her an honorary supervillain?”

Ladybug snorted. “Oh, I’d love to declaw her, all right,” she muttered – even as those sharp eyes flicked for the barest moment to Clint and Natasha, now making their way carefully across the open room behind the Seamstress, wide open to discovery and attack if the Seamstress turned around. One hand idly flicked the yo-yo down – and then began to spin it, so fast that the red-and-black weight became a glowing red-white circle by her side. “Too bad Chloé-ness isn’t as easy to cleanse as evil.”

A strange sharp beeping cut her words off.

Ladybug’s eyes widened as her gaze locked on the hole in the ceiling, then darted to Chat Noir’s ring – where one of the toe pads of that green-glowing cat’s paw had just winked out.

“You’ve…?”

Chat Noir smiled – but Tony could tell that it was forced. “Three minutes.” His eyes narrowed slightly. “The threads obey her. The red ones have needles. She can attack with pins, or use them to control- Watch out!”

He whirled, staff snapping around to intercept a lunging Armani suit. Dark fabric collapsed around the metal, fluttering as though about to lunge, and Chat Noir’s eyes narrowed. With a sharp spin, he whipped the cloth around and launched it from the end of the staff, sending it flying through the air to intercept an artfully subtle grey twill Brooks Brothers three-piece. Sleeves and buttons and lapels tangled, buying Chat Noir enough space to carry his spin through to intercept an attacking red dress that, going by the plunging neckline and peek-a-boo-length hemline, had probably been plenty predatory even before being animated by a supervillainess.

Now that is a form of fashion-therapy I could get behind-

Silvery darts hissed through the air – and Chat Noir ducked slightly as Ladybug flipped through the air over his head and came down on one knee, her yo-yo spinning in a circle of red light to shield both herself and her partner from the onslaught of pins. Chat Noir didn’t even glance at her – just shifted his stance slightly to ensure that any suit trying to get at his partner’s back would have to go through him first.

Behind the shield, blue eyes scanned the room, taking in the Seamstress, and then Clint and Natasha, in position behind the possessed woman but not yet willing to give up the advantage of surprise while the situation was relatively stable and the enemy wasn’t in ambush range. A moment later, Ladybug’s eyes slid sideways to meet Tony’s gaze.

She held the glance for a moment. Shifted her gaze back to the trio in the center of the room. Back to Tony.

He was pretty sure he understood the message. You three handle her. We’ll distract.

The last pin landed point-down in the carpet, leaving Ladybug surrounded by her own little personal mini-forest of sharp-and-pointy. With a snap of her wrist, Ladybug brought the yo-yo weight back into her hand – and straightened, pulling herself up to her full height. Which… wasn’t even as tall as Chat Noir, dammit, was there some maximum height rule for French superheroes that Tony hadn’t heard about?
“Are you sure you really want to be wasting all those pins?” she taunted, smirking. It was a good smirk. Tony gave her at least an eight out of ten. Maybe even as much as a nine. Arch tilt of the head, free hand nonchalantly resting on one cocked hip, upper part of the red-and-black mask rising along with what had to be a hidden eyebrow – she’d gotten her entire body into that smirk. “Because you might want to save a few for yourself. That dress is starting to look a little unraveled.”

The Seamstress gritted her teeth, eyes flashing fury. “We’ll see who’ll come undone!” she shouted, and the two needles flashed as they darted at the woman, trailing red thread in their wake. But Ladybug had been ready; yo-yo spinning into a shield again, she whirled it around herself in a complex figure eight pattern, striking aside first one needle, then the other as she brought it about-

-straight into the tangling snare of dark thread that followed.

Driven by the momentum of its own weight, the yo-yo wrapped itself around the threads until cord and string were knotted together in a hopeless tangle. Eyes wide, Ladybug gave the yo-yo a desperate tug, trying to free it – and then was forced to let go as the threads yanked in unison, pulling the ring of the yo-yo’s cord right off her finger as the red-and-black toy flew through the air to land with a smack in the Seamstress’s outstretched palm.

“Ha!” Undoing the snarl of her own threads with a flick of her fingers, the Seamstress attached the yo-yo to her belt, next to the sewing kit. Her feet touched down on the floor as the new slack in the thread lowered the web that had held her suspended in the air, and she smirked in the face of Ladybug’s cold glare. “Now. Hand over your…”

Tony didn’t need to see more than the way Natasha and Clint both tensed. Arm braced, he fired.

The kickback sent a fierce ache slamming through every joint in his already sore arm, from wrist to shoulder – ow, okay, definitely need to build in some kind of recoil absorption on this thing – but the blast knocked the Seamstress off her feet and straight into Clint, as the archer lunged close to grapple and pin. Before he’d even secured his hold, Natasha darted in, snatching both yo-yo and bag off the woman’s belt.

“Ladybug! Catch!” Drawing her arm back, Natasha flung the yo-yo across the room with a fastball pitch, followed by the bag-

“No!”

The Seamstress flung Clint aside with flat-out inhuman strength as she stretched out a hand, clawing and grasping. Threads flew, only to slip off the smooth, hard surface of the yo-yo as Ladybug snatched it out of the air.

But before the red-suited girl could reach the bag, its flight abruptly reversed course, the threads plucking it out of the air and reeling it back into the Seamstress’s waiting fingers.

Eyes narrowed and focused, Natasha pressed her attack, trying to keep the woman from recovering long enough for Clint to get back into the fight.

The Seamstress was having none of it. For a moment, the two women grappled, the Seamstress’s enhanced strength and definitely supernatural skill against Natasha’s greater mobility and thin-lipped determination. Then something silvery flashed, and Natasha yelped, staggering back as though she were being dragged by some sort of invisible force.

For a moment, Tony couldn’t figure out what he was seeing – Natasha’s arms were
wrapped close around her body, as though she were hugging herself for some reason – but she was jerking her arms, like the sturdy fabric of her suit jacket had become a *straightjacket*…

Then he saw the pins glinting in the dark fabric.

*Aw no, why did I not see that coming*-urk!

Hitting the carpet, Tony rolled, trying to get away from the flock of silvery, sharp and pointy flying through the air at him. And mentally swearing; the empty space on this floor meant the Seamstress hadn’t been able to build up her web to block their movement, but at the same time it meant he didn’t have any cover to hide behind-

Something hit his arm, and a second later, his collar – and Tony suddenly found his own *clothes* not listening to him, yanking him up to his feet and pinning his arms. It was a bit like the experience of having Jarvis fly the suit. If Jarvis were a mad mind-controlled villainess with magic powers-

*How the hell did she not skewer me, anyway?* The pins had been flying straight at him, Tony should be feeling like a substitute pin-cushion – but he could see one of the pins from here, neatly tagging a fold of his sleeve, parallel to his arm.

…the head of the pin was green. And cute. Very cute. Tony couldn’t even do himself the dignity of calling it a frog. That was most definitely a *froggy*.

*Which doesn’t keep it from being a very stabby froggy if I try to squirm.* *Ow!* Darn it, this was why Tony was a T-shirt and jeans kind of guy, he hated fittings for custom clothes…

Although granted, this was the first time he’d been taken hostage by his own fashion sense.

“You know,” he said, going for nonchalant as his shirt dragged him over to the Seamstress. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Clint wasn’t doing much better; he’d either gotten tagged when the Seamstress threw him, or when she’d gotten Natasha. Dammit. “Last I checked, the whole *pinning down* thing is supposed to happen after the clothes come *off*.” Grinning, he gave the Seamstress a saucy wink.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ladybug actually *choke*, the tips of her ears going as red as her costume. Next to her, Chat Noir had clapped a hand over his mouth in an attempt to hide a wide grin, shoulders shaking a bit as green-on-green eyes sparkled.

“You…!” the Seamstress spluttered, flushing red and then paling before reddening all over again.

*Score one distraction,* Tony thought, as his eyes darted around the room, assessing the situation. Behind Ladybug and Chat Noir, he could see a mess of torn, tangled and thoroughly beaten high fashion. From the look of things, that was one set of suits that wouldn’t be getting up again in a hurry…

*On the other hand, she has us now.* Gritting his teeth, Tony *yanked* at his clothes, ignoring the bite of inconveniently located pins. And now he really, really wished he’d actually gotten doused a little more thoroughly by the sprinkler system. Wet silk was fragile; he might have been able to literally tear himself out of the damn sleeves. As it was, without any good leverage…

*Bipbipbipbipbip.*

Chat Noir winced subtly, his right hand tightening on his staff as another paw pad winked
out on his ring.

Blue eyes narrowing as her lips tightened with determination, Ladybug took a small step back – then wound her arm back, and launched her yo-yo. Straight up.

“*Lucky Charm!*”

Reaching the end of the cord, the spinning disk hung in the air, blazing red-white light.

Tony braced himself as best he could as the Seamstress snarled. If this is anything like that *Cataclysm* trick…

Swirling flecks of luminescence flashing in every shade from blood-red to snow-white gathered together in the center of the light, coalesced into a single shape, flared-

...Red and covered with large black dots, a cylindrical object dropped into Ladybug’s waiting hands.

Tony blinked.

He wasn’t the only one. Ladybug gave the heavy bottle a look of flat disbelief.

“…*champagne*?” she muttered incredulously.

Chat Noir grinned. “Well, while I wouldn’t *mind* a celebratory glass, we should *purrr*obably wait until— *Look out!*”

With a quick half-step, he was between Ladybug and the grasping threads, his staff snapping back and forth as he spun the end of his staff in the air to snag the threads, then quickly turned it parallel to them to let the threads slide off before the Seamstress could steal his weapon-

Then yelped, as the pins that had been hidden in the storm of threads darted in.

And bounced off his black suit to clatter harmlessly to the ground.

The Seamstress shrieked in rage.

Chat Noir simply smirked at her. “Sorry, Miss Seamstress, but I’ve already had my shots for the year.”

“*Why did it not work?*”

Still smirking, Chat Noir spread his hands. “The power of *seamless* teamwork?” he suggested lightly, the tip of that belt-tail flicking playfully. “Or seamless body armor, at least.”

His tone was cheerful and confident and nonchalant – but Tony thought he could see a slight trembling in those outstretched hands. Apparently he hadn’t actually expected that save.

The Seamstress’s hands closed in fists, her threads knotting and winding around each other with her fury. “That doesn’t *matter,*” she hissed, “all fabric obeys my pins!”

Chat Noir *stuck his tongue out* at her. “Sorry. They’re *meow-*gic suits,” he shot back, completely unrepentant.

And behind him, Ladybug’s eyes were darting around the room, fierce with focus as they jumped from Chat Noir, to the twisting threads, to the bottle in her hands, Tony, the Seamstress herself…
Ladybug smiled, and the hairs stood up on the back of Tony’s neck. He never wanted to be the focus of that grin, thank you so very much. It looked like it would be right at home on Natasha’s face when she had a bone to pick with someone and a hallway full of stupid guards between her and her target.

“Chat Noir,” she said lightly. “Be a good kitty and tie up that string for a minute, will you?”

Chat Noir’s innocently taunting grin deepened into a match for that calculating smile. “Knot a problem, my Lady,” he purred – and then extended his staff again and stepped forward as he began to spin it in that whirling shield again.

The Seamstress laughed as her threads formed those tangling loops again. “You think that will defend you against me?” she demanded, as they snared the staff-

Chat Noir just smiled, and kept spinning. “Oh, don’t worry,” he said lightly, taking another, deliberate step forward as the threads looped thicker and thicker around the baton. “I’m just winding you up!”

Three things happened then. The Seamstress yanked her threads back, trying to pull the staff out of Chat Noir’s hands. He retracted it to its smaller shape again, leaving the gathered loops caught in his hands like a big ball of really thin yarn. And he lunged into the pull.

What came next, in Tony’s humble opinion, was completely YouTube-worthy.

With an honest-to-goodness feline yowl that had no business coming from an apparently human throat, Chat Noir tumbled across the carpet, flailing – not to get away from the threads, but to pull them in towards him, even bouncing up to bat down a few lines that passed closer to the ceiling.

The Seamstress made a startled sound as the threads trailing from her fingers jerked madly, and the woman reflexively yanked back-

Chat Noir’s mad tumble came to a stop as he rolled almost right up to her feet, thoroughly tangled and knotted in the snarled strings and grinning like a kitten who’d gotten into the catnip stash, eyes wide and sparkling – even that belt of a tail flicking gleefully, trailing purple and white threads.

“Hello,” he said brightly, as if he hadn’t just freaking handed himself over to the Seamstress, complete with wrapping.

For a moment, she simply gaped, clearly too stunned to react – then that butterfly mask flared to life over her face for a brief moment.

She burst into disbelieving laughter. “Why, thank you,” she said coquettishly, mockingly feigning a flattered look. “So kind of you to simply hand over the Miraculous!” Smirking, she reached forward – and stopped short, a startled look of dismay on her face.

Somewhere in that mad scramble, Chat Noir had managed to wrap his left hand over the fingers of his fisted right – and the very threads keeping him captive had bound them in that position. There was no way the Seamstress would be able to get to his ring without freeing him in the process – and by the frustrated fury that overtook the dismay in her face, Tony was willing to bet that was the Miraculous she kept talking about.

Chat Noir’s sunny grin shifted to something darker, taunting. “Yeah. Good luck with that,” he purred.
Face twisting in an ugly snarl, the Seamstress shoved a hand into her bag, pulling out a vicious-looking pair of scissors. Her other hand made a sharp gesture, fingers crooked into claws. “Hold him,” she snapped.

Tony gritted his teeth and tried to dig his heels in as his own shirt, unfaithful thing, dragged him forward. The pins weren’t controlling him, just his clothes – but he wasn’t able to keep the sleeves from opening his arms wide like a mockery of some kind of bear hug, and dammit, tiny as Chat Noir was, even Tony could probably hold the guy on his own, particularly with the string keeping him from breaking the hold -

With a pow, a red-and-black cork flew past Tony to slam the Seamstress right in the nose.

And a fountain of foaming, bubbling champagne doused Tony with the force of a garden hose turned full blast, soaking through his hair, his face, his shirt-

...Did she just seriously weaponize a bottle of Clos d’Ambonnay? some little neuron that hadn’t been thoroughly pickled out of existence before Tony decided to go dry demanded in disbelief. We are talking Godzilla Threshold here...

The shirt pulled him forward even as he spluttered, he cursed and tried to pull back-

With a tearing sound, the seam of his sleeve parted, as wet silk yielded to the twisting pressure. Tony’s eyes widened – and then he moved.

With a fierce jerk and a mental thank-you for fashionably loose cuffs, Tony wrenched his arm back, pulling his hand out of the cuff as his elbow burst through the weakened seam, tearing his way out of the sleeve.

No time to free his other arm. And he didn’t have to. Stretching his fingers out, Tony snatched the sewing bag off the Seamstress’s belt and twisted to fling it at Ladybug.

“No!” the Seamstress cried, dropping the scissors to whip out her threads – but in the process, she loosened the loops holding Chat Noir, just slightly, and he managed to wrench himself around enough to kick her in the knee, sending her stumbling back. Straight into Natasha, who swept a foot around to trip the Seamstress as Clint twisted himself into her path, bringing the supervillainess down hard for just a moment.

Just long enough for Ladybug to drop the champagne bottle to thump on the carpet and catch the bag. Eyes determined, she grabbed it by the mouth, one hand on either side.

“That’s enough out of you, akuma,” she said fiercely, and ripped the bag in two as the Seamstress screamed in rage and denial. Spools and pins and needles tumbled to the floor, joined a moment later by the scraps of cloth as Ladybug dropped the remnants of the bag.

Fluttering movement caught Tony’s eye as something seemed to peel its way out of the torn fabric – a butterfly maybe the size of his palm, pitch black but for a strange, eerie purple luminescence that seemed more a deeper darkness than a source of light.

Ladybug made a gesture over her yo-yo, and the top of the weight opened like ladybug wings to reveal a shining white light. Quickly, she whirled it into a circle to build momentum, once, twice-

“I free you from evil!”

The yo-yo whipped out, snatching up the black butterfly – the akuma? – just before it
managed to flutter out the window, the cover of the yo-yo snapping closed again around it.

Reeling the weapon back, Ladybug smiled. “Gotcha,” she said with satisfaction, and tapped the yo-yo with her finger. It opened again, and a shining white butterfly fluttered free. “Bye-bye, little butterfly…”

Suddenly, the shirt on Tony’s back went slack, reverting to nothing more than – now thoroughly soaked – fabric. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Clint and Natasha picking themselves up, likewise freed. Both of them were keeping a close eye on the Seamstress – but she seemed to be in shock, staring blankly at Ladybug as though suddenly all her momentum had suddenly simply dissipated.

Stumbling a little as the force pulling him vanished, Tony gingerly shook his arms out, ignoring the way his torn sleeve flopped in the process – note to self, make joke about video game characters progressively tearing off bits of their costume to symbolize Taking Levels in Badass, or else Clint’s going to get going on Tarzan jokes and I will be obligated to initiate World Prank War III and they’ll take my superhero license away again – and breathed a sigh of relief. At his feet, Chat Noir did the same thing – and now the catboy’s grin had morphed into something a lot less cocky and substantially more shaken and relieved.

“Hang on a sec there, I’ll help you out of that mess,” Tony told him, looking around for the scissors the Seamstress had dropped and trying to convince his hands to stop trembling with leftover adrenaline. He did not blame the guy for feeling rattled.

For that matter… hell. How much sheer guts had that taken, for Chat Noir to basically throw himself straight into the Seamstress’s hands, not even knowing Ladybug’s plan, just trusting that his partner would come through?

Damn. That was a level of teamwork-trust that Tony wasn’t used to seeing outside of Hawkeye and Black Widow at the top of their game.

The carpet under his feet squelched a little bit as he stepped on it, and Tony had to shake his head. “Oh man. I don’t envy the cleaning staff. Hope that they get paid extra for dealing with this.”

A chuckle brought his attention back to Ladybug as she reached down to pick up the now-empty spotted champagne bottle. Her cheeks dimpled in a grin as she winked at him. “Then let’s do them a favor,” she said – and flung the bottle straight up. “Miraculous Ladybug!”

The bottle spun up, and up – and up, as though the ceiling weren’t even there, and for a moment Tony’s brain sort of slid sideways, trying to figure out where and when he’d walked into a M. C. Escher universe-

Then it burst apart, dissolving into thousands and thousands of fluttering red-and-black little ladybugs, each one trailing glimmers of delicate pink light as they swirled together and then split apart, swarming everywhere.

A mass of them cascaded up through the hole in the ceiling left by Chat Noir’s Cataclysm – and left whole plaster and tile in their wake. Others swished over the fallen clothing and pins, which vanished as though the whole battle had never happened.

Another swarm swirled around Chat Noir, who laughed and flipped up onto his feet, giving himself a full-body shake as he stretched his freed arms. Then the same swarm whirled its way over to Tony.
That was… *weird*. It was a swarm of bugs. It should have been… creepy, or crawly, or at the very least it should have *tickled*. Instead, Tony just felt an odd, warm tingling feeling – and then they were gone, and he was blinking at the room again, his shirt and hair completely dry, the torn silk intact and tidy again-

-although, seriously, he was inclined to take it off as soon as he got back to his hotel and *never wear it again*, treacherous thing-

As he flexed his hands uncertainly, a weight shifted on his wrist. Startled, he pushed the cuff of his sleeve back, and blinked. His Colantotte bracelet gleamed on his arm, innocently intact, as though nothing had ever happened.

…*Wow. Maybe Pepper won’t kill me. Or at least, only kill me a little bit.*

Motion in the corner of his eye and Clint’s sudden, startled curse brought his attention sharply back to the Seamstress.

A dark, roiling mass of black… *something* had enveloped her. But even as they watched, it began to dissipate, peeling away from her feet and then up her body – and then it was Bissette sitting there in her stained dress, blinking in dazed confusion at them.

“What… how… where…?”

Next to Tony, Chat Noir and Ladybug bumped their fists together. “*Bien joué!*” they chorused, grinning cheerfully.

Then Chat Noir sighed dramatically, lacing his fingers behind his head as he stretched. “Too bad you had to clean it all up. I was having fun.”

Ladybug snickered softly and flicked a finger against the bell at his throat. “So sorry to take your new toy away, *chaton,*” she said, grinning.

Chat Noir clutched both hands over his heart, *pouting* at her even as he batted those cat-eyes. “Truly, you are a *cruel* one, my Lady, *stringing* a poor cat along like that!”

Tony raised a hand to hide his own grin as Ladybug gave her partner a mock-stern look, even though he could see her bite her lip to stifle a chuckle. Before she could say anything, however, Chat Noir’s ring gave another warning trill, and the last of the toepads flickered out, leaving only the central paw pad glowing dimly on the black face.

Paling, she grabbed Chat Noir’s shoulder and pushed him towards the window. “You have less than a minute left, *go!*”

Tony expected him to make some sort of snarky comment – but instead, Chat Noir ran to the open window, pausing on the sill just long enough to catch Tony’s eye. With a quick, apologetic smile, the catboy flicked a casual, two-fingered salute at him – and then jumped.

Startled, Tony jerked a step forward reflexively before he saw the small black shape touch down on the roof of the building across the street – and then uncoil in a springing leap that carried him up, up, *up*, a dark shape against the bright blue afternoon sky as his jump carried him up out of the view of the window.

Nearby, Ladybug breathed a quiet sigh, shoulders relaxing, before she reached down and plucked up the small sewing bag, intact again, that rested at her feet.
“Madam?” she said politely, walking to Bissette with a smile. “I believe this is yours.”

Bissette’s eyes had been darting around the room, growing wider and wider as she took in the strange location, the confused Avengers. Now they locked, not on the bag, but on Ladybug’s red-and-black skinsuit.

Her lower lip trembled. “Oh no. Oh no. I didn’t… I didn’t…” Her face crumpled. “…I did, didn’t I?”

Ladybug dropped to one knee next to the woman, gently pressing the sewing bag into her hands before resting a gloved hand on her shoulder. “This was not your fault,” she said, gently, but with a fierce earnestness. “I want you to remember that. Papillon took advantage of a natural, human reaction and used you. You are innocent.” Face softening, she ran a finger lightly along the intricate embroidery sweeping over Bissette’s shoulder, one of the few spots that hadn’t been stained by the wine. “I’m sorry about your dress,” she added quietly. “I wish I’d been able to fix it, too. It must have been absolutely amazing.”

Bissette sniffled, tears running over onto her cheeks, but she managed a weak smile.

Ladybug looked up at the Avengers. “Will you look after her?” she asked apologetically. “There should be paramedics arriving downstairs soon, if they’re not here already, but I…”

A familiar warbling beep interrupted her, and Ladybug winced slightly.

“I’m guessing that means you need to head out now,” Tony said, following the sound to Ladybug’s earrings, where one of the five black dots had just flickered out.

_Huh. So they both have some sort of timer._

“We can take care of it from here,” Natasha said firmly, offering a hand to Bissette. “Thank you, Ladybug.”

Ladybug nodded her own thanks, taking out her yo-yo.

“I… I don’t remember anything,” Bissette said weakly, as she accepted Natasha’s assistance and climbed shakily to her feet. “It’s… I was in the bathroom, and then…”

“Well, if you really want, I’ll see if I can’t snag some video off the security cameras,” Tony said, offering her one of his best devil-may-care grins before it slipped into a real chuckle. “Heck, I need video of this myself, STAT. Guy in catsuit and a lovely lady giving haute couture the beatdown it deserves? Pepper is going to eat that up, I need to save it for bribery against the next time she goes on the warpath.”

Ladybug chuckled as she walked to the window, then paused, suddenly thoughtful. “…Mister Stark? Do you think it would be possible to get a picture of Chat Noir tangled in the string?”

Tony smirked. “I think I can pull that off. Why? Planning on teasing him out of a few lives?”

“Let’s just say that it never hurts to keep a little blackmail handy.” Ladybug winked as she wound up and threw her yo-yo out the window. After a moment, she tugged at it, as though testing a grappling line. Then, to Tony’s amusement, she glanced back at them, and giggled.

“What?”
“Well…” Ladybug grinned ruefully at him. “Welcome to Paris?”

With that, she jumped off the windowsill. Walking over, Tony glimpsed her arcing down, feet nearly brushing the road before the line pulled her up and she swung up, up and above the roofline. By then, she was distant enough that he could only just make out the movement as she gathered the yo-yo back at that moment of freefall where she reached the peak of her arc, and then launched it to some new anchor to continue the swing.

“Someone has got to introduce that girl to Spiderman,” he muttered to himself with a smile, shaking his head, and then paused as he turned around. Clint was awkwardly patting the shell-shocked Bissette on the back as they walked over to the elevator – but Natasha had paused, head tilted to the side as she tapped her lower lip thoughtfully.

“What is it?” Tony asked warily. That sort of look from Natasha could mean all sorts of thing. Often involving a great deal of pain to bad guys. Or a lot of embarrassment to irritating teammates, during downtime, if they got on her bad side.


Tony blinked, and then mock-reeled, clapping both hands to his chest over the arc reactor. “Natasha!” he cried – he couldn’t quite pull off rejected suitor the way Chat Noir had, rejection had really never been an issue for him, but he could fake it. “After all we’ve been through, you’d leave me for a sexy catboy?”

Natasha snorted. “Please. Sexy? Sexy is cheap. I deal with it every day.” She smirked at him. “That? That was not sexy. That was weapons-grade cute.”

Chapter End Notes

That last line? Pretty much the entire reason I gave in and wrote this fic. (And, sorry for leaning on the fourth wall a bit, but Tony just had to get that crack in about French anime.)

Quick note: when Chat Noir tells Ladybug that he has three minutes, he means “three minutes before I have to drop out of the fight” – because disengaging from a fight is not always easy, and once he did that, he’d still have to find a way to get out of sight. So he padded his time a bit. (…yes, I like puns, too. And Chat Noir may be the Pungeon Master of the team – but just rewatch Stormy Weather/Climatika. Ladybug’s not above getting a few punches in herself!)

Fun fact: the mouse/muscle pun? Etymologically, the word muscle actually comes from Latin *musculus* – literally “little mouse.”

I once read that the most probable injury resulting from a human trying to run on all fours – which is sort of possible, although our legs are really too long for it and there’s no real point when we’re designed for bipedal motion – isn’t from breaking your arm or falling on your face, but breaking your fingers. Because our fingers are very fragile to pressure pushing them backwards rather than forwards (in fact, that’s a classic self-defense move for exactly that reason), and our reflex when going on all fours is to rest our weight on the palms of our hands. So when the body’s weight moves forward, the palms come up – but the fingers are splayed on the ground with nowhere to go, so they
bend away from the palm and towards the back of the hand, and…

Yeah. *Ow*.

Given that it’s canon that Chat Noir can and does transfer to cat-running, particularly when he needs to maneuver quickly – either his fingers are somehow far more flexible, or he’s actually using his knuckles or even his fingertips. Which is, technically, possible, if you have *really strong* hands and fingers. Climbers, for example, might be able to pull it off. And, lo and behold, it is indeed canon that Chat Noir, before ever gaining his Miraculous, was strong enough to quickly climb at least a good ten, fifteen feet straight up – including crossing what looks like an overhang – and then launch himself into a headlong dive to catch a small, fast-moving critter in mid-air. And landed safely – suggesting that he may have done stunts like that a *lot*.

(I can hear Plagg now. “The Cat is strong with this one…”)

And yes. Ladybug and Chat Noir are tiny. Compare them to most of the adult characters in the series. Methinks two someones are overdue for growth spurts.

The Origins episodes show the consequences if an akuma is freed and not cleansed – and the fact that only Ladybug has the power to cleanse them. (Which irritates the heck out of me – Ladybug gets three different powers, and Chat Noir gets one? – but that’s a rant for another time.) Suffice to say that an uncleansed akuma swiftly leads to Nightmare Fuel.

Chat Noir versus suits: yes, my bunnies had so much fun writing that. (And for the record, a brief round of Google-fu suggested Brooks Brothers as a respectable rival to Armani, so I just had to get that in there. The champagne vintage is likewise the result of a few minutes skimming the internet.) For a glorious bit of mental imagery, take a look at the [LG Divide & Conquer TWIN Wash commercial “Fighting Laundry” on YouTube](https://www.youtube.com).

There are, indeed, pins with Cute Animal characters for heads. I couldn’t resist tagging Tony with one. (Look up Misuya-Bari pins.) As for Chat Noir’s immunity… yes, it’s canon that akuma control-powers can work on them (or at least on him). But the Seamstress’s powers are aimed at controlling fabric, not people – and those suits aren’t really fabric at all.

…besides. I’m a proud member of the “Stop Possessing Chat Noir Already!” club. Heroes should be more resistant than civilians, at a minimum. Once was a good plot twist. Twice was a little frustrating. Three times? This had darn well better have some interesting character development payoff.

The bit about tearing costume pieces off is a reference to Prince of Persia: Sands of Time.

…and Ladybug absolutely wanted the picture of Chat Noir for future tactical considerations. And helping out the Ladyblog. She most definitely does *not* think that her partner is cute, and she does *not* find him ridiculously adorable in full bouncy-kitten-mode and she did *not* regret that the crisis kept her from enjoying the silly and this is *most definitely* not a Suspiciously Specific Denial.
Facts and Physics

Chapter Notes

I meant to post this yesterday, but given that I had been awake for over twenty-four hours (I could not get to sleep on the plane), I decided it would be best to stall until I felt a little less like a zombie. On a related note, I do not know when the next chapter will be going up; that will be dependent on internet access and how much free time I have available once my program starts.

Some dialogue taken directly from the MiraculouSubs translation of the French-language version of the second Origins episode.

And while on the topic – I couldn’t find a way to get this in, but did anyone else notice that Papillon calls himself “le Papillon/the Papillon” in his Evil Speech, while Ladybug simplifies it to just “Papillon”? I wonder if that’s a subtle bit of nyah on her part – Papillon was playing up his portentousness, while she turns it into just a name.

I should point out that I came up with this story long before the Origins episode declared that the abilities of Ladybug and Chat Noir centered on creation and destruction, and the background worldbuilding I did based on the good luck/bad luck premise was too much fun to simply throw out. Besides, I really like the idea of Ladybug and Chat Noir both getting their powers from primordial chaos, AKA primordial potential. And it’s possible to view creation and destruction the extreme poles of good fortune and bad fortune…

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“So. The two of you ready to tell me the real reason you’re here yet?”

Natasha arched an eyebrow as Tony dropped himself down onto the couch. She had to admit, she was impressed. Tony Stark was known for his patience in the same way that deserts were known for their humidity. She had half-expected him to leap down their throats the moment the dust settled.

On the other hand – Tony might present himself as a professional jackass, but he had a conscientious side underneath the veneer. After Ladybug had made her exit, he’d returned to the floor they’d been on when everything started to retrieve his briefcase, and returned bearing Bissette’s purse and an elegant blouse-and-skirt ensemble that he’d handed to the girl with an offhanded, “Courtesy of Stark Industries, miss.”

Natasha had raised an eyebrow at that. She was fairly certain she’d seen that particular outfit on one of the display racks for a high-end off-the-rack fashion designer. She sincerely doubted the owner had let it go for anything less than a small fortune.

On the other hand, given that she distinctly remembered knifing the skirt when it had attempted to tangle her legs during the melee, the vendor might have been glad to see it gone. The damage might have been repaired by Ladybug’s odd power, just like Clint’s jacket and the hole in the ceiling, but…

Well. Tony wasn’t the only one in their trio who’d found an excuse to change clothes as
soon as they’d gotten back to his suite in Le Grand Paris. Natasha counted herself as a practical person – but there was something profoundly unsettling about your own clothing turning against you.

But Bissette hadn’t even blinked when Tony handed the ensemble to her, just given a vague nod as he’d gently chivvied her off to the women’s restroom to get changed. Even when he’d claimed the ruined dress upon her return, handing it off to a wide-eyed member of the staff with the promise of a truly Tony Stark-grade tip if the man could salvage it, she hadn’t reacted beyond a bemused look.

Shock, had been Natasha’s first thought – but that didn’t quite seem to fit the symptoms. There was no thousand-yard stare, and while Bissette seemed slightly disoriented and confused, she didn’t seem particularly dazed. More… drained, maybe – as though all the desperate emotional energy that had sent her running from Chloë’s jeering in tears had been wrung out, leaving the woman a little baffled – knowing she had been upset, but no longer actually feeling it, with no memory of what had happened in between.

Well. Turning into a supervillain probably counts as a form of catharsis, at least, Natasha thought wryly.

Still. It had been a relief when the three of them had escorted Bissette down to the ground level to find two paramedics waiting in the lobby. The pair had taken charge of Bissette with no more than a quick, courteous nod of thanks to the Avengers, wrapping a shock blanket around the girl’s shoulders and gently ushering her off to one of the side doors, where they were met by a woman with a look of no-nonsense compassion about her that reminded Natasha of some of SHIELD’s better post-mission counselors – the ones who understood that sometimes, everything went wrong, and that healing wasn’t about not being broken, but learning your way around your own sharp edges.

The counselor wasn’t wearing a uniform – but she and the paramedics all wore patches on their shoulders, patches that matched the unit designation on the police officers currently manning the quick barricade that had been set up in front of the main doors of the convention center. The design of the patches was simple: a black ring on a red background, encircling the spread wings of a white butterfly.

The Brigade d'Intervention d'Akuma. Paris’s own dedicated Akuma Response unit, trained to contain and minimize the damage wrought by a supervillain, and to help the victim once the akuma had been dealt with.

At least our intel got us that much, Natasha thought. She’d certainly run missions with less information in the past – but that didn’t mean she had to like it.

Clint settled down into an empty chair, automatically correcting for his quiver. He’d armed himself as soon as they’d made their way back to Tony’s hotel room, for which Natasha did not blame him, although it would make keeping their presence under the official radar a little more difficult.

“Believe it or not, the suit’s actually legitimate SHIELD business,” her partner said, clearly amused by that fact. “And we’ll need to follow up directly with Mister Agreste now, since the party at the Exposé ended up getting a little rowdy.”

Tony snorted. “Fury sending the two of you shopping for nice clothes?” he asked dryly, raising an eyebrow.

“Hey. I want one of those suits,” Clint defended. His grin dropped a moment later. “But it’s
not a coincidence that SHIELD sent the two of us to inspect them, either.”

Tony nodded, the motion just a hint too sharp to be casual, for all the man’s relaxed posture. “Figured as much.” Straightening up from his slouch, he eyed the two of them. “So. What was all that about? Because when last I checked, most people don’t go around yelling it’s a supervillain the way most sane people yell it’s a lawyer.”

Natasha felt the corners of her lips twitch as Clint snickered, but both of them sobered quickly, glancing at each other. They’d briefly discussed how to present the situation to Tony, after learning he’d be in Paris – but they’d hoped for a little more time to gather intelligence.

The Seamstress’s dramatic appearance had changed the plan.

“You’d think we’d know better by now, she thought wryly.

“We don’t know nearly as much as we’d like,” she admitted, honestly.

Tony crossed his arms over his chest and raised an eyebrow pointedly. “You knew the Seamstress was possessed; both of you were holding back from kill-shots even before Adrien managed to warn me. And you threw Ladybug’s yo-yo back to her before you threw the bag, Natasha – even though we were supposed to be getting that akuma thing away from her. You knew she needed that yo-yo to exorcise it, didn’t you?”

