

## Wed Locked

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# Wed Locked

by [BroadwayCutie16](#)

## Summary

Okay, good news and bad news. The GOOD news is, Sabine is actually the younger sister of the King of Coccidellenae. He summons his sister and her family to the kingdom. Marinette is happy to get away from it all for a while.

The bad news?

Its not for a while. The King had a deal made with the neighboring King and Queen of Simosa, that would unite their kingdoms. The friendship will be cemented by a marriage between their son and a young woman from the Cheng royal clan.

Marinette's uncle decides that SHE will be that young woman.

After Lila's lies unravel back home, Adrien, Alya, Nino and the class gets back in contact with Marinette, and are relieved to receive her forgiveness. Their joy is short-lived once they learn of Marinette's impending nuptials. They fly to the kingdom to save her, only to find themselves struggling to find a way free her from her royal duty.

As if that wasn't enough, the bridegroom seems pretty shifty to Adrien. He and Marinette will have to figure out what's lurking beneath the surface of all this white silk and wedding bells- and maybe uncover some buried feelings-before she is forced down the aisle.

## Prologue

Rong sat still from where he sat. He could scarcely believe what he had just been told. "Are you certain?"

His head of international security nodded. "As certain as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west." He reached into his robes and pulled out a tablet. "While I was on that undercover mission in Paris, France, I stopped in a local bakery—a boulangerie, as they call it there—for something to fuel me for the task ahead. And when I entered, there she was."

He held up the screen towards Rong, so that he could see the photos taken by the spy's hidden camera on his clothes. A smiling Asian woman stood at the counter, wearing a Chinese-style white top and a lotus blossom in her short, dark hair. She was much older than she had been when Rong had seen her last, but her face glowed and her eyes laughed in the same way he remembered.

"Sabine...after all these years..."

"That's not all.", the agent continued, swiping for more photos. "She co-owns that bakery with her husband."

Rong's eyes widened at thar last word. "Husband?"

"A Frenchman.", explained the agent, pointing to a picture of Sabine next to a man. He was tall and bulky and covered in flour from his simple clothing to his bushy brown mustache, but his eyes were kind and his face was sweet, there was no denying the adoration he and Sabine shared in a single glance.

"By the name of Tom Dupain. Even in the brief time I was in that bakery, I could tell that he is a good man."

Rong smiled gently at the photos presented. "I'm glad she has found happiness. But, be that as it may, she still must return home. And since she has married, the husband must come with her."

"Oh, but my lord,", said the agent. "I have yet to tell you the final piece of the puzzle." He paused for dramatic effect, then swiped on the tablet. "They have a daughter."

Rong sat up straight when he saw the next photo appear on the tablet. The girl in the photo was lovely. Her hair was as dark as the night sky with highlights of blue shining in the natural sunlight. Her round eyes were as blue as the ocean that stretched towards their great land. Her pink lips formed a smile that made anyone feel at ease. At just one glance at this picture, Rong could see that this young lady possessed all the striking yet comforting beauties and airs that her mother did. In fact, even at first glance, she reminded him so much of Sabine at a young age.

"Her name is Marinette.", his agent told him. "She is fifteen years old. Charming girl, makes a good first impression. Happy and bubbly, with that certain charisma that Sabine was so beloved for. In fact, she is very much like Sabine was at that age."

Rong stared at the photograph, the wheels in his head turning. This could solve their recent problem.

"Leave me the tablet."

The agent placed the tablet on the floor at Rong's feet. The higher man nodded. "You have served me well. Go see Officer Xio for your reward."

The agent bowed and mumbled gratitude, before graciously leaving the room.

Once he was gone, Rong picked up the tablet and held it close to his face, studying every detail and feature of the likeness of Sabine's daughter captured on film.

"Marinette...", he mumbled to no one in particular. "Your life is about to change."

# Royal Bombshell

Marinette sighed as she walked home from school. Another day, another eight hours of Lila sprouting all sorts of wild stories about her fascinating life as an inspiration for princes and rockstars. Another eight hours of the whole class, minus Adrien, catering to her every whim. Another day of Marinette being invisible.

She supposed she should be grateful. The tension between her and her friends wasn't nearly as bad as Lila had promised that it would be. Sure, they still rolled her eyes at her when she acted cold towards Lila, when it seemed like all she was doing was trying to be friends. But they still hung out and acted friendly with her when it did not concern Lila.

It was taking all of Marinette's strength to keep it that way. It was especially hard without Adrien's help. On the contrary, he was rewarding Lila and her lies by being her friend in public. She had even appeared with him in some photoshoots! It had hurt, really. She had thought that Adrien had had her back. But perhaps that had been a lie of his own. Perhaps he really didn't care.

If that was so, than it was a good thing that she had decided to let him go after the Miracle Queen Crisis. It was time she moved on and found a boy who returned her affections, one who did not clearly have her in his friend zone

At least it was all over for today. At least now Marinette could go home and relax before she threw herself back into the whirlwind first thing tomorrow. She looked both ways, crossed the street, grabbed the door handle, and opened the door to the boulganrie.

"Maman! Papa!", she called put as she stepped inside and slipped off her backpack. "I'm home!" As she dropped her bag off at the door, she paused, expecting to hear them call out to her from the back of the kitchen.

Instead, she heard their voices from upstairs.

"Marinette? We're upstairs. And...we have company."

Marinette blinked twice. She had not been informed that they would be having visitors. Still, maybe this would cheer her up after an exhausting day of dealing with Lila. Taking her purse, she made sure Tikki was hidden inside before she dashed up the steps. Coming to the next floor, she opened the door to the family living room. What she saw in there made every muscle in her body freeze.

Her parents were there, alright. Her mother were sitting on the sofa and looking over their shoulders at her daughter. But she did not look happy. In fact, she looked very sad, even a little bit ashamed. Her father could not look at her, his head bowed. But that was not the first thing that Marinette noticed.

What she noticed first were the splendidly-dressed Chinese couple that stood before the Dupain-Chengs, blocking the view of the TV set with their wide, ancient-styled Chinese

robes and elaborate hairstyles. The man was dressed in black and looked twice as old as Sabine, his dark hair pulled up into a high Chinese man-bun, his dark eyes stern and cold as he set them upon Marinette, who felt a chill go up and down her spine.

The woman was not much older, and her robes gleamed with vibrant pastels and gold designs, her hair piled and braided atop her head with decorations of gold woven through. Her eyes were lined with black coal, making them pop like a cat's eye, and her lips were painted cherry red, their form squeezed into a tight pout as she stared up at Marinette like a statue.

Sabine smiled at her daughter, but it was a forced, weak smile. "Marinette...come sit down."

The blunette was confused, but she obeyed, coming over to sit between her parents. She saw her father was staring at his lap as if it were the most groundbreaking thing he had ever seen in his life. This scared Marinette. She had never seen her papa so shocked, so silent, so...emotionless.

Turning back to Sabine, her blue eyes were alit with fear. "Maman...who are these people?", she asked in a trembling voice. She hadn't a clue what was going on, and that terrified her.

Sabine took in a breath, a shuddery one, looked at her lap, and gestured a hand towards the couple before them. "Marinette...this is your Great Aunt Cheng Jun and her husband, Wang."

Marinette stared up at the two, her blue eyes widening. Her mother hardly spoke of her family back in China. Her Great Uncle Cheng Shifu had been an exception. And even then, he would not speak to his niece's daughter about any other relatives.

Jun walked to stand in front of Marinette and pointed a finger at the younger girl, the sleeve of her silk robe sliding down her wrist. "Stand."

The tone she spoke in was so calm and composed yet so cold and firm that Marinette rose to her feet without question. Her head bowed down, afraid to meet her aunt's eye, but her ears caught every word.

"Hmm...good posture, nice figure..." Jun clicked her tongue. "For a girl who lives in a bakery, you're awfully skinny."

Jun took Marinette's chin in her fingers and tilted her head up so that their eyes met. The look on Jun's eyes was so cold and emotionless, like the eyes of a statue, that Marinette felt a chill go all through her body.

"Clear eyes...good for threading needles. No acne, strange at that age." Jun squinted at the dusting of freckles across Marinette's nose. "Well, she's no great beauty, but I suppose she's pretty enough."

Marinette had had enough. She swatted her aunt's hand away, earning a pair of horrified gasp from her aunt and uncle, and stared the elder woman dead in the eye. "Let's cut the criticism and tell me why you're here."

Jun looked down at her, irritated. "I see you inherited your mother's quick tongue and temper. Shame." She looked back at her niece, who was still looking away. "Shouldn't you tell her, Sabine? I mean, you are her mother. Isn't it your duty to let her know who she really is?"

Marinette whirled around to face her mother, her eyes clouded with confusion and fear. "Maman, what's going on?!"

Sabine took another shuddery breath, and Marinette could clearly see the tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. "I always planned to tell you one day, when you were old enough to understand. I suppose one day is today." She raised her head to meet her daughter's gaze, her own wet. "I am the Princess of Coccidellnae."

Marinette felt as if the ground had been pulled out from under her feet. "W-What?" She looked at her father, who faced her with a sad gaze, then back at her mother's tear-stained face. "Maman...is this some sort of joke? Because if it is, it is not funny!"

"It's not a joke, Macaroon.", said Tom gently. This made Marinette shut up. Her father had not called her Macaroon since she was seven. This was serious.

Sabine went on. "I was born in Coccidellnae, a small country that bordered China. My father was the King, and he was raising me and my older brother, his heir, Rong, by himself after our mother died when I was twelve. I have no doubt that he loved me and Rong with all his heart, and only wanted the best for us. But what he thought was best for us did not bring us happiness."

"My father was conservative and very old-fashioned. He always put so much pressure on the two of us. Rong to be the exact kind of strict, unmerciful, somewhat cold ruler that Papa was, and me to be the perfect proper princess. He always taught me that good girls were seen and not heard, servile to men, and partake in only ladylike hobbies, certainly not messy baking and video-games."

"He was dead set on marrying me off to the man of his choice, not the man of my choice, when I came of age. Well, I'd put up with a lot of my father's expectations up until that point, but that was where I drew the line. Before my fifteenth birthday, I ran away from that country and immigrated on my own to France, and I never looked back."

After her mother had finished her story, Marinette's head was spinning. Her mother had been a princess?! She was descended from royalty?! For the first few moments, Marinette couldn't speak. She made a few sounds, then managed to string together some words.

"But...Uncle Shifu...he..."

"...gave up his royal title to follow his dream of being a chef.", finished Sabine. "He taught me how to cook behind my father's back. When he visited, he promised not to tell you anything about our family."

Marinette couldn't feel her legs. Surely, she thought, this was some sort of dream that she was having, and any minute now, she would wake up in her bed as Marinette Dupain-Cheng,

a normal girl with a normal life, and not the daughter of a runaway Chinese princess. She waited. And waited. And waited. But the illusion did not fade away. Because this was real.

Marinette looked back at her papa. "Did you know about this?"

Tom nodded, looking flushed and ashamed. "Yes...your mother told me when I proposed. She already knew I loved her without the crown. She wanted to see if I could accept her despite it, too. And I did. And I kept my promise to her and never told another soul. Then, when you were born, we agreed we would tell you when we both thought you would understand. We just didn't expect that day to be thrust on us like this."

Sabine rose to her feet and took Marinette's hands in her own. "Sweetie, please understand...I never regretted my decision to leave. Your father, this bakery, you...its everything I've ever wanted. I never told you before because I didn't know how you'd react. Please don't hate me." She looked so scared, scared of rejection, scared of anger.

But her fears were vanquished by the sweet smile of her daughter. "Maman, you had nothing to worry about. I totally get it. Its kinda a bombshell." All three laughed, the air around them much lighter than it had been a few minutes ago.

"Well, wasn't that a sweet moment.", remarked Jun, recapturing everyone's attention. "Back to the matter at hand. Sabine, we're here on your brother's command."

Sabine blinked twice. "Rong? Rong sent you? How is he doing? I haven't seen him in so long...not since I..." She didn't need to finish that sentence.

"He is doing well.", said Jun in a stony tone, no feeling whatsoever. "He took the throne many years ago after your father passed on."

Sabine gasped softly at the mention of her father's death. Marinette's heart wrenched at her mother's grief-stricken expression. It was clear that although the King had been stern with his daughter and set impossible expectations for her, she had still loved him dearly.

"Yes...quite tragic.", Jun commented, again with no sadness. "But Rong is King now. And he has missed you dearly over the years. He wants you and your family to come home at once. He insists on meeting his new brother-in-law and niece."

Jun looked at Tom and Marinette respectively at the mentions of them. "We have a limo parked outside. We'll be waiting while you pack your things."

And with that, she and her husband marched proudly out of the room before anyone could utter a word of protest.

Marinette's eyes were wide. "Go to Coccidellnae?"

Sabine shook her head. "Marinette, its okay, we're not going anywhere! I'll just tell Aunt Jun that—"

Marinette quickly raised her hands to stop her mother's rant. "No, Mom! I want to go!"



Sabine blinked twice. "You do?"

"Of course!", her daughter exclaimed, excitement written all over her face. "I want to meet the rest of my family! I want to explore my culture!"

"And I want to meet my in-laws!", said Tom, happy as a clam. "I want them to know just how much I love their daughter, niece, cousin, granddaughter, etcetera, etcetera."

"Please Maman..." Marinette's voice became softer at this part. "Just for a few days."

She shot them with the sad bunny look, a trick she had not pulled since she was ten. Marinette hoped it was working. Despite all she had done to relieve the stress that had been piled on her shoulders, she still felt stretched thin. Maybe some time from all the drama was just what she needed right now.

Sabine took a deep breath in through her nose. "Well...maybe a little family vacation wouldn't hurt. I'll call the school and tell them you won't be in for a while. You two go pack, and I'll keep all our friends up to date—while leaving out the royalty part."

Marinette squealed and hugged her mother. "This is gonna be so much fun!"

Sabine watched her husband and their daughter race upstairs to pack for the trip, hiding a storm of worry behind a smile. They had been so excited, she hadn't the heart to tell them why she was hesitant on going to Coccidellenae—because she feared that once they left France, they would never be able to return.

## Adrien & the Truth

Adrien arrived at class a little later than usual. He had had a photoshoot early that morning and had to finish before he came to school. The first thing he noticed was that Lila was sitting in the front, right in Nino's usual spot, while said bespectacled boy was sitting in Marinette's spot.

"Hi, Adrien.", said the brunette, batting her eyelashes at him.

Adrien fought the urge to roll his eyes. "Hi.", he said flatly.

He looked up towards the back, expecting to see Marinette sitting there. But to his surprise, she wasn't there. He looked over at Alya. "Where's Marinette?"

"Oh, she's not here yet.", said Alya.

Adrien's brow furrowed. "Did you ask her if it was okay for you to give her seat to Nino?"

"Nah. She won't mind. Or at least she shouldn't."

Her answer sent Adrien into shock. Alya was just giving away her friend's seat, without her permission or even a heads up? Did she not remember what Marinette had to do to earn back that seat from Chloe? "Shouldn't you see if she's okay with it before you do so?"

"But Lila needs my seat in the front dude.", his friend explained. "Her tinnitus is acting up again."

Adrien suppressed a growl. The ol' tinnitus card again. It figured. He avoided Lila's gaze, lest he reveal a nasty glare. At first, Lila's lies had seemed harmless to him. After all, all she was doing was making up silly stories because she wanted people to like her.

But after what had she had done, first getting Nathalie and the Gorilla in trouble with his father, then framing Marinette for theft, leading to her expulsion, Adrien had realized that he had sorely misjudged Lila, especially since both misdeeds had led to akumatizations. He had initially thought she was a lonely girl, who was desperate to have friends, and a part of him had sympathized with that. But now he saw who she really was—a conniving, two-faced shrew who would do anything to stay on top.

He didn't know how to prove that Lila was a liar. She was too good at keeping that part of herself hidden. And there was no way he could convince her to save Marinette without giving her something in return. Lila was not the kind of girl who would do something without compensation. Adrien had to make it worth her while. So he struck a deal with her—clear Marinette's name, leave her alone, and he would be her friend. She agreed.

He couldn't tell Marinette why he was acting so chummy with Lila all of the sudden, while knowing that she was a lying witch. If he did, and Lila found out, it could be enough for her

to consider the deal null and void. She didn't want anyone to know that Adrien was only hanging with her because he wanted to keep Marinette safe, especially not Mari herself.

Then, out of the blue, Gabriel decided to make Lila his muse and include her in photoshoots with his son, and Adrien couldn't protest out of fear that Gabriel might keep him from school and all his friends. He tried to stay positive, but the stress of keeping up the charade was getting to him, not to mention he feared Marinette might hate him now.

He looked back at Nino. "Okay, so she needs the seat. I get that. And it was nice of you to give it to her. But why do you have to take Marinette's seat? Why can't you move to the back?"

Nino and Alya stared at him like he had suddenly gained an extra set of eyes. They were not used to their passive, reserved friend being so abrasive. He was usually so accommodating to everyone, sometimes even to a fault.

He stood there for a moment, waiting for them to come up with a good answer. But all that came from their end was silence. Adrien glared at his friends as he adjusted his backpack. "You know what? You can sit with Lila, Nino. I'll move to the back."

He started the trek up the stairs, ignoring his friends cries that he did not have to do that. But he did. He got to sit with Marinette, or she got her seat back. Either way, he could not sit next to that liar. He was seething underneath his calm, composed surface.

As he slid into the back row, Mme. Bustier entered the room. "Welcome, class. Hope ypur brains are ready for today's lesson."

She turned to the blackboard. "Madame?"

She turned back around to see Adrien's hand raised up high. "Yes, Adrien?"

"Shouldn't we wait for Marinette to get here?", he asked.

Mme. Bustier shook her head. "Don't worry about her, Adrien. Madame Cheng called to tell me that she and her family are going on a little vacation. They'll be gone for a while."

Adrien sat up. "How long will they be gone?"

"She didn't say.", said Mme. Bustier. "But she told me that she'll call as soon as she gets a certain return date." She turned to the blackboard, only to turn back once more at the sound of Lila's voice.

"Wait! My tinnitus! Its gone again! Must be better now! I'll just go sit in the back!"

This time, Adrien could not hold back his groan.

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Later, as the class filed out one by one, Nino walked up to Adrien. "Dude, what's the deal with you?", he asked, irritated. "You're starting to act like Marinette did when Lila first got back. Marinette didn't tell you anything, did she?"

That peeved Adrien off. So now Marinette was brainwashing him against Lila? As if sweet, thoughtful Mari would ever do that. What kind of spell had Lila put on their friends?

"She didn't tell me anything.", said Adrien. "I just think its kinda rude that you pushed Marinette to the back without her permission. Don't you remember when school started? How hard she fought to earn her seat back from Chloe? I know she was late, but that doesn't mean you should make decisions for her without her. The least you could have done is shoot her a text to ask if it was okay."

Nino and Alya looked nervous, perhaps even a little ashamed. They hadn't thought of that.

"We thought it would be okay...you know, she's always so helpful...at least she used to be, before Lila showed up. You should've seen her at lunch the first day Lila came back from Achu. She was so mad that we were bringing Lila lunch."

"Wait...you brought her lunch?", exclaimed Adrien. "Why?"

"Because her wrist was hurt!", said Nino.

Adrien looked at him strangely. Another injury? How many afflictions could one person get?

"Anyway, Marinette was pretty upset, probably 'cause she was jealous, so she threw a napkin at Lila. Who caught it, but only to save Max."

"Adrien blinked. "Save Max? What are you talking about?"

"Lila said she once saw a man's eye get gouged out by a napkin."

Adrien simply gaped at the two. "A napkin?!", he snapped. "You seriously believed that?! How can a napkin gouge out an eye?! And isn't Max wearing glasses?" Are you seriously that stupid?, was the question that Adrien did not say. How could his friends be so gullible?

Nino and Alya looked surprised, then mad.

"Oh my God, you sound just like Marinette!", said Alya. "You're bullying Lila, just like she was!"

That made Adrien freeze, rendered him speechless. Marinette was the bully? She was bullying Lila? From what he was hearing, it seemed to be the other way around. And worst of all, he had been letting her get away with it.

Alya and Nino scoffed and left him alone, stunned and angry. Angry that they would so easily turn their backs on Marinette. Alya had been her best friend for almost a year now, and Nino had known her since they were little. After everything that had happened, everything she had done for them, she didn't even get the benefit of the doubt? That mere thought disgusted him.

He looked in his bookbag and realized he had forgotten a pencil in the classroom. He turned to go back into the classroom, and was surprised to see Lila still there. Not wanting to risk

being alone with her anywhere, he decided to hide and wait for her to leave.

He listened closely when he heard her chuckle to herself. "Family vacation? When I faked that call from my mom, I came up with a better excuse than that."

Adrien gasped softly. He had known Lila had cut school, but he had often wondered how she had done it. Now he knew, she faked a phone call from her mother to get excused from class.

Stop, Adrien., he thought. Her cutting school doesn't hurt anyone but herself. The consequences will catch up to her there sooner or later.

"This is perfect.", Lila continued, snickering. "Without her around, I can easily convince her friends that she's a total witch. No niceness to sway their opinions. I can start all sorts of nasty rumors to turn them against her, and she won't be able to prove them fake. Maybe I'll tell them they insulted her behind their backs, or how she's been picking on me. By the time she gets back, she'll be completely alone. That'll teach her to mess with my popularity."

She spun on her heel and strode out of the room confidentially, never once noticing Adrien hiding behind the door, having heard every word. Anger surged through his body.

"I can't believe her!", he yelled, as Plagg poked his head out. "We had a deal! I become her friend, and she leaves Marinette alone. First, she lies about Marinette, then breaks her promises...do words mean nothing to her?"

"Don't get all upset, kid.", said Plagg.

Adrien looked at Lila's retreating form with an icy glare. "I'm sorry, Plagg, its just...I keep giving her chances, and she wastes all of them."

"Well, I think she's gotten enough chances.", said Plagg. "I know you want to see the good in people, because if you can't, you'd have to give up on your father. But I think its time to expose her."

"How, Plagg?", asked Adrien, running his hands through his flaxen blond locks. "I can't just come on out and say, 'Lila's a liar'. That's what Marinette did, and no one believed her. And she's the most trustworthy person I know. If her word's not enough for them, what good will mine be?" He was in a dead end. "What do I do, Plagg?"

"Simple. Get proof.", said Plagg.

"How?", asked his chosen.

The kwami flew out. "I've kept this to myself, because I thought it was an obvious solution, and you were just avoiding it because you were making excuses for Lila. Looking back though, you have always been a little dense when it comes to...certain things. So, I guess I'll just have to tell you."

He hovered by Adrien's ear and whispered the plan into his canal. With every word, Adrien's sunny face grew brighter and brighter.

"Plagg, that's genius!", he said once his kwami was finishing explaining. "Thank you! Its perfect!"

He looked out the room, where Lila was being fawned over by their classmates. "You had one last chance, Lila Rossi.", he said sternly. "And you blew it. I'm done protecting you. Time to pay the price."

**For the record, I actually blame the writers for what happened in Chameleon. Here's what I think they had in mind when they thought of the episode.**

**"Hm, let's see. We want Lila to be a bigger threat to Marinette than Chloe. How do we do that? I know! Let's lower the IQ of the whole class so that they believe every word Lila says, even if it doesn't make sense!"**

**"But we also need to give Mari that little push towards being salty towards Lila. I got it! Let's make Alya and Nino act like total jerks who steal their friend's seat and push her to the back of the room without her consent and blame her for not being cool with it! Oh, and we can't let Lila get exposed right away, so we should make it so Marinette conveniently leaves out the part about Lila bullying and threatening her so Adrien just thinks she's a harmless liar and doesn't have see any solid reason to expose her until its too late!"**

**"Alright! This is gonna be the best season yet!"**

# Coccidellenae

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Sweetie? Marinette? Are you awake?"

Marinette's eyes fluttered open as she stretched out in her bed. "I am now. What is it?" Sabine smiled weakly. "We're here."

Here. Coccidellenae. The land of her birth. But from the look in her mother's eyes, Marinette could tell that she wished they had never come.

Everything had happened so fast the day before. Once they were packed and ready to go, Marinette and her parents had been whisked away in a car, to the docks, where they were swiftly loaded onto a yacht parked on the furthest end, out of plain sight. The keepers of the dock had been paid a hefty sum to keep quiet about their departure. They did not need all of Paris knowing the truth. Not yet, at least.

Climbing out of bed and up the stairs, onto the deck, Marinette stood by the railing and looked out into the distance. What she saw out on the horizon took her breath away. She could see a grand castle of white stone, carved into fine architecture, with towers that scraped the clouds, flags of brilliant colors that flew proudly in the winds. It dwarfed even the tallest skyscraper, and overlooked out the rest of the land, sitting on the beaches.

Aunt Jun stood next to Marinette, smiling at her grandniece's awestruck expression. "Magnificent, isn't it?"

"That's an understatement.", breathed Marinette. "Its the most spectacular thing I've ever seen."

Jun beamed proudly, like she had just won the Nobel Prize. "Its the ancestral home of your people.", she said. "Every generation of the royal family has lived in it's walls, all the way back to the first ruler of Coccidellenae."

Marinette grinned as the ship drew closer. "Its amazing."

Jun smiled. "I'll leave you to admire it. We'll be docking in less than an hour. Might I suggest you tidy up before we port."

She turned and left below the deck, leaving Marinette to stare at the castle in all it's glory and wonder.

"Marinette?"

Tikki chose to come out of hiding as soon as Jun was out of sight, looking concerned. "Marinette, we can't stay here for long."

"I know that, Tikki.", Marinette sighed. As usual, the ladybug kwami was the voice of reason. "But we won't stay here long. Just a few days, a week at the most."

"But Hawkmoth can do a lot in that time.", Tikki reminded her.

"Well, we're already here.", said Marinette, gesturing towards the castle in the distance as they neared shore. "We can't just leave. I doubt they'd let us anyway. Besides, I have the Horse Miraculous now. I can teleport back if there's an akuma. Tikki, all I need are two days. One to meet the family, and another to explore the kingdom. After that, I promise, if we don't leave, and you're still nervous about Hawkmoth, I'll fake an emergency to go home early."

She turned to go change before they reached the port. Tikki sighed in defeat. It was true. There was little they could do now without revealing the true reasons why Marinette was needed back in Paris. They might as well enjoy themselves and worry about other matters when the time came.

-----  
Marinette was helped onto the docks by a well-dressed butler type. When she saw the shiny black limousine parked on the street, the door held open by a chauffeur, she could not contain her girlish squeal of delight. Climbing inside, she saw that it was equipped with stereos, a snack bar with caviar and truffles on silver platters, and a cooler full of fizzy drinks and even a bottle of champagne. The seats were extra-soft and made of leather, promising a comfortable ride to the castle.

As Marinette helped herself to some truffles, she noticed that as they rode high, there was chatter outside, muffled by the windows closed all the way. Without warning, she pushed the button to lower the window, and got a choir of excited scream as a greeting.

"Its her! Its the new Princess!"

"Quick! Get a photo!"

Half a dozen camera flashes blinded her vision before Sabine slammed the button, shutting the windows once again. From the look on her face, Marinette could tell she was not amused.

"Great. Now your photo is going to be in every magazine there us, and everyone will know the truth!"

Marinette flushed with shame. "I'm sorry, Maman."

"Oh, don't be so hard on her, Noodle.", Tom said, pouring some champagne for him and his wife as he referred to her by the pet name he had chosen for her when they first started dating.

Sabine sighed as she rubbed her tired eyes. "I just want this vacation to be over as soon as possible. I wanna go back to my old life, baking sweets and watching TV with my husband and child. I don't want it to get out that I'm a runaway royal."



"Perhaps it is good that people know.", said Jun, nibbling on caviar. "You no longer have to hide."

Sabine scoffed as she took a glass from Tom. "Let's just meet the rest of the family and get this visit over with."

Marinette continued to dine on truffles. This was a good sign. Her mother was already anxious to leave, despite the fact that they had only just arrived a few minutes ago. It should be easy to convince her to return home early, when the time came. She snuck some truffles into her purse for Tikki and spent the rest of the ride in silence.

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They managed to slip through the palace entrance unnoticed by any paparazzi or bystanders. Lining up the walls were ancient portraits of Kings and Queens, Princes and Princess, many important leaders and figureheads. A banner with the family crest, a ram's head surrounded by two ladybugs, hung in every corner of every room.

At last, they arrived at the throne room. The guards pushed the golden double doors open, allowing them entrance, and the family stepped onto the aisle leading to the front. At the head of the room, stood a golden throne, covered in red silk cushions, on a podium of three steps. And sitting on that throne was a man reaching his fifties—King Cheng Rong of Coccidellenae.

He was tall, with strong, chiseled facial features, bearing a thin mustache-beard combination that was the same jet black as his thinning black hair. He had a scar on his right cheek, and a mole right next to his left eye. He wore grabd robes of red and gold, and a black coronet on his head. His eyes were dark, but as soon as they were set upon Sabine, they lit up and sprakled like stars.

"Sabine!"

He leapt off his throne in a quite un-kingly fashion and bolted towards his sisters, taking her into his arms and spinning her around. "How I've missed you!"

A much-needed smile appeared on Sabine's face. As much as she didn't want to be here, she was happy to see her big brother again. So she returned the hug and said sincerely, "I missed you, too."

Placing her back on her feet, Rong looked over at the tall man behind her. "Ah! Thomas! I recognize you from your picture! I trust you've been treating my baby sister like the princess she truly is."

"Princess? I treat her like a queen!", said Tom, in a tone that was stern but playful. Even slouched over, he was at least a foot taller than his brother-in-law.

Rong's eyes finally got sight of the young lady in pink and pigtails. "Ah...Marinette...you, I've been especially looking forward to meeting."

He placed his hands on her shoulders, drinking in the appearance of his niece, studying her features, noting which ones he recognized from his sister and the ones she must have

inherited from her father's side of the family. "You are truly a beauty. Just like your mother."

Rong took a step back. "I've arranged living arrangements for all of you. There will be a dinner tonight with the whole family. Aunt Jun and others have laid out some suitable formal wear for you to appear in. We will be meeting in the banquet hall at five o'clock sharp. Please be punctual."

-----

A handmaiden unlocked and opened the door to Marinette's temporary bedroom. The blunette gasped as she stepped inside and dropped her bags to the floor. It was a bedroom fit for a princess. Warm rugs protected her feet from the cold wooden floors. A white vanity desk with spindly legs stood next to a huge wardrobe of white wood lined with gold decor. The canopy bed had sheets and curtains of pale pink silk that fluttered in the breeze coming from the balcony window.

"Your Aunt has left your attire for tonight on your bed.", said the handmaiden. "If you need anything else, Your Highness, just ring this bell." The maid placed a silver bell on a brass handle in Marinette's hand, then exited with a curtsy.

Marinette glanced around. Your Highness...that new title would take some getting used to, she knew that much.

She walked over to her bed and saw that a set of clothes had indeed been left out for her. It was a lovely pink hanfu dress with an undershirt with a sheer blue high collar, an lilac underdress that fell to the floor and left a train, a piece of pale blue cloth to wrap around her waist, and a long red sash that was at least three yards to keep it all secure. Her aunt had also left a set of flower-tipped hairpins to adorn her tresses with.