“Know, no,” Natasha admitted. “Strongly suspect? Yes. Most of her abilities seem to rely on it.” She leaned forward. “Akuma?”

“That’s what Adrien called it. Chat Noir and Ladybug mentioned it as well,” Tony said. “Doesn’t sound like a French term.”

“I think it might be Japanese,” Clint said thoughtfully. “Pretty sure I’ve heard it crop up related to those cartoons with the big eyes.” His eyes flickered uneasily for a moment, before he added, “Kid didn’t mention how the possession thing works, did he?”

The question came out casually enough, but Natasha saw Clint’s fists tighten until his knuckles showed white under his tan, and she had to fight the urge to wince. Clint had never quite forgiven himself for what had happened when he’d been under Loki’s power, back during the Tesseract incident. Mind control was a loaded topic for him. They’d known the basics coming into the mission, but forewarned was not the same as being happy about it.

“Wasn’t a lot of time for detail,” Tony said, almost apologetically – if Tony Stark could ever be called apologetic. “He said akuma got into people’s heads by twisting their emotions around to ‘crazy’ and gave them powers, and he told me about the whole talisman thing. That was pretty much it.”

So it was some kind of emotional manipulation. “That’s more detail than we had for certain before,” Natasha said, meeting Tony’s eyes levelly. “Thank you.”

The inventor blinked slightly, and some of the tension in his shoulders eased. “So, what do you know?” he pressed, although his tone was more honest curiosity now.

Getting to her feet, Natasha walked to the side table where she’d left her travel bag and fished out the tablet she kept in one of the inner pockets. Not that that would keep it away from prying fingers – but she didn’t keep sensitive information on her in the field, physical or digital.

More to the point, if someone pried, they’d only get more suspicious if they didn’t find
anything – and she highly doubted that anyone would expect her to not have information on the akuma situation, if they knew enough to pry in the first place.

“SHIELD has had its eye on the situation for a while,” she explained, unlocking the screen and opening up the appropriate set of images. “We first became aware of something out of place in August, when a blizzard…”

Tony must have inhaled at the wrong moment, because he doubled over coughing briefly. “Wait, a blizzard? In August?” he rasped in disbelief. “This is Paris! They barely get a few inches of snow all winter!”

Natasha nodded. “The storm itself developed in just a few minutes, and spread to cover the entire metropolitan area of Paris. It lasted less than ten minutes, however, and then simply vanished.”

“In a swarm of sparkly ladybugs?” Tony asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Most likely,” Natasha agreed, pulling up the image she wanted. “However – Ladybug may have reversed the immediate effects, but the ripple effect of such an unnatural weather system suddenly appearing and then vanishing had a significant impact on storm systems across most of the oceanic climate zone of Western Europe. SHIELD started asking questions, but since the situation had apparently resolved itself so quickly, it was low priority. Until this turned up.”

Turning, she reached over the back of the couch to offer the tablet to Tony.

The inventor tilted it to look at the screen, and sucked in a sharp breath that hissed between suddenly gritted teeth.

“. . .this is a portal,” he said flatly, looking at the satellite image of a dark, circularrentin the air over central Paris. “Like the one over New York.”

“Similar, at the very least,” Clint agreed. “Although we don’t think it connected to the same place. We don’t know enough to say for sure either way – there was a girl livestreaming the incident, but apparently she lost her phone before she could get a clear image of anything on the other side of the rift. Either way, that one cleared up pretty quickly as well, and so far as we can tell, nothing made it through.”

“That one?” Tony echoed pointedly.

Natasha nodded to the tablet again, gesturing for Tony to begin swiping through the images. “The supervillains created by these akuma are highly varied. We’ve been tracking, and so far as we’ve been able to tell, there are no real overall patterns in their powers, either in terms of what they can do or their scale.”

Tony swiped to yet another picture, and froze, a strange look coming across his face. “I . . . can see that, yeah,” he said, sounding a little strangled. And then asked, incredulously, “Pigeons? Really?”

Clint snickered as Natasha winced, remembering the report on that . . . incident.

“Ever gotten to a stake-out point only to discover the pigeons claimed it first?” Clint grinned, clearly delighting in their discomfort. “Hitchcock had it right. Pigeons are evil. Heck, they’ve even got the Sith eyes to prove it.”

“We’ll take your word for that,” Tony said dryly. Lowering the tablet to his knees, he turned his attention back to Natasha. “So this wasn’t just a one-off thing. These attacks happen a lot.”
“At least two or three times a month,” Natasha confirmed grimly. “Almost weekly.”

Tony’s cheeks puffed as he released a slow breath. “So that was what Adrien meant when he said things had been too quiet recently.” His eyes narrowed. “How long?”

“Since this started?” Natasha replied. “So far as we’ve been able to determine, the first incident was only a few weeks before Climatika – the supervillain who triggered the blizzard,” she clarified. Reaching over the couch again, she swiped through the pictures until she found the one she wanted – a massive creature reminiscent of the Hulk in shape, but by all appearances made of solid stone, about to launch a car after a fleeing policeman.

Tony blinked at the image, eyebrows rising with interest, and tapped the screen to call up the metadata attached to the image. “Cœur de Pierre – Stoneheart?” he asked.

“Yes. First sighted bashing his way out of a local school – apparently some kid who got turned down by his crush or something,” Clint said, having picked himself up from the chair to stand with his hip braced against the arm of Tony’s couch, so that he could follow the conversation. “Basically paralyzed Paris for a few hours – shooting at him just made him bigger, and he’d bash through just about anything.”

“And they didn’t call in the army?” Tony asked.

“They were trying,” Natasha acknowledged. “In fact, given that the Mayor was apparently informed of SHIELD’s existence, I wouldn’t be surprised if he tried to put in a call for the Avengers.” And she wanted to go on the record as not liking that idea. As a group, the Avengers had hammered out something resembling an understanding with Fury – no small accomplishment, given that two of them were Fury’s subordinates, one was a quasi-soldier with no real organizational ties anywhere, and two were civilians who were practically allergic to anything resembling organized military or political institutions, and for good reason. The thought that a random civilian official would consider himself authorized to call on them… made a certain amount of sense, but it didn’t sit well with her.

Of course, given his daughter, it was entirely possible that Mayor Bourgeois had simply assumed he had the right to do so, rather than actually having any sort of official power to that effect.

“I take it that the situation was handled before it got that far,” Tony observed, his pursed lips suggesting that he’d been going down a similar line of thought. “Ladybug and Chat Noir?”

Natasha nodded. “Their first recorded appearance,” she confirmed. “A civilian girl had apparently been following Stoneheart, and submitted the video she’d taken with her cell phone to the local news channel.” She hesitated for a moment, before adding, “It seems likely that it was not just their first known appearance, but their first appearance, period.”

“Ouch. So much for staying off the public radar,” Tony said, swiping to the next picture. And froze, staring at the eerie head hovering against the backdrop of the Eiffel Tower, made of thousands of those strange black butterflies.

Butterflies Natasha recognized, now, having seen one with her own eyes, and she hoped Tony wouldn’t notice the way she swallowed, trying to coax moisture back into a mouth that had suddenly gone bone-dry. If any one of those little black butterflies could create an opponent like the Seamstress, or Stoneheart, or Climatika, and Papillon had thousands at his disposal…

Then I suppose we’re lucky that he seems to have a plan beyond simply unleashing chaos and devastation, she thought grimly. I just wish we had some idea of what that plan was.

“The only solid intel we’ve got on the person or thing behind this mess,” Clint said flatly, eyes hard as he scowled at the image. “Tasha, do we have the video?”

Natasha nodded, tapping the screen to bring up the metadata, and using that to call up the file.

Seen in motion, Stoneheart’s resemblance to the Hulk both increased and decreased. Increased, because there were simply only so many ways something that size and build could move – and because Stoneheart and Hulk shared that same quality of… acuity, that vague hint that, size and slow words aside, there was much more going on behind those glowing eyes than one might think at first glance. Decreased, because Stoneheart’s movements as he settled himself at the edge of the Eiffel Tower’s second platform were ponderous, in a way that the Hulk’s never were, no matter his size. And then he simply stopped, as still as the rocks he seemed to be made of, not even seeming to notice the girl screaming in one absently-raised fist.

The stillness didn’t last.

Stoneheart suddenly groaned, doubling over as coughs fought their way out of him. Twisting, he roared, threw his head back-

A swarm of black butterflies exploded out of his mouth, boiling upwards to coalesce into a nearly featureless head, eyes nothing more than dark indentations over a sharp nose and sneering mouth.

Natasha glimpsed Stoneheart collapsing backward, seemingly lifeless – but only for a moment, as the camera view cut back, apparently transitioning to one of the circling helicopters, just as the mouth of the effigy opened.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Listen to me carefully. I, am the Papillon.”

It wasn’t a thunderous voice. The voice was male, and almost soft, even as it echoed across the silence of the open space surrounding the Tower; the sort of tone that made you lean forward to listen, even when you knew you didn’t want to hear a word of what he said.

“Ladybug. Chat Noir. Give me your Miraculous. The ladybug’s earrings, and the black cat’s ring. And everything will go back to normal. The people have suffered enough because of you-”

Even watching this for the tenth time, Natasha still wasn’t certain how the simple sound of sarcastic applause managed to cut through that voice so easily.

The video feed switched to another camera, at ground level, as it focused in on a small figure in red and black, as Ladybug strolled forward.

“Nice try, Papillon,” she said dryly. “But don’t reverse the roles – we all know who the supervillain is. You’re the one who transformed all these innocents into monsters of stone and rock!”

She stopped, feet set wide and braced, as her hands tightened into fists by her side. “Papillon. It doesn’t matter how long it’ll take – but we will find you, and you’ll be the one to give us your Miraculous!”

Then she launched herself into a run, yo-yo a shining whirl by her side as she ran down the long bridge towards the tower, before she launched it ahead of her to wrap around the lamp-posts at the edge of the tower plaza, and used the wire to slingshot herself up to Papillon’s level-
“I free you from evil!”

It was hard to follow what came next – the view bounced around, clearly switching between cameras, but none of them could get a good enough angle to show more than Ladybug twisting and flipping in the air to keep her momentum a little longer, as the shining yo-yo lashed out again and again and *again*, each sweep stealing a swath of butterflies from “Papillon’s” mass as the image roared in fury. Eventually, it burst apart in a scatter of dark wings, as the akuma tried to escape – but by then, there were too few, and Ladybug was able to sweep them up as her leap finally peaked and brought her down to land on one of the cross-girders above the platform.

She turned, one of the cameras finally zooming in now that she was no longer in motion to show a face full of a strange mixture of defiance, reassurance and entreaty.

“I’m making a promise to all of you,” she shouted, voice echoing across the same space that Papillon’s had filled just seconds before. “No matter whether some try to hurt you – Ladybug and Chat Noir will do everything in their power to help you!”

Holding out her yo-yo, she tapped the top of it, then raised it up.

The camera view pulled out again as butterflies fountained upward in a cloud of shining white wings, hovering overhead for just a moment before scattering in all directions…

Reaching out, Natasha tapped the screen to stop the video. There was more, of course, but they’d covered the important part. If Tony wanted to watch the rest of the battle against the reawakened Stoneheart, he could look it up himself.

And he probably would, knowing him. But for the moment, the inventor just stared at the image frozen on his screen without apparently seeing it, eyes narrowed and hard.

After a long moment, Tony huffed, a sharp, angry puff of air as his mouth twisted. “*I’m only doing this because you didn’t do what I wanted, so this is all your fault,*” he said in a mocking sing-song. “Straight out of the scriptbooks of schoolyard bullies and just about every other abusive slimeball out there. Cute.”

Clint grimaced. “It nearly worked, too.”

Tony’s lip curled, but then he shook his head, sighing as he rolled his shoulders in an effort to shake some of the tension out of them. “…Yeah, I could see that,” he admitted. “Gotta hand it to Papillon, he sure knows how to manipulate an argument. A whole city of terrified people who don’t know what’s going on? They’d have bought it hook, line, and sinker. Just to have someone to blame.”

Natasha nodded. “If Ladybug had been one iota less confident, Papillon would have turned the whole city against them.” And she knew for a fact that at least some of that confidence had to have been feigned. She’d seen a clip of unused footage, of Ladybug wincing back from a policeman’s brusque dismissal, accepting the blame, and only recovering after a few quiet, intense words from Chat Noir that the microphones hadn’t picked up. If Papillon had made his accusation a moment sooner…

Well. He hadn’t. “As it is, Papillon’s threat seems to have backfired. Ladybug and Chat Noir have the full support of the Parisian population, and pretty much blanket authority to make whatever requests they need in order to stop a supervillain. For the most part, the people seem to adore them.” She had to smile a little. “I understand the city even commissioned a statue.”
Tony chuckled, setting the tablet aside and eeling himself around on the couch so that the three of them were more or less facing each other properly again. “So, not really the Spiderman type. They do their heroing out in the open, where everyone can see.”

“They don’t really have much choice,” Clint pointed out. “Nine times out of ten, the villains attack in broad daylight.”

Tony raised an eyebrow, but nodded. “Makes sense,” he admitted after a moment. “Sounds like the villains are just a means to an end for this butterfly guy. And it’s not like he’s the one out rampaging across Paris. If Ladybug and Chat Noir are the ones he’s really after, then he wants the villains to be big and loud and visible.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “So. Who are those two?”

This was going to be the interesting part. “We’re not sure.”

Tony snorted. “Pull the other one.”

“Hey, they’re not exactly running around advertising their real identities,” Clint said, a mischievous sparkle in his eyes. “The masks are kind of a clue.”

The inventor rolled his eyes, every inch of his relaxed slouch showing just how unimpressed he was. “Like those masks actually hide anything? To say nothing of the suits. Damn. Even I’d think twice about wearing a get-up like that.” He grinned. “Only twice, though. Third time around, suit’s on.”

Natasha wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of a reaction. “Actually, it’s official public policy. They can’t do much about civilian speculation – and there’s quite a bit of it,” and if she never had to slog through some of those conspiracy theories again, she’d be a happy agent, “but all public officials and newscasters are barred from making inquiries into Ladybug and Chat Noir’s real identities. The Mayor’s already cracked down on one or two journalists who tried sneaking around to do an exposé.”

That got Tony to sit up a bit, blinking. “Seriously?”

“Think about it,” Clint pointed out. “Even if someone didn’t go public with it – the akuma possess people? Then who knows how much of what they know gets passed on to Papillon. If you know who those two really are, and one of those little black butterflies gets to you…” His face darkened and he looked away, his point made without any more need for talking. Loki had proven what could happen if an enemy managed to take control of an agent with useful intel.

Showing a sensitivity he rarely actually bothered to listen to, Tony grimaced, obviously guessing where Clint’s thoughts had gone. “Okay, I admit, that makes a certain amount of sense. Besides, a little mystery is good for tourism.” And then he gave them a Look, eyes narrowing in a way that silently warned that Tony was feeling tempted to turning things over to Mr. Stark, dangerously wealthy businessman, unrepentant hacker, and the mind behind Ironman. “And I don’t believe for one second that any of that would have stopped SHIELD. Don’t tell me that you guys don’t have files showing the grades they got on their kindergarten fingerpainting assignments by now.”

Natasha didn’t try to dodge that unspoken accusation; after the events surrounding Tony’s palladium poisoning and recovery, he had every right to be paranoid about SHIELD’s approach to exceptional individuals. “There are… certain factors that have made investigation challenging.”

One eyebrow rose pointedly.
Natasha didn’t smile – but she’d be lying if she said she hadn’t been looking forward to this from the moment they’d known Tony would be getting himself involved. “You’re good at judging women’s ages, Tony,” she said. He had to be. For all his rakish ways, Tony Stark had never once so much as wolf-whistled at a girl under the legal age of consent – despite active pursuit in some cases, including several honeypot operations by various crime syndicates looking for blackmail and tabloids looking for a racy scoop.

Which was going to make this all the more effective. “So tell me,” she challenged. “How old is Ladybug?”

Tony blinked at her in surprise, opening his mouth to fire back an answer-

And left it hanging there, jaw slack, as his eyes rounded in surprise.

Natasha couldn’t help a wry shrug of sympathy. She was no poor hand at estimating someone’s age, weight, height – dozens of details, summed up and filed away at a single glance. She depended on that skill, in her line of work, to catch the thousands of odd little details that even the most skilled disguises rarely managed to completely mask.

Which meant she remembered very, very well the alien sensation of studying Ladybug’s photos, the videos, even the heroine herself – and feeling that trained observational skill come back with nothing more than the equivalent of a mental …shrug.

“Holy freaking…” Tony trailed off, blinking. “That’s… wait. She’s short. I remember that! And – black hair. Blue-grey eyes. Small athlete’s figure…”

“Yeah – but do you think you could pick her out of a crowd?” Clint asked pointedly.

Tony opened his mouth, closed it again, and then shook his head, slumping back against the arm of the couch. “Until you asked, I would’ve said yeah, of course, but…”

“It’s not just human eyes,” Natasha said, anticipating where Tony’s mind would go next. “Recognition software, pattern matching – nothing seems to work. We know what they look like – as I said, there’s a statue of them, and there’s no shortage of photos and video footage. But when we try to make a connection between this is what Ladybug and Chat Noir look like and this is what a certain person looks like – it’s like the mental pathways are simply blocked.”

“It’s not just recognizing their features, either,” Clint added. “I looked into the subway systems here and Paris. Cameras everywhere. And we have plenty of evidence of Ladybug or Chat Noir ducking into a terminal and then just vanishing. Even if by some wild stretch of luck they managed not to get caught on camera taking those masks off, it should be child’s play to make the connection – superhero goes in, a minute later, Mild Mannered Citizen walks out. I don’t think there’s anyone in the world who hasn’t seen that movie.” He spread his hands. “And yet… zip. Zilch. Nada.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Oh really,” he murmured, his fingers twitching slightly on the case of the tablet, and Natasha would be willing to bet good vodka that the inventor would be testing that interesting little tidbit, as soon as he – or rather, JARVIS – got his electronic fingers into the files.

Good. She’d be interested to know if Jarvis – not human, but also far from a simple computer system – could slide past the strange protections.

But for the time being, Tony continued, voice deliberately light, “Well, if it works even
when someone’s looked them straight in the face, then it’s certainly no tech I’ve ever heard of, unless someone got an honest-to-goodness Not My Problem Field up and running. So… what? Some kind of mutant ability?”

“It’s been suggested,” Natasha admitted. “We think it’s unlikely, however. For one thing, physical abilities enhanced to that extent would be very, very difficult to hide in day-to-day life – especially in a city as busy as Paris.”

“Point,” Tony admitted. “The green-on-green eyes would be pretty hard to hide. And I have no idea how you’d get mutant abilities that would explain fake ears that move on their own. Or the tail. Belt. Thing.”

Clint grinned. “Not to mention, leaping buildings in a single bound. Can you imagine being able to do that and not using it whenever you could?”

Tony snorted in amusement. “In case you didn’t notice, it sounds like they are, they’re just wearing masks and tight suits. Sounds a lot like the X-Men to me. Besides, it’s not like they actually…” He trailed off, eyes widening-

-and then let out a huff that was part frustration and part astonishment and part pure, wry amusement as he raised a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Except Chat Noir did. Right in front of us. Across the street to the roof of the apartments across the way, then straight up over the hotel. Spiderman couldn’t have made that jump – not without an assist from his webbing, at least. How did I not notice that? More of this weird Not the Superheroes You’re Looking For effect?”

Natasha chuckled, resting her hip against the back of the couch. “Actually, it’s something that shows up all over the place. SHIELD’s analysts have taken to calling it the cinema effect.”

Tony blinked, and raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

“What he said,” Clint added, twisting in his seat. “I haven’t heard about that one. Sounds like there’s a story behind it.”

“Not that much of one,” Natasha admitted. “They aren’t sure if it’s something that’s always been around – it’s possible – or if it’s developed in part since people have gotten used to movie special effects that are good enough to make the impossible look natural. Loosely put – when someone does something that should be physically impossible, but without any obvious cues that it is impossible, the same suspension of disbelief that lets us accept that sort of thing in movies kicks in.”

Tony’s lips quirked. “I suppose that makes a certain sort of sense,” he admitted. “Lets you get on with things like screaming and running, rather than standing like an idiot going but, but, but.” He shook his head. “Okay, so not mutant powers. But definitely superhuman abilities, and last I checked, that sort of thing doesn’t just turn up at random. So what gives?”

Oh, he was not going to like this. “At the moment, our best guess is that we’re looking at some kind of magical influence.”

Tony stilled for a moment – and then turned his head slightly to give her a flat, disbelieving Look.

Natasha shrugged.

Tony rolled his head back on his shoulders and groaned. “Magic. Lovely,” he groaned, pouting at the universe for a second before sighing heavily and sitting up again. “So do we have any details, or did your nice friendly analysts just throw up their hands and say, it’s all magic, you should
really just relax?”

Natasha had to bite the inside of her cheek for a second to hide a snicker. Truth be told, the reactions among the analysts had apparently been much like Tony’s. Only with significantly more swearing involved. From what she’d picked up from Clint and the other people she’d gotten to know in SHIELD, magic was more or less the bane of the organization’s existence, long before Loki’s dramatic entrance on the scene. In no small part because Earth-native magic users were few and far between, and apparently allergic to anything resembling too much public attention – and she couldn’t exactly blame them for that. Which meant that SHIELD’s knowledge of magic was limited to careful guesswork and analysis, and a mess of folklore and superstition which might or might not be accurate. On certain days. If the moon was in the right phase.

“Like physicists trying to figure out how gravity managed to work without violating touch-at-a-distance,” Coulson had noted. “They knew it did, they just were missing the pieces that would make it all make sense.”

The memory brought a slight pang – she’d liked Coulson, the man who’d vouched for her along with Clint, when she’d barely have been willing to vouch for herself. She allowed herself a moment, before pressing on. “They have a few guesses, at least,” she said. “For one thing, Ladybug and Chat Noir both seem to get their powers from some sort of chaos-based magic…”

“Huh. That’s a new one since I last talked to them,” Clint commented, raising his eyebrows. “How’d they come up with that? From where I’m standing, I’m pretty sure they’re playing the role of Guardians of Law and Order, here.”

“Think about that Lucky Charm of Ladybug’s,” Natasha started.

Both men groaned. “Do we have to?” Tony asked, looking pained. “Because seriously, I’m pretty sure that broke my brain, I’m still making sure I got all the pieces glued in right.”

She was not going to laugh at them. Although it was very tempting. “The point is, that ability appears to give her a single object that, if used in the right way, with a half-dozen near-random factors falling exactly into place, will let her succeed in her objective. At a smaller scale, many of their battles seem to involve many small things going right for them – or perhaps more accurately in Chat Noir’s case, going wrong for his enemies.”

“Like rival suits tangling each other up? That… actually kind of makes sense,” Tony said, looking as though he’d really rather have his fingernails pulled than admit that much. “Black cats are supposed to be bad luck, after all. And… huh. Aren’t ladybugs supposed to be good luck?”

Natasha nodded. “Outside that – our analysts think that they’re not actually magicians, themselves. We seem to be looking at some sort of magical transformation.”

“Which means… what?” Tony asked. “Because I’ve gotta warn you, I’m picturing Sailor Moon saying by the power of the Moon, here. And I really can’t see those two as magical girls.” He paused, before suddenly laughing. “Okay – Chat Noir, sure, I could see him rolling with that and owning it. Guy’s got a well-developed sense of the ridiculous.”

“Actually… that’s not a bad analogy, as I understand it,” Natasha admitted, as Clint cackled. “They have a relatively limited set of abilities that produce more or less the same effect every time; the variation seems to come in how they apply that effect. Once an ability has been used, that sets off a time limit, after which they lose their transformation and have to find some way to recharge their energy before they can rejoin the fight – and that’s confirmed, there have been occasions where one of them had to take over a fight while the other retreated, vanished, and then
returned, anywhere from a few minutes to half an hour or more later. And they both seem to be dependent on a magical talisman for their abilities.”

“These… Miraculous, right?” Tony asked, giving it the same French inflection that Papillon had. “Any idea what those are?”

Natasha traded a glance with Clint, both of them wincing slightly. “Nada,” the archer admitted. “What you saw in that video? That’s literally pretty much all we know about the things, right there. Though, if I were going to guess? I’d bet you that Ladybug and Chat Noir only got their hands on theirs after Papillon made his move. Like I said – who’d have been able to resist using those awesome abilities? So it seems reasonable to guess that these Miraculous turned up after Papillon started throwing black butterflies around. Maybe even because of it.”

“Huh. Sort of like a natural defensive reaction?” Tony pursed his lips, apparently distracted for the time being from his sheer distaste for the concept of magic. “Ladybug seemed pretty convinced that Papillon has one, too.”

“We’re assuming, for the time being, that she’s right,” Natasha admitted. “At the moment, she and Chat Noir are the people most likely to know, one way or another.” She spread her hands. “And that is, literally, all that we know, Tony.”

“…not very much, is it.” he said thoughtfully, tapping his fingers restlessly against the tablet again. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? Because Fury’s got to be tearing the hair he doesn’t even have out over this mess.”

That was… fairly accurate, actually. Fury had not been pleased by the situation in Paris. Natasha didn’t blame him. “Essentially, yes,” Natasha admitted.

Tony straightened up on the couch. “Right, then. I’m guessing the next move is to talk to the mayor… What?” he interrupted himself, obviously seeing the way the two SHIELD agents both grimaced.

“Mayor’s… not gonna help,” Clint said dryly. “He’s been stonewalling SHIELD – heck, stonewalling the whole mess – ever since Ladybug and Chat Noir took Stoneheart down.”

Tony blinked. “…Seriously?” he asked, incredulous.

Natasha huffed, a little irritated herself. “Within the city, Ladybug and Chat Noir are the public’s darlings. Outside it? Mayor Bourgeois is doing everything in his power to suppress any word of this – the akuma attacks, Papillon, anything – from getting out. The attacks are broadcast on the local television channels – but anything that goes out of the city is edited. Heavily. Same for radio, newspapers… just about any information channel he can put pressure on.”

That got a wince from Tony. “Guess I can sort of see his point. Tourism’s a pretty big source of income for Paris. If people are worried they’re going to get carried off by pigeons or turned into mummy minions, they’re likely to take themselves and their money and pick somewhere else for a romantic vacation.”

“Or a bunch of thrill-seekers who think it’d be fun to flirt with the odds will come pouring in,” Clint pointed out. “Or international news hounds looking for the scoop of the decade by unmasking the heroes, no matter what the fallout for Paris might be.”

Now it was Tony’s turn to grimace. “And the Mayor thinks that pretending none of this is happening will make it all go away?” He snorted. “Or at least, keep it from affecting his standing in
That got a snicker from Clint. “Actually, I’m willing to bet that half the reason he’s still in office is that none of his serious contenders want to touch the hot seat with a ten-foot-pole while this mess is going on.” He made a face. “But, yeah. When Fury tried to approach him, apparently Bourgeois more or less shoved him out the door while insisting that everything was perfectly under control, we most certainly do not need help, go away before someone sees you.”

“Hm.” Tony slanted a glance at them. “And what do you two think?”

Natasha traded a quick look with Clint, who shrugged; the ball was in her court, then.

“I think,” she said carefully, “that Paris is a very big city for a two-man team to cover. And that beyond that, we just don’t know enough to make a call on what the situation warrants.”

Tony nodded slowly. “So what you really need,” he said pointedly, “is a local who’s willing to give us the real story about what’s been going on here.” Then, unexpectedly, he grinned. “Fortunately, I know just the person. And what do you know, we even have a legitimate reason to get in touch.”

Natasha blinked at him, as Clint’s brow furrowed. “We do?” he asked.

“Sure.” Grinning, Tony pulled out a plain white business card, the G of the Gabriel logo emblazoned on the back. “Because you know, I wouldn’t mind a James Bond suit of my very own.”

“IT appears to me, Ms. Romanov, that Mister Fury’s needs would best be served by an off-the-rack line,” Gabriel Agreste said thoughtfully, running a hand over his chin. “With a few minor modifications to the design, I can ensure that any reasonably skilled tailor would be able to handle the final fittings without interfering with the mobility of the suit.”

“That would be ideal,” Natasha agreed, looking relaxed and comfortable, as though they hadn’t been standing around in the guy’s office for a good hour.

“Excellent.” And no wonder Adrien was such a good actor; the smile Agreste flashed at Natasha was professionally perfect, not even a flash of the lower row of teeth to hint that it was fake. Tony didn’t believe it for a second. “In that case, I will have the finalized designs prepared within a few days. I do apologize that we were unable to complete this business at the Exposé yesterday.”

“That’s quite all right,” Natasha reassured him. “Given the disruption caused by the Seamstress, it’s perhaps just as well.”

And just like that, the warm smile was gone, replaced by cool disdain. “Ah yes. Rather an inconvenience, that. I do wish that Ladybug and Chat Noir would simply resolve the issue already.”

“Kinda hard to do when the big bad won’t come out from behind the scenes,” Tony said lightly from where he was slouching against the wall by the door, because apparently Gabriel Agreste didn’t believe in providing chairs when he had guests over for a business meeting. Color Tony oh-so shocked and surprised. Not.

Agreste’s lip curled ever so faintly in what Tony suspected had to count amongst the most
honest expressions he’d seen on the guy’s face yet. “Given that the Papillon has hardly been subtle about what he wants, I should think the solution would be quite straightforward."

Across the room, Clint looked away from an ornate gold-leaf painting of a pretty golden-haired, green-eyed woman who had to be Adrien’s mother, and eyed the designer thoughtfully, a slight line between his brows. “Last I checked, handing over magical items to the sort of person who sends supervillains rampaging across a city fell under the category of really bad idea.”

“Hm.” Gabriel pursed his lips slightly, and then shook his head, the annoyance smoothing out into urbanely noncommittal expressionlessness again. “Regardless. The constant disruptions have proven exceedingly inconvenient.”

“That’s right – you were the target of one of the victims,” Natasha noted. “Jackady, I think it was?”

Which was the oddest name for a supervillain… oh. Jackady – as in Jacque a die, the French version of Simon Says. That… was almost awesome enough to make up for the travesty that was Monsieur Pigeon. Almost.

Although, eesh. The implications of a supervillain with powers themed along the lines of Simon Says were… disturbing. Then again, Papillon obviously had no hangups about mind control, why should he veer away from creating supervillains with similar abilities?

Gabriel’s lips thinned as his shoulders straightened pointedly, like an affronted cat confronted with sub-standard kibble. “The holes in the mansion’s security have been corrected,” he said stiffly, obviously not appreciating the reminder.

“One steel-grey eyebrow quirked upwards the width of a hair. “If you wish to hear more about our local heroes, I suggest you discuss the topic with someone else. My son, perhaps; the younger generation in particular has been quite taken with them. Nathalie.”

The secretary busy disappearing into the background at the desk by the door – and occupying practically the only chair in the whole room – started, looking up quickly. “Sir?”

“Schedule a meeting with my guests for Adrien this afternoon.”

To Tony’s surprise, the woman hesitated, biting her lip slightly as she glanced at the computer screen – less checking something, Tony would guess, given that she didn’t click anything, and more avoiding direct contact with her employer’s cool gaze. “Ah… about that, sir…”

“He has no photoshoots scheduled, I believe?” Agreste’s tone didn’t shift at all.

“Well, no, but…” Nathalie looked like she was bracing herself slightly. “I believe he has a literature test scheduled for today, and… he spoke of an engagement with his friends.”

Gabriel made a dismissive gesture. “Contact the school to arrange for a make-up of the test, then.”
Nathalie’s shoulders slumped slightly. “Very well. I shall inform him.” Pushing her chair back, she rounded the desk and disappeared through the double-doors leading to the front atrium.

Tony blinked slightly. “So… wait. You’re just going to pull him out of school for the day? Just like that?” Which… okay, they’d come here fully intending to maneuver a chance to talk to Adrien again. But he’d anticipated it would take a lot more jockeying on their part – not that the guy would throw them at the kid himself.

Gabriel clasped his hands behind his back, expression slightly bored, now. “My son is well ahead of the rest of his class. I only permit him to attend public school because he has insisted that it will serve as valuable social experience, on the condition that he continue his work with the photoshoots, and that he maintain a pace of education that I deem appropriate. Now, if you will excuse me, I am certain Nathalie will return shortly. Good day.”

_Sheesh. Cold nothing, that’s liquid nitrogen right there, _Tony thought, carefully not shaking his head as the man paced out. Call 911 – 112 in France, right? – because I’m picking up some severe freezer burn here.

Once the door closed behind the designer, however, Clint whistled, low and pointed. “I’d say that Princess Bourgeois isn’t the only serious piece of work in town,” he commented, as the three of them drew together so that their voices wouldn’t echo too loudly across the large study-cum-gallery.

Tony shook his head. “No kidding. Are we sure that guy is Adrien’s father?” Which was pretty much rhetorical, given the giant glass case of photos covering one of the walls, but sheesh. Kid’s mother must have been one hell of a woman.

And Tony just wanted to go on record saying that the wall of photos wasn’t exactly making him feel much better. Because, sure, proud papa, fine – but he hadn’t missed the fact that they were all glossy, professional photos, probably taken from Adrien’s modeling shoots. Not a candid shot or home photo to be seen. Heck, not even any team photos, and hadn’t Adrien and Chloé both said something about him doing fencing, at the very least? Anyone with the guts and reflexes Adrien had shown dealing with the Seamstress surely had snagged himself a few trophies.

Then again – Adrien was a kid who’d faced off against a supervillainess with nothing more than a polite smile and a paperweight. So, yeah, coming from _that _angle, Tony could kinda see the relation, but…

“Chronic grief,” Natasha observed. “At least, that was the assessment of SHIELD’s profilers, when they looked into him.”

Tony snorted. “Why am I not surprised you guys ran checks on him?”

Natasha rolled her eyes at him. “It’s standard procedure for _any _civilian consultant, there was no particular reason to waive it. Particularly given that he was going to be designing clothing for agents to wear _in the field._”

“And odds are, anyone putting on those suits is probably pulling bodyguard duty,” Clint admitted. “Meaning, it’s not just their necks at risk if they can’t move quickly.”

Well, okay. Put _that _way, Tony could kind of see the logic, sure. “Chronic grief?” he prompted, looking at Natasha again.

She nodded to that crazy gold-leaf painting. “His wife went missing under mysterious
circumstances three years ago,” she explained. “Simply walked out the door and vanished one day; no warning signs, no indications it was planned – she was simply gone.” She shrugged. “There were no leads, and there’s been no sign of her since. But apparently Mister Agreste has flatly refused to allow her to be declared Presumed Dead, and he continues to employ multiple private investigators to look for her.”

Tony winced, even as he grimaced. “Okay, so I guess I can see how that would mess with a guy,” he admitted, trying to imagine what he’d do if Pepper just disappeared on him one day. It wasn’t pretty. Still. “We need to bring Steve here, tell him to go at the guy with the Disappointed Face. No one’s immune to the Disappointed Face.”

Clint snickered. “Pretty sure Agreste would be.”

Tony pursed his lips. “Are we sure he isn’t a supervillain himself?” he asked. “I mean, fashion – that’s got to be at least fifty percent evil, right out of the starting gate.”

A soft laugh interrupted him as one of the doors to the atrium swung open. “I think he’d take that as a compliment,” Adrien said as he leaned around the door to look at them.