Marinette once more squeaked with delight and scooped the dress off her bed, hurrying behind a silk panel divider to try it on. She was enjoying herself so much, she hadn't given a thought to everyone back home since she had woken up that morning.

## Chapter End Notes

If you want to read the next part early, sign up to my Patreon [BroadwayCutie16!](#)

## Your Chat is Showing

Adrien entered Le Grande Paris Hotel, looking around for his contact. If he was going to clear Marinette's name and show Lila's true colors, he would need to stay focused on the mission. Right now, everyone was at lunch. He had managed to tell his father that he was sick in the nurse's office, with Nino covering for him, to get out of the photoshoot scheduled for that day. Luckily, his friend had not pressed on the reasons why Adrien wished to skip the shoot. He just figured Adrien wanted a break.

Adrien went to the front desk, and smiled sincerely. "Pardon, but I have an appointment with Mousier Jagged Stone. What room is he staying in? My name is Adrien Agreste."

-----  
"The young Mousier Agreste is here."

Jagged's face lit up when he saw the teen model enter. "Ah! Good ol' AA! Come right on in!"

Adrien sat on the sofa next to the rockstar as he strummed his guitar. "Thank you for meeting me on such short notice, Mister Stone."

"Call me Jagged!", he said, his British accent complimenting his friendly, laid-back tone. "And its no biggie! I remember you in the front row with Marinette at the last concert I did in Paris! Any friend of Mari's is a friend of mine!"

Adrien smiled. "Funny you should bring up Marinette. I came here because I wanted to do something really special for her, and I was hoping you could do me a favor."

"Of course! Anything for Marinette! What do you need me to do?"

Adrien grinned wider. "She's done so much for everybody and gotten so little in return. So, I was kinda hoping you could show up at school to surprise her, maybe even put on a little private show for her and her friends."

"That sounds like a splendid idea!", Jagged exclaimed.

It was then that his producer chose to intervene. "No way! Jagged isn't doing anything for free!", snapped Bob Roth.

Jagged frowned. "And I say its the least I can do for the girl who designed my album cover and helped me rise back to number one on the charts!"

Adrien grinned like the cat that got the cream. "Great! Can't wait for you to get there..."

-----  
"A surprise party for my daughter?" Madame Rossi looked intrigued by Adrien's

announcement. "And you want me to be apart of it? How nice of you and your class to set up something nice for Lila!"

The blonde model nodded. "I wanted to do something big for Lila. I mean, she has done so much since she came to school. She deserves everything I plan to give her."

Madame Rossi looked pleased as punch. "I knew my bella was popular, being the class representative and everything, but I never thought she'd be this beloved! I'm so happy! You know, Lila has always been a little unsure of herself. She didn't have a lot of friends back in Italy. But ever since we came to Paris, she's really blossomed! Don't worry, I'll be there! I've been wanting to come and see for myself how Lila is glowing at school!"

Adrien hid a mischievous smirk. "Perfect..."

-----

He snuck back into the nurse's office, where Sabrina was waiting for him.

"Well?", she whispered as he slid into the seat next to her.

Adrien grinned. "Its done."

The nurse came back, and Adrien jumped to his feet. "Hey! Whaddaya know! I'm feeling much better! I think I'll go back now! Thankseeyalaterbye!" And he was gone in a blur of black, white and blonde.

Sure enough, everyone was crowded around Lila's table as she spun a new tale. Adrien could not help but smirk devilishly. "Enjoy your popularity while you can, Liar-la.", he remarked, patting himself on that back for thinking up a new nickname for her. "It's not gonna last much longer. Thanks to Jagged Stone, you're about to hit rock bottom. Time to face the music."

"Careful, kiddo.", whispered Plagg. "Your Chat is showing." The little cat could hardly contain his smug glee, either.

"Lily!"

Benigna Rossi's voice rang out from the doorway, and Adrien smiled seeing her entering the school grounds, cameraman close behind in tow. He looked back at Lila, and the look on her face gave him almost as much satisfaction as defeating an akuma. Her eyes were wide, and her skin had paled. If death had walked in, she could not have looked more shocked and terrified.

"Mom! Wh-Wh-What are you doing here?!"

"You'll see soon, baby.", said Benigna, smiling at the classmates. "Are these your friends? They seem nice."

Alya's face lit up. "Madame Rossi! Its good to meet you! Do you mind if I get an interview with you for the Ladyblog?"

Lila jumped up, waving her hands all about in a panic. "No! No, Alya, that's okay! She doesn't need—"

"Of course!", said Benigna, not seeming to hear her daughter. "I'd be honored. What do you want to know?"

Alya pressed the record button on her phone and started talking. "So, tell us true, how was your vacation to see Prince Ali?"

The pride on Benigna's face gave way to surprise and confusion. "Vacation?"

"Yes! Lila told us you and her were personally invited to visit Prince Ali of Achu, and that's why she was out of school for so long!"

Benigna's face turned to stone. "Prince Ali...Lila told me the school was closed."

A thick silence fell on the grounds. After what felt like an eternity, Nino broke the quiet.

"Why would the school be closed for months?"

"Lila said your principal got akumatized.", said Benigna. "Well...he did...but Ladybug and Chat Noir de-evilized him the day after he got infected.", Mylene told her.

Alya bit her lip. "So...you only let her go to Achu because you thought the school was closed?" She had a sinking feeling that she knew what the truth really was, but she did not want to believe it. She did not want to believe that she had been duped by Lila. She did not want to believe that the girl who's interview she had posted on the web for all to see was a liar. Above all else, she didn't not want to believe that she had made a mistake by taking Lila's word over Marinette's.

Benigna frowned. "No, because we were never in Achu. We were never invited there, let alone by the Prince. We've never even met him."

Ivan scowled. "Wait a minute...than where has Lila been all these months?"

"At home.", Benigna replied in an icy tone. "She's been sitting at home all these months because she said she couldn't go to school due to it being shut down."

Her glare fell upon Lila, as did every other eye in the courtyard. She didn't meet any of them, her eyes fixed on her lap. Adrien could scarcely contain his glee. It was all going according to plan. He wondered how Lila would try to get out of this one.

Suddenly, Jagged Stone's accented voice echoed throughout Francois Dupont College. "Good morning, Paris teens!"

Screams rose up as the rockstar strutted onto the scene like a peacock. Flipping up his red, white and blue Eiffel Tower sunglasses, he scanned the grounds. "Where's my girl, Marinette?"

"Marinette's not here.", called a voice. "She went on a family vacation."

Jagged's face fell. "What? Adrien didn't tell me she was absent!"

That was his cue. The blond model ran to Jagged's side. "Aw man, I totally spaced. But you know, Jagged, while you're here, why don't you say hi to your good friend—" He thrust an arm towards the brunette girl sitting at the next table. "Lila Rossi."

Lila looked terrified, her olive eyes wide. "Wait—Adrien brought you here?!" Their eyes met, and Adrien gave her a devious smirk. One look, and she knew—he had set her up.

Jagged squinted at the dark-skinned girl. "Who?"

"Oh, surely, you remember Lila!", said Adrien, not even trying to sound sincere. "You know, the girl who saved your cat? You wrote a song all about her!"

Jagged blinked twice, confused. "Saved my cat? I don't have a cat! A cat wouldn't last two minutes around Fang!"

Adrien grinned wider. Everything was falling into place. Time to strike the final blow.

"She said you wrote her a song after she rescued your cat from an airplane lane.", he went on, not even bothering to conceal the false tones in his voice. "She told us all about it."

Jagged frowned, pointed a finger right at Lila, and then said loud enough for the whole school to hear, "I've never seen that girl before in my life!"

All eyes were on Lila. She was sweating, shaking, too afraid to move. If looks could kill, the school would be guilty of multiple counts of murder.

Her mother was the first to speak. "You have a lot of explaining to do, young lady."

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When Lila exited the principal's office, her eyes were sunken and bloodshot, and her face was stained with tear tracks. Her mother looked like she didn't know whether to cry or scream at her daughter. "I'll pull the car around.", she said, every word turning to ice the moment it left her lips. "You're going to be grounded for a very long time."

Lila watched her mom walk away, her heart sinking lower and lower. Once she was gone, the young girl started sobbing all over again. It was all over. Her mother's trust. Her perfect school record. Her popularity with her classmates. It was all gone. She had nothing. And it was all because of...

"Cat got your tongue?"

The voice that had once made Lila's heart beat faster now ignited a flame of rage within her. Her head spun in the other direction, and there he was, leaning against the wall, wearing a smug expression that she was just itching to slap off his perfect model face.

"You...", she hissed, venom dripping from her voice. "You did this!"

Adrien stopped smiling to frown at her. "You bet I did.", he said, eyes narrowed into slits. "My only regret is that I didn't do it sooner."

"How could you do this to me?!", she wept. "You've destroyed everything I've been working for since I got here! Why?! Why would you do this?! I thought we had a deal!"

Adrien stood up straight. "That's what I thought, too. Until I overheard you plotting against Marinette—again—when you thought you were alone in the classroom."

Lila paled. "I...uh..."

Adrien didn't wait for her to try. Not this time. He was done waiting for Lila. "If you're not going to hold up your end of the bargain, Lila, why should I hold up mine?"

Lila tried to plead to Adrien's all-too-forgiving side. "Look, Adrien, I am so sorry! I admit it, I messed up! But I learned my lesson this time, I swear! I'll never hurt Marinette again! Help me out of this! Give me another chance!"

Adrien shook her head. "I've given you plenty of chances, Lila. And you threw all of them away. Its clear these chances mean nothing to you. Just like your word means nothing to me. Why should I believe you feel sorry now, after all the times you claimed you were truly sorry and then went right back to your old ways?"

Adrien shook his head, glaring at the Italian girl. "You're never gonna change, Lila, at all, and I was an idiot for thinking for so long that there was some good in you. A guy can only hope for so long. The deal is off. I want nothing more to do with you, Lila Rossi. Go to a new school, go back to Italy, I don't care. Just stay away from me. And from Marinette."

"She's only in the way because she's jealous—"

"Jealous?!", Adrien cut her off harshly. "She was jealous of you?!" He was tired of the lies. Tired of her blaming everyone but herself. At least not in Adrien's book. "No, Lila...I think the problem is you're jealous of her. Because unlike you, she doesn't feel the need to lie about herself to look good. She doesn't need to threaten and bully others to keep them in line. She's popular for who she really is, not for who she pretends to be. And that's why you wanted her to lose everything. Because she has everything you want, but are too insecure and selfish to have."

Lila was speechless. Adrien took advantage of her silence to deliver one final message. "I've told you before Lila. You can always count on me. But not if you hurt the people I care about. And that includes Marinette."

And with that, he turned his back on her, both figuratively and literally. He didn't turn back, not when a car horn honked, not when Lila's footsteps faded away, not when he heard the sounds of a car leaving.

He looked up to see Alya standing there, her face completely blank. They stared at each other for a moment. "How much of that did you hear?"

"Almost everything."

"Oh."

Silence reigned between them once more. Alya looked up, tears forming behind her brown glasses. "Adrien, be honest...do you think she'll forgive me?" She didn't need to say a name. He knew who she was talking about.

Adrien paused. Then he said, "She will. She probably shouldn't, but she will."

Alya gave him a curt nod. She was willing to do anything, even grovel, if it meant she got her best friend back.



## Be-What?!

Marinette finished applying the makeup that had been set up for her, admiring her reflection. For her appearance at dinner, she had chosen to wear her dark hair loose, with a single white lotus blossom tucked behind her ear, with a set of pearl jewelry with a matching necklace and earrings. She smiled as she admired her reflection in the mirror. Hiding Tikki in the folds of her hanfu top, she exited her temporary quarters and walked into the dining hall to meet the rest of the family.

The dining hall was just as splendidly decorated as the rest of the palace, the same ancient portraits of rulers past, the same banners with the family crest. Marinette swore the dining table was had to be at least a mile long. Dozens of people sat around it, all dressed in the same Chinese finery that she had been given.

Aunt Jun smiled seeing her. Part of her face had been painted white, with brightly-colored eyeshadow and blush popping out from the paleness of the powder. Her silk dark purple robes were grand and elegant, glittering with designs of gold and silver, and her hair had been piled into an elaborate style on top of her head. "Marinette! So good to see you! And don't you clean up nicely?"

Addressed blunette smiled at the compliments.

Jun ushered her to one part of the table, where some teenagers sat. The girls were dressed in ensembles similar to Marinette's, some with fancier hairstyles and a tad more makeup on, while the boys donned simple robes of dark yet iridescent hues. When they saw Marinette approach, they all cried out in delight.

"These are your cousins, some first, some second.", Jun explained to her.

She gestured to two girls. "These are my own granddaughters, Mei..." She gestured to the girl in a sky blue hanfu, who smiled sweetly.

"...and Ying." She gestured to the other in sea green, who gave Marinette a friendly wave.

They took her by the arms and pulled her into the seat between them, their presence warm and comforting.

"I'll leave you to it."

As Jun left, Marinette found herself peppered with questions and comments from her cousins.

"Did you really spend your whole life in France?"

"What is Thomas like? Is he nice?"

"Do you like baking like Aunt Sabine?"

"You're so pretty! You must get that from your mom!"

Marinette was happy to answer their questions and thank them for their compliments.

She was over the moon. Her family was making her feel wanted and appreciated completely, something she had not felt since Lila's return to school. The whole conversation with her newfound family, she did not give Alya, Nino, or even Adrien a second thought. She was too busy living in the moment.

The servants came and served the food. There were spring rolls, kung pao chicken, chow mein, beef lo mein, peking duck, crab rangoon, fried rice, egg rolls, and dumplings stuffed with every edible sort of meat. Ronin even announced that they would be having fried ice cream and egg custard tarts for dessert. It was a feast fit for royalty—which, of course, they were.

As soon as the main course was finished, Rong got to his feet, clinking his glass.

"Attention, dearest family.", he said after clearing his throat. "As you all know, tonight is no ordinary night. Tonight, my dearest little sister Sabine has returned to us." He gestured towards his sister, dressed in red-and-gold silk with pinkish-red flowers in her hair.

"And with her, she has brought her husband, Thomas." He gestured to Tom, dressed in a simple black Chinese outfit, his hair and mustache combed nicely. "In the short time I have known him, he has shown himself to be true of heart, said heart loving my sweet sister with all of it."

Tom smiled at his brother-in-law.

"Not only that, the love that he shares with her has produced a daughter." He gestured towards the blunette towards the further end of the table.

"Marinette...when I look into your eyes, I can see all the good qualities your mother possessed at your age." Rong smiled kindly. "I believe that I speak on everyone's behalf that with these three here, our family is now complete."

Everyone clapped and murmured in agreement.

Rong took a deep breath. "And now that you are here...I believe that you can help us."

This peeked the interests of the Dupain-Chengs, leaning a bit closer to hear better.

"Trying times have fallen upon our beloved land. Our armies are weak. We are vulnerable to threats from outside forces. In times such as these, we must cement our alliance with our old neighbor, Sidorio. With our strengths and resources combined, we will remain well. But to do so, extreme measures must be taken."

Rong walked towards Marinette, glass still in hand, staring at her with dark, glassy eyes. "Marinette...your mother has told me all about you. How you are kind and brave, how you are always willing to help, how you always put the greater good before your own. You are a strong, selfless woman. And we need that to pull this alliance off. Now, you are young, I know that. I understand if you feel I'm putting too much pressure on you..."

Marinette quickly rose to her feet. "No...don't worry about me, Uncle Rong. I can do it."

She was not scared of pressure. She was Ladybug. She saved Paris on a regular basis, while still juggling schoolwork, friendships, drama, class representative duties, and trying to confess to Adrien. She could handle anything.

"Whatever you need me for, I can help you."

Rong's smile was as bright as the sun that was beginning to set in the distance. "Wonderful! I was hoping you'd be up to the task!"

Marinette could see the smiles on her other relative's faces from the corner of her eye. She felt surges of pride rush through her veins. She was helping, and they were praising her for it. She hadn't felt this kind of feeling in months.

"It is settled than!", announced Rong, his voice proud and jubilant. He placed his hands on Marinette's shoulders and locked gazes with her. "As if this moment forward, you are betrothed to the youngest Prince of Sidorio!"

A silence fell upon the dining hall. Marinette's jaw fell open, her big blue eyes growing even bigger, at least twice their usual size. Her mother had been in the middle of peeling a piece of food, and now her hands had gone stiff, allowing the morsel to slip out of her fingers and fall back onto her plate with a splat. Her father had frozen with his glass raised to his lips, and now the sweet drink was dribbling off his chin and down his chest, staining his clothes.

It took Marinette thirty seconds to full register what her uncle had just said. "Betrothed?! Meaning...meaning I have to get married?!"

Her head was spinning. She felt like she might pass out. The turn of events did not sit well with her. She shook off the aftershocks and looked Rong right in the eye.

"No! Nooooo...no! Nope! Nuh-uh! Ix-nay! Not gonna happen!"

Rong's happy smile darkened into a frown of irritation. "You just said you could help us with whatever we needed you for."

"I just thought I could host a visit with them!", Marinette insisted. "Deliver some presents! Butter them up! Not marry into their family!"

Sabine stood up. "Rong, be reasonable!", she cried. "You can't seriously expect Marinette to marry someone she doesn't even know!"

"She will know him.", Jun insisted. "We sent him a letter, telling him to come to our palace in a week's time to meet his bride-to-be."

Marinette shook her head. "No way! I am not getting married! I'm only sixteen!"

At that, every face in the room looked at her funny. "Sixteen?", remarked Rong. "Well, better late than never."

"You don't look a day over fifteen!", one aunt said sweetly.

Marinette started waving her arms around wildly in true Marinette fashion. "Are you not hearing me?! I said I'm not doing it!"

Rong's frown became stronger. "This union will cement our friendship with Sidorio. Why are you so against this? Don't you want to help us?" "Of course I do!", Marinette cried. "But...can't we just sign a treaty with them or something? Why does it have to involve marriage?"

"Wedlock is the strongest kind of alliance.", Rong explained. "By joining our two families together, our agreement shall be nearly unbreakable. This is the best way to secure our kingdom. And as part of our family, you have a duty to do whatever you must to protect our people." He shook his head sadly. "I just don't understand why you're fighting this so hard. This is an honor in our code."

Marinette frowned. "If its such a honor, get someone else to do it! I just got here! Leave me out of this!"

Rong sighed. "I would...except every other acceptable woman in our family is already married."

Marinette's eyes widened again as she turned back to her cousins, who nodded in confirmation.

"Even you two?!", she cried, pointing a finger back and forth between Mei and Ying.

Both nodded again.

Marinette took a deep breath before facing her uncle once more. "I'm sorry. I want to help you, really, I do. But this just too much to ask. I barely know you guys, or this kingdom, and now you expect me to marry someone I don't even know? To fulfill some duty that I never promised myself to? You think just because we're related, that means you can just pluck me out of France, bring me over here, ask me to make a huge commitment like this, and I'll just say, 'yes, master, whatever you wish, master.'"

"But here's the thing—I never asked to stay. I never asked to devote myself to you. I have a life back in Paris. I can't just ditch it entirely. I'm sorry, but I can't do what you want me to do."

She finished her rant with a heavy sigh. "I hope you understand. But I'm sure if we put our heads together, we can think of another way to make peace."

She looked to her uncle hopefully, only for hopes to fall when she saw his face, tight with anger.

"No...no, you will marry the prince.", he said in a tone that was cold as ice yet still somehow seething with heated anger. "Because I am not just your uncle. I am your King. And as long as you are in my palace, you will do as I say. And if I say that you will be married to the

Prince of Sidorra in two weeks' time, than that is what will happen. Even if I gave to drag you down the aisle myself."

One look at his raging face sent Marinette back into that shy, timid, helpless version of herself that had existed before Ladybug. She had faced numerous akumas and dangers in the past, but none of them terrified her so much as the look her uncle wore, with the deep frown and eyes that could shoot daggers. He glared down at her for a few seconds longer before sitting back at the dinner table to resume eating.

Marinette sat back at the table, eating the rest of her meal in silence and wondering how her life could go to such depths of hell in less than five minutes.

## Reconnect, Unconnect

Marinette walked back to her bedroom in a sort of haze. She hardly noticed her surroundings, only just aware enough to navigate the hallways to get to her room. Once there, she walked to her bed and fell facedown on the sheets, perfect for muffling the anguished scream that came out of her mouth seconds later.

How had it all gone so wrong? An hour ago, she was on cloud nine, surrounded by luxury and a new family. Now, she was being forced into an arranged marriage to a total stranger. It was not how she had pictured she would get engaged. Her future was being set in stone for her, someone else holding the carving tools, and she had no say on how it would be shaped.

Tikki placed herself on the satin divan pillows sitting on the bed, just as distressed at this turn of events. Being alive since near the dawn of time itself, Tikki had seen a lot of things. And arranged marriages was one of them. Some of her holders' parents, whose union, which had produced the holder, had been an arranged marriage. Some of them had seen their friends go through with arranged marriages. Some of the holders had even been forced into arranged marriages themselves.

Sometimes, after many years together, the couple grew to love one another deeply. Sometimes, they became dear friends, fond of each other, but no more. But sadly, more often than not, the couple would spend the rest of their lives together distant and unhappy with the match. At best, they remained strangers to one another, just as they had the day they met, and at worst, they spent their lives loathing each other. Tikki feared this might become the case with Marinette and her new betrothed.

Finally, the dark-haired girl lifted her head and groaned. "Tikki, what am I gonna do?", she moaned miserably. "I can't get married! I'm way too young!"

Tikki sighed. "I know. Its not an ideal situation. I mean, I've seen arranged marriages before, but I thought we were past all that now."

"So did I!", cried Marinette.

She sat up on her bed and held her head in her hands. "This is a disaster!", she wailed. "Now I'm gonna be married off against my will to some guy I don't even know and I'll be stuck at his stupid palace forever and I'll never get to go back home and I'll never graduate and go to fashion school and become a great designer and how will I be Ladybug if—"

She sat up suddenly. "Wait a minute...that's it!"

"What's it?"

"The Miracle Box!", she cried, jumping off her bed. "I'll just put on the Horse Miraculous and transform and get a portal out of here and back to Paris!"

"But Marinette...Rong will find you.", said Tikki. "He'll find you, get spies to track you down, like he had spies tell him where your mother was. And Paris will be the first place they'll look!"

Marinette stopped for a second, then shook her head. "Well than...I'll just have to assume a new identity. Better than living out a loveless marriage to a rich snob."

She walked to her bag, pretty secure of her escape plan. She picked it up, undid the zipper, opened it wide...

...and there was nothing there.

Marinette's heart dropped. "Where is it?!", she screamed. Tikki zoomed over, looking equally horrified as her chosen turned her bag upside down and shook it, hoping against hope that the Box would somehow miraculously reappear and fall out. "What happened to my Miracle Box?!"

Before Tikki could say anything to cheer her up, her phone rang from her vanity desk on the other side of the room. As her kwami hid, Marinette walked over and picked it up to see Alya's contact photo taking up the screen.

She swiped to accept, and her real face appeared. "Hi, Alya. What's—"

She never finished her sentence, as Alya starting bawling her eyes out.

"Alya, what is it? What happened?", Marinette asked, pulling up her chair to sit down. Something told her this was going to take a while.

Alya took off her glasses and rubbed at her teary eyes. "I'm so sorry, Marinette! I'm so, so sorry! I am the worst best friend ever!"

Marinette was silent. She didn't know what was happening, or how to react. "I...I don't understand. Where's this coming from?"

"Its Lila.", Alya sniffled, and on instinct, Marinette felt her anger flare up. Just the mere mention of that name cheesed her off.

Alya sniffed and continued. "You were right about her. You were right about everything. Today, her mom showed up at school, and I wanted to ask her questions about her visit to see Prince Ali of Achu, but she said Lila told her that the school was closed 'cause the principal was still akumatized."

This cheesed off Marinette. Lila had lied to her own mother to get out of school? That was low, even for her.

Alya went on, sniffing every few words. "And then, Jagged Stone arrived at school to surprise you with a free concert, but of course, you weren't there. So then, Adrien showed him Lila, and asked about them being good friends and him writing a song about her as reward for saving his cat. And Jagged said he'd never seen her before in his life!"

Marinette blinked twice. "Adrien?"

Alya smiled, just a little bit. "Oh, yeah. That's the thing, girl. Turns out he knew about Lila. He convinced Jagged to come to school, knowing he would disprove her stories about him. Then he tipped off Lila's mom, telling her that Jagged Stone was performing at our school, so she'd go to cover the event, and find out what was really going on with Lila."

Marinette leaned back, eyes wide. "Adrien did all that...for me?"

It perplexed her. She knew Adrien was her friend, but what happened to not exposing Lila? What happened to their friendship?

Alya answered her question soon enough. "I overheard him talking to her after. He said he only became friends with her because she promised to leave you alone if she did. But then he overheard her plotting to turn us all against you, and he decided the deal was off."

Alya rolled her eyes. "Man, you shoulda heard him, girl! He really ripped into her! He said that she's jealous of you, because you don't have to lie to look good, because you're popular by being yourself, and that's why she hates you, because you have everything she wants, but can't have because she's selfish and insecure. Then he said, 'You can always count on me, but not if you hurt the people I care about. And that includes Marinette.'"

Marinette was elated when she heard that. She fell back over her chair and swooned. "He cares about me!"

She wanted to thrash around uselessly and dance around the room. She had been wrong about Adrien. He hadn't lied about being there for her. He had been looking out for her the whole time. He had sacrificed himself, allowed himself to bask in Lila's nauseating presence in an attempt to protect Marinette. And when the time came, he stepped up to the plate.

Never in her life had Marinette been so happy to be wrong. Maybe he wasn't as toxic as she had thought before. After all, if he was willing to cooperate with Lila Rossi of all people, just for the promise of keeping Marinette safe, then he must care deeply for her. Mari was all the way up on cloud nine. But she swiftly fell back to earth when she saw the still-somber look on Alya's face.

"Alya?"

The auburn-haired girl on the screen took off her smoggy glasses and wiped newborn tears from her brown eyes. "I am so, so sorry, Marinette.", she whimpered. "You tried to tell me about Lila, but I wouldn't listen. She told me she could get me connected with Ladybug, and I just...I got so excited. I wanted to believe it was true. But it was all a lie. I should have listened to you. You were only trying to protect me."

Marinette smiled sadly. "I didn't want her to ruin your blog.", she said. "With her interviews about Ladybug. You're such a good reporter, Alya. I didn't want your followers to lose faith in you."



"You don't have to lie to make me feel better, Mari.", said Alya, putting her glasses back on. "We both know I'm a lousy reporter. I gave you all that flack about 'checking the facts' and I didn't even bother to do my own homework."

"Well, in your defense,", said Marinette. "Its not like you could have just called Ladybug on the phone and asked her if she was friends with Lila."

Alya shook her head. "Why are you making excuses for me? I don't deserve it. I was a rotten person, and an even worse friend."

Marinette smiled at her sincerely. "For the same reason I was trying to protect you from Lila's lies in the first place, even if you didn't trust me. Because you're my best friend, Alya. You're the one who taught me to believe in myself. You pushed me to stand up to Chloe. You taught me that all that's necessary for the triumph of evil is if good men do nothing. You made me who I am today."

Alya was tearing up again, only this time from happiness. "Girl...I love you. You're the best. I don't deserve you for a best friend." She wiped her wetted eyes. "And I promise, when you get home, I'm gonna do everything I can to make it up to you."

At that, Marinette's smile vanished, replaced by a worried frown. With the rush she had gotten from the news of Adrien standing up for her, and the warmness in her heart from Alya's sincere apology, Mari had completely forgotten about her new predicament. Her blue eyes glanced downwards and darted back and forth, as her mind raced to come up with a way to explain all this to Alya.

"Marinette?"

Alya's joy had turned to concern. "Are you okay? Is everything alright over there?"

Marinette laughed nervously. "Um...Alya? I have some...news."

Alya blinked twice. "What kinda news?" Mari forced a smile on her face. "Well...its really funny, you're gonna laugh."

Alya leaned forward.

Marinette gulped. "You see, the thing is...I..." She squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm getting married." She kept her eyes shut, waiting to hear Alya's reaction.

"Sorry, girl! We must have a bad connection or something."

She looked back to see Alya's frame shaking, clearly from shaking the device, thinking there was a bug in the system. "It sounded like you said you're getting married."

Marinette gulped again. Hoo boy. She looked back at Alya's face on the screen. "I did. Because I am." She counted the three seconds it took for her words to sink in.

"WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!"

Alya's jaw hung open, her eyes bulging out from behind her glasses. "You're getting married?! To who?! You've been there for like, a day! How could you have fallen in love with someone enough to get engaged?!"

Marinette sighed. "I didn't fall in love."

Alya sat back. "But you just said..."

"I didn't say I was doing it of my own free will, did I?", remarked Mari in a deadpan tone.

It took Alya a moment to figure it out. "Wait...are you saying its an arranged marriage?!"

Marinette sighed, but nodded anyway.

Alya got teed off. "An arranged marriage?! What is this, the seventeen-hundreds?! I thought we were all past that crud!"

"Apparently, my mother's country isn't.", Marinette sighed. "Right now, I'm in Coccidellenae, where Maman was born. The reason we came here is because her older brother, my uncle Rong insisted we come here. And now he's saying I have to marry the son of another family to bond us together. Kind of a game of 'don't fight us, we're the in-laws.'"

"Girl, you need to ditch those guys and come back home.", said Alya, as if it were that simple.

"That's easier said than done, Alys.", Mari moaned. "See, the truth is—"

"Marinette!"

The dark-haired girl gasped and spun around in her chair to see her Aunt Jun, with her dark, soulless eyes directed right at the new face on her phone screen. "Who are you talking to?"

Marinette flushed in worry as Jun strutted over to where she sat to glare at Alya's image on her device. "Aunt Jun, this is my friend, Alya, from back in France. Alya, this is my Great-Aunt Jun. She escorted me and my parents to Coccidellenae."

Alya gave a friendly wave and smile, intended for the elder woman. "Nice to meet you."

Instead of replying nicely, Jun plucked the phone off the table and held it close to her face, her dark eyes narrowed at the Creole girl. "Miss Alya...I'm going to have to ask that you never call this number again."

"What?!"

Now Alya was mad. "You can't tell me what to do."

"As the Baroness of Chunbridge, and the aunt of King Rong Cheng the Third, I can."

Alya was thrown off-guard by that. "Wait...King?!"

The dots connected in her mind. But before she could utter another word, Jun dropped the phone to the hardwood floor and stomped on it, hard, so that the last thing Alya saw was the sole of her expensive shoe before the screen went totally black.

Marinette stared at her broken phone in horror, falling out of her chair and onto her knees, gingerly picking up the shattered device in her fingers. She raised her head to look up at Aunt Jun with tears in her eyes. "Why?"

"It is for the best.", she was told curtly. "You are a Princess now. And as a princess, you must devote yourself entirely to your new duties, both as a royal lady, and as a future bride. Who you are now is entirely defined by your relation to the King.

She leaned down and lowered her head so that her lips whispered into Marinette's ear. "From this day forward, you are never to contact your former friends again. Nor are you to mention them, Paris, or your old life. You belong to the royal family now. And to Coccidellenae."

She pulled back slowly, allowing her words to sink in. She smiled smugly. "Now, do get some rest. Tomorrow will be a busy day. We will start discussing your wedding plans."

And with that, she spun on her heel and exited as swiftly as a breeze, shutting the door behind her.

Marinette sat on her knees in the center of the floor, allowing it all to process in her mind. She looked back at her destroyed phone, the last link to her friends, and gingerly ran her fingers along the cracks in the screen. Her eyes welled up with tears. She could no longer bear it. Allowing her phone to fall from her hand, she buried her face in her palms and burst out sobbing right then and there, weeping for the life, the friends and the freedom that had been taken from her.

# No Choice

Knock, knock.

"Marinette?"

Slowly, Sabine opened the door to her daughter's new bedroom and peeped her head over. The sight she saw broke her heart. Her sweet baby girl, her only child, curled up on the bed, sobbing into her pillow.

"Oh, honey..."

She rushed to her daughter's bedside and sat beside her shaking, sobbing form, stroking her back in soothing motions. "Aunt Jun told me what happened. I'm so sorry."

Marinette turned her head so that it lay sideways on her pillow, showing her swollen, tear-filled blue eyes. "It's not fair, Maman. I never asked for any of this. I have to leave my home, all my friends, give all my hopes and dreams...and for what? So I can be nothing but some rich snob's baby-making trophy wife?"

Sabine sighed heavily. "Believe me, Marinette. I understand. This...This the life that I was trying to protect you from. This is why I ran away. So that I could be free to live my life the way I wished. To love who I love, be who I wanted to be, not what everyone else wanted me to be...and I wanted my children to have that same freedom."

She blinked back tears. "But I guess it was all in vain."

Marinette sniffled as she sat up. "Maman, isn't there any way I can get out of this?", she asked desperately.

"I'm afraid not.", whispered Sabine. "Rong seemed to have learned from my running away. He's really beefed up security since I lived here. There's little chance we can escape the castle. And there's an even smaller chance we can change his mind about the marriage."

Marinette stared at her lap. "Then...I guess I have no choice.", she whimpered. "I'm gonna have to marry the prince."

Sabine hugged her daughter. "I'm sorry that this happened to you, Marinette. But I promise, your dad and I will be here for you, every step of the way, all the way to the altar."

Marinette hugged her back, still reeling from this sharp new turn in her path. She never imagined her life would turn out this way. She had been so worried about Lila taking all her friends away from her. But she never thought that she would be taken away from them.

-----

Alya stared at her phone screen. After Jun's intervention, she had tried a dozen times to call Marinette back, but the connection always failed. Clearly, Jun had demolished her devices to sever their contact. Alya wanted to scream.

How could this have happened? How could Sabine's older brother be King? More importantly, how could he be forcing Marinette to get married against her will? She knew that some cultures still practiced arranged marriages, but she had never thought one of her closest friends would have to go through one.

Why did Marinette have to marry this guy anyway, whoever he was? What did her family have to gain from legally pairing her up with some random guy they chose? They were teenagers, crying out loud! They were just barely getting a grip on puberty! And now they were expecting Marinette to be ready for a lifetime commitment?! The girl couldn't even commit to getting to school on time!

"Sis?"

She looked up to see Nora—sorry, Anasi, standing in the doorway.

"You look down in the dumps. What happened? Did Marinette not accept your apology?"

Alya winced. "She did. But its not that. I just found out something really crazy."

"What's that?"

She sighed. "Marinette just told me she's getting married."

Anasi blinked twice, then burst out laughing. "Ha ha! Good one, little sis! Marinette's getting married!"

Alya scowled at her chortling big sister. "What's so funny? Its true!"

Anasi rolled her eyes. "Nice try, Alys. But last I checked, you and your little friend are way too young to get hitched." She walked away, still chuckling under her breath. "Getting married...yeah, right."

Alya sat there, deep in thought. Her sister's quick dismissal, however irritating, had put things in perspective for her. The original plan was to go to school and tell everyone straight out about what she had discovered. But it was too unbelievable. Alya never would have believed it herself had the places been switched. Chances are, they would react the same way as Nora, and assume that Alya was just pulling their leg. Not to mention, after how Lila had fooled them all, the class would be especially skeptical of claims with no evidence.

Wait a minute...evidence...

A good reporter always checks her facts.

Alya smiled as she pulled out her computer and typed in the first of many Google searches. She had always said it. Time to act on it.

# History of the Chengs

"Alright class, free period!", announced Madame Bustier. "For the last forty-five minutes of school!"

Everyone cheered. Free periods were the best. They were free to spend it however they wished, being creative in the art room or in the gym doing sports.

Just as they were gathering their bags, Alya's hand shot up in the air from the second row. "Um, Madame Bustier? If we are having a free period, there's something I'd like to show the whole class. May I?"

"I don't see why not."

Alya smiled and reached into her backpack, pulling out her laptop, ignoring the moans of frustration from her friends.

"Come on, Alya! We were gonna go to art and make something for Marinette!", Nathanael whined.

"Yeah, we need to make it up to her! For what we did with Lila!", added Alix.

Alya got up and walked to the front of the classroom, plugging her computer to the screen Madame Bustier used for digital presentations. "Trust me, guys...this is about Marinette."

This caught the class's attention. "What is it?", asked Mylène. "Is she okay?"

Alya faced her friend, chewing on her lower lip. "Well...it depends on what you mean by 'okay'..."

Okay, now everyone was worried. "What is it? Tell us!", yelled Kim.

Alya pushes up her glasses. "Okay...good news and bad news. The good news is, Marinette and I made up last night when I Skyped her. She's fine...physically."

Max frowned. "And...the bad news?"

"The bad news is...she can't come back to Paris because she's getting married."

A silence fell on the room. A dozen pairs of wide eyes all blinked back at her, empty and emotionless. Alya held her breath and waited for their next reaction.

Out of the blue, Nino burst out laughing. Adrien soon followed suit. After him came Kim, Max, Alix, and before they knew, the whole class was roaring with laughter, throwing their heads back and banging their desk in hysteria. Even the teacher was clutching her stomach and chortling like there was no tomorrow.

"Ha! Good one, Alya!", Nino wheezed out between howls of laughter. "You really had us there! We thought something was seriously wrong!"

He looked up, expecting his girlfriend to be grinning and laughing along, a confirmation of her little joke. But to his surprise, her face was serious. "Alys?"

Alya sighed. "Nino...lookit my face. Do I have my joking face on?"

The laughter quickly died down as everyone else saw the somber look on Alya's face before turning to Nino, whose cocoa complexion had just turned a shade or paler. "No..."

"What does that mean?"

Nino gulped as realization hit him like a truck. "That you're not joking?"

Alya gave him a curt nod of the head and counted the seconds until the truth sunk in for the rest of them.

"WHAT?!"

The classroom exploded again, this time in shouts of disbelief and anger.

"Married?! What do you mean she's getting married?! What kinda head injuries did she get that made her think it was a good idea?! Who even is this guy?!"

"The Prince of Simosa."

"Simosa?! Where the heck is that?!"

"It's a little country close to Signapore, neighboring the country of Coccidellenae, where Marinette's mom was born...as Royal Princess."

Another shocked silence.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that last part?", asked Max.

Alya opened her laptop and typed in something. On the screen, there appeared an old photograph, dated from the 1980's. There was an old Chinese guy dressed in grand robes of red, green and gold, with a golden crown on his head, adorned with red and orange jewels, fashioned to look like a rising Phoenix.

Standing next to him was a young lady, no older than they were right now, adorned in a silken Chinese-style gown of pearl pink and silver, her long dark hair arranged in a fancy hairdo with flowers and jewels decorating it. But the face...the class recognized her face right away.

That was Sabine Cheng, Marinette's mom.

"As it turns out...Sabine is the long-lost Princess of Coccidellenae. That man next to her is her now deceased father, King Cheng Xiang the Seventh."

She brought up a news article on the screen next to the picture of Sabine with her father. The headline read RUNAWAY ROYAL: PRINCESS RUNS AWAY. "When Sabine was sixteen, she ran away from the palace and her arranged marriage and escaped here to Paris. But no one back at the palace or Coccidellenae knew where she was up until a week ago, when a spy reported back to him."

She brought up another photo over the other two. It was another Chinese man, much younger, all decked out in a magnificent military uniform, gleaming with medals and decorations of gold and bronze, with a flowing red velvet cape trimmed with gold falling around him. The Phoenix crown now rested on his own head, flashing brilliantly in the light. He was the epitome of regality.

"This is Sabine's older brother, the current King of Coccidellenae, Rong Cheng the Third. Last week, someone in his spy organization went to France on a mission and accidentally stumbled upon Sabine and her family at the bakery. When Rong found out through the spy, he sent for Sabine and her husband and child to come to Coccidellenae to get to know them."

Another article popped up over the photo. There was a photo of Marinette and her parents, just barely visible through the window of a limousine. The headline said ROYAL FAMILY GROWS: LONG-LOST PRINCESS RETURNS WITH HUSBAND & CHILD.

There wasn't a jaw in the room that was closed by now. Nathanael stood up. "Wait...does this mean Marinette is a princess, too?"

Alya shrugged. "I guess."

Rose's blue eyes glittered momentarily. "Wow! Lucky!" It was bad timing, but Rose's obsession with fairytale princesses knew no limits.

Juleka spoke up. "But why is she marrying the Prince of Sardinma—"

"Simosa."

"Whatever. How can she marry someone she just met?"

Alya grew sad. Then she brought up another article. The headline now read POWER COUPLE: SIMOSIAN PRINCE TO WED COCCIDELLENAEAN PRINCESS IN ARRANGED ROYAL MARRIAGE.

"WHAT?!"

Alya sighed. "Yeah...apparently, King Rong wants to ally his country with Simosa's against future threats to the monarchy. And he thinks the best way to cement their friendship is through a political marriage between the two royal families. And he's picked Marinette to be the royal bride."

"This is ridiculous!", Max shouted. "Marinette cannot get married! She's barely even sixteen! Are there no child protection laws in that country?"

Everyone else murmured in agreement.



Alya groaned. "I looked it up, and apparently, the minimum age for marriage is fifteen. Actually, most families set to work arranging the marriages way before then so that the kids are ready to walk down the aisle as soon as they're old enough."

Mylène stared. "Wait, so...Marinette's never coming back?"

Alya's shoulders slumped. "No...she's not."

The class felt as if they had been stabbed in the heart by a dear friend.

"No! She can't be gone!", cried Nino. "We have to do something!"

"Like what?!", exclaimed Alix. "It's not like we can just fly all the way over to Coccidellenae and tell the King 'you can't force Marinette to get married'."

Adrien shook his head. "There must be something we can do..."

The whole class hung their heads in defeat. No one said a word, but their silence was clear enough a message for Adrien...

There was nothing they could do.

---

"Master? You told me when to alert you if I felt something amiss with the Miraculous."

"Yes, Nooroo?"

"I have felt most of the Miraculous leave the country."

"What?!"

"Yes, but I can sense where they have gone."

"Tell me now."

"Coccidellenae."

"Where is that?"

"A small country on the Meridian Seas."

"..."

"..."

"I will have Nathalie book a flight to this country at once. I'll simply tell Adrien I'm going on a business trip there. Thank you for telling me this, Nooroo."

"Yes, Master."

## To Coccidellenae!

Adrien arrived back home with a gray cloud hanging over his head. He still couldn't believe that he had lost Marinette for good. She was one of his best friends, and now he would never see her again. She was going to be married off against her will to some guy she didn't even know and live in his castle forever and what if he didn't want that cute little hamster that Alya said Mari had always wanted—

"Adrien?"

Nathalie's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. "Yes?"

"Your father wanted me to tell you that he's going on a business trip to a country called Coccidellenae. He doesn't know when he'll be back, so..."

Adrien went stiff. "Did you say Coccidellenae?"

Nathalie looked surprised. "You've heard of it? How? I had never heard of it until your father mentioned it today while you were at school. How did you hear—"

Before she could finish her question, Adrien took off towards his father's office, ignoring her cries to come back. He ran down the halls and rapped hard on the door of the office.

""Nathalie? Is that you?"

Instead of correcting Gabriel, Adrien simply opened the door and walked inside, bracing himself for his father's scolding. Gabriel did not condone his son interrupting his time in his office, or anyone else for that matter. Only Nathalie was allowed right pop in on him unannounced.

"Adrien, what are you doing in here?", Gabriel all but growled. "You know the rules!"

"Father, Nathalie says you're going to Coccidellenae!"

"Yes, on a business trip. I know you'd like me to stay here, but I have some very important —"

"Take me with you!"

Gabriel stopped talking and stared at his son, surprised by such a plead. Nathalie came in, panting to catch her breath. "I'm sorry, sir. I tried to stop him...". She looked up to see Gabriel's surprised face. "Sir?"

Gabriel took a step towards Adrien, whose green eyes were begging him to grant his request. "You want to come to Coccidellenae with me? Whatever for?"

"Father, you remember Marinette, right?"

"The girl who won my hat competition? How could I forget her? I still can't believe she turned down Audrey's offer to go to New York."

"Well, it turns out her mom's brother is the King of Coccidellenae."

Gabriel's jaw fell open. "He is?"

Adrien pulled out his phone and swiped at it. Then he turned it around to face his father, and Gabriel could see two teenagers of Chinese descent on it, both dressed grandly. The boy wore a silver crown that had the heads of two dragons on the front, facing one another, holding a giant ruby between their clawed hands. And the girl standing next to him...there was no doubt about it. That was Sabine Cheng, alright.

"Unbelievable...", murmured Gabriel, adjusting his glasses to check if he was seeing right. All this time, royalty had been right under his nose, and he'd been none the wiser.

"A few days ago, King Rong, Sabine's brother, brought her and Tom and Marinette to Coccidellenae! But not just to visit! To live! Forever!"

"Well, I understand why you would want to visit your friend, Adrien, but—"

"It's not just a visit, Father!", cried Adrien, and Gabriel could see his distress. "It's a matter of life or death!"

Gabriel looked flummoxed. "Pardon? How is it a matter of life or death?"

"Now that he's got Marinette, King Rong is going to force her to marry some prince she doesn't know!"

Now Gabriel was really flabbergasted. "I'm sorry—marry?! Isn't she your age?!"

"People apparently marry really young there. Please, Father! I need to go to Coccidellenae! I need to see Marinette! Maybe I can help her get out of this marriage!"

Gabriel just stared at his son, every moment that ticked by pure agony for Adrien. Marinette's fate now rested in his crafty yet cold hands. He could see the desperation in Adrien's sad, pleading eyes. Nathalie held her breath, wondering what Gabriel would say.

Finally, the designer spoke. "Who else knows of all this? Your classmates? Mademoiselle Tsugi?"

"My class, yes. Kagami, no. No one's told her yet. Alya announced this in class today. She spoke to Marinette last night, but her aunt severed all their contact after that."

Another minute of silence. Gabriel had a stony face as he gave his final answer. "Well...if it means that much to you, you may come."

Adrien smiled. "Really?!"

Gabriel gave him a small smile. "In fact...why don't you bring all your friends with you?"

Adrien's eyes went wide. "Wait...really?"

"Really. You all adore Mademoiselle Dupain-Cheng so much. You all deserve to see her. Maybe with all your hands helping, you will have better luck freeing her from her unwanted engagement. I'll pay for the plane tickets and everything."

"Oh, thank you, Father!", Adrien cried, hugging Gabriel tightly. "I'll go tell everyone right away!" He bolted past Nathalie and out of the room to call all his friends.

The woman in the room looked back at her employer and old friend with a surprised expression. "Sir, this is a very...unusual thing for you to do."

Gabriel smirked at her, showing his Hawkmoth side. "Nathalie, Marinette Dupain-Cheng is being forced into marriage to a man she does not know and probably will not like. Adrien and his friends are at risk of losing their everyday Ladybug forever. Do you know how many negative emotions this could stir up? How many akumas I can create in such a short time? And if Ladybug is really in Coccidellenae, without Chat Noir, it'll be so much easier to get her earrings! And without his Ladybug, getting Chat Noir's ring will be a piece of cake!"

He now gave her a full sinister grin. "This is my biggest opportunity since Lila Rossi got her whole class akumatized. And I'm not going to let it slip away."

He turned away. "That reminds me. Contact Mademoiselle Rossi to let her know that her modeling contract has been terminated."

"Yes, sir."

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"Dude, you're serious?!" Kim's voice was loud and proud over the video call, including everyone from class.

"It's true! He said he'd pay for everything!"

"I never thought I'd say this, dude,", said Nino. "But your dad is the best! I gotta go get permission from my folks!"

"Coccidellenae, here we come!", exclaimed Alya, and they all cheered in agreement. Adrien smiled from ear to ear, feeling better than he had since Lila Rossi had returned to school.

They were going to get their everyday Ladybug back.

## It Begins

Marinette awoke the next morning to the sun shining on her face, the sound of chirping birds just outside her window. Usually, such a beautiful sights and sounds would lift her spirits, but not today. Not after everything that had happened yesterday.

She pulled herself off the silk sheets of her new canopy bed and pressed the heels of her palms against her swollen, reddened eyes. She glanced at her surroundings, at her new bedroom. Because it was her new room. At least, it would be until she would have to move in with her new husband, wherever she lived. The reminder that she was getting a husband chosen for her weighed down on her heart like a cinderblock.

She rose from the bed and walked towards the window where the birds were cheeping and singing merrily. She opened the panels of the window and looked out at the cluster of white dove-like perched on a branch, snuggling against one another, content to be together. In spite of her own sorrow, Marinette smiled at the birds, gazing at them with a soft smile.

Suddenly, the birds all took off, flapping their wings as they soared through the air, until they were little shadows against the form of the rising sun. Marinette watched them fly away, free to go where they pleased, wishing she could join them, that she might grow wings and fly away from this gilded cage she had been locked away in, back to her friends and home in Paris.

"There you are!"

She jumped and spun around to see her Aunt Jun standing in the doorway. She looked vastly different in the mornings than when she did in public. Her hair was pinned up against her head in tight pin curls, sections of her dark raven locks pinned up against her head in tight twists, held in place by criss-crossed bobby-pins. The twists were so tightly wound and so securely pinned that there were bald gaps on Jun's scalp between the lumps of black hair that were scattered around her head.

Not only that, she also had cream smothered all over her face. It wasn't even the same cream on the whole face. She had white cream on her forehead and cheeks, green cream underneath her eyes, and black cream all over her chin. She also had a pore-strip over her nose, some bleach under her nose right above her lower lip, and a scarf tied under her chin and over the sides of her head.

Marinette had to blink a few times before she truly recognized her great-aunt. She looked nothing like the poised, disciplined ice queen Marinette had met for the first time just the other day. Luckily, those dark, calculating eyes gave her true identity away. "Aunt Jun! I...I almost didn't recognize you. You look..." She trailed off as she struggled to find the nicest way of saying what she wanted to say.

"Don't even try, my dear.", Jun said, dismissing her niece with a wave of her hand. "I know I look a fright. While my beauty is radiant, it does not come as naturally as I would like. To keep myself looking my best, I engage in these treatments. After all, as a member of the royal

family, one must present oneself as perfectly in public as possible. And to do that, sacrifices must be made."

Just then, the handmaiden from yesterday walked into the room. She was wearing her usual Chinese-styled gown, stitched panels of lavender bright pink and pastel orange, her dark hair pinned up with colorful flowers and ornaments arranged in it.

"Pardon, Your Grace.", she said with a curtesy to Duchess Jun. "I am here to help the Princess start the day."

"Oh, of course.", muttered Jun with a curt nod. She looked back at Marinette and smiled sweetly. "Today, we start preparing for your wedding."

Marinette's heart sank.

"Start with something light and simple.", Jun told the handmaiden. "We'll be beginning with the fittings for her bridal gown. The seamstresses will need to get a feel of her body shape. A thin dress will do. Nothing bulky, that will interfere with the measurements."

"As you wish, Your Ladyship.", said the handmaiden with another curtesy.

Jun looked back at a dour Marinette. "I'll see you downstairs in an hour. Do be punctual." And with that, she exited the room sharply, like a gust of wind.

Marinette sat on the bed, pouting.

"Your Highness?"

It took two or three more times of hearing that before Marinette remembered that the handmaiden was referring to her. She turned around to look at the girl, who looked about her age. "Yes?"

"Before I help you choose an outfit, I must ask what you would like for breakfast?"

"What do you have?"

"Steamed stuffed buns, rice noodles, scallion oil pancakes..." The handmaiden listed off the options.

When she finished, Marinette stared at her blankly for a few seconds. Then she spoke. "What's your name?"

The maiden blinked twice. "Pardon, my lady?"

"What's your name?", Marinette repeated. "You must have one. Or, are you not allowed to tell me?"

The maiden was quiet. Then she said rather shyly, "Nuying. My name is Nuying."

Marinette smiled kindly at her. "That's a nice name. Do you mind if I call you by it from now on?"

Nuying looked surprised, but nodded. "If that's what you wish, my Princess."

"Well than, Nuying, I would like some stuffed buns and a glass of juice, whatever fruit you have."

Nuying curtsied yet again, this time with a smile. "As Your Highness wishes. I will be back in a while to bring it up."

"Wait, bring it up?"

"Why, yes. All members of the royal family have breakfast served to them in bed. While you eat, I will go through your closet and present the best choices for your wardrobe today, so you may decide. It is tradition."

And with one more curtesy, she hurried out of the room to fetch Marinette's breakfast. Tikki came out of hiding, flying over to Marinette. "She seems nice."

"She does. A little shy, though."

"She's a royal servant, Marinette. I think she's used to taking orders without protest. It's part of her life."

"I guess you got a point."

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Adrien jiggled his leg as he sat with Kagami and Luka on the plane. Chloé had complained about not getting to sit with him, but he hadn't taken any of her whining, not this time. Taking care of Lila, standing up for justice, had felt good. It was the same feeling he got when he defeated akumas as Chat Noir. He knew what this meant, and what he had to do. If he wanted to be worthy of the ring, he had to start acting like a hero out of the mask, too.

He called her out for her behavior, telling her that this was the reason that he had stopped talking to her after the Miracle Queen Crisis. He had always defended her, but she had crossed a line when she willingly teamed up with Hawkmoth and let herself get akumatized. She was now no better than Lila Rossi, and he wasn't having any of it anymore. He was done.

He broke off their friendship, for good this time, saying that he was through with her. It hurt that things had to end like that. Chloé had been his oldest friend, and she had always been there for him, treated him kindly, and he had really hoped that she could change. But in his heart, he knew that he had no choice. Too long had he put up with her toxic behavior, at the cost of his own trustworthiness among his friends. And she had proven that she was not willing to put in the effort to be better.

Adrien looked over at his girlfriend, sitting next to him. "Thanks for coming, Kagami."

"You say that as if this were a favor to you.", she said. "It's not. Marinette is my best friend, too. I don't want her to be forced into a political marriage, either. She is a special girl, and

deserves to be in a happy, healthy, loving relationship, entered of her own free will."

"She does.", Luka chimed in. "She's amazing. She deserves to be with someone she truly loves, who loves her for her. The song of her heart."

Adrien nodded. He knew what Luka meant. Since the day they met, he had picked up on the chemistry between the sweet designer and the blue-tipped musician. He honestly wondered why it was taking so long for them to start dating. Maybe Marinette was too shy. Not everyone had the confidence Chat Noir had for Ladybug.

Funnily enough, Adrien did always feel a tad uncomfortable when he thought of Luka and Marinette together, like when he thought his Valentine was from Marinette. At first, he had been happy. But then he remembered Luka, and he knew there was no chance. Adrien couldn't compete with a cool, soulful senior guitarist. Luka had the moves that Adrien wished he could show outside his leather suit, if only he didn't have the chance of his father scolding him. Why would Marinette like him when she had someone as smooth and awesome like Luka Couffaine vying for her affections?

But Kagami liked him. She had made that clear from the beginning. And after being rejected so many times by Ladybug, it felt good being with someone who wanted him. Kagami was kind at heart, and bold and confident, and someone from his own social circles, so he didn't have to worry about her father's disapproval. And she was devoted to him and only him.

And if Adrien needed anything right now, with his mother gone and his father distant, he needed someone to love him.

He was pulled out of his thoughts by the pilot's voice over the speakers. "Attention, passengers. We have arrived over the beautiful country of Coccidellenae. In about twenty minutes, we will be landing. Until then, you may look out the window and admire the view. I promise you, it's really something."

By instinct, Adrien leaned over towards the window and glanced out. What he saw below took his breath away. A rainbow of richly-hued colors coated on the lands, shining brilliantly even from hundreds of feet below the plane. Old, majestic palaces and other grand buildings were scattered among the fields, each big enough to be seen in detail, even from a bird's eye view. Adrien had never seen anything so magnificent in his entire life. Okay, yeah, he'd never seen anything outside of Paris, but still!

"Welcome to Coccidellenae."



## Reunited

Marinette stood on the stool, sulking like a child as three different women fussed over her. She was in nothing but a thin white shift, no shoes or socks. The seamstress and her assistants measured her, wrapping tapes around her waist and holding them up against her body, taking notes of her sizes. It was all very tedious, but Marinette just took it in stride.

Sabine stood with her Aunt Jun, now in her usual elegant clothes and perfectly done hair and makeup. The Duchess smiled in satisfaction as she watched her grandniece be subjected to grabby hands and strange murmurs. "Isn't she lovely?"

One of the seamstresses held out two swatches of shiny silk before her mistress. One was a bright, glossy red, the other a smooth, gleaming white. "What color should we choose for the gown, my lady?", she asked. "Red or white?"

Jun put a smooth, manicured finger to her painted lower lip. "Hmm...difficult choice. White is a safe, stable choice for a young lady about to be married. It symbolizes purity of the soul and the body. On the other hand, red is a tempting choice, especially for honoring our Chinese roots. Plus, it represents good fortune and fertility."

Marinette's shoulders slumped. "Great. So my options are 'sweet little virgin' or 'lucky baby-maker'. That's not degrading at all."

Jun shot her a stern glare. "A proper lady does not talk back to her betters."

"I wasn't talking to my betters. I was talking to you."

Jun's eyes narrowed dangerously as she pursed her lips into a dissatisfied pout. "We're going to have to work on those manners of yours. No man wants a wife with a smart mouth."

"Does that mean if I keep this up, he'll cancel the wedding? Works for me."

Jun chose to ignore her this time and turned back to Sabine, who looked nervous, sensing the growing tension between her aunt and daughter. "Sabine, dear, which color do you think we should use for the wedding dress?"

"I think Marinette should decide what she wants to wear for her wedding."

"I think I should decide when my wedding should be. Maybe like, twenty years from now?"

Jun gave her niece an unamused look. "And that is why we must decide the dress for her. She's not cooperating! She's not going to pick anything for this wedding herself!"

"Well, I didn't get to pick having this wedding for myself, so why pick anything else for it?!"

Jun spun back around to glare at the not-so-eager bride-to-be. "Listen to yourself! Whine, whine, whine! It never ends! And here I thought you were such a mature young lady when

we first met! You're not getting out of this duty, so you can pick a dress color, or I'll pick for you!"

Marinette was about to talk back, but then she saw her mother's pleading face. Her eyes said, give up, you're not going to win.

The girl sighed heavily. "White. I choose white."

"For the hanfu or the underdress?"

"Um...hanfu?"

"Excellent choice.", said Jun, smiling proudly. "See? That wasn't hard, now was it?"

Marinette did not reply, merely grumbled to herself as she stepped down from the stool and behind a panel divider to change into more covering clothes, a lilac hanfu and a periwinkle underdress.

"We should have the gown ready in six days.", said the head seamstress as Marinette returned to her mother's side. "Four, if we work late. Which we will, if that is what you wish."

"Oh, no need.", Jun assured her. "The dress will be in the traditional fashion that is wore by all princess brides in our family. It's a delicate and thoughtful process, one that should not be rushed."

"Unlike others things about this wedding.", mumbled a grouchy Marinette, earning another glowering stare from her great-aunt.

"Six days it is, than. Thank you very much, Your Grace."

As the seamstresses packed their supplies and hurried off to start their work, Jun approached her grandniece, who was still staring hard at the floor, pouting like a child.

"Stop sulking. It's unbecoming. You're getting married soon. You must stop acting like a child and start acting like a proper lady."

"But I am a child.", said Marinette, lifting her head, and Jun could see the rims of her eyes turning red. "I'm not ready for this kind of thing yet."

"I was a year younger than you when I was married.", Jun pointed out. "So don't complain about being too young. If you ask me, people these days undervalue the concept of young marriage. Start them now, I say! Not a moment to waste!"

"But what if I don't love him? The prince?"

Aunt Jun suddenly looked at her grandniece as if she had suddenly grown a second set of eyes. "Love? Love?!" And she burst out laughing.

Marinette frowned at her aunt. "What's so funny?"

Jun's proud, haughty laughter died down into light giggling. "Marinette, my dear...marrying for love is something people do when they're poor and stupid. And you are neither of those things."

Marinette gaped at that comment. "How could you say that?"

Before Aunt Jun could respond, a royal servant came running into the room, panting to catch their breath. "Your Highness! Princess Marinette! You must come to the palace entrance at once! There are a bunch of foreign teenagers there who claim to know you personally! They refuse to leave until you come out."

Marinette blinked several times. "Really? Did they say anything about who they were? Where they were from?"

"Yes, I know they said they flew all the way here from Paris, France to see you."

Instantly, Marinette's face lit up, and she bolted past the servant and out the door, her great-aunt's shouts and demands to return falling on deaf ears, all while her mother simply smiled to herself.

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Marinette pushed past the palace knights guarding the doorway to the castle and bolted towards the tall iron gates. Sure enough, just on the other side, she could see some familiar faces talking to some guards, trying to get in.

"Guys!"

Her voice caught their attention, and all heads turned to see the young princess running up to them. A great cheer came up from the teenagers outside the gates.

"It's her! She's here!"

"Marinette! It's us!"

"We came to rescue you!"

The head guard looked at his princess as she stopped next to him, his forehead creased. "Wait...Your Highness actually knows these young people?"

"Yes! They're my class from school in Paris!" She beamed as she faced them, taking their hands to check if they were real. "I can't believe you guys are here!"

"Of course we came! We couldn't leave you in the lurch!", said Alix. "Not this time."

"We're so sorry, Marinette!", cried Rose in a pleading tone. "We're sorry for believing all of Lila's stupid lies!"

"We miss you.", added Juleka.

Marinette felt tears forming in her eyes. "You guys...", she whimpered happily. "I-I missed you, too."

"Please don't leave!", begged Mylene. "Who else is going to be our shoulder to cry on, or the first to tell good news to? Chloé?"

"Hey!"

Marinette wiped her watery eyes. "Guys, I want to go home with you more than anything." She pouted a bit. "But I don't think I have a choice in this matter."

"Says who?", scoffed Ivan.

"Says my uncle, King Rong."

"Come on, what's he's doing to you can't be legal!", Nino exclaimed. "He's not only keeping you and your folks captive in his fancy-schmancy castle, he's forcing you to marry someone you don't know!"