Tony blinked. Sure, they hadn’t been exactly whispering, but they’d been keeping their voices down, and they were sort of clustered at the far corner of the room – good ears on that kid, apparently.

Then again, given this place was all hard walls and apparently no living things in it except for Nathalie, Gabriel, Adrien, and the three of them – yeah, sound would carry, and now Tony was feeling grumpy all over again.

Clint cleared his throat slightly. “I’d have thought you’d be at school,” he noted.

Adrien smiled, although Tony thought it looked a little pained. “I come home for lunch,” he explained, stepping around the open door. He’d ditched the fancy suit for jeans and a white, short-sleeved button-up over a black T-shirt – although Tony was willing to bet that the whole ensemble, from sneakers to T-shirt to whatever product gave his hair that artfully tousled look that probably took half an hour to get in place, was designer down to the last thread. Probably all Gabriel brand, at that.

Didn’t help that the kid was still carrying himself like a model, even in his own house. Though maybe that was nerves; he’d clasped his hands behind his back in a pose that had to be copied from his father as he looked at them. “Nathalie said you wanted to see me?”

“Sort of,” Natasha replied. “We were asking a few things about what happened yesterday. Your father told us we really should be talking to someone your age, and sent Nathalie to arrange a meeting.” To Tony’s surprise, she looked… apologetic, almost. “I’m sorry. If I’d realized he would pull you out of school for the day…”

Tony blinked at that, because what fifteen-year-old wouldn’t be gleeful at a chance to get out of classes?

Except that Adrien’s smile had taken on a rueful cast. “It’s… okay. He doesn’t really want me there in the first place. I only started attending this year, and I’m pretty sure he only gave in because Nathalie backed me up.” He offered a bright smile that had a bit of mischief peeking around the edges. “That, and the fact that I’d already managed to get myself registered when he wasn’t looking.”
Tony blinked again. “How the heck did you manage to get the paperwork taken care of?” Because Daddy Agreste definitely had the vibe of a man who read *every single clause* of every single piece of paper to cross his desk.

Adrien’s grin had teeth in it now. “Let’s just say that, so long as it gets her something she wants, Chloé can be *amazingly* helpful sometimes.” He hesitated, then nodded towards the door. “But if we’re going to be talking for a while… well, would you like to come to my room? It’s a little more comfortable than here.”

Frankly, Tony thought that a *jail* would be more comfortable than this place – or the rest of the house, to be honest. The whole place was so utterly *monochrome*, all cool whites and blacks, that it made Tony want to storm around with a couple cans of neon spray paint in defense of what little claim he still had on sanity.

“We’ll try to finish up quickly, so you have a chance to go back to your classes,” Natasha began to offer as they left the office and climbed the stairs, but Adrien shook his head. “No – it’s okay,” he said, sounding a little tired and resigned underneath the politeness. “If he told Nathalie to pull me out of school for the afternoon and I turn up anyway, she’s the one who will get in trouble.” He shook his head. “At this point, I’ve missed so many tests that the school’s letting me make up for them with term projects for most of my classes.” Leading the way towards the door, he drew in a deep breath, then glanced sidelong at them. “So, um… what exactly *did* you want to talk about?”

And, darn it, the kid was good enough to hide it from someone looking just at the way he held himself – but there was a stiffness in his *movement* that said he was tense.

Which, well. Tony couldn’t exactly hold that against the kid. Having a bunch of big-name superheroes tracking you down after a supervillain attack would definitely be a little nerve-wracking.

So he stretched his legs a bit, to make sure the kid would see his grin when he glanced to the side, and replied, “Well, see… it’s like his. You know about our little side job, right? Weird is kind of supposed to be our *thing*. And yesterday? Yesterday was *very weird.*” He shrugged. “But Ladybug and Chat Noir didn’t exactly have the time to sit around and chat over a glass of wine. You? You seemed to have a pretty good idea of what was going on, all things considered, and you proved you could keep your head clear enough to look after yourself. Which also means you keep your head clear enough to pay attention to things other people miss. Like elevator buttons.” He eyed the kid, openly. “Which, sorry, I’ve *got* to ask. How did you even manage to pull that off? Seriously.”

Adrien chuckled, a little awkwardly, but with a glint of embarrassed pride in green eyes as he scratched the back of his head. “Well… that floor’s always been slippery, I used to make a game of sliding around it as a little kid. And…” He shrugged as they reached a dark door with a sunburst pattern outlined in silver on it. “I’m a model, I fence, I play basketball… I know how to fall with style. The rest was just…” He grinned as he opened the door. “Applied physics, really. Please, come in.”

The bright sunlight filling the room inside came as a bit of a shock. Not that the rest of the mansion had been *dark* – the opposite, really. But where the atrium and Gabriel’s office had mostly been illuminated by flat, cool indoor lights reflecting from pale walls… well, for a second Tony wondered if they’d somehow managed to step *outside*.

No surprise, given that the far wall was floor-to-ceiling windows. All *two and a half floors’ worth* of it.
Clint whistled low and long as he followed Adrien through the door, pausing as he cleared the small narrow space between what looked like skateboard ramps of some kind to turn around, craning his head back to get the full effect. “Damn rich people,” the archer said in English, with feeling.

Tony blinked as he came in last. “Y’know,” he said dryly, “I’d say I represent that remark, but…”

Okay, so to be fair, he had an entire tower all to himself in the middle of downtown New York, even if technically some of it belonged to his company rather than him, he’d never been entirely clear on the details there. That was a level of extravagance all its own, sure.

That didn’t mean this place wasn’t its own unique brand of completely ridiculous, though – and by ridiculous, Tony meant a teenage boy’s dream, if that boy wasn’t quite sure if he was supposed to be a nerd or a jock. The room was two floors, the second floor an open mezzanine looking out over the open space of the main floor and lined top to bottom with books, books, books, and more books. The ground floor also boasted a computer desk with three separate monitors, and a fourth looming overhead that could pass for a cinema screen. Probably had fisticuffs for the privilege of the title with the equally massive TV screen standing with its back to the windows, surrounded by matched white chairs and couches. There was an arcade corner underneath a branch of the mezzanine, and a basketball hoop on the opposite wall, complete with court lines painted onto the floor. Dear God, the kid had his own climbing wall, going right up the wall past the hoop and over to the little balcony over the door, just off the mezzanine. And a zip line, connecting that corner of the second level to the far end of the mezzanine.

Tony would bet good money that Adrien had probably spent a solid week, at some point in his life, never touching the floor of his room. Tony sure as hell would have.

Heh. Oh yeah, Hawkeye drool ahoy, Tony thought with a grin – and then blinked. Because Clint wasn’t looking at the rock wall, or the zip line, or the fire pole that provided yet another alternative to the artfully spiraling and probably not actually all that functional staircase connecting the mezzanine to the main floor, or any of the other fun acrobatic toys. He was looking at that neatly painted basketball court floor, face just a little too expressionless and an odd hint of tension in his shoulders that Tony wasn’t quite sure how to read. Hiding a frown, Tony looked down.

After a minute, what Clint had seen suddenly hit him. Or rather, what he hadn’t seen.

“So,” he said casually. “Nice climbing wall there. What do you do if you fall?”

Because where were the mats?

That climbing wall was a good twenty-five feet high, easily, sheer vertical all the way up. The floor was hard – great for bouncing basketballs, maybe, but if Adrien fell from even halfway up that climbing wall, he’d be courting a sprained ankle or wrist, minimum. Any higher, and they’d be talking serious damage. Up to and including life-threatening, even if the kid didn’t break his neck.

What the hell? I thought Agreste was supposed to be this super-paranoid dad?

Okay, so it was possible that the mats were rolled up in some secret cubby somewhere. Only, not, because no way no how would any mat that could be dragged around by even an athletic fifteen-year-old be thick enough to cushion a fall from that height. Rather more to the point, fifteen-year-old. Sure, the kid had a good head on his shoulders, but good enough to always dutifully pull the mats out when he wanted to quickly Spiderman his way up to the library level, and then dutifully stash them all away when he was done?
Hell. Come to think of it…

Tony scanned the room again, this time concentrating less on all the shiny toys and more on the space as a room, a place where a kid spent probably a very good portion of his life. And… yeah.

Adrien had obviously gone out of his way to shove as much color into the space as he humanly could, from the orange ramp-thingies to an art-deco red and gray carpet over by the desk. There were cabinets framing either size of the whole computer set-up with all sorts of trophies and medals – yeah, Tony’d thought as much, no way the kid could have gotten away with not getting a few prizes – and there were a few artfully framed fencing and basketball posters on the walls.

Except.

Those posters were abstract – organization posters, not showing celebrities. And no movie posters, rock stars, or pretty actresses to be seen on the walls. Those couches and chairs next to the TV were placed with mathematical precision, all right angles, the little coffee table spotless.

Hell. The whole place was spotless. Not a crumb, coffee stain, or smear of pizza to be seen. Not a scuff mark on the basketball hoop’s backboard. Hell, not even a book face-down on the bedside table or a controller cord straying out from under the TV with its fancy game consoles tucked into the cabinet underneath.

This place looked like the idealized picture of a teenage boy’s dream room. Not one where someone actually lived.

Which, okay, cleaning staff were a thing – and no way Agreste didn’t have some on hire, not with all his stark, white rooms. But in a kid’s bedroom? His private space, where he hid all the little secret guilty pleasures that Daddy dearest wasn’t supposed to know about?

Not to mention… Tony eyed the arcades again. Which, okay, not exactly tech he messed with much, but he was pretty sure that arcade-style dancing machines came with two pads, for partner play. And this one had one. Meaning, a custom model, meant for one kid alone. What, Adrien wasn’t supposed to have friends come over or something?

All of a sudden, that glorious wall of windows seemed less about the windows and more about the bars.

Damn. And I thought my old man was a problem.

But Adrien just laughed, sounding a little sheepish as he scratched the back of his head.

“Well… generally speaking, the first rule is don’t fall.”

Clint snickered. “I tend to favor that one myself. What about when it doesn’t work?”

Adrien shrugged and grinned. “I try to aim for the couch.”

From where he stood, Tony could Natasha’s face clearly as both of her eyebrows made a jump for her hairline. Which was an unusually open reaction, but on the other hand…

The kid had trained himself to, if he lost his grip, go completely against basic instinct and jump away from the wall – at an angle no less, because that couch wasn’t even facing the climbing wall, or even all that close to it. Which probably had taken no small amount of practice.

Houston, I sense a serious case of cabin fever from hell.
Smiling crookedly, Tony shook his head. “I think I’m beginning to grasp how you picked up an interest in applied physics.”

“Well… yeah.” Adrien walked over to the desk, waking the computers with a tap on the keyboard. “It’s my favorite subject, really.”

“Oh?” Tony asked, strolling over. “Physics, huh? Not design?”

One of Adrien’s screens had a web browser open; another had a document, some sort of school paper. The third was open to the desktop. The background was a green-eyed, blonde girl standing in a field of flowers – very obviously a picture of Adrien’s mother in her teens. But where Agreste’s gold-gilt painting had been demure, the girl in Adrien’s background had a tauntingly mischievous glitter in her eyes.

Adrien rubbed the back of his head again, looking embarrassed. “Not… really, no. I’m… well, I’m not really creative. Not the way my father is. Or some of my classmates – my friend Marinette does all sorts of design work. You name it – clothes, hats, CD covers…” He looked away. “I can’t do that sort of thing. I’m… well. I guess I’m better at breaking things down than creating them.”

Ouch. Not really an issue Tony’d ever faced, really – his problem had always been that his talents had been too much in line with Stark Sr.’s master plan for his life. But he could imagine what it would have been like, if he’d been… oh, a musical genius or something, not an engineer.

Still. “Hey, nothing wrong with being analytic,” Tony noted, craning his neck a bit to look at the paper. “Heck, look at me. I may invent cool stuff, but ask me to reverse-engineer something? Train wreck in the making. Granted, probably an awesome train wreck, but still. Train wreck. I get busy thinking about how I’d do it and end up ignoring how it was actually done.”

Guh. Given the recent conversation topic, the subject matter was a little hair raising. The suits have proven protective properties in cases of extreme cold and heat, and against many basic hazards. However, the transformation may have deeper effects, protecting the subjects from such dangers as inertial stress. Consider the Bubbler incident, when Ladybug and Chat Noir…

Tony’s brain came screeching to a halt. And then revved a second later as he darted his eyes across the text, skimming with a purpose now. Inertial forces, centrifugal force…

“Wait,” he said. “This paper – are you seriously doing a physics project on how Ladybug and Chat Noir do what they do?”

Adrien blushed as Natasha and Clint both made interested noises, quickly crossing the room to join them. “Um. Yes?”

Tony eyed the kid. “And how exactly are you getting your material?” he asked, pointedly.

Adrien quickly raised open hands to shoulder level, eyes wide. “From videos!” he said hastily, nodded to the webpage on his browser. “I’m not like Alya, Mister Stark, trust me. You can check the video records yourself – I don’t hang around when a supervillain attacks. When I see something like that coming, I run and I hide!”

Heh. Well, apparently the kid did have some self-preservation instincts in there, despite the climbing wall and the zip line. Settling back a bit, Tony skimmed the open page of the paper again, a little more carefully this time. “So… you’re trying to figure out how they do what they do?”

“Seems kind of pointless,” Clint said. “I mean… magic.”
Before Tony could argue, Adrien leaned in, eyes bright and excited. “See, that’s the thing!” he said, the words practically tumbling out of his mouth. “It’s not! Well, I mean, obviously it is magic, but… Look.”

Grabbing the mouse, he opened a different tab on the browser, one that was open to a video. From the somewhat grainy quality and the angle, Tony thought it was probably from security camera footage – and, based on the surroundings, set in the lobby of Le Grand Paris. The screen itself was paused on Ladybug and Chat Noir, facing off against a man dressed like some sort of rock star, holding a giant sword made of…

Tony blinked. “Okay, that takes swordfish to all new levels of bizarre.”

Clint groaned, and he could feel Natasha’s eyeroll without even looking at her. But Adrien, at least, sputtered on a gleeful laugh, almost closing the tab by accident when his finger twitched. Coughing unconvincingly, the boy quickly scrolled through the video until he found the spot he wanted. “Look at this,” he said, and hit play.

There was no sound, which was too bad – from the look of things, there was some fine banter flying. As well as a superhero, as the sashimi swordsman managed to throw Chat Noir back. The cat boy flipped in the air and landed on his feet, the force of his landing actually sending bits of dust and leaves tracked in from the street puffing away from him-

“There.” Adrien paused again, pointing at that little impact-cloud of debris. “There was a lot of force at work there, right? And yet, Chat Noir didn’t land any differently than an acrobat would have.”

Huh. “In other words, they’re not immune to inertia, but they’ve got some way to absorb impact better than most people?” Tony guessed, quickly skimming the titles of the other tabs – looked like other videos, mostly taken from the same website. Awesome. He’d have to watch those himself when he had a few minutes. Then he turned back to the paper, feeling oddly flattered when Adrien obligingly turned the mouse back over to him and moved out of the way. Heaven knew Tony wouldn’t have thought too kindly of anyone reading over his high school physics projects.

…Granted, there hadn’t been a Tony Stark-level genius in the world to look at his work when he’d been in high school, for obvious reasons.

“Inertia, gravity…” Adrien shrugged. “The point is, physics works around them, even when they’re doing impossible things. So… I thought, if I looked at the physics of what they do, maybe I’d be able to figure out a bit more of what it is they’re doing…”

Tony scrolled down a bit more, and stopped short. “…You have a theory for how that Cataclysm thing works?” he asked, carefully casual.

“Really?” Natasha leaned in to read over Tony’s shoulder, and even Clint stepped closer for a look. Not that Tony was surprised. What Chat Noir had done when they’d been fighting the Seamstress was… impressive. Very. And following that with some of the stunts in the video clips he’d seen on Natasha’s tablet…

Well. Good thing the cat was apparently firmly on the side of the good guys.

Adrien hesitated. “…Sort of?” he said tentatively, ducking his head a little. “I mean… it’s not exactly something I can prove or anything, but…”

Tony twisted in the chair to face the kid squarely, eyebrows raised in open invitation.
Adrien drew a deep breath. “Okay. So, this might sound silly, but… black cats are supposed to be bad luck, right?”

“Depends on the culture, but in Western Europe, yes,” Natasha noted.

Adrien nodded. “Cataclysm destroys pretty much whatever Chat Noir hits with it, but… it’s not just, poof, disintegration. When you look at what it actually does, it looks like it… accelerates decay. Sort of like… well, intensified entropy.”

_Huh._ Okay, had Tony mentioned he liked this kid? Because he did. “So… bad luck?” Tony prompted. He thought he saw where this was going, but he was curious to see how Adrien had approached it.

Adrien nodded again, with more confidence this time. “If you think about it – entropy’s pretty much a lot of little things going wrong over time, right? An oxygen atom binds to iron, and the iron rusts. Or a bit of mold sets into wood, and the wood decays. Or cells not copying perfectly. Take radioactive decay. Technically, it’s completely random which atom will emit a particle, right? So it is, _technically_, possible for every single atom to decay at the _exact same moment_.”

Tony snorted, but he grinned anyway. “Technically, sure,” he said. “Just _really, really unlikely_.”

“Don’t you mean _really, really unlucky_?” Adrien shot back, green eyes sparkling.

Clint huffed. “Good one,” he noted. “So, you think Chat Noir’s Cataclysm is making everything possible go wrong for _one thing_, just the way Ladybug’s Lucky Charm makes everything go _right_?”

“…Maybe?” Adrien ducked his head a bit again, looking embarrassed. “I think so, anyway. It got kind of complicated – I ended up poking at chaos theory a bit, and, well, I’m _really_ not sure I understand that well enough to really apply it yet…”

“…Adrien?” Tony said, very carefully giving the name the correct French pronunciation rather than using the Anglicized version. “Just so you know, when you’re ready to tell your dad to take the modeling job and stuff it, give me a call, because there’s an open internship at Stark Industries with your name on it.”

Adrien stared at him. “But…”

Tony pointed at him. “I’m serious. You’ve got magical superheroes, and you decided to sit down and _try to figure out the physics_. I _like_ that sort of thinking!”

Adrien’s cheeks turned bright red – and, okay, no fair, he looked camera-ready even like that. Some people got all the good genes, sheesh. “To be honest, if my father weren’t so determined to keep me where he can keep an eye on me, I think he’d probably shove me onto the plane himself.” He sighed, the blush fading. “Which… would probably be the worst thing he could do, really.”

“Oh?” Natasha asked, her tone that very calm neutral that Tony associated with Black Widow on the hunt for information.

Adrien didn’t seem to notice. Glancing around, he made his way over to the cabinets that doubled as a bedside table, sitting down on it. “Well… the akuma,” he said quietly. “I mean, I’m not sure, but… there seems to be this pattern, where Papillon targets people who feel… angry, but not just angry, if that makes sense. _Frustrated_ types of angry. People who feel helpless when they want
to do something. People who are angry that the world isn’t fair.”

Huh. Interesting. And more than a little sobering; Tony knew a lot about that sort of mindset himself. The Avengers had that name for a reason, after all. Forcing a grin he didn’t quite feel, Tony joked, “Man, the guy must be a menace around toddlers, if he goes for the whole it’s not fair! thing.”

He’d meant it as a joke, at least. But to his surprise, Adrien winced.

“…Aw, no,” Clint said slowly. “Don’t tell me that’s actually happened?”

“Yeah.” Adrien studied the laces of his sneakers.

“Explain,” Natasha said, voice sharp and cold.

But oddly – or, maybe not so oddly, given the kid’s father – Adrien didn’t seem put off by it. Sighing a little, he leaned back, bracing his arms against the back edge of the cabinet for support. “There’s this girl that my friend Marinette – the one I mentioned earlier – babysits sometimes. I’m not really clear on the story, but it was something about her doll getting taken away. She threw a tantrum, and… she turned into the Puppeteer. She could control people by using puppets of them.”

“Well, that could be worse, I guess,” Tony said slowly. “I mean, not many real people have… dolls… made…”

Aw. Shit.

“Ladybug and Chat Noir?” Natasha guessed quietly.

Adrien nodded. “And three previous supervillains. Ladybug managed to get the doll of herself back, but… Chat Noir got controlled. It was a mess.”

Tony had to whistle at that. Yikes. No wonder Chat Noir had been so tense when he’d body-blocked the pins going for Ladybug.

He honestly didn’t expect to be immune. Guess it’s a good thing the Seamstress’s pins were based on manipulating cloth – whatever those magic suits are, looks like they didn’t count.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tony saw Natasha’s fingers slowly curl into a tight fist, that and the too-blank expression on her face the only hint of some serious anger. “We didn’t hear anything about that incident.”

Adrien blinked, then looked thoughtful. “Come to think of it… so far as I know, the Puppeteer never actually left the TV station. She transformed there, and Ladybug warned all the staff to stay clear, so… yeah, there wouldn’t have been much footage. I only knew about it because… well, when she got her hands on a supervillain doll, the original victim got forcibly turned back into that villain, no matter where they were. One of them was right in front of me when it happened.”

Yow. That was spooky all on its own, yep.

“Plus, if she was a little kid, I’ll bet they went out of their way not to broadcast,” Clint suggested. “So far as I know, France has laws protecting the privacy of minors, right? It’d be rough on a little kid, getting a reputation like that.”

Adrien blinked, then slowly nodded. “I suppose so. Most people understand these days that the people who turn into supervillains are victims. Even Chloé doesn’t really go after people on that basis, not anymore. If nothing else, by now I suspect just about everyone in Paris knows at least one
or two people who’ve been possessed.”

Tony stared. Because, sure, he could buy that SHIELD’s intelligence-gathering had missed a couple incidents, given the whole gag order, and the sheer chaos of a lot of these attacks, and the whole all-the-damage-vanishes-in-a-swarm-of-ladybugs weirdness. But... “Just how common are these attacks?” he asked slowly. “How often do they not make headlines?”

“…fairly?” Adrien shrugged. “Sometimes Ladybug and Chat Noir only get there after the attack’s already being broadcast. But sometimes they’re right on the scene and clean things up before the situation ever gets that big – like with the Seamstress, yesterday. Or sometimes other things happen and no one gets a chance to report until everything’s over, like when Bubbler snatched all the adults right out of the city – that was a mess, too.” He tilted his head. “I’d say there’s an akuma attack… every other day? Roughly. Sometimes we get a quiet spell, and sometimes there are two in the same day.”

After a long, shocked silence, Natasha breathed something that Tony was quite certain was a curse, as Clint closed his eyes, letting his head roll back on his shoulders.

“So much for our intel,” the archer muttered. “Blast. Where do we even start?”

Adrien hesitated, one left hand gripping the loose edge of his white button-up as the fingers of his other hand tapped a quick rhythm, bright green eyes studying them thoughtfully.

“…Look,” he said suddenly. “If you really want to know about Ladybug, you really should talk to Alya. She runs the Ladyblog.”

Natasha looked at him, one red eyebrow going up. “The fanblog?” she asked.

Adrien nodded vigorously. “Her information’s usually good. She’s the one who took that first video of Ladybug and Chat Noir; she was really crazy about running off to record every single appearance for a while. She’s calmed down a bit since then, but her blog is still pretty much the number one source of information.” He held up a smartphone. “She’s in school still, but I can text my friend Nino and ask him to pass along an invite for them to come over after class?”

Tony nodded. “And until then… mind if we borrow your computer for a bit? I feel the need to go diving in the video archives. Anybody got popcorn handy?”

Chapter End Notes

Of course the Avengers would end up picking Adrien as their example of a Perfectly Normal Parisian Civilian. In the world of Miraculous Ladybug, the Law of Irony has nearly as much power as the Rule of Cool.

Apologies to any and all native speakers of French for any errors in the name of the Akuma Intervention Brigade (but you know that Paris must have something of the sort at this point).

Same for any errors in the physics technobabble – I am no physicist! As for Adrien – it’s canon that he’s very intelligent, since Nino mentions he always gets the top grades in the class, and it’s also canon that physics is his favorite subject. So I could see him looking at Ladybug and Chat Noir’s abilities and trying to figure out how it works.
The nature of episode airing for Miraculous Ladybug makes timelines a bit of an issue – they were deliberately aired in a non-chronological order, with different countries airing them in different orders, and the developer declared that one of his goals was to set the episodes up so that – with the exception of the Origins episodes, which were always meant to be the season finale (despite being chronologically the first) – they could be seen in any order. With that said, I firmly believe that Climatika was one of the very early akuma. Ladybug and Chat Noir are too clumsy in that fight to be experienced; they're clearly still learning the ins and outs of their powers and their teamwork: the awkwardness about boundaries, Ladybug’s insistence on I-can-do-it-myself when she can’t even see, the whole drop-the-yo-yo-on-someone’s-head gag. Which means, summer vacation comments aside, that it must have been shortly after the new school year started. So, late August or early September. By the same token, the events of Origins can’t have been more than a few weeks earlier, at most.

It’s likely that Papillon is limited in his ability to create akuma, the same way Ladybug and Chat Noir are limited to one use of their special powers per transformation. (Which doesn’t mean he can’t create multiple akuma per day – he just needs time to recharge in between; the fact that several episodes start with the news reporting “they once again saved the day” suggests that multiple attacks in a single day do happen.) So that cloud of akuma he uses to make his demands in Origins was likely only possible because Stoneheart’s akuma escaped. Natasha doesn’t know that, however – and the idea of Papillon having access to that many akuma at once would be genuinely terrifying!

Speaking of special powers… yes, Ladybug and Chat Noir can, in fact, leap buildings, if not in a single bound, than at least with minimal assistance. Yes, even without using their weapons to give themselves a boost. We see Chat Noir jump from the top of a car to a lamppost, and then across the street to the rooftop of a three-story building – and eventually to the roof of the Grand Paris. And at the time, he couldn’t use his baton, because he was carrying Marinette. So yes, definitely able to make inhuman leaps. (As for the whole “cinema effect”? That was actually a jab at myself, for not noticing that detail sooner – once you go back and actually look for it, they do that sort of thing a lot.)

Regarding the Mayor stonewalling SHIELD: bunnies think that actually what happened there was that Mayor Bourgeois is just Genre-Savvy enough to look at Fury, look at the Significant Naming that pops up all over the place in Miraculous Ladybug, and think, Oh dear God this man is a supervillain waiting to happen get him out of town now!
Putting Pieces Together

Chapter Notes

Reports of there being internet available at the field school were, while not wholly lies, somewhat exaggerated. So it’s taken some hoop-jumping to get this one posted, and I can’t guarantee when the next one will be up.

…which means I should probably apologize for the cliffhanger.

“Oh. My. God.”

Natasha fought the urge to shift uneasily. She’d faced down alien invasions, would-be world conquerors, an angry Tony Stark, and on one memorable occasion Nick Fury in the throes of the hangover to end all hangovers. None of which had made her as uneasy as the expression in round, soft brown eyes.

Then again, she was trained for situations that could be perilous to life, limb, sanity, and continued employment. Starry-eyed teenagers… had not been included. Unfortunately.

At least Clint looked equally nonplussed. Tony, on the other hand, was grinning broadly, clearly enjoying the moment. Then again, he was very much a hero in the public view. The adulation of the public was part of his daily life.

She’d always suspected he was less than sane.

“Oh my God,” the girl Adrien had introduced as Alya squeaked, clutching her phone like a talisman in front of her chest.

Behind her, Adrien’s friend Nino cleared his throat gingerly, lightly tapping her on the shoulder. “Um. Babe? C’mon, get it together…”

Alya barely twitched. “OhmyGod.”

Leaning against the back of his white couch, Adrien traded amused looks with Marinette.

And three, two, one… Natasha counted, more entertained than she really should be.

Right on cue, the girl flushed a painfully deep red, all the way up to her ears, and hastily looked at anything except Adrien’s now baffled face.

Natasha bit back the urge to shake her head in amusement. It had taken all of one minute to realize that Alya’s friend, who claimed she had tagged along for moral support, had a huge crush on Adrien. And by all appearances, was completely at a loss for what to do about it.

Tony seemed to find the whole thing immensely entertaining, and also rather adorable. Natasha had overheard him chuckling something to himself about, can’t fault the kid’s taste. Professionally handsome guy her age who also happens to be intelligent and ridiculously nice? Glad he wasn’t around when I was that age, or I’d never have seen any action.
Pity that Adrien was clueless – if, in fact, he really was. Natasha would be willing to give fifty-fifty odds that at least half of the kid’s cluelessness actually stemmed from a determination to ignore the crush, in the hopes that Marinette would get over it, or at least calm down enough to respond to his friendly overtures as a friend.

Natasha wished him luck. Marinette didn’t seem the sort to calm down much. She’d all but passed out from hyperventilation when Adrien had introduced his classmates to his guests.

On the other hand – as Natasha watched, the girl drew in a deep breath before nudging Alya with her shoulder. “Come on, Alya. You’ve met superheroes before. Ladybug even gave you a personal interview once, remem…”

Apparently that was what it took to break the dam.

“OhmyGod the Avengers read my blog, superheroes are reading my blog, EEEEEEEE!”

Adrien flinched, hands clapping over his ears in an effort to protect them as Alya’s voice spiraled upwards into a shriek of pure, excited delight.

“Oh my God, oh my God, give me a second, I have to stream this…!”

Natasha moved without thinking, closing one hand on the girl’s wrist as she fumbled her smartphone out of her pocket. “Please don’t,” she said, her voice clipped and just slightly warmer than frosty.


“Tasha and I do a lot of hush-hush work,” Clint said with a nonchalant shrug. “Cameras aren’t really our thing.”

From the blank way Alya stared at the two of them, they couldn’t have said anything more incomprehensible if they’d been speaking Russian. “But… but… but…” she said slowly, phone still resting slackly in her hand.

At least she seemed to be paying attention. Natasha released the girl’s wrist with an internal sigh. Strangely enough, she suspected this would be easier if Alya were a real reporter. Even the noisiest tabloid newshound was at least aware that there were some things that weren’t supposed to be made available to the public – even if they gleefully ignored that awareness. Alya, however, was very much a child of the Information Age, where everything from what you had for breakfast to your current location to your romantic escapades went up on the internet almost as soon as it had happened. Where “privacy” meant hiding your posts behind a Friends Only tag. The idea that there were some things that simply should not be posted at all plainly Did Not Compute.

Fortunately, they had their own Information Age PR specialist with them. “You know how it is,” Tony said casually, bouncing one foot where it rested on his knee as he stretched out his arms across the back of the couch. “Not everyone does the whole limelight thing the way I do. And speaking of – that is some fine legwork you’ve been doing on that blog of yours. Where do you get your information?”

That seemed to snap Alya out of her stunned daze. “I do it myself!” she said proudly, holding up her phone for a moment before sliding it back into the breast pocket of her checkered shirt. “I made an app so that my phone would alert me the instant any news goes out about a new supervillain, or if Ladybug or Chat Noir are seen.”

Clint grinned crookedly. “That’s got to be frustrating when it starts going off while you’re in class.”
Nino groaned. “Tell me about it,” he said with a roll of his eyes. When Alya shot him a sharp look, he simply shrugged, leaning to the side to rest his arm on Adrien’s shoulder as he looked at her. “Look, I think you’re awesome, but you sit behind me in class. It’s kinda hard to pay attention to Mrs. Bustier lecturing about literature with that little jingle going off in my ear.”

“That’s assuming you were paying attention in the first place,” Adrien noted, eyes glittering with amusement as he pointedly dipped his shoulder out from under Nino’s arm.

The other boy clasped his hands over his chest dramatically. “Ouch!” he cried. “Betrayed by my best friend! Oh cruel world!”

This time, Alya rolled her eyes as she elbowed him gently. “That’s what you get for complaining,” she said archly, before turning back to where the Avengers were watching the byplay with amusement. “It’s annoying, yeah,” she admitted. “Less than you’d think, though. We’ve had a lot of attacks at our school, so I get plenty of first-hand footage that way.”

“Really?” Tony asked, doing an admirable job of keeping his tone casual and interested, even as Natasha fought to keep her eyes from narrowing. “More than normal, you mean?”

Alya nodded enthusiastically, even as Adrien and Marinette both winced faintly and Nino sighed, looking away. “Definitely more – oh, hang on, I’ve got this neat map, I’ll show you!”

Pulling out her phone again, she swiped through several screens and applications with quick, experienced fingers, before making a sound of triumph and turning the phone in her hand to show them the screen. “Here – it’s a map of all the known akuma possessions, I worked for weeks getting the background information on some of this. I only just finished it.”

…Oh, I don’t like the look of this at all, Natasha thought grimly as she and Clint leaned forward for a better look. A map of Paris had been covered by multiple overlapping polygons of various colors, each one accented by a white point somewhere in their area, while several also had black pins.

“What are the colors?” she asked, as Clint reached out to take the phone and used two fingers to zoom in and out on certain areas, the thin line of his lips and flinty, narrowed eyes saying he didn’t like what he was seeing, either.

“Well… the white pins show where Ladybug and Chat Noir defeated the victim and purified the akuma,” Alya explained, leaning over to point. “The black ones show where the akuma originally possessed the victim – we don’t always know that one. And the color blocks are the general area where the supervillain did stuff.” She grimaced. “Or, well, in some cases, I had to do two layers, because some of them, like the Black Knight or Bubbler, managed to hit the whole city.”

The Black Knight… now that had been a chilling post to read. Not the least because Alya had included a video she’d recorded on her phone, which had shown a strange black wall bearing down on her and her classmates as they tried to escape… and then simply cut out as it reached them. Given what Alya described as the Black Knight’s power, of transforming people into minions… that was an unsettling thought.

*These akuma can create supervillains who can turn everyone in the city into their minions.* That was… unsettling.

It would be one thing if those powers were limited to simply transforming the victims, as the Black Knight and the Pharaoh both had. But if she considered what Adrien had said about the Puppeteer’s powers…
When she’d heard that, her first thought had been the many, many lines of Ironman and Captain America-themed toys. Which had been bad enough.

Then Tony had one-upped her.

“Hulk action figures.”

She really did not want to imagine the results of that.

Marinette leaned over Alya’s shoulder in turn, blue eyes narrowed and intent. “…are those organized in any way?” she asked slowly. “Date?”

Alya sighed, shoulders slumping a little. “No. I tried, but the app doesn’t let you get that detailed…”

“Oh really?” Tony asked, eyes glittering. Holding out a hand, he wiggled his fingers imperiously at Clint. “Gimme.” And then glanced up at Alya. “With your permission, of course.”

Alya gave him a perfect teenager’s you’re an idiot look. “You’re Tony Stark.”

Tony cackled as Clint handed the phone over with a smirk. “See, guys? That’s the proper attitude to take to your resident genius.”

“You’re still not getting your hands on my radiator,” Clint deadpanned. “It would try to take over the world. We’ve got enough bad guys out there without adding home electronics to the list.”

A near-continuous stream of bips and beeps chimed from the phone as Tony’s thumbs flew. “C’mon, it’s a radiator, worst it would do is run for mayor, and given the alternatives home electronics would probably be an improvement. Speaking of…” For just a moment, he paused in his typing to hold the phone up between thumb and forefinger. “You, young lady, need a serious phone upgrade. Note to self, send you a real phone, something that would actually hold up to some of those stunts you were pulling in the videos…” Without waiting for a response, he went back to typing, and a moment later, made a victorious noise in the back of his throat as the screen reloaded the map. “There we go, color-coded by date, darker colors are more recent… oh. Lovely.”