"What is all this?!"

Marinette turned around to see Aunt Jun storming in her direction, her pretty face twisted in fury. Trailing close behind were Tom and Sabine, looking worried.

"What do you people think you're doing here?!", she shrieked at the kids. "You're trespassing on royal property! I should have you arrested on the spot!"

"Who died and made you the boss?", remarked Alix rather rudely.

"My husband, the Baron of Chunbridge. Left me everything he owned in life. Which makes me higher up than you filthy rats, which means you have to do what I say!"

"Hey! I remember you!", Alya piped up, glowering at the older woman. "You're the woman who broke Marinette's phone!"

The Baroness looked at the reporter and her eyes snapped open wide, her red lips curling into an ugly shape. "You! I told you never to contact my niece again!"

"Wait—niece?!"

"Marinette, this old kook's related to you?!"

Marinette pressed her lips in a thin line. "Yes. This is my mother's aunt, Baroness Jun."

"Enough!", boomed her aunt, glaring harshly at the class. "Get off my family's property this instant! Go back to whatever gutter you dirty mice crawled out of!"

Half of the jaws of the class dropped at her insults.

"For a member of royalty," remarked Kagami coolly. "You seem to be lacking the class usually required."

Jun looked as if she had been slapped. "How dare you speak to me that way! It's so clear now that none of you were raised to respect your superiors!"

"Aunt Jun, please!", Marinette pleaded with her aunt. "They're my friends!"

"Darling, I strongly suggest you acquire better friends.", Jun muttered darkly, her eyes narrowed to slits as she looked the kids. "Preferably ones with manners."

"We have manners!", shot back Nathanael. "We just don't see the point of putting them to use towards high-and-mighty snobs like you!"

Seeing the situation about to reach it's peak, Sabine stepped in. "Aunt Jun, it's okay! I...I invited them!"

"You what?!", growled Jun.

"You did?", exclaimed Marinette.

"You did?", asked Alya with a raised eyebrow.

Sabine gave her a look that said go along with it.

"Oh! Yes! Yes, she did!", Alya said. She swerved her head back and forth, shooting the gang the same look as Sabine to get them all on board, and fast. "She invited us here! We're guests!"

"Oh, yeah!"

"That's right!"

"We were totally invited!"

Jun looked back and forth between the intruders and her niece, studying their expressions before she settled her gaze on Sabine. "Did you get the King's permission to extend this invitation?"

"Well, no, but I figured, it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission."

Jun kept her glare in Sabine before she sighed, giving in. "Very well than. I suppose we can't turn them away now. It would be rude."

"Now she's concerned about being rude?", muttered Chloé to Sabrina.

"Chloé, don't look a gift horse in the mouth!"

Suddenly, both girls looked to see the Baroness's souring glare upon them both. "Just for that, little lady, you can sleep in the servants' quarters during your stay."

Jun was surprised to hear giggles and snorts of amusement from the others.

"No! I can't sleep with the maids! I am the mayor's daughter! I deserve first class treatment!"

"The mayor of what?"

"Paris! He's the Mayor of Paris!"

Jun simply raised one brow. "Well, we're not in Paris, now are we?"

"She's got your number there, Chloé.", Kim commented with a smirk.

"Shuddup, Le Chein!"

Jun faced the rest of them with an icy expression. "As for the rest of you, we have plenty of rooms available in the rest of the palace. Our butler will assign you all."

"What is going on out here?"

All heads turned to see a man in his late middle ages storming towards the palace gates, his face red. He was dressed in rich colors and fine fabrics and furs. On his head, he wore a thin golden crown encircling his head. The class recognized him at once, from the photo Alya had shown the class. Even though he was older now than he had been in the picture, his facial features, even though contorted in anger, were unmistakable.

Adrien immediately went down on one knee, bowing his head down. "Your Majesty!"

The man stopped in front the gate separating him from the blonde model, staring him down in disapproval. "And just who do you think you are, barging onto my property uninvited?"

"Rong, no! I invited them to the wedding!"

"What?! Sabine, who are these children?"

"They're my friends from Paris! They came here for me!"

"Rong, I'm no any happier that Sabine went behind our backs, but we cannot turn them away now! It would reflect poorly on the crown."

Rong glared at his sister, but he sighed in defeat. "Very well than. Guards! Open the gates!"

At the King's command, the palace gates creaked open to allow the French people entry. Like a flow of water, the class rushed out between the iron piles to embrace Marinette. One by one, they hugged her tightly before passing her off to the next person. Marinette accepted each hug with joy, her thoughts drowned out by the sound of all her collective friends expressing their happiness over having her back.

As the celebration winded down, who should appear from the crowd but Gabriel Agreste himself. Marinette found herself stunned. "Mousier Agreste! What...What are you doing here?"

"I am here on business, expanding my fashion brand to other parts of the world. When Adrien found out where I was going, he begged me to take him with me. You can only imagine my shock when he told me why he wished to go. In fact, many things about his story shocked me."

Gabriel turned to Sabine. "So...you're a runaway Princess?"

Sabine faltered a bit. "Well...yes."

Gabriel shook his head. "Amazing. All this time, I was buying baked goods from a member of foreign royalty!"

"Wait a minute...", Jun spoke up, her eyes narrowing in thought as she looked at Gabriel. "Agreste?" Her eyes went wide. "Of course! I recognize that name! My daughter went to one of your fashion shows a few years ago in London! She said it was spectacular!"

"Not surprised.", said Gabriel flatly. "I'm a big name in the fashion industry back in Paris. And I'm working on getting my name heard in other parts of the world as well. I just finished getting some stores set up in Japan, thanks to the Tsurgi family."

That's when Rong spoke up, sounding much friendlier than before. "Tsurigi! Of course!" He turned to Kagami and pointed at her. "That's why you looked so familiar to me! You're the spitting image of Tomoe Tsurgi!"

Kagami smiled a bit. "She's my mother."

"I knew it! I was in the audience of the big fencing tournament when your mother took home the gold! She deserved it! Her technique was flawless." Rong smiled at her. "Don't worry, I'll fix up one of our finest rooms for the daughter of one of the greatest fencers of all time!"

Nathalie stepped forward with her tablet. "I am Mademoiselle Sancour, Gabriel's assistant. Mousier Agreste must ask humbly for the finest rooms you have in your home. One for him, one for me, and one for his son."

"His son? Which one is his son?"

Marinette walked to the blond model. "Uncle Rong, this is Adrien Agreste, Gabriel's son and heir. He's also one of my best friends."

Adrien smiled at her. "Really?"

Marinette smiled back. "Really."

"Ah, I see. Well, I'll have Mr. Unn assign you all to your bedrooms. Each one has two beds, so you can share if that's what you wish. If not, we have plenty of rooms, so you can have your own if you want."

Adrien perked up. "Can I room with Nino?"

"Sure. Whoever that is."

Adrien shot his father a pleading look. Gabriel stared back emotionlessly before he shrugged. "I'm going to be busy this whole trip. Might as well find some ways to keep you occupied."

Adrien pumped his fist into the air. "Yes!" He dove in to hug Gabriel. "Thank you, Father!"

He ran to Nino, who gave him a high five.

"Dude, this is awesome! It'll be like the sleepover we never got together!"

Marinette beamed at seeing her friends laugh and smile with her again. Yesterday, she felt as if her whole life was ending. Now, there was a ray of hope and light in what was the worst situation ever.



## Past the Golden Gates

The class stepped into the throne room and were instantly blown away by its splendor. Marinette and her parents giggled at their awestruck expressions, while Rong look quite pleased with himself, as he himself were responsible for the majesty of his palace, as if he had designed and built it and not his ancestors.

"This place is amazing!"

"Tell me about it! This place makes Chloe's dad's hotel look like a dump!"

"Hey!"

Alix looked at a fancy marble sculpture sitting prettily on a pedestal. "No way...I saw that sculpture in one of Jalil's books! It's supposed to be a masterpiece!"

Nathanael stepped beside her. "It is! It's Heaven by Gin Chu Ya! It's the greatest piece of work that he ever created! His Mona Lisa. Wow...this is an amazing recreation."

A scoff was heard behind him and Alix, and they turned to see King Rong smirking at them smugly, like he was smarter than them.

"What?"

Rong quirked a brow at the two teens. "Recreation?" He rolled his eyes and chuckled.

Alix and Nathanael turned sharply to each other, eyes wide and jaws hanging open, then spun around completely to stare at the sculpture.

"This...This is the original sculpture?!", gasped Nathanael, his hands trembling in awe and disbelief.

Rong let out a satisfied "hmm..."

"Get out...", whispered Alix. "Jalil would flip!"

Juleka stepped forward to admire the piece of work. "It is really pretty...", she said softly, reaching out her hands.

Snap!

The crack of a wooden fan against Juleka's hand echoed off the tall walls of the throne room. The poor girl immediately retracted her hand with a sharp cry of pain, her other hand instinctively going to rub the sore spot on her skin.

Marinette was at her side in an instant, while Sabine's deadly glare directed right at her Aunt Jun, who was giving Juleka an icy look that made the timid girl feel smaller than even Chloé ever had.

"Don't touch that! It's a priceless work of art! You'll get your grimy peasant germs all over it!"

"Aunt Jun! That was rude!"

"You can't talk to my friends like that!"

Even Rong looked upset by his aunt's actions. "With all due respect, Aunt Jun, there are nicer ways to tell our guests to keep their hands to themselves. You owe this young lady an apology."

Lady Jun now found herself being glared at by almost everyone in the throne room. Pressing her full, red lips together, she softened her facial features a bit and looked more kindly upon Juleka, who was looking more and more like mouse caught in a trap.

"I humbly beg your pardon, dear. I can get a little...testy at times."

Rong cleared his throat. "Albert will take you to your assigned rooms. Please keep them as neat as you can, and treat our staff with the utmost respect."

"Wait!", Adrien spoke up. "We need to talk to you!"

Rong furrowed his thick brows together at that demand. "You? Talk to me? About what?"

"About Marinette's wedding!", exclaimed Adrien. "You can't force her to marry someone she doesn't know!"

Suddenly, Rong's face became dark. Adrien's heart stopped, the King's face reminding him so much of his father at his worst moods, only Rong's was much, much more intimidating.

"Oh...I see now.", he growled at the blond boy, stepping over to stand before him, towering over the young Agreste by three whole feet (he was quite tall). "So that's what you came here for. You decided you'd come to her rescue and save her from her arranged marriage, like some sort of hero. Well, guess what? I'm her uncle, and the King, and I decide what is best for my family and my country!"

"But you can't just decide her life for her!", Alya piped up. "This is the twenty-first century! Women have the right to choose for themselves what they want!"

Jun fluttered her fan as she stuck her nose up in the air. "As a woman myself, I speak for Marinette and all the ladies in our family when I say that royal women have a duty to crown and country. Oftentimes, that duty to marry the men that have been chosen for us by our betters and guardians, even if we do not know them very well. Nevertheless, we must do what we must to uphold the royal family honor and carry out our legacy. It is our responsibility to our family, to our ancestors, and to Coccidellenae."

"But-But-But—"

"This is not up for discussion!", Rong roared, silencing Adrien and the rest of the class with his cold eyes and tone. "I am the King! I rule this country! I make the decisions on how to

help my family and my people! You are mere children, simple commoners of a foreign land! You have no say in our culture, in our politics! It would do you best to hold your tongue for the rest of your stay here, should I even allow you to stay after your blatant disrespect for our culture and traditions!"

Nino gulped. This guy made Gabriel Agreste look like Frosty the Snowman.

Speaking of whom, the designer stepped forward and took his son by the shoulder, giving him a gentle squeeze and a stern look. "Adrien, perhaps you shouldn't speak any further. His Majesty has a point. You are not a member of the royal family, nor am I. We are foreigners in a different land, with no royal or political standing. We have no power here. You have no power against His Majesty's choices."

"But...Marinette—"

"Is his niece, and a member of the family of which he is patriarch. The royal family of another country. I highly doubt that getting yelled at by a child of a foreign country will change his mind. It is best you let this go. Now." He spoke the last word very coldly and sharply, making it clear that he demanded his son's silence.

Just then, Adrien felt another hand on his free shoulder, this one gentler, kinder. He turned to see Marinette's face just hovering above his shoulder, smiling at him sadly but sweetly. "It's okay, Adrien. I'll be okay."

He looked back at her apologetically as Rong and Gabriel walked away to sort things out with the rooms, allowing the two some privacy. "I'm sorry, Marinette...I wanted to help you. I really did. I haven't been a very good or helpful friend to you lately, and I wanted to redeem myself."

"Adrien, what are you talking about? You're a great friend."

"I didn't help you with Lila. I tried to get her to stop targeting you, but she just went back on her word."

Marinette's smile became less sad and more true. "Adrien, just the fact that you tried to help me is enough."

He looked at her with genuine surprise on his face. "It is?"

"Of course! Alya told me she overheard you talk about your deal with the devil." She motioned to the brown-skinned reporter standing nearby, who gave Adrien an encouraging smile. Marinette looked back at her former crush. "The fact that you sold your soul to Lila, just to protect me from her...that's more than enough to prove your friendship. You're a true friend, Adrien Agreste. And don't listen to anyone who says otherwise."

Adrien gave her a true smile. "Really?"

"Really truly."

His eyes glittered with gratitude. "Thank you. I needed to hear that."

She nodded, then went off back to Juleka. "Hey, I'll show you girls to my room! And I'll get you some cream for your hand."

The girls followed Marinette down the hall, waving goodbye to the boys.

"And while they're catching up, I'll show you boys to your rooms.", said Tom, holding up the paper slip containing all the room assignments. "Follow me!"

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"Here we are!", Marinette announced as she unlocked the door to her new bedroom with the golden key Aunt Jun had given her. Swinging it open, she stepped inside, leading Alya, Rose, Juleka, Mylene, Alex, Kagami, Chloé and Sabrina, who all gasped in astonishment at the beauty and luxury of the lodgings.

"Girl! This is your new room?!", squealed Alya. "It's unbelievable!"

"It's the most beautiful room I've ever seen!", exclaimed Mylene, running over to admire all the fancy trinkets and furniture.

"It's just like a fairytale princess's room!", Rose swooned, skipping around to get a good look at everything.

Alix flopped backwards onto Marinette's large, fancy canopy bed, letting her body sink into the mattress. "Wow...this is so soft. Getting tired just lying here."

"Princess?"

Everyone looked over to see a prettily-dressed girl their age standing in the doorway, smiling politely as she held a small bottle in her hand. "I have the ointment Your Highness requested."

"Oh! Everyone, this is Nuying. She's my, um, handmaiden." Marinette spoke that last word uncomfortably.

"Wow! Even the servants here are dressed to the nines!", remarked Sabrina, admiring Nuying's lovely pink, violet and orange dress, and her lovely hairdo, not a strand out of place.

Nuying walked over to Juleka. "I believe this is for you.", she said softly, holding up the bottle. "Please sit, and I will apply it."

"Oh, Nuying, that's nice of you, but I was gonna do that.", said Marinette. "I just needed you to bring the ointment."

"Oh, no, no, no, Your Highness.", said Nuying with a shake of her head. "It is my job. A Princess cannot do such tasks on her own. That is what I am here for. If your Uncle or Aunt heard I let you do it, I would be in quite a peck of trouble."

"Oh." Marinette's shoulders slumped, her bluebell eyes falling to her new shoes. "Well...I guess I don't want to get you in trouble."

Juleka sat on the bed next to Alix as Nuying unscrewed the bottle top and poured some soft white mush into her pale hand. Taking the hand of Juleka with the red blotch, she gently rubbed the spot where Jun had struck her. Within seconds of rubbing, Juleka released a relieving sigh.

"That...that feels amazing.", she said. "Seriously, what is in this stuff? I've never had ointment like this."

"Coccidellenae secret.", Nuying stated simply, screwing the top back on the bottle. "Now that that's taken care of, would you like me to show you ladies to your rooms for your stay here?"

"We would. Thank you."

"I'll go with you.", said Marinette.

In all the fuss, no one noticed Chloé brooding in the corner in the room, not even Sabrina. They missed the way her face twisted into an ugly scowl, how her skin had become a tint of red as she glared at her surroundings in envy, stewing her own thoughts of how unfair everything was. Chloé had wished to become a princess for as long as she could remember. Ever since she was a little girl, she had been wearing tiaras she'd badgered her father to buy for her, waving a toy scepter around to order her servants around, fantasizing about someone coming and telling her that she was actually the long-lost heir to a forgotten kingdom.

And now, all of that had happened...

...but not to her.

Who had it happened to?

Marinette Dupain-Cheng. The one girl that Chloé hated most of all, had somehow gotten everything Chloé had ever wanted for herself. And she was even engaged to a real prince! Chloé had been dreaming of finding her own legit Prince Charming since she was five! And one had just fallen right onto her enemy's lap! It was like all of Chloe's dreams were coming true, but they were coming true for someone else. Someone she didn't even like.

And the worst part of it all? Dupain-Cheng didn't even WANT to be a princess! She didn't WANT to marry a prince! That was the icing on the crud cake that life was feeding Chloé. To see her worst foe get everything she had been wishing for, only to want to rid herself of it all and go back to being that nobody baker girl in Paris with those unattainable dreams of becoming a famous fashion designer.

Of course, no one noticed her anger and jealousy. No one asked if she was okay, only passing her by as if she were a chair on their way out of the room as they followed Nuying out into the hallway.

Nuying was given a list of dorm assignments, detailing who would share a room with whom.

Alya Césaire & Kagami Tsurugi  
Rose Lavillant & Juleka Couffaine

Mylene Harperle & Alix Kubel  
Chloé Bourgeois & Sabrina Rainincorpx

Nuying stopped in front of a dark brown wooden door. "Miss Césaire and Miss Tsurugi will be staying in this room.", she declared, unlocking the door with a set of keys that had been bestowed upon her, along with the list.

When the door opened, jaws dropped. The room had a Japanese vibe to it, with two traditional platform beds and paintings in ancient style of beautiful women in kimonos. The curtains were made of silk, bright and colorful, and they even had a little Buddha shrine in the corner of the room. The room was adorned with a small bonsai garden and a traditional Japanese tea table with an authentic tea set arranged on top.

"Wow! This is awesome!", said Alya, stepping in. She looked at Nuying with a raised eyebrow. "But one thing I don't get...why all the Japanese stuff? Aren't you guys Chinese?"

"Some female members of the royal family have much free time on their hands.", explained the handmaiden. "They have taken to decorating the various rooms of the palace. They love to give each room a unique theme." She turned to Kagami. "When His Majesty was made aware of your heritage, he insisted that you receive this room. He thought you might appreciate the decor and tradition of it. As a fan of your mother's, he feels you deserve the best while you stay here."

Kagami smiled at Nuying, then looked around the room. "It is quite wonderful. And makes me feel like I am back home in Japan. Do give His Majesty my sincerest gratitudes."

"As you wish. Now, let's get the rest of you settled in."

She led the girls to their assigned rooms, two at a time, each bedroom with a different theme to its decor. Rose and Juleka's room was like a great big garden, with stalks of fresh bamboo, vines of plum flowers, and bundles of Chinese orchids and peonies. There was even a little tree between their beds with lotus flowers in their branches. Rose was over the moon, and Juleka was just happy to see her happy.

Mylene and Alix's room was decorated, as Nuying said, to match the royal family's personal room at the Buddha temple where they worshipped and prayed. There were several statues of the main idol, some in bronze, some in silver, but most were made of gold and adorned with various precious stones. Incense and candles were lit at the shrine positioned at the head of the room, and there were multiple silk cushions of different colors scattered around the floor, for praying, Nuying said.

When it came time to take Chloe and Sabrina to their quarters, Nuying walked to the end of a hallway and rung a bell. Almost immediately, another servant, one less finely-dressed in a plain black smock and white apron, came running.

"Hilda, please take the blonde one and her little lackey to the servant's quarters below the ground floor.", commanded Nuying. "Duchess Jun insists that they take their lodgings there for the entirety of their visit."

"No!", shrieked Chloé, stomping her foot. "I don't belong in that lowly shack! I belong up here with the cream of the crop!"

Sabrina stepped forward, looking nervous yet desperate. "Come on, there are like a hundred rooms around here! Can't we stay in one of these?"

"I have my orders from the Duchess.", Nuying reminded her. "Would you have me go against my mistress?"

"Bah! That old coot is full of it! I'm not budging from this floor, and neither is Sabrina, so you might as well unlock one of those good rooms for us to stay in!"

Nuying and Hilda shared a look that said "is she for real?". Marinette groaned and shrugged. Hilda sighed and clapped her hands twice. At once, large, heavy footsteps came towards the five girls, and out from the corner, behind Hilda, was a big, brawny man in uniform.

"Lao, this blond brat and her little friend here are trying to refuse the orders of Duchess Jun. Please...escort the two of them to the servants's quarters below, as Her Ladyship wishes."

Lao nodded and stormed over to Chloé, scooping her off her feet and throwing her over his shoulder, ignoring her kicks and feral screams as she demanded he put her down. She made a motion towards Sabrina, but she jumped and quickly said, "It's okay! I'll follow you!"

"At least that one has a bit of common sense.", muttered Hilda as Chloé was taken away, her commands and shrieks going unheard as Lao carried her away, Sabrina trailing close behind.

"Your Highness, your Aunt Jun wishes you to meet her in the ballroom as soon as possible.", Nuying told Marinette.

---

Marinette wandered into the ballroom to see her aunt and mother waiting for her. Also awaiting her arrival was a young man she did not recognize. Was he one of her cousins? She couldn't remember. There must have been a dozen cousins at the welcoming banquet last night.

"You asked for me, Aunt Jun?"

Jun smiled. "Indeed. It is time for your dancing lesson."

"Dancing lesson?"

"But of course!", said Aunt Jun, her voice reaching high pitches. "You're a Princess! You simply must know how to dance with poise and grace!"

The man stepped forward as Jun smiled at her. "This is Yi Eung. He's taught all your cousins how to dance at balls. And now, he shall teach you."

Eung gave a deep bow, before lifting his head and his hand up towards Marinette to accept. Marinette went to shake his hand, only to have him grip hers and yank her closer to him, putting himself in the proper position for a waltz, arm extended to the side, hand on her opposing hip.

"Let us begin." Jun clapped her hand, and a violinist began to play a song. With no time to prepare, Marinette stumbled as Eung led her into a standard box step. She gathered herself and did her best to match his steps. It took a moment or two, but she soon was stepping in sync with him.

"Good, good. One, two, three, one two, three...keep to the rhythm." Jun gave feedback as he carefully eyed her grandniece's feet. "Excellent. Now try it while spinning."

Eung started turning Marinette around, and her foot slipped and landed right on his shoe. "Yow!"

He stopped and practically jumped away from her, lifting his leg to grab and clutch his sore foot.

"I'm so sorry!", squeaked Marinette. "I'm, uh...kind of clumsy."

Eung plastered a smile on his face. "It's fine. There's bound to be a mistake on the first try." He took her hand and pulled her back into position. "Let us begin again. From the top."

Thirty minutes and forty-seven missteps later, the furthest Marinette had been able to go in the dance without squashing Eung's poor toes was six steps in. The poor man now sat in a chair against the wall, feet propped up on the edge of the seat to rub at his aching feet, glaring openly at his newest student. "You are, without a doubt, the clumsiest creature I have ever encountered! And I once taught a mule how to dance!"

Marinette's cheeks flushed deep red with humiliation, while her mother matched Eung's glare. Jun sighed, eyes squeezed shut in exasperation, rubbing her nose between her thumb and forefinger. "We have our work cut out for us." She opened her eyes and set them upon Marinette. "You will report to this ballroom, eight sharp, both in the morning AND in the evening. Your dancing must be perfect by the time Prince Tao and his entourage arrive next week."

Marinette's spirits fell even further. It seemed that no one was willing to let her forget her engagement to this stupid prince. It was enough to drive her nuts with all the reminders. "Can I go now?"

"Of course you can go!" Marinette smiled at last. "You can go to the parlor, where your next lesson is!"

And her smile vanished as quickly it had appeared. "My next lesson?"

"Oh, yes! We have a lot to cover in one week! You must know the proper deportment, etiquette, style, court protocol, customs, rituals, and much more before you're ready to meet the Prince! Any royal bride must be in tip-top condition before she's presented to her betrothed!"

Marinette shifted uncomfortably. "I...I was hoping to give my friends a tour of the palace, or just catch up."



"You can do that another time.", scoffed Aunt Jun. "We need to get started now!" She shooed Marinette off towards one hallway, not giving her a chance to argue.

---

Marinette entered her room, exhausted. All day, she had been dashing from one lesson to another. She walked with books on her head to practice walking gracefully. She lifted a cup of tea up and down, over and over again until her arms were sore. She took so many notes of court rituals and protocol that her brain felt it might explode from too much information.

She plopped onto her canopy bed and took off the shoes that were pinching her aching feet. She was so tired, she felt as if she could sleep for a hundred years. Just as she was about to curl up and take a snooze, the door swung open.

There stood Aunt Jun, looking serious as usual, earning a groan from Marinette. "What now?"

"I just came in here to tell you, tomorrow is the day we go to Temple. There, we shall ask the shaman to bless you for your upcoming union and pray to Buddha for good fortune. It is a very important part of the wedding preparations."

Marinette blinked. "Oh, so it's kind of like church?" That actually sounded nice. And she was curious to explore the religion of her mother.

"Sort of. You can bring your friends if you like. It'd be a great learning experience for them, to know our culture and religion."

"That sounds like a great idea."

"Wonderful! See you at sunrise!"

Marinette jolted upright. "Wait—sunrise?"

"Yes! We always attend Temple at the earliest time! First hours of the service! I'll send the servants to wake and dress you at five am tomorrow." And she left the room in a breeze, not giving her niece a chance to protest.

Marinette's heart sank. "Five am?!" She fell backwards on her bed with a loud groan. Tikki came out of hiding and shook her head sadly.

"I can't get up at five in the morning! I can barely get myself to wake up at nine!"

"Marinette, we have bigger problems!", exclaimed her kwami. "We still don't know what happened to the Miracle Box! And we still have no idea where it could be!"

"Tikki, I know! But right now, they're keeping me busy with all this Princess and wedding stuff! I haven't had the chance to investigate any leads! And it's really late. Look, I'll start looking into it tomorrow, I promise! Right now...I need to get as much sleep as I can." A sour look crossed her face. "Before I'm forced up at the crack of dawn."

Quickly, she threw off her silk dress and threw on her new nightgown, before curling back into bed. "Goodnight, Tikki."

Seeing no point in arguing, Tikki flew up to a secluded nook in the room and settled in herself. "Goodnight, Marinette."

---

Adrien adjusted his covers as he climbed into the giant bed. The temporary bedroom he shared with Nino was decorated like a knight's, with a suit of armor in every corner and swords and other weapons hanging from the ceilings like paintings. It was pretty awesome.

Adrien looked back at Nino, sleeping like a log, snoring loudly. Plagg perched himself on his kitten's shoulder. "Man, I've heard trains quieter than him."

"Oh, hush, Plagg.", Adrien chided playfully. He smiled at his best friend, sleeping soundly in the bed next to him. "Well, we didn't get to see Marinette much today, but tomorrow's another day. I'll have to come up with a Plan B."

"Plan B? For what?"

"For getting Marinette out of her arranged marriage, Plagg! That's the whole reason we came here, remember?"

Plagg blinked. "Wait, you're still going through with that? I thought Rong and your dad shot you down there."

"When have you ever known me to give up that easily?", asked Adrien with a smirk befitting his hero self.

"Okay...but how are you gonna get her out of this? I mean, clearly, asking nicely isn't gonna work."

"I'll think of something, Plagg.", said Adrien as he lay in bed. "I always do. I'm not gonna let Marinette down. Not this time. Never again."

# Temple Run

GONG!

"Waah!" Marinette scrambled to an upright sitting position. Through the haziness of her sleep-deprived vision, she could just make out Nuying and two other girls standing in the room, one of which was standing next to a still-vibrating, very large Chinese gong, mallet still in hand.

"Seriously?", she mumbled, rubbing at her face to pull together her half-asleep brain.

"We tried everything else.", said Nuying. She held up a new dress for the Princess. "Now come on! We haven't much time! You must meet your family in the throne room in twenty minutes!" And with that, the other two girls dragged Marinette out of her new bed and got to work.

---

Marinette entered the main foyer of the entrance of the palace, looking lovely but feeling cruddy. She had on a new pinkish-red hanfu with rose-gold floral designs etched all over, a dark blue sash, and pale pink slippers. Her dark hair had been done into a bun with two thin sections on either side of her head tied into loops hanging from just above her ears, with a big flower comb inserted on one side.

She yawned, reaching a hand to her mouth, when she felt a sharp tap on her shoulder. "No yawning!", came Jun's strict, sharp voice. "You'll ruin your makeup!" The Duchess was grandly dressed, her face covered in thick, bright makeup, her hair piled atop her head in a grand, eyes-acting style, her robes gleaming and glistening when the light caught them.

Marinette saw a crowd approaching them, and smiled when she started to recognize their features. However, her smile faded when she saw those features marred with grogginess and sleepiness. Her friends were dressed their best, but slouched over and dazed, rubbing at their faces to stir themselves awake.

"I'm sorry, guys.", she said sheepishly. "I agreed to let you come before they told me what time we'd be leaving."

"It's okay, Mar.", murmured Alya. "S'not you fault your family is crazy. Seriously, who wakes up at five in the morning for church? Even the Catholics don't wake up this early!"

"This is not church!", came Rong's deep, rumbling voice as he swept into view, swathed in furs and fine silks, wearing the Phoenix crown of rose gold and rubies on top of his head. "This is Temple! We will pay respects to the Great Buddha and pray for his blessings for Marinette's marriage! It's an important part of the wedding proceedings!" He pointed towards the doors. "To the carriages!"

Outside, the dozens of Cheng royal family members walked about, getting line to climb into the coaches arranged for the morning. Each of them was dressed in their finest, all of them chattering happily amongst themselves in excitement as the footman sorted them into which

coach, according to their branch of the family tree, their interests, or how close who was to who.

One footman approached Marinette. "Princess Marinette, you and your parents will be taking the lead carriage to Temple, along with your Uncle, the King." He pointed to the fanciest, most elegant-looking carriage, pulled by a pair of fine-looking brown stallions, their postures regal and proud. Marinette could see her parents waiting inside for her and Rong.

"Um...I was actually hoping to ride with my friends...", she said softly.

"Don't be absurd.", Rong cut in, taking her by the shoulder. "As niece of the King and the guest of honor for the blessings ceremony, you are required to ride at the head of the line. It's tradition."

Marinette stole a sad, longing glance at her friends, who looked just as disappointed as she did. Adrien smiled sadly. "It's okay, Marinette. We understand. We'll see you at the Temple."

With a sad sigh, Marinette followed her uncle to the main coach, as the footman approached her friends. "You all will take the carriages at the back of the queue." It was then he pointed to three carriages at the back of the line. Unlike the other coaches carrying the royals, these carriages were as plain as could be, with no fancy decor or embellishments, the horses pulling them gray-furred and plain-looking.

Chloé turned red in the face. "Oh no! I am not riding in one of those! I want one of the good carriages!"

"All the other carriages are occupied, miss.", the footman stated simply. "Each is full with His Majesty's relatives."

"Well, tell one of them to move it and give their spot to me!", barked Chloé.

"I'm afraid I cannot do that. The King would be very upset. As commoners who are unrelated to the royal family, these are the best we can offer you."

Adrien looked at his old friend pleadingly. "Chloé, please, you're making a scene!"

"Yeah, come on, Chloé!", snapped Alix. "You already got yourself in hot water when you insulted Marinette's Aunt Jun. Do you have to make things worse for yourself?"

"What would be worse for me would be riding in one of those garbage coaches, while Dupain-Cheng is riding in style at the front of the line! I refuse to be in last place to that baker girl while she's living it up!"

"Chloé, you're embarrassing us!", Mylene hissed at the mayor's daughter.

It was then that Gabriel appeared next to Chloé. "Miss Bourgeois."

"Oh, Uncle Gabriel! It's awful! They want me to ride in one of those shoddy carriages at the back of the line while Marinette Dupain-Cheng and all her relatives hog all the decent

coaches! Can't you get them to change their minds?"

Gabriel leaned slightly towards Chlo  , a dark scowl in his face. Adrien gulped. He knew that look. That was the look his father gave employees right before he delivered a scathing speech listing off all the ways they'd failed and disappointed him, following by a swift firing. This was going to get ugly.

"Miss Bourgeois. You are a guest of the royal family. They have given you a room, food, and a chance to be beside them in public. However, instead of being grateful for this opportunity and their hospitality, you insist on acting like a spoiled child and whine about what they deny you, rather than be thankful for what they do give you. In doing such, you degrade yourself and your family name by throwing tantrums in front of a King and his family. I imagine once it gets out how you acted during your stay, your name will be mud in the fame game, and anyone important that could have helped you get a leg up in the world will snub not only you, but anyone associated with you. I wonder how your father will fare in the next election when the voters find out that his daughter made a fool of herself in front of royalty. I doubt even bribes will smooth the scandal over."

With every word he spoke, Chloe's arrogant, snotty demeanor melted away, leaving behind a scared, humiliated girl. Gabriel narrowed his eyes and spoke once more. "I strongly suggest you suck up whatever entitlement you have and comply with His Majesty's wishes before you shame yourself or your family name any further."

Reduced to a shrinking violet, Chlo   shuffled away from Gabriel and headed towards one of the plain coaches waiting for her. Adrien watched her go without any further complaints, then looked up at his father with a grateful smile. "Merci beacoup, Father."

"Yeah, never thought I'd say this, but...thanks, Mr. Agreste.", said Nino, smiling at the designer for once.

"Well, I could let her embarrass herself or, by association, me and Adrien any longer.", said Gabriel simply. "In fact, Adrien, I don't want you in the same carriage with her after that episode. You will ride a separate coach with me. Furthermore, since we have a limited amount of carriages, you may choose any friends you wish to ride with, as long as it does not exclude Miss Bourgeois."

Adrien beamed from ear to ear. "Thank you, Father!" He hugged Gabriel, then faced the others. "I choose Nino, Alya, Luka and Kagami."

The chosen four smiled, touched that they were his choices. Gabriel nodded. "Very well. All those who were picked, follow me and Adrien."

The five kids followed Gabriel to the first plain carriage, while the others stayed behind to be sorted into other carriages. Sabrina readily volunteered to join Chlo   in the last carriage, with Rose, Mylene, and Ivan reluctantly joining them, being the nicest and most peaceful of the group, while Kim, Max, Alix, Juleka and Nathaniel took the middle carriage with Nathalie.

Once everyone was sorted out, the horses took off towards the Temple for the ceremony.

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As the procession rode through the villages, commoners gathered out on the streets, waving mini-versions of the Coccidellenaen flag and cheering as the coaches passed them by, each jumping and leaning over to get a glimpse of the passengers inside.

Marinette looked out the window, seeing people calling her name and trying to take pictures of her with their phones. She was reminded of all those red carpet events she had seen on TV, where the fans lined up for a brush with their favorite celebrities, screaming and freaking out at the sight of them. And now, she was that celebrity, the one they were dying to see. It all felt so surreal, like this was all a dream.

"Well? Don't just sit there.", said Rong. "Wave to the people. Blow them kisses. Give them what they want."

Marinette obeyed, waving to the people through the coach window. This seemed to please them, as they all started cheering louder, jumping and screaming in delight like they were on a rollercoaster. She was flattered by their admiration of her.

Rong smiled in approval at her actions. "They love to see their new Princess.", he said proudly.

Marinette continued waving to the people, soaking in their praise as the procession continued past the crowds, down the road, towards the end of town, where a cluster of large, majestic mountains rested, reaching towards the clouds.

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The footmen escorted Marinette and her parents out of the main carriage, before moving to help the King out as well. She looked up at the mountain from where she stood at the very base, the grassy green stalks brushing against her silken slippers, making soft swishing sounds against the fabric as she took steps. "So...where's the Temple?"

"Up there.", Sabine sighed, pointing towards the mountaintop. "To get to the Temple, you must climb up the stairs to the lowest peak of the mountain. That is where the monks have built the Grand Temple."

"Stairs?"

King Rong caught his niece's eye with a motion, leading her to a spot around the mountain. There, Marinette caught sight of the hundreds of steps, carved out of the mountain rock, spiraling up the side of the peaks. She paused, taking in the height of the stairs and amount of steps. There had to be a hundred at least, and that was only in her view. Who knew how many more steps were needed to reach the Temple.

Her friends caught up with her, freezing when they saw the stairs built into the mountainside.

"What's this? Where's the Temple?", asked Mylene as she and her friends gathered at the base of the steps.

"On top of the lowest peak.", Rong repeated. "You must descend the stairs to reach the Temple."

At his words, the French kids paled considerably. "You mean...we have to climb all those stairs?", moaned Nathaniel, his hand trembling as he pointed to the countless steps needed to reach the Grand Temple.

Rong coughed. "Well, you do." He clicked his fingers, and a hoard of servants appeared, carrying a litter of gold and silver, extra large. "The royal family is going to be carried up there. But at least you'll get a good workout." He waved his hand. "Come, Marinette."

Shooting her friends a sympathetic look, she followed her uncle to the royal litter. The others just stared and gaped at the impossible number of steps they had to climb to get to the Temple.

"My legs are starting to hurt already.", whimpered Max.

"I like a good workout, but this is ridiculous!", exclaimed Kim.

Kagami sighed. "Well, you know what they say. The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

"Royalty first!", declared the servants. A whole army of them carried the royal litters, four for each carrier, lugged the royal family and started up the mountain stairs, with the French kids following after them, bracing themselves for an agonizing journey.

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The trip to the Temple took a full hour to complete. For Marinette's friends, however, it felt like they were walking for a year. Every few minutes, she would peek out from behind the silk curtains of her litter and glance behind her to see her friends trying to keep up and keep their breath as they dragged themselves up the steps. Every time she checked on them, they looked more tired and worse for wear. Even Kim and Alix, the most athletic of the gang, were starting to run out of steam.

"Are you sure we can't stop for a break?", Marinette asked her uncle. "My friends look like they're about to pass out."

"Those weaklings?", scoffed Rong. "The servants have gone the same distance they have, all while bearing all out weights! Do they look worn out to you?"

Marinette looked out to see the servants carrying her, her uncle, and her parents in their litter. While they were quite sweaty, they did not look the least bit tired from lugging the weight of four people up the mountain. It was quite impressive. "No...they look fine."

"Those friends of yours need to toughen up.", said Rong. "Children these days are too soft. Why, when I was your age, I already had a fiancé, a college degree in economics and philosophy, and a black belt in three different forms of martial arts!"

"Oh, honestly, Rong!", chided Sabine, rolling her eyes.

"I'm just saying, her friends can handle a few stairs."

"A few? Rong, there are three-hundred-and-seventy-five steps leading to the Temple! That's much more than a few."

Tom and Marinette gaped at her. "Three hundred steps?!"

"And seventy-five.", added Rong.

"And you expected those poor kids to climb all those steps without a break, or even a single complaint?!", barked Tom.

"How many steps do we have left?", asked Marinette.

Rong turned to the window of the litter. "Young man, how many more steps until we reach the Temple?"

"Only a hundred and fifty-seven more to go, Your Majesty!"

Rong smiled cheerily at his family. "See? Only a hundred and fifty-seven more to go!"

"A hundred and fifty-four now!"

Marinette groaned. "My poor friends."

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After what felt like forever, they finally, finally reached the top of the lowest peak of the mountains. Once they left behind the final step, half of the French gang collapsed to their knees, then fell over on their stomachs, panting and wheezing like old dogs who had just chased cars around the whole neighborhood.

"Can't...feel...legs...", Nino sputtered out.

Some of the Royal guards eyed the worn-out teens with disdain.

"What a buncha wimps."

"I know! I haven't been in that kinda state since I was ten!"

"Who...you callin'...wimps...buddy?", Kim choked.

"We're calling you as the men who have been training in war since we were seven! You got worn out after that measly climb? Puh-lease! We've gone mountains taller than this—carrying two buckets full of water! Without stopping for any breaks!"

"You Frenchmen are pathetic.", scoffed the other guard.

Normally, such arrogance and snobbiness would have inevitably led to those two guards getting attacked by the more muscular and athletically-inclined of the group. But even they were too weakened by the climb up the stairs to defend their honor. All they could do was send dirty glares to the guards as they struggled to regain breath and stay alive.



Footmen escorted the royals out of their litters, one by one. Marinette saw her friends on the verge of death and gasped, running to their sides to give them aide. "Are you guys okay?"

"Just...need...a minute...to catch our breath!", said Adrien between pants, putting on a smile for her.

Marinette looked doubtful, but had no time to push her friends further or offer more help as he uncle placed a hand on her shoulder and turned her away. "The Mass is beginning."

# Mass

The Temple was glorious. The columns painted red and gold, with drawings of dragons swirling upwards along the poles. Life-size statues of animals lined the halls, each belonging to the Chinese calendar, all made of the finest, sparkliest jade ever seen. The floors were littered with silken pillows, shining brightly in the sunlight.

The newbies oohed and aahed at the majesty of it all as Rong led them all inside. He took his place at the best pillow of all, the one front and center, right before the podium. It was the best seat in the house, not just because it was closest to the action, but because it was the most expensive pillow there, the biggest, the shiniest, and the best decorated. It was the special pillow, reserved for only the King.

As he knelt before the podium, his knees sinking into the plushness of his special pillow, he motioned to his sister and her family to come forward. They did. Rong glanced at Marinette, then pointed to the pillow lying at his right side. Understanding his silent command, Marinette obeyed and knelt on the chosen pillow. Once she placed her knees in it, she was surprised at how soft and cushy it was. Whatever it was stuffed with, it was so thick that she couldn't even feel the hardwood floors underneath. It was like kneeling on a cloud.

The rest of the family knelt on their assigned pillows as music started. The class looked around as the pillows were quickly being used, leaving them with none.

"Where are our pillows?!", asked Chloé, a tad too loudly for anyone's preference.

Rong looked behind on his shoulder, a guilty expression on his face. "Oh dear...we don't usually have guests for this Mass. And your sudden arrival didn't give us the time to remember to prepare such accommodations. You'll all just have to kneel on the floor."

"What?! You want us to kneel on the hard, dirty floor without anything to cushion our knees or protect us from dirt?!", Chloé whined loudly.

Then she looked at Adrien, who was giving her a dirty look, even dirtier than the ones from everyone else. Then he looked back at the King, gave a small bow, and said civilly, "Please ignore her, Your Majesty. We'll be fine kneeling without pillows."

Rong gave him a curt nod of approval, then turned back to the front for the beginning of Mass.

Chloe's mouth hung open at Adrien's dismissal of her. He had asked the King to ignore her?! How could he discard her so easily in front of someone so influential?! She whipped her head back to see her getting down on his knees, along with all their other peasant classmates.

"Adri-kins?! How could you?!", she hissed at him as music started.

"Chloé, be quiet. Mass is starting.", Adrien whispered, keeping his eyes towards the front and away from her.

"But you just—"

Adrien looked at her from the corner of narrowed eyes. "Chloé, either shuddup and kneel, or take it outside! Now is not the time for one of your temper tantrums!" His voice was packed with heat, yet still somehow so cold it burned.

Chloé gaped at Adrien for a moment. She looked around, but found no support from the others, not even Sabrina, who, too, was kneeling, and looking up at Chloé with a pleading puppy-dog expression, begging her to just do as she was told and not make any more of a fuss.

Defeated, Chloé knelt on the filthy, hard wooden floors and pouted for the next ten minutes while the Mass ceremony opened. A dozen monks stood on the podium, singing an ancient song in their mother language. Most of the class didn't understand what the monks were saying, but luckily, Adrien was there to translate.

"They're singing to the ancestors, the people before them, to guide their descendants down the right path and help bring honor to themselves, their families, and whatever else they may do in life.", Adrien whispered to his friends, careful to keep his voice low as to not disrupt the ceremonies.

Adrien continued to translate the prayers the monks recited throughout the rest of the Mass. At some point in the ceremony, the monks performed rituals which involved smoke and incense oils that filled the whole Temple with different smells. Some were invigorating and energizing, others were smooth and soothing. All of them were strong enough so that even the class in the back could clearly smell every hint and note of the oils.

An hour later, and their knees were aching from the impact of the hard floors beneath them. Some of them worried what would happen when they had to stand again. Chloé had already reached her limit of patience and groaned. "Ugh! When is this gonna be over?!"

"And now, for the final part of our Mass," announced the head monk, answering her prayers. "We shall perform a special ritual and prayer, to bless the upcoming marriage of our new Princess."

At that part, Marinette visibly grimaced. All her friends cringed, too. Boy. Someone up there must really to rub it in.

The head monk cast his elderly gaze upon her, reaching out a wrinkled hand to her from his robe. "Come to me, my child."

Marinette obeyed, rising off her knees slowly and stepping onto the podium where the monk awaited her. Up close, she noticed the leader was a very old man, with a round, cherubic face that was wrinkled with great age, yet his eyes held a lifetime of kindness and wisdom that shone brighter than all the gold in the Temple, and a warm smile that comforted her like coming into a sweet embrace, making her feel like in spite of everything, everything was going to turn out for the best.

"Such a beauty!", he exclaimed, looking the girl up and down. "You are as lovely as your mother was at that age!"

Marinette blushed at his compliment. "Merci, your...Monkness?"

"And you speak French!"

"Well, I was born and raised in France, sir."

"Exotic, too! You'll make that Prince a very happy groom!"

Marinette faked a smile. "Oh...good. That's...just what I wanted to hear."

The monk chuckled. "Kneel before me, child."

Marinette did as she was told, getting back on her knees before the head monk, who was handed a small coppery-golden-colored metal mortar and pestle. He mixed something inside it, still smiling upon the Princess. "Now, for the magic...", he said in an awed tone of voice, like a magician announcing his grand finale to an audience.

He held out the bowl towards Marinette, and she could see some strange chunky red powder stuff inside. "This is wish powder.", he explained. "When I press it to your head, you shall think of your greatest desire for the marriage, and I will hear your inner thinkings. The Holy Lord and Virgin Mother will hear your prayer, granting your wish for your new wedded life." He smiled warmly. "Now close your eyes, and think of your desire for the future."

For Marinette, it was easy to think of her greatest desire. As she closed her eyes and felt his fingers against his forehead, she made a prayer. A prayer that her intended husband would meet someone else, or get in trouble, or the King of Simosa would change his mind, or something that meant the wedding would be called off and she would get to go home to Paris and live her own life again.

She focused hard on this wish, picturing flying back to Paris on a plane, accepting her lycée diploma at graduation, going to fashion school, cutting the ribbon at her own fashion house, and lots of other great things that she would get to do if only something happened that ended her stupid arranged engagement.

As she opened her eyes, Marinette saw that the head monk's face was no longer friendly and sweet, but pale and shocked, like he had just seen a ghost. She panicked for a moment. "What?"

"You don't wish to be married?", he exclaimed.

Marinette's face turned as red as the powder in the pestle as gasps rose up from behind her. Even though she kept her head facing front, she could feel Rong's disappointed and reprimanding glare at the back of her head, silently scolding her for her thoughts of rebellion. For that moment, she had pretty good idea of what it was like to be Adrien with his father.

Speaking of Adrien, he and the rest of the gang were gaping as well, not so much at Marinette's wishes to not be married,, they knew that already. They were gaping at how the monk had actually heard her inner thoughts. Yeah, he'd said he'd do that, but none of them actually believed him. They had just thought it was something all holy monks said, part of their religious rituals.

"Dang.", said Kim. "That guy's good."

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The journey back down the mountain from the Temple was a long and agonizing one for Marinette and her parents. Rong had not said a word to her since she stepped down from receiving her "blessing" from the monks, or during the rest of the mass, for that matter. He remained as silent as stone, his face stony as well, as the mass ended, as the family exited the Temple, as they loaded into the carriages, as the servants carried them down the mountain stairs.

As the family exited the and transferred to the coaches, Marinette stole another guilt-ridden glance at her uncle. His face was still emotionless, but Marinette could see the blazes of anger in his dark eyes. "I'm sorry, Uncle Rong.", she whimpered. "I didn't think...I didn't know he could actually..."

"Don't apologize.", said Rong. He sounded resigned, defeated. "Your thoughts and desires are all your own. I can tell you what to do, but not what to think or want."

"So...you're not mad at me?", she inquired.

"I'm not mad.", he said. "I know my limits. I can control the family's duties, I can control the kingdom...but I cannot control your heart. That much is yours and yours alone."

Marinette felt relieved, sighing happily, releasing the tension from her body.

"I'm just concerned about you.", he went on. "Getting your hopes up. Because this wedding will happen. Make no mistake about that, Marinette. You will be married, and that is that. So I strongly suggest you not get your hopes up about getting out of it, because you won't be. That is final."

And with that, he stride off into the waiting head carriage, leaving Marinette feeling stiff and cold from his stern lecture. Sabine walked up and placed a hand on her daughter's shoulder. "Don't mind him, Marinette. He just doesn't want you to be disappointed."

"Maman, I already am disappointed.", she pouted. "And he caused it."

This time, it was Marinette whose unpleasant and unhappy vibes made the ride home uncomfortable for her parents and for King Rong.

# Hard Truth

## Chapter Summary

Unpopular Opinion: I don't believe that Miss Bustier is a bad teacher, or even a bad person for that matter. I believe that she, like so many other characters on this show, is a victim of poor writing decisions to ensure plot convenience. I think if and when she learns about Lila's true nature, she will not pressure Marinette or anyone else to forgive her like that, nor will she let Lila go unpunished if she's able to. So please, go easy on the woman.

When they got back to the palace, Nuying greeted Marinette. "Your Highness! You have a final fitting today! We're making a new dress with your measurements! You are to wear it when you meet your intended for the first time!"

Marinette plastered on a smile. "Oh. Great."

Aunt Jan stepped forward, looking pleased at the announcement. "Well, isn't that fine! Go along, help them with the gown. It must be up to standards. After all, first impressions matter quite a lot. Especially when meeting the person you'll be spending your life with."

"Of course, Aunt Jun."

"Allow me to escort you to the sewing room, Your Highness."

Bidding a quick goodbye to her friends, Marinette followed Nuying down the hallways, towards the sewing room. Once they were alone in the halls, Nuying spoke.

"I heard what happened at the Temple.", she said.

Marinette startled. "You did? How?"

"My cousin is the official keeper of the Temple garden. He spied on the Mass and called me right after to tell me everything."

Marinette slumped over slightly. "Oh."

"Was what the monk said true? Do you truly not wish to be married?"

"Well, of course I don't want to be married! I've never even met this guy! What if I don't like him? What if he's a jerk? I don't want to spend the rest of my life chained to someone I hate!"

"But I've heard that Prince so supposedly very handsome and charming."

"Looks and charm don't rank high in my list of desired traits for a husband.", the new Princess muttered.

"But they certainly don't hurt.", Nuying remarked.

Marinette bowed her head sadly. "You just don't get it. I don't care what the guy looks like. I want someone with a kind heart. Someone who will respect me as a person. Someone who will be my best friend. Someone who cares about me, who wants me for me, not as a trophy wife or a political tool."

Nuying looked at her mistress sadly. "I'm sorry, Princess. I didn't know you felt that way."

"It's okay, Nuying.", said Marinette softly. "I mean, I guess from your perspective, I sound kinda spoiled. I mean, here I am, a literal princess, living in the lap of luxury, set to marry a rich and handsome guy, and I'm complaining to you, a servant, that I don't want any of it."

Nuying shrugged. "I suppose not everyone ends up with the life they want, do they now?"

Marinette chuckled and shook her head. "No...no, I guess they don't."

"We're here.", said Nuying, leading her mistress into the sewing room for her latest fitting.

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After the fitting, a dance lesson, and ten classes on court etiquette and protocol, Marinette finally retired to her room. She hadn't gotten a moment with her friends since coming back from the Temple Mass. She envied them, free to explore the castle and tour the kingdom villages as they wished, while she was stuck with all the various tutors and royal family members, who were molding her into the perfect bride for the Prince.

"Ugh! What a day!", she exclaimed, collapsing on her bed face first. "I dunno how much more of this I can take!"

Just then, there was a knock on the door. "Marinette! It's me, Maman!"

Marinette groaned. "Maman, I'm tired right now!"

"I know, honey, but I have something for you! Your teacher is here on Skype!"

Marinette lifted her head. "Madame Bustier is on video call?"

"She wants to talk to you!"

Marinette jumped off her bed and ran to the door, flinging it open. Sabine passed her the phone with a smile. "Have a nice one." And she left.

Sure enough, Madame Bustier's cheery face lit up the screen. "Marinette! It's so good to see you!"

"It's good to see you, too, Madame Bustier!", Marinette said, sitting back on her bed, this time in the normal way.

Her favorite teacher's eyes then became tinged with sadness. "Sweetheart, I just wanted to say I'm sorry I mishandled your situation with Lila!"

"It's okay, Madame Bustier. It wasn't your fault."

"Yes, it was.", she said strongly. "I should have looked deeper into her absences. But she completely fooled me with that fake email and those forged notes..."

"Fake email? Forged notes?", exclaimed Marinette.

Caline nodded. "Yes. She gave the school a fake email that was supposed to be from her mother, and she forged her mother's signature on everything from school forms to medical notes. And I fell for all of them."

"Madame, if she created fake documents to fool you, you shouldn't beat yourself up! Anyone could have fallen for that!"

"But I should have sensed she wasn't as innocent as she thought.", Caline said with a sniffle. "I failed you as a teacher, Marinette."

"Madame, Lila was really good at pretending to be someone she wasn't.", Marinette assured her. "She fooled a lot of people. You're not the only one. Don't take all the blame."

"But I was failing you long before that, Marinette.", said Caline with a sigh. "I understand it probably looked like I was favoring Chloe when I told you to forgive her for ruining your present for my birthday. But I just wanted to avoid you getting akumatized."

"How is asking me to forgive Chloe for destroying my gift avoid me getting akumatized?"

"Because I couldn't punish Chloe. She would tattletale to her father and get Principal Damocles to punish me, or even suspend me from teaching, or get you in trouble just because it was your gift that started it. But if I told you that, you'd just feel resentful and helpless, and you'd become prime akuma bait. So I told you to be the bigger person and that you had more power and awareness than Chloe so you wouldn't feel that way, so you would feel stronger."

Marinette pressed her lips together. That...actually made a lot of sense. Chloe did have an unfair advantage when it came to getting her way at school. She could get out of anything with just some crocodile tears and the threat of a phone call to her father. It was enough to leave anyone, classmate or teacher, feeling powerless. And when someone felt powerless in Paris, they were the perfect target for Hawkmoth.

"Well...I'm not happy about what happened...but at least now, I have a little more clarity. And it makes me feel better. Thank you, Madame Bustier."

Caline smiled. "Oh, Marinette! You're wonderful! I'm going to miss having you in my class!"

"I dunno, Madame Bustier.", Marinette told her with a frown. "I don't think I'll be staying here."

Caline frowned back. "Why not? Aren't you getting married?"



"Not if I can help it.", said Marinette. "I just don't think I can go through with it, Madame Bustier! I mean, marry some jerk I don't know?"

Miss Bustier blinked. "How is he a jerk?"

"Well, I don't know, I haven't met him just yet. But I just know he's gonna be a pain in the butt!"

Caline tilted her head to the side. "How do you know that?"

"I just do!", snapped Marinette, folding her arms over her chest and huffing in irritation.

Miss Bustier was silent for the longest minute. Then, she cleared her throat. "Marinette...you know you're one of my favorite students, right?"

Marinette looked at her. "Yes, I know."

"I mean, you're dedicated, hard-working, compassionate, creative, a born leader..." The teacher trailed off.

Marinette pursed her lips. "Sounds like there's a 'but' coming."

Caline took a deep breath. "But...you can be a little impulsive."

"Impulsive?"

"It's one of the reasons I didn't really look too deep into your feud with Lila.", Caline explained. "I mean, you're a sweet girl at heart, but your track record with first judgements is not spotless. Remember when Adrien first came to school, and you saw him fiddling with the gum on your seat? You automatically assumed he was the one who put it there, and you accused him right off the bat."

"Well, what was I supposed to think?", Marinette exclaimed. "His fingers were pushing around gum on my seat! Anyone would have jumped to the same conclusion!"

"Maybe...", said Caline. "But you didn't even allow himself to explain. And when he tried, you wouldn't let him get a word in. You stuck with your first conclusion, and refused to keep an open mind to anyone who tried to tell you otherwise."

Marinette shrank back. Looking back, she supposed she could have handled the situation a little better.

"That's why I never looked further into your hatred towards Lila.", Caline explained. "I figured that it was another bad call by you, another instance of you writing off the new kid before getting to know them. And I think that's what your friends were thinking, too. We were all just expecting you to realize you judged Lila before you got to know her and apologize."

Marinette slumped over. Looking back, she supposed it actually made sense why her friends thought she was overreacting to Lila. Because she had done so in the past with Adrien and

Kagami. She had assumed them to be jerks at first glance for impulsive or petty reasons, so they had assumed that this was just another instance of her jumping the gun about the new kid, and thought it would soon pass as easily as it had before, with Marinette realizing she had been too quick to judge and making peace with Lila.

"Okay...but what does that have to do with my marriage?", she asked.

"Because that's what you're doing right now, Marinette!", said Caline. "You haven't even met this prince yet, and you're certain that he's going to turn out to be a terrible person! You've basically condemned him before you've met him!"

"But I don't even know this guy!"

"Exactly!", said Miss Bustier.

Marinette looked at her strangely.

"You don't know this boy. You don't know what he's like. And yet you're assuming the worst of him. Instead, you should try to think positive."

"But what if he's a jerk?"

"But what if he's not? You haven't met this prince, Marinette. For all you know, he could be nice and kind, too. Perhaps he's just as upset about this arranged marriage as you are. How do you know he's going to be awful before you even meet him?"

Her words rang with truth, Marinette had to admit that. She had been so upset by the whole "arranged marriage" deal, she had tried to justify it further by predicting her intended to be an irredeemable jerk. But the truth is, she knew nothing about the man her uncle expected her to marry. She was just projecting her anger over being forced to marry against her will on the man that had been chosen for her.

"Look Marinette, I'm not telling you to be happy about this whole ordeal. I'm only asking that you actually see what the prince is like before you decide what kind of person he is. Meet the boy first.. Get to know him, and then you can decide whether not you want to marry him.

Marinette bit down on her lower lip. "I dunno, Madame Bustier."

The teacher gave a shrug of the shoulders. "At this point...what do you have to lose?"

Her last words really got Marinette thinking.

## New Things

A few days later, after a hundred more lessons, Marinette woke up one morning to see Nuying standing at the foot of her bed. She giggling uncontrollably, giddy as a schoolgirl.

"They finished it!"

"Finished what?"

"Your betrothal dress!", Nuying squealed clapping her hands in delight. "The tow you'll be wearing when you first meet your future husband face-to-face!"

Marinette's first instinct was to groan, but her talk with Madame Bustier the evening before popped into her mind. Her teacher's words echoed in her head.

Meet the boy first. Get to know him. What do you have to lose?

Sighing heavily, Marinette threw off her covers and climbed out of bed, sliding her feet into the cushy slippers placed at the side for her. "Alright, we're doing this, I guess. Let's see what they got."

With a squeak of delight, Nuying called out towards the open door of the room, saying something in Chinese. There came the sound of rolling wheels, and Marinette's breath was taken away from her when she saw what they were bringing in.

There, put in a mobile dress mannequin, was the most beautiful Chinese-styled gown Marinette had ever seen.

The top was made of silk so creamy-colored it shone like gold, with soft mesh covering it patterned with peach flowerbuds. The waist skirt was short, covering the breasts, dyed dark green with flowers of lighter green and pink. The rest of the skirt was seafoam-green with more flower patterns. A sash was tied around the breasts, cherry-red on one side, bubblegum-pink on the other, tied into a loose bow with long loops. The look was finished off with a lovely pink pink shawl, once more decorated with pastel flowers.

Marinette was speechless as she walked over to the rolling mannequin and studied the new ensemble. She reached out, fingers grazing the silky top, as she released a breath of awe. Even after growing up in Paris, France, which was highly thought of as center of all high fashion, she had never seen such exquisite work.

"This...This is what I'm wearing?", she asked, voice barely above a whisper, as if speaking any louder would break the spell that had made this outfit so impossibly stunning.

Nuying was pleased with the awestruck reaction from her mistress, while the seamstresses puffed up like proud peacocks, taking accomplishment in their work impressing the Princess.

"Just imagine the look on Prince Tao's face when he sees you in it!", gushed one.

At once, Marinette fell swiftly back down to Earth from cloud nine. "Right...the Prince..."

She mashed her lips together, glancing up at the other girls in the room. "Speaking of the Prince...do any of you know what he's like?"

The three girls looked surprised at that question, blinking owlishly at Marinette, then at each other, then back at her again.

"Why are you asking us?", said one of the seamstresses. "We're just servants of a castle foreign to his."

"Well, I've never heard of this guy before, and I thought...maybe he's visited once or twice? I mean, the countries must be close if we want to make a political alliance."

Nuying put a finger to her chin, deep in thought as she searched her memories. "Well, I think we hosted the King's younger sisters once or twice...but no, Prince Tao never came here."

Marinette sighed. "Well, guess it was a long shot."

"But there has been more than enough talk about him in the news and such.", said a seamstress. "Rumor has it he's incredibly handsome and charming!"

"And a military legend!", said the other. "He's been praised for his prime fighting skills and ingenious plans for battle!"

"I hear he's so gorgeous, men and women have tried to join the army just for the chance to see him!", said the first seamstress, eyes wide with awe.

"I hear he's so suave, he once made an entire ballroom stocked with courtiers, both men and women, faint from his smooth honeyed words!", gushed the second one.

"I hear he's so impossibly attractive, fifteen different women have proposed to him!", Nuying added to the mix. "Can you imagine a man so perfect, girls ask for his hand in marriage?!"

Marinette's brow wrinkled. "What's so weird about girls asking him?"