By now, all of them had gathered around the couch where he was sitting to see the results as he held up the phone. Natasha grimaced.

Oddly, though, it was Marinette who spoke first, her face set and grim, the silly, flailing child nowhere to be seen. “That’s a search pattern, isn’t it.”

“What?” Alya and Nino both blurted, the girl snatching her phone back to look at it more closely. Behind them, Adrien grimaced, as though this revelation had simply confirmed his own suspicions.

“Looks like it,” Clint said, standing up so that he could reach over and manipulate the screen a bit. “Look at this. Pattern’s not perfect – I’m guessing there are limits to how much Papillon can control his victims, or maybe just in where he can find a suitable target. But… looks like he’s got a general pattern of hitting a fairly wide area at first, and then mostly concentrating the next two or three attacks inside that area.” He frowned, tapping on the screen to zoom in on a dense cluster of black dots, with one lone white point. “Except for this place.”

“That’s our school,” Alya explained, shaking her head. “We’ve had so many kids get possessed, it’s kind of crazy.”

Natasha saw a shadow cross Tony’s face for a moment, but a moment later it was gone, as the man shrugged nonchalantly. “Makes a certain amount of sense,” he pointed out. “We’re talking collège
here – total hotbed of hormones and emotional tsunamis. If Adrien’s right, about Papillon going after people who are mad about *not fair* – easy targets right there.”

That prompted a number of offended, rueful or worried looks from the kids – but Natasha frowned, crossing her arms over her chest. “Why *that* school, though?” she pointed out. “There are plenty of others. Thousands of children that age within Paris. Why this particular group?”

Adrien cleared his throat carefully. “Actually, I… have a theory about that,” he admitted.

Alya whipped her head around to stare at him. “What? Why haven’t I heard about this?” she demanded, reflexively reaching for her pocket before remembering and grabbing after her phone.

“No video, remember?” Clint warned, although he handed the device over readily enough.

Alya blinked, startled, then huffed a sigh, tucking the phone back in her pocket before crossing her arms to give Adrien a Look. “Well?”

Adrien rubbed the back of his head, offering a winsomely awkward smile that had Marinette turning all sorts of interesting colors. “Ah… well, part of it is that I’m still not sure, but…” He drew in a long, deep breath. “I think the first couple attacks were random. Especially Ivan – Stoneheart.”

“The first villain to appear.” Natasha nodded slowly. That made a certain amount of sense. If Ladybug and Chat Noir were Papillon’s targets, and yet all indications suggested they’d only appeared *after* the first attack began – then Papillon likely had begun with no idea of where to find them, and had simply targeted the most convenient victim.

*Which could be useful,* she thought, careful to keep her feelings from her face. These were civilians, and good-natured ones at that; no need to scare them with the Black Widow’s bloodthirstiness. But Papillon, on the other hand…

With an internal sigh, she pulled herself back. Among other things – *convenient* would only help them if they could figure out the parameters of how Papillon was able to find and possess his victims. How fast did the akuma move? Could they be stopped by physical barriers? Did they have any powers on their own, without possessing someone?

...And, Natasha realized with a sudden chill, *even then, that assumes that Papillon isn’t protected by the same glamour effect that keeps anyone from finding Ladybug and Chat Noir’s identities.*

In which case, studying Papillon’s methods became even more important – because looking at what Papillon thought would be an effective way to find the heroes could, in reverse, give them a baseline for how to find *him.*

“But why…” Marinette blinked, apparently too distracted to really pay attention to the fact that she was actually *talking to her crush.* “Oh. Of course. He wanted Stoneheart to be – well, loud and visible. And our school is one of the closest to the Eiffel Tower.”

“D’you think he can tell what someone’s gonna turn into before he sends out one of those black butterflies?” Nino asked, looking a little disturbed. “Because, man, if he wanted people’s attention, a stone Hulk is pretty sweet. Uh, no offense meant,” he added hastily, with a wide-eyed glance at the three Avengers.

Tony waved a hand cheerfully. “None taken. When the Big Guy’s around, I certainly pay lots and lots of attention. That armor’s expensive, it doesn’t need dents.”

Which was possibly the most sense Tony had ever shown on that subject, Natasha thought with
amusement. And… also a very good reminder that convenient, in this case, could have a number of meanings, from Papillon’s point of view.

Clint leaned forward, raising his eyebrows pointedly. “So you think that the first supervillain at your school was random. I take that to mean you think it stopped being random at some point.”

Adrien nodded, then hesitated, slanting an apologetic look towards… Nino? “Well, the next one from our school… that was Bubbler.”

The boy winced slightly, his shoulders slumping. “…I’m really sorry about that, man.”

Natasha exchanged a quick, startled glance with the two men. Nino’s been possessed? “What happened?” she asked quietly, hating herself for it just a little. But they needed to understand how the possessions worked.

The boy scuffed at the floor with the toe of a high-topped sneaker. “It was Adrien’s birthday,” he mumbled, not really looking at anyone, “and… I just wanted to throw him a party, y’know? I mean, he’d only just transferred in, he didn’t really know anyone, and a lot of the other kids were kinda leery because, well, Chloé’d made such a fuss over him. But… well, I went to try to convince Mister Agreste that it’d be a good idea, and…”

“Ah,” Tony said, in a tone of complete understanding. He grimaced. “I think I see where this is going.”

Nino shrugged awkwardly. “I’m… really sorry, you guys. I – I just wanted Adrien to get to have some fun.” He looked up at last, dredging up an obviously painful smile. “Guess I blew that, huh?”

“Nino, no,” Adrien said fiercely, turning around to grab the other boy by the shoulders. “You were trying to look out for me – there’s nothing wrong with that! My father’s just…” He winced slightly. “…stubborn.” His eyes slid away, as though he felt ashamed by the admission.

Marinette scowled darkly at that, but then shook her head and stepped forward so that Nino would meet her fierce gaze. “Exactly. It wasn’t your fault, Nino! Papillon used you, the same way he used Ivan, the same way he uses all his victims. Blaming yourself… it’s like what he tried to do at first, making the attacks Ladybug and Chat Noir’s fault, when he was the one turning innocent people into monsters! Don’t let him do that to you, Nino. Don’t let him make you feel ashamed of wanting to do something for a friend!”

Natasha saw Clint and Tony both wince at that. She didn’t blame them. She’d heard – and agreed with – Tony’s rants about sheer apathy in the face of evil more than once. The thought that there was someone out there deliberately targeting those rare people with the emotional drive and conviction to try to actually change things for the better…

Worse – it more or less confirmed what Adrien had told them. Your intentions didn’t matter. So long as that crack in the armor was there, so long as you cared about anything enough to get hurt… you were potentially vulnerable.

Natasha had lived with walls around her heart and soul before, without truly caring about anything – up to and including her mission, really. She didn’t want to go back to that life.

Nino blinked at Adrien and Marinette’s fiercely earnest faces – nearly identically so; all right, Natasha would grant Tony this much, that was cute – and then turned a half-tentative, half-hopeful look on his girlfriend.

Alya shrugged, not quite as nonchalant as she probably wanted to be. “Not like I can throw any
“stones,” she pointed out, bumping him with her hip. “At least you got possessed because you wanted to do something nice for your friend. Me, I got possessed for something that... really was my own stupid fault, honestly.” She made a face. “I can’t believe I actually thought Chloé might be Ladybug.”

“Neither can we,” the other three chorused dryly.

Natasha blinked. So both Nino and Alya had been possessed? No wonder Adrien was well-informed. Come to think of it – Alya did bear a marked resemblance to one of the supervillains who had come to SHIELD’s attention, one Lady WiFi. And given Alya’s position as, apparently, one of the top amateur journalists following the story of the superheroes and Papillon, Lady WiFi made a certain amount of sense...

*Oh.*

Thinking back on the timeline of Lady WiFi, Natasha fought the urge to curse. She had a sudden feeling that she knew what Adrien’s theory about their school might be.

Tony seemed to be caught on something else. “Just how many people in your class have gotten possessed?” he asked, brows furrowed.

The four kids looked at each other. “A lot,” Adrien admitted. “In fact...” He frowned slightly. “At this point, I think Marinette and I are the only ones from our particular class who haven’t been.”

The girl cringed, tugging on one of her pigtails, so dark a black that the eye was tricked into seeing blue in the highlights. “So far, anyway,” she said nervously, because summoning up a bright smile. “Or the teacher!” she added quickly. “Wow. Can you imagine? Pop Quiz. Now that would be a scary supervillain!”

Nino and Alya lunged in unison to clap hands over Marinette’s mouth, nearly sending all three crashing to the ground. “Shhhhhhhhh!” Alya hissed. “No giving the universe any ideas!”

Adrien – who’d dodged out of the way just in time – grinned. “Think we’d defeat her if we aced the quizzes? That would be kind of cool...”


Pressing his lips together in a distinctly unsuccessful effort to hide a grin, Adrien shook his head in amusement, before turning back to the Avengers, serious again. “But, yeah. It’s not just our school, it’s our class. Not too long after Nino got hit, another classmate of ours turned into Timebreaker.”

Marinette paled slightly. “That one was scary. She transformed practically right in the middle of us!” she explained hastily. “And she was really mad at all of us because we’d accidentally gotten her watch broken...”

Adrien nodded. “I think she was just random chance, too. She’s... well, pretty hotheaded normally. And – it was her birthday, she’d gotten a special present, and then won a race, and then found out we’d broken it...”

Tony winced. “Whoof. Big high whiplashing into a fury? Yeah, that’d do it.”

“...Actually,” Marinette said slowly. “She might *not* have been random. That watch was... a little weird.”
Adrien blinked. “Really? I mean – it was really big, even for an older pocket watch, but other than that…”

Marinette’s eyes widened then, as a whole series of strange expressions crossed her face. “Um! Well… I mean, not that I saw anything weird,” she said, the words practically tumbling over each other to get out of her mouth, “that would be silly, but… I don’t know, it had… that funny blue color? Kind of like a glow? And all those fancy decorations?”

Natasha raised an eyebrow slightly, but held her peace. If she recalled correctly, the theory on Timebreaker had been that she had time-related powers. Given that… it was entirely possible that Marinette remembered a slightly different version of events than her classmates. “You think Papillon was interested in the watch?”

Marinette shrugged uncomfortably, eyes flitting about and looking anywhere but directly at Adrien. “Well… I just think, he’s always after their Miraculous, and he got his greedy hands on one somehow…”

“And, speaking from experience, guys who think like that never stop grabbing for more,” Tony said, a dangerous glitter hidden in his eyes behind a wry smile. Then again, Ironman had a history of dealing with people who always wanted one more superweapon. Dealings that tended to involve armor and explosions.

Adrien drew in a slow breath through his nose, then slowly let it hiss out through his teeth. “I… hadn’t thought of that,” he said slowly. “I mean, I’d guessed that Papillon went after the man at the museum because of Alix – that was her brother, right? But… well, I figured that tempers tend to run in families, so it makes sense that Papillon would have family members of past akuma marked.”

“But he might be after that watch, huh?” Alya said, pulling her phone back out and thumbing through the map. After a moment, however, she frowned. “Except… he doesn’t seem to have done anything else around that museum – and they had that papyrus with Ladybug on it and everything! I mean, the Mime, maybe, but he didn’t even stay in the area very long. If Papillon was interested in the watch, why would he just let it go like that?”

“…Because he found something even better,” Adrien said quietly.

And now we reach the real point, Natasha thought, tensing slightly as she watched the boy’s shoulders shift ever so subtly under that white button-up.

Alya’s eyes narrowed. “He did? What?”

Adrien pointed at her. “You.”

Alya blinked at him, plainly taken aback.

But next to her, Marinette gasped, hands rising to cover her mouth as her eyes flew wide in dismay, and Natasha suspected that the girl had pieced together what Adrien suspected herself. “You were there,” she said, voice trembling just a bit. “Investigating Ladybug’s identity. You live-blogged the whole thing, even when the Pharaoh kidnapped you.”

Alya smiled confidently – but Natasha didn’t miss the way her fingers had tightened on the phone, clearly uneasy with where this was going. “It worked, didn’t it? They both showed up really fast. I got their attention!”

“But you also got Papillon’s,” Natasha said quietly. “From what little we can observe… I suspect he would not be the sort to pay attention to a teenage girl’s blog. Not until he got a chance to observe
your dedication first-hand.” She looked at the blogger, who’d bitten her lip uneasily. “Am I right in
guessing that Lady WiFi…?”

Marinette pressed in close to Alya’s side, lacing her fingers through the fingers of the girl’s free hand
while Nino stepped up to station himself right behind her other shoulder – not actively touching, but
close enough that Alya could probably feel his warmth through her shirt.

Alya swallowed, then managed a weak smile. “That was me, yeah. Got expelled for… well, something stupid, in hindsight, and then Chloé blew it way out of proportion, and our principal has no spine when it comes to her…” She closed her mouth firmly and drew in a deep breath before leaving it out slowly.

“That was just a few days after the Pharaoh attack,” Adrien said. “And… ever since then? Almost
every week, someone is possessed at our school, or someone from our school is possessed – sometimes both. It gets even worse if you count people near the school, or our classmates’ family and friends.”

“Stalking horse,” Natasha concluded.

Marinette shot a piercing look at her, blue eyes hard. “Explain,” she said flatly, her tone clipped and controlled.

Natasha inclined her head slightly in acknowledgement. “Based on the map you showed us, Papillon
has managed to cover most if not all of Paris in his search grid, quite thoroughly,” she noted. “The
fact that he’s still doing city-wide attacks, however, suggests that he hasn’t narrowed the area much,
if at all. My guess is, even using a methodical system, he hasn’t been able to get past whatever it is that keeps them from being recognized. Which means he needs to find alternatives.”

Tony grimaced. “Alya’s got a rep for trying to find Ladybug’s real identity, and she’s definitely come the closest to succeeding. Heck, even if you don’t know her identity – Ladybug gave you a private interview, right?”

Alya nodded, a little stiffly. “Yeah, although I didn’t set that up…” She glanced at Marinette.

“Interesting.”

“In that case, it wouldn’t even matter if you actually knew who she was or not,” Tony said. “So long as you’ve got some way to contact her, something more direct than that blog of yours. Something you might use if, say, a classmate turned into a supervillain at school.” He opened his mouth, as if to say more, and then closed it again, eyes dark and glittering dangerously.

Clint huffed. “And if he can confirm you’ve got a line to Ladybug – that gives him a chance to set up a trap. Or… is it possible to get possessed twice?”

Alya paled. “Yes. Ivan was…”

“B-but that was a special case, wasn’t it?” Marinette interjected. “He was the first one, remember? I think Ladybug and Chat Noir were probably still figuring out what they had to do, and made a mistake.”

That, at least, seemed to pull Alya out of her shock: she blinked once, and then rolled her eyes.

“Figuring it out?” she asked dryly. “Marinette, you’re the one who took me to see that papyrus in the museum, remember? Ladybug’s been around for thousands of years. I’d imagine that she knows what she’d doing by now!”
Natasha very carefully did not snort at that, although she did trade a quick, sardonic look with the other two Avengers while the children were distracted. Because, to borrow a teenage colloquialism herself, yeah right.

Oh, that Ladybug as a role was ancient – that was quite possible, and she planned to pass that tidbit on to SHIELD’s analysts as soon as she could, in the hopes that they would be able to come up with something in their historical research a little more solid than a cryptic image on a damaged papyrus scroll.

But this Ladybug? Natasha had seen that video Alya had posted of the first battle against Stoneheart. It had been… a little painful to watch, if she was going to be honest. The smooth teamwork the pair had shown against the Seamstress was nowhere to be found. Those had been the fumbling, clumsy efforts of two amateurs trying desperately to figure out the limits of their abilities. In fact, by all indications, Ladybug hadn’t even settled on a name for herself until Alya had ambushed her in the aftermath.

Tony had sighed after seeing that bit. “All right,” he’d said. “I officially forfeit the right to mock the poor girl for her superhero name, Gratuitous English and all. I’m all too familiar with the horrors of blurt-the-first-thing-that-comes-to-mind under pressure.”

“Well… there wasn’t anything about akuma on there, was there?” Adrien asked thoughtfully, drawing Natasha’s attention back. “According to the papyrus and what you got from trying to interview the supervillain—”

And Natasha still hadn’t made up her mind if that was a sign of brilliance on Alya’s part, or a foolhardy trust that nothing really bad could happen that ran on the extreme end of the scale even for a teenager.

“-back then, Ladybug was fighting the pharaoh who was trying to bring his wife back from the dead,” Adrien concluded, and slanted a smile at Marinette. “Just because Ladybug’s been around for a while, that doesn’t mean Papillon has, right?”

The girl nodded eagerly, eyes shining – and then froze, cheeks pinking as it obviously hit her that she was talking to Adrien.

To her credit, though, although her eyes got a little glassy, after that one moment of realization, she rallied admirably. “R-right,” she said. “If Papillon’s new, then it might have taken them a little time to figure out how to deal with his akuma.” She smiled brightly, only slightly awkward.

Natasha heard Tony cackle, “Score!” under his breath, and rolled her eyes slightly before prodding his shin with her toe. Not quite a warning kick, but hopefully enough to remind him that they were here for a reason, and not to get tangled up in teenage romantic shenanigans.

Although she had to admit, the whole thing had a certain adorably charming innocence about it. Not really something she knew about from personal experience, but it was proving entertaining to watch.

Clint shook his head, wry amusement flickering over his face for a moment, before sobering again as he returned to the more pertinent topic. “So you think that Papillon’s using Alya as a proxy for finding Ladybug and Chat Noir?” he asked.

Adrien turned up his hands. “Maybe?” he said tentatively. “I mean… I can’t think of any other reason why so many of the victims are from our school, or possessed at the school, or are people connected with the school.”
“Or maybe he thinks they’re from our school!” Alya said, brightening. “Or, well, not from, maybe, but they have to be nearby. They always seem to turn up really fast. When Nathanaël became Evillator, they showed up almost as fast as he did! And when Horrificator sealed off the school, they managed to get inside.”

“But not always,” Adrien argued. “Sometimes it takes them a while – the Black Knight got halfway across the city, and he was possessed right in front of the school. And when Reflekta attacked, Chat Noir showed up fast, but Ladybug took a while.”

Tony shifted on the couch, catching Natasha’s eye. “Suggestion?” he murmured, eyes glittering mischievously. “Fire the SHIELD analysts and hire this bunch instead. They know more about what’s going on than the authorities.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course they do,” she replied, careful to keep her voice low. “From the sound of it, they’ve been caught in the middle from the very beginning.”

“Besides,” Marinette was saying stubbornly, “it’s not like they aren’t just as fast showing up other places. Remember Kung Food? He sealed off the whole Grand Paris, and Ladybug and Chat Noir still managed to get in.”

Nino blinked. “You think they’ve got some way of… I dunno, just sensing when a supervillain appears? Is that why they always show up so fast?”

“That,” Clint said thoughtfully, inserting himself into the conversation again, “or Papillon’s actually skewing his own data.”

All four kids blinked at him, clearly baffled – but when Natasha glanced at Tony, the engineer was nodding.

“Hey,” he said, noticing her look. “It makes a certain kind of sense. Ladybug and Chat Noir? Not stupid, not at all. There’s no way they haven’t noticed the pattern themselves. Bets that they keep a close eye on the school, and people from it?”

Natasha pressed her lips together as another thought occurred to her. “That could be less skewing his data, and more manipulation,” she noted grimly.

Marinette paled. “If he thinks they’re… watching the school,” she said slowly, “then he can predict in a general sense where they’ll be. And he could use that to set a trap.”

Alya paled, reaching for her pocket before catching herself. Instead, she curled her hands into fists tight enough that her nails were likely embedded in her palms. “We have to warn them!” she said fiercely.

“All right,” Nino asked practically. “Because, y’know, this probably isn’t the sort of thing you can post on the Ladyblog. Last thing you want to do is give Papillon any ideas if he hasn’t thought of this himself, right?”

“…Okay, true,” the blogger said, drawing in a deep breath before looking down at her hands, very carefully relaxing them. Then she brought her head up, eyes narrowed with determination. “Which makes it even more important that we figure out who they are! We need to find Ladybug before Papillon does!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Tony said, sitting up quickly. “How’d we suddenly jump to trying to hunt those two down ourselves, here? Because last I checked, that’s what they’re trying to avoid.”
“Well, how else are we supposed to warn them?” Alya demanded.

“Anonymous tip hotline? Junk e-mail address? Write it down, make a paper airplane, and toss it to them the next time you see them go by? Mention it the next time you score one of those private interviews?” Tony raised an eyebrow. “There are a dozen ways you could set up communication lines that wouldn’t require you knowing Ladybug’s identity.”

Alya blinked, looking taken aback. “But…”

Marinette huffed, rolling her eyes. “I still don’t get why you’re so crazy about finding out Ladybug’s identity,” she said. Apparently, this was something of a long-standing argument. “Isn’t it enough that she’s doing what she does?”

Alya frowned at her, drawing herself up to her full height in righteous indignation. “People deserve to know who their heroes are! How else are we supposed to thank them?”

“Well,” Tony said, very deliberately casual, “I’d suggest starting with not destroying their civilian lives, myself.”

The girl’s jaw dropped, as all four of the kids stared at Tony in shock. “W…What?”

Natasha shook her head slightly, trading a quick glance with Clint. Her partner nodded subtly, and then leaned in slightly to draw attention to himself. “Remember what we said earlier? About me and Tasha not really being big fans of cameras? If the wrong person got hold of that, it could get us or people we care about killed.”

“Everything you put on your blog is accessible to anyone with an internet connection,” Natasha explained. “Anyone can see it – including Papillon. Especially if he’s already marked you as someone to watch. If you made their identities public, it wouldn’t just be them in danger. Their friends, their families, even just random people on the street would become targets.”

“ Heck, ask my CEO,” Tony said with a crooked, not really humorous smile. “She’s had people try to kidnap her so many times, I think she invented a standard procedure for it so it’d stop disrupting company business every time.”

“But…” Alya bit her lip. “But if I just didn’t post it…”

“You didn’t hesitate to talk all about that textbook on your liveblog,” Marinette said quietly, but with a glint of steel in her eyes. “For all we know, that’s what made Papillon decide to fixate on our school.”

Natasha didn’t bother to hide her grimace this time. Watching that particular video had been like being dropped off a boat straight into icy water. She was quite willing to bet that Ladybug’s little interview in the aftermath of the Pharaoh incident had been all about damage control.

“Hey.” Adrien stepped slightly behind Alya, looking like he’d almost rather be stepping in front of her as a shield. “The Ladyblog does good things. It’s a way for victims to find people who understand, for one thing. And like Alya said – liveblogging the Pharaoh thing might have been crazy, but it did mean that Ladybug and Chat Noir got to the scene quickly. That might have saved her life.”

Natasha was inclined to press the point – among other things, Alya’s post about the book could very well have endangered every fifth-year collège student in Paris – but then she took in Alya’s expression: blank with horror, her eyes glassy with tears.
I think she gets it, she told herself, taking her temper and sitting on it with all her control. After all – it wasn’t Alya she was truly angry at, not really. It was the whole situation, from the mayor to the citizenry to Papillon himself.

Still, there was one more point that she needed to drive home – for Alya’s own sake. “Even if you didn’t post it,” she said quietly, “you would still know. And if Adrien is right that Papillon is watching you…”

She’d… well, she’d tried to keep her tone more or less gentle, and she thought that she’d more or less succeeded. Alya still looked heartbroken, like she’d just seen a dream shatter.

She probably had. She was, by all indications, a child of the Information Age, grown up on a diet of superhero stories. She’d probably built a dozen glorious fantasies about discovering the heroes’ secret identities and being taken into their trusted inner circle, fighting against evil with her camera and her wits and her special knowledge.

Even Tony looked like he was starting to think maybe he’d pushed the point a little too hard. Smiling a little apologetically, he deliberately relaxed back into the couch, tilting his head to one side. “Besides… remember what I said, about not everyone being that crazy about the limelight?” he asked. “I kinda get the impression Ladybug and Chat Noir don’t really want a bunch of public acclaim. Can’t blame ‘em, it can really be a hassle. Papillon doesn’t exactly give them much choice except to do their heroics where everyone’s watching – but they don’t really strike me as the type to enjoy all the attention. They’ve got a job to do, after all.”

“ Heck,” Clint said with a crooked grin, “I’ll bet you a hundred euros that Chat Noir’s flat-out shy.”

Adrien blinked in surprise, clearly thrown – but his reaction paled in the face of the three dramatic double-takes the other children made, heads whipping around in one synchronized motion to gape at the archer.

“Shy?” Marinette gaped. “Chat Noir? That’s ridiculous! I’ve met him, he’s a complete and total clown!”

Natasha raised her eyebrows. You’ve met him, hm? Interesting. Particularly given the implication, if she’d read that exchange of glances earlier correctly, that it had been Marinette to set up that private interview with Ladybug for Alya.

Papillon may have focused on the wrong schoolgirl, if he wanted someone who actually has the ability to find his targets.

“So?” Clint said, arching his eyebrows as he shrugged. “He’s a performer. Take it from someone who knows a bit about the circus – lots of performers are shy, when they’re not on the stage and playing to an audience.”

Oddly, though, he was still watching Alya out of the corner of his eye. The blogger was simply gaping, blinking wildly as though her train of thought had gone completely off the rails-

Ah, Natasha realized, as her partner ever-so-subtly relaxed. Of course. Hadn’t they just covered the fact that Papillon went after emotional hurts? He seemed to focus on anger, certainly, but there wasn’t that great a difference between anger and horror and heartbreak.

Something to bear in mind. Sometimes, you had to break someone’s comfortable assumptions about the world apart… but here, unless you wanted to be the source of another supervillain terrorizing the streets of Paris, that meant you also had an obligation to stick around and help them put it back
And there was nothing like a distraction to push someone past that first horrible moment of *what have I done*, Natasha had to acknowledge, as Alya blinked in bemusement at Marinette’s flailing.

“How.” Tony tilted his head to the side. “Think you’re on to something there, actually. The interviews? Other than the statue thing where Ladybug didn’t show, he keeps himself in the background, lets his partner handle most of the PR.”

“But… but he’s so…” the girl spluttered.

“Over the top?” Clint suggested with a crooked grin. “Half of why I think he’s shy, actually. No one’s *that* ridiculous unless they’re deliberately faking it a bit. Masks let you pull off stuff you normally wouldn’t dare.”

“…All the more reason to keep their identities secret, I guess,” Marinette said slowly. She wasn’t flailing anymore, but the baffled look on her face suggested that she’d just had a number of assumptions knocked seriously askew herself, and hadn’t quite figured out what to do with the new picture in her hands. “I mean… if part of why they act the way they do is because of the masks…”

Natasha tapped her fingers lightly on her thigh for a moment. “I’m fairly certain they don’t even know each other’s identities,” she noted.

Tony blinked. “Seriously? They trust each other enough that they’re practically telepathic!”

Adrien laughed a bit at that. “Maybe, but… well, you don’t need to know *details* about a person to *know* them, right?”

“And they always go different directions after a battle,” Nino pointed out, before wincing. “Oh man… d’you think that means *no one* knows who they are? I mean, obviously they know their own identities, but…”

“Yeah.” Clint’s eyes flicked over towards Natasha for a moment. “That can get pretty stressful.”

She shrugged, knew it wasn’t quite as dismissive as she wanted. There was a *reason* that the Black Widow had finally let SHIELD catch up with her, after all.

Tony flopped back on the couch with a dramatic groan. “Oh man. Top that off with supervillains attacking every other day… dear God, when do those two get any *sleep*? Or if these are usually daytime attacks, any work done?” He shook his head and smiled crookedly. “Really, that should make finding them pretty easy. Just look for the people who are about to lose their jobs on account of terminal absenteeism.”

Alya burst out laughing, nudging Marinette with her elbow. “Terminal absenteeism, huh? Now who does *that* remind me of? What was your last excuse, again – sun in your eyes so you turned down the wrong street?”

Marinette flushed beet red, pushing her friend away with a pout. “Yes, because I’m *sure* Ladybug falls face-first down staircases on a *regular basis*,” she grumbled, not meeting anyone’s eyes.

Adrien chuckled ruefully. “For all we know, they both might,” he pointed out. “I mean – I have a hard enough time with my schedule, between classes and photoshoots. Can you imagine how hard it would be to juggle fighting *supervillains* on the side? At least the photoshoots are *predictable*.”

“I bet it drives them *crazy*,” Marinette said with a huff. “Who knows? Maybe *that’s* Papillon’s master
Natasha drew in a sharp breath, only catching herself just in time to at least keep it silent.

Because that fit.

Ladybug and Chat Noir could not afford to share their identities with anyone, not even each other. Which meant they had to drop everything and simply vanish from their civilian lives without explanation, on an almost daily basis. Even the best liar in the world would start running out of plausible excuses sooner or later.

And while the attacks could happen anytime, anywhere… for the most part, they happened in broad daylight. When people were at work, their activities tracked by friends and bosses.

She glanced at Tony, noting that the billionaire had paled, although he’d kept his crooked smile intact to hide it. Plainly, Tony had added the pieces up as well.

At this point, Ladybug and Chat Noir’s civilian lives are probably complete train wrecks.

And that… was stressful. And distressing. And frustrating.

And all the while, Papillon loomed over all of Paris. Ready to spring on the first crack in someone’s emotional armor.

They’re not immune to mind control. Which means…

The more their civilian lives fell apart… the more likely that Ladybug or Chat Noir themselves would become vulnerable to possession.

Natasha’s eyes darted over to meet Clint’s grim gaze. He nodded in silent agreement.

We need to talk to Fury.

Lips pressed together, the director of SHIELD settled back in his chair. “So it’s a war of attrition.”

“More like a three-pronged attack,” Clint corrected, leaning forward slightly. “There’s always a chance that one of his supervillains will actually succeed in getting their hands on the Miraculous – apparently there’ve been a couple close calls already. And all the while, he’s basically got the entire civilian population of Paris acting as his own private investigators, to track them down; Alya’s far from the only one who’s completely careless about the theories she puts out there, just the most visible, and one of the most closely involved.”

Standing back a bit from where Natasha and Clint were stationed around the tablet, since technically he was only allowed in on this particular video-conference out of courtesy – and recognition that trying to keep him out of it would be a futile effort – Tony grimaced. Jarvis had done a preliminary scan of Ladybug and Chat Noir-related internet posts while they’d been visiting the Agreste mansion, and… yeah. At this point, Tony strongly suspected that the only reason Ladybug and Chat Noir’s identities hadn’t been blown wide open was that weird Not The Civilian Identity You’re Looking For effect.

Which at least made him feel a little better about the fact that even Jarvis apparently couldn’t run a proper facial recognition program on those two, no matter how many images he used as references. Even if it drove him crazy.
“The problem is,” Clint said, “they’re stuck fighting a defensive battle. No one seems to know where those damn butterflies come from, or where they go after Ladybug cleanses them – looks like a couple of people have tried to track them, but thus far, no luck.”

“Hm.” Fury’s fingers drummed momentarily on his desk. “Papillon,” he said curtly. “What do we have on him? Do we have any idea what his objective is?”

Natasha and Clint exchanged glances, before Clint grimaced. “Honestly? I don’t think it matters,” he said reluctantly. “Pretty obvious he’s got one short-term goal – grab these Miraculous things from Ladybug and Chat Noir. If he manages to get that far…”

“Then it doesn’t matter what he thinks he’s after,” Tony said bluntly. “Trust me, I know the type. This is a guy who doesn’t see people, he sees tools for getting what he wants. People like that don’t let go of power once they’ve got it. If he gets Ladybug and Chat Noir’s Miraculous – well, it’s not going to take long before he starts thinking things like, what else can I get away with, now that there’s no one to stop me?” He crossed his arms. “Thus far, he’s been too focused on going after Ladybug and Chat Noir directly to pull anything else. Take them out of the picture, though, and there’s going to be trouble.”

“Some of that focus may be from his mindset,” Natasha said thoughtfully. “Thus far, the pattern of his attacks suggest that he’s thinking like a civilian, not as a criminal or trained military.”

The director’s eye narrowed with a calculating glint. “In effect, Papillon is holding the entire city of Paris hostage,” he observed. “Both to the threat of further supervillain attacks, and to the threat of becoming a supervillain oneself. And yet…”

“And yet he doesn’t use that,” Natasha confirmed. “The attacks are essentially random, rather than targeted, his victims focus primarily on personal objectives, and for the most part they attack Ladybug and Chat Noir. He’s made no particular attempts to strike at the city itself.”

“Could be a problem with controlling his victims,” Tony pointed out. “For the most part, they’re doing their own thing, right? Takes active intervention for him to give them directions?” At least, that had been their best guess at the strange butterfly-mask they’d seen flashing up on the Seamstress’s face.

“Doesn’t mean they aren’t doing what he wants the rest of the time,” Clint said tightly, and Tony bit back a wince. Right; mind control was a sore spot. And it wasn’t like Clint had been simply a puppet, either; he’d been doing his own thing, more or less.

Tony shrugged, hoping it’d read as an apology of sorts. “Besides,” he pressed on, “it’s kinda hard to threaten to bring down the Eiffel Tower when a bunch of helpful little sparkly ladybugs just put it back again.”

“We don’t know what the limits of Ladybug’s abilities are,” Natasha pointed out, before shaking her head. “There’s also the fact that his supervillains could easily be far more damaging than we’ve seen so far. For the most part, he seems to target ordinary civilians.” Her eyes narrowed. “Imagine what could happen if one of his akuma targeted, say, a serial murderer.”

Tony had already opened his mouth to reply. Instead, he snapped it closed and swallowed, hard. Because… yeah. If a sweet girl like Bissette or a couple of good-natured kids like Nino or Alya could turn into ruthless villains, Tony really didn’t want to think about what would happen if one of those little black butterflies attached itself to someone who already had a taste for blood. Not to
mention, if it went after a guy in prison…

Can we say jailbreak?

And while Ladybug might be able to clean up the mess caused by the supervillains, Tony wasn’t so sure her fix-it would work to scoop all the escapees up and drop them back in jail. It wasn’t a total reset, after all – when they’d beaten the Seamstress, all the Exposé guests who’d stampeded their way out of the hotel were still gone.

“Not a nice thought,” he admitted reluctantly. “Hope he doesn’t think of it.”

Clint grimaced, shaking himself subtly – and then paused. “You know, odds are good that he wouldn’t go there, even if he did.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow at him.

“That whole production, when he announced himself,” Clint said with a shrug. “So far as this guy cares, he’s got a right to be doing what he does, and it’s Ladybug and Chat Noir’s fault for not falling in line. Sure, a lot of that’s probably rhetoric…”

“But actively help the criminal element, and his nice pretty self-justifications won’t hold up so well,” Tony agreed. A sudden thought, and he snickered dryly. “So we’re looking at a guy, probably civilian, probably pretty rich given he has the time to spare on this, and the attitude that he’s got every right to be doing it. Evil French Batman? Bat Blanc?”

Clint cackled, and even Natasha’s lips twitched slightly in amusement, while Fury grimaced and pinched the bridge of his nose. Score.

“At least Batman did the job himself,” Clint replied, rolling his eyes. “Apparently Papillon doesn’t like to get his hands dirty.”