At once, the servants gaped at her in horror, and Marinette worried she said the wrong thing.

"You...You think it's acceptable for a lady to propose marriage to a gentlemen?", scoffed a seamstress. If Marinette had just asked her how to contact the devil to make a deal with him, she could not have sounded more horrified.

"Uh...never mind.", Marinette sighed. "But um...what else?"

The three servant girls gave her puzzled looks. "What else what?"

"What else about the prince?"

"What else do you want to know?"

"Well...is he kind? Funny? What are his interests, other than military stuff?"

"Oh, that's all we know.", said Nuying with a shrug. "Like I said, never met the boy. Only know him through the rumors we hear."

Marinette deflated. "Oh."

One seamstress stepped forward. "Perhaps we cannot help you learn about your intended...but I know someone who can."

Marinette perked up. "Really? Who?"

"Aunt Wu!", said the seamstress.

Marinette gawked. "Who?"

"She's a fortune teller!", the seamstress explained. "And lucky for you, her business is right in the village just outside the castle! You can go to her and ask her about the prince! She'll be able to tell you!"

Marinette blinked several times at the suggestion. "A fortune teller? You want me to go to some old lady and ask her to use magic powers to see my future before it happens?"

"Yes.", said the seamstress simply.

Marinette scoffed and folded her arms over her chest. "Seriously? A fortune teller? You guys believe in that stuff?"

"We don't believe. We know. Aunt Wu is a miracle! She's never given a wrong prediction once!"

"She told me my future husband would have eyes as gray as a rainstorm.", said the other seamstress as she reached into her pocket. "And look!"

She pulled out a photograph of a handsome man with deep, beautiful gray eyes that captivated souls. "It's been ten years, and we're still head over heels!"

"I thought about quitting my job at the sewing shop where I used to work.", said the first seamstress. "Aunt Wu told me to keep going. A few months later, my boss sold one of the robes I made to a palace servant, who wore it in front of His Majesty, who was so impressed with my work, he tracked me down and offered me my job at the palace!"

Marinette wrung her hands anxiously. "I dunno...I want answers, sure, but to put the fate of my happiness, in the hands of some old kook who claims to be able to predict the future? It seems really risky."

"It couldn't hurt, could it?", Nuying pointed out.

Marinette pondered this for a moment. "Hmmm..."

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"A day off?"

Rong looked at his niece with a puzzled look.

Marinette nodded hopefully. "Yes, Uncle Rong. I thought, since the royal family of Sidorio arrive the day after tomorrow, maybe I could go out with my friends, have some fun, since I'll be swamped after the prince comes. You know, one last day of freedom before making a lifetime commitment." She smiled her sweetest smile, the one she used to give her parents when she wanted extra dessert when she was little.

Rong narrowed his dark eyes at her. "If this is some trick to get out of your marriage, I swear..."

"I promise, it's nothing like that!", Marinette swore to him. "And just to prove it, you can send a bodyguard with me. Heck, send two bodyguards with me if you want!"

Rong looked as if he were deep in thought. Then, he sighed. "Very well. I'll give you my own personal bodyguard for the occasion. Nothing gets past him."

Marinette smiled gratefully. "Thank you, Uncle Rong! You won't regret this, I swear!"

She finished her breakfast and excused herself from the table to go find her friends.

---

"Come on, you guys! We've been here for almost a week! No one has any ideas?"

Alya stood in the front of the room, where everyone else lounged on fainting couches and cushy chairs.

"Sadly, the security here is much more efficient than I anticipated.", said Max sadly. "The guards are sharper than a knife, and are alert to even the tiniest changes in their environment. Getting anything past them would be like trying to fight an akuma without superpowers. The odds of winning are a million to one."

"And there's no way we're gonna be able to talk the old man into cancelling the whole shindig.", muttered Nino bitterly. "And I thought Adrien's old man was a control freak. Seriously, this Rong guy is so uptight and apathetic, he makes Gabriel Agreste look like Santa Claus."

"Yeah, this place is the pits.", Alix sulked. "I thought being royal was supposed to be fun. But ever since Marinette got here, she's been forced to take all these boring lessons and marry some jerk who she doesn't even know. No wonder her mom ran away from here."

"How was she able to run away, with the security of this place?", Mylene wondered out loud.

"I believe that the quality of the security is actually the result of Madame Cheng's going AWOL as a teenager.", Kagami chimed in. "After his own sister was able to escape from the

palace the first time, it makes sense that Rong would improve security in his home to lower the risk of that happening again."

"Well, we have to do something!", cried Adrien. "That prince and his family will be here in two days! It will only get harder from there! We need a plan! And we need one fast!"

Just then, there came a knock on the door. "Guys! It's me!"

"Come in, Mari!"

Marinette opened the door and skipped into the room. "I have great news!"

"Your uncle called off the wedding?", asked Kim hopefully.

Marinette's smile faltered. "Uh, no."

Kim's face fell. "Rats!"

"But the good news is, I got tomorrow off! I was thinking we could take a tour of the village just outside the palace! It's supposed to be really fun!"

Alya grinned from ear to ear. "Girl, that's perfect!"

"I know!"

"We can totally sneak you to the nearest airport and get you on the first available flight outta here!"

Marinette's face fell. "Uh, yeah, Uncle Rong only agreed to it as long as I took his bodyguard."

"Darn it!"

"Relax! I know you guys want to get me out of this thing! But right now, all I want to have an amazing day with all my best friends. Who knows? It might be the last one we get for a while."

Adrien gave her a sad smile. "Yeah. We haven't really gotten to enjoy Marinette's company since we got here. Tomorrow, let's just kick back and make some memories with our everyday Ladybug."

The class murmured to each other, all in agreement. They were eager for Marinette time.

# Clairvoyance

The village was all abustle. Vendors dragged carts, each filled with a different item to sell. The sellers were offering everything under the sun, from flowers to jewelry to freshly-baked goods. A million voices harmonized in the air, mixing together to create a sort of music. If you did not speak up, your voice was lost in the shuffle and unheard.

The gang walked along the sidewalks, taking in the sights, sounds and smells of common Coccidellenae. It was untamed, yet that was what made it so fascinating. Not a single one of them knew what to do or see first.

"Well? Any ideas on what we should check out first?", Alya asked the group.

"Ooh! Look!", cried Mylene, pointing to a poster. "There's going to be a dance recital in the square! They're doing traditional Chinese fan dances from ancient times! Let's go see that!"

"Or we could check out this sports game!", Kim suggested, holding up a flyer he found. "It's called scoshin! I've never heard of it before, but it's a sport, and the people on the poster look tough and are kicking a cool-looking ball around, so I'm sure it'll be awesome!"

"I just looked it up!", Max spoke up, looking at his phone. "Apparently, scoshin is a game that requires cunning as well as skill, where you must send the ball flying through a hoop fifteen feet in the air to score points! Achieving such a feat requires one to not only get past your opponents, but also calculate the movements and aerial needed to reach the hoop in seconds! It was invented in the first days of Coccidellenae, and has been the national sport of the country for centuries!"

Max beamed as he hugged his phone. "My prayers have been answered! Finally, something Kim and I can enjoy together! Athleticism for you, and mathematics for me! You can admire the skill of the players, and I can study the calculations of their feats!"

"Aw, I wanted to check out the art museum here!", said Nathaneal. "I read that Coccidellenae is the muse of some of the greatest artists in the world! Some of my favorite painters and sculptors were inspired by the beauty of Coccidellenae, both it's royal family, it's people, and it's natural beauty! I need to see the art of this country! I mean, Rong has the original sculpture of one of the most famous artists in the world! Imagine what the museum has on display!"

"Guys, guys, relax!", Marinette cut in. She wore a long hooded robe, the hood over her head, to lessen the risk of getting recognized. Right behind her, her uncle's favorite bodyguard trailed her, on high alert for any dangers. "We'll all have plenty of time to see everything you want! Uncle Rong says we can stay out until sundown, and there's hours before that!"

"Since we have so much we want to do, why don't we all grab an early lunch to fuel ourselves! Uncle Sifu's restaurant is only a few blocks from here! We can go there and enjoy his world-famous Celestial Soup!"



"You mean, his world-famous Marinette Soup!", Adrien corrected her with a playful wink. Marinette blushed at his reminder.

"Alright! Let's get going then!"

---

When they entered the restaurant, the group was personally greeted by Sifu Cheng. He gave Marinette the traditional French greeting of kissing her on each cheek. "It is wonderful to see you! Rong told me to expect you here! Which is why I set up the Jade Dragon room!"

"Jade Dragon Room?", Marinette repeated curiously.

"Yes. I had it installed after my restaurant took off. It's a special room, away from the rest of the building, reserved for my royal family when they come here to enjoy my cooking. Since it's away from the other parts, this way the family can have a quiet, peaceful and private meal without being bothered by any of my other customers."

"Bothered? Is the family so repulsed by commoners that they can't even sit in their presence?", Marinette questioned, annoyed at the thought.

"No, no, it's not like that.", Sifu assured her as he led her away, her friends following close behind. "It's the customers who cannot be around them without causing a scene. They become starstruck, you know. Always asking for autographs and photos, posting online that the royals are here, alerting the paparazzi, never letting my family have a moment's peace."

"Oh.", squeaked Marinette, shoulders slumping. That made sense.

Cheng Sifu escorted his niece and her friends to the Jade Dragon room. It was secluded from the rest of the restaurant, and had a long table big enough for all fourteen friends to sit together. There was also a jade sculpture of a Chinese dragon in the room, living up to the name.

Of course, they all ordered the Marinette Soup, which was served to them quickly. Some also ordered side dishes of rice, stuffed buns, and other Chinese delicacies to go with their soup.

"Man, this stuff is delicious!", said Ivan. "I still don't know why Chloe doesn't like it."

"Where is Chloe anyway?", asked Marinette. "I thought this was a group event."

"Oh, we didn't invite her.", said Alya simply. "I mean, this isn't a class event. We don't have to invite her."

Adrien looked up from his soup. "Wait...is that the only reason Chloe is invited to class events?"

"Well, duh!", said Alix. "You really think we would have her around if we could help it? We only invite her on class trips and picnics because it's school policy."

"I thought you were trying to give her a chance or throw her a bone."

"Nah. You're the one who does that, dude.", said Nino. "The rest of us just want Chloe as far away as possible. I mean, if we invited her, she'd probably just whine and make stupid demands and get us to do what she wants."

Marinette held her breath, waiting for Adrien to defend Chloe like he always did and get upset at them for trash-talking her.

To her surprise, Adrien gave a sad sigh, a shrug of the shoulders, and simply said, "You're probably right."

Everyone looked at him in surprise. He looked around, blinking. "What?"

"That's it? No lecture? No 'she's not that bad'? No 'you should give a chance'?"

"Well, she's been whining and complaining ever since she got here. So I wouldn't be surprised if she did the same here. Maybe it's for the best she's not here. I just feel bad for Sabrina. Her being Chloe's friend means she's left out, too."

Rose sighed sadly. "We know, but if we invited her, she'd tell Chloe, and Chloe would push her way into our outing."

"Sounds like Sabrina's friendship with her is ruining things for her.", Adrien moped. He gave a bright smile. "But enough! We came out here to have fun, not mope. Let's forget them for a while and enjoy ourselves."

Everyone was pleased that Adrien was unwilling to let Chloe ruin their day, present or absent. Marinette was smiling from ear to ear, feeling like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

She quickly finished her soup, then excused herself from the table, pulling her cloak over her. "I need to use the bathroom. I'll be back." She left the room, the bodyguard close behind.

"Man, the guy won't even let her use the john without him.", said Kim.

---

Marinette checked to make sure her friends were preoccupied with their soup and chatter, then slipped out a back door of the restaurant with her uncle's bodyguard close in tow. She looked around, then took out the business card the seamstress had given her.

"Can you take me to this address?", she asked, handing the card to the guard. He looked it over, glanced back at her, and gave her a firm nod, motioning for her to follow his lead.

---

The bell above the door rang as a new customer entered. An elderly woman in a yellow hanfu, with salt-and-pepper hair piled high on her head, dark eyes shadowed with blue makeup, and full lips painted cherry red, looked up from her writing desk to see two people enter her shop. One was a young woman in a heavy cloak, the other a tall, strong man.

"Hello. I'm here to see Madame Wu.", said the girl.

The woman smiled. "I'm Madame Wu. You want to know what your future holds?"

"Very much.", she said.

Wu stood up. "Then follow me."

---

Marinette sat in a wide room, sealed off from the others by screen doors, her legs crossed on the floor. In the center, a tiny firepit sat as Madame Wu set everything up. She took a box of matches and a bowl of chicken bones and sat on the other side of the pit across from her newest client. Striking a match, she tossed it into the pit, and a small fire swiftly grew.

"Now, is there anything specific you want to know?"

"Well, my family has arranged for me to marry a man I've never met before.", Marinette explained.

"Ah! I see! You want me to tell you what this young man is like!", said Wu with a smile.

"Yes, yes!", cried Marinette. "I want to know!"

"Well, you've come to the right place, my dear!", said Wu. "But I'll need payment. It doesn't have to be money. Anything will do."

Marinette reached into her purse, pulling out a pair of ruby earrings. They had been part of the collection the family had gifted her when she arrived in her new bedroom. "Will these cover it?"

Wu looked on in awe, her dark eyes sparkling with joy. "Ah! You must be wealthy! I should have guessed when you said your marriage was arranged." She took the earrings with a warm grin. "Yes, these will do!"

"So, how does this work?", asked Marinette.

"It's simple, really. You throw a bone into the fire, and the heat makes cracks in it. Then, I take them out with some tongs and read the cracks to tell your destiny."

"Read the cracks?"

"Yes." Wu took the bowl of bones and held it out towards her client. "Go on."

Reluctantly, Marinette took a single chicken bone and tossed it into the flames, the sound of cracking bone coming mere seconds later. After half a minute, Wu took the bone out of the fire with tongs and blew on it to cool it down. Taking it in her aged hands, she squinted at the cracks, studying them closely as she held the bone up to her face.

"Well? What does it say?", asked Marinette, anxious and eager for an answer.

A huge grin came onto Wu's face. "Oh! Oh! My girl!"

"What?! What?!"

"You're going to marry a handsome and powerful man!"

"Handsome and powerful?"

"Oh, yes! I can still it! He's the fairest of the fair! With power beyond imagination!"

"That's it?"

Wu looked up and gaped at her client, who looked utterly unimpressed. "What do you mean, 'that's it'?"

"I mean, that's great that he's cute and powerful, I'm not complaining, but what else? Is he kind? Is he smart? Is he funny?"

"Oh! You're one of those!", said Wu. She brought the bone back up to her face and squinted harder. "Hm...hm...mm-hmm..."

Marinette wrung her hands together nervously, every second that ticked by without an answer pure agony.

Finally, Wu smiled and looked back at her client. "Yes, the man you marry will be as beautiful on the inside as he is on the outside."

Marinette smiled in relief. "Really?"

"I've never been wrong.", said Wu with a kind smile. "The cracks say that he will have a heart of gold, the courage of a warrior, and the soul of a hopeless romantic."

Marinette's heart felt much lighter than it had in a long time. "Really?"

"Really really. The cracks never lie."

The Princess sighed in relief. "That's the best news I've heard all week!" She got up and ran over, giving Mistress Wu a big hug. "Thank you! You've been a huge help!"

"It's what I do."

---

Marinette slipped back into the Jade Dragon dining room, rejoining her friends.

"Man, you took a long time in there.", Kim chuckled.

Marinette blushed. Kim smiled sincerely. "It's okay, Mar. We're all used to your extra-long bathroom breaks."

"Yeah, Marinette. Perhaps you should go consult a doctor for that.", Max suggested gently.

Marinette blushed harder. Of course. The bathroom was always her go-to excuse to go detransform. How embarrassing. "I'll... look into it."

She looked over at Alya, who smiled and held up her phone. "Selfie!" They moved in together and posed, waving their soup ladles around. "Say Coccidellenae!"

The click went off, and Alya moved her phone around, taking pictures of all the others with their soup. Then, they all took turns posing at the jade dragon statue. Alya finished with one

last photo, a selfie of her and Marinette with Cheng Sifu.

Marinette looked over Alya's shoulder as she composed a post of all the photos she'd taken. Suddenly, as she started tagging people, a name flashed across the screen.

@ItalianBeauty14

Marinette's heart dropped. She knew that account. She had seen it in the posts of some friends, and in the recent posts of the online Gabriel Brand account.

That account belonged to Lila.

"Alya? Why are you tagging Lila in the post? She's not here."

"Exactly.", said Alya. It was then Marinette took notice of the cruel, sadistic grin spreading across her bestie's face. "Can you imagine the look on her face when this shows up on her feed? How ticked off she'll be when she sees us living our best lives out here while she's stuck back home, serving time for her lies?" She beamed like she'd just won an award.

"Man, I wish there was some way to see her reaction to this!"

Marinette's mouth formed an O. So that was her angle. Alya was tagging Lila's account in her post of them having fun in Coccidellenae, specifically so Lila would see everyone she lied to and manipulated having a day of fun and adventure in a beautiful, exotic country—without her. She was rubbing their enjoyment in Lila's face to get back at her for everything she'd done.

Of course, Marinette knew that was kind of cruel. But considering how Lila had framed her, harassed Adrien, and nearly gotten everyone akumatized, she figured a little salt in the wound was the least the Italian deserved. Besides, Alya has that spark in her eye that said there was no stopping her. So Marinette just stepped back and watched as Alya typed a tagline that said "Coccidellenae vacay with my best friend ever!", and pressed "Post".

Alya smiled and looked at the others. "Come on, you guys! There's plenty more on our list! Let's not waste a minute!"

## Princess Promises

After a full day of watching sports and performances, admiring exhibits, and eating delicious food, the French kids were escorted home by Marinette's new bodyguard, chattering excitedly about all the things they had seen and experienced in such a short day. It was the most fun they had ever had. So much fun, they completely forgot about Marinette's forced marriage for the first time since landing in Coccidellenae.

When they entered the grand hallway, however, their good moods were brought to a screeching halt by a familiar shrill voice.

"YOU!"

They all flinched harshly at the volume and deadly tone of the voice, turning towards the direction of the source, which was a very angry, very jilted mayor's daughter with a redheaded minion cowering behind her.

"You losers have some explaining to do!"

"What? What do we need to explain?", asked Marinette. The next thing she knew, her nose was half an inch from Chloe's phone screen, which now showed a photo of her with Mylene, Alya and Ivan at the dance recital earlier that day, smiling and clearly having a good time. Looking at the frame, she saw the photo was from Instagram.

"This! There are several pictures with MY Adri-kins tagged in them, of you all skipping around the village, sightseeing and soaking up the culture—without me! Did I miss a memo, or did my invitation get lost in the mail?"

Marinette's face fell. Of course. Alya had tagged Adrien in the photos, and since she was still following him on social media, the photos had shown up on her feed, revealing to her that the class had gone on a trip and left her and Sabrina behind.

"Chloe, we didn't invite you because this was an outing between friends. And you are definitely not our friend."

"Aren't you supposed to invite me to all class events? Isn't it school policy?"

"Chloe, this was not a school event. It was an event that we organized as a friend group, not as a class. It was completely independent of school. Therefore, we were under no obligation to invite you. Especially since if you did come, you'd probably ruin it for all of us."

Chloe made a choking sound. "I knew it! That stupid crown has gone right to your head, Dupain-Cheng! You don't have to worry about being forced to marry that prince! The minute he sees what a entitled, bad-mannered brat you are, he'll call the whole thing off!"

Adrien stepped in and took Marinette by the arm, pulling her away from Chloe without a word. "Adri-kins! Where are you going?! Bring Stupid-Cheng back here! I'm not done

with her!"

---

Adrien ignored Chloe's screams and demands, pulling Marinette away from her wrath. Once they were far enough away, he stopped and turned to her, his face full of embarrassment and sorrow.

"Marinette, I am so, so sorry about Chloe! I've tried reprimanding her, but every time I do, she just digs her heels in deeper! I'm really starting to lose it!"

Marinette patted his shoulder. "It's okay, Adrien. If that's true, then I guess the best thing we can do now is avoid her."

Taking the high road wasn't something she particularly enjoyed. Marinette like to handle things head-on. But if there was one thing she had learned from Lila, it was that sometimes, the high road was the only logical option. Let's face it, Marinette was only making matters worse by accusing Lila without seeable cause. Of course she would be the one who was asked for evidence when she was the one making accusations towards an seemingly innocent girl. She should have taken that time to think of a better way around Lila's lies, but that was a story for another day.

Right now, the high road was their best bet with Chloe. All of Adrien's attempts to scold or reprimand her only resulted in fanning the flames of her anger. At this point, it was best to just step out of the way instead of provoke her ire further.

"She's been extra moody since we got here.", Adrien told Marinette. "It's because she's jealous."

"Jealous?"

"Chloe's wanted to be a princess for as long as I can remember!", he explained. "Almost every time she came to my house to play, we would play some sort of game where she pretended to be a princess! And she talked all about how she wanted to marry a real prince when she grew up! And now that that's all happened to you instead of her...she's beside herself. She's upset because you, the girl she hates most, got everything she ever wanted for herself."

Marinette bit her lip. That...actually made sense. It was no secret that Chloe hated Marinette. To see her hated enemy achieve her childhood dream must sting. Marinette imagined how she would have felt if Chloe or Lila became a world-famous fashion designer married to Adrien with three children and a hamster. It was not a pleasant thought. It would make anyone irritable.

"But that's no excuse!", said Adrien, walking with Marinette down the halls. "Besides, you don't even want all this! You don't even want to marry the prince!"

"Uh, yeah.", said Marinette, looking away. She thought back to her conversation with Mme. Bustier, who had asked her if maybe Prince Tao had some things in common with her and might be more compatible with her than she thought. She thought back to Aunt Wu's psychic prediction about the man she was to marry having a heart of gold.

Honestly, Marinette was starting to wonder...what if both of them were right? What if she actually liked the prince when she met him? If that happened, then this whole arrangement might work out for the best. After all, there was little chance of her escaping with the security around here, and Rong on the hunt for her. She might have a better chance at happiness if she faced this situation with optimism, and actually gave the prince a chance to win her over.

At this point, meeting and getting to know the prince was probably her best bet.

But how could she tell her friends that, after they had flown in all the way from France to set her free from this arranged engagement?

She couldn't think about this now. She was already late to her next dance lesson.

---

That night, after supper, Marinette walked to her new bedroom when all of the sudden, a door opened, a hand reached out, and yanked her into another room, where she was met with the smiling face of Alya.

"Girl! I figured it out!"

She dragged Marinette to a whiteboard, around which all the other girls were gathered, sporting grins. Marinette looked at the drawings on the whiteboard. There were figurines representing her, Alya, and others. One drawing had her dressed up in the official royal maid's uniform, and another depicted her next to some sort of boat.

"What is this?"

"Our plan to get you out of here!", exclaimed Alya. "It's simple! We'll disguise as the maids, then pretend to go out to run errands for the royal family, like grocery shopping or something. But in actuality, we'll be sneaking onto the next ship outta here! From there, we'll find our way back to Paris! It's foolproof!"

The girls cheered.

Marinette looked long and hard at the board. "It's a great plan, Alya. But...it has one flaw. All plans to get me out of here have one flaw."

The smiles vanished, and the girls exchanged worried and confused looks.

"What's that?", asked Alix.

Marinette deflated. "Even if I do manage to escape, Paris will be the first place Uncle Rong will come looking for me."

Shoulders slumped in realization.

"Oh, no...", Mylene whimpered. "That means...no matter what plan we come up with, we can never take you back to Paris."



Marinette sat on the floor with her gal friends. "Girls, I appreciate your thought for me. And I wish there was a way out of this that could make everyone happy, and I could come home without worrying about Uncle Rong finding me." She tugged at a loose thread in her dress. "But...I've been thinking..."

"About what?", asked Kagami.

"Welll...what if the prince is actually a good guy?"

Brows wrinkled.

"Good guy how?"

"Well, I've been talking to Madame Bustier, and she thinks I should meet the prince first before I make any final decisions about this marriage."

Faces went slack.

"Girl, this is a joke, right?! Do not tell me you're actually thinking of going through with this!"

"We'll, it might be my best option, Alya. After all, chances of my my escaping are slim to none. And like I said, even if I can get out, I can never go home. I'll have to spend the rest of my life in hiding."

Marinette fiddled with a loose strand of hair. "And...honestly, I've been writing this prince guy off as a jerk to justify not wanting this engagement...but what if he's actually likable? What if he's the kind of guy I could fall in love with? If that's so, than this whole arrangement could actually work out for the best!"

"Oh! What if he's a real-life Prince Charming straight out of fairytales?!", Rose cooed excitedly. "Handsome, kind, brave..."

"Exactly!", said Marinette. "I've been assuming the worst of this guy before I even meet him. I think I should give him a chance. Meet him and get to know him before I decide this won't work."

"But what about us?", cried Alya. "If you actually marry this guy, where does that leave us in Paris?"

"Don't worry, Alya. I promise, if things do work out between me and Prince Tao, I'll be sure to visit you all in Paris as much as I can after the wedding."

Alya quirked a brow. "Promise?"

Matinette smiled, holding up her hand with an extended pinky finger. "Pinky promise."

Alya reluctantly accepted with a tiny smile, linking her own pinky with Matinette's before pulling her into a hug, the rest of the girls piling in to embrace their beloved Mari.



# What Might Have Been

"Babe!"

Alya looked up. She had just been leaving Marinette's bedroom after a long talk, just the two of them, to discuss the latter's future. It had been a heavy topic, but one that needed to be discussed nonetheless.

Nino came running to his girlfriend, Adrien hot on his tail. "Babe! The guys and I struck gold! Hear me out...what if we get this big box, add a bunch of stamps, say it's a souvenir gift to my mom, but in reality, Marinette is hiding in it to—"

"Scrap the plan, Nino.", Alya cut him off with a sharp but kind smile. "I appreciate the thought, but Marinette has decided to give the prince a chance."

"Wait, WHAT?!", Nino hollered. Next to him, Adrien's jaw fell open.

"Yeah, she knows that the chances of us sneaking her out are slim to none. And even if we did sneak her out, Paris would be the first place Rong would come looking for her to drag her back."

"So she's gonna enter a loveless marriage?", Adrien exclaimed, unable to believe what he was hearing.

"She's thought about that, actually. What if it doesn't have to be a loveless marriage?"

"Huh?"

"Hear me out, babe.", said Alya, taking Nino by the shoulder. "What if the prince is actually a cool guy? What if he turns out to be a guy Marinette could actually fall in love with? If so, this whole arrangement could actually be a good thing!"

"But what if he's not a cool dude?! What if he's ugly? Or mean? Or Miraculous forbid...both?"

"Nino, baby, we can cross that bridge when we get to it. Marinette's best bet for happiness now, really, is to see if this prince guy is actually someone she could be happy with. And don't worry, baby, she pinky promised me that if it does work out, she'll visit us as often as she can."

Nino looked reluctant to accept such a thing, but after hesitation, he nodded his head.

"I guess we can give it a go. But if he turns out to be a jerk, I'm shopping for a cardboard box."

Alya laughed. "Deal." And they fist-bumped on it.

Adrien stepped in between them. He couldn't believe what they were saying. "Are you two serious?! You're actually going to let Marinette go through with this stupid thing?!"

"Dude, relax. We just think it would be best if we saw the kind of person this prince dude is before we make any more plans, and saw for ourselves if this arranged marriage deal would work out."

"Yeah, I mean, let's be honest. At this point, what's Marinette got to lose?"

Adrien shook his head. "But...but...but..."

Nino hugged his bro. "Dude, relax. Maybe the prince is a really cool guy. Maybe he'll be a good match for Marinette. Heck, maybe he'll turn out to be the perfect match for her! The man of her dreams! Wouldn't that be a good thing?"

Adrien stared at the floor and bit down hard at on her lower lip. "I...I guess." He turned his away. "I...I gotta go. I promised Father I'd meet up with him."

And without another word, Adrien darted to his bedroom, leaving behind two baffled and rather worried friends.

---

Adrien went into his guest bedroom, shut the door behind with some force, and plopped down on his temporary bed. Plagg came out of hiding and saw the distressed look on his holder's face, a mix of sadness and frustration.

"You okay, kid? You look like someone ate your Camembert."

"I...I just don't know what to feel, Plagg. I know that Marinette's best bet might be to marry the prince, and sure, he might turn to be great, but..."

"But...?"

"But...But I don't want her to marry him! Even if she does like him! Even if he does turn out to be a good guy!"

"Why not? Wouldn't it be a good thing if that happened?"

"For her, maybe!", said Adrien. "But not for me! I know it sounds selfish, Plagg, but...I don't wanna lose Marinette! I don't want her to marry some stranger and move to a foreign country and never see us again!"

"Alya said she'd visit when she could."

"It won't be the same, Plagg! Nothing will! Nothing will be as good without Marinette! Who's going to be our class representative and lead us properly? Who's going to give us kind words to cheer us up when we're down, and cheer us on to go after our goals when we're scared? Who's going to be our everyday Ladybug?"

Plagg shrugged.

"I just...I don't know what we're gonna do without Marinette. What I'm going to do without her. I...I can't begin to imagine life without her. I don't think I could go more than two days without being able to see her smile in person. Even the little things, like...like hearing her laugh, or people telling me what's she's been up to today. I...I don't want to go cold turkey, Plagg. Not with her."

"Well kid, I hate to break it to ya, but...the way things are going now, I think you have to get used to the idea."

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That night, as Marinette prepared for bed, a knock came to her door.

"Come in.", she said.

The door opened to reveal Adrien entering the room. Once he got a full view of Marinette, his heart skipped a beat.

She looked stunning. In a simple yet elegant, flowing silken nightgown with spaghetti straps and trimmed with white lace, color shiny, the lightest of lavenders, her midnight hair let loose and floating effortlessly around her shoulders like a halo, she looked like an angel.

"Adrien? Did you wanna talk?"

He remembered to breathe, and walked fully into the room, closing the door gently behind him. "Alya says you've decided to...give the prince a chance. Is...Is that true?"

"Well...yeah. I've decided to meet Prince Tao and see what kind of person he is before I try to get out of this betrothal."

"But what about us back home in Paris? If you marry the prince, you'll have to move to his country, into his castle. You'll never come back to Paris! What would we do without you? Who will be our everyday Ladybug?"

Marinette smiled gently, walking over and placing her hands on his shoulders. "You know, when Ladybug needs help, when she's unable to do her job, it falls to Chat Noir to fill in the gaps."

"Huh?"

"You were my everyday Chat Noir, Adrien. When I wasn't able to expose Lila, you had my back. You covered my weak spot and exposed her for me when I couldn't. And now, I need you to be my everyday Chat Noir again. I need you to be there when I can't. Cover for me."

Marinette gasped seeing tears, actual tears, begin to pool in those beautiful green eyes that she had fallen in love with on that rainy afternoon.

"But...it won't be the same without you."

Marinette smiled sadly at him. "I know. It won't be the same without you or the others, either. I'll miss each and every one of you like crazy. But...of all the ideas, this one seems the most practical right now. This is my best bet. We need to give it a shot, at least."