“That we know of,” Natasha countered. “Given that his civilian identity could be anyone, we don’t know if he’s ever attempted personal intervention.” She shook her head. “However, I would agree. Papillon seems to keep everything at a distance, which may explain why he’s never exploited the effective hostage situation he has at his disposal. Thus far, his approach has been intelligent, analytical, and manipulative, but not actively strategic.” Then, to Tony’s surprise, she drew in a deep breath and adjusted her shoulders slightly, as though bracing herself, before turning to look at the tablet and Fury’s face. “Which is why I recommend that we pull out, sir. As soon as possible.”

Tony gaped at her, and even Fury and Clint seemed startled. A moment later, the director leaned forward, brow furrowed. “Explain.”

“I’ve noticed a pattern,” Natasha said grimly. “When a bystander actively helps Ladybug and Chat Noir, that same bystander often is the next one targeted for possession. It happened with Alya, after the Pharaoh incident. It also happened with that rock musician. It even happened to Chloé Bourgeois.” She shifted her attention to Clint and Tony then. “Papillon knows we’re here. He may not know who we are, although the odds of that are better than I like – and, sir, I suggest that SHIELD refrain from allowing any classified knowledge to be handed to Mayor Bourgeois in the future,” she added, a hint of exasperation coming into her tone.

The words were almost lost under Clint’s heartfelt swearing. “Papillon can target anyone,” the archer said. “And if he can turn out city-threatening supervillains from the average civilian…”

Tony wanted to curse himself. More accurately, he wanted to replace the more-or-less respectable business suit he’d reluctantly donned for the meeting with Agreste in favor of a suit with a little more
titanium alloy in it, and wreck something. If he just had a damn target.

And Natasha simply nodded. “Ladybug and Chat Noir are almost certainly civilians themselves, behind the masks,” she said quietly. “They’ve improved remarkably since Stoneheart’s first attack – but the fact remains that they’re self-taught, and still learning how to use their abilities. Papillon’s already stacking the deck against them. The last thing they need is to end up fighting one of us as well.”

“Self-taught?” Fury asked sharply. “Is that confirmed, or supposition?”

“Guesswork,” the spy admitted, but her gaze was level and confident. “They were clumsy and uncoordinated at first, but over time, you can track the way they’ve improved, both in terms of fighting and teamwork.”

“Makes sense,” Clint said thoughtfully. “The sort of… trapeze artist trust they have in each other? That doesn’t happen in a day. Especially not when you only know the other person when they’re wearing a mask.”

“Exactly.” Natasha nodded. “Although some of that was learning to trust their own abilities; their strengths and limitations.” She hesitated, a frown flickering across her face. “Although they still aren’t utilizing their abilities to maximum effect.”

Tony opened his mouth, meaning to ask what she meant-

And then winced, because he already knew, didn’t he? “Cataclysm,” he said flatly. “How did Adrien describe that? The ability to destroy literally anything?” He didn’t even realize he was rubbing at the arc reactor under his shirt until he felt the fabric under his fingers slide against the hard metal. The Seamstress’s take apart at the seams trick had been unsettling enough, and apparently she’d been limited to using it against fabricated objects – things that actually had seams. If Cataclysm lacked that limitation… “That’s a one-hit kill ability… and he uses it mostly to create distractions.”

Although using it to disrupt the sound waves when they’d been fighting Guitar Villain had been all kinds of clever – and rather in line with Adrien’s theory about Cataclysm being a form of directed entropy, come to think of it.

Clever. But not particularly strategic.

“It’s not simply that,” Natasha corrected, leaning back in her chair. “He has enhanced senses – vision and hearing at the very least, and given the tail, I suspect he has an enhanced sense of balance as well. He’s stealthier than Ladybug, if only because black is less visible than bright red, although at least the spots break up her profile slightly. The baton and his ability to switch between quadrupedal and bipedal motion mean he can move quickly and fight effectively in a wider range of environments than Ladybug – she needs room to spin and throw that yo-yo.”

“Scout,” Clint summarized, “or…” He hesitated, grimacing.


“Wait, wait, wait,” Tony said. “Seriously? The catboy’s supposed to be some kind of hitman? Can you seriously see him…”

He trailed off, grimacing. The worst part was – from a weapons design viewpoint, he could see it. Hadn’t he just been thinking that it was odd to use a one-hit kill ability to create simple distractions?

At the same time…
“…Okay,” he admitted slowly. “Powers-wise, sure. But Chat Noir himself? Can’t see it. I don’t think that guy *could* use his power on a living thing. Not and live with himself afterward.”

To his surprise, Natasha nodded. “Agreed,” she said simply. “Which is… reassuring, to be honest.”

Tony blinked at her in surprise. Although he noticed, from the corner of his eye, that a small, rueful smile had flickered across Clint’s face.

Natasha shrugged at him. “Strategically speaking, they’re failing to utilize Chat Noir’s abilities to their fullest extent,” she said. “He’s the scout of the pair, and the heavy hitter. And they’re using him as the first line of defense, to stall and distract. Using Cataclysm as a distraction is a waste of the ability.” She hesitated slightly. “But… All things considered, I think it’s for the best that it *is* in the hands of someone who actively avoids hurting people.”

“Like the Hulk,” Tony said thoughtfully. And slanted a suspicious glance at the tablet. Fury was being *way too quiet*, sitting with his elbows on the table and his fingers laced in front of his face, leaving nothing of his expression visible except for one glinting eye and the dark eyepatch.

Clint huffed a laugh that didn’t sound nearly as amused as he was pretending, running a hand through short-cropped hair. “Ouch. But probably a good comparison,” he admitted. “Makes me kinda glad that Ladybug *doesn’t* have that ability.”

Tony gave him a *look*. “Ladybug? Seriously?”

Clint gave him a *look* right back. “Five words. *Bringing down the Eiffel Tower*.”

Tony sucked in a sharp breath, wincing. “…okay, point,” he admitted. “That was… cold.”

Because… okay, sure, by all accounts the Mime had been one *heck* of a tough customer. He couldn’t blame Ladybug for exploiting the hell out of the one weakness they’d been able to find in the guy’s abilities. Except that it had involved *dropping the Eiffel Tower on him* – and, more or less inevitably, on everyone around him. Sure, the Mime had kept himself, and by association anyone close to him, from being squished…

But there was no way that people *hadn’t* died in that stunt. People who’d been nearby, who’d been on the road the tower had dropped on, to say nothing of anyone who’d been *on* the tower at the time. Sure, apparently Ladybug had been able to undo the consequences with her magic (geh) ladybug swarm, but…

Yeah. *Brrr*. Not the happiest thought.

Natasha seemed to agree, from the careful way she shifted her shoulders – a motion that on anyone else would probably be a full-body shake. “My point exactly,” she agreed. “But even then, I don’t think that was a calculated sacrifice. Ladybug doesn’t have the… mental *hardness* it takes to shoot the hostage. I think it’s more likely that she was so focused on bringing the Mime down that she didn’t really consider the consequences, or she assumed her powers would be able to clean them up.”

“Not a happy thought,” Tony said uneasily. Because, seriously. With the exception of Stoneheart bringing down a skyscraper, the fall of the Eiffel Tower probably counted as one of the most destructive events since Papillon had begun his attacks, in terms of direct consequences to human life and the infrastructure of the city – and Ladybug had very deliberately arranged for it to happen.

For a moment, Natasha seemed to almost hesitate, before her chin rose slightly, eyes sharp, as though she’d come to some kind of decision. “Tunnel vision,” she said evenly. “It’s a common problem with teenagers anyway, let alone under the level of stress those two are dealing with.”
Tony stared at her, dimly aware that he probably had the same blank, stunned look on his face he could make out on Clint’s from the corner of his eye. Even Fury started, eye widening.

“…Teenagers?” the director asked slowly.

Lips thinned in a grim line, Natasha nodded shortly. “That’s my best guess at the moment: Ladybug and Chat Noir are teenagers. Likely no older than fifteen.”

Several seconds ticked past before Fury straightened in his chair, eye hard. “Your evidence?” he demanded.

“Nothing direct,” Natasha told him. “Tony’s the one who figured it out.”

Tony gaped, for once honestly wordless. “Me?” he managed to sputter at last. “Natasha, you’re the one who pointed out that I couldn’t tell how old Ladybug was, and…”

She arched an eyebrow. “You couldn’t. And yet, you did not flirt with her. Not even once.”

Eyes wide, Clint leaned back in his chair and whistled. “Damn. She’s right. Heck, you haven’t even commented on her figure – just the outfit. No eye candy commentary, no whistling…”

“That’s because…” Tony started, and stopped cold. Because the only answer he could come up with was that would just be creepy.

“It’s not just Ladybug,” Natasha pointed out. “You call Chat Noir a catboy.” She shrugged. “Granted, catman doesn’t roll off the tongue – but you’re not normally dismissive with people you actually like.”

“Hey!” Tony objected reflexively. “Don’t insult my powers of sass. Okay, granted, I do like the kid… d…”

Blindly reaching back, he managed to find the back of an unused chair and used it to guide himself down to a proper sitting position. Because all of a sudden it felt like his mind had flipped on him, bits and pieces falling into place and leaving him wondering how he possibly could have missed it before.

“Shit,” he breathed, and rubbed at his face. “They are just kids. How did I not see that?”

Because, sure, weird freaky magic Jedi tricks, fine. But the two even acted like teenagers. Granted, teenagers who’d shouldered one hell of a responsibility, but still kids, playing at flirting with no idea what to do when it worked, short tempers mitigated by a genuine will to do good…

He rubbed his face. “That textbook,” he groaned. “Damn it, that should have been a huge red flag right there.”

“Likely the glamour kicked in to sidetrack us,” Natasha suggested. “But it seems to apply at the level of recognizing the connection; after all, people know what those two look like. So even though the glamour prevented you from putting a specific age on Ladybug, it didn’t change the fact that you knew she was underage by American standards – so you acted accordingly. What I recognized wasn’t them – it was you.”

Clint tilted his head to the side – and then, unexpectedly, he commented, “You know, if they’re kids… that’s kind of a relief.”

Tony shot the archer a hard look. “A relief?” he demanded.
Clint crossed his arms over his chest, meeting Tony’s gaze squarely. “Yes. If they’re kids, then Papillon’s nasty little war-by-attrition trick isn’t going to work nearly so well. They’ve got a safety net.”

“They’re probably not responsible for keeping a roof over their own heads, or food on their table,” Natasha noted thoughtfully. “Granted, they’re also subject to more oversight, unless their parents are criminally negligent – and it’s likely their grades are suffering. So they’re still vulnerable… but less so than someone at risk of losing their only means of income.”

Tony’s hands hurt – when had he fisted them? “Okay, point,” he said flatly. “Doesn’t change the fact that we’ve got a pair of teenagers busy trying to protect all of metropolitan Paris from a string-pulling puppetmaster who’s already painted a target on their backs.” He pointedly shifted his gaze over to meet Fury’s flat, expressionless gaze through the tablet’s screen. “Now what are we going to do about it?”

Fury met his gaze squarely. “We are doing nothing.”

…what.

As Tony stared blankly, Fury shifted his attention to Natasha and Clint. “I want the three of you out of Paris tonight.”

What.

“You sure about that, sir?” Clint asked, frowning slightly.

Natasha sighed quietly. “There’s nothing we can do to help the situation,” she said.

What.

“Can’t help,” Tony echoed, and didn’t even try to hide the sarcasm. “You know, last I checked, people with too much power on their hands and a pathological inability to take no for an answer were our job.”

“Be that as it may,” Fury replied tightly, “Agent Romanov is correct. The best thing you can do to assist in this situation is to remove yourselves from it.”

Well, well. From grim commander to gritted teeth in one sentence. That had to be a record. “Oh really.”

Fury drew in a slow breath. Let it out, just as slow.

“Stark,” he said, his voice utterly flat. “Let me remind you that none of the Avengers are suited to fighting battles where the person you’re fighting is a hostage. In addition, while Ladybug is able to undo any damage brought about by the actions of either Papillon’s victims or by herself and her partner, we do not know the limitations of the ability. She clearly does not undo everything. We do not know if her powers would extend to reversing damage caused by forces other than these Miraculous.” His face darkened in a scowl. “There are experts uniquely adapted to this situation in place. Let them handle it.”

“Those experts,” Tony said, matching Fury’s tone, “are kids. Or did you miss this whole conversation somehow?”

“I heard it just fine,” Fury growled at him. “Which is why I want you out of there, before the next supervillain of the day with mind-controlling powers swoops in and those children end up forced to
“Excuse me?” Tony demanded, leaning forward in the chair. “Could you maybe remind me just who managed to No Sell Loki’s glowstick of doom?”

That earned him a dark look from Clint, but Tony kept his angry stare locked on Fury’s one eye as the man leaned forward until his face practically filled the tablet’s screen.

“Certainly,” the director said coldly. “At the same time I remind you that we do not know whether or not that protection will work against the powers of Papillon’s victims. The present situation in Paris, as you yourselves have noticed, is extremely precarious. I refuse to let your presence risk matters further.” His eye narrowed. “Or did you somehow overlook the fact that between you and Agent Romanov, you’ve managed to break part of that protective glamour?”

Natasha breathed a soft curse. “Tony…”

Damn it, he’d had enough of this. Tony stood up, so abruptly that the chair he’d been sitting on toppled over behind him, the thud almost inaudible against the ringing in his ears.

“You know,” he said coldly, “some of us, when we break something, stick around to fix it.” He suddenly turned his back on the tablet and Fury’s glare, and stalked to the door.

“Hey-!” he heard Clint shout, sounding worried and angry in equal measure as Tony wrenched the door open.

Tony gritted his teeth. “I’m going to cool my head,” he said curtly, and took a childishly petty delight in slamming the door closed against any response the SHIELD agents might make.

Nice part about staying in an older, “classic” hotel like Le Grand Paris – making his way from the penthouse floor up to the fancy rooftop pool didn’t take any time at all.

Evening had come and gone while Clint and Natasha made their report to Fury; it was full night now, the rooftop terrace completely deserted. It was still technically open, the nighttime lights on and everything, although the cover for the pool had been pulled, so you could see the water flashing in the lights but couldn’t actually get in and swim. Safety issue, probably, given that there wasn’t a lifeguard up here.

Be nice if the Mayor were half so conscientious about the safety of his damn city, Tony thought with a mental snort, resting his hands against the railing.

He got it, okay? He got it. SHIELD couldn’t be everywhere or do everything, and Papillon’s ability to take people over and turn them into ruthless supervillains was a potential nightmare from a security standpoint. Near as they could tell, Papillon’s villains retained all the knowledge of the original victim – they were the victims, just with nifty new powers, a campy makeover, and all the nice little evolutionary and social limits saying don’t do this shut down hard. If an agent got grabbed, everything they knew could be used against SHIELD. Not to mention the people of Paris.

He felt his lip curl in disgust. So their solution is to leave a bunch of kids to pick up the slack.

Not just Ladybug and Chat Noir, either. Although if he ever found whoever had come up with the brilliant plan of dumping a couple of magic objects and the responsibility for this mess in the hands of two kids, he was going to have words. And probably a repulsor blast or two.

No. What really got at him was Adrien, and the kid’s classmates.
A bunch of teenagers are stepping up to the plate better than all the adults in the city combined.

Sure, Alya’d been careless and reckless, and pretty short-sighted with her obsession about finding Ladybug’s identity. At least she’d done something. That blog of hers wasn’t just information on Ladybug sightings; there was a locked forum specifically restricted to victims of past attacks, for example. (Not that the lock had kept Tony out, though he hadn’t actually read anything. Much.) And when Bissette had been upset, Adrien had tried to head the possession off – and when that failed, he’d kept enough sense to remember that a bunch of superhero tourists were in town, and had made sure they had enough intel to do something before he got away.

And all the while…

Those kids are so used to this mess that they don’t even blink about the fact that people at their school are turning into supervillains on a weekly basis.

Hell. Adrien had practically joked about the possibility that he was next in line for a little black butterfly.

And what are the people who are supposed to be in charge doing through all this?

Okay, fine. The Akuma Brigade kept civilians away from battlezones, and provided counseling for victims. But Tony sure as heck hadn’t seen them helping. As for the mayor…

His hands tightened on the rail.

Guy’s supposed to be the leader of the city, and what’s he doing? Burying his head in the sand and leaving two people to try to protect the whole damn city, when he knows perfectly well there are people he could ask for help.

But that would make the Mayor look bad, wouldn’t it? So instead, he just swept everything under the rug – unless, of course, he could benefit from making a fuss.

Just. Like. Stane.

Growling in his throat, Tony thumped a fist down on the railing, closing his eyes to breathe deeply through his nose.

Even if his eyes had been open, he probably wouldn’t have seen it coming, with the blazing lights of the rooftop dazzling his eyes. Against the dark sky beyond those lights, fluttering black wings were nearly invisible – until the butterfly set down for just a moment atop the bright circle of the arc reactor.

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NOTES (because I went over the character limit again. Oops.)

…of course I went there. Avengers in a Miraculous Ladybug setting – of course Papillon’s going to snare one of them!

This fic introduces an alternative headcanon regarding the balance of power than the one I introduced in Luck of the Draw. There, I suggested that Chat Noir might have powers that he hasn’t learned about yet. Here… yes, Ladybug has more specific powers. But Chat Noir has many more
built-in advantages – a cat’s night vision, reinforcement on the suit, claws, etc. (And given that real cats use their tails to help balance... well, I like that idea better than the tail being pure decoration!)

Speaking of headcanons? I like the idea that Adrien knows Marinette has a crush on him. She’s not exactly subtle. This puts him in a bind, because Marinette is a friend, and he doesn’t want to hurt her. But he doesn’t want to lead her on, either. So he plays clueless, and tries to get her to treat him as just another classmate. He deliberately ignores her odd behavior (no way did he miss her diving off the bench, or hiding behind Alya), and otherwise treats her as a friend.

One of my personal rules is that, if a character frustrates me enough in canon that I feel like giving them a swat, I can... but only once, and if at all possible, that character should learn from the experience. But Alya most definitely needs a swat for her behavior as the Ladyblogger. Just in that first incident with Stoneheart, Chat Noir had to sacrifice his weapon to save her from becoming collateral damage. Twice. In the Timebreaker incident, Stopping to snap pictures of Timebreaker gets her killed (at least as much as Chat Noir was). In the Pharaoh incident, she announces on a public blog that she thinks Ladybug is in fifth-year collège (meaning, fourteen or fifteen), and tries to interview Ladybug in the middle of fighting the supervillain. And Chloé leaning on the principal to get Alya expelled for a few days might have been over the top, but taking pictures of another student’s locker is not acceptable behavior, given that it tends to lead to things like blackmail and cyber-bullying.

To be fair, if you read between the lines Alya seems to calm down eventually; to me, all the above episodes happened relatively early in the timeline. Still, that sort of behavior is a problem. And even as late as Volpina (which reads to me as one of the last episodes, chronologically), her default on anything Ladybug-related is clearly still to whip out her phone and record.

My read? Alya’s a fourteen/fifteen year old who has never had anything seriously bad happen to her – and so the danger of the situation hasn’t sunk in. She’s caught up in the thrill and excitement of having her daydream come to life – which means, of course, that she immediately dove into it by taking on the persona of the Intrepid Reporter. (Plus, I suspect that she has her own girl-crush on Ladybug, and daydreams about becoming BFFs. Hamsters and all.)

…to be fair, dealing daily with Marinette’s Prophecies of Doom and Disaster isn’t exactly the best training for thinking seriously about “and then what?”

I’m pretty convinced that Bubbler is another very early incident, for a number of reasons. Marinette’s crush is most definitely at its most incoherent stage, for example, and Adrien hasn’t gotten his feet under him enough to call Chloé out on her more blatant behavior. Then there’s that silly “drop the yo-yo on Chat Noir’s/Ladybug’s head” gag, and the fact that it didn’t occur to Chat Noir to use Cataclysm on the bubble until after they’d risen too high to escape; they’re still figuring out their abilities. The rest of the timeline... well, I confess, I see the order happening in this way in part because of the Alix/Jamil/Alya string.

I’m not kidding about the amount of attention the school gets. I assume that there are plenty of attacks that don’t get shown in the series – but of the ones that are, it’s easier to count the ones that aren’t linked to the school either directly or by physical proximity: Climatika, Pharaoh (Alix’s brother), Mr. Pigeon, Copycat, Mime (Mylène’s father), Animan (triggered by schoolkids being brats), Puppeteer (whom Marinette babysits), Guitar Villain, Digitizer (who just happened to be triggered when the kids were interning at the hotel), and Jackady (who was near Adrien and Nino, and went after Adrien’s father). Although, granted, I’m pretty sure that Antibug was triggered simply because it was too convenient to pass up, rather than her connection to the school. Still, that’s only eleven out of twenty-six (counting the Invisible) who aren’t connected to the school directly. Four, if you count indirect connections.
To be fair, that has a lot to do with the limitations of the animation medium, and also making certain that the villains/victims are people it’s easy for the audience to care about. But *in*-universe? Them’s some pretty scary statistics.

As for how Natasha is able to make guesses as to Ladybug and Chat Noir’s age and experience – it’s canon that people do know *what they look like* – see the statue! So my headcanon is that the glamour really kicks in whenever someone tries to apply observations of the superheroes to who their civilian identities are. The ability to observe isn’t blocked – it’s the ability to draw connections between those observations and the heroes’ real identities.
I have internet! (Having given up on my previous lodgings and decided to shell out cash for the glory of a door that I can close and be alone when I need my introvert time. And, yes, internet so I can keep up on my classes!)

However, given my limited access to internet, I haven’t been able to respond to comments. I’ll try to catch up once this chapter is posted, but I figured people would be more interested in finding out what happens with Tony first.

Warning for slightly off-color humor; Clint latched onto a joke and would not let it go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Someone should go after him.”

“Ouch. Point.” Clint sighed heavily, rubbing at his face with an expression that suggested he seriously wanted to simply check out of the real world for a while, and cast an irritated look at Fury. “Way to hit the guy’s buttons.”

The director grimaced. “Whether or not Stark likes it, the fact remains that the longer the three of you are in Paris, the more precarious the situation becomes.”

“He knows that,” Natasha said, rising from her chair. “Which is why he’s angry.”

And why you are, she didn’t add. Fury and Tony both tended to lash out when they were frustrated. Unfortunately, neither of them were particularly good at recognizing when someone else was doing it. And far too good at hitting each other’s buttons with a sledgehammer.

“One last question,” Fury said. “Do you have anything for me on the other matter we discussed?”

Natasha hesitated for just a minute, torn. The Seamstress incident had shown that Papillon’s akuma could strike very quickly…

But this wasn’t a topic they could really discuss while Tony was present – definitely not in his current temper.

Glancing quickly at Clint, she turned back to the tablet, although she didn’t sit again. “I think you need to use the magic item angle.”

Clint nodded, eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “Yeah. Play up the fact that the powers aren’t really Ladybug’s or Chat Noir’s. They’re from an outside source.”

“Technically speaking, so are yours and Captain America’s,” Fury countered, but there was an undertone of calculation to it.

“Take away my bow, I can always get a new one,” Clint countered in turn. “And the serum may have been from an outside source, but you can’t take it away from Steve. Think more Thor here – you remember what happened when he first showed up, with the hammer.”
Natasha nodded; she hadn’t been there for the incident, but she’d read the report over again, when SHIELD’s analysts had suggested the Miraculous might be magical items as well. “I sincerely doubt they just happened to find their Miraculous the day Papillon first attacked. It’s far more likely that someone gave them the items. Which means they could be taken away again, once Papillon is defeated.”

“And so long as Papillon is active, only a fool would pull those two out of Paris. They’re needed there.” Fury said – and then, with a hint of exasperation, admitted, “Not that there aren’t fools in abundance.” For a moment, he was silent, his gaze slipping up as though looking at something on the far wall – probably playing through strategies in his mind.

A moment later, he nodded briskly. “I think we can make this work,” he said. “If nothing else, the Papillon situation and the limitations on their powers should be enough to convince the powers that be that the situation needs further monitoring before a final decision is made. I’d rather leave your suppositions about their ages out of the picture, but if I have to, I’ll bring that in as well; that should give us enough support to at least force a stalemate.” He let out a sigh, posture easing for just a moment to betray the level of frustration and fatigue he’d shouldered.

Natasha felt some of the tension ease in her shoulders. Good. Ladybug and Chat Noir had enough on their plates; they didn’t need international power mongers trying to manipulate them as well.

That didn’t do anything for a completely different sort of tension building in her gut, the longer they delayed. “Sir. If that’s all…”

Fury nodded sharply. “Go. Find Stark, and keep him from doing something we’ll all regret—”

The window shattered.

Natasha reacted without thinking; diving to the side, she tucked and rolled, letting the momentum of her leap carry her behind the bulk of the couch to escape from the flying shrapnel. She extended her legs before her roll carried her beyond the couch, hitting the ground with her feet and letting her remaining momentum carry her up in a low crouch as her free hand shot behind her, drawing the small handgun she’d kept tucked underneath her light jacket.

Clint had reacted at the same time, and now was in a low crouch in the cover of an overturned easy chair. Meeting his eyes, Natasha nodded shortly, then slipped her free hand into her pocket to pull out a small makeup case. Flicking it open, she angled the mirror to show her the intruder.

…oh, damn.

White and gold, was the first impression. Almost blindingly white articulated plates, the gleam of golden plating beneath. Where each plate met the next, lines of burning purple-white blazed, streaming out from a blazing circle set high on the chestpiece.

The shape was slightly bulkier, the colors different – but it was unmistakably a variant of the Ironman armor.

“I,” the figure said in Tony’s voice, echoing faintly behind the helmet, “am Peacemonger.”

Natasha glanced across that open bit of space to meet Clint’s eyes.

“Well, nuts,” the archer said.
Everything was so \textit{simple}.

Privatize world peace. It wasn’t such a hard concept. Put peace and protection in the hands of the people who actually \textit{needed} it, rather than letting a bunch of politicians who claimed they spoke for the greater good and grubbed for power any way they could get it go around calling the shots. Nice. Simple. Straightforward.

But it wasn’t, was it?

Because the problem wasn’t just the politicians. It was the \textit{people}.

So long as there were a few individuals with the guts and the strength to stand up against evil… in the end, they wouldn’t have a \textit{choice}. Wasn’t that what had happened to him, why he’d become Ironman in the end? Because there was a job that needed to be done, and sure as hell no one else was doing it.

Except that that way lay Obadiah Stane. Lay Mayor Bourgeois, who \textit{hid} what was going on from the people who \textit{could} have helped, while his daughter went around priming people for possession with casual, petty malice, and then screamed and ran away when the consequences came to call. That way lay Gabriel Agreste, sneering about how Ladybug and Chat Noir should have ended the whole mess already without lifting so much as a \textit{finger} to help, while his son watched all of his classmates turn into supervillains one by one.

Hell no. The only way peace could \textit{really} be privatized, was when people didn’t have the \textit{option} of making it someone else’s job.

\textit{Exactly, Peacemonger}, purred Papillon’s voice. \textit{Of course, to be truly effective, we must ensure that the heroes are no longer available to hide behind, mustn’t we…?}

Arm screaming in protest, Natasha let go of the grappling wire. She hit the road harder than she’d planned; rather than coming down on her feet in a run, she had to drop down to the pavement and roll to absorb the extra momentum, before letting the roll carry her back up onto her feet-

A car swerved, the driver slamming the horn in desperate protest. No time to dodge out of the way; instead, Natasha launched herself \textit{up}, sliding across the hood of the car. She barely glimpsed the wide-eyed stare of the driver through the windshield before her feet hit the ground on the far side-

She dropped as a pulse of energy and \textit{force} slammed through the air where she’d been, dimly noting the sound of glass shattering and bricks crumbling, underneath the deep-throated roar she normally associated with welding torches turned to full blast.

“Now that was just plain \textit{rude}.”

Natasha felt a \textit{thud} shudder through the car behind her as the driver wisely decided to abandon his vehicle and flee on foot, rather than risking getting caught in a supervillain’s crossfire. For a moment, she wished she had that sort of option; direct confrontation was generally not her preferred style.

\textit{Work with what you have. You have his attention. Hold it!}

Her hair was whipping everywhere in the turbulent wind kicked up by the repulsors. Sparing a moment’s annoyance, she shoved it back from her face and straightened to her feet. “Rude?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.
“Jumping out the window?” Peacemonger replied incredulously, by all appearances completely oblivious to the screams and chaos quickly rising around them as he hovered over the street, arms crossed over his chest. Nearby, two cars crashed as their drivers attempted to escape through the same space at the same time – luckily, it looked minor, since they hadn’t had time to get any speed.

Peacemonger simply uncrossed one arm to shake a metal-armored finger at her. “Seriously. Defenestration is a villain thing, thank you very much. I’m here to help you.”

*Oh, that doesn’t sound ominous at all.*

Even so, she almost laughed, because she would have bet good vodka that there was a pout underneath that expressionless helmet. Peacemonger *sounded* like Tony, which was… more than a little unsettling, to be honest. Although she did note that Peacemonger spoke French – flawless metropolitan French, as though he’d spent his entire life in Paris, rather than the grammatically fluent but distinctly American-flavored French Tony spoke.

But the language didn’t make much difference – she *knew* that distinctive banter-on-the-edge-of-mayhem tone. Relaxing her shoulders, she shifted her weight subtly, keeping her knees soft, so that she would be able to dive in any direction at a moment’s notice.

“Help?”

Startled, Natasha glanced to the side, and bit back a stream of curses. A wide-eyed woman with a perfectly done-up face and neatly trimmed red hair that looked like a professional dye job was peering around the edge of a parked car a short distance away, apparently heedless of the potential damage to her expensively understated gray suit. She was holding a microphone, and over her shoulder, a much more casually dressed man was carefully sweeping a heavy-duty video camera over the scene.

_Dammit, dammit, dammit!_ It wasn’t that Natasha hadn’t expected trouble, not when Peacemonger was a noisy meteor blazing white-hot over the middle of a crowded street in the middle of the evening rush hour – but she’d *hoped* that by now, people would know to *lie low* when a supervillain appeared.

Then again – if she didn’t miss her guess, this was the woman who’d pushed d’Argencourt into possession – and when he’d transformed in front of her, had made sure her camera recorded it, and tried to stall the man by interviewing him. And done something similar when Digitizer was rampaging. Perhaps Alya wasn’t the only reporter who prioritized getting the information of an attack out.

Either way, despite a white face under the professional makeup, the woman smiled sunnily. “Hello! I’m Nadia Chamack, with the evening news, reporting to you live about a new super-super guest here outside the Grand Paris,” she quickly corrected, probably guessing that the man in white and gold armor hovering over the street might react badly to being called a supervillain. “Sir, would you like to tell our viewers a bit about yourself?”

Natasha almost slapped herself on the forehead – and then hesitated. This could _work_. The one thing Tony Stark could never turn down was an audience-

The hairs stood up on the back of her neck as Peacemonger slowly pivoted in the air to face Chamack, his arms spread wide as though in welcome. The pose was pure showman – but the _movement_ was pure predator.

“How? I am the Peacemonger!” he declared grandly. “Here to bring you world peace, in the only way
that really works: by putting it in the hands of private citizens!”

Chamack’s face was an interesting study in uneasy confusion, but she gamely nodded. “And how will you be doing that, Mister Peacemonger?” she asked, apparently ignoring the way her cameraman’s knees were visibly knocking together, even as he held the camera steady. “You said something about helping?”

“Yes.” Peacemonger’s tone changed suddenly, turning dark and vicious. “And I think I’ll begin with you-”

Natasha had burned through most of her grappling line to survive the drop from the hotel window, but she had enough. Releasing the catch, she threw, snarling the end of the line around Peacemonger’s gauntlet as he raised his hand to point dramatically at the reporters.

“Run!” she snapped, and yanked on the cord.

She knew better than to try to match strength against strength with Tony’s armor, and she doubted Peacemonger’s copy was any weaker. But she didn’t need strength, just leverage. She’d fought beside Tony, and studied the weaknesses of his equipment in case she ever found herself forced to fight against him.

One particular weakness she’d found: Tony’s repulsor boots didn’t have much in the way of lateral stability. Repulsors, after all, only had one setting: away.

The sharp pull of the cord threw Peacemonger off-balance – and his legs and feet came out of alignment as human instinct made him stumble in midair. The push from the two boots suddenly no longer coordinated, he began to veer back and forth over the street, the blast of his boots setting off car alarms and setting debris flying as the few people who hadn’t already run for their lives screamed and ducked, covering their heads. In the commotion, Natasha saw Chamack’s cameraman drag the protesting woman away, hurrying for a nearby alley.

A sudden jerk at her grappling cord warned her in just enough time to quickly loose it; Peacemonger had managed to stabilize his flight and come about, and he was, as expected, Not Amused. The blank mask of the armor was immobile as ever, but that didn’t keep the fury from rippling off of him in almost physically tangible waves.

“That,” he said, mild and pleasant and dangerous as an angry snake, “wasn’t very nice.”

“Neither is attacking a civilian,” she retorted. “How, exactly, is that supposed to bring world peace?”

Peacemonger huffed as though offended. “I’m astonished you have to ask.”

“I’m feeling a bit slow today,” she countered dryly, keeping her eyes on Peacemonger but watching her surroundings carefully from the corners. Most of the civilians had cleared out, thank goodness, but Chamack and her cameraman were still out in the open, although Chamack seemed to have gotten with the program and was running as quickly as she could manage on attractive but less than practical high heels-

Peacemonger’s hands curled slightly, and Natasha tensed as she heard the whine of power building, acutely aware of the empty car at her back.

“It should be obvious,” Peacemonger said archly. “The only real road to peace is to make sure everyone’s ready and able to defend it. And the only way to bring peace to the whole world…”

His hand came up.
Natasha hit the pavement and rolled as the blast from Peacemonger’s glove emitters slammed against the car where she’d been standing less than a heartbeat earlier. But something was wrong, a blast like that should have sent the vehicle flying, but she hadn’t heard a crash-

Fetching up against the side of a building, Natasha quickly glanced over to assess the result of that attack.

Her breath caught.

Gold-white light flashed over the car, coating it in energy until only the shape remained visible. Then the shape changed – and a duplicate of the Peacemonger’s armor, identical save for the absence of those glowing lines of power and the center circle of the arc reactor, stood where there had been a car moments before.

Peacemonger gestured shortly – and the armor broke apart, the individual pieces flying straight for Chamack.

Natasha had seen Tony’s homing bracelets at work before; the technological brilliance of the trick was mind-boggling, even if the inventor usually peppered any discussion of the technology with copious reference to Empathic Weapons and “I can’t help it if my armor loves me so much, I’ve just got this magnetic personality.”

Seeing that technology used as a weapon was hair-raising.

Chamack screamed as the gloves locked into place on her arms, stopping her stumbling run cold as though she’d been brought up short by chains. A second later, the boots locked on, immobilizing her feet, followed by the rest of the arm pieces, the leg pieces, the torso-

The helmet snapped closed over Chamack’s face – but although it was slightly muffled, Natasha could still distinctly hear her screaming for help.

The cameraman stumbled away, horror on his face – and then turned on his heel and bolted, dropping his equipment without a moment’s hesitation as he sprinted for the cover of an alley.

“...is to make sure that no one has the option of making someone else fight for them,” Peacemonger gloated, as another set of armor flew through the air after the fleeing man.

For just a breath, Natasha fought off a shiver. Peacemonger sounded like Tony. He even acted like Tony, if a seriously unhinged version of him.

But if Tony, the man who defined refusing to follow orders, ever heard those words, there would be blood.

“That’s not promoting peace,” she said flatly, as her eyes flickered over the street, assessing the situation. “It’s only widening war.”

Damn. She needed to get out of here. If Peacemonger really had the power to transform vehicles into those attack-armors – she needed to find somewhere other than a busy street crammed with people headed out to enjoy the nightlife of Paris, find somewhere quiet with relatively few cars.

Right. At least this wasn’t downtown New York. But no cars, in the middle of Paris?

Peacemonger sighed, radiating disappointment. “You don’t understand. Everyone hides. They force other people to fight for them – and when they’re not the ones in danger, what reason is there for them to end the fighting, to stop poking people with sticks until they lash out again? No. This is the
only way. If they won’t face the wolves when they’re the ones who woke them in the first place, then I’ll make them.”

Slowly, he turned about to face Natasha.

“Which means I need you to stay out of my way.”

“Look out!”

Natasha dodged to the side, just ahead of the duplicate armor’s lunge. She kept moving, shifting to keep Peacemonger in her line of vision, and fought down an atavistic chill as the suit turned to face her again. The movement was clumsy, oddly stiff – but still recognizably Ironman’s.

Behind the helmet, Chamack was babbling in obvious panic. “I’m sorry – I’m sorry – I can’t control what it’s doing…!”

Damn.

Natasha gave ground freely, although she kept a wary eye behind her, alert for any attempt to herd her into a trap. “Stay calm,” she said firmly, more to quiet the reporter’s babbling than anything. She needed to think.

She had several tricks up her sleeve for fighting Ironman’s armor, just in case someone ever stole or recreated it, or Ironman himself went off the deep end. But most of them depended on the element of surprise; they’d only work once. Waste them on Peacemonger’s puppets, and she’d end up facing the supervillain with no aces up her sleeve.

And most of those tricks weren’t exactly gentle on the person inside the armor.

Damn!

Chamack hadn’t been transformed. She wasn’t mind-controlled. Which meant, based on past attacks, that she was likely to remember every minute of this. If she was injured in the fighting… well, shoot the hostage might be SOP, but it wasn’t exactly going to make for good press for the Avengers, and their visit here in Paris was on shaky enough ground as it was. Injuring a reporter was bad press they definitely didn’t need.

And… thus far, the Papillon situation had yet to yield any casualties, thanks in large part to the efforts of Ladybug and Chat Noir. If their concerns about Ladybug’s Charm not healing any damage inflicted by a third party proved justified… Ladybug and Chat Noir would likely blame themselves for not intervening faster. As might the rest of Paris.

Natasha wasn’t going to do that to them if she could avoid it.

Which means I need to get out of here before Peacemonger gets one of those suits on me. I’m not sure why he hasn’t tried yet- Not good!

Sudden movement from the corner of her eye forced her to dodge sideways – exactly the direction she didn’t want to go, closer to the wall and restricting her movement. The second suit moving to box her in was simply icing on the cake.

“Don’t worry,” Peacemonger’s voice said reassuringly, even though the words themselves weren’t reassuring at all. She couldn’t see the supervillain from this angle, but even with the glare of the streetlights, she could make out the flashes that meant he was converting more cars into puppet-suits.

“When this is all over, you’ll thank me. For the time being, however…”
The two suits lunged in unison, not close enough to tangle each other, damn…

Something whistled as it sliced through the air – and an arrow hit the leg joint of the new armor, the ungainly head bursting apart into a fast-hardening polymer that clung to everything it touched. The suit stumbled, knee and ankle joints suddenly frozen and boot glued to the street-

Natasha moved, ducking down under the cover of the armors to keep out of Peacemonger’s line of sight, and bolted down the narrow space between two buildings, praying that she hadn’t just trapped herself.

She almost had. But a quick scramble up a fire escape, leaping off one of the platforms to kick against the opposing wall, balancing for a precarious moment on the outthrust lintel of an ornate window before swinging down from one of the poles supporting an awning over some kind of restaurant, to the wide-eyed shock of the patrons dining there, shock quickly followed by understanding, and a kind of controlled panic as they all began quickly evacuating to the inside of the diner – good, the one benefit of Papillon’s constant attacks was that most of the civilian population of Paris had learned how to get out of the way by now…

And she was clear, although from the growing sound of chaos and panic through the narrow alley behind her, it wouldn’t be long before Peacemonger – or his puppets – expanded to this street. But she didn’t see any sign of the flying pieces of armor coming after her; apparently they at least had only limited abilities to home in on a target. Perhaps Peacemonger needed a clear line of sight to set them on someone…

Or he doesn’t mean to trap me the way he did Chamack, she thought, moving at a brisk stride to the nearest cross-street and taking the turn that would carry her away from Peacemonger for the time being. She wasn’t going to be able to take him down without surprise and a plan on her side, which meant that a tactical retreat was in order for the time being. Even if it meant that Peacemonger’s army would be growing in the meantime. He seemed focused on civilians, people who don’t actively fight for themselves.

God, but this would be a mess when Tony got back to himself. Papillon had a great deal to answer for.

Peacemonger first, she reminded herself, moving down the street with a purpose.

The sound of footsteps running at a measured, ground-eating pace alerted her a second before Clint came up behind her, breathing a little harsher than normal and bow held ready in his hand, although he hadn’t strung another arrow yet.

He fell into step with her, eyes scanning the balconies and rooftops. She didn’t bother to ask if he’d been followed; Clint was a sniper, he knew to move after he took a shot. And if Peacemonger had been on his heels, he wouldn’t have rejoined her.

“Tell me you have a plan,” he said bluntly.

Natasha nodded curtly, not taking her eyes off the doorways and dark shadows of alleys between the streetlights. “We need to get into a residential district.”

She didn’t have to look at Clint to know he grimaced at that. Nor did she blame him. Peacemonger was clearly targeting the general populace of Paris; leading him straight to their homes went against everything the Avengers were supposed to stand for.

But the downtown streets around the Grand Paris were too damn crowded. At least in the more
residential areas, most of the people would be out of sight in their homes, and there’d be less cars…


Natasha spared half a moment to glance at him, recognizing the district’s name. “Where Agreste lives?”

The archer nodded. “Wasn’t there a park down the street from him?”

Good thought. Excellent thought; a park would mean cover for them, and less potential victims for Peacemonger to target. And, not insignificantly, it was practically next door to the Collège Françoise Dupont – the school that Adrien and his friends attended. Which meant, if they were lucky, that Ladybug and Chat Noir would be nearby and notice the commotion, if Chamack’s earlier broadcast hadn’t done the job.

And even if they’re not, she thought with a kind of grim amusement, making a quick turn at the next street after checking her mental map of the city, at least if we confront Peacemonger there, we’re not likely to be adding much data to Papillon’s search.

The only trick would be reaching it in time. The district wasn’t exactly far from the hotel, but it was still a respectable distance that would take a good twenty minutes or more to cross at the pace they were holding. And like Hell was Natasha getting into any sort of vehicle with Peacemonger flying around transforming things. That wouldn’t be asking for trouble, it would be handing herself over to it gift-wrapped. So walking it was, and they’d just have to hope that Peacemonger wouldn’t cut them off.

He didn’t. In fact, they didn’t see any sign of pursuit at all. From the increasingly edgy way Clint was scanning the skies around them, Natasha wasn’t the only one who found that disturbing.

Lampposts lined the walking paths of the park and illuminated the fountain at the center, but they were smaller, softer lights than the bright lamps lighting the streets, and Natasha and Clint both paused long enough to let their eyes adjust to the changed light levels and to learn the bright areas and the shadows that could work for or against them in a fight before moving deeper in.

It wasn’t exactly New York’s Central Park; this was a small urban plaza, more open grass than trees, meant for children to run around and couples to sit on benches in the shade.

It would have to do.

“This isn’t going to slow him down much,” Clint muttered, clearly unhappy as well.

“It’s better than nothing,” Natasha countered, keeping a close eye on the streets. She hadn’t seen the puppet-armors fly after they’d latched on to a victim, although she doubted Peacemonger would have neglected that feature. Tony certainly wouldn’t have. But given that Peacemonger’s stated goal was to keep people from running and hiding from conflict, the omission could have been deliberate. It was a lot harder to run away if you couldn’t fly.

How big will his army be by the time he gets here? He would come after them. The fact that Peacemonger had immediately gone after the two of them suggested that he – or Papillon – had identified the remaining Avengers in the city as primary targets. But if he’d been directly focused on them, he would have come after them by now. That they hadn’t seen him suggested he was taking his time – probably transforming people as he went.

Hopefully the people of Paris had seen what was going on and gotten off the streets. She and Clint had done their best to encourage that, when the simple sight of two grim-eyed people, one with a
bow in hand, walking purposefully down the road hadn’t already sent the civilians running.

Often, it hadn’t. There’d been so many attacks that some people seemed to view them as entertainment now. After all, if everything was fixed in the end, where was the harm?

*We’ll see if they still hold that tune after Peacemonger’s dragged them around the city in tin cans…*

She grimaced at the thought. *Yes,* there was a vicious side of her that almost approved. But mostly… the fact that they’d run away sat badly with her. Their job was to handle things like this…

Wait.

“She didn’t go after us because we were threats,” she said slowly. “He targeted us because we defend people. Sometimes from the consequences of their own actions.”

Clint sighed, free hand brushing over the ends of his arrows as though checking his draw. “Like Ladybug and Chat Noir. I’ll bet that’s what Papillon latched onto; his most effective victims are the ones who start out focused on those two to begin with. Odds are he’s going to go looking for them.” He glanced at her. “Any idea how we can find them first?”

“Well. It’s *pawssible* that we’ll find you.”

Natasha turned sharply, heartrate spiking in the half-breath before memory identified the voice, and looked up.

A pair of brightly luminescent cat-eyes gleamed back in the low light that reached to the top of the fountain in the center of the park. Dimly, Natasha was able to make out another, more slender shape next to Chat Noir; in the darkness, the bright red of Ladybug’s suit nearly vanished into the shadows.

Natasha relaxed slightly, releasing her grip on the small handgun she’d tucked back underneath her jacket as the pair dropped lightly down to the paving stones of the walkway. She didn’t like being surprised on a *good* day.

Ladybug immediately strode over to meet them, Chat Noir a quiet shadow at her shoulder. “What’s going on?”

She had a good poker face, Natasha noted; there was no waver in the brisk, professional voice, and the only hint of worry was a faint furrow in her brow, right at the line of her mask. Chat Noir’s face was similarly controlled and focused – but the metal-tipped end of his belt-tail was flicking restlessly, and his cat-ears were twitching back and forth, as though tracking every sound around him, betraying his unease.

Clint grimaced as he slid a half-drawn arrow back into his quiver, although he kept his hand there, clearly not trusting the momentary quiet any more than Chat Noir did. “Papillon got to Tony,” he said bluntly.


Ah. This could be delicate – in more ways than one. “He was… upset by what we learned about the situation with Papillon and the akuma, after the Seamstress’s attack yesterday,” Natasha said, choosing her words with care. She did not want to say that it was learning that Ladybug and Chat Noir were probably teenagers that had pushed the inventor’s temper to its limit, not out loud where any bystander could hear. They didn’t know what Papillon could learn from his victims’ knowledge; if, somehow, he hadn’t learned that detail from Tony, Natasha had no intentions of putting the information out there herself.
But we need to warn them. Papillon may know. And even if he didn’t – they need to know that their glamour can be partially circumvented.

It was strange. Nothing about what she saw in their faces and bodies had changed – but her perception had, and it was as though suddenly her eyes were registering what had always been there, but never quite seen. She’d known they were short; now she could see that it wasn’t the shortness of compact bodies, but youth, limbs not yet grown to their full length. The hints of baby fat lingering around cheeks, softening the bone structure of the adult’s face hiding underneath.

She still couldn’t actually venture a guess as to their ages, which was as disconcerting as ever – but now she knew they were dealing with adolescents here, not adults.

Ladybug drew in a bracing breath, and nodded. “Peacemonger, right?” she said. “Ms. Chamack’s interview has been playing on the evening news.”

Well, at least the reporter had accomplished that much with her recklessness. Natasha nodded. “So far as I was able to tell, Peacemonger’s armor has the same capabilities as the Ironman armor.” Although she hadn’t seen any missiles yet. She was hoping that wouldn’t be a problem; after all, Peacemonger explicitly didn’t want to kill people, and in general Papillon’s victims rarely were deliberately lethal. But she wasn’t going to assume the missiles weren’t still in reserve, either.

Ladybug winced slightly; Natasha had a feeling the girl had been doing some research herself, after meeting them during the Seamstress battle. But she nodded her understanding nevertheless.

“Anything else?”

Natasha couldn’t help but grimace. “We need to fight him away from other civilians. And vehicles, if possible. He transformed a car into a suit of armor that he set on Chamack. After that – Chamack is still herself inside it, but the armor is basically Peacemonger’s to control, she’s just dragged along.” And because that hadn’t happened until after Chamack was running, it wouldn’t have been in the broadcast, so the civilian population wouldn’t know to look out for it. Damn.

Ladybug and Chat Noir traded quick glances. “So… we’re sort of dealing with a Black Knight take on Rodgercop?” Chat Noir asked, looking almost ruefully amused, although the glint in his eyes and the way gloved and clawed hands curled into fists betrayed that he was deathly serious under the humor.

“With Lady WiFi’s cleverness, going by the way he was talking,” Ladybug agreed with a wince.

Natasha felt her brows rise slightly. That… was actually a fairly succinct summation of Peacemonger’s threat level.

And from what she recalled of the information on those three supervillains… none of them had been an easy fight.

But Ladybug squared her shoulders, chin rising as she turned back to Natasha and Clint. “What about the akuma?” she asked. “Do you have any idea what the talisman would be?”

“Oh. Damn. Natasha shot a quick look at Clint, hoping…”

He winced, shaking his head. “Shit – sorry. But I was so focused on getting clear, and then lining up a good shot… I didn’t even think to look.” He looked back at Natasha. “You were the closest. Any ideas?”

She grimaced, trying to think back. Nothing had registered as particularly out of place…
Chat Noir suddenly stiffened, shifting into a fighting stance as his baton extended to the length of a quarterstaff. “I think we’re about to get a second look,” he said, tone mild and casual as his eyes narrowed dangerously.

All of them fell into battle-ready stances as a meteor of burning purple-white streaked above the trees of the park, and slowed to become Peacemonger, hovering overhead.

“You left in the middle of our discussion,” the supervillain mock-complained. “Very bad manners, that.”

“You got distracted. Also very bad manners,” Natasha countered dryly, as puppet-armors dropped down out of the dark sky into the park – apparently they could fly, although perhaps not in combat. She counted about twenty or thirty – more than she’d hoped, but less than she’d feared, at least-

And then had to pause and take a breath, because she could hear the victims inside the armor. Some had nothing but sobbing echoing under the masks. Others were swearing furiously, or shouting. And more than a few began crying out to Ladybug and Chat Noir, pleading for them to save me!

Chat Noir’s ears flattened against his head, and Ladybug winced. But they both held their ground, watching both the swarm and Peacemonger overhead.

Gritting her teeth, Natasha focused on Peacemonger as he drifted down closer to the lights of the park. As she’d suspected, Peacemonger wasn’t carrying anything in his hands, and there was nothing she could make out that seemed out-of-place on the armor itself – certainly nothing that looked like anything Tony had been carrying when he’d stormed out of their room, or that he might have picked up on his way to wherever he’d gone to fume. And there was nothing particularly odd about the armor itself, except for those brightly glowing and, so far as she could tell, entirely cosmetic energy-lines tracing back to the purple-white circle where the arc reactor should be…

Oh no.

Natasha caught her breath, and said flatly, “Ladybug. The akuma… I think it might be in the arc reactor.”

Clint cursed.

Ladybug glanced quickly over her shoulder; they’d shifted so that the four of them were more or less back-to-back, although Natasha knew that wouldn’t last once the fighting started; they all depended too much on movement to stand their ground. “Not good?” she asked.

Natasha gritted her teeth. Peacemonger was waiting; she suspected that Papillon wanted them to know just what a mess this would be. “Firstly, the arc reactor is actually on the inside of the armor,” she said flatly. “It’s embedded in Tony’s chest. We’ll have to get past the armor to reach it.”

“Embedded in his chest?” Chat Noir yelped, although he – barely – managed to keep his voice down. “Why?”

“Because it’s keeping him alive,” Clint said darkly. “The arc reactor goes, Tony goes.”

Ladybug swallowed audibly. “How much time does he have?” she demanded. “If we destroy it quickly…”

“That’s the third problem,” Natasha said. She wondered if Papillon realized what he’d done. She wouldn’t put it past him; this sort of sadistic choice was exactly in line with his typical modus operandi. “The arc reactor is a reactor. Destroy it, and…”
“Boom,” Clint concluded.

Chat Noir’s ears had fully flattened against his head. “…this would be a purrfect time to start swearing,” he said, a little shakily. “Unfortunately, I don’t think there are any words strong enough.”

Ladybug actually breathed a hint of a chuckle at that – but then all of them tensed as Peacemonger drifted down until he was hovering only a few feet above the ground in front of Ladybug.

“You know,” Peacemonger said in Tony’s most casual voice, “there’s really no need for us to be fighting. Like I said, I’m here to help you guys.”

“I’m not sure I agree with your definition of helping,” Ladybug replied dryly, apparently relaxed. But her yo-yo never stopped spinning.

“These people have a responsibility they’ve been shirking,” Peacemonger insisted. “I’m just keeping them on task, as it were.” He sighed dramatically, shrugging. “But if you’re going to be stubborn about it…”

And suddenly, Natasha was very busy, as the gathered puppet-armors swarmed all at once.

There were too many to try fighting any one individually. Instead, she concentrated on dodging, staying just ahead of any attempt to tackle or grapple and letting the sheer number and the clumsiness of her opponents work in her favor. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Chat Noir doing the same thing – only the chaos he left in his wake was practically a weapon all its own, as he went high, springing from shoulder guard to helmet to roll on the ground and bounce back again and leaving behind knots of armored shapes tangled in a mess on the ground.

Bad luck as a tactical weapon, she thought, almost amused.

Nearby, Ladybug had also taken to the high ground, using her yo-yo to slingshot herself out of the thick of things – and not just herself, Natasha realized, as another one of those binding arrows went off in a cluster of armors; Clint must have hitched a ride to get himself positioned out of the fray where he could put his bow to work, while Ladybug dropped back down. In the bouncing about, she’d managed to loop the wire around a group of puppet-armors. A sharp tug, and she managed to use the leverage of her swing to drag them sideways, blocking one path towards where Natasha and Chat Noir were fighting.

All and all, they were doing better than she’d expected. But Peacemonger was hovering overhead. Too late, Natasha saw him point a hand at something on the edge of the park – felt the pulse of energy and had to quickly shield her eyes from the flare of bright light-

A high-pitched scream split the night, and for a moment, everyone simply froze.

Two girls who had apparently been hiding behind the car stared back at them. One, a tiny blonde with wide blue eyes, had clapped both hands over her mouth in horror, apparently realizing a moment too late that screaming was probably the worst thing she could have done. Her friend, a taller girl with long dark hair pulled half over her face and goth-style clothes, simply blinked at the scene in front of her.

“…Robot army,” she said slowly, blinking. “I don’t think we’ve seen one of those before…”

The blonde girl squeaked as the car reformed into a pair of armored suits right in front of them – and then, unexpectedly, grabbed the taller girl by the shoulder and shoved her back, using the same motion to haul herself forward until she was between her friend and the armors. “Juleka, run!” she said desperately.
The physical jolt had apparently broken Juleka’s shock. “What?” she demanded. “Rose, no! I’m not going to leave you behind—”

“Both of you, go!” Ladybug ordered, and snapped her yo-yo at Peacemonger, trying to draw his attention again.

The repulsor boots roared as Peacemonger rose higher in the air, safely above the arc of the yo-yo, but he neither moved nor reacted beyond that. Natasha couldn’t make out any sort of expression beneath the white-on-gold helmet – but she had a feeling that if she could see his face, he would be studying the two girls intently.

Then, against the darkness of the sky – now fully night, stars hidden completely by the haze of the city – she saw the lines of that butterfly mask flare up over the visor of the helmet for a moment. Peacemonger remained still for a moment longer – and then gestured sharply.

As the armors broke apart, Rose and Juleka both bolted, the taller girl grabbing the tiny blonde’s hand and physically pulling her along, using her own longer legs to give her friend that added bit of momentum.

The armor was faster.

For a moment, Ladybug stared as the two new armors rose mechanically from the pavement. Then she whirled, turning a blue-blazing glare on Peacemonger as though she could drag him down out of the sky by sheer willpower alone.


Peacemonger simply hovered, as seconds ticked by. Then, to Natasha’s shock, he nodded.

“Agreed,” he said…

And the two suits launched from the ground, not towards the park, shooting off into the darkness.

“Wait!” Chat Noir yelped, as Natasha mentally cursed and Ladybug gasped. “What are you…?”

“Well, if we want to talk about bad manners – dragging children onto a battlefield definitely counts, don’t you think?” Peacemonger replied, drifting downward again as his army of puppet-suits and their captured victims reformed their ranks.

“Interesting double standards,” Natasha replied dryly, narrowing her eyes slightly. She kept her focus on Peacemonger as she spoke – but she watched those ranks out of the corner of her eye.

“Double standards?” Peacemonger mock-recoiled, hands clutching his chest, just below the glowing circle that marked the arc reactor. “I’m perfectly consistent.” The playfulness dropped from his voice as he swept a hand out to indicate his captive army. “The people of this city have spent too long hiding behind two overworked heroes, with only the children trying to do anything to actively help. It’s time they stepped up and did something about this situation themselves!”

For just a moment, Ladybug blinked. Nearby, Chat Noir looked nearly as taken aback.

Get used to it, Natasha thought, not unsympathetically. If things continued as they were – it wouldn’t be long before Papillon’s influence reached a critical threshold, where he could use the very resentment generated by his long reign of terror to create still more villains.

Or maybe it simply had never occurred to them that maybe defending all of Paris shouldn’t rest
entirely on their shoulders.

“But to accomplish that… I need you four to stand down,” Peacemonger said, the menace vanishing as quickly as it had come.

Ladybug snorted, her yo-yo whirling in a glowing white circle around her hand. “You don’t really expect us to simply step aside and let you do whatever you want, do you?” she retorted. As she spoke, her eyes moved across the park, darting from Peacemonger to the trees around them to the puppet-armor minions to her allies, obviously hunting for the edge that would let her break the impasse.

“Well, I would appreciate it,” Peacemonger said, tone dangerously light and playful. “But if you’re not buying the idea… Well. We’ll just have to do things the hard way, won’t we?”

“Watch your backs!”

Natasha whirled at Clint’s shout, glimpsed shocked faces suddenly uncovered from the ring of armor-

And then threw herself to the ground and rolled, ducking under the cover of the fountain as a cloud of armor-pieces flew at her.

Oh. Damn, she thought. I should have seen this coming.

The puppet-armor was under Peacemonger’s complete control. Why had she assumed that once it locked on, he couldn’t release that victim to send the armor after a completely different target?

Which means we may have made a serious tactical error in coming here, she noted grimly, as the thwarted pieces of armor came around for another pass.

Because if Peacemonger didn’t need to transform something into armor every time he went after someone, if he could simply recycle armor from his own puppets – then he’d brought all the ammunition he needed with him. And to top it off…

Whirling, Natasha closed her hand around a reaching wrist joint, braced the other against the breastplate – and twisted. Betrayed by its own momentum, the puppet-armor flew headlong into the swarm of metal coming after her. The victim inside yelped; Natasha ignored him; this wasn’t exactly the time to be apologetic over a few bruises.

…Peacemonger could use the rest of his forces to harry them, because of course he wasn’t the sort to sit back and send his minions after the heroes in small, bite-sized portions.

You know, Tony, Natasha thought, trying to shift to at least get her back against something, only to be forced farther into the open, right now, I really wish you were a little less fond of that blasted Evil Overlord list…

Because there was a helmet coming at her out of the corner of her eye, and boxed in by three armors, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to evade in time-

A silver blur smacked the helmet down to clatter on the ground.

“I think your copies could use a language refresher,” Chat Noir called cheerfully, with a sunny smile completely at odds with the hard tension in his frame. “Embraces are an act of amour, not of armor. And most certainly not to be pressed on the unwilling!”
He kept the staff whirling, darting back and forth to strike down any free-flying piece of armor that came near the two of them. Natasha let him cover that side of the battle, focusing her efforts on the puppet-suits. With her attention no longer divided, she was able to make some headway, at least enough to glance around to see how her companions were faring.

She couldn’t see Clint – but she heard the hiss of an arrow nearby, and the distinctive *thwock* followed by crackling that meant he’d used another of his glue-arrows to pin down a cluster of the puppet-armors, keeping them out of the fight and rendering the pieces unable to be reused to target someone else.

Or so Natasha hoped, at least. Ladybug, like Chat Noir, was using her yo-yo like a shield, and every piece of armor they knocked aside fell to the ground, seemingly inert. But with her yo-yo occupied, she was effectively caught on the ground; she didn’t dare stop the spin long enough to strike out or anchor herself to swing out of the fray. Clint’s glue-arrows were effective – but his shots were few and far between, obviously chosen with care; he was picking his shots, trying to make the scant number of the bulky arrows that he had count.

They were holding their own. But it was a delicate balance, and the moment something gave…

Overhead, she caught a flicker of ominous purple. And Peacemonger raised a hand, the repulsor charging as he directed it at Ladybug.

*Not good!*

The girl saw the blow coming and tried to move out of the way – but it hit her yo-yo shield squarely, knocking it off its spin as both the weight and Ladybug herself went flying. Ladybug hit the ground with her shoulder and turned the fall into a more or less controlled tumble, curling her body to protect her head and neck until she had killed enough momentum to roll back up and onto her feet, shaking her head for a moment in an attempt to clear the dizziness, and quickly recoiled her yo-yo-

Tried to, rather. But it had gone the other direction, and before she could tug the string to bring it back, one of Peacemonger’s armors had reached out to grab it.

An arrow exploded against the chestplate – literally *exploded*, dazzling Natasha’s eyes for half a moment and driving the puppet-armor back just long enough for Ladybug to yank the yo-yo out of its reach. But while there had to be magic at play in how quickly the girl snapped the weight back into her hand, it still took a moment, and every free-flying piece of armor was homing in on her in that moment of vulnerability-

Chat Noir came down in the middle of the swarm with a shout, spinning staff shifting from hand-to-hand as he ducked and wove, covering his partner as she reeled her weapon back into her hand. Then Ladybug was in the thick of things with him, lunging low as he went high, the two moving around each other and their weapons with the unthinking ease of countless hours of practice-

*Which might be the most telling thing about this whole mess; if they really don’t know each other outside the masks, then the only ‘practice’ they’ve gotten is during live combat.*

Then Natasha lost sight of them for a moment, dodging between two puppets so that they would crash into each other, and then flipping back, using one as a springboard to leap up and land on a third’s shoulders, standing there for a moment to scan the battlefield again, with intent this time, because something *wasn’t right*…

Her eyes widened. *“Behind you!”* she shouted, before her time was up and she sprang backwards, the force of her jump knocking the already unbalanced puppet-armor to the ground the moment
before grasping gauntlets latched onto her legs. Landing next to another, she hooked her leg around
the back of the joint in the armor at the knee, designed to bend – and kicked, making the puppet
stumble forward and into the path of another. She ducked forward with it, using the puppet itself to
shield herself from Peacemonger’s direct line of sight – thus far, she hadn’t seen any of the puppet-
armors use repulsors, or any of Ironman’s other tricks, and she was hoping that meant that they didn’t
have them, because otherwise this would go from messy to ugly very quickly.

Nearby, Ladybug and Chat Noir had managed to evade the flying armor pieces that had come up
behind them as they fought – but the sneak attack had forced them farther apart. They were each
holding their own, but…

None of us are making any headway, Natasha thought, eyes narrowed as she slammed the heel of
her hand against the chin of another puppet, toppling the – woman, by the noise she made – over. We
need to regroup!

Which meant getting out of here and going to ground, at least for a moment. It would give
Peacemonger time to reinforce his army – but the puppets were distractions. If they were going to
finish this, they’d need to go straight to the source, not mess around with minions.

Grunting as she threw another armor over her shoulder – that was going to hurt tomorrow;
redirecting an entire suit of metal wasn’t exactly easy even when they didn’t land a glancing blow
along the way – Natasha took advantage of the momentary lull in her attackers to glance around,
trying to think of a way to signal the other three-

Just in time to see one of the puppet-suits on the ground break apart into flying armor, practically
under Ladybug’s feet.

Ladybug threw herself back, but the armor pieces were already inside the reach of her yo-yo shield,
coming at her point blank-

Chat Noir tackled her, both of them tumbling over the ground just underneath the onslaught.

For the space of an adrenaline-fueled heartbeat, Natasha thought they’d gotten clear. Then Chat Noir
yelped as he was dragged upright by the gauntlet locked onto his right arm.

“Oh no you don’t!” Ladybug snarled, leaping up to cover her partner’s back as Chat Noir gritted his
teeth and visibly dug in with his heels, left hand clawing at the armor as he pitted every bit of his
slight weight and magically enhanced strength against the pull of the gauntlet. Ladybug abandoned
the whirling shield to go on the offensive now, the weight of the yo-yo leaving streaks of light in the
air as she snapped it out and in, knocking the bits of armor aside before they came anywhere near her
partner.

For a moment, the battlefield stilled again-

Peacemonger, Natasha thought, gritting her teeth and moving to help cover the pair as the energy-
lined figure of the transformed Tony came down slightly. Looks like he needs to be able to
concentrate to control the armors. If we can get close, get him distracted, we’ll have the edge…

Peacemonger held out a hand, and the gauntlet dragged Chat Noir a step forward before the boy
gave up on removing the gauntlet and lashed out with his left hand, latching onto a nearby lamp post,
metal shrieking as human-sized cat-claws dug in deep.

“Don’t worry,” Peacemonger said. “Just give me the Miraculous. Then you’ll be safe…”

Chat Noir growled. And not a human snarl, but the deep-in-the-chest rumble of a feline who’d just
reached the end of his patience. From the startled expression that crossed Ladybug’s face underneath the mask, it was a sound she’d never heard her partner make before.

“For your information,” Chat Noir bit out, “I volunteered for this.” His eyes narrowed. “And I am sick and tired of being kept safe for my own good!”

Shadows twisted, crackling with wild energy as they converged on the catboy.

“Cataclysm,” he hissed.

Natasha knew that Tony had chosen his preferred titanium-gold alloy for, among other things, its ability to resist corrosion – mostly on principle, since Tony’s suits rarely survived combat (or more commonly, Tony’s tinkering) long enough for degradation to become a problem. She doubted that Peacemonger’s suit was any less durable.

But in the face of concentrated chaos, that resistance didn’t count for much.

The gauntlet on Chat Noir’s arm didn’t rust so much as it disintegrated, sparking briefly before falling in pieces, many no larger than one of Natasha’s trimmed-for-combat fingernails. Chat Noir stumbled backward, almost falling from the sudden loss of resistance, and quickly let go of the lamp post, shaking his hand out as Ladybug caught and steadied him, her face thin-lipped with a mix of fury, concern and relief.

By that point, Natasha was close enough to grab both of them by the shoulder. “Quick,” she said sharply. “We need to get out of sight, before he recovers-”

Damn. Too late. Peacemonger was rising higher in the air again, and Natasha didn’t need to see his face to feel the absolute fury pulsing off of him…

An arrow hit him squarely in that expressionless faceplate – and exploded into a starburst of blazing, eye-searing white light.

The three of them ran for it, Natasha letting the other two lead as she blinked, trying to clear the bruise-green sunspots from her vision and trusting to her own instincts and spatial awareness to keep her on her feet and moving as they darted out of the park, across the street, and into the shadows of some large building.

The school, she thought, almost laughing – which told her more than enough about her current mental state. But it did make sense. With the number of times Papillon had attacked, Ladybug and Chat Noir probably knew the premises as well as any student.

Assuming that they aren’t students here themselves. She hoped not. If they were, then she’d been right, and at best neither of them could be older than fifteen.

Clint joined them a half-heartbeat after they’d come to a stop in a nook formed where the impressive front façade of the school gave way to the plainer side walls; he must have made his own escape as soon as he’d released that arrow. “Everyone in one piece?” he asked, his voice a little clipped in the way that Natasha knew meant I hate staying back when things get ugly, even though he knew that he was most effective as a hidden sniper.

“All in one piece,” Chat Noir said cheerfully – and then winced faintly as his ring beeped, one of the paw pads flickering out. “Sorry, my Lady…”

Ladybug had been looking blankly across the alley, her mind clearly racing. At his words, she blinked, looked at the rest of them-
And grinned.

“I know how we can take Peacemonger down,” she said.

Natasha looked at her sharply, reading the confidence in that sly smile. “How?”

“It’s that armor of his that’s the problem, right?” Ladybug looked at Chat Noir. “Go feed your… recharge,” she said, stumbling in her words slightly as she quickly modified whatever she’d originally meant to say, her eyes darting over to Natasha and Clint.

Chat Noir blinked – then his eyes widened slightly, before narrowing to a knowing smirk. “Got it,” he said.

Ladybug nodded, then hesitated, looking at Natasha. “I need you to go with him, Black Widow,” she said, a little more formal but the tone of command unmistakable.

Natasha raised an eyebrow at that, but nodded without saying anything. She recognized the level of trust Ladybug was putting in her, sending her off with Ladybug’s partner when he was going to be at his most vulnerable.

“Feed.” Implies there’s another living thing involved in their transformation, doesn’t it? In that case, no wonder they were vigilant about their identities. All personal reasons of safety and privacy aside – the secret would become that much more important if they were protecting something else in the bargain.

“What about you?” Chat Noir asked, tone casual and cat-eyes bright with worry.

Ladybug grinned at him before reaching out and poking him lightly on the tip of the nose. “I’ll be getting him in position for you to pounce,” she said, and stood up, yo-yo in hand and eyes intent as the roar of repulsors began to draw near. “You’re not the only one who can play distraction, chaton.”

Then, eyes glittering challenge, she stepped out of their hiding place and leapt into the street to confront the approaching supervillain. “Peacemonger! If you want to play with puppets, look out for the strings!”

And struck.

The red-and-black yo-yo zipped through the air to wrap around the ankle joints of Peacemonger’s boots. Startled, the supervillain veered-

Ladybug flicked her wrist, and jumped.

Slingshotted by the rewind of the yo-yo and by Peacemonger’s own momentum, she flew through the air, up, over the armored figure – and down, right onto Peacemonger’s back.

Clint whistled as Peacemonger whirled and veered, trying to compensate for the unexpected added mass and to respond to his hitchhiker. “She gets pretty… focused when she has a plan in mind, doesn’t she?”

“Tell me about it,” Chat Noir said, with a sigh that was half-wince, half-amusement, and one hundred percent adoring teenage boy.

“We should get out of here,” Natasha reminded him, relieved when Chat Noir shook off his distraction with a quick nod. “Clint…’
“Go,” the archer said, arrow already on the string as he risked a glance out at the street, obviously assessing his potential routes. “I’ll cover her.”