And she hugged him tightly, which he happily returned with a touch of melancholy on his heart.

---

Adrien wandered aimlessly down the hallways, feeling as though his heart had been flattened by some sort of steamroller of defeat.

"I failed, Plagg. I failed Marinette. Again. I'm the worst friend ever."

"Don't say that! You didn't fail! It's just that Pigtales changed her mind about the marriage before you could find out the right way to get her out of it."

"I still feel bad, Plagg. I know Marinette decided to give the guy a chance, but..."

"Adrien?"

Plagg hid as Kagami appeared from around the corner. "Who were you talking to just now?"

"Uh, no one! Just myself! Talking to myself! I'm weird like that!" Adrien played with his fingers. "I'm just...a little out of it. Marinette decided to meet the Prince of Sidorra and give him a chance to convince her to marry him."

"I know. She told me and the other girls.", said Kagami, sighing heavily. "But she's promised to visit us in Paris as often as she can if it does work out."

"But it won't be the same as having her here.", said Adrien.

"I know it won't.", said Kagami, taking him by the arm. "The moon is out tonight. Why don't we take a stroll in the gardens to take your mind off things?"

Adrien gave her a small yet still somewhat sad smile. "That does sound nice."

They headed to the royal palace gardens, lush and colorful with exotic flora and fauna. They walked and talked, avoiding the subject of Marinette and royalty and engagements entirely. Kagami held onto Adrien's arm the entire time, her eyes never leaving him.

As they conversed, they both failed to notice a lone figure on a balcony above, looking down upon them. She tucked a loose strand of black hair behind her ear and sighed, a sigh of both acceptance and mourning over what could have been.

"See, Tikki? If things work out, I might finally be able to move on. And then I can truly let Adrien and Kagami be happy, and be happy for them."

Not willing to see this any longer, Marinette turned around and slipped into her quarters for the night. If she had stayed for just a few seconds longer, she would have seen a blond boy turn his green eyes towards the light of her bedroom window.

# Family Reunion

Marinette finished off the dance with a twirl and a low curtsy. Clapping echoed in her ears.

"Excellent, excellent!", declared her dance teacher, beaming with pride. "I have to admit, Your Highness, I had my doubts. But while you are the clumsiest student I've ever had, you are also the most hard-working. You've made tremendous progress in excellent time, considering your earlier lack of poise."

Marinette rose up to stand and gave her teacher a grateful smile. "Xiéxié nǐ, xiānshēng.", she responded.

"And your language, too!", he added. "Fluent! Like you've spoken it all your life! You've mastered everything we've taught you in merely two weeks! You are a wonder!"

Marinette blushed from the praise.

King Rong stood nearby, smiling. "You know, at first I chose you to marry Prince Tao because you were the only option left. But now I see it was more than just good fortune that we found you. It was fate! Truly, you are the woman most worthy of becoming Prince Tao's bride!"

Marinette was half-flattered, half-dejected.

Suddenly, a servant came hurrying into the ballroom. "Your Majesty! The rest of the family is here!"

Marinette blinked. "I thought the whole family was already here."

"Oh, not even close.", Rong told her. "The rest of the family was abroad at the time of the news of your existence and couldn't make it in time to meet you. Now they're all arriving." He waved her over. "Come now. We must introduce you to them all."

Marinette picked the skirts of her dress and gracefully hurried after Uncle Rong towards the throne room.

Tom and Sabine were already there, awaiting Rong and Marinette. Rong sat upon his golden throne, waving his niece to stand next to him on his right hand. Sabine stood on the other side, at his left hand, while Tom stood on her own left.

Marinette looked around, and saw all her friends, plus Chloe and Sabrina, gathered in a cluster midway in the throne room. She smiled and waved at them, and almost all of them smiled and waved back, even Sabrina, with the exception of Chloe. Marinette felt a tap on her arm, and looked back at Rong to see a stern look on his face, his eyes commanding her to focus.

A servant, dressed in a high-collared Chinese tunic of dark blue silk, held up cue cards of some sort. "Presenting the royal family of Coccidellenae!", he declared loud enough. He looked at the first cue card. "Introducing, the firstborn daughter of Baroness Jun of Chunbridge, Dowager Queen Yon Su Yi of Turmezistan, with her son, King Yon Phillip of Turmezistan, her daughter-in-law, Queen Yon Eleanor, and her grandson and heir, Crown Prince Yon Nicolas, her granddaughter Princess Yon Xianrui, and her second grandson Prince Yon Zachary!"

"Introducing, son of Baroness Jun of Chunbridge, Count Cheng Ru Sheng, his wife Countess Cheng, and their grandsons, Lord Cheng You Siqi and Lord Cheng Xavier!"

"Introducing, son of Duke Cheng Han-Lo, Duke Cheng, Duke Cheng Yongcheng, his wife Duchess Cheng Ying, their son, Duke Cheng, and their grandsons, Lords Ethan, Ian, and Owen!"

"Introducing, daughter of Duke Cheng Le-Po of Winchin, Lady Genji of Uminhaie, her husband, Lord Genji, and their daughters, the Ladies Keiko, Ochi, and Ami Genji!"

"Granddaughter of Baroness Cheng Jun of Chunbridge, Queen Liang Hayan of Mandalia, her husband King of Mandalia, and their daughters, the Princesses Liang Xiao Chou and Marguerite of Mandalia!"

"Introducing, granddaughter of Baroness Cheng Jun of Chunbridge, Queen Sūn, her husband King Sūn, and their daughters, the Princesses Fangyi, Ruoxi, and Dong Xiowan!"

"Granddaughter of Duke Cheng Han-Lo, Queen Yang Guifei, and her children, Princess Chen-Chen, Grace, and Sophia, and Prince Oliver!"

"Introducing, great-granddaughter of Duke Cheng Le-Po of Winchen, Countess Lily Kikelomo of Zamunda, her husband, Count Omari of Zamunda, and their children, Ladies Vivian and Dayani Kikelomo and Lord Kyuata Kikelomo of Zamunda!"

Marinette's head spun as she tried to keep track of all the different names, titles, lands, and family connections, as one group after another entered the throne room and bowed to the royal family of Coccidellenae. How many kids and grandkids did her great-aunt and uncles have? And great-grandkids?! She knew Aunt Jun had married young, but yeesh!

"Introducing, daughter of King Cheng Xiang VII, Queen Guo Lotus Blossom of Shangri-la, her husband King Ruo of Shangri-la, and their sons Crown Prince Guo Lunmo and Prince Guo Shen of Shangri-la!"

Marinette saw, in her perpetual vision, her mother's face turn to ash at the name. "Maman?"

Sabine looked over at her daughter nervously and opened her mouth, only to be cut off when the doors opened and in stepped a pair of finely dressed royals, decked out in silken robes of gold, red and green. The Queen's hair was piled up into a towering do with decorations of gold and precious stones woven through, extravagant and eye-catching, her face caked in white makeup with brightly-colored stains on her cheeks, lips and eyelids. Her golden



earrings with rubies and pink diamonds were shaped like dragonflies, and were the actual size of real ones. Her gleaming, glittery gown trailed at least three feet behind her.

All in all, she was magnificent.

She and her husband stopped right in front of the podium steps to the throne, wearing poker faces, looking almost bored. The Queen's lovely auburn eyes moved upwards to fall upon Sabine, who bit her lip hard, almost as though she were afraid of this regal woman. But that, thought Marinette, was silly.

Right?

A moment of thick silence reigned in the throne room. Finally, Sabine gulped, plastered on a smile, and spoke kindly, but with a nervous edge in her voice. "Lotus...it's so good to see you again."

Queen Lotus Blossom pursed her cherry-red painted lips in a sour pout. "Sister."

Marinette and her friends startled at the word. Sister?

"Well, well, well," said King Ruo, narrowing his own eyes up at Sabine. "The kingdom's beloved princess has returned."

Sabine averted her gaze away from the King, who's lip curled upwards in response.

"What is wrong, Sabine? Have you no words for your ex-fiancé?"

Marinette's mouth fell open, as did those of all her friends.

"Ex-fiancé?", she cried. Her mother looked back and forth between Marinette and her father guiltily.

"Yes...he is the man that my father wanted me to marry."

"The one you ran away from?", asked Marinette, recalling the story.

Sabine nodded wordlessly.

"Yes.", Rong mused calmly. "Luckily, the royal family of Shangri-la were perfectly willing to accept our little sister Lotus Blossom as a replacement bride, and she was more than eager."

That's when Tom felt King Ruo's eyes on him. "So...you're the peasant bloke that Sabine preferred to marry over me."

Tom waved a nervous hand back at him, a sheepish grin on his face. "Heh, heh...nice to meet cha."

Marinette winced, and she caught the gazes of her friends from across the room, sharing nervous expressions. This situation had the awkwardness of every time she'd jumbled her

words in front of Adrien, combined.

The tense moment finally ended when a young man, not much older than Marinette, stepped forward and ascended the podium with a smile. He was tall, with a bit of a beard, dark almond-shaped eyes, and chiseled features, rather handsome. He wore a suit of red trimmed with black and silver thread, with a phoenix embroidered on one side of his tunic in silvery-gray. He lowered his head, falling to one knee before Rong on his throne. "Well, I for one, am quite excited to meet my long-long aunt at last."

"Sabine, Thomas, Marinette," said Rong, eyes still on the man before them. "This is Lord Sūa Shen, Lotus Blossom's youngest son, and the official heir to the throne of Coccidellene."

The Dupain-Chengs blinked at Rong.

"Wait a minute, he's next in line for the throne?", asked Tom, pointing at Shen, who was still in his bowing position.

"Yes.", Rong answered plainly. "Lord Shen here is one of my closest living male relatives, as my youngest nephew. And since he has five older brothers, and therefore is unlikely to inherit his own country's throne, I've made him my heir."

"Don't you have any kids?"

Marinette regretted those words the moment they burst out of her mouth.

Then, and only then, did she suddenly recall that during all her stay in the palace, none of her mother's family members to whom she had been introduced, had been introduced as Rong's children.

She cast a guilty look at her uncle. He stared back stone-faced, but she could see the sadness in his eyes. He sighed.

"I am afraid I have no children.", he replied, keeping a calm, steady tone of voice, no sadness detected in it. "A few years after marrying my wife, we found difficulty conceiving. We took to a doctor, and he ran tests, which proved that I am unable to sire my own child."

Sabine gasped, looking heartbroken. "Oh, Rong! Rong, I'm so sorry!"

Rong shook his head, waving a hand at his sister as if to dismiss her. "No use dwelling on the past, on what cannot be. We must look towards the future." He looked at Marinette. "Like the wedding!"

"Oh, yes!", chirped Lotus Blossom, becoming much more chipper as she ascended the stairs towards her newly-found niece, taking Marinette's hands in her own. "Let me see the bride-to-be!" She looked Marinette up from head to toe, then pulled her arm up to spin her around. "Oh! She's beautiful! Just like her aunt!"

"And like her mother!", Tom chimed in.

Lotus Blossom blinked back at him. "Oh, sure, she looks a little like Sabine. But you can tell she inherited more of my perfect genes!"

Sabine's eye twitched.

Rong clapped his hands as he stood from his throne. "Well, that's everyone! Now, the Sidorian royal party should be arriving any minute now! Marinette, return to your quarters! There's a warm bath awaiting you! You are to be bathed, groomed and dressed immediately. We must have you looking your very best for Prince Tao! First impressions matter!"

Marinette tried to smile as Nuying appeared by her side and led her away back towards her bedroom. Just then, Rong's gaze fell upon the class, and they shrank under his stare. Even though his face was neutral, he still looked intimidating.

"As for the rest of you...you should make yourselves presentable as well. Change into something more suitable. It reflects poorly on us if we allow guests that dress so shabbily into the court."

"Shabby?!", shrieked Chloe, face turning beet red. "This ensemble is one hundred percent Gabriel designer brand!" She posed in her top and jacket, in her white pants and shoes. "See? Even my socks are Gabriel brand!" She gave her blonde ponytail a haughty flip.

Rong blinked, expression unchanging as he stepped down from the podium and walked towards the Mayor's daughter in long strides. "How much did that ensemble cost?"

"Altogether? It was twenty-seven hundred euros!", Chloe boasted as Rong stopped right in front of her. "That's twenty seven with two whole zeros at the end!"

Chloe expected the King to be impressed with the cost of her clothes. But Rong smirked deviously as his hands ran over his black tunic.

"You see this tunic?", he said slowly. "It's pure silk. The silk was made by a flock of silkworms in Japan, kept and raised exclusively to make clothes for the Coccidellenean royal family." He held up his wrist to draw attention to the edge of his sleeves, lined with glittery gold. "The thread used to line my sleeves and collar are infused with real gold." He pointed to the buttons fastening his tunic, which shone in the light. "Each button is made of jade, each made specially in a lab to inject enough iron to turn it black."

His hands moved downward to his pants, also black. "These pants are made from the wool of vicuña, a distant and rare relative of the alpaca, which produces the rarest wool there is. They were handspun and handsewn by workers at a private farm kept by a very wealthy distant relative of the family." He tapped his feet. "As for these shoes, well, they are pure leather of African ostrich, gummed down to incredible softness by toothless old women for generous wages." He folded his arms over his chest. "And this is just a casual everyday outfit for me."

With every word, Chloe's mouth opened bigger and bigger, which made Rong's mocking smirk grow wider and wider. "All in all, my ensemble costs about...seventy-seven thousand

in our currency." He leaned in to get up in Chloe's face. "That's seventy-seven with three whole zeroes at the end."

He patted her cheek. "What is it you modern children say? Get on my level."

The class looked like a school of fish, gaping at Rong as he spun on his heel and stride away with his head held high.

"Dude...", said Nino, slamming a hand to his head.

"I suddenly feel extremely underdressed.", remarked Kagami, looking down at her own outfit. Her clothes were expensive, too, but the description of Rong's clothes made her feel like she was wearing rags.

"Me, too.", chimed in Adrien, looking down on himself. "And I've never felt underdressed in my whole life!"

"Sweet mother of Trixx, that outfit cost more than what my mom makes in a year!", screamed Alya. "And she's the head chef at the most luxurious hotel in Paris!"

"Ya hear that, Chloe?", snarked Nathaneal. "Maybe your dad should raise wages. So even if your clothes don't level up with Rong's, at least something in your life will!"

Everyone laughed except Sabrina. And Chloe. She just stood there, face frozen, save for the twitching of her eye.

## Face to Face

Marinette had been bathed extensively, in a tub that contained more perfume and lavish oil than water. Her hair had been done up in a half bun style, with hair extensions that allowed two braided loops of hair to tie around her ears, secured with pink silk ribbons. Once dressed, Nuying started on her makeup, which involved thick white paste on her face.

As Nuying began making her up, her friends entered the room. They looked downhearted as they looked down at the clothes they were wearing. Why, though, Marinette could not understand. They were extra nice blouses and skirts.

When they looked up at Marinette, however, their expressions brightened instantly.

"Wow! Marinette, you look gorgeous!", cried Mylene. "That dress is amazing!"

"And I love the way they did your hair!", cried Juleka.

Marinette smiled, blushing only slightly less pink than the rouge Nuying was applying to her cheeks. "Thanks. Why the long faces, though?"

The smiles faltered. "We feel underdressed here!", said Alix, pointing to her blouse. "Chloe tried to brag about her full designer outfit, but Rong totally shut her down by telling us all about his outfit—with the silk shirt and the rare llama pants and the sleeves lined with actual gold!"

"Ah yes, His Majesty's clothes are quite impressive.", said Nuying, taking a tiny pot of purple eyeshadow to put on Marinette's lids.

"Impressive is an understatement.", said Kagami. "He made Adrien feel underdressed for the first time in his life!"

"All of us feel underdressed here.", said Alya.

Nuying looked at the princess's friends. "If you truly feel underdressed, there are a few spare dresses worn by handmaidens."

Alya eyed her suspiciously. "You mean, wear servant uniforms?" She did not like what that was implying. All her doubts ended with Nuying's response.

"Oh, yes. They are pure satin, and each has white quartz buttons. They're not completely up to His Majesty's standard, but it should be just enough so that you do not feel so out of place."

Every other jaw in the room dropped.

"Seriously? Even the servants here dress better than we do!", exclaimed Alix, throwing her arms up.

Nuying smirked. "That is nothing. Her Grace Duchess Jun owns a collar of rubies and pink diamonds...for her cat."

The other jaws lowered to the floor.

---

The boys, plus Chloe and Sabrina, entered the grand hallway. Fifty courtiers lined the walls, murmuring amongst themselves as they patiently awaited the arrival of the royal family of Sidorio.

At the head of the room, King Rong was adjusting his ensemble. He wore a black high-collared shirt trimmed with golden thread, the image of a phoenix rising from flame embroidered in glittering gold thread as well, accentuated with some shiny red and orange thread for extra flair. Pinned to his shoulders was a red velvet robe trimmed with gray fur, cascading down his back. His black pants had a red line on either leg, his shoes polished so vigorously one could see their reflection in them. He had on his official crown in the shape of a phoenix, which glittered in the overhead lightings whenever he moved.

Tom and Sabine were right next to him. Sabine wore a hanfu dress of palest green, trimmed with gold, pale blue flowers in her short dark hair. She had on a gold necklace and dangling golden earrings, with itty-bitty little jewels in them that caught light and glittered. She held up a traditional Chinese handled fan in her hand, and helped Tom adjust his matching green shirt, shiny and bright like emeralds, his hair and mustache moussed, his black pants starched, his shoes polished.

Adrien frowned as he saw the guys look down at themselves and then at each other. Even in the nicest clothes they had packed from home, they were significantly underdressed compared to everyone else in the room. Even Chloe, in her sleek twelve-hundred euro Gabriel Agreste yellow pencil-skirted dress, her pearl necklace and jewel-drop earrings, and her seven hundred euro designer stiletto heels, looked plain next to the noblewomen and their brightly-colored hanfus with elaborate embroidery and images on the fabric, their accessories with no less than a dozen sparkling jewels, and high hairdos with fancy buns, loops and twists.

Adrien smoothed down his plain white dress shirt, with a crisp collar and buttons up, the fanciest shirt he had brought from home, and approached King Rong and Sabine and Tom, the latter two who smiled seeing him.

"Adrien! You guys are here!", said Sabine. "And don't you all look nice!"

"I dunno, Miss Cheng, we still feel underdressed here.", said Nathaneal shyly.

"Where's Marinette?", asked Kim.

"Oh, she and the girls are in the room next door.", said Tom. "We're planning on giving her a grand entrance when the Prince arrives."

"Speaking of whom, he will arrive any second now.", said Rong. "So do go to the sides to give the guests the room for their big entrance."

The boys shuffled off to the sides, waiting for the big moment. They looked towards a pair of sheer tulle red curtains.

Meanwhile, Marinette was behind those curtains, standing still as Nuying touched her up. Around her, the girls were smoothing their shiny pastel satin dresses and adjusting the simple long hair pins holding their buns.

They stopped cold when trumpets blared from the other side of the curtains. Presenting, His Royal Majesty, King Unis Maëo of Sidorio!"

Marinette's heart fell to her stomach. This was it.

Nuying gave her a supportive smile. "Good luck out there, Your Highness." She curtsied and briskly exited the room.

The girls crowded around the curtains, carefully peeking out from between them to see the commotion.

The doors to the end of the grand hallway opened wide, and in strutted a man of Asian descent. He was tall, almost six feet, and swathed in furs and expensive fabrics that gleamed as though made of moonlight. On his head, a great golden crown, one shaped like an elegant crane, sparkled with blazing blue gems that shone like the oceans. He entered with two servants behind, carrying his cape of smooth white fur, which was six feet long and trailed behind him. As he marched towards the throne, there appeared a party of entertainers. A band played a grand ballad of Chinese origin, with lutes, cymbals, loud pipes, stone chimes, and all sorts of other instruments that filled the whole room with such intense volume, it was almost enough to make one go deaf. In front of them, a large group of dancers, all dressed in gold and pastels, moving gracefully yet energetically, performed traditional dance.

If the King of Sidorio had intended to make a grand entrance, he had succeeded, and then some. It was a spectacle like nothing the French king had ever seen before.

King Unis stopped in front of where Rong stood. He held up his arms, putting them over his chest as one fist pressed against his open palm. Rong did the very same thing, and the two Kings bowed to one another, dipping at the waist to a right angle, their movements sudden and precise.

Rong stood up straight and turned to his sister and brother-in-law. "Sabine. Thomas. Step forward." He walked backwards, and the couple walked forward, huddled close together as they stood before Unis.

Unis bowed to them. "Your Royal Highnesses. It is a great honor to join our families through this blessed marriage. And now, allow me to introduce to you, my youngest son, the Prince Tao."

It was then Chloe crossed her fingers on both hands and started to mumble under her breath.

"Be ugly, be ugly, be ugly, be ugly..."

A moment of silence.

Then a short, chubby man came waddling into view, dressed in clothes that were much too tight on his frame. He faced the royal family with a gap-toothed smile.

The boys flinched in anguish.

"Yes!", Chloe whisper-yelled with a huge grin.

"Princess Cheng Sabine, Sir Thomas Dupain...", said the short little man.

Sabine and Tom forced a smile on their faces, which sadly, was very clearly faked.

"Presenting, your future son-in-law, Prince Tao.", he continued, stepping aside and sweeping his arm towards the front of the room.

Sabine and Tom let out breaths of relief, and so did the guys.

"Whew! He's not the prince!", said Nathaneal.

The crowds parted behind King Unis, each singing in harmony, their motions almost like dancing, to reveal a person standing behind them all, back turned to the royal family. He donned a silken robe of royal purple, embroidered with the designs of a dragon, that flowed slightly behind him on a train. His long hair, black as a raven's wing, flowed down his back, smooth and shiny, lustrous and flawless, and spun around him like poetry in motion as he turned quickly, showing his face to the rest.

When he did, almost every jaw in the room dropped.

He was the most beautiful man any of the French had ever seen. His handsome face was the stuff of fairytales, sculpted facial features, defined yet soft and smooth, dark eyes that seemed to bore into one's soul, full, feminine lips, strong shoulders, muscles taunt through his shirt underneath his robes, tall and serious. He was like a prince straight out of Chinese folktales and fairytales.

Proper, yet graceful, he strode towards Tom and Sabine, motions proud and respectful, and bowed low to the both of them. "Greetings, Princess Sabine, Sir Thomas. I am Prince Tao of Sidorio. And you are the mother and father of my bride-to-be. I hope to honor you as I would my own mother and father."

"NO!"

The attention of the room was stolen away by a cry and a stamping foot. Chloe stomped hard, fists clenched, tears beginning to form in her eyes as she boiled over the cruel hand fate had given her.

"No! No! It's not fair! It's just not fair! He's a total hunk! There is no justice in the world! None!" She folded her arms over her chest and pouted, glaring deadly at Marinette's new gorgeous fiancé.



The others just all rolled their eyes and looked back towards the front.

Tom and Sabine looked at each other and traded joyous smiles. Tom cleared his throat and stepped forward. "Pleasure to meet you, Prince Tao.", he said, taking his hand for Tao to shake.

Tao eyed the hand oddly. Tom coughed. "Um...handshake?"

"Oh. I see. That is...a bit informal. I am used to bows."

"Well, we're gonna be family, ain't we? Why formalities?"

"True." Tao gently shook his hand. "It is an honor, Sir Thomas."

"Please, call me Tom."

Sabine stepped forward and shook Tao's hand. "It's wonderful to meet you. You seem like a fine young man."

"Thank you. I actually come bearing gifts for my mother and father-in-law." He snapped his fingers, and servants stepped forward, casing golden cases on plush satin pillows. Tom and Sabine immediately became flustered.

"Oh, no no no no! We can't accept presents! We're not selling our daughter to you!"

"Don't think of it as a dowry. Think of it as a son giving presents to his parents. A reward for caring for and raising my bride. After all, like you said, we are family now."

One servant approached Tom. "For you, my father-in-law...". They opened the case, revealing a sort of knife with a golden handle, carved like a snake with fangs. "A dagger, with which to defend yourself and those you love."

Tom smiled. "Oh, thank you, but I'm a hugger, not a fighter."

"Daggers have many uses.", Rong explained. "Not just fighting."

Tom smiled and took the knife in his hand. "I guess I could use it to cut food..."

"And for my mother-in-law...". The second servant stepped forward and opened the case, revealing a Chinese hairpin, with the ends carved into the shape of two swan heads, holding a dark blue jewel in between them. "A hairpin, crafted by the finest jade artist in my homeland. I hope you will wear it to the wedding as a sign of your blessing of my union to your daughter."

Sabine smiled and took the pin. "It's lovely. I'll definitely wear it to the wedding. Thank you."

In the wings, the girls all smiled. Rose even let out a little squeal of delight.

"He's so handsome!", she gushed. "He's like a prince from a fairytale!"

"Respectful towards his future in-laws, as well.", Kagami added, nodding with approval. "So far, so good."

That's when Rong's voice came through the curtain.

"Prince Tao, we are overjoyed to have you here at last." He cleared his throat. "And now, without any further ado, I would like to present to you, my niece, your beautiful bride, Princess Marinette of Coccidellenae!"

"Alright, that's your cue, girl!", said Alya, giving her bestie an encouraging pat on the shoulder before shuffling away from her. The other girls followed suit, giving Marinette her space to be presented. They held their breath and waited to see her walk through the curtains to greet her husband-to-be.

And they waited.

And waited.

But nothing happened. Marinette just stood there, feet glued to the spot where she stood, staring straight ahead at the curtains an inch from her face.

The girls' excitement quickly gave way to concern. Alya stepped forward, reaching for her bestie. "Marinette? Are you okay?"

Marinette backed away, looking panicked. "I can't do this!"

# Love is in Bloom?

## Chapter Summary

To clarify, I had this chapter planned and typed out BEFORE Derision aired.

"I changed my mind! I can't do this!"

"What?!"

"I can't do it!", Marinette panted, pacing back and forth. "It's too much! Do you think it's too late to sneak me on a plane back to Paris!"

"Marinette, you're the one who decided to give the guy a chance!", said Alya. "You said it was the least you could do! Why are you backing out now?!"

"Yeah, I mean, he's super hot!", said Alix. "So we're already off to a great start!"

"But...". Marinette wilted, toying with the strings of her sash. "What if he doesn't like me?"

The girls' faces softened for a few moments. Alya walked over and placed her hands on Marinette's shoulders. "He will. You're amazing. And if he doesn't, he's either a jerk or an idiot."

"A jerk or an idiot I'll be forced to marry.", Marinette mumbled bitterly.

"Marinette, remember what Madame Bustier told you.", said Kagami, coming to stand at Marinette's side. "Get to know him first. Then make a decision. You promised to give him a chance. You can't fulfill that promise if you don't go out and meet him."

"You've always encouraged us to be brave and go for it.", said Juleka as she and the other four approached. "Now it's time for us to return the favor."

"You can do it, Marinette.", said Mylene. "You're our everyday Ladybug. And part of being an everyday Ladybug is being brave."

"You got this!", said Alix. "No guy can resist you, royal or otherwise!"

"The prince is gonna love you!", Rose gushed. "Especially in that dress!"

Marinette smiled. "It is a fabulous dress, isn't it?"

"That's the spirit, girl!", said Alya, giving her bestie a hug. "Now you get out there and make some true love happen!"

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Rong tapped his foot impatiently, checking the time on his pocketwatch. He could feel the icy stares of the Simosian King and Prince Tao on his head as he kept his own gaze lowered to avoid their disapproval. It wasn't really working.

Just then, the one with the glasses and unruly hair poked her head out of the curtains. "Hey! Sorry about that! Princess got a little cold feet! She's fine now!" She stepped out of the curtains, along with the chubby one and the one with the purple streaked hair, who each took one section of curtain.

The glasses-wearing one dusted off her orange hanfu and cleared his throat. "Prince Tao? I want you to meet your new fiancé, and the best thing that will ever happen to you—Princess Marinette Dupain-Cheng!"

At once, the two pulled back the curtains, and a gasp rose up from the boys, Adrien's being the loudest.

There stood Marinette, in a gorgeous Chinese-styled gown of pastel colors, hair braided with ribbons, face made up to perfection. She had her head lowered, but lifted it and smiled, meeting her eyes across the room with Prince Tao.

Rong smiled proudly when he saw Miss Tsurugi sneak out from the door attached to the back. She held up her smartphone and pressed at the screen. That's when fine Chinese harpist music began to play.

Rose and Alix appeared behind Marinette, carrying woven baskets. They hurried up to the front, bowed, then stood straight, standing just before Marinette, positioned on the side to allow the prince full view. As the music played, they walked side by side, each step in perfect sync, tossing pink and red flower petals onto the path before Marinette, who walked slowly and gracefully to their same beat, her feet meeting petals as she made her way to the Prince.

Finally, Rose and Alix reached Rong's side. They bowed to the King respectfully, then hurried off, rejoining their friends, along with Mylene and Juleka. Marinette stood by her uncle's side, still smiling sweetly, as beautifully as she could, and locked eyes with Prince Tao.

Alya nudged the Prince with a devilish smirk. "You're a lucky, lucky guy. And not just 'cause you're a prince."

Rong cleared his throat. "Thank you, Miss Césaire. That will be all."

Alya bowed and went back to her boyfriend. She raised a hand with her palm facing him. "High-five, he's hot."

Nino gently smacked his hand against hers, not too loudly, and turned back to watch the first interaction.

Prince Tao stepped towards Marinette, smiling at her kindly. But was it a polite smile or a love smile? She couldn't tell.

Finally, he took her hand and raised it up. "Your uncle sent me a photograph of you when the marriage was arranged.", he said. "You are a hundred times more beautiful in real life."

And with that, he bowed lower and brought her hand to his lips, kissing the back of it. Marinette's whole face turned red to match her painted lips.

"Oh my lanta.", she said, her voice wavering. "You're not too bad yourself."

He stood up and smiled at her brighter. "A good sense of humor, too. I think you and I will have many happy years together."

She smiled more sincerely. "Let's hope."

Adrien looked at Marinette blushing and smiling that beautiful genuine smile at Tao, eyes all sparkly, looking like a match made in heaven...and he was overwhelmed by the urge to punch the guy in his stupid pretty face. Or throw up. Or both.

What was going on?

"We're just glad you're not ugly."

"Kim!"

Tao laughed. "No, no, it's okay. I, too, am grateful not to be ugly. I must thank my good genes."

Marinette blushed a little more from embarrassment.

"Oh, before we continue, I have brought my bride a present from my homeland.", he said, snapping his fingers.

Marinette gasped softly as a servant came running over with a silk-covered pillow. "A present? You shouldn't have."

"Nonsense. I know in your country of origin, you mark your impending marriage with a diamond ring. While we have no such thing here, I thought I could give you something to signal yourself as my future wife. Think of it in place of an engagement ring."

On the silk pillow was a little ornamental jewelry box, rusty gold with Chinese lettering on it. Tao took the box and held it out to Marinette, who accepted with a smile. Carefully lifting the lid, she looked inside, and a gleam appeared in her eye.

"What is it? What is it? Show us!", Nathaneal pleaded.