**Fury is so not paying me enough for this.**

Not that *any* organization would include the sort of pay slot for *had to watch a teeny tiny teenage girl play rodeo rider on top of a possessed Tony*. Seriously. He didn’t think the world was prepared for a junior Tasha. *He* certainly wasn’t.

**Eh. Has to qualify for hazard pay.** Wouldn’t even be the weirdest justification he’d put into that particular column since the Avengers Initiative had gotten off the group. Superhero work included some *very weird* things.

**Ladybug and Chat Noir don’t even get a pay check. That’s gotta bite.**

Perfectly familiar with the back of his mind sitting back and providing peanut-gallery commentary, Clint quickly scanned the street. He could still make out the puppet-armors in the park, and more than a few had followed Peacemonger into the street – but right now, most of them were just sort of hanging around where they were. Apparently, they really were effectively drones. Sucked for the people inside them, granted, but at least that was one less thing to worry about, so long as Ladybug kept Peacemonger distracted.

Clint looked up, following Peacemonger’s flight. Ladybug was hanging on like grim death as Peacemonger veered and spun, trying to shake her loose – although at least his weird *I’m here to help you* thing was apparently keeping him from trying to use a building to *scrape* her off his back; that was something.

Every now and then, Clint thought he saw a flash of pink-purple near Peacemonger’s faceplate; apparently Papillon, wherever he was, wasn’t particularly amused by the situation. Clint wondered what his damage was – ranting about the red-and-black earrings that were *so close*, but physically impossible to reach, probably.

But apparently there were limits to how deeply Papillon could control his victims – or maybe the connection was just harder to make when his target was flying all over the place rather than hesitating.

None of which was helping Clint’s problem.

*I said I’d cover her. I meant it. But as long as Peacemonger keeps swooping like that, I’m likely to hit her.* Which would suck. In more ways than one.

Meaning he’d better find some other way to do his job. He was almost out of sticky-arrows at this point. He could try clotheslining Peacemonger, but again, he risked catching Ladybug in that, and he’d already used up one of his grapnel arrows getting out of the hotel room after Peacemonger introduced himself…

As Peacemonger roared past, Ladybug twisted around to catch Clint’s eye with her own.

She held the gaze for a moment, just long enough to be sure she had his attention. Then, pointedly, she glanced to the side, and up.

At the Eiffel Tower.
Clint jerked his chin in a quick nod, and then fired off a second flash arrow – not at Peacemonger, but across the street. It hit one of the brick pillars supporting the metalwork fence of the park with a brilliant flash of light that made the supervillain check his motion and turn – with Ladybug throwing her weight against him to steer him farther off-course.

Perfect distraction for Clint to retreat down the alley to the nearest crossroad and take off at a run.

“You stand watch here. And don’t come in.”

The ears and tail had fooled her, Natasha noted as the door closed behind Chat Noir. Chat Noir had a much better poker face than she’d given him credit for – even with those tell-tales, he hadn’t given away just how much he did not like the entire situation. Not until those uncharacteristically clipped, hard words.

Turning, she positioned herself to keep watch through the window of the small café Chat Noir had led them into. So far as she could tell, though, they’d managed to evade any pursuit as they’d retreated down a small alley to a side street and this small café. Which might not mean anything; there was always the chance that they’d simply missed the signs…

Underneath the door to the kitchen, green light flickered for a moment.

Natasha drew a deep breath and deliberately turned away, focusing her watch on the windows leading outside. It was hard to wrap her mind around just how much Ladybug and Chat Noir had been forced to trust the Avengers – effectively strangers, outsiders who’d stumbled into the middle of this mess. Now Ladybug was trying to stall one of the more dangerous supervillains Papillon had yet created and trusting Clint to watch her back-

And all it would take would be Natasha deciding to ignore that closed door, and she’d know Chat Noir’s real face.

Well. There was something she’d wanted to tell the pair. The circumstances were hardly ideal – but she was unlikely to get a better opportunity than this.

Quietly, knowing that her voice would carry in the dark café and kitchen even without magical ears to catch the sound, Natasha said, “You and Ladybug need a way to communicate as civilians.”

Silence – the utter, complete silence of someone who had gone completely still, listening intently. No response, however, which was only sensible. The glamour protected their voices from recognition – but right now, he didn’t have that defense.

Still, Natasha could hear the implicit question. “When we fought the Seamstress, you didn’t know when Ladybug would arrive. Which means you don’t have any way of contacting each other when you’re not wearing the masks.” She had to grimace at that. They were less frequent these days; most good SHIELD agents could recognize her, and she usually worked with Clint anyway. But she’d done double-blind missions herself, knowing there was another allied agent in place but not knowing who they were, and knowing that they wouldn’t know her, in turn. Which made it so dangerously easy for the two agents to trip each other up…

Enough. She had a point to make. “I understand the need.” Even if she hadn’t been convinced of the need for secrecy before… well. Peacemonger was certainly a case-in-point. The Miraculous,
whatever they were, might keep Ladybug and Chat Noir safe from Papillon’s possession. But
gambling on that might would be a dangerous game.

“However,” she pressed, “you do need some way of contacting each other. You’ve been lucky so
far; both of you have managed to find out about the akuma attacks relatively quickly. But not all the
victims are obvious. One of these days, one of you is going to be caught alone, fighting against a
supervillain somewhere that your partner will have no way of hearing about it.”

Still no response. She didn’t even hear him moving; even as a civilian, Chat Noir was cat-quiet, with
an intensity that was almost tangible. She had to admire his self-control. No one – especially not a
teenage boy – liked having weaknesses pointed out, even when they did see the value of the
exercise. Natasha wondered if that scenario hadn’t already happened, or at least come close. As the
Avengers had discovered, which victims came to the attention of the international community had a
great deal to do with luck, and the scale of their actions. And given how frequent the attacks were…it
wasn’t only possible, it was likely that Ladybug and Chat Noir had faced off against victims who’d
never gotten a chance to come to wider attention. In which case, only random chance would have
brought both of them to the scene.

Or magic-led luck. But, again, not something you wanted to gamble your partner’s life – or your
own – on.

*Keep going. You don’t know how long it takes him to recharge the transformation magic, and we
need to get back as soon as possible.* “You can set up lines of communication that won’t
compromise your identities. Burner phones. Pagers. Coded posts on the Ladyblog. Anonymous e-
mail accounts. Any of those could work – but find something. And…”

She hesitated before continuing. Technically, what she wanted to say next crossed beyond the hazy
line of offering advice as someone in a similar line of work to flat-out meddling, but…

She still remembered the way her stomach had simply dropped at Coulson’s words, slightly distorted
by the phone line: *Barton has been compromised.*

“Consider setting up a way to let your partner find your real identity,” she said at last, knowing her
voice had gone a little too flat and controlled. “In case Papillon gets to one of you, or if something
happens. Sealed envelopes, a deadman letter – just make certain that if one of you disappears, the
other has some way to find out what happened.”

For the first time, she heard a reaction – a very soft, sharply indrawn breath, released in a slow sigh
that hissed slightly, as though escaping through gritted teeth.

And then soft words, oddly distorted. “Transform me.”

Green light flared at the opening under the door again. Then Chat Noir opened it – and Natasha was
startled into chuckling. He had a mixing bowl in his hand – clearly having used that to distort his
voice enough to say the trigger phrase.

She liked these kids.

He grinned cheekily as he set the bowl on the counter, the paw mark on his flat ring gleaming green
and bright, all four of the pads restored. And if there was a thoughtful shadow underneath the grin –
well. She knew something about the value of masks.

“*Purr*pared to bring Peacemonger down to earth?” he asked.

So he wasn’t going to respond directly to what she’d said. Natasha could accept that. Ladybug and
Chat Noir needed their secrets to stay secret. But he’d at least heard her out.

Right now, they had a job to do. “Ready,” she replied. “Assuming you have some idea of how to actually reach him, when he can fly anywhere.”

Chat Noir grinned. “What would you say to a little fun with applied physics?”

This is almost hilarious, Clint thought, sighting along his arrow at the shiny meteor of white and gold streaking purple light across the Parisian nightscape, and the little figure in black-and-red clinging like a really determined burr to his back. Only not just clinging, because somehow, Ladybug had managed to loop her yo-yo around Peacemonger, and now she was more sitting on the supervillain’s back and steering the crazy swoops in almost lazy arcs swinging closer and closer to Clint’s position on the Eiffel Tower.

The riding like a horse jokes would be inevitable, and Tony would probably own them with no shame, except for one little detail: Ladybug was a kid, which made her officially Off Limits.

Dear God, I think I finally found a joke that would embarrass Tony What-Is-This-Shame-Business Stark, Clint smirked to himself, still tracking that flight path as Ladybug guided Peacemonger’s loops closer. This vantage point presented an interesting challenge – sure, he had no problem seeing his targets, but between the blaze of Peacemonger’s armor and the lights of Paris below, his eyes didn’t have any real chance to adjust to the darkness. That was going to make things a little tricky. And aiming at a bright object in a dark environment was much harder than you’d think; the high contrast and unusual lighting made judging distances tricky.

Still perfectly doable. He was a professional. But tricky.

Don’t think she wants me shooting Peacemonger, though.

What she was ultimately after – other than stopping the whole rampage, getting the akuma away from Tony, and otherwise Saving the Day – Clint wasn’t sure. But Ladybug clearly had a Plan – and from the way Chat Noir had reacted, the catboy knew what she needed from him and Natasha, at least.

So Clint settled in, watching intently, and let the back of his mind cackle in amusement as it calculated just how long he’d have to wait before teasing Tony about anything to do with this mess would count as funny, rather than goading. He was used to this sort of wait-and-watch game, as a sniper; letting part of his mind offer just enough commentary on the situation to keep him awake and alert, letting another part wander just enough to keep him relaxed enough to hold his position for hours, if need be – while the rest waited in predatory focus for the moment when the target was in range. Then – the tension of the bowstring between his fingers, the hum as shaft shot past his ear – and in the distance, someone or something falling over dead, while he packed up and shifted position before the arrow’s flight could be tracked.

Granted, he usually knew what he would be aiming at. For the time being – he had his last grapnel arrow on the string, having used the other getting into position. If Peacemonger succeeded in throwing Ladybug off – well, odds were fairly good she’d manage to catch herself, the girl played Spiderman with that yo-yo on a regular basis. But if things looked like they might get a little hairy, he could at least shoot her a safety line.

If it turned out he wouldn’t need it for that, well. He could always play lasso-the-supervillain himself.
And if the idea of an itty bitty girl literally riding him like a rodeo horse didn’t make Tony splutter, the idea of getting roped by Clint probably would.

*Just give him a month or two to get over the whole I-became-a-supervillain part. Minimum.*

But if Ladybug had wanted him just for that, there was no reason for her to have sent him off in this direction. Which meant there was something she wanted him to do.

*You use a ranged fighter to hit the things you either can’t reach or don’t want to get too close to. But from the look of things, Ladybug had solved the whole problem of how to get close to Peacemonger, at least temporarily. So what was he missing…*

*Wait a minute. Since when do light poles go up higher than the skyline?*

…oh.

Distracted for just a moment, Clint blinked at the two figures in black balanced delicately at the top of the silvery pole, looking *down* on the whole scene from several blocks away.

*Oh man. So that’s how they’re going to get the drop on the Peacemonger…*

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*Take her Miraculous!*

Papillon’s fury thundered through Peacemonger like one of Thor’s lightning bolts, shattering clarity into a thousand white-hot sparks of mental pain until he could barely see the HUD of the helmet anymore.

Not that it mattered. He knew *exactly* where the Miraculous were, tantalizingly close-

*Take them!*

…and also *out of reach*. Arms didn’t bend that direction. So long as Ladybug kept her position on his back, the earrings might as well be on the other side of the city.

*Then throw her off? Papillon snarled. Slam her into the buildings, crush her like the insect that she is!* For a moment, Peacemonger’s course veered off, arcing for the side of the Eiffel Tower, where he could scrape his unwanted passenger off the way he’d shuck mud off his shoes-

Then he corrected his course, accelerating away. *No.*

Outrage hammered down on him, halting Peacemonger in midair above the Champ de Mars parade grounds at the foot of the Eiffel Tower, as Papillon bore down on him with the full weight of his will. *You will obey me!*

Didn’t Papillon know who he was dealing with? No one, *no one*, told Peacemonger what to do.

*That wasn’t the deal.*

*I thought I made the terms clear*, Papillon countered, silkily dangerous. *You owe me the Miraculous!* I’m *not* killing Ladybug to *get them for you*. The point was to *protect*, and to teach the people of Paris to grow up and start defending themselves for a change. Take Ladybug’s Miraculous away,
and she’d be safe, and people like Mayor Bourgeois would have to start actually doing something. Oh, he’d get the Miraculous for Papillon. A deal was a deal. But he’d do it his own way. Without hurting them.

Papillon’s disgust was palpable. Heroes. You always try to be so... so heroic!

Well, that was what the man got for cutting a deal with a hero-

“Thank you for the ride, Mister Peacemonger,” Ladybug interrupted the internal argument, her voice mock-sweet. “But I think this is where you and I part ways.”

And then she jumped off.

“Lucky Charm!”

Peacemonger shot upward for a moment before he could correct the repulsors’ force to counteract the sudden loss of weight – and then swore and dove, blasting straight through the glittering haze of red and black and light.

_Idiot! Grab the item before she can catch it – if she does not have the Charm, she won’t be able to undo all your hard work, Peacemonger!_

Except that he couldn’t make out the Charm in all the glitter and sparkle – and Ladybug was right there.

Back in her hand, the yo-yo whirled over Ladybug’s head like helicopter rotors, not fully stopping the fall but slowing it. But dangling in mid-air, drifting down to the ground, her weapon and her dominant hand both occupied, there wasn’t anything she could do about him reaching for those earrings at last...

Just as he came up under the whirl of the yo-yo, something latched onto his boot and tugged.

Pulled off course, Peacemonger came up again and turned, HUD locking onto the heat signature perched in the beams of the Iron Lady’s upper structure.

Hawkeye. Of course. How could he have forgotten the archer’s knack for perfect timing?

_It doesn’t matter_, Papillon reminded him. _Focus on Ladybug, we have her...!_

True enough. Clint didn’t have many arrows that could stop his armor, and he’d already used most of them up. The rest wouldn’t be effective at this range; the special add-ons made them too heavy to be at all accurate beyond a limited distance. Which meant he could turn his attention back to Ladybug.

Who had just touched down lightly on the grass, holding out her hands to catch a very large, very heavy horseshoe-shaped object.

Peacemonger couldn’t help himself. He burst out laughing as Ladybug blinked owlishly at the giant spotted magnet in her hands.

“Oh, that’s clever,” he congratulated her, hovering in place as he grinned at the girl. Not that she’d see it through the helmet, but the thought counted, right? “I’m afraid it’s completely useless, though. The armor’s not much use if all it takes is a big magnet to reel me in, you know.”

And Ladybug...

...smiled at him.
“Oh, it’s not for that,” she said mischievously. “Although I do admit, it worked perfectly to make you hold still.”

And two new weights slammed down on Peacemonger’s shoulders with the force of a guided meteorite.

“Cataclysm!”

All three of them crashed down to earth together. Natasha and Chat Noir both rolled with the impact to escape the hail of white and gold armor fragments raining down all around them. Many still crackled and sparked with purple-white energy; one arc danced over Chat Noir’s shoulders for a moment, leaving blond hair poofed like the tail of a startled cat. More crackled across the knuckles of Natasha’s right hand, leaving a momentary numbness quickly followed by a burning pins-and-needles sensation, making her fingers spasm-

Shoving that aside, Natasha twisted about, just in time to see Peacemonger pick himself up from the midst of the wreckage of his armor, as though he hadn’t just been hammered out of the sky with all of their weight and momentum combined.

Frankly, Natasha was amazed that she was still capable of moving. Even with the initial impact with the distracted Peacemonger to break their fall, no one would normally survive toppling from the height of Chat Noir’s impromptu pole-vault…

I think we can consider the manipulation of inertia officially one of their abilities, she thought distantly, as Peacemonger turned to face them with a snarl.

He looks like Tony.

Only reasonable – most of Papillon’s victims retained at least their basic features in supervillain form. Why would Papillon give up a psychological weapon like that? But understanding that didn’t make it any less of a shock to see Tony Stark, wearing a skin-tight white and gold suit, lines of power radiating out across suit and skin alike from the corrupted arc reactor, as though Tony’s own body had become a circuit-board, as he brought blazing palms up to face them.

The repulsors are part of his hands, damn it…!

Clawed fingers digging into the soft grass and dirt for purchase, Chat Noir threw himself at Peacemonger, momentum and magical strength and pure, stubborn determination hurting him through the air to slam into the man’s shoulders with enough force to throw Peacemonger back and to the ground. The catboy twisted as they fell, hooking his arms under Peacemonger’s and holding the man, just for a moment-

A moment was all Natasha needed. Her still-twitching right hand was no use; lunging forward, Natasha reached out with her left and snatched the arc reactor out of Peacemonger’s chest.

Please don’t let this kill him, she thought distantly as the supervillain with Tony’s face suddenly seized up, the glowing lines of power veining his body suddenly going dark. Tony had a margin of safety between the removal of the arc reactor and irreversible damage – but every time something messed with the arc reactor it shaved away a little more of that margin, and she didn’t know what effect Papillon’s meddling might have…

Something dropped over her shoulder to land with a thump on Peacemonger’s chest.

Looking at the incongruous black spots decorating the bright red, oversized horseshoe magnet,
Natasha very nearly burst out laughing.

Instead, she allowed herself a steadying breath, and handed the purple arc reactor, humming with something that felt very much like outrage, over to Ladybug. “I trust you have a plan to destroy this without taking half of the city out with it,” she said.

The girl smiled confidently as she adjusted her yo-yo so that a length of string dangled in a loop from her hand. “I have an idea,” she said, fitting the arc reactor into the loop.

Then she turned, waving up at a shadow in the girders two-thirds of the way up the Eiffel Tower, and began to whirl the makeshift sling, faster and faster, until-

“Pull!” she yelled – and launched the arc reactor into the sky.

Following the rising gleam of the arc reactor along the length of his arrow, Clint grinned.

*Nice. Just like shooting discs on the target range.*

He loosed, the arrow slicing through the air to strike the arc reactor at the peak of its climb, high overhead.

*…Only with bonus fireworks!* 

*Tony’s going to complain about Hollywood physics,* Natasha thought, bemused, as the little star of purple light exploded outward in a ring of crackling energy and pure *force* that ripped through the night sky. The very top of the Eiffel Tower vanished, vaporized-

And that was about the extent of the damage, as the explosion petered out, having expended its energy outward rather than down, leaving nothing but hints of purple Saint Elmo’s fire dancing across the sheered-off top of the Tower and a few of the taller buildings nearby.

As well as an eye-searing arc of red-white, as Ladybug’s yo-yo shot up and snapped closed on a hint of black-and-purple flutter in the sky.

“Gotcha,” Ladybug said fiercely, whipping the weight back into her hand.

Natasha gritted her teeth and reached for the magnet. They were in a race against time now. Based on the first Stoneheart battle, even if the akuma wasn’t immediately purified, once the talisman was broken the victim would quickly revert back to themselves. In order to restore Tony’s arc reactor, Ladybug would need to use her restorative powers – but to do that, she’d need to use the Charm currently helping to keep him alive-

White butterfly fluttering away into the night, Ladybug darted past Natasha to slap her hand down on the giant magnet.

“Please let this work,” she muttered, eyes wide and dark with worry. “*Miraculous Ladybug!*”

For just a moment, nothing happened.

Then the magnet burst apart into swarms of glittering ladybugs, nearly blinding Natasha as they burst
apart in front of her, swarms multiplying as they swirled and scattered. The top of the Eiffel Tower flashed back into place, as though it had never been missing…

And a small blue-white light appeared in midair, seeming to float for just a moment before remembering that inconvenient law of physics known as gravity.

“Oh no-!” Ladybug gasped, as it started to fall.

Chat Noir leapt, catching the reactor in midair and flipping around to toss it to Natasha. Catching it with a hand that was no longer half-numb, Natasha snapped it into place in the cavity of Peacemonger’s chest.

Just as oily black-and-purple energy washed over Peacemonger, leaving Tony Stark blinking owlishly up at her.

For just a moment, he seemed to hesitate, taking in the situation – lying on the grass blinking up at the night sky, Natasha kneeling over him with her hand on his chest, Ladybug standing just behind her and looking on with worry, as Chat Noir worked his way past no-longer-squashed topiary to rejoin them.

“…Just for the record, I’m pretty sure I don’t really fit the Sleeping Beauty role,” Tony commented.

Natasha snorted, more relieved than she really wanted to admit to the man. He’d never let her forget it if she did. “It seems to suit you better than White Knight, at least,” she said dryly.

Chapter End Notes

Argh. Clint was very, very frustrating in this chapter. The problem is, he’s a sniper. Which means that his role in a battle is to be invisible until he lands a precise shot at the exact right moment. He’s not up close with the other characters, he’s not talking, and he’s not visible. Which makes keeping him an active part of the action very tricky. I finally had to sit on the plotbunnies until they yielded their “Natasha and Tony PoVs only” approach, at least briefly.

When Marinette’s Uncle Cheng is possessed, he switches from clumsy, halting French to perfectly fluent, so the linguistic shift seems to be part of the possession as well. It makes a certain amount of sense, after all – the people Papillon really wants to send a message to appear to be native French speakers.

Regarding distances: Adrien’s house, Marinette’s house, the park, and the school all are practically within eyeshot of each other, which seems a little bit ridiculous. Especially given that Climatika implies that the Kids Plus TV station is right next to the park as well. I don’t know zoning laws in Paris, but that seems odd. The location of the Grand Paris is a little more vague, but every time we’ve seen people traveling that way, they seem to take public transit or cars. Which in Adrien’s case doesn’t mean much, given that he apparently is chauffeured to the school instead of walking two or three blocks, but it’s the closest information I have. (Personally, I tend to pad the distances we see in the show; some of the very restricted area used has to do with budget limitations for animating backgrounds, I suspect!)

In canon, we don’t hear Ladybug and Chat Noir comparing different akuma very much
– in part, I suspect, because this would mess with the whole “watch in any order” approach. However, logically they would start building up an internal list of references; that’s part of what experience is all about!

Natasha’s suggestions about communication methods have shown up in other fics; I especially like *Masks* by Lynse on AO3, which introduces the idea of a sealed envelope with a photograph as a way of giving Ladybug and Chat Noir the ability to learn their partner’s identity, without actually forcing the Reveal.

And as for Chat Noir’s reaction to Natasha’s advice… given his home life, he knows *painfully* well how damaging simply not knowing can be.
Aftermath

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay in getting this out; the second half of my Japan trip ended up being very busy. Which is a good thing, but definitely exhausting. And jetlag is a pain.

This is the end of the official What the Cat Dragged In fic. However, there will be one more chapter, because I ended up writing a coda…

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The message Natasha sent was characteristically short, terse, to the point, and – considering the way their last communication had ended – entirely unsatisfying in terms of details.

Still, Black Widow managed to cover the most salient points: Peacemonger situation handled. No casualties. No lasting damage. Leaving Paris. Full report upon return.

Fury grimaced, leaning back in his chair and pinching the bridge of his nose. Not that it did damn-all as a stress reduction technique. Days like this, he desperately missed his own days as a field agent. Blowing up a deserving target definitely sounded appealing right now, and he so rarely got to push the button himself, as Director.

It didn’t help that, all things considered, this had to be the best possible outcome of what had been his worst-case scenario when he’d sent Black Widow and Hawkeye to Paris – particularly after learning that Ironman would be there as well.

Given the limited information they’d had on the situation going in – and damn Bourgeois for the suppression or outright ignorance of any real information on the threat – that had seemed a somewhat delicate but still manageable set of circumstances. With the added information that the Avengers had gathered from their discussion with the civilians (and Fury fully intended certain heads to roll over the fact that his primary data analysts had dismissed this Ladyblog as a source of information, run by a teenage fangirl or no), precarious had quickly been revised to disaster waiting to happen.

And likely to happen to anyone else we send in. Damn it.

There was so much SHIELD could have done to, if not handle the situation, at least mitigate it for the people on the ground – hero and civilian alike. Pattern analysis to track this Papillon down, find him, and end him. On-the-ground support moving civilians out of the way of combat, or even to help harry the supervillains. Drop points for supplies, such as whatever Ladybug and Chat Noir needed to recharge their abilities, so that they weren’t forced to scrounge for them if a fight went long, hoping to get lucky.

Hell. A basic stipend, to offset the all-too-likely financial difficulties the two heroes were undoubtedly facing, as the Avengers had noted. Even that would be more support than what the pair were getting at the moment.

Except that even the intelligence support required some form of secure communications. Which, given that Ladybug and Chat Noir didn’t exactly publicize their contact information, meant that communications would have to go through unsecured channels… or arranging a face-to-face hand-
off of some kind.

*And every agent we send into Paris is as much at risk for possession as the locals.* More so, probably, for the same reasons he was pulling the Avengers out. No SHIELD agent joined the organization because they enjoyed the feeling of being helpless.

Any sort of support in the form of supplies was even more at risk. Bank accounts could be traced. And even if the agents making the drops managed to escape being compromised…

_All it would take is someone identifying the drop areas, and Papillon will have a ready-made ambush location._

Or the press would. Professional or amateur. And that was arguably even more dangerous. Ladybug and Chat Noir were free to _fight back_ against Papillon.

Fury grimaced. Black Widow was right, damn it all. Right now, the best thing they could do for the people of Paris was to _stay out of it._ And keep an eagle eye out in case the situation ever changed.

He snorted to himself, then. _At least I should have enough material now to convince the World Security Council to keep their hands to themselves._ All things considered, what they knew of Ladybug and Chat Noir’s powers said they’d be too limited to be of great help in most circumstances. Which might not stop them – Ladybug’s ability to restore damage would have been invaluable after the Chitauri invasion, for example, if she could actually apply it in such a case, and Chat Noir’s ability to destroy with a touch opened fascinating options…

_As if they thought that far ahead._ No – he was fairly certain the pressure from the WSC to recruit the pair had more to do with collective annoyance that the French members _would not_ stop bragging about having their own home-grown superheroes.

Politics. _Hmph._

_Well,_ he thought, pushing his chair back as he stood. _At least one good thing seems to have come of the Peacemonger mess. I’m not sure even Black Widow would have been able to convince Stark to cut losses and leave, otherwise._

“You seriously don’t remember anything?” Clint asked, his eyebrows doing something complicated as he looked over at Tony – a gesture that involved dodging a small family with enough luggage on a pushcart to keep an entire battalion of high-society ladies well-stocked, and all the steering capabilities of the Hulk at full charge.

Seriously, there were _reasons_ Tony avoided commercial airlines, some of which had nothing to do with the vulnerability of being stuck in a metal tube with a whole bunch of strangers or the irresistible urge to tinker with the plane _just a little_ while in flight. But even private jets needed someplace to _land_, so the Charles de Gaulle Airport was something of a necessary evil.

“Not a thing,” Tony confirmed, making for the peace and _elbow room_ of the VIP area. “Just going up to the roof to sulk.” He grimaced. “Which was damn stupid of me, in hindsight.”

Natasha shook her head, walking with an air of directed purpose that even had the luggage train juggernauts finding reasons to not be in her way. Tony _really_ wanted to learn that trick, but he had the feeling that he just didn’t have the right personality to pull it off. Or maybe the right combination of chromosomes. “No one is particularly intelligent when they’re furious,” she said. “And you had your reasons.”
That had actually been the most disorienting part of the whole thing. He’d stormed up to the roof with a mad-on fit to jury-rig a new suit and blast holes in the landscape. Then the next thing he knew, he was lying flat on his back in the grass as the arc reactor clicked into place, a ruffled Natasha and relieved-looking Ladybug standing over him, and he just… wasn’t angry, anymore. Not that he’d forgotten why he’d been angry, not at all. But it was like something had gone in and just opened a valve and all the anger and frustration that had welled up to pool in his gut had just… drained away.

As a therapy technique, it actually wasn’t half-bad – except for all the chaos and destruction everyone else had to deal with, of course. With the anger gone, he’d been clear-headed enough to actually listen to Natasha’s explanation of the situation, after Ladybug and Chat Noir had done their usual whoops timer’s going gotta run thing.

The explanation had summed up to, believe it or not, we actually came to see if we could do anything to help.

“Ladybug and Chat Noir are defending a major capital city,” Natasha had told him bluntly. “The last thing SHIELD wants to do is haul the local experts out of an ongoing situation. Our goal was to offer them some form of back-up or support if possible.”

Of course, Tony’s little stint as Peacemonger – Peacemonger, if he ever got his hands on Papillon there would be words, because the Obadiah Stane reference was not cool – had put paid to that idea. It was enough to throw Tony into high dudgeon all over again.

Which was why he’d given in and gotten them all a ticket out of France. Tony hadn’t survived this long by lying to himself about the sort of person he was, and he didn’t mean to start now. There was no way he wasn’t going to get into a proper sulk over this mess again – and if he was in Paris, well, Peacemonger would doubtless be quick to make a reappearance.

No wonder the city had invested in a specialist counselor for akuma victims. Sure, the whole get-possessed-and-fixed thing apparently cleared out the mind-fogging rrrrrrrrrrrrrargh!-style fury that Papillon latched onto, but the causes of that fury wouldn’t have changed. In some cases, just getting past that initial rage was enough to settle the problem. In others – well, without doing anything, it would just boil up all over again.

Besides. The looks on Natasha and Clint’s faces when he’d actually agreed to talk to the counselor briefly had been epic and well worth the poking. Especially since the counselor turned out to be a brisk, no-nonsense lady who apparently had already figured out that pussy-footing around Tony’s feelings wasn’t the right way to handle him. Tony had actually asked for her card, after she’d released him from the brief session to go back to his hotel and, word-for-word, fall over so hard you leave a crater in the floor. Not that he ever anticipated using it himself, but believe it or not Tony did recognize that sometimes people needed that sort of thing, and he liked to have a list of competent experts on hand.

Not to mention his ulterior motive in that little visit. After all, one thing that had become painfully clear was that the real experts on the Papillon situation weren’t the authorities of Paris.

As evidenced by the small group waiting for them in the VIP lounge.

Tony blinked at the teenagers. “Okay, I’ll bite. How’d you know to meet us here?”

Alya grinned broadly, one eye closing in a wink as she wagged her finger. “A good journalist doesn’t reveal her sources!”
Nino snickered, crossing his arms over his chest. “By which she means that Chloé finally figured out that the Black Widow was in town and was screaming to the high heavens about the injustice of you leaving so soon. Good call on getting while the getting’s good, I say.”

Natasha actually closed her eyes and covered her face with a hand for a second, while Clint looked pained, and wow, Tony couldn’t blame them. Talk about a security fail. He had a feeling that Mayor Bourgeois was going to be blacklisted from anything even resembling sensitive information for the rest of the man’s career. “And meeting us here?” she asked dryly.

“Ah. That would be my doing,” Adrien admitted, flushing slightly. “My father doesn’t… well, travel much anymore, but I’ve been brought along to greet important visitors enough to know my way around the VIP areas.”

“Okay, that makes sense. Except for why,” Clint said pointedly.

“We wanted to make sure you were all okay,” Marinette explained, clasping her hands behind her back, the little round pink purse slung over her shoulder swinging slightly with the movement.

And apparently you meant Tony, given the way Natasha and Clint both cast pointed looks at him. Feeling awkward in a way that never happened when there were cameras pointed at him or he got caught doing something incriminating by Pepper, Tony coughed into his hand. “Eh… I’ll manage,” he said.

“What about you?” Natasha asked, looking at them. “I apologize for leading the battle so close to your school, but it was the only area we could think of where there wouldn’t be many people or cars around.” She hesitated. “Do you know Rose or Juleka, by any chance?”

Tony bit down a wince. Natasha had told him that bit. Or rather, she and Clint had referenced it, and Tony hadn’t let it go until he had every ugly little detail.

In a way, the story of carting the two kids away to keep them out of the line of fire scared Tony the most out of all of Peacemonger’s actions. Because he could actually see himself doing that.

To his surprise, however, the kids started laughing. Eyes dancing, Marinette explained, “Actually, we told them that we were meeting with you, and they asked us to pass on that they were just fine. Rose said that it was scary at first, but once she realized they were just flying, it was a lot of fun.”

“And Juleka said that getting a free Ironman-style ride over the town was ‘totally rad,’” Nino added, uncrossing his arms to throw in some air quotes.

A tension Tony didn’t even realize he’d been holding suddenly relaxed at that. Grinning, he crossed his own arms over his chest, standing with hips cocked. “And now I get to be part of the cool kids’ Ex-Supervillain club. How awesome is that?”

Alya and Nino looked at each other and grinned. “Don’t worry, you two,” Alya said cheerfully, patting Adrien and Marinette on the shoulder. “We’ll let you be honorary members.”


“We should have a T-shirt,” Nino added.

Tony reeled in mock-horror. “You mean there isn’t one already? Travesty! I am totally fixing that as soon as we get on the plane.” He grinned at Marinette. “Adrien says you’re a pretty good designer. Wanna have a go at it?”
For just a moment, Marinette turned tomato-red. Then a glint of *ooo, a challenge* that Tony knew from his own mirror slipped into grey-blue eyes. “Hmmm…” she murmured thoughtfully.

Clint glanced at Natasha ruefully. “I think we just witnessed the creation of a monster,” he said.

“I resemble that remark,” Tony huffed, before glancing at the flight information board on the side of the room. “Whoops. Looks like they’re done prepping the plane.”

“Guess that’s our signal to leave,” Alya said with a slight pout, before grabbing Nino by the shoulder and tugging him towards the door. “Come on, let’s go check the bus schedules.”

“Awww, can’t we just ride with Adrien again? That car is awesome.”

“Do you want to risk a close encounter with Mister Agreste again?…”

“Just a moment, Marinette,” Natasha said.

About to follow her friends, the girl turned and blinked at Natasha as the door swung closed behind them.

Natasha stepped over to her – not coincidentally blocking Adrien’s view, as the boy went to retrieve his schoolbag from the closet.

Taking Marinette’s hand, the spy slipped a USB stick into it.

Her voice was so low that Tony, standing right next to them, had to strain to hear it – even knowing what Natasha was going to say.

“Pass that on to Ladybug.”

Marinette went white, eyes huge and dark as she tried to stumble back, her free hand clutching at the strap of her purse.

Natasha didn’t let go, giving the girl a sharp look. “And be careful,” she added. “Alya already knows you somehow set up an interview with Ladybug for her. Don’t give her a reason to connect the dots and figure out that you know Ladybug.”

Or someone else could figure it out. The warning hung silently in the air.

Marinette swallowed dryly as Natasha finally released her hand. Then blue-grey eyes narrowed and she nodded once, sharply, with all the determined focus that Tony associated with the Black Widow herself.

Natasha stepped back as Adrien approached, the boy looking back and forth between the two curiously. “I just remembered,” she commented, back to a normal conversational volume, before he could ask for an explanation. “Adrien, I can confirm part of your hypothesis on how Ladybug and Chat Noir’s powers work. They definitely seem to be less affected by inertia than they should be. And it seems that they can extend the effect to cover someone with them; I shouldn’t have survived falling on Peacemaker the way we did, let alone getting away without even a bruise.”