Marinette reached inside and gently lifted out a silver figurine in the form of a spider, decorated with tiny diamonds and smooth black jewels that caught the light and glittered with every little move.

"Oh! It's beautiful!"

Adrien looked uncertain. "A spider? Pretty risky choice there."

"No, it's fine, Adrien. I actually like spiders."

He looked at her like she had grown a third eye. "You do? Since when?"

Tao cut in, leaving his question unanswered. "I thought you would like it. I was told that you are interested in fashion and clothing design, and after all, the spider is..."

"...nature's fashion designer.", the royal couple said at the same time. Marinette's big blue eyes now seemed even bigger and bluer.

Adrien flinched. "Nature's fashion designer? That's a thing?"

"It actually makes sense.", said Max. "Spiders do weave their webs in intricate and varying patterns to create both beauty and functionality, similar to a human designing and crafting clothes."

"So...it's actually a really thoughtful gift.", Ivan pointed out, smiling.

"And a flashy one.", said Alya. "I mean, lookit the bling on that thing!"

"Wait...". Max came running up to Marinette, ignoring the scowls of the royals around as he leaned in, adjusting his glasses as he eyed the silver spider more closely. "Those black ones...are those...Haitian black pearls?"

Tao puffed up like a proud peacock. "The finest on the market."

Max looked up with an astonished look on his face. "Seriously? Those are the rarest pearls on the planet! Just one single pearl costs three hundred euros a pop!" He looked back at the spider. "Sweet Einstein, this must have cost you a small fortune!"

"Oh, it wasn't much.", Tao scoffed with a dismissive wave of his hand. "A mere chip in our bank account. Let's see now...". He turned to a servant. "You're good at math. Translate the amount from our currency into theirs."

The servant took out a paper and pen and started scribbling, murmuring numbers under his breath, reminding himself to carry this and multiply that. Finally, he finished with a flourish of the hand and handed the paper to the prince, who glanced at it. "Let's see...that will have cost...twenty-five thousand of your French euros."

Every French jaw dropped.

"Twenty-five grand?!", shrieked Alix. "Holy schmuck! With that kinda dough, I could buy replacement wheels from my rollerblades until my legs were crippled from old age!"

"That itty-bitty bug costs more than my mom's car...", Nino said, still shaking his head in disbelief.

Marinette was speechless. "Omigod, I-I-I can't accept this, it's way too expensive..."

"Nonsense!", Prince Tao cut her off. "You're a princess, and the future wife of a prince. When we are married, I'll buy you enough golden tiaras to stock a closet! It will be the least you are owing as someone of your stature."

"But this costs way too much! I'd feel bad if I kept it..."

"Marinette.", he said tenderly, clasping his hands over hers. "I must insist you keep it. It is my present to you, as your husband-to-be. Please."

Marinette smiled sincerely. "It's wonderful. Thank you so much."

They locked gazes, and Adrien's stomach flipped three times over.

"Well! Let's not just stand here like ninnies! Let's get into the dining area and start our luncheon!"

## Royal Luncheon

The royal families and their guests all filed into the dining hall, where the placements were set, with not one, but two long dining tables, side by side. King Rong, the reigning monarch of the homeland, sat at the head of the first table. The King of Sidorio sat at his left hand, and his heir, Lord Shen, at his right. His dear sister Sabine sat next to Shen, and Tom next to his wife.

Prince Tao led Marinette to two chairs, right next to his father. He skipped the one directly next to his father and pulled out the one next to that for her. Marinette smiled and carefully seated herself in the offered chair, doing a mental victory dance when she managed to do so gracefully.

She looked over at her friends approaching, and waved at them to come over and sit with her. They smiled, but they had barely taken a step towards her when a royal guard intercepted them.

"Forgive me, but this table is strictly royalty only.", he informed them emotionlessly. "His Majesty has reserved a second table for those of un-noble blood."

Both Marinette and her friends were disappointed, and looked just as much. But, seeing no point in arguing, the Miraculclass shot their everyday Ladybug sad looks before dragging their feet to the second table. Marinette's head drooped for a moment as her Aunt Jun slipped into the chair next to her where she'd wanted Alya to sit.

As the Miraculclass sat down, Rose's dour mood was lifted when she got a good look at the place settings.

"Ooh!", she croed, picking up her plate, which was made of finest china with handpainted depictions of phoenixes with red, orange and yellow flaming feathers swirling around the edges. She looked onto the placemats to see an array of forks and knives, each a different size and slightly different shape. There were four forks, four knives, and three spoons.

The servants all bustled out of the kitchen, carrying the first course, announcing the dishes as they offered it to the diners and served them—dumplings and steamed buns stuffed with meats and vegetables, crab ragoon, pearl balls, tea leaf eggs, and something the class didn't recognize.

"What's pào cài?", asked Sabrina.

"It's a dish of Chinese origin.", explained Kim. "Pickled cabbage."

Chloe's upper lip curled in disgust, looking at the leafy dish as though it were a fried cockroach. "Ew! I'm not eating anything pickled or made from cabbage!" She waved her hands at the server. "Take that away! Gross!"



Unfortunately, for her at least, her fussing caught the attention of the royal family sitting at the next table. They glared towards the French mayor's daughter.

"Miss Bourgeois!", hissed Gabriel, banging his fist lightly on the table. "I told you not to make a fool of yourself while you are here! You are embarrassing us! Insulting their cuisine! Now you must accept the food and eat it!"

Chloe wanted to argue, but then she caught Adrien, sitting next to his father, and her heart stopped. He had the exact same angry look on his face as his dad. And I mean exactly. The family resemblance, for once, shone through. In fact, he looked even more upset with her than Gabriel at the moment.

"Did I say gross? I mean gorge! I want to gorge myself on this yummy stuff!"

The servant came back and served Chloe a hearty dose of pào cài on her plate. She slowly became aware of all the eyes on her, cold and stern and expectant, waiting for her to start eating. Trying to quell her queasy stomach, Chloe took some pào cài, shoved it hastily into her mouth, and started to chew.

Slowly, her chews became slower, longer, less forceful, her eyes widening as she tasted the delicacy. She swallowed, looking ahead surprised. "Say...that's actually not half bad." She smiled a little, then helped herself to another bite.

Marinette released a breath of relief. Crisis averted. Her eyes wandered back to Prince Tao, sitting next to her, and she still could not believe how handsome he was. From this close up, she could see his chiseled chin, his sculpted cheekbones, his broad shoulders, his full, almost feminine lips. This guy had won the lottery in looks.

But looks were temporary, she knew this. If they were going to build a life together, she needed to get to know the Tao behind the pretty face.

"So...Prince Tao..."

"Please,", he cut her off. "We're going to be husband and wife. Simply Tao will do."

Marinette nodded. "Of course. Tao. So...tell me about yourself. Your interests, your hobbies, your passions, that kind of stuff. I mean, if we are going to get married, we should know this stuff about each other."

Tao flashed him a smile, and Marinette swore this boy missed his calling as a model. His smile could sell out stores, if posted in the shoppe windows.

"It pleases me to see that my bride is not only beautiful but quite wise as well."

Marinette's cheeks flushed from the praise. "Aw, stappit.", she replied, almost squawking like a sick parrot from the nerves, flapping her hand around rather ungracefully.

Adrien stabbed his chopsticks into one of his dumplings, shoved it into his mouth, and began chewing rather roughly.

"So...what are, like, your hobbies and interests?", she asked.

"Well, I do adore hunting.", said Prince Tao.

At the next table, Mylene gulped down the water she had been sipping, coughing loudly from the shock.

Marinette's smile became the ever so slightest bit strained. "Hunting? As in, animals?"

"Ah, yes.", he replied in a boastful tone. "I honestly don't think there's a single breed of beast in Sidoria that I haven't shot down."

Mylene's face went white.

"Like...with a gun?", asked Marinette, trying not to look or sound as unnerved as she really was.

"Oh, no! A gun is a weakling's weapon.", stated Tao. "No, the mark of a true man is his skill with a bow and arrow. Only a true hunter is skilled enough to master the weapon. And of course the occasional throwing dagger." He leaned in with a grin. "I like to aim right for the head. Quick and clean."

Mylene lowered her head, shivering like she'd caught a chill, before pushing her plate away.

"Mylene, honey, are you okay?", asked Sabine from the next table.

"I've lost my appetite.", the gentle girl whimpered in response.

Marinette's twitched ever so slightly, before she cleared her throat. "Ah...any of your interests that don't include blood and guts?"

Tao pursed his lips for a moment mulling over the question before a smile graced his face. "I enjoy music. I attend concerts all the time."

Marinette beamed from ear to ear. "Me, too! I love concerts! Concerts are the best!"

"Do you now?", he said with a cheeky smirk and a gleam in his eye. "Well, it just so happens that one of my favorite musicians is holding a concert tomorrow evening, at the grand theater just a few blocks from the palace. Perhaps...I may take you there?"

"Wait, it seems kind of last minute.", said Marinette. "How are we gonna get tickets?"

Tao smiled at her, waving his hand around as if to dismiss her question. "Tickets, schmickets. The musician is closely connected to the royal family of Sidoria. I can pull a string or two and get us a box seat."

Marinette's eyes doubled in size. "Whoa, seriously?!"

Tao smirked proudly at her. "Seriously."

"That'd be amazing! It's a date!"

The royal family members smiled seeing the engaged couple planning an evening out.

"You know what?", said Rong, reaching for his goblet. "You kids can take the official royal carriage if you want to."

"Really, Uncle Rong?", asked Marinette. "The extra fancy one with the golden phoenix on the door?"

Rong finished sipping his wine before turning to Marinette with a beaming smile. "The very same one."

"My, Rong,", said Sabine, plucking up a veggie dumpling with her chopsticks. "That's very generous of you."

"Well, those two are the future of both Coccidellenae and Sidorio.", said Rong, finishing up his plate. "They deserve the finest life has to offer."

Just then a cough came from Lord Shen, who gave Rong a very unamused look. "The future of Coccidellenae? And what am I, chopped liver?"

"Oh, well of course, I still regard you as the future of Coccidellenae!", Rong corrected himself apologetically towards his nephew. "But these two," He gestured to Marinette and Tao. "Will forge an alliance between our two countries that will last for generations to come!"

As the guests neared the complete clearing of their plates, Marinette lifted her gaze up towards her cousin, Shen. He was eating with impeccable manners and a pokerface. He seemed a little stiff and distant, just like Rong.

"So, Shen,", she began cautiously. "You're going to become King of Coccidellenae. What are your plans for the country once you take the throne?"

Shen glanced up from his near-empty plate of food, his expression unreadable. Then, after a moment, he cleared his throat and said, "Well, I drafted many a proposal to expand and fund our nation's military."

"Which completely unnecessary.", Rong added. "We are a peaceful country. We have been for nearly seventy years, ever since my father ascended the throne. The military has enough funds to keep it sufficient."

"Sufficient is alright,", said Shen. "But our military could be great! The finest the world has ever seen! If we just give it a little more—"

"And take necessary attention away from more pressing matters?", Rong cut him off. "Shen, you realize that any extra money we take out to give the money will lower the budget for matters of this country that are of more importance."

"More importance?", asked Marinette. "Like what?"

"Like those in need.", Rong told her. "There are various programs in Coccidellenae that provide pressing needs to people who are less fortunate in the world, like orphanages, homeless shelters and soup kitchens. Not only that, there are all the public schools and hospitals. And those are all mostly dependent on the tax money from the people. If we give extra funding to the military, it will come out of the budget for those vital programs."

"Hold up!", piped up Ivan, turning everyone's attention to him. "I'm confused! If you can afford to spend thousands of euros on a casual outfit, couldn't you just extend the budget?"

Marinette gulped, worried that Ivan might have invoked Rong's wrath, however justified.

Instead, the King calmly replied, "I can see how you would be confused by my extravagance in clothes while staying strict on the country budget. However, I must inform you that most of the money that we spend freely as royals comes from the various business ventures and organizations that we begin and or have married into."

The Frenchmen looked puzzled. "Huh?"

"As you can see, we are a very large family indeed.", said Rong, sweeping his arm out towards the table of numerous relatives. "As such, there are many of us who have no chance of assuming a throne, so many have pursued other ventures."

Duke Le-Po, Rong and Sabine's second-youngest paternal uncle, spoke up. "My grandson Alistar is a hotshot kung-fu movie director and producer in Taiwan."

Nino sat up straight. "Wait a minute! Did you say Alistar? As in Alistar Song?"

Le-Po grinned.

"No way! Your grandson is THE Alistar Song?!", cried Nino. "I love his movies! He practically revived the kung-fu genre single-handedly!"

"Yeah his movies are awesome.", said Ivan. "Except for the actress who always gets cast in the leads."

"LiLi Hwin-Qua.", Nino confirmed. "Yeah, she's terrible. I don't know why she keeps getting cast." He turned back to the Duke. "N-No offense to your grandson!"

"Oh, you must be talking about Alistar's girlfriend.", said Duke Le-Po.

Nino's eyes widened. "Wait, girlfriend? Your grandson is dating the lead actress from his films?"

Le-Po raised his eyebrows in confirmation.

"Well, mystery solved.", commented Alya with a shrug.

"Tell them about Hiroki!", said Jun, before taking a sip of the imported Chinese wine from her glass.

"Another grandson of mine, Hiroki, he's big in finance.", Le-Po went on. "You might have heard of him. Gengi Banking?"

The French jaws fell open. "Your other grandson is Hiraku Gengi?!", cried Kagami. "That man practically owns half of Japan!"

"My oldest daughter married his father."

"His father? You mean Ryoki Gengi?! The world-renowned heart surgeon?! He's your son-in-law?!"

"And I'm proud to have him as such.", said Le-Po. "And to think, Jun told me that it was a bad idea to let her marry him. But when she found out that he was so rich and famous for his work that he constantly wore lambskin gloves and hired a chauffeur just to protect his miracle-working hands, she decided he was good enough. We have very high standards when it comes to marrying into our family."

Jun raised her glass of wine with a smug, superior grin as she declared. "I also have many grandchildren. My granddaughter Mayra married Sir Vito of Naples."

"Sir Vito?", echoed Alya. "He's like, the richest man in three different countries of Europe! Lila once told us he helped her organize a charity with him!"

Jun's forehead wrinkled. "Who is Lila?"

"No one.", Alya said, a little too quickly, trying to cover up her momentary lapse.

Marinette wasn't offended. She knew the point Alya was trying to get across. Lila only used the biggest names to dazzle with her celebrity lies. If she had lied about knowing them, that was the measure of their glory.

"Other children and grandchildren have married into some the richest and most affluent families of Asia and even a couple in Europe.", explained Duke Han-Lo. "We could probably buy and sell the Agrestes, the Bougeoises, and the Tsurugis combined!"

"So as you can see,", Rong concluded, taking a sip of his own wine. "Our family budget is separate from the country's. We do not tax the people to pay for our lifestyle."

"That's...actually pretty progressive.", said Ivan, smiling a little.

"Thank you.", said King Rong, setting his goblet down. "But it also means that we are not under obligation to give extra money the military. At least, not when it is unnecessary. Our military is fine as is. We recruit only the top applicants, keep a rigid schedule, and make sure all the needs are met without going over budget."

"But what if there's a war?", asked Shen.

"If that comes to pass, we will make the necessary sacrifices and adjustments.", said King Rong. "But there are no wars on the horizon, and I don't see the point in preparing extra for something that might never come to pass. And let us hope it will not come to pass. That is

why we marry off our sons and daughters. To keep the peace. Would you have us wage war against other countries just for the heck of it?"

Shen balled his hands into fists. "I just feel like this country could be so much more..."

"And I am deeply grateful for your dedication towards our homeland.", said Rong. "But war is no way to help it, but to hurt it, even if we did emerge victorious. My father kept war at bay for all forty-four years of his rein. And I am not about to break such a perfect streak, nor sully his legacy, by starting something now."

He took another sip of wine. "I highly urge you to focus your skills and talents towards other aspects of Coccidellenae. Such as helping with those other programs I just mentioned, or perhaps even diplomatic matters with neighboring countries." He looked over at Marinette. "Perhaps we should look towards France! After all, it was the country that housed my sister, where she married her husband, where their child was born! Perhaps an official alliance is in order now that we have family from there!"

"And perhaps the same could be said for Sidorina.", added in Prince Tao, smiling at his bride-to-be beside him. "After all, how can I not propose a friendly alliance with the birthland of my future wife?" He gave her a grin that made Marinette glad she was sitting down, or else her knees would have definitely given out.

At the next table, Adrien glared in Tao's direction, before he shoved a whole entire serving of sliced beef into his mouth and swallowed it in a single gulp.

## New Developments

"Omigosh, did you see him, Alya?", Marinette gushed to her best friend later that evening. She was hosting a slumber party of sorts, in her new bedroom in the palace. She had not had one on one time with her gal pals all day, and now, after Prince Tao had bid her farewell for the evening, they had a lot to talk about.

"Girl, did I ever!", exclaimed Alya, eyes wide with glee and happiness for her bestie. "That guy is capital C-H-A-U-D, hot!"

"And rich!", added Alix. "I mean, twenty-five grand for one tiny spider figurine?! The guy loves to splurge!"

Marinette's fell upon Prince Tao's gift, which had now found a new home on her nightstand. The crystals and black pearls caught the moonlight coming from the window and glimmered like stardust.

"There was also a lot of thought in the gift.", Juleka pointed out. "He found out that you were into fashion design, so he got you a spider, which is nature's fashion designer, apparently."

"And he even got your mom and dad presents, too!", squealed Rose happily.

"So he's considerate as well as handsome.", said Kagami. "Excellent combination."

"And tomorrow, he's taking you out to a concert.", Mylene chimed in. "He's even using his status and connections to get you a free box seat!"

Kagami smiled. "He's looking like ideal husband material."

Marinette blushed. "He is, isn't it?"

Maybe Madame Bustier was right. Maybe this arrangement could work out after all. Prince Tao was not only good-looking, he was charismatic and sweet and attentive to her. He was basically the kind of guy Marinette had read and fantasized about, plus with money and a title. She could really see a future with him.

(Plus, she had to admit, the idea of becoming a Queen did have it's appeal.)

"Do you think he'll like any of your baby names?", asked Mylene. "Louis, Emma, and Hugo?"

Marinette but her lip. In all honesty, she had fixated on those names when she had envisioned a future with Adrien. Especially Emma. She had picked that name particularly because she knew Adrien might want to honor his long-lost mother. But using those names for the children she would have with another man somehow felt... weird.

"Actually, I was thinking I'd pick out new names for my kids," she said. "I mean, he'll probably want some more traditionally Chinese names. Fancy ones, too. Maybe I can use

Louis, Emma and Hugo for middle names, though."

"Oh!"

Every head turned over to Sabrina, standing in the doorway like a deer caught in headlights.

"Oh, don't mind me!", she said quickly, holding up her hands as if to defend herself. "I'm just fetching a late night snack!"

"Oh, well, my cook had lots of this made for us.", said Marinette, gesturing to the plethora of egg yolk buns, red bean buns, and grass jelly that had been delivered to her room for her and her guests. "He made a lot, so there should be plenty leftover."

"Actually, it's not for me.", Sabrina admitted sheepishly. "It's for Chloe. She sent me to find the kitchen, and she's very particular about what she eats, so..."

"So she sent you to get her food like you're her maid or something?", scoffed Alya.

Marinette bit her lip. She knew she shouldn't feel obligated to, considering that Sabrina had been Chloe's accomplice in bullying her for years now. But somehow, she felt bad for the redheaded girl. It was probably the way she was looking longingly at the little circle the others had created, gathered around, smiling and laughing and stuffing their faces and enjoying each other's company. Marinette was willing to bet that Sabrina had never had anything like this with Chloe.

"Hey...why don't you join us?", she asked, earning some bug-eyed stares from her friends, their faces like "what the h-e-double toothpicks are you trying to do?!"

"Oh, no, I can't, Chloe's expecting me—"

"I'll summon a servant to fetch Chloe her bedtime snack.", Marinette offered. She reached for the device by her bed that was set there to summon servants to tend to her at a moment's notice. "You sit here. You look lonely."

Sabrina's face looked hesitant, but her eyes betrayed her to the other girls. They could see, clear as day, how badly she wanted to join in on their sleepover fun. Their empathy and compassion trumping their hatred of Chloe and grudges towards her lackey, they smiled at the policeman's daughter and gestured for her to sit with them.

Words alone could not express the kind of joy that had appeared on the poor girl's face at the invitation. She stepped inside and plopped down in between Mylene and Juleka.

"So, what were you guys talking about?", she asked, reaching for a red bean bun.

"How awesome Prince Tao is.", Alix clarified.

"Oh, right.", said Sabrina. She took a bite of bun, chewed it a little, and then swallowed. "He's gorgeous. Considerate, too. You should have heard Chloe after lunch. She ranted on jealously for hours how unfair it was that you get to be a princess and marry a hunky prince. You're one lucky girl, Marinette."



Marinette's heart lifted as she pondered how everything really had worked out for the best. She had the perfect man at her fingertips, and now she wouldn't have to be envious of Adrien and Kagami. She knew it wouldn't be long before Tao won her heart fully away from the blonde with his compassion and charisma. And then, finally, Marinette could truly be happy for him and Kagami, no strings attached.

"Yeah...I guess I am."

---

"I'm glad everything worked out for Marinette in the end.", said Ivan.

All the boys were having a slumber party of their own, gathering in a parlor room, which Rong claimed was the "gentlemen's parlor", where he and other members of the royal family went to smoke expensive Cuban cigars in fine leather chairs, play pool and poker, and discuss their many viable business ventures.

Right now, the boys from the French class were gathered there, having their own game of poker, just like the games that Rong said he played with his male relatives and in-laws. They were even playing at the special poker table that Rong had had handcrafted just for this purpose. The King had even allowed them a servant to deal the cards and use that special tool they used in casinos to shift the betting pool together or to the winner of the draw.

(Although, they were playing with loose change and whatever other tiny knick-knacks and trinkets they had found in their pockets and suitcases to spare to gamble with, while Rong had said that when the men in the royal family played, they gambled with real gold coins and small jewels. However, Aunt Jun had informed them that Rong strictly admonished any gambling outside the family betting pool, as he did not want to encourage the habit among the family and the dishonor it would bring.)

"Yeah, I'm glad, too.", said Nathaneal, shuffling his cards. "I mean, this whole arranged marriage actually was a great thing for her. Because of it, she ended up landing the hottest guy on the continent!"

"That's a matter of opinion, Nathaneal.", said Max, making it a point to keep his poker face on as he shuffled his cards.

"Is it really?", said Kim, playfully nudging his best bud with his elbow. "I mean, did you see that guy! He makes Adrien look like an average joe!"

"Ah-hem."

Kim turned his head to Nino at the sound of his cough, and that's when he noticed Adrien sitting right next to the bespectacled boy, looking just a teensy bit wounded from the jock's comment.

"Oops. Sirry, Adrien."

"S'okay.", said Adrien in a toght voice, turning his intense focus his hand of cards. "I guess he is pretty good-looking."

"Pretty good-looking?", exclaimed Nathaneal. "The guy's built like a Greek God. As someone who constantly studies art of the Greek Gods, I would know. Not only that, his face looks like it was sculpted by angels."

"I have to admit," Max finally confessed, setting one card onto the pile. "He is rather striking. And extremely affluent, to boot. Imagine spending twenty-five thousand euros on one tiny little figurine."

"Don't you think that's kind of wasteful, actually?", Adrien offered. "Spending all that money on some trivial little gift?"

"It wasn't trivial," said Ivan. "He was giving it to Marinette in the place of an engagement ring."

"Dudes, can you imagine all the other stuff he'll buy Marinette once they're actually married?", Nino exclaimed. "Crowns, jewelry... maybe he'll even get her a scepter! I mean, like he said, she's going to become Queen!"

"Oh man, Marinette would look so boss wielding that scepter around!", cried Kim.

Adrien glanced over at Luka at the edge of the table, looking at his own set of cards. "Guys, maybe we should stop talking about this. This must be really hard for Luka and all..."

"No, it's okay, I don't mind," said the blue-haired guitarist, looking up at the blonde model with a smile so that he would know that he was perfectly fine. "I'm just happy as long as Marinette is."

"But aren't you just a little upset that this whole marriage totally ruined your chances with Marinette?", exclaimed Adrien.

Luka shrugged. "Honestly, I don't think my chances were ever really that good to begin with."

"What?! What are you talking about?! You two had great chemi—"

"Adrien, it's okay. Yeah, I really like Marinette, and I wish things could have ended differently for her and me. But honestly, she's found the perfect man now. So I feel like everything worked itself out for the best."

Adrien's shoulders slumped.

"Dude, aren't you happy for Marinette? Everything worked out for the best!", declared Nino. "The prince is perfect!"

"Perfect's a pretty strong word, Nino...", Adrien said.

"Strong, maybe. Accurate, definitely!", cried Kim. "He's smart, handsome, charming, smooth, super rich, and considerate towards Marinette! He's basically the guy of her dreams! And now she's gonna get to marry him!"

Adrien set his cards down. "I fold." He shoved his coins into the pile and rose up from his chair. "I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

"But the chef said he was going to bring us hor'dourves!", Nathaniel protested.

"I'm not hungry," said Adrien bluntly. "Goodnight, everyone." And he briskly swept out of the room like a draft before anyone could stop him.

Nino furrowed his brow. What was up with his bro? He'd been acting weird all day, ever since Prince Tao first showed up. He had been acting weirder during dinner. He had watched Marinette and the Prince together at the table with the focus of a hawk, and the deadly glare of one, too.

Wait...

Could he be...

Nino quickly shook that thought out of his head. There was no way. Adrien didn't like Marinette like that. No matter how Nino and Alya had tried to change that. They had both accepted that. There was no point in thinking differently.

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Adrien wandered the hallways of the royal palace like a ghost. He didn't know what was going on with him. He should have been happy, right? Nino and the other guys were right, everything had worked out better than they could have hoped for. The prince was everything a girl could want. Handsome, charming, attentive, generous, treated the in-laws right, incredibly wealthy, and he was next in line to become King of a country. Marinette in particular seemed to really like him. Adrien had no doubt that the prince could give Marinette a wonderful life, one filled with the luxury and happiness that she clearly deserved.

So why did he still feel so rotten about the whole thing?

"Adrien?"

He stopped, spinning around. In his haze, he hadn't even realized he had been walking past Marinette's new palace bedroom. She stood before him, leaning out through the doorway of her room, clad in a silken nightgown of lavender that made her blue eyes seem even bluer, her midnight hair let loose and free, just like it had been that day on the hotel rooftop, right before Hearthhunter had struck, right before Miracle Queen ruined everything and changed his and Ladybug's world forever, chasing away their master.

"Adrien, I'm surprised you're not with the guys," she told him gently, stepping fully out of the room and closing the door behind her to allow them privacy. "I thought you guys were playing poker in the gentleman's lodge."

"We were! They are!", said Adrien. "I quit early. I'm a little tired, so I decided to turn in for the night, but I got lost on my way here."

"I can get a servant to escort you back to your room, it's no big deal.", offered Marinette, as sweet and considerate as ever.

Adrien looked her right in the eye. "Marinette... do you like Prince Tao?"

She blinked a couple of times, before lowering her gaze to her feet, nervously fiddling with her hair. "Well... he seems really nice. He's courteous, and considerate, and flattering towards me..."

"But do you like him?", asked Adrien. "Enough to marry him?"

Marinette met his gaze with a soft, comforting smile. "I think... Prince Tao is the type of man that I can see a future with. I... I actually can see myself falling in love with him. Eventually. I mean, he's exactly what I always fantasized about. He's handsome, charismatic, thoughtful, kind... I shouldn't have any trouble falling for him."

Oh... why did hearing those words from her twist him up inside?

"Well... as long as you're okay with this, Marinette, so I am," he replied calmly. "I just want you to be happy. That's all I want. And if he can make you happy, than I'm happy for you." He took a step towards her. "You know that, don't you, Marinette?"

"Of course I know," she confirmed for him with a smile. "Oh! That reminds me! I forgot to say thank you! For finally exposing Lila. And for that deal you made with her to get me back in school."

"It was the least I could do," he said, waving his hand to dismiss her thanks as if they were unnecessary. I mean, things only got this bad because I told you to take the high road. And when I finally realized how dangerous she was, I wanted to tell everyone, really, I did. But I thought if no one listened to you, I had zero chance."

"It's okay, Adrien, really it is," she reassured him. "I should have warned you about Lila sooner. I should have told you that she threatened me on her first day back at school, or how she stole your father's book..."

"She what?!", he yelped. "She threatened you?!"

"She told me she'd turn everyone against me if I didn't go along with her and let her keep lying," explained Marinette. "And when you sat next to me in class, she took that as a sign I wasn't going to back down."

"But I chose to sit in the back with you!"

"You know how twisted Lila is."

Adrien shook his head. "Marinette, I'm so sorry... I should have known something was off..."

"How could you have known? I didn't tell you," she said, stepping towards him. She took his hand in her own, and Adrien jumped. She had never held his hand before. He never knew how soft and smooth and warm it was.

"Adrien... sometimes I forget that you haven't had a lot of experience with social situations, like bullies or friendships or reading people. And that can cause me to have unrealistic

expectations of you. Which is unfair to the both of us."

It was true. She had spent so long believing him to be perfect in every way, blinded by the fog of love, it had caused her to forget that he was his own person, with morals and outlooks and personal experiences that were different from her own, who was flawed like anyone else. And it had caused her to treat him like this god who could do no wrong. Which was the exact opposite of how he wanted to be treated. What he really wanted was for people to treat him as a normal person like anyone else. Marinette had known this, and she had still pretty much worshipped him, just like any other crazy fan.

In a way, she supposed, Lila had done her one small favor. This whole disaster had helped to take away the rose-colored glasses she had been wearing around Adrien. She still cared for him a lot, even though she no longer saw him as perfect. This was hope for a new beginning between the two of them, a better beginning, without any unrequited crushes getting in the way of them actually becoming friends.

She would just have to figure out how to squeeze in enough Adrien time to reach real friendship levels before her wedding, if that ever happened.

"Look, Adrien, I don't entirely approve of your methods back when Lila first came back, but I can understand why you did them. And when you found out that you were wrong, you did your best to fix it. And now you know better, you can act better in the future."

He smiled at her hopefully. "So we cool?"

She beamed at him. "We're cool."

Out of nowhere, she lunged forward, wrapping her arms around Adrien in a hug. He tensed up. The last time they had been like this was at Chloe's apology party a few months ago, which had been the setting to the Despair Bear Disaster. Back then, their hold had only lasted two minutes, maybe three, before they were cruelly interrupted.

But this time, this time, there was nothing cutting short five whole entire minutes of untarnished, pristine bliss as Marinette held him tight, wrapping him in a cocoon of warmth and happiness. He couldn't help but hug her right back, completely engrossed in this feeling she was giving him, this euphoria that was the strangest mixture of safety and energy. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced before.

All too soon, the moment was over, and Marinette pulled away from him, although she at least graced him with a brilliant smile before she said, "Well, I better go back in. See you tomorrow, Adrien!"

She went back into the bedroom, gently closing the door behind her, leaving Adrien alone in the hallway, with only one question on his mind.

What is this funny feeling in my chest?

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