Tony nodded; she’d described that little ambush, too. “And you can totally quote her on that. And me. Which reminds me, that internship offer is still open, for when you decide you’re tired of fashion.”

Marinette looked completely scandalized by the very idea, but Adrien just chuckled. “You know, I
don’t mind the job *that* much,” the boy said, as an attendant came through the door to announce that their flight was ready for them.

Clint smirked at him. “I dunno, kid. One of these days, *someone’s* going to do a Ladybug and Chat Noir themed fashion show, and you know it. Think you’ve got what it takes to pull off a skintight black leather catsuit?”

Marinette made a strange noise with distinct overtones of *my brain is in a very happy place and I think I’m going to die.* And Adrien…

…smiled, his thumb idly playing with the flat-faced silver ring on his right hand.

“Oh, I *meowst* certainly do,” he purred.

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“You’re being quiet.”

Settling back in his seat, Tony shrugged. “Just… thinking.”

Natasha and Clint both raised their eyebrows. It was almost cute, in a terrifying way, just how well they mirrored each other.

Tony waved a hand out the window as the plane continued its ascent, indicating a billboard where he could just make out Ladybug’s distinctive red-and-black shape. “It’s just kinda odd. We’re official heroes. Got the title and the paycheck and everything. But Paris? Paris *loves* those two.”

“Hard not to,” Clint admitted. “They’re good people.”

Tony nearly snorted. Superheroes, he believed in, sure. Good guys? Not quite so much. But… yeah. Ladybug and Chat Noir… he was willing to count them as the exceptions that proved the rule.

That thought led to another, and he started snickering.

Clint eyed him warily. “What?”

“If the idea of *Steve* getting taken over by an akuma weren’t pure Nightmare Fuel, I’d so want to send him here to meet them.”

Natasha’s lips twitched. “No you wouldn’t.”

Now it was Tony’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “No?”

“Steve would want to adopt them.”

“Honestly? That’s at least half the appeal…”

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Chapter End Notes

Many of my crossovers are born from my love of outside points of view – it’s fun to play with how characters from X series would respond to the situation and characters of Y. And the characters and overall situation of Miraculous Ladybug actually slot very
neatly into the world of the Avengers – you wouldn’t think it, but despite the overall comedic, no-one-gets-permanently-hurt tone, if you look at some of the supervillains Ladybug and Chat Noir face, they’re seriously scary! But at the same time… well. The details of the Ladybug situation are such that any visiting Avenger is going to be going, “…wait, what?”

But then I ran into a wall, because while the two series might balance surprisingly well… well. If SHIELD knew anything about Papillon’s MO, they wouldn’t let any of the Avengers get anywhere near Paris, because can we say akuma bait?

Then the wall grinned at me.

Oh. Hello, plot…

SHIELD gets a lot of flak for heavy-handed methods – deservedly so, in many cases. But given that they are technically dedicated to protecting the world, and most of the people who sign up do so with the goal of making a difference… Well, I just wanted to try showing a different take on SHIELD here. One where they really are trying to do what’s best.

What can I say? Poor Communication Kills and paranoid leaders of secret agencies make for drama, but sometimes I just want good guys to act like good guys.

For those of you who wanted the Avengers to see right through the Paper Thin Disguises… No. This is a major rule that I follow when writing, and especially when writing crossovers: thou shalt obey the narrative laws of the fictional universe. If a Big Bad is a terrifying Big Bad in one setting, then that Big Bad needs to be a terrifying Big Bad to all characters involved in a crossover. You don't get to just declare that the heroes of another setting are so powerful that they can stomp all over him - even if logically they probably could, because the power levels of the two universes are different. If something’s a major obstacle in one setting, then it needs to be a major obstacle to characters from any setting, or else you're just belittling everything the characters in the original setting have gone through to try to deal with said obstacle. And if you can’t make that work in a believable way, then the two canons aren’t going to mesh very well.

Hence, the glamour. The real reason Ladybug and Chat Noir’s identities are never suspected, of course, really has to do with the tropes of the genre. You’re supposed to accept the improbability and suspend disbelief. But it doesn’t hurt to have an in-universe explanation. And yes, the glamour really should extend to circumstantial evidence. Video cameras aside (and they most definitely should have been caught on camera when they transformed in Puppeteer, let alone the times we’ve seen them duck down a subway staircase and walk out the other side as civilians), Horrificator and Kung Food both involved Ladybug and Chat Noir showing up in sealed environments. Which should have been a giant clue!

The secret identities are a key element to Miraculous Ladybug. No way are some strangers going to waltz in and see through everything, because that goes against the laws of the ML universe.

(You may have noticed that I've tried to honor that even in my ANs. Because I'm writing this from the point of view of "Avengers visiting the Miraculous Ladybug setting," I've done my best to not actually give away, in as many words, who Ladybug and Chat Noir actually are. Although I doubt anyone has been fooled!)
Coda

Chapter Notes

Well. Mea culpa.

To make a long story short… when I am stressed, I get tunnel vision. And this turned out to be a very stressful semester. (I was reading an average of two academic books and several articles each week, on top of my assistant instructor duties. And I can’t speed-read to save my life.) Which meant that I kept forgetting I hadn’t posted this – or if I remembered, I was too overwhelmed to deal with it.

However, finals are almost over, and I finally have a chance to breathe and get caught up…

NOTE: This shows some of the repercussions of events from the Ladybug side. So ultimately, this chapter is about Miraculous Ladybug, more than the crossover.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loose gravel crunched quietly as Ladybug touched down on the rooftop, a flick of her wrist reeling in her yo-yo as she carefully steadied her breathing and straightened, letting the last of the gleeful adrenaline ease out of her system. She didn’t think she’d ever get over the sheer fun of swinging her way through the streets and spires of Paris-

Well. At least it had been fun once she’d learned to relax and trust her instincts, and had figured out the timing. Back when she’d first started, there had been a few… epic fumbles.

But she’d – heh – gotten into the swing of things soon enough, and by now, she could cross Paris at a speed even a private car couldn’t hope to match. Even at night, in the dark.

And the view was a great reward.

She smiled as she stepped over to the concrete wall that served as a safety rail for the rooftop and leaned her elbows on it, looking out across the city. Out here, she was far enough away from the major commercial districts that the night was quiet, but the building itself was high enough that she could make out the sparkling clusters of light at the different areas, with the Iron Lady standing slender and tall in the middle.

“Ah, the starry sea of Purris by night!” a voice declared dramatically behind her. “Just the scene for our very first date… ow.”

Grinning, Ladybug used the finger she’d landed on the tip of Chat Noir’s nose, right where the point of his mask ended, to push him back. “You wish,” she told him, grinning at the familiar game. Chat Noir did care about her, a lot. But the flirting? That was just having fun, and they both knew it.

Chat Noir mock-pouted as he stepped back. “My lady is so cruel,” he sniffed – and then sobered.

“Yes, then, if this isn’t a date – you wanted to talk?”

Sobering herself, Ladybug nodded. She’d been trying to figure out a way to get the information to Chat Noir for a while now; it wasn’t exactly easy, when they never saw each other outside of akuma
attacks.

Back when the attacks had first started, they’d discussed trying to run evening patrols around the city, and even tried it for a little while before quickly realizing that it just wasn’t going to work. Paris was a big city, and there were only two of them; even if they split up, they couldn’t hope to cover even a fraction of a fraction of it. And… well, after a few close calls where she’d used her powers as Ladybug to handle a robbery or something like that, only to find herself facing an akuma with Tikki already exhausted and the timer ticking down…

It wasn’t that she didn’t want to help out. But there were police and firemen and people whose jobs it was to take care of things like that. Ladybug and Chat Noir were the only ones who could handle Papillon’s supervillain victims. So… well, if something was happening right in front of her and Ladybug could help, she’d duck aside, transform, and help. Or if there was something that only Ladybug could do. But wasting Tikki’s energy by going out and looking for wrongs to right… much as Ladybug hated to admit it, that would simply be irresponsible.

So the whole patrol thing had sort of petered out, especially once they realized that they didn’t need to go looking for Papillon’s akuma. He wanted them to show up, after all.

And quite frankly, the extra hours of homework time and sleep were worth way more than the teeny-tiny itty-bitty chance of stumbling over a supervillain before they hit the news. Even as it was… the only reason her grades hadn’t completely fallen through the floor was that Tikki was a godsend who could explain the parts of lessons that she’d missed because she was drowsing in class. Or saving Paris.

All of which meant that finding a time to actually talk, properly, without the looming crisis of an akuma hanging over their heads, had been a lot harder than she’d expected. She’d finally resorted to grabbing Chat Noir before he took off after the latest attack, just this afternoon, and asked him to meet up with her that evening.

Oddly, he’d seemed relieved – like he’d been trying to figure out a way for them to talk, as well. He’d quickly suggested this warehouse roof, a landmark from those early patrol attempts that they’d picked out as a useful place to practice some of their new-found abilities, since there weren’t many people around to notice them.

She snapped her yo-yo down and up, once, as if it were a normal toy, and then pressed the hidden catch on the side of it, opening up the small compartment behind the communicator. Unlike Chat Noir’s suit, hers didn’t have any pockets – reasonable, maybe, given the danger of catching her yo-yo’s wire, but it was still incredibly annoying – but her yo-yo did have a place where she could tuck a very small object without worrying that she’d drop it.

A very, very small object. It was worse than trying to use the pockets on her designer jeans. Darn it.

Luckily, what she was carrying was small enough to fit.

“Actually, I needed to give you something,” she explained, and tossed it.

Chat Noir easily caught the tiny object between two fingers. Darn cat reflexes. Darn cat night vision. Why didn’t she get any ladybug-related abilities? Not that she wanted to go around eating flowers or putting off pheromones – ick! – but couldn’t she have a special sense of smell or something? Or wings. Wings would be amazing – and she could see how they’d fit with the suit already, it would look so stylish…

On the other hand, that was sort of the way Chat Noir seemed to work. He didn’t have her
purification or restoration abilities. Instead, he had a lot of small advantages sort of spread out. So maybe it all came out even in the grand scheme of things.

Looking at the bit of plastic and metal, Chat Noir blinked. “A USB key?”

Ladybug nodded. “It was a gift.” She hesitated. “From the Black Widow.”

And she was not going to tell him how Ms. Romanov had gotten it to her. It had been two weeks since the Avengers had left, and her knees were still a little wobbly.

It’s okay, she reminded herself. She just figured out that Marinette knows Ladybug. That’s all. The secret is still safe.

Not that it would save her from Doomsday Alya, and possibly a reappearance of Lady WiFi, if Alya ever put together the pieces the way Black Widow had. Which, given that Alya now had her own uniquely personalized Starkphone… well, that could be Very Bad. Maybe arranging that private interview hadn’t been such a good idea…

Nope. Still worth it. Granted, at the time she’d just been trying to sue for forgiveness after the mess with the phone and the video… but she was never going to forget the look of sheer, delighted wonder when Alya had walked in and seen Ladybug waiting on the mezzanine for her.

Chat Noir hesitated. “From the Avengers?” he asked. The dim lights of the city behind Ladybug reflected eerie green in slitted pupils dilated wide to catch every bit of light in the darkness.

Ladybug nodded. “It’s all the information they gathered when they were here. About the akuma, about Papillon… and about us.”

You are the only ones who know how accurate, or not, any of this is, the small text file marked Read Me First had said. Which means you are the only ones who can judge whether or not an outsider can learn enough through your glamour to endanger your real identities.

Along with a list of very familiar names, emails and phone numbers, marked For Emergencies.

She had the Avengers’ contact info. She didn’t know if that was a relief, or utterly terrifying.

Chat Noir bit his lip, visibly uneasy. “My lady,” he said slowly, “the Black Widow is a spy. Using electronic files from her…”

Ladybug startled both of them by laughing. “I’m not that careless, chaton,” she said with a grin, and spun her yo-yo on the tip of her finger like a top. (A move she’d never be able to pull off as herself, she was pretty sure. Being Ladybug was fun sometimes.) “I used this to read it. If they can hack a computer that doesn’t even exist most of the time, and only connects to the Internet or the cell phone networks using magic… Well, I don’t think they’d need a Trojan in that case.”

…which didn’t mean she hadn’t sat down and grilled Tikki about virus protection and security before she’d actually tried it. Because eep.

Chat Noir laughed ruefully as he pulled his retracted baton from its resting place in the small of his back and flicked it open. “I suppaw you have a point,” he said, grinning as she gave an obliging groan of despair. He clicked the USB into the port on the side of the communicator (and Ladybug didn’t even know if their communicator had even had ports until the moment they’d needed one; sometimes she really wondered about their weapon-tools), the dim pale glow lighting his face from below in a kind of eerie way that made him look even more like a cat as he used the touch-screen to slowly scroll through it.
And paused, eyes widening. “Ah… my lady? You, um… you forgot to delete their files about you.”

Ladybug drew in a deep breath. “…I didn’t forget. I left them on purpose.”

Chat Noir’s head came up sharply, and he stared at her. “My Lady…?” he breathed.

Ladybug shrugged uncomfortably, and wished her shoulders would stop hunching like that. It wasn’t very superheroic, was it? “It’s…” She laughed awkwardly. “Well, I… when I was looking at it, I sort of… opened their file on you by mistake,” she said in a rush. “And… I guess it just didn’t feel right not to share?”

Which wasn’t what had happened at all. But she’d been standing right there when the Avengers had been talking about their theories about Ladybug and Chat Noir. She hadn’t meant to… to pry second-hand, as it were, especially when she was the one who insisted that they keep their identities secret, even from each other. But she couldn’t not listen, either. So keeping the Avengers’ theories about her to herself, after she’d sort of spied on their theories about Chat Noir… it just didn’t feel right.

They were partners. There were some things they had to keep secret from each other, they couldn’t do anything about that. But this, she could do something about. Even if their theories about her had been… scarcely close, in places.

Although there had been some interesting gaps. Nothing in their file on her said anything about Black Widow’s suspicion that Marinette knew Ladybug. Maybe she’d figured that out after they’d made the files. Or maybe they’d deliberately left that out, as being too dangerous to write down.

There hadn’t been anything like that when she’d glanced at the file on Chat Noir, either. Although that was less surprising, because really. What were the odds that both of them had ended up meeting the Avengers without the masks?

…although, she hadn’t given him all the files. There was one image file in particular that she’d very carefully tucked away. Purely for tactical purposes. Just in case.

“Besides,” she added, suddenly serious. “If the Avengers figured this much out in a day or two… Papillon probably has, as well. What if he starts targeting people based on these ideas?” She made herself laugh a bit. “Although I think you’ll be safe, at least. I mean, they suggested you might be shy.”

Chat Noir hesitated, slowly lowering the baton. “Actually,” he said slowly, eyes not quite meeting hers, “that’s… accurate enough to be a little terrifying.”

Ladybug didn’t mean to gape at him. Yes, the explanation the Avengers had offered made sense, in an odd way, but… “Are you serious?”

Chat Noir rubbed the back of his head, grin a little too bright to be anything other than awkward. “Um. I’m… not so good with people, really. And I overact when I’m nervous?” he said sheepishly. “Seriously, I’m glad you didn’t see me when I went to meet Marinette, back when she was helping us with Evillustrator. I was so nervous, I think I’d have been shaking my paws off, if I weren’t also on the verge of laughing at myself, I was so over the top.” His grin steadied, a little rueful but with genuine laughter sparkling in his eyes. “I’m a little worried that Marinette came away thinking that I was so full of hot air I could float a balloon. You should have seen the faces she was making when she thought I wasn’t looking!”

…oops. Ladybug was very, very glad that even Chat Noir’s keen night vision wasn’t color-sensitive
enough to pick up on the blush. She’d thought he hadn’t noticed. And he had been silly. Even for him. And with Chat Noir, that was saying something.

Wait. “Why were you so nervous about that?” she asked, baffled. She’d just asked him to watch over Marinette, it hadn’t been that complicated. Unless…

Oh no. Please don’t let him have a crush on Marinette, she thought in a panic. Seriously, the universe does not need that much irony.

And… Chat Noir was giving her a Look. “You mean besides the fact that victims don’t lose their powers if they lose the item, only if it’s broken, and I can’t capture or cleanse an akuma, and I had no idea where you were or how to contact you?” He shook his head. “Even if Marinette had managed to get the pen away from him safely, I’d have had to protect her from an angry supervillain, without accidentally breaking the pen. Why wouldn’t I be nervous about something like that?”

Ladybug opened her mouth, then closed it.

She… hadn’t even thought about that. After all, she’d have been right there the whole time – not transformed, true, and that had been terrifying all on its own. But once they’d gotten the pen away, all she’d have had to do was get out of sight – and Chat Noir always got civilians out of the line of fire when a fight was on, it was one of the things that made him such a great partner, she could concentrate on the enemy without worrying about bystanders because she could trust that he’d look after them – and she’d be able to transform and take care of the akuma then and there. Easy.

She hadn’t considered what it would look like from Chat Noir’s point of view, having no idea where she was or how long it would take her to return. And if the pen had broken before she’d arrived…

The army of Stonehearts had been bad enough, and Stoneheart hadn’t had any particular special abilities. An army of Evillustrators? That was downright terrifying.

Ladybug winced. “I didn’t… Chat Noir, I’m so sorry. I… suppose I should have thought that plan through a little more.”

Chat Noir smiled at her – not his usual cocky grin, but something softer and warmer that probably would have made her heart flutter if not for Adrien. “It all worked out in the end,” he reminded her.

Then that soft grin turned distinctly mischievous. “Besides, my Lady. If I were inclaw’ned to hold a grudge, it would be over the fact that you left me all on my own. For nearly an hour. With Chloé Bourgeois.” He shuddered dramatically. “She tried to get me to do her physics homework.”

Ladybug stared at him for a long moment. Then, slowly, she raised her hands to cover her face. “Oh dear God. I am the most horrible partner ever. How do you even put up with me?” When Chat Noir just snickered good-naturedly, she spread her fingers slightly, peeking out between them as she gave in to curiosity. “Did you do the homework for her?”

“Of course not,” Chat Noir said virtuously. “Or… well, I might have done the reading assignment…” He smirked.

Ladybug burst out laughing. Of course he had. That was so utterly Chat Noir.

But when her laughter calmed, she noticed that Chat Noir was glancing at her almost hesitantly – as though he wanted to say something, but wasn’t certain how.

“What is it?”
“Well… the Black Widow had a gift for me, too. Sort of.” He’d taken the end of his tail in one hand and was twirling it absentely – a habit that Ladybug was fairly certain he’d picked up to keep it from twitching. “We talked a bit, while I was feeding my kwami. She had some advice.”

Ladybug blinked. “Really?” she asked, trying to decide how that felt. On the one hand… advice from another superheroine? An experienced one, who knew all about secrecy and things like that? Yes please!

On the other… advice. From the Black Widow. Eep?

Chat Noir nodded. “She suggested we find a way to communicate outside the masks.”

Ladybug bit her lip, thinking that through. “It does make sense,” she admitted. Their communicators only worked if both of them were transformed. Another means of communication would let them alert each other if they encountered an akuma. Or if for some reason they had to de-transform in the middle of a battle, which had happened a few times. “But…”

Chat Noir nodded grimly. “I’m having trouble thinking of something that couldn’t be traced. Even anonymous e-mails aren’t necessarily safe, if we get another Lady WiFi-type.”

Ladybug grimaced. “All it would take is one badly timed Facebook breakup,” she agreed, drumming her fingers against the yo-yo she’d settled back around her waist again in frustration-

And then paused, remembering her earlier line of thought. “What if we started patrols again?”

Chat Noir blinked at her. “My lady?” he asked.

“Or… not patrol-patrols. That was a silly idea to start with,” she admitted. “But what about… well, something like this?” She nodded at the empty roof around them. “Just, meeting up every now and then. It wouldn’t solve the communication problem, exactly, but we could at least keep each other mostly up to date on things that are going on. If one of us needs to leave the city for a week or two, for example.” Thus far, it hadn’t been a problem for her. Her parents weren’t all that big on traveling to begin with, not when they had the bakery to keep up, and they’d never pull her out of school. But the school year was almost over, and it wasn’t that uncommon for them to take a day or two off for short trips. She had no idea what Chat Noir’s situation was like, but odds were good that he had times when he’d have trouble making it to the scene quickly, too.

Chat Noir nodded slowly, and then hesitated for a moment before visibly bracing himself. “Black Widow also suggested… we give each other a way to learn what our real identities are. Just in case.”

Stiffening, Ladybug started to object, and then caught herself.

Yes, they’d agreed that it was too dangerous to share identities with Papillon looming over the city. Tikki had admitted she honestly did not know if someone who carried a Miraculous would be immune to possession by the akuma or not; they’d never really run into a situation quite like this before. Ladybug had decided to be proactive on that front and keep an eye on her own emotions; she’d seen enough victims by now to know what sorts of mindsets Papillon preyed on. But careful wasn’t the same thing as safe. It was just too dangerous.

Well. To say she and Chat Noir agreed on it wasn’t really true. He’d thought that sharing their identities would be worth the risk. But when Ladybug said no, he’d acceded to her wishes, and he’d never brought the topic up again.

A boy who knows the meaning of ‘no’? a mental voice suspiciously similar to her mother’s chuckled. Hang on to that one!
To be honest, she’d actually thought about telling him. After all, if there were anyone in the world she could reveal her identity to, it would be Chat Noir. He was her partner. Which was a concept she’d never really quite understood until she’d experienced it. Alya was her best friend, sure; they hung out, giggled together, encouraged and teased each other. And Adrien… was Adrien.

But Chat Noir knew her, even if they didn’t know each other’s real names and faces. He could read what she needed from him without either of them saying more than a word or two, would always have her back, and would shake her by the shoulders or just stand there and breathe with her, whatever she needed. And she’d do the same for him.

More than that… Chat Noir, of all people, had no illusions about Ladybug. He’d seen her at her best, and he’d seen her at her worst. He called her out on the things she did when her temper was up. He knew just how much of a klutz she could be – he still teased her about how they’d met, sometimes, or joked about the lumps on his head from all the times she’d dropped her yo-yo on him. When she’d nearly given up the idea of being Ladybug, he’d been the one to remind her of the good things she’d already accomplished. He knew Ladybug the Hero and Ladybug the person.

Besides. It would be kind of fun to hang out with someone who was even dorkier than she was.

“You have an idea?” she asked, careful to keep her voice and face controlled and neutral. Because she still stood firm on her decision that no one could know who they were – not even them. But Chat Noir knew that, and he’d never pushed her on it, and that meant he had an alternative, or he wouldn’t have brought it up at all.

Chat Noir nodded. “That’s why I suggested we meet here,” he admitted, gesturing at the roof, with its empty gravel between two doors leading to stairwells, one on either end of the rectangular area. “I was thinking… you go over there and hide behind that stairwell. I hide behind the other one. That way, neither of us can see each other. Even if we tried, the other would hear the gravel. And there’s no one around who can see us, not if we’re sitting down below the level of the wall.”

“And then?” Ladybug asked, trying not to sound nervous.

Chat Noir drew in a deep breath. “Then both of us de-transform – and we send our kwami to talk to each other.”

Ladybug’s jaw dropped slightly. “Our…”

Oh. Oh.

Oh, that made sense. Tikki never left her side, and she suspected that Chat Noir’s kwami was the same. And then… “Even if one of us is possessed,” she said slowly, “our kwami will have somewhere to go for help. They can grab the Miraculous and run.” Better than that, the kwami would be able to warn the other one that their partner had been possessed, that they couldn’t count on back-up.

Chat Noir looked away. “It’s… a little more than that,” he said, his voice oddly tight.

Worried now, Ladybug waited.

Chat Noir was quiet for a long moment – or at least, he didn’t say anything. But he was breathing, slow and steady and controlled, as though bracing himself.

“…My mom’s been missing for over a year now.”

Ladybug jerked. “Chaton…!” she said sharply, not sure if it was warning or concern.
He shook his head at her. “No more details than that,” he said firmly. “I promise. But… it’s important. Because my dad’s been just… dying a little more every day, ever since then. It’s not just that she’s gone. It’s that we don’t know what happened. She just… walked out one day and never came home.” He turned shadowed eyes on her, biting his lower lip for a moment. “My lady… I don’t…” He made a sharp, frustrated gesture with one hand, echoed by a single lash of his tail before he got it under control again. But his ears were twitching back and forth, betraying his agitation. “I just… What if that happens to us one day? One of us just… vanishes, and never appears again? If we do this… we’ll at least be able to find out. One way or another.”

His voice had been getting tighter and tighter as he spoke. Before it could break entirely, Ladybug stepped closer to put a hand on his shoulder. He twitched, then stopped talking. “It’s a good plan,” she told him, smiling. “That was always something that worried me – if something happened to me, what would happen to my kwami? This way, they’ll have somewhere safe to go. And…”

She trailed off. She’d never lost anyone, not really, let alone the kind of painful, gaping absence that she never would have imagined was hiding behind Chat Noir’s grin.

Adrien’s mother is missing, too, she thought with a sudden pang. Does he feel like that, too?

That was awful. And she didn’t want anyone else to have to go through that. Not if there was something she could do to prevent it.

So she nodded. “Okay. Do you have a snack for your kwami?”

He visibly shook himself as she took her hand off his shoulder, and had to cough once before nodding. “Yeah,” he said, forcedly casual and relaxed. “I always carry a little, just in case, ever since Mr. Pigeon.”

“That’s a good idea,” Ladybug said ruefully. She’d tried carrying backup cookies for Tikki, for a little while, but… um. Teenage girl, chocolate chip cookies… the ending of that story was kind of a foregone conclusion, no matter how hard she’d tried to resist. Tikki had found the whole thing hilarious.

Chat Noir shrugged. “Only way I can get him to do anything, really,” he said, rolling his eyes a little, and stepped back. “In that case – we should probably get this done, then transform back and go home. I’ve got some things I need to do.”

Ladybug thought of the book report sitting on her desk and winced. “Likewise,” she admitted. But… there was one more thing, she realized suddenly, recalling her earlier thoughts. “Chat Noir?”

Already walking toward the far stairwell, he looked over his shoulder, blinking at her. “What you said to Peacemonger, back then…” she said slowly. “You volunteered for this?”

He grinned shamelessly. “Well, more or less? I mean, the Miraculous just showed up in my room that day, my kwami popped out… I couldn’t say yes fast enough.”

Ladybug winced a little, looking away. “I didn’t,” she admitted quietly. “I said no. And after people started turning into statues because we hadn’t caught the akuma… I took the Miraculous off. I tried to give it away…”

She’d never told him that. Sure, he’d seen her waverling, when Sabrina’s father had shouted that
she’d had her chance and blown it, but…

To her surprise, Chat Noir just smiled at her. “So you weren’t sure at first? That’s probably a good thing, you know.”

She stared at him.

“Which of us jumped into it so fast he didn’t even know how our powers worked?” Chat Noir asked, still smiling, if a little wryly. “Someone needs to look before they leap. One reckless idiot is enough for our team, don’t you think?”

Ladybug bit back a startled laugh. That… was Chat Noir, through and through.

Shaking her head in amusement, she turned and headed for the stairwell.

Marinette shivered a little.

Not that it was cold, exactly. It was a nice night, and her black shirt handled the slight breeze dancing over the rooftop just fine.

That didn’t stop her from feeling very, very exposed, sitting on gravel with her back against a concrete stairwell entrance, on the roof of an old warehouse that Marinette Dupain-Cheng had no business being anywhere near, with her kwami cuddled in her hands.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this, Tikki?” she asked, worried.

The kwami smiled brightly at her. “Definitely! You were right. It’s a good plan. And you two are partners, after all. It could be useful, having a way to find each other quickly in an emergency.”

“I know,” Marinette agreed. “It’s just… risky.”

“Not as much as you’d think,” Tikki said thoughtfully. “Plagg and I are the only ones that we know can’t be possessed. The information’s safe with us; we know how to keep secrets.” She floated up to Marinette’s eye level before winking mischievously. “Besides, I haven’t had a chance to properly talk to that little sourpuss in years. This will be fun!”

With that, she darted away, actually passing through the concrete wall of the stairwell rather than flying around it.

Marinette sighed, drawing up her knees so that she could rest her arms on them. In her head, she knew this should be safe. The roof wasn’t that big. Even if Papillon attacked right here, right now, she and Chat Noir were close enough to the kwami to transform immediately. Nothing was going to grab them.

Faintly, Marinette heard the familiar sweet, almost chirping voice of Tikki, although it was muffled enough by the distance and the stairwell that she couldn’t make out any sort of words, assuming that kwami even used French when they were talking to each other. Because accompanying Tikki’s voice was another one, also high but not quite as much, a little more nasal, with a kind of drawling cadence to it.

That must be Chat Noir’s kwami.

The thought shocked through Marinette with a force almost like a static shock. Here she was, sitting
out of sight behind a stairwell… and on the other side of the roof, the other side of the other stairwell, there was a blond boy about her age, with green eyes – probably? His transformation did change them in a way hers didn’t, obviously. A boy who cared about her enough to put her wishes ahead of his own, who’d sacrificed himself for her once, even if she’d managed to undo that timeline. A boy who was something more than a best friend, who she might actually have fallen for if not for Adrien, but who was close to her in a way that she wasn’t sure even Adrien could ever match, because he understood her, and she him, without either of them even thinking about it.

A boy with a face she’d never actually seen, and a name she’d never heard.

Marinette huffed a frustrated laugh, tugging at her ponytails. Because to be honest?

She didn’t think about Chat Noir’s secret identity. She didn’t think about his secret identity a lot. Sometimes, when she was particularly tired or stressed, she’d catch herself spending hours not thinking about who he might really be, instead of working on her calculus.

Just like she spent every bus ride across the city most definitely not staring out the window and sitting up just a bit every time she saw a flash of blond hair, wondering if it was hiding bright green eyes and a grin that invited you to laugh along with him. Paris was a big city, after all. Whoever Chat Noir really was, he could be anywhere. Anyone.

Or maybe he goes to the same school as me. She’d never really considered what it meant, that both of them always turned up at the scene so fast.

Not that she hadn’t considered the possibility before. She’d just dismissed it as ridiculous, because seriously? All the schools in Paris, and Ladybug and Chat Noir both ended up in the same one? As if!

Besides. Yes, they were just as affected by the glamour as anyone else – which was a good thing, because that meant Papillon couldn’t see through it, either. But surely she’d know her own partner if she happened to bump into him!

On the other hand… it never really occurred to me that he might be shy, either…

There was an odd, hiccupping little squeak, followed by a thump and more squeaking. Marinette blinked, straightening a little. She knew that sound.

Did Tikki just… fall out of the air laughing?

“Nyeh-heh-heh…”

Adrien sighed, pushing back from his computer screen as it shut down. The good news was, the warehouse rendezvous had apparently gone unnoticed by the people of Paris. Although they’d have to set up a few alternatives and switch between them erratically, if they stayed with Ladybug’s plan to meet up occasionally in the evening. The bad news…

Swiveling in his chair, Adrien eyed the little black kwami who hadn’t stopped cackling at him from the moment he’d de-transformed after returning to his room. “Plagg, you’re starting to scare me here.”

Plagg just snickered. “Kid? I want a camera.”
Adrien blinked. “Why…?” he asked warily.

“Because when you learn who Ladybug is, your face is going to be better than cheese.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m aware that Astruc has declared that Ladybug and Chat Noir patrol Paris, in one of his Twitter feeds. I choose to ignore this because, A, it doesn’t show up in the TV show canon at all (at least as of yet), and B, it makes no sense. Two people can’t hope to cover all of Paris, and they’d quickly give away their general location simply because of the limited range of their patrols. The odds of actually finding an akuma are astronomically low. And using up their kwami’s energy going out and looking for petty crime to stop, when they’re the only ones who can take on Papillon’s supervillains, is simply irresponsible.

Don’t even get me started on the fact that we’re supposed to believe that Marinette missed a class because she was rescuing a cat from a tree. As Ladybug. (Though there’s a potential storyline there about Marinette getting so enthused about the savior-of-Paris thing that she starts neglecting her normal life…)

Intervening when there’s a crime right in front of them? Definitely. Heck, that reflexive urge to help is how Adrien and Marinette were chosen to begin with. Throwing everything aside when they hear about a crisis that they have the ability to avert (like that crashing helicopter flashback)? Also something they’d do. But nighttime patrols when they’re already leading very busy double-lives and need the sleep? I don’t see that lasting very long.

Marinette did not impress me in Evillustrator. At all. Bad enough that she stormed out on Chloé’s protection detail and left Chat Noir to deal with that girl on his own (that alone probably counts as a Hero Fail!), but she then went home and detransformed. When she knows that Chat Noir has no way to safely defuse a supervillain on his own, and that they cannot contact each other except when both of them are transformed. They got lucky when Evillustrator switched his attention from Chloé to Marinette herself. Which was part of her character development, I think… I just wish they’d pointed out that irresponsibility a bit more!

I’ve never really bought into the fandom trope of “Marinette feels like she doesn’t measure up to Ladybug.” Yes, Marinette has an insecure streak – that was made very clear in the Origins episodes. But the Marinette we meet throughout the rest of the series usually handles her insecurity, not by timidity, but by being aggressive and, sometimes, touchy. (See the whole “insisting that she doesn’t need help when she can’t see a thing” in Climatika. That sort of behavior is a classic sign of insecurity.) The one time the question of revealing her identity to Chat Noir does come up, in Lady WiFi, she’s regretful but firm, not nervous; it’s a calculated decision, not an emotional one. And her later conversation with Tikki makes it clear that she would have liked to tell Chat Noir, but she decided that keeping their identities secret would be the smart thing to do.

As for her actions around Adrien – and note, it’s only Adrien… she’s not shy. She’s awkward. There’s a difference!
(Mind, I wouldn’t be surprised if the series tries to claim that’s the case, at some point, because it’s a popular trope for the superhero genre. But if it does, they’re going to be taking what we’ve already seen in the narrative and forcing it to fit a Procrustean bed.)

Besides. With the Origins episodes, we know that Chat Noir is perfectly aware that Ladybug is sometimes unsure of herself (he had to give her a pep talk!), and that she can be a klutz (look at how they met; that was an epic Crash-Into Hello!). And she knows he knows.

Likewise, Chat Noir has shown no signs of pushing the topic of identities, outside of "Lady Wi-Fi." He’s made it clear he would like to know, and that he thinks they can trust each other with their real identities. But all it takes is one clear “no” from Ladybug, and he accepts it, even though it’s hard. This is a very important part of his character – the fact that he knows how to take “no” for an answer. Chat Noir’s meant to be a different sort of hero, a role model, and respecting peoples’ boundaries is a very big part of that.

It’s always struck me that Adrien seems to keep camembert on hand for emergencies (excepting the Mr. Pigeon incident, where he has to ask for some – I headcanon that said episode was fairly early in the chronology, and Adrien decided he’d learned his lesson and took to keeping some on hand), while Marinette has had to scrounge for cookies pretty much every time. Then it occurred to me that there’s a very easy explanation. Adrien, canonically, hates camembert cheese. It seems very likely that Marinette does not hate chocolate chip cookies. Her emergency supply likely has a bad habit of vanishing…

(There’s also the mild fact that Adrien needs to bribe Plagg to do anything – and camembert’s harder to find than cookies. That would encourage him to keep a stash!)

End Notes

Kamaete (thegoldenavenger on Tumblr) drew some art for the fic! (Warning, there are spoilers.)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